



# (La)Crosse My Heart

**Author:** *Britney M. Mills*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** He's a pro on the field—but a disaster in front of a camera. She's got one rule: no falling for clients.

Clark

I can dodge defenders and score from midfield, but stick a camera in front of me and I fall apart. After one brutal interview clip went viral, I've done everything I can to avoid the spotlight. Now my team's bringing in some PR fixer to clean up my image.

Great. Just what I need.

Except the fixer turns out to be her.

Jessa Stratton—my best friend's older sister, the girl who always rolled her eyes at me, and now the one person I'm definitely not allowed to fall for. Too bad my heart didn't get the memo.

Jessa

I've worked hard to build my career helping athletes manage the media—and I follow one rule: never date a client.

So of course my next assignment is Clark Denton. My brother's best friend. The guy who stole my car and brought it back looking like a disco ball.

But he's not just the cocky player I remember. He's focused, vulnerable, unexpectedly thoughtful... and I'm starting to see way too much good in him.

I just have to keep it professional. Easy, right?

Right?

(La)Crosse My Heart, a best friend's sibling novella, is book 7 of the Sweet Sports Kisses multi-author series—a sweet/clean romcom sports collection set across the U.S. Each story is connected through the Play It Forward organization, bringing heartwarming romance, humor, and just the right amount of competition. If you're looking for no-spice, kisses only with the perfect amount of swoon, then this series is for you!

**Total Pages (Source):** 54

# Page 1

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Jessa

It's been a long day, but at least I'm here. In a new state, trying to mentally prepare for a new job. Jessa from a year ago would not believe how far she's come, from thinking she'd marry long-time boyfriend, Dan, and never leaving Virginia, to moving across the country as a single gal with no firm future spread out in front of her.

Moving to Utah wasn't on my radar even a few months ago, but the opportunity to continue building my resume and start fresh made me jump at the chance.

I originally applied for the public relations position, but as a former waitress, as well as a manager for the track and field team in college, they didn't see that as qualification enough.

But my story about helping Tony Davidson, the star of the 100m and 200m, revamp his reputation after a cheating scandal caught their attention. The school test kind of cheating. I don't think the guy knew how to talk to girls.

The Stockton Media Group basically created a position for me as Athlete Image and Engagement Manager. I'm pretty sure it's still on a trial basis, so everything with this first client has to go smoothly so I can make more concrete plans for the future.

Have I lived outside of Virginia? Yeah, for a whole four years, not counting all the breaks in college. I'm a University of Maryland graduate. Go Terrapins!

Even that was within easy driving distance of my childhood home.

Getting to Utah is either a several days' drive or an expensive flight, so I guess now is a good time to not focus on being homesick. I've got goals to reach and an ex to forget, so that should be enough. I hope.

It'll be different working with professional athletes, though. I'm excited about this chance to help them while also restarting my life.

I've done a little research and while I'd love to be working with Trey Hatch, the star forward for the Utah Yetis hockey team, he seems to do well by himself. I grew up a Boston Breeze fan despite living states away. And I may have done a happy dance when I learned more about his wife, Kenzie. She's the perfect match to him, and I wonder if I'll get a chance to meet them. Maybe the professional sports world is small in Utah and they all support each other?

A gal can hope.

Maybe I'll get a basketball player instead, since those are the two sports under the Stockton umbrella. I'd have to do a lot more research if that's the case.

I glance around at the empty house, wishing I had stuff to unpack. The semi my furniture is on sent a notification saying they'd be delayed because of some road closures in Wyoming. I'm not sure how that relates, but I'm still used to using the maps app to get anywhere, so maybe that's how they get here.

I bought an inflatable mattress and a pillow before coming to the house, knowing I don't want to sleep flat on the floor. Then I napped for three hours, which felt amazing after the stress of my travel day.

I check my calendar and realize the video call I'm supposed to be on starts in three

minutes. Where did I put the charger to my laptop? I remember putting it into the carry-on bag before I left my mom's house in Virginia, but I'd had to rifle through the bag to find a few things and now everything is out of order.

I find it in the bottom of the suitcase I'd checked in on the plane. How that happened, I'm not sure, but I don't have time to dwell on it. I plug the cord in and find the information to log into the online meeting.

Propping my computer in front of me on the mattress, I wait for my new boss to sign on.

Applying for the position for Stockton Media Group had been a last-minute decision, so finding out I got a completely different job was incredible. And while I didn't know all the specifics for my current job, I know I'll be able to float among the teams the company owns.

The sound dings and Daphne Carter, the woman who hired me, smiles back at me from the screen.

"Good morning, Jessa. How are you settling in?" she asks.

I give a half-hearted laugh and glance around. I don't have a lot to occupy the rental I signed a lease for.

"Well, I need to go shopping, that's for sure." We both laugh together.

"I can't wait to see it when you've got it decorated. Did you hire a moving truck?"

"Yeah, I figured that would be easier than trying to drive out here with a car and a moving truck. My brother didn't have time to take off." And with my parents gone to Dubai for my dad's work, this was the best option.

Daphne nods. "That's understandable. I'm glad you're using the money we've allotted for you. Now, I'm sure you're curious who your first assignment will be."

That's an interesting way to put it.

"I'm excited to work in any capacity but, yes, it would be nice to get the background information on them," I say, trying to keep my smile bright, but I'm nervous. I'd looked up all the star players on both the NHL and NBA teams Stockton manages and have worked on several ideas to prepare for this meeting. With this being a newly created position, I want to make sure they understand what I'll bring to the table and why they need someone like me.

I don't know why my whole body is tense. Maybe it's because I've only taken on clients when I've known exactly what I was getting into. In this situation, I'm kind of on retainer.

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And they're putting a lot of trust in me to do this based on having worked with only a few athletes for free.

"Okay, so we'll have a few more to work on by mid-summer, since basketball and hockey are done for now."

I freeze, trying to wrap my head around that. "They aren't still playing games?" That probably should've been in my research, but it's a glaring hole I have to come back from. Why would they need me here so early then?

"Both teams didn't make the playoffs, so we'll get you working with them as soon as preseason starts. But the Lancers will start playing soon and we've got one standout who needs a reputation makeover."

The Lancers?

I do a quick search in my internet browser and find a lacrosse team. They own a pro-lacrosse team?

She shuffles a few papers, and I wonder if she doesn't know many of the players well, or if she's just trying to give me an ulcer while waiting for the information.

"Your new client is..." she starts. Did I sign up with a game show or an actual billion-dollar company? "Clark Denton."

There's all sorts of ringing in my brain and I'm trying to figure out what's wrong. Then I focus on the name.

"Clark Denton, originally from northern Virginia, Clark Denton?"

Daphne grins. "Yes, actually. I'm surprised you know that off the top of your head. You've done your homework."

I groan inwardly, remembering all the times I'd dealt with him in my teens. I might as well be honest.

"He was my younger brother's best friend growing up. We have history there."

"That's the best news I've heard all day," she says, clapping her hands together once. It makes me jump even though we're not in the same room.

"Why?" I ask, my usual composure taking a break at the wrong time.

"Because we need someone who can help him get through interviews. Right now, all the feedback and surveys we've taken from the fans for the Salt Lake Lancers show that while he has some of the best skills, he's not a huge fan favorite because of his stern demeanor."

Obviously I haven't been paying attention to his career, or else I would've known I'd have to deal with him. And the fact I didn't even know professional lacrosse was under the Stockton Media Group's umbrella is just another misstep. This is why I need to be thorough in my research and not think I already know everything.

Clark Denton. All I can remember is wanting to choke him every time he came over because of the pranks he'd play and his overall annoying attitude. And him stealing my car.

This should be fun. Or sheer torture.

I have to switch back into professional mode, knowing I'll have to treat this exactly like I did for the others I've worked with. This might be a hurdle to cross, but the finish line is still close.

"Do you have a meeting already set up for me to meet with him? Also, are there any mandatory activities or events I need to know about for him in the coming weeks?"

Daphne moves around a few more papers and says, "We don't currently have a meeting scheduled for you, but you're welcome to get in touch with Coach Martin to arrange something. It looks like they'll be starting practice tomorrow."

My stomach sinks. Yes, I'm excited about this chance, but I also thought I'd have a few days to settle in before getting right into the jumble. I can't remember if I even packed an outfit that would work for a lacrosse field.

"As far as media events," Daphne continues, "it looks like the team is signed up to help a company called Play It Forward in two weeks. It'll be here in the valley, so you won't have to travel for it."

I nod, typing all of this into my phone so I don't forget. I'll have to do some research to figure out what the company is and what it means. Maybe it's giving their gear to people in need?

"Perfect. I can work with this," I say, trying to come up with some more ideas of how to highlight Clark's better features. All I can see are the awkward gangly features of him coming to our house as a teen, and I know I've got my work cut out for me.

"I'll be in New York for most of the week for a conference, but if you need anything, just send me a text and I'll call when I have a minute."

"Just to clarify, you want him to be the fan favorite by the end of the season?"



Daphne chuckles and says, “Closer to the beginning would be great. He’s got a few endorsements that would probably be grateful for a change in his approval rating.”

That’s new. I didn’t realize there were now endorsements for some of the pro lacrosse players. It’s not like they’re as popular as the bigger sports, and I’m betting a lot of them have jobs during the off-season. At least, that’s what Brock said once when he was talking about Clark’s career. I’m surprised I forgot all of that. Then again, not really. I’ve been on track to creating my life so I don’t have to lean on anyone, as my recent ex-fiance found out.

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Then again, he was leaning on me way more than the other way around.

“Okay, if you’ll send me any of the contact information for the team you have, I’ll get to work on making appointments and go from there.”

“Perfect. Thank you so much, Jessa. And just a note of warning. We frown on relationships with our clients, so please keep things strictly professional.”

I try to keep my expression neutral, wondering why she would even mention that when we’ve only talked three or four times.

“I don’t think that will be a problem,” I say, grinning.

Me falling for Clark? That’s laughable.

Daphne nods. “Perfect. I’ll get that information emailed over to you. Good luck.”

We end the call, and I immediately slouch. My mother would be furious if she saw me, but this is something I didn’t see coming.

Am I a little bummed I’m not working with a hockey or basketball star? Maybe. This will just have to be a step to get to those bigger clients.

I’m a professional. How hard could it be to work with my brother’s best friend?

Clark

I find my bag from the baggage carousel at the airport, grateful it's one of the first ones out. All I want is a shower and a good long nap. I'm exhausted after my early flight from Chicago. Maybe it's more than the flight that's causing me to wish I could sleep for the next seventy-two hours.

As excited as I was to find out I'll be receiving endorsements from a few lacrosse gear companies, some of that waned when I realized I'm not the best actor in the world. Actually, a dried sponge has more personality than I do when a camera is in my face.

I knew it was a possibility, but spending an entire weekend to not be finished with the media kit they wanted is humbling. Not finishing even one section of it is demoralizing.

Lacrosse players don't make the money football or baseball players do, but we're slowly clawing our way up in the world of professional sports. For the past three years of my professional career, I've been a firefighter during the off-season. It's weird to think I might not have to go back in the fall.

But a miracle will have to happen to fulfill my end of the bargain.

I feel like instead of making improvements with each take, I only got worse when the camera turned on. I'm an athlete, not an actor.

I came out of the dressing room at one point and heard one director say, "He might be a pretty face, but he won't sell anything with that attitude."

I didn't think I had an attitude. And it wasn't like I didn't try to take instruction. I'm an athlete, so most of my life has been listening to a coach or a mentor. The only way

to get better is to try new things.

They wanted me to stick around for another few days, but practice starts this afternoon. I'm not missing that if I can help it. My years are numbered playing this intense sport, and I want to soak up every opportunity while I still can.

Which means I need to go to therapy or something to help with my nerves.

Maybe I don't look approachable when I'm just hanging out, but that's not the worst thing in the world, right? So, I'm supposed to fly out again before games begin. I guess I should learn a few pointers on how to be a better spokesperson.

At least I'm home.

Well, it's kind of home. Right now it's got more space on the inside than most homeowners, but I'm still kind of a college kid at heart. No, I haven't pulled a recliner from a dumpster to use daily, but I'm trying to wait until I've got a little more in my bank account to get a few nicer items.

The house is my first big purchase, one that only slightly makes me feel like an adult. But it's better than throwing away money on a rental and I've got a few of my teammates helping with the costs. Did I think I'd be a landlord by the time I was twenty-five? No, and while it sounds cool, we've had to have the plumbers come out twice since we moved in six months ago. I might need to get toilets that can handle a bunch of men who are barely out of the teenage years.

The rideshare driver drops me off in front of my house just as the sun peaks over the mountains to the east of my house. As much as I love the east coast, where I grew up, there are so many advantages to living here. This place is beautiful.

I take a moment to breathe and then glance around. Nora, our ninety-one-year-old

neighbor, is already outside with her walker, bent over her flower garden. I'd love to get some sleep before practice, but I'd rather keep Nora out of the hospital for as long as possible. She's like my adopted grandmother.

"What do you have there?" I say, setting my bags on the front porch and walking over to her.

She must not've heard me because she startles when she turns to see me a foot away.

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“Oh, Clark. I didn’t see you coming. What are you doing up at this hour?” she asks.

I grin and say, “I should ask you the same thing.”

“Well, I don’t sleep well anymore, and it’s not as hot if I get out here early to weed the flowers.”

“What if you sit and tell me a story while I weed? It looks like you’ve got a few new ones since I left this weekend. You can always ask any of us to help, you know,” I say, gesturing to the house.

“You’re all so busy, and I hate to be a burden.”

“Well, one of us will be over to mow your lawn later.”

She gets tears in her eyes and reaches over to take my hand. She gives it a squeeze and says, “Thank you, son. That means more than you can imagine.”

I kneel, pulling weeds from the soft ground for the next thirty minutes as I listen to Nora tell me stories about her life. She’s seen a lot, and it’s interesting for me to learn about the past that isn’t in a watered-down version of history from school.

“Have you met the woman who moved in across the street?” Nora asks, grinning. I turn to see the rental sign from the lawn straight across from us is gone.

“I didn’t know anyone was renting it out. Do we need to worry about her?” I say, giving Nora a wide grin. “How do you know it’s a woman?”

She chuckles softly and says, “There’s not much that happens in this neighborhood I don’t know about. She looks to be young. Maybe your age. If you want, I’ll be your wing woman and get more information.”

The image of this sweet white-haired woman trying to get phone numbers of ladies for me to date makes me laugh.

“I think we’ll be okay,” I say. “Lacrosse is starting, and I won’t have much time for anything, even dating.”

Nora shakes her head and tsks at me. “You’re only young once. Don’t get too caught up in life that you miss out on something great.”

I nod, knowing the sentiment is well-intentioned, but I don’t know if it applies to me right now. I’m only twenty-five and have only ever been married to my sport. The women I’ve been with didn’t like the laser-focus I have to getting better and staying in shape, which means I’ve never really had a long-term girlfriend.

“Maybe I’ll make a treat to take her. I can always use help taking it over, though.”

I nod. “I’m sure Burton would love to help with that.”

At just over six feet tall and with some muscle to round it out, I’m nowhere near as intimidating as my teammate Burton. He’s the tallest guy on the team and has me beat by at least thirty pounds. But when he’s with Nora, you’d think he was a giant teddy bear.

I clean up the pile of weeds and dump them in the bag she has next to her. Then I take it over to the outdoor garbage can and throw it away.

“Thank you for your help, Clark. I’ll have to make dinner to say thank you for all you

boys do.”

I shake my head. “It’s good for us to help you.”

As much as I love Nora, I’m a little nervous that whatever she feeds us has either got freezer burn or is way past the normal expiration date.

I help her into the house and then head over to grab my bags from the porch. A sound causes me to turn, and I look over at the small house across the street. Am I curious about the renter?

Maybe, but I don’t have time to dwell on it.

If my mom was living here, she would’ve already picked up some kind of treat to go meet the new neighbor. Me, on the other hand? I’m just hoping there’s no drama.

I take a quick nap and then start prepping for the first day of practice. There’s a lot I’ve learned about how my body performs best, and a good stretch and warm-up are key. It’s when I get to the arena, almost in the locker room, that I glance up to see Coach waving me over.

“Hey, Coach Martin,” I say.

“Clark, it’s good to see you. Although, it sounds like things didn’t go so well in Chicago?”

I frown and look up at him, confused. “How do you know about that already?” I ask.

“We’re a small organization, Clark. Things get around fast.”



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“I promise I tried,” I say, sighing. “Acting has never been my forte.”

“We all know that,” Coach Martin says with a laugh. “Your face backs it up.”

I let my frown deepen, knowing everything I feel shows right there on my face—that’s what keeps getting me into trouble.

“Don’t worry,” Coach says, patting me on the back. “We’ve got someone called in to help you with that.”

“Please say you didn’t hire a plastic surgeon or something,” I say, shaking my head.

Coach Martin laughs louder than I’ve ever heard before. “Hopefully it won’t come to that, but I guess we can always keep it as an option later.”

It’s a good thing I know him well, because I haven’t had a coach as chill as Coach Martin before.

“Hilarious, Coach,” I deadpan.

“Okay, so I just got word today from the managing company. Looks like they’re pairing you up with someone to help with your ads.”

Frustration rears its head, and I shake it off. “I don’t need that, Coach,” I say.

“From what I’ve heard about this past weekend, you definitely do.”

I don't like how serious he's being about this. "I'll be fine. It just takes some time for me to get used to the cameras."

"Clark, it seems like you had a hard time, even when you were holding a lacrosse stick. And that's your normal, everyday face, right?" He points to me, and I try not to frown, which isn't working.

I close my eyes and wish the humiliation from this weekend hadn't followed me home. "What are they going to do? Give me facial exercises?" I ask.

Coach shakes his head. "That, I'm not really sure about. I just know that with you as our main franchise player, we need to use you as the face of the team."

"Can I get a card that says 'Get Out of Jail Free'?" I ask, cracking a smile.

"If I don't get one, then neither do you," Coach says, his smile not as bright now.

That makes me think he has to do things he's uncomfortable with, too.

"Do you know who I'm working with? It's a long shot, but I'd be more comfortable if I didn't have to stress about spending a lot of time with someone I barely know."

"I can't remember the first name, but I think the last name was Stratton."

I frown. "Brock?"

Coach shakes his head. "That doesn't sound familiar."

Who am I kidding? I would only luck out if my friend from high school was the one to help me reform my "struggle face." He has a sister, but the chances of Jessa leaving Virginia to live in Utah seem pretty slim. She always loved the idea of

traveling and trying new things—as long as it didn’t involve leaving her hometown of Alexandria for more than a week at a time.

I’ll just have to worry about that later.

“Get out there, work hard, and show the team you’re ready to be captain this year.”

I do a double take and stare at Martin. “For real?”

He nods. “I think if you can fix things with your endorsements and with everything else we’re doing, I don’t see why you couldn’t wear the C.”

I smile then, knowing I still have a lot of work to do before I can earn that honor—but it’s definitely something I want. I’ve put a lot into this sport, and leading the team to a postseason victory would be the ultimate accomplishment.

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Jessa

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Did I think I'd be out on the lacrosse field this quickly? No.

Preseason games start in just a couple of weeks, and if we're going to make sure the Lancers—and Clark—have the best season possible, I've got to get to work.

There's so much that goes into these consultations. Usually, I'm going in completely blind, with no information about the client, and I have to dig deep to figure them out. Then again, knowing Clark for at least six years before our paths diverged might actually hinder the process. If he shows up with his irritating attitude, acting like the same annoying guy I remember, I don't know if I'll survive it.

I let out a deep breath and remind myself I'm a professional. I can work through this and prove to the company I'm worth every penny they're paying me.

My brain takes me back to the interview with Daphne. Why would she mention anything about a personal relationship with Clark? It'll be easy enough to just get the job done and then go back to avoiding Clark like the plague.

Maybe he's already had to work with people and has been able to charm them? He's never really been one to do that with me.

I walk out to the field and sit on one of the higher-up benches, watching as the guys go through skills and drills.

Meeting Coach Martin just a few minutes ago helped ease some of my anxiety, but it's still too early to tell how things'll go. He's fairly chill for a coach, which differs from the few I've worked with. Usually there's a vein popping out of their head as

they scream at their players. His is a different approach, from what I can see here, and I'm interested to see how the players respond.

I'm scanning the players, looking for who I think Clark used to look like at sixteen or seventeen. That was my first mistake—none of these guys are little beanpoles. Each one, while differing in height, definitely has some muscle mass. They're way stronger than I remember lacrosse players being.

I haven't really followed the sport since my brother's injury during my freshman year of college. I never got back into it after he stopped playing.

Coach blows the whistle and says it's time to get a drink before the next set. The guys grab their water bottles, many of them pulling off their helmets and shaking off the sweat earned from the heat of the day.

That's when I recognize Clark—dark hair, dark eyes, tight jawline. Also... way more muscle than I would have imagined. I swallow hard and try to focus on some of the other players.

Maybe Daphne had a point.

I shake my head. How can I use this to help Clark's image?

One of the easiest ways would be through social media. I open my phone and search for the team on the different platforms. There are only three or four posts on each app, which is strange.

I search for the Utah Yetis and the Salt Lake Outlaws, the hockey and basketball teams under Stockton Media. They have a few more posts, but they're edited in the same strange way.

It doesn't take long to find Daphne's cell number. After several rings, it goes to voicemail.

"Hey Daphne, this is Jessa Stratton. I'm here at the field working on a few things to help Clark. I noticed there aren't really any social media posts or reels for any of the teams under SMG. Is there someone I can contact about working on some more branding and posts about the players? I know I'm only working with Clark, but this would be a team thing that could probably help any of them. Anyway, give me a call back when you have a chance." I press End.

Did I say too much? Maybe I should've waited to give her the run-down for when she calls.

I do some research on Stockton, curious as to why a billion-dollar company doesn't have the infrastructure set up to push their teams higher. I knew they purchased the hockey team four months ago and the basketball team six months ago, but this is a critical piece of marketing their team has missed.

The team goes back to their drills, and I watch as Clark's movements are fluid and precise. If I'd had a fraction of that kind of athleticism, maybe I would've been better at sports. That's one of the main reasons I became a runner. Some people don't consider it a sport, but it definitely is. Practices are comprised of constant running or sprinting, while most other sports only used it as punishment.

I open my phone to make some notes, trying to get as much information on the page as possible. It'll help once I'm working with Clark so I can figure out why he's having such a hard time with interviews and media sound bites.

It's not much longer before Coach Martin calls the group to finish out practice.

Now's my time to shine.

I get up from my seat and walk down the stairs of the bleachers, wishing I hadn't gone for a pantsuit today. It's hot enough outside that I could've survived with a pair of jeans and a nice blouse. Maybe it's because the Stockton Group is taking a big chance on me being here and I want to dress to impress.

As the guys walk out of the stadium toward the locker room, I scan them to find Clark.

"Is that all you've got, Denton?" I say with a grin. Teasing, lighthearted or otherwise has been our love language. But without the love part. There has been absolutely no sparks between us in the past.

And yet, I have to keep recalling Daphne's warning about getting involved. If we'd had no prior relationship, I'd probably be very attracted to this guy.

He glances up, and there's a second before I see recognition in his eyes.

"Jessa?"

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I nod and walk around the handrail to head down the last few stairs.

“Please tell me you’re not the one I’m supposed to be working with,” he says, wrinkling his nose. And there’s the attitude I’ve waited for.

Being this close to him is a trip. He’s been such a fixture of my teenage memories that seeing him grown up and filled out is doing things to my brain.

“It’s me. It could be worse though, right?”

He shakes his head. “No. You’re just going to make fun of me for my lack of media charm.”

There’s an edge behind the humor and I can see this will be a sensitive subject.

“We’re not teenagers, Clark,” I say, folding my arms over my chest. “Go shower up and then we’ll meet.”

His jaw tenses, his old sign that he’s not happy about this arrangement.

He nods and heads into the small tunnel. I turn to walk out of the stadium through another gate that leads to the offices. There’s got to be some kind of office I can borrow to get this thing started.

I ask a gal at the main desk, and she gives me instructions to an upstairs conference room.



The faster I help Clark, the faster I'll be able to move onto the next client and continue to prove my worth. I'd rather not move again within the next couple of years, but that's all based on my success here.

By the time I'm done, this company is going to have the most well-known players across the board.

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Clark

Did I take the slowest shower ever? Absolutely.

By the time I've changed, no one's in the locker room. I'm okay with that. My roommates probably headed out to get some food, which I would love to do about now, but I've got to suffer through whatever Jessa has to say.

When did she become an expert in helping people with their communication skills? The last time she used her own, it was to yell and scream because I stole her car.

Valid.

I probably shouldn't be like this with Jessa. She'd always been a solid influence in my life, even if I enjoyed goading her into things.

I really don't want her to pick apart my personality and all the things I'm doing wrong with media appearances.

So I drag myself out of the locker room. As soon as I open the door I see she's standing there, tapping away at her phone.

It gives me a second to take her in, to realize the girl I'd known had grown into a woman. She's got curves and confidence that I don't remember. I can't believe she's willingly wearing heels.

"Are you ready for this torture?" I ask.

Jessa glances up and nods. "I didn't think you'd make it out of there so soon. Let's head upstairs to the conference room and we can talk about some details."

We wait next to the elevators, and she goes back to something on her phone. I'm not sure why I'm so irritated about it, but why isn't she asking questions now? Save me some uncomfortable time in the conference room.

"How long have you been doing this?" I ask, gesturing my hand out in front of me and her.

"What? Working with people on their media presence?" When I nod, she hesitates, "For about a year."

"How did you get into this?" I ask, suddenly curious.

The elevator doors open and we step inside. I lean against the side, and she presses the button for the third floor.

"I went to college for public relations and got a few internships. I noticed the support for guiding athletes through dealing with anything outside of their sport was lacking, and I wanted to help."

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“Who else have you worked with?” I ask. This sounds like more of an interrogation on my part than it should be. But it would be nice to know I’m not a total loss. If one of the more well-known athletes in any sport had problems like I do, I’d know there’s hope for me.

She glances away and says, “I worked with a lot of track and field athletes.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Track and field? That’s not even close to lacrosse.”

She stares at me and lets out a slow breath before answering. “I’m not teaching you on-field skills. I’m giving you tips to help you talk to the cameras or perform for your endorsement deals. You may be an expert in your sport, but from everyone I’ve talked to since I got here, you need help in other areas.”

I don’t know whether to laugh or be offended. It’s almost refreshing to have her blunt delivery back in my life. For a very short time, hopefully. “What title do you give people when they ask?”

“I’m an Athlete Image and Engagement Manager. The company was hesitant to hire me.”

I shake my head. “That’s not something I want to hear from you.”

“Well, I don’t have several dozen referrals as others in my position. I’ve worked with college teams in the past but never professionals. Where do I get experience if no one gives me that opportunity?”

Groaning, I say, “So you want to make me your test rat?”

“Your words, not mine,” she says, holding her hands in the air. She laughs a little, and I’m surprised by how beautiful she is when she smiles.

Whoa, I need to stop that line of thought before it goes too far. This is Brock’s older sister, for crying out loud. There’s no way a relationship with her would ever work. Not that I should even jump to that kind of thinking.

The elevator doors open and Jessa walks out first. I watch as she gracefully strolls toward the conference room down the left hallway. Has she been here for a while? I’ve been with this club for the last three years and I’ve barely ever been up here.

She opens the door and waves me inside. “Okay, let’s talk through some things.”

I take a seat, leaning back in it so I’m balancing on two legs. The distraction of keeping my balance helps ease the anxiety a bit, like if I have something else to focus on, I won’t have to worry about what questions are coming.

“What are you feeling when you go into media interviews?” she asks, grabbing a tablet from the chair next to her. Where did that come from?

“Like I’d rather just shower and go home than talk to reporters.”

She stops tapping on the tablet screen and glances up at me. “You don’t want the limelight of people telling you how great you played?”

I frown and shake my head. “I play this sport because I love it. Because deep down, I don’t know what my life would be like without it. It’s not about recognition. It’s about survival.”

Have I ever put all of those words together when describing my lacrosse life? No. But maybe they'd been bubbling to the surface. Or maybe it's being with Jessa.

As much as I don't want to go through whatever mental hoops I need to be cured, maybe it's a good thing I'm working with her. She knows a lot about me, although a few things have changed from when I was a little hellion.

She nods and taps away at the keyboard some more. "Do you get nervous when you know you'll have to speak to reporters?"

"Not really. It's more a combination of the whole thing. The dozens of questions and the cameras." Admitting this seems way too vulnerable for me, but I've got to get it out if I can make things different. I don't want to waste another weekend like the one I just went through for the endorsements.

Jessa nods and types on the tablet again. "What about your personal brand? What are you hoping it will look like?"

I frown, not sure what she's talking about.

"I'm a Salt Lake Lancer. Isn't that my brand?"

She gives me a slight eye roll and says, "No, that's the team's brand. You need to come up with something so people know immediately it's you."

"Are we talking about clothing or my signature?" I ask, still more confused than ever. "I thought we'd be going over the ways to talk to people or something. Not that I can't talk to people..." I say, trailing off.

Jessa nods. "We'll get to that point. I'm not going to just help you in one part and send you on your way. I'm here to help with the total transformation."

I frown. “You want me to be a robot?”

“No,” she says with a groan. “Most people are content to work with me on this. Of course, you have to be difficult.”

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I take in a breath, knowing I have to tread lightly. Jessa has always been severely type-A about life, and I'm making her fray at the edges.

"I'm sorry. I'll just listen while you tell me the plan."

She breathes in deeply and gives me a smile. "Thanks. That would make this so much easier."

She writes something on her tablet and then turns it so I can see.

"Okay, so there are a few different parts to this makeover."

I see one of the items is wardrobe change.

"Am I currently the ugly duckling?" I ask, unable to keep my mouth shut. She gives me a glare, and I raise my hands. "Okay, sorry. Go on."

"The management group wants you to be the face of the team and soon. So, we've got our work cut out for us. We're going to work in a few areas. First off, we need to pinpoint what you want to be your brand, like I said before. It encompasses your style, what you're wearing when paparazzi are out?—"

"You remember I play lacrosse, right? It's not exactly celebrity status over here."

"At least you're self-aware enough to know that. But if you're going to be remembered by the lacrosse lovers, we've got to give you that edge. So, we'll work on your clothing choices, your presence on social media, etcetera. Actually, will you

open up your social media accounts so I can see them really quick?”

I pause, trying to remember when I last posted. “They might have cobwebs on them,” I say, giving her a small smile.

“It’s fine. It gives me an idea of what you posted before and then we can revamp from there.”

I log in and hand her my phone, watching as her neatly trimmed pink nails come close to mine. She scrolls through, her lips pinched together as if she’s not happy about something.

Her scrolling gives me a chance to study her again. Jessa’s a few inches taller than I remember and she’s wearing subtle makeup. Her favorite color had been mint green for so long that no matter what she wore, it was like a scavenger hunt daily for the color.

I don’t see any color at all, aside from the tan business suit. Even her phone and tablet are black.

Sure, she’s got mostly the same personality, making sure we don’t mess with her business time. Despite the changes, she’s beautiful.

Is it weird I’m thinking of her in a non-best-friend’s sister sort of way?

Maybe I just need to go on more dates to combat this odd and unusual feeling, but she’s about the only person who’s been able to get me in line throughout the years. And the first to make me even consider a date since my junior prom.

My one-track mind has been focused on lacrosse for so long, I don’t know if I’d know how to juggle more than one thing.



“Something wrong, boss?” I ask, feeling a touch of anxiety as she continues to scroll through my feed. There’s a reason I stopped posting on social media. I get obsessed with the numbers, which isn’t good for my mental health. The fact she wants to resurrect that makes me nervous.

She blows out a breath and says, “We’ve got a lot of work to do. It won’t be that bad, but it’s more than I originally thought.”

Great. Just what I wanted to hear.

“Okay, so I need a few new clothes and better social media game. What else do you have in store for me?” I ask, sitting back and folding my arms across my chest.

“Daphne, the gal for Stockton Media, mentioned a few programs we can use for this. We need to make the fans fall in love with you. It’s going to take a careful approach to curating the right posts and events, but I think it’s doable.”

“Do I have to post daily? I’m not good at that.” When I have to post, I usually open my app and close it right after, overwhelmed with all that goes into it.

Jessa shakes her head. “No, I’ll work on that for you. We’ll have posts scheduled to make the process easier.”

The tightness in my chest eases some and I nod. “Sounds good.”

“We’ll have you attend a few charity functions and get some pictures there we can use for several posts. Is there a cause you’d like to sponsor or help with? Maybe coach a youth lacrosse team?”

I laugh loud and long at that idea. “I don’t know if anyone would love that idea, especially the parents.”

“Come on, you were always great with kids,” she says. Then she pauses and her cheeks turn a bright shade of pink.

“Thanks,” I say with a wink.

She sighs and shakes her head. “At least that’s what I can remember of you from all those years ago. You liked to terrorize my life, but you were always nice to the younger neighborhood kids.”

I swallow, surprised she remembered something like that.

“Anyway, let me see if there’s anything else I needed to ask you.” She scans her tablet and says, “Oh, do you have a girlfriend? We can add her to some posts?”

I frown. “What does that have to do with my image?”

“Typically, people love watching a romance blossom. Think of every celebrity relationship and the buzz about them being together or not for weeks or months before it’s confirmed. I think it could be an interesting approach.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend.”

There’s a moment of surprise on her face before she nods and says, “Good to know. I think this has been a good first meeting. When’s your next practice?”

“Tomorrow, same time, same place,” I say, leaning forward in my chair. I check my phone and see we’ve been in here for an hour already. No wonder my limbs are stiff. I’ve been sitting here for way longer than I typically would after practice.

“Do you have a second job?” Jessa asks, glancing up at me as she waits for the

answer.

“Well, I can always go back to my job at the fire station if needed, but with the endorsements I’m supposed to finish working with, I should be able to live on just my lacrosse income for a few years.”

She looks surprised, and I grin.

“That’s awesome. Okay, well, let’s meet tomorrow for a wardrobe check. Send me your address and I’ll come see what you’ve already got, then we’ll go from there.”

“You won’t take away all the comfy clothes, will you?” I plead.

“No, but if you have too many, we’ll have to thin the herd. And then we’ll go shopping.”

“My favorite thing,” I say with sarcasm in my tone.

“You’ll be fine. You’ve never gone shopping with me. I know how to make it as painless as possible.”

“We’ll see.”

We walk out of the room and head back to the elevator.

“Are you renting a place here in town? Or are you only in a hotel until you can check me off your to-do list?” I lean against the wall next to the elevator and wait for her response.

She looks at me with wide eyes as the elevator doors open. We step inside and the doors shut.

“I’m here for a while. You’re kind of the trial run for the company. If I’m successful with you, then I’ll find a more permanent place. I hope to help Stockton Group with all of their teams.”

“Be honest, were you hoping to work with a hockey player?”

She scrunches her nose. It sends me back ten years when she’d do that every time I came over to the Stratton house.

“No, I wasn’t sure who I was working with, but I’m here to make a name for myself, to build something I’ve been hoping for the past several years.”

There’s not much I can say about that. “I hope you make it to your dreams. What does the fake golfer say about it? Did he move here too?”

She looks like she’s just eaten an entire lemon before she shakes her head. “It’s sad that nickname describes him so accurately. We broke up about six months ago. I applied to work out here, and he was insulted I would think of leaving the east coast. But I needed a change. It was almost a test to see what he would do.”

“Did he end up making it even close to the PGA tour?” I ask, letting my curiosity have full rein of my mouth.

She gives me a quick shake of the head and leaves. “See you tomorrow. Send me that info.”

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Jessa

Why is my face still burning after I've been away from Clark for the last fifteen minutes? Working with someone you've known in the past is not for the faint of heart, especially when he's so blunt.

I'm surprised he even remembered about Dan, my ex-boyfriend. What's sad is that I'd been with the guy for nine years. Had there been any progress? No, we'd been stagnant for the last five.

I've wondered over the last six months why I'd never left. It was comfortable and it meant I didn't have to change a lot. It was easier.

Until it wasn't.

When I had to spend all the time planning dates and trips while he spent time "honing his craft", i.e. playing golfing games on his Xbox, I realized it was time to move on. And starting fresh meant getting away from the comfortable and taking a leap so big, I still get butterflies from it.

I get into my car and plug in the address to the rental house in my GPS, knowing I've still got a few more times of driving the route before I'll understand how to navigate this city. The gal at the gas station tried to tell me about the grid system and how I just needed to go so many streets north or south to get where I had to go. That's a lot of calculations for this gal while I'm trying not to get run over by the crazy drivers here in Utah.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I'm off the freeway and then even more when I turn onto the road to the house. Hopefully, I can get used to this place, because I refuse to give up on making sure my life is lived fully.

Do I have food for dinner? Probably not anything I haven't unpacked, which means it's only small snacks. I should've thought of making a grocery run before getting to my house.

Maybe I'll splurge on food delivery this one time.

I park in the driveway and get out of the car. I've got my satchel full of things in the back seat, along with my refillable water bottle and a pair of sneakers. Heels have never been my strength, so I pack comfy shoes for when I need some serious relief.

It's when I close my car door that I see something out of the corner of my eyes.

I turn to look at the house across the street, one that's got several cars out front and a faded-yellow paint.

Getting out of a car is Clark Denton.

"Did you follow me?" I ask, allowing my frustration to bubble over. So much for being calm and collected.

Clark turns and sees me. His look of confusion turns into a broad grin in a matter of seconds.

"I didn't follow you. This is where I live," he says, walking over to stand on the curb across from me.

I close my eyes and groan. "You've got to be kidding me. Of all the places they

could've sent me, they have me living across the street from you? I thought I got enough of that growing up," I say, wondering if it's too late to negotiate my living situation.

"Well, at least you won't have to go far for that clothing consultation. You can even come over for breakfast beforehand. How do you like your eggs?"

"I'll be fine for breakfast, thank you. Why are there four cars in your driveway?"

He chuckles and says, "Roommates, Jessa."

I don't know why Clark having roommates is suddenly so funny, but I let out a laugh that's hard to control.

"What's wrong with splitting the bill?" he says.

"I just never took you for someone who loved people in your space."

He nods and breathes out. "It was a change at first, but it was either have roommates or live in an apartment with cockroaches."

I shiver at the thought of that. "You're right. I should've thought of that first."

He points to the light-green house behind me. "Are you sharing with anyone?"

Why does that question feel so intimate all of a sudden?

"No, I've got this place to myself."

"Do you have any furniture? I haven't seen a moving truck pull up."



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“That’s in transit. I was hoping stuff would be here today.”

I’ll have to check the tracking emails I’ve been getting from the moving company.

“Well, let us know if you need help. The guys would be happy to.”

I nod, knowing that’s the last thing I’m hoping for. “I should be okay. The moving company will help bring things in and set them up.”

“Sounds good. If you need anything, we’re very neighborly over here.” He grins and I do everything I can to avoid the sudden flip in my stomach. There’s no way I’m going to let any feelings well up for this guy. We know way too much about each other, and it would be weird.

I try to wave, but with all the stuff in my arms, it’s an awkward move all around.

I turn and walk into the house, wishing things were already set up. My brain can’t concentrate well when things aren’t in line and put away, so this is going to take some mental gymnastics to get any work done tonight.

After the consultation with Clark, I know I need to make a sound plan, or else there’s going to be a lot of wasted time in the next few weeks. The sooner we can get the wheel turning on the fan thermometer for Clark, the better off we’ll be. I might still live across from Clark, but I won’t have to work with him forever.

That’s about the only thing keeping me from insanity. Because as much as I want to hold onto my old feelings about Clark, the older, slightly more mature Clark is

breaking down those barriers left and right.

My phone rings, and I turn it over to see my good friend Anna calling. We met our last year of college and have kept in touch ever since.

“I’m so glad you called,” I say when I pick up the phone. We’ve never been the type of people to start with pleasantries when chatting.

She gives a little squeal. “Oh good. I had a feeling I needed to call you. How’s life in the west without me?” Her tone went from bubbly to sad within just a few words. I can picture her with her lip jutting out, showing she’s still bummed I left.

“It’s off to a slow start, but I’m going to succeed. You can always transfer out here so we can still hang out.” I chuckle, knowing Anna is more routine about her life than I am, and that’s saying something. She loves her job working as a clerk in a courtroom, and I love that she loves it. I’d be bored to tears having to sit and hear all that legal jargon day in and day out.

“I’ll come for a visit once you get settled, but you know how much I love my townhouse. So, what have they got you working on? Or better yet, who is your project? Is he cute?”

“Why do you automatically assume it’s a guy?” I ask, laughing.

“Because I know how to research and I looked up the company you’re working for. Tell me, is he a smoking hot hockey player? I could definitely get behind that.”

I blow out a breath, thinking of the whirlwind of a day I’ve had. From finding out who I’m working with, to finding out he lives just across the street. “I’m helping my brother’s best friend, actually.”

“What? What do you mean?” Anna asks.

“I mean, Brock’s best friend from high school and college is the guy I’ve been assigned to.”

“Is he hot?” Anna asks, getting that conspiratorial sound in her voice.

“Anna! I’m not looking to date the guy. I need to keep my job since I just moved here.”

“Well, you won’t have to work with him forever. There’s nothing wrong with checking him out for the future.”

Normally, the thought of even talking about this with her irritates me, but with how much Clark has matured over the past few years, maybe there’s a chance?

No, no chances given here.

“I’m not looking for a workplace romance. And after everything with Dan, I’ve got to choose carefully.”

“Is it sad you were dating Dan before you knew me? I always said you deserved someone better.”

The truth hurts sometimes, and I still wonder how different life would’ve been if I’d gotten rid of Dan a lot sooner.

“Yes, yes, it is sad.” But I can’t linger on the time wasted. I learned a lot from that relationship, and I hope to not repeat most of it. “What are you up to?”

“Just getting ready for bed. So, what’s your future boyfriend’s name?” she asks

coquettishly.

“Clark Denton. There’s not a chance of us going beyond a working relationship, Anna. The guy was a thorn in my side growing up.”

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“Well, I’m single. Maybe you can scope him out for me.” She laughs, and I shake my head.

“You won’t do long distance or move here, Anna,” I say.

“True. But a girl can dream. Do you have a picture?”

“No. Anyway, the moving truck didn’t come today. I’m still doing everything on the floor in this house.”

“You need to go shopping. You didn’t even take that much furniture.”

She’s right, but I was going to wait until the truck came, just so I knew what I wanted in the house.

“What if I’m not here that long?” I say, the minor blip of worry filling me.

“Is this a trial run? I don’t remember you telling me that.”

“They haven’t said anything, but I feel this depends on how I do with Clark. I originally applied to be a public relations manager.”

“If they made up a job specifically for you, why would they terminate you that quickly?”

I search my memory, thinking we’d already talked about this. But then again, the interview and moving process all happened within two weeks, so chances are higher I

didn't give her the full story.

"I don't know. My boss did specifically mention not to start a relationship with Clark."

"Ha!" Anna practically yells into the phone. "So you thought about it."

Why does she have to be so confident?

"Only as to why she mentioned that."

"You're a lot more gutsy than I am, Jessa. Moving across the country for what could be a temporary job is brave. But maybe you'll have your Prince Charming and live happily ever after in the desert."

I think about Clark and wonder if I'll have to move back to Virginia with my tail between my legs if this doesn't go the way I hope.

The guy is an anomaly, but I need to remember we're in a client relationship and hopefully what I do to help him works.

"I needed some adventure in my life, but now it's like I need to recharge that bravery."

"Oh, my show is about to start. Call me in a couple of days with how it goes. I'm excited to hear about this journey of yours."

I nod and say, "Thanks Anna. Have fun."

I look back to the notebook in front of me and try to shift on the blow-up mattress.

Writing out a plan for the next few days, I focus on how to help Clark. I need to make this work.

My food order gets dropped off, and I take my time eating it, trying to brainstorm even more ideas than the ones I already have.

I'm going to makeover Clark if it kills me.

6

Clark

It's eight o'clock, and I could definitely sleep a full eight hours at this point. Am I getting old? I'm pretty sure Nora can make it to nine before going to bed.

There's a knock on my bedroom door.

"Come in," I say, putting my phone down.

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Jackson comes into the room and gives me a guilty look. "I might've put something down the disposal I shouldn't have."

I frown and throw back the covers. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not used to a food disposal, and I think I put something a little too big in there."

"What exactly did you put down it?" I ask, gritting my teeth to keep from yelling. Sometimes having roommates is like running a daycare.

He says nothing, looking like a deer in headlights.

I walk into the kitchen, shaking my head. I'd bought this house earlier this spring, knowing it would be easier if I didn't have to keep throwing away money on rent. It's not a mansion, but it's a nice enough house. But I don't want to ruin things before or after the warranty runs out. I doubt the warranty would cover anything, to be honest. That's been my experience, at least.

I glance into the sink and see a bone in there. "Please tell me you didn't put chicken wing bones in there," I say, running a hand over my face.

"I didn't know, man," Jackson says, giving me a look like he's terrified of getting into trouble. "I just thought it could take anything put down there."

I want to yell, but I have to remember a few of my roommates don't have the same world experience I have. Jackson is a baby at twenty-one years old, and this is the first time he's really been on his own. It sounds like it's a miracle his mom didn't



move out here when he did, since she'd bought a place by his college. Home-cooked meals every night sounds amazing, but having my mom keep track of everything I do isn't a good enough tradeoff.

Throwing the bone from the sink away, I then focus on the drain. My hand is way too big to fit in there.

"Can you fit your hand?" I ask, leaning against the counter and waving for Jackson to take a chance.

He tries and it's the first time I've realized his hands are even bigger than mine.

I think about the other guys in the house. Chances are low we'll be able to fish the bone out of the drain.

Jessa?

She wasn't super excited to be working with me and then finding out we're living across the street from each other threw both of us for a loop.

The easier route would be to call a plumber. But since it's after hours, I don't know if I want to foot that bill. Sure, I'm making more money than I have since I started with this team three years ago, but I know how fast it can all go if I don't spend it wisely.

I slip on my slides and walk toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Jackson asks.

I sigh, knowing I'll have to prepare for a debate and maybe some bribery to get her over here.

“To get some help.”

I’m grumbling as I walk across my grass in the twilight. It’s hard to see the curb, so I step carefully, wanting to avoid a weird sprain or even an ACL tear. It sounds ridiculous, but I’ve heard of stranger things.

There are no lights on inside, and I’m wondering if maybe I should wait until morning. Then again, my roommates aren’t all the brightest and would end up using the sink even if I taped it off and put a warning sign next to it.

I finally lift my hand and knock on the door. I freeze, trying to listen as much as possible, but I hear nothing.

I knock again and finally see a small glow of light through one of the window squares on the door. The glass is opaque, so it’s not super clear.

Did I get the wrong house? I turn to see her car still in the driveway connected to this house.

A figure is walking toward me. The door opens the smallest crack.

There’s about three seconds before she opens the door wide enough for me to see her face.

“What do you need, Clark?” she says, rubbing her face. It’s then I see she’s got her keys stuck between her first and second finger.

“What are you doing with those?” I ask.

“I didn’t have my usual safety items, so I figured this could at least make someone uncomfortable, especially if I shove it in their eye.”

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I involuntarily take a step back, not wanting her to stab me accidentally.

“Okay. Anyway, can we get your help with something?”

She frowns, and I find my gaze stuck on her lips. They look so red and kissable.

I shake my head, trying to pay attention to her answer.

“You need my help with something?” she asks. “More than just a reputation rebuild?”

I roll my eyes and nod. “Yes, you can put it on my tab.”

“Am I going to be running for my life? Or is this a hazing welcome to the neighborhood?”

She’s definitely a lot more skeptical than I thought.

“We need your help to dig something out of a hole.” I wince, knowing that doesn’t sound like the best explanation, either.

She shakes her head and closes the door a few inches.

“My roommate threw a chicken bone down the disposal, and we can’t get reach it. Our hands are too fat, and I’m worried one of the idiots will cost me more than their monthly rent if we don’t get it out now. Not that they’re really idiots, just that they don’t always use their full brain capacity when making decisions.”

She opens the door wider and says, “You want me to stick my hand down there to pull out a chicken bone? Really, Denton? I don’t believe it.”

“Please, Jessa. I won’t let anyone near the switch while you’re trying to get it out. I’ll owe you dinner or something.”

She looks at me for several long moments and I’m worried that if I say anything, I’ll sway her to the no zone.

Then I think of an idea.

“I’ll just talk to Nora then.” I turn around as if to walk down the porch steps.

“Who’s Nora?” Is that a touch of jealousy in her tone?

“She’s our ninety-one-year-old neighbor. I’m sure she’ll be okay helping us out.”

Jessa makes a loud groan and says, “Fine. Let me get my shoes on.”

I wait for her nearer the sidewalk and laugh as she comes out in a large fluffy robe and what looks to be animal slippers.

“What are you wearing on your feet?” I ask, trying to squint in the darkness.

“Buffalo. They’re my favorite, so don’t judge.”

I hold up my hands and shake my head. “The animal or the slippers?”

She punches me softly in the shoulder. “Both, all right?”

“You don’t love cuddly kitties or something a little?—”

“Less terrifying? Not as much as the buffalo.”

“That’s a choice I didn’t foresee.”

She raises an eyebrow. “So, you’ve been trying to figure me out?”

I open my mouth, but I’m not sure what to say. “That’s what you’re trying to do with me. I figured I’d have time to do the same for you.”

“What have you thought so far?” she asks.

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“You first,” I say, stepping up on the curb in front of my house.

She pauses. “There’s a good portion of your old personality there.” She says nothing for several seconds, and I’m wondering which way she’ll go with this comparison of the old and new me. “I think you’ve matured and once we get you comfortable around a camera, we’ll be doing just fine. Your turn.”

I probably deserved that.

“You’re not as short as you once were, but I think this Dan-free diet you’ve got going on agrees with you.”

We’re at the porch and I can see the faint blush on her cheeks in the light.

“Thank you. I think the mountain air is part of that, too. Okay, let’s get in there and get the job done. I have to mentally prepare to work with you again tomorrow.”

I laugh at that. I’m sure she’s super excited about that.

Opening the door, I lead her into the kitchen, where it seems all the guys in the house have congregated to see what’s about to happen with the disposal.

“Do you not have anything else to do?” I asked, pushing Burton out of the way.

“The hockey game got over and we’re just curious,” he says.

“Everyone, this is Jessa. Jessa, these are the guys on the team. Jackson, Burton,

Finny, and Stack.”

She blinks a few times before she says, “Are those actual names?”

“You know it,” Burton says, grinning at her. “Where did you come from?”

“I don’t have time to give you a biology lesson, Barton.”

“She lives across the road, in the rental,” I say, pointing at the wall closest to the road.

Jackson looks at me innocently. “How did you convince her to come over here?” He says in a loud whisper.

“He wanted to wake up an elderly neighbor,” Jessa says, pushing back the sleeve of her robe.

Finny turns to me. “You were going to wake up Nora? That would’ve taken all night to get her over here.”

It takes all of two seconds, and Jessa is holding up the chicken bone. She drops it on the counter and says, “Are there any other to-do items on your list?”

It’s the sarcasm I’m used to, and for some reason that’s comforting to me.

“I think that should do it. Thanks, Jessa.”

I walk her over to the door and she leaves, hurrying across the road and back into the house. I don’t close the door until I know she’s inside and then turn to the guys.

“You’re a lot more familiar with her than most of our other neighbors,” Burton says,

folding his arms. His eyes are squinting at me, as if he can read the answer he's searching for on my face.

“What are you talking about? We're practically Nora's adopted sons,” I say, walking past him to the kitchen. I need a drink and to avoid their penetrating gaze.

“Didn't we see her at the arena?” Stack says, tapping his pointer finger against his chin a few times.

Jackson nods slowly. “That's why she looks so familiar. Is she part of the media team? Maybe she's the new trainer or something?”

Burton studies my expression closely, and I finally give in.

“She's not a trainer. She's the sister of my high school best friend and she's been assigned to help me with my interview struggles.”

“Really? They hired someone for that?” Burton asks, his eyebrows cinched together looking like a chunky caterpillar.

I frown. “Are you trying to make me feel like a loser? Because it's not working.”



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“Really? It’s not like I’m the best one with a mic in my face. I wouldn’t mind you passing along any tips you get from her.”

My defenses crumble and I nod. “For sure. I’m sure she’d be willing to help more of us.”

Jackson looks like he’s seen a ghost. “Are you sure? Because she looked like she wanted to spend as little time with you as possible. Did you make her mad when you were younger?”

I think about it for a moment and it’s like the memories just whoosh back. I haven’t thought about them in years.

“Well, there was this time I put her name in to sing in a school talent show. She went through with it, singing a song from Wicked she loved, but then shot lasers from her eyes at me for the next couple of weeks.”

“I could see that,” Finny says, nodding.

“It could also be the time I ‘borrowed’ her car and returned it not quite clean.”

Burton looks confused again. “I don’t know if you have a different idea of irritation, but these don’t sound that bad.”

I shake my head. “Well, the Jessa I know lives and dies by a schedule. A plan for everything and everything is in its place. The car had not only food wrappers but also glitter and a mixture of perfume and body odor.”

Stack has a mischievous grin on his face and the rest are a mixture of laughter and confusion.

“You are sick,” Jackson says.

Raising both hands in the air, I say, “I didn’t hook up with anyone in the car. This girl had a crush on me and saw me get out of the car at a football game. She asked me to a dance using a glitter bomb and her perfume.”

“So, it was your fault by default?” Finny asks.

“Pretty much,” I say, shrugging.

“I don’t think that’s how she sees it,” Jackson says.

“You still better make it up to her,” Burton says. “I’m sure clearing the air will be better for you to work together.”

I pick up the kitchen rag and throw it at him. “What are you? The house therapist?”

He chucks the rag back at me and I catch it right before it hits me in the neck.

“No, I’m the guy who should charge for my advice. I’d make bank off all of you since you don’t listen the first time.”

“Whatever, man,” I say, laughing as I walk by. Burton is one of the bigger guys on our team and to think of him doing anything other than smashing people is laughable.

I head back to my room, knowing I need to get ready for another day tomorrow. If I’ve got to fit in training with Jessa, I’m going to need all the rest I can get.

Jessa

The mattress definitely has a hole. Can I take it back after having it for one day? There are too many aches and pains in my body to count which ones are from the mattress/floor and the others from just living.

I open my suitcase, taking in the options I have to wear for the day. If I'm going to Clark's house this morning, a business suit feels like a lot. I pull out a pair of overalls and a plum-colored T-shirt to go with it. A pair of flats and a quick twist to my hair and I'm ready to head over there.

I grab my tablet and phone, making sure I've got the keys to the house before I lock up. I don't need to call a locksmith on my second day here.

It's warm out for only nine o'clock in the morning. But as I turn, I'm surprised to see Clark, shirtless, mowing the lawn next to his house.

My gaze lands on his chest for way too long as I take in the definite slopes and curves where it was flat several years ago. How did he get so built just playing lacrosse?

Shaking my head, I glance around, wondering if anyone has seen me leave my house yet. Maybe I can go back inside and head back over once he's done cutting the grass. And has a shirt on.

As if magically hearing my thoughts, Clark glances over and waves, stopping the lawnmower. He pulls out the earbuds and takes a few steps toward me. "Hey, are you ready for our consultation?"

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That sounds so strange coming from him, but it is what it is. This is my life now.

“You look busy. I’ll come back later.” I nod and turn, ready to bolt back inside the safety of my house. I should not be this flustered by a bare chest and some gorgeous ab muscles, but here we are.

“Are you Jessa?” a soft voice asks. I turn back, surprised to see an older woman sitting on the front porch of the house behind Clark.

“Yes,” I say, not sure whether I should move forward or backward at this point.

“Oh good,” she says, and pats the seat next to her on the patio furniture.

I sit next to her, and the woman pats my knee with her hand.

“I’m Nora Birchly. It’s so good to meet you.” She looks harmless, and maybe I’m a little curious about this older woman Clark used against me last night.

“How did you know my name?”

“Clark is a wealth of knowledge when I pull out my special brownies.”

I frown and look over at Clark. “Um, why are they special?”

She gives me a funny look and says, “Because I put applesauce in for part of the oil. That gives it another level of fudgy goodness.”

I breathe out a sigh and laugh. Did I think she was using something else in those brownies? Possibly.

“That’s good to know. How long have you lived here?”

“Going on forty years. The neighborhood has changed a bit since Fred and I built this house, but it’s home.” She turns in her chair the littlest bit, but it makes me feel like she’s putting her full attention on me. “So, you’re coming from Virginia. I bet this is a big change for you.”

Something about this woman makes me want to bottle her up and keep her for how mischievous she is.

“It’s definitely different. I might need to invest in some lotion because of how dry it is here.”

She pats my hand and says, “That’s a great idea. You’ve got to keep your skin looking young for as long as possible. I’m in my nineties now, but there are some people who think I’m mid-seventies at the latest. I’ll have to show you my skincare routine sometime.”

“I would love that,” I say, feeling more relaxed than I have in a while. My own routine is pretty basic, but I’m always curious about what works for people.

“Isn’t he handsome?” Nora says, changing the conversation quickly.

“Who?” I ask.

“Clark of course. He’d make a good match for some lucky girl, that’s for sure.”

I glance back out at Clark and something about his taking care of his elderly neighbor

makes me see him a little differently. He'd always been the one who only cared about what served him, but maybe he'd had a few chances to learn helping people was a noble thing.

"How do you know Clark?" Nora asks, bringing me back to the present.

"He was my brother's best friend in high school."

"Is he older or younger?"

"My brother? Younger."

She gives me a wicked grin and says, "Even better. I was older than my husband, too."

I wave my hands awkwardly in front of me. "No, not the same. I mean, I'm not dating Clark. I'm still trying to get over a breakup from a few months ago."

Six, to be exact, but I'll use whatever excuses I need to get through this very professional relationship with Clark. Although, I don't think I can be around him when he's half-naked.

That's the only reason I've got anything remotely close to an attraction for him. I'm a woman and can appreciate a good body.

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The hard part is my brain keeps pointing out all the ways he's not like the old Clark I knew from the glitter-bomb incident.

Nora and I chat for another few moments when Clark comes back, wiping his face off with the shirt he'd tucked into his back pocket.

"It looks great again, Clark," Nora says, grinning at him. "But I thought you said one of the boys would help with it."

"I had some time, so I figured I'd get it done before it got too hot. You know Burton. He'd be whining the rest of the day if he had to mow in the early morning heat."

"Well, Jessa and Clark, I think I'm ready for a little catnap. Thank you so much for working in the yard, Clarky. And Jessa, it was so nice to meet you. I hope you'll come over often."

Clark helps open the door and stands at the ready as the woman maneuvers her walker into the house.

Once she's inside, I ask, "What did she do before you moved in?"

Clark shrugs. "From what I've heard, she had to hire someone to do the lawn work, and she was pretty lonely."

"Does she not have family?"

He shakes his head. "No, Fred died three years ago, I think. And they could never

have children.”

I know it’s not everyone’s dream to have children, but for people who would love them and do everything to mold them into good human beings, there’s a touch of mourning there for her.

“Are you ready for this?” Clark says, winking at me. No shirt and a wink are a terrible combination. Not that I knew that before, because Dan never tried.

“Um, yeah. Lead me to your mountain of clothing.”

8

Jessa

Okay, so I’ve said it a few times, but we’ve got more work to do than I thought.

“These are all the dress shirts you own?” I ask, holding up the two that are semi-decent. The others have way too loud of patterns or are missing buttons. A few even have holes in them.

“Probably. My typical wardrobe is a T-shirt and shorts.”

“What about for game days? You don’t have to come in a suit or something?”

He shrugs. “This isn’t a sport where we worry about that.”

“Maybe you should, though.”

He scrunches his nose before he runs the towel through his hair. At least he went into the bathroom for a shower with clothing instead of coming out and making it difficult



for me to concentrate again.

“I don’t see how that would help.”

“You’ve said the world doesn’t know the sport of lacrosse. Why not educate people?”

He purses his lips. “Do you forget why you’re here? I’m not the trailblazer. I’m just the one who wants to play lacrosse for as long as possible.”

“But don’t you see that by providing more opportunities and advocating for your sport, you’ll be helping not only yourself but others who might look up to you?”

“I don’t like it when you get ideas. That means I’ll have to do more,” he says, his tone sour.

I roll my eyes. “Again, you put in the work for your sport but a little more off the field and things get better for everyone.”

“Agree to disagree. What’s the verdict on my closet?”

“You’re a bachelor who keeps everything, even if it’s threadbare and falling apart. You definitely need a girlfriend just to help with your personal style.”

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“The position is open, if you’re interested.” He laughs, and I have to turn away so he doesn’t see my red cheeks. The fact that my brain is a traitor and keeps calling up visuals of Clark without a shirt is making this even more uncomfortable.

“I’m good. I’m dating my work now.”

He laughs again. “Um, I don’t remember you asking me out, but I accept.”

I widen my eyes as my stomach drops. Why am I bumbling every bit of this today?

“Back to your closet,” I say, trying to buy me some time, “You need at least one or two good suits, a few pairs of slacks, and polos. I’d recommend some better shoes, too.” I bend over to pick up one of the “dress shoes” in his closet, holding it up before him. There are scuffs and scratches on both, with even a hole at the front of one, making it open a lot like a duck’s bill.

“What’s wrong with those? I’ll just get some tape and put it back together.”

I close my eyes, trying to breathe in and out before I say something I might regret.

“You’re a professional athlete, Clark. You need to look more put together than just rolling off the field.”

He’s quiet for a long moment and then says, “Fine. I might as well get this taken care of so you’ll stop bugging me about it.”

“The question is, what do you want, Clark? If you’re fine the way things are, I’ll go

back to my boss and let her know you'd rather not be the face of the team. That you want to continue working at the fire station instead of having an opportunity to devote more time to your craft."

At least five emotions flicker across his face at that.

"No, I want to do this. Need to do this." He looks more determined than I've seen him since I got here.

"Okay, let's get to the store, then." I walk to the door.

"Right now?" he says, his words coming out choked.

I shrug. "You don't have practice for another four hours, right? Unless you have something urgent you need to be to before then, we might as well get this done."

"I'll meet you outside. I'm driving though."

I grin at him. "Not going to happen, Denton."

9

Clark

We're at the mall and I'm wishing there was a camera in my face asking all the questions instead of enduring the endless lineup of clothing.

Okay, maybe that's too far.

I've never been a great dresser, but I didn't need to be when playing sports. Most of the time at school, I was coming from some training or lifting to get to my other

classes, so it was easier to shower and throw on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt.

“Favorite colors?”

I raise an eyebrow. “Isn’t it normal to have one favorite?”

“You won’t wear the same color every day for the rest of your life.”

“That’s true. Blue and orange.”

She wrinkles her nose a bit and says, “I don’t think that’s the best combination. Maybe separately?” I don’t realize she’s not talking to me until she turns around and walks into the mall.

I trail behind her, wondering what I’ve gotten myself into. But this will all be worth it, right? I need to keep reminding myself that, even when I’m in the changing room at the third store.

Coach Martin asking me to be team captain is a big deal, and maybe it’s vain to want to have that honor. But I feel like I’ve worked hard ever since I made it to the league, and I want to show him I’m up to the task. Now I need to get my fear under control so I can do this.

The hardest part about all of this is that I used to be pretty good at interviews. Then one idiot had to go ruin it.

Then I became a meme.

There's a lot of mental toughness that goes into being an athlete, pushing through pain and working through slumps, but this is one mental block that's almost impenetrable.

Jessa is good at talking to the employees of the stores, only addressing me when I need to try on something else. Have I ever done a fashion show before? No. While this one doesn't quite feel like that, I can't imagine what it's like to be someone who has to change clothes multiple times a day.

Don't get me wrong, I change my clothes, but having a set outfit for different times of the day isn't my goal.

It feels like we've been inside for four days by the time we walk out. I breathe in the air aggressively, trying to tease Jessa about our time in the mall.

"We survived," I say, bending over and walking like I suddenly have a limp.

"Oh, it wasn't that bad. We were only in there for two hours. That's probably a record." She keeps walking, putting space between us.

I look down at the bags in my arms and while I don't want to agree with her and give her ego an enormous boost, getting this many things in such a short time didn't seem possible before.

"There are so many things in these bags, I'm not sure I'll know what to wear and

when,” I joke.

She blows out a breath and says, “Well, I guess it’s a good thing I live so close to you right now.”

I grin and say, “So you’re going to come dress me every morning?”

“Ew, no. But I can give suggestions. Now that we have some adequate stuff to work with. We haven’t made it to a suit shop yet, though. We’ll have to find a time to fit that in.”

The nice thing about doing a shopping spree is that I’m not super worried about money at the moment. But I’ll have to be careful so I don’t overspend before I get everything fixed with the endorsement deals I’ve got.

“What’s next?” I ask, curious. Maybe it’s self-preservation so I can prep myself for what’s coming.

“We’ll have to do some mock interviews.”

I widen my eyes and groan.

“We won’t do that today. I’m sure you’re tired from shopping and need to get ready for practice. So we’ll do that tomorrow. Then I’d love to get a photo shoot with you.”

“You and me?” I ask, grinning as I point from her to me.

Her eyes go wide before she rolls them.

“No, Clark. For your social media. Has the club ever had a photographer or someone to run their social media?” She opens the door to her car, and I wait to answer until I

get in.

I start to shake my head and then say, “Well, kind of. The last owner let his granddaughter do it. But her idea of what would be good to post wasn’t based on how many others saw it.”

Jessa nods. “I can tell that from the few posts she put up. What happened to her?”

Shrugging, I say, “I think she just gave up and they never replaced her. There was a lot of weird stuff with those other owners. It’s been a night and day difference with Stockton.”

“But if they’ve owned you for the last few months, you’d think they would’ve filled the positions necessary to help their marketing.”

“What if things were so bad in the main office they’re still trying to put things right?” After meeting the last owners, I can imagine it’s a pretty tangled mess when it comes to official documents for the teams.

She doesn’t say anything for a few moments. “Yeah, I didn’t think about it like that. I’ll just have to find someone to do your photo shoot then.”

Now is when I cringe. “Can’t we hold off on that until after I work with the gear companies?”

She blinks a few times and says, “What gear companies?”

“I’m sponsored by STX and Warrior. I’m also supposed to meet with Gatorade to negotiate a contract.”

Nodding, she says, “That would’ve been good information to know yesterday. Do

you have a time when you'll be back working with them?"



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“Well, I flew to Chicago last weekend and tried countless takes, only to run out of time before they got anything usable. So they might need some time to recover before they fly me out there again.”

She nods, tapping her chin with a pen. “Okay, if you’ll give me their information, I’ll take care of that.”

“That’s what my agent is for, Jessa.”

“Oh, yeah. Duh. Okay, send me your agent’s information so I can coordinate with them. Have they done nothing to help you with this?”

I mentally go through the many meetings I’ve had over the past few seasons and while I’m grateful to my agent for helping me get a contract with the Lancers, he hasn’t done a lot since then.

I’m the one who had to reach out to the sponsoring companies with my stats and information, just to make sure my name was getting out there. The goal is to set up things for the future, and it won’t happen on a player’s salary.

“You know what? Maybe you should be the one negotiating with the companies.”

Jessa raises an eyebrow and says, “Are you sure? I don’t want to step on toes.”

“To be honest, I think it’s about time we parted ways. My agent hasn’t done a lot to help me in the past year.”

She nods. “Okay, send me whatever information you need me to know. I can schedule things and get the ball rolling to finish out your media obligations. Well, until the games start, anyway.”

I smile, grateful she’s here and willing to go all in. Maybe I should’ve found someone like her a lot sooner. But when I was only focused on the four to five months of lacrosse and trying to survive on a different career’s income, it was harder to make the switch or take the time to do that.

She drives us back to the house. I’m determined to get everything inside in one trip, so I loop all the bags over my wrist and walk as quickly as I can across the street.

“Make sure you hang everything up. I don’t want to see it on the floor with wrinkles when you need to wear it.”

I laugh and call out over my shoulder, “Okay, Mom.”

I might not be able to see her face, but I can definitely feel the invisible daggers she’s shooting at me.

This might not be the worst arrangement I’ve ever had.

10

Jessa

My mind has been going a mile a minute since our shopping trip yesterday. Maybe it’s the urge to fix things in me that makes it hard to concentrate if things aren’t just so, but part of me wonders if Daphne and upper management know all the missing pieces for this Lancers team. The lack of a photographer and social media person are two slots that should be filled almost immediately.

Sure, it can be a colossal pain in the behind, but there's something about knowing there's some tangible growth happening for this club, even if it's just in the slow uptick of followers.

I have to make this into a seamless, understandable schedule for my brain and so far, it's not quite fitting nicely.

I've contacted the two companies sponsoring Clark. He's set to head back out to their studio to get the photos and media they need for his campaigns in two weeks.

That means I have fourteen days of major work on his media presence and confidence in front of a camera before we have to go back, but I think we'll be fine.

What would be great is to get some shots of the guys now. That's one problem with being thousands of miles from my hometown. I don't have a contact for everything I need.

I used to love photography and even took a few classes in high school and college, loving that it was an escape from the harder subjects I didn't enjoy.

There are a bunch of other things I should do, like coming up with a detailed guide of how I'm going to get Clark comfortable in front of a camera, but I'm now hyper-focused on finding a good camera on the local classifieds.

There's been enough scams for me to realize what's good and what's not. So after scouring through the listings for a bit, I finally find one for a decent price. I'll have to order a better lens, but at least it's a start to taking photos of the team. I might be the image reform gal for Clark, but I can imagine a few others would benefit from this system.

After meeting the person in a Walmart parking lot, we exchange the money for the

camera. The guy is kind of shifty and so once I'm in the car again, I go through every single pocket, making sure he didn't leave any random allergens or possible dangers in there.

Everything looks to be in order.

I don't have time to go back to the house and change, so I drive to the arena. At least I'm in jeans and a T-shirt, which is going to be a lot easier to take pictures in than a pantsuit.

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On the way over, I call Coach Martin to ask if I can take pictures of the guys, to which he willingly agrees.

I've got at least twenty minutes before the team comes out to practice, so I set up at the door of the locker room and wait. I take a few pictures so I can test out the different buttons. In the past, I'd used a competing camera brand I'd rented for my classes, so this will be a test run.

"I don't recognize you without the robe on," Jackson says, walking out of the locker room.

I laugh and shake my head. "You must've at least a little to know I'm your neighbor."

I lift the camera and take a pic of him.

"Why do you have a camera?" he asks, looking nervous.

"Just trying to help build the team with fan engagement. Give me a smile."

With his hair sticking up, I click a few pictures, knowing I'll be able to use this at some point.

The team slowly streams out of the locker room and then I see Clark, his dark-blue eyes locked with mine.

To break the awkward release of bubbles in my stomach, I lift the camera and take a candid of him.

“Is this part of the remodeling process?” he asks, looking as though he’s going to throw up.

“Yeah, I need a few pics to post to your social platforms. What better way than to start here?”

I lift the camera and take another picture, but he only looks worse. “Okay, you look like you drank straight lemon juice. What’s going on in your head?”

He swallows and my gaze travels down to focus on his throat, surprised at how much I enjoy seeing his Adam’s apple move with the action.

Don’t be weird, Jessa.

“I’m just not the greatest at pictures, you know?”

I tilt my head to the side and say, “That’s a lie. You were always taking pictures when you’d hang out with Brock. Remember when you made that water slide out of an old billboard sign? I think you filled an entire memory card with videos that day.”

“That was a long time ago,” Clark mutters.

It’s then that Burton comes out and puts an arm around Clark’s shoulders, looking like he’s more than happy to share.

“Look up the Lancers vs. Rattlesnakes game from two years ago. The post media interview is worth the stomach cramps from laughing.”

Clark isn’t laughing, though. He looks like he’s ready to run through a wall so he doesn’t have to stand here any longer.

I lift the camera and take a quick picture of the two of them, knowing it doesn't show Clark in the best light right now, but he needs to get used to the camera.

"Good luck at practice," I say, giving Burton a silent thank you when Clark turns away. If Clark is going to be guarded about it, at least I'll know what his past trauma is from.

I decide to delay watching the video. I don't need Clark to crawl into a worse place if he knows I've seen whatever's eating him. Not until I can make some notes and create a plan.

I spend the rest of the practice walking around and taking pictures of the guys, happy to have at least some content for a few days. These can go into carousel posts and some reels to get us started. I'm not an expert at it, but anything is better than nothing.

Instead of sticking around for the rest of practice, I head out, knowing I've got a lot ahead of me.

My careful plans are going to need to be tweaked after I watch whatever I hope is causing Clark's struggle with interviews.

I'm inside and take my laptop over to the countertop, opening my search engine and typing in the information Burton gave me earlier.

From the amount of views on the post, this is going to be a sizeable piece of trauma.

The reporter standing next to a slightly younger Clark says, "Walk us through that last play. Few people can send their team onto the next round of playoffs with a last second goal."

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The mic goes in front of Clark. He looks so confident there, like he knows exactly what he's supposed to be doing. So different from the man I photographed earlier.

“Uh, yeah, so I had the ball and—I mean, I didn't really have the ball until I did, and then it was just, you know, go-go-go... turn off the brain and let the muscle memory take over. And then... goal! Yeah, we won. It was cool.”

Okay, so it was a little awkward. But he was probably talking himself through the process as he remembered it.

I scroll down to the comments, and that's where it begins.

“He speaks fluent panic.”

“Is that what we're calling zoning out these days?”

There are thousands of other responses, but my heart hurts for him. The Clark I know is just that passionate about lacrosse and I love him for it. Okay, definitely not love. I admire him for following his dream. I only wish I'd done that sooner.

I click out of the video to see he was made into a meme. I'm actually surprised I didn't see this before.

This has to be why he's so uncomfortable around cameras.

I stare at Clark's face, trying to see his underlying feelings. The guy looks okay until the end, almost relieved that he's been able to describe the play.



Was something said after the interview?

It takes a minute to find the longer video, but I watch the same footage as before and then it continues.

“That’s all? Maybe I need to try lacrosse,” the reporter says.

“Well, I mean, it takes some practice, but lacrosse is the perfect game for anyone who can take a hit.”

“How often do you get hit in the head?” the reporter asks, but there’s something different in his tone, like he’s steering this entire discussion to make fun of Clark.

“It’s illegal to hit someone in the head, but accidents happen.”

“You heard it here, folks,” the reporter says, turning to face the camera. “This sport isn’t for the weak in body.”

The clip shut off and I again went to the comments.

“That guy talks like he’s been hit in the head a few times.”

“Did you catch how the reporter mentioned ‘weak in body’ and not in mind?”

Of anything I’ve learned about Clark, he’s far from dumb. He obviously hasn’t had the training some of the more well-known athletes have had when dealing with lame questions from reporters.

I spend the next few hours studying the interviews of many athletes and celebrities, noting when to deflect, when to avoid, and when they were outright blunt. If it can be used to help prep Clark, I’ll use it.

I thought I was invested before, but it seems I've taken on second-hand revenge for what that reporter did to Clark and his confidence in front of a camera.

It's late, and I'm thoroughly exhausted. I can't help but smile though, because I've got a plan, one of the best I've had in a while.

11

Clark

"Did you really have to mention the video to Jessa?" I ask Burton as we make our way home. We carpooled together and had I known how much of my life could be ruined by that one video, and sharing it with Jessa, I would've gone by myself.

Burton reaches over and hits me on the shoulder, sending me into the door and my head knocking into the window.

"Are you an idiot?"

I frown and shake my head. "No, contrary to popular opinion. I'm just a guy who wants to play lacrosse."

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“And you’ve got the best situation ahead of you if you’d just fix what you’ve got going on here. Giving Jessa a big part of your mental block might just be the way to get you cured. Then at least you don’t have to try to describe it. She can see it all firsthand and then do her thing from there.”

Shaking my head, I say, “I doubt it. I’m not the best at interviews.”

“Did you see my final one at the end of the season last year?” Burton waits a moment and then says, “I talked about lacrosse as if it was part of a dinner menu. I’m telling you, man. Don’t screw this up, so the rest of us can get the help we need.”

He’s dead serious, but from his words, I can’t help but laugh at the whole situation.

“You’d think there would’ve been something like this in college,” I say.

“For what?”

“Like a prep class for interviewing.”

Burton shakes his head. “Are you kidding? At our school, they just made it as easy as possible for the athletes to win and basically guided us through the interview process. Now, it’s like the reporters are just trying to make us look like meatheads.”

I nod, chewing on that for a moment.

“The hardest part to get past is the worry. Am I going to be humiliated again?”

Burton glances over and says, “The real question is, do you want to be paid well for giving it your best shot? Or are you going to hide and feel sorry for yourself because you got made fun of a couple of years ago?”

Well, that was definitely direct.

We let the silence marinate for a few moments as we pull down the road to our house.

I get out of Burton’s car and grab my stuff from the backseat, knowing I’ve got to get this fixed. I can’t sit and worry about how everyone is going to take my words. I need to show them my fun, relaxed side and let everything slide that people add about my words.

“Are you not going inside?” Burton asks.

“No, I think I’ll take your advice and get working on things right now.” I take my bag with me over to Jessa’s house and knock on the door. As I stand there, I wonder if I should’ve taken another shower before coming over. I took one at the arena, but sometimes it takes my body a while to register that we’re no longer working out.

The door opens. “Hey Clark. Do you need something?”

Why does she have a pitying look on her face?

“You watched the clip, didn’t you?” I say, trying to push the frustration down.

“Yeah, what’s wrong with that? I have to have all the facts to help you, and knowing the root cause is the best for that.”

I sigh, remembering Burton’s words. “True. Do you have time to work on some pretend interviews, or what’s the next step for this?”

That I'm flustered is an understatement, but I've been through enough games in my career to know that nothing can get better if we don't push through the hard.

"Yeah, I was just working on a plan."

There's a large peal of brakes and I turn to see a large semi parking in front of the house.

"They're here," Jessa says, clapping her hands.

"Is that your stuff?" I ask. Peeking into the house, all I see are bare floors. I didn't realize she doesn't have any furniture yet.

She nods. "Do you mind if we wait until they're done moving everything in? I'd love to direct them and not have to move things a few times."

I nod. "For sure. Let me know if you need help lifting anything."

She smiles, and it does something to my chest. I take a step back so she can walk out to greet the guys.

I walk back to the house and try to reason that the feelings I've been going through are normal with Jessa. Maybe we've just spent too much time together and this will all be over when she's successfully fixed me.

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Either way, I need to focus on what's going on with my life and my sport. I've only got a few years left in lacrosse and I've got to stay focused on that. Jessa might not even be here for that long, especially if I can't get my brain to relax.

12

Jessa

"If you'll just bring that dresser in, I'll show you where it needs to go."

Instead of following me, the guy wheels the dresser and leaves it right behind my car before walking back up the ramp for another piece. He's got headphones in, so I do what I can to get his attention. It ends up being a wave with what feels like a bad Irish jig.

"Why did you just put it here?" I ask, trying to be polite when he finally removes his headphones.

"You don't have the proper entry for our dolly to get through without injury. We'll just leave your stuff on the driveway and you can figure out what to do with it."

"So you put it right behind my car? What if I need to go somewhere?"

The guy walks over and moves the dresser just to the right of the back of my car.

"You can't take it inside? In the contract it says I paid you to move my stuff out of my old place, transport it here, and then help me move it into the house."

The man doesn't stop moving things up and down the ramp. The other one with him doesn't say much either.

"There's no way I can move the dresser inside on my own." It's the very sturdy kind, passed down by my parents. It's hard enough to move by sliding, let alone needing to go up the three steps to the front door.

"I'm sorry, but this is the best we can do," the guy says.

I'm not sure whether I should pace or throw things right now. How can a company just do that to their clients?

I sit down on the porch and pull out my phone. It doesn't take long for me to find the receipt for this company, and I read all the smaller print to see what it says.

There's nothing in it that says they can't move the furniture in if there's no ramp.

I walk over to them as they finish taking out the last two pieces of my furniture, along with the boxes of clothes I'd sent.

"There's nothing in your contract that says you can avoid moving the pieces inside." I lift the phone so it's closer to the guy's face.

He swats my hand away. "I don't care what it says. I'm quitting anyway."

The other employee looks confused, as if not sure how to react to that.

"You're quitting? You're supposed to be my trainer."

"Sorry, kid. I need a different career." He pulls out his clipboard and says, "Sign here."

I shake my head. “I’m not signing. The agreement was that you’d put it into the house.”

Instead of saying anything else, the guy walks around the truck and gets in. His partner runs to jump in just as the truck drives away.

I don’t think I’ve been this mad in a long time, and that’s saying something. I’ve had enough stressors to make it so I’m close to that brink often enough, but how am I going to get all of this inside?

It takes everything inside me to push back the panic and tears. This move hasn’t been as easy as I thought it would be. Next time I’ll have to figure out how to do it all myself. Get the truck and just drive it out here or something.

Then again, I hope I won’t have to move for the next couple of years.

I turn to see five men walking over, one of them wheeling a dolly over.

“What are you doing?” I ask, wiping at a stray tear.

“We noticed they were just dropping everything off in the driveway. Tell us where we need to put it,” Clark says.



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“You don’t have to do that,” I say, touched by their willingness to help when I haven’t even asked for it.

“I know you’re strong, Jessa, but I don’t know if you can lift that beast,” he says, pointing to the large dresser. “That thing has been a pain for way too long.”

I smile, laughing. It’s a small thing, but I love that he’s got some experience with the things in my life. It takes away some of the sting in the homesickness that threatens to take over.

I walk up to the door and open it, waiting as Burton and Jackson bring the small couch in.

One by one, the guys bring in everything. It’s when all is inside within thirty minutes that I’m more than grateful.

“Thank you to all of you. Can I send you all some money?” It’s the least I can do.

Burton raises a hand and shakes it. “We’re good. We’re always willing to help a damsel in distress.”

“Why thank you, Burton. How about I make you all dinner this weekend? Let me get unpacked and I’ll get a menu planned.”

Clark frowns. “You know how to cook? Something other than mac and cheese?”

With a slug to his shoulder, I say. “I’ve been on my own for quite a while now, Clark.

I had to learn a few things to make sure I didn't starve."

"Do you teach lessons on that too?" Jackson asks, and I find his expression sincere.

"I'd be willing to help if needed," I say, laughing a bit.

"Good, because we are not eating well in this house," Jackson says, looking like it's the world's worst travesty.

Stack nudges him and shakes his head.

"We eat plenty of good food," Finny says.

"Anyway," Clark says, raising a hand before the conversation can devolve further.

"Let us know if you need help with anything else."

The rest of the group waves and turns back to walk to their house. Clark stays behind.

"Is that all the stuff you brought from Virginia?"

"Yeah, why?" I ask.

"Well, if you need help to get more stuff, I have a friend who works in a furniture store. I can refer you to her."

Something about that sends alarm bells ringing throughout my brain.

"I should be good but thank you."

He nods and says, "Okay, sounds good. Do you need help unpacking your boxes?"

I laugh and say, “Are you wanting to spend more time with me, Denton?”

He chuckles and says, “That’s not a bad thing, right? And I’d love your help in getting this problem solved. We can kind of swap help.”

“Why the sudden urge to improve?”

“There’s a lot riding on it, and I just want to do a good job.”

“Then take the night and relax. We’ll get going on all of that tomorrow.”

He smiles at me, making my stomach go a little soft. “So, you don’t have any homework for me?”

“I’ll send you a few links you can study. Good night, Clark.”

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“Good night, Jessa.”

Watching him walk away, I’m way too focused on watching every muscle. The guy has a much bigger heart than I originally gave him credit for. I’ll need to work on unpacking while finishing out the plan I have for him.

I might’ve been hesitant when I originally found out I’d be working with him, but now I only want his success. And to stop watching him walk away.

13

Clark

“Okay, what are we working on?” I ask Jessa the next day.

I thought we’d be inside one of our houses working on the interviewing process. Maybe using a fake microphone, like a package of spaghetti or something. My house is quiet during this time of day because the other guys are all at their regular jobs.

Instead, we’re standing next to an empty playground at a local park.

“We’re going over some basic interviewing skills. Will you hold onto the monkey bars?”

I swallow and look at her, confused about the instructions. “You want me to go hang from the monkey bars? Aren’t I a little old for that?”

She chuckles. “Don’t you usually do that anyway when you’re working out? It’s just a body hang or something like that.”

She has a point, but it still feels weird that a grown man is playing on the playground.

I barely have to stretch from my standing position.

“Okay, tell me about the first time you held a lacrosse stick.”

I let go of the bars and stare at her. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Clark, we won’t get very far if you don’t shut up and just answer the questions I have for you.” She puts her hands on her hips and gives me a look that says I’d better listen. She’s trying to be intimidating, but she looks adorable when she’s mad at me.

I grin, liking it when she’s assertive. She’s grown into herself and that’s one of the hottest things about her. I mean, if I were interested in dying. Brock would probably not approve of me checking out his sister.

I reach up and take hold of the bar, pulling myself off the ground.

“To be honest, holding a lacrosse stick for the first time wasn’t that exciting. My mom signed me up for many activities back then, hoping I’d like one that would suck all the energy out of me before she had to take me home.”

Jessa laughs and says, “I can understand why she did it.”

My hands burn and I have to readjust my grip once or twice.

She pulls out her phone and points it at me.

“You better not be recording,” I say.

“This is just for practice. Sometimes it’s good to see what you’re doing after the fact so you can fix it.”

I wish she wasn’t right. I’m not good at watching video of myself, but that’s the one thing Coach Martin won’t bend on.

“Fine. What kind of torture is next?”

“I’m surprised you’ve stayed up there that long. Um, when did you know you wanted to play lacrosse more than just recreationally?”

“I think it was my sophomore year of high school. We were playing Groveton, our biggest rivals. I had a breakout game and became a regular starter after that. The adrenaline and scoring was addicting.”

“Okay, you can get down.”

I let go of the bars and start rubbing at my palms, trying to take away the sting as soon as possible.

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She turns the phone around and presses play, showing me hanging onto the bars. In my brain, I was struggling, but I actually don't look too bad hanging there.

“What are some good things you saw in this clip?” she asks.

“Please tell me I don't have to write a paper on this,” I joke.

She puckers her lips and shakes her head. “There's a reason I didn't go into teaching. We're talking about the positives. What are some things you see that went well?”

I glance back at the screen and blow out a breath, unsure of what to say. It was nowhere near the polished ones she'd sent me to study the night before.

“The only thing I can come up with is that I answered the question while still holding onto the bar.”

Jessa frowns, looking as though a storm is about to come in.

“What are you talking about? You went from looking terrified to your normal self. And you even smiled while the video was going.”

“Because this exercise is ridiculous.”

“Are we complaining about a process that might be outside of the typical box but is helping you? Because I can always smack you upside the head and see how you feel after that.”

I laugh loudly, bending over as I continue. “You definitely have some spunk,” I say when I finally relax a bit.

“There’s no way to get through life than to be more assertive.”

A thought pops into my head, and I wonder what happened to her that made her have that attitude. I know it hasn’t always been her forte, but it’s a good look for her now.

Maybe the deadbeat ex-boyfriend?

“Okay, this time I want you to hang upside down from the bars while I ask you a question.”

I stare at her for an extra few seconds and then sigh. It takes some work, but I finally hang upside down like a bat.

“Do you think I’ll suddenly have a billion dollars and become a vigilante if I hang here long enough?” I ask.

Instead of shooting me a warning look, she snorts and then we both laugh.

“You think you could fight for justice in black spandex?”

I laugh and shake my head. I have to lift up a little to give my head a break from the blood rushing to it.

“I fight for justice daily in my own home. I wonder if this is how my parents felt when I was growing up.”

She laughs again and says, “Probably. Anyway, let’s get back to the exercise.”



“Was this some idea you found on the internet?” I ask, pointing to me hanging from the bar.

Instead of addressing my question, she continues with her own. “What did you do with the awful pair of neon green and pink shorts you had as a teen?”

I’m so surprised by the question that I shift my legs and end up letting go of the bars, falling straight to the ground. My hands only help me miss my head, but I slam my shoulder against the sand. I always thought sand would be a cushion for any fall, but it’s maybe one level under cement.

“Are you okay?” Jessa asks, coming to kneel next to me. I lie there for a few extra seconds and take a few breaths.

“I’ll live,” I say, my breath blowing up some sand into my eyes.

Maybe it’s just easier to not worry about cameras.

“I’m so sorry. I thought it would be a good idea. Let me help you up.”

I finally push up off the sand, feeling the grittiness of it all over my body. That’s the one thing I hate about sand. It’s like glitter. It never goes away, no matter how many times you vacuum and empty stuff out.

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I sit on the sand, not wanting to move too quickly.

“What if instead of having me hang from things, we build a sandcastle or something? Is this exercise trying to get in touch with my inner child?” I ask, struggling to keep a straight face.

Jessa frowns and shakes her head. “No. I just thought of the playground so you could do something while distracted from the camera.”

“Well, it turns out it was almost too good of an idea. Anyway, what question did you ask before I tumbled into a concussion?”

Her eyes go wide, and she says, “Please tell me you don’t have a concussion. Coach will kill me.”

I chuckle a bit and say, “I didn’t hit my head, and I’m pretty sure Coach would pick you over me.”

“He’s only met me twice.”

“Exactly,” I say, laughing. I take a couple handfuls of sand and bring it together. It’s too dry, so I dig deeper, finding the sand that will stick together.

“Okay, so the question was your neon shorts. Did you finally give them up? Or did your mom keep them to make you a quilt later?”

“That’s a good idea, actually. She’s kept all of my jerseys over the years, but I don’t

think the neon fabric would go well with the rest of the colors.”

“Your mom can do some incredible things with fabric and a sewing machine.” Jessa digs in the dirt, which is surprising because of her nails. They’re not super long, but they are well taken care of. “Have you been back to see her recently?”

I nod, thinking of the trip I took over for Christmas. “She seems to do well. I told her to move out here by me, but she’s got so many activities with her ladies’ civic club and the quilting stuff that it’s easier for her to stay there.”

“She’s always been a busy lady. I’m sure she appreciated having you visit.”

“I’m not sure. I wonder if I actually hinder her schedule when I’m there. How are your parents?”

“Also enjoying being empty nesters. I hear from them twice a month. I’m sure they’ve been around the world at least six times in the past eightish years.”

“Do you see Brock very often?” I ask, doing my best to shape the sand into a square. This is a lot harder to do without those plastic molds.

“Sometimes. He’s dating a gal, and I think they do a lot with her family since she’s from Chicago and they live close.”

I shake my head. “That’s right. I was going to visit him this past weekend, but I was so flustered from my botched acting abilities I forgot most of the things I needed to remember.”

“Are you happy here?” Jessa asks, turning her head to tame one section of hair that fell out of her ponytail. The action is graceful and makes me want to lean over and kiss her. Except we’re sitting in a big kitty toilet. Not the best place for something

like that.

“Yeah, I like it. There are a lot of things I miss about the East Coast, but there’s plenty to do, depending on the season.”

“That’s good.”

I construct the next part of the small tower I’m working on, but the base isn’t completely sturdy.

“So, um, what happened with Dan?”

Her eyes grow wide, and she takes in a deep breath before she looks away.

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean, nothing?” I ask, stopping my building so I can watch her expression.

“I mean, there’s nothing to tell because we rarely did anything of note.”

“So what made you break up?”

She breathes out, letting the bits of sand fall to the ground as she watches it.

“I wanted more. I want more. I don’t want to be stuck in a cycle out of convenience. If I’m going to be with someone, it’s because I’m learning and growing with them, not tugging them along to do anything.”

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With a small smile, I say, “Well, I’m glad you finally realized that with Dan the Dud. The guy’s personality was awful.”

She regards me before saying, “Yeah, but maybe that was how I look to him, you know?”

“Is that what spurred on the fresh start out here?”

She nods and says, “Absolutely. I knew if I didn’t change scenery, I’d end up in the same position, not making any significant progress in my life.”

“And how has it changed you for the better?”

She laughs. “Maybe we should have you on the other side of the camera. Your questions are good.” She thinks about it for a moment and says, “Well, in my less than a handful of days experience, I’ve learned how to move across the country, for one, and I’ve had to be outgoing because I don’t know anyone yet.”

“Except for me,” I say, giving her a cheesy grin.

“Except for you,” she says, smiling. “Then again, there’s been a lot of years in between when we were teens and now. It’s kind of fun getting to know the older you.”

Something in her eyes is different, as if she’s seeing me for the first time. And with all of her openness about her past relationship with the golfer wannabe, I have this urge to be that for her. To be the one who helps her experience things and enjoy the

big and little things in life.

What's going on with me? I've never had the thought of wanting to pursue a relationship with a woman while still playing lacrosse.

My health is good and I hope to continue playing for the next ten years.

The endorsements help, but could I support a family on what I'm making now?

Who am I kidding? There's no way she'd even look at me as anything other than Brock's friend.

Something about that hurts and I wish I could fix it now.

Jessa stands up, swiping the sand off her pants and working to get it out of her sandals.

"Did I pass, Coach?" I ask, trying to change the mood. Not that there's anything wrong, but I need to shake this from my system and now.

Lacrosse needs to be my focus, as well as helping my teammates improve.

Jessa laughs and says, "Maybe. Hopefully, there's no lingering injuries with your shoulder."

I roll the shoulder I landed on and say, "I think we're good. Why don't you ask me another question while we stand here? I can probably handle it now."

She raises her eyebrows and says, "Okay, let's do this."

Jessa

He did not, in fact, handle it.

What can I do to help him, to get him to where he'll be able to look at a camera and not worry so much about it?

Then I think of his mom. Maybe she'd be able to help.

"Can I see your phone for a moment?" I ask.

I reach out my hand to him and he gives me a quizzical look.

"If you want my number, all you have to do is ask."

I groan, knowing while he's improved somewhat, he's definitely got some of that teasing still in his system.

It irritated me several years ago, but after a crappy relationship with Dan, I don't mind it as much. In fact, it's flattering that he'd even try to flirt with me. I'm not good at returning it, though.

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But I shouldn't even try, especially since Daphne specifically warned me against any kind of personal relationship with him. Is that why I'm semi-attracted to him? Because she'd originally planted the thought in my head?

I don't need to ruin the chances of me staying here by dating the guy I'm working with.

I take his phone.

"I thought you already had my number," I say, searching for the video call app on his phone. I finally locate it and search for his mother.

The phone rings and Clark steps closer, confused by whom I could've called.

"Hey Clark," Mary's voice says in a singsong tone.

"Hi Mary," I say, waving at her before I hand the phone over to Clark.

"Wait, was that Jessa?"

Clark turns the phone to face me, and I wave again.

"Yep, it's me."

She grins. "What a fantastic surprise. I didn't know you were in Utah. To be honest, I'm surprised you ever talked to him again after the glitter incident in your car." I laugh, grateful the years have softened the frustration of that moment.



"I'm in Utah now, working with the Stockton Group. Clark is my first client here."

"Oh, I'm so glad he's got someone as wonderful as you. Keep him grounded, will you?" She winks at me, and I laugh.

Glancing up at Clark, he looks like he's not pleased with those comments.

"Here he is," I say awkwardly. I'm not sure how to handle the praise from her.

"Hey Mom," Clark says, looking casual as he holds up the phone.

I pull out my phone and film him, a stark difference from moments ago when the camera was in his face.

"How are things going there, darling? I didn't expect a call from you yet, but I always love hearing your voice."

"We're good. Practices have started. Jessa is helping me figure out what to do about my on-camera interviews."

"Oh, that will be such a big help. Maybe you should try some breathing exercises or some mock interviews?" she says.

"Those are already on the plan," I say, still recording the call from my phone.

Clark makes a face at me before turning back to the camera. "Did you get your quilt finished, Mom?" he asks.

"Oh, I did. Let me go get it to show you."

Clark scrunches up his nose, but he's patient as she takes a few moments to return to

the screen with a beautiful quilt filled with color.

"That's really cool, Mom. All those tiny pieces must've taken you a long time to put together."

"Not too bad. I just turn on my favorite show and get working on it. I moved my big sewing table into the TV room so I don't have to miss anything."

Clark chuckles, one of those deeper rumbling noises that throws my nervous system for a loop.

"Sounds like the perfect combo."

"It was so great to hear from you, son. Can I call you again later? I'm supposed to be getting ready for a dinner this evening with some friends."

"That's just fine, Mom. Love ya."

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Why does my heart melt listening to him with his mom?

I hadn't seen him interact with her in a long time and wonder if they've always been like that or if the passing of his father made him a little more patient with her.

He looks at me, a hint of vulnerability shining through. It only makes me want to protect him, as if he's a wounded bird.

One I wouldn't mind kissing.

Wait, no. I don't need to do anything physical. I need to keep my job.

I'm in trouble and not in a good way.

15

Clark

"So, what was the purpose of calling my mom?" I ask, tucking my phone back into my pocket.

"Just look at how relaxed you are," I say, opening the video on my phone.

It takes me a few seconds to look at the screen because I'm blown away by the happiness and excitement on her face, like she's just discovered a hidden chest of gold.

Why am I having such a surge of feelings for her now?

Maybe because she's been able to let down her defenses a bit and I've seen the woman she's become. And the woman she hopes to become.

Was the sand the trick? If so, I need to remember this when I'm anxious before an event. Or an interview.

"What do you think?" she asks.

It's only then that I come back to the present and realize the video is over. "Um, can you play it one more time?"

She gives me a slight frown and presses the button to play the video. I break my gaze away, knowing it would be embarrassing if I ask to watch it again.

Focusing on the screen, I see my face from the bars again. There's little emotion there, peppered with a small smile. Then she swipes over to the other video, and I have a wide smile on my face as I talk to my mom.

"What do you notice differently from this video to the one where you were hanging from the bar?"

I raise an eyebrow and then finally laugh. "This sounds like some test from school. It's been so long since I've been there."

"Come on. What do you see?" Jessa asks, pointing to the video.

"I'm a lot more relaxed."

She nods. "Absolutely. You look so casual, in a good way. We just need to channel

the relaxed Clark when you have to be in front of a camera."

"If only there was a magic potion or something I could take to fix that."

She grins and shakes her head. "It's called a muscle relaxer, but I don't recommend that for you, especially before a game."

"Can you imagine trying to play lacrosse?" I say, laughing loudly. "Running down the field and just flopping on the turf?"

Jessa's laugh is loud and contagious, making it difficult for me to control my laughter. She's now laughing so hard she's snorting, and I collapse back onto the sand. My stomach feels like I've just done a hundred sit-ups.

She sits down next to me again, trying to stop laughing. A few minutes go by before we can compose ourselves. I wonder what the drivers of passing cars think of two adults just hanging out in the sand. Wishing we could be at the beach?

"Well, that was therapeutic," Jessa says, wiping at the corners of her eyes.

I bend my arm and rest it behind my head, looking up into the sky. My body is buzzing with an energy I've never felt before, and I'm not ready to ruin it.

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“Okay, so I think we've made some progress here. Let me check my plan to see what we need to do next.”

"Please don't tell me we're going skydiving or something," I say, laughing.

Jessa stares at me. “I don’t have that on the list, but I can add it if it will help.”

“Didn’t you say something about skydiving being on your bucket list at one point?”

Her eyes widen and she nods. “Yeah, that was a while ago. I forgot about it. Are you afraid of heights?”

Shaking my head, I say, "No, but I'm saving that for when I'm done with lacrosse."

"I didn't have you pegged for the all-out adrenaline rush kind of guy. Interesting."

"What about you? Would you fall out of a plane with nothing but some rope and a thin parachute to keep you from dying?"

She looks terrified. “I don't think I've thought about it that deeply before. Maybe I should scratch that off the invisible list.”

"There are things I've thought about way too much. Like interviews and cameras."

"We just need you to have an enjoyable experience with them. Oh, I remember what's next. This Saturday, the team is taking part in an event called Play It Forward."

"Okay, what do I need to do?"

She taps her chin and says, "That I have to do some research on. The name of the contact I have is Milo, and I haven't gotten a response just yet."

I nod, knowing I'll need to prepare for a lot of cameras if it's an event where all the team will be.

"You'll be fine, Clark," Jessa says, as if reading my mind. She pats me on the arm, her skin so soft.

"Thanks," I say. I'm not as sure as she is, but I still have a few days before I need to worry about that.

"Should we head out? I need to get a few things ready for social media. And I have my TV again and can watch my show."

I raise an eyebrow. "Which show is this?"

"It's a newer series about a detective who finds out she's a paranormal and has to go on a treasure hunt to figure out her family history."

I blink a few times and then nod. "Paranormal, huh? Like witches and werewolves?"

She blushes and nods. "I'm a sucker for a good mystery."

"I'm interested to hear more about it."

There's a slight hesitation and she says, "You can come watch it, if you want. I'd even be willing to go back a few episodes so you can catch up."

I can't tell if there's hope in her voice or if she's just being polite and really wants me to leave her alone.

My phone pings with a reminder.

"Rain check?" I say. "I'm supposed to meet with the coaches in an hour."

She nods, averting her gaze so I can't tell if she's happy or disappointed. "Sounds great. Let me know if you need anything for the meeting."

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Jessa

Our adventure in the park was very eye-opening.



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I should probably try to keep Clark away with a ten-foot pole, but I find myself more and more at ease around him. I don't feel like I have to change anything or be someone I'm not. His light teasing is actually kind of fun, too.

Who am I and what happened to the crazy type-A Jessa?

I'm not completely gone, but is this what it's like when I relax? It's been so long since I've had that luxury.

With Dan, it felt like I was always wound up. I'd be worried about why he wasn't looking for work, even after borrowing money from me a number of times. Then I'd spend hours putting together the perfect date, hoping that if everything was done exactly how I envisioned it, the spark we'd had at the beginning of our relationship would return. That was more of a subconscious thought than anything.

Each and every time I'd head home disappointed that things weren't how I wanted them to be.

And yet, yesterday was practically a dumpster fire and I have nothing but good feelings about it.

I'm grateful Clark wasn't seriously injured when he fell off the monkey bars. That's probably the last time I should get "real ideas" from the internet about how to get out of a rut.

I've probably replayed the scene where I impulsively invited Clark over to watch a show a hundred times. He was kind about saying he had something, which is why I

need to keep telling myself he's not interested in me like that. I shouldn't be either, but there was a point while I was sitting in the sand that I didn't care about the consequences of anything.

On the off-chance Clark might be attracted to me, would I give up this job to see where it went?

That's something I'll have to think about more deeply, when I'm not trying to track down information about an event that can give Clark some good practice at communicating. I'd imagine there will be a bunch of cameras around as well.

Maybe we should try exposure therapy?

I laugh and shake my head, knowing that buying one camera was a stretch to my budget.

I focus on the notebook in front of me.

After a lot of research, this Play It Forward event sounds like such a great thing, but it would be nice if someone were available to answer questions. I wanted to get things ready so I could prep the team, but it's been all quiet on the Wasatch Front.

Maybe another call would help? Or should I look for another charity?

It isn't until around two that afternoon when I get a whirlwind of emails and messages about the Play It Forward event. It's about time.

I call Clark, waiting for him to answer.

He finally picks up right before his voicemail.

"Hey," he says, his words soft because he's out of breath.

"Hey, are you running?"

He chuckles and says, "Yeah. Well, I just finished. What's up? Are we doing some more princess training?"

"Did you just call yourself a princess?"

"I couldn't come up with another funny line that quickly."

We both laugh, and it feels good to do it so randomly. Just like when we were at the park. Ugh, I can't keep collecting moments like this.

"No training today. We'll just need to be ready for tomorrow. The event starts at ten in the morning. I'll send you the address to the park. You'll be meeting a bunch of kids from the community and teaching them a bit about lacrosse." I glance down at the emails and search to make sure my information is correct. "It looks like you'll have the freedom to teach them whatever you want."

"So are we running a practice of sorts? A clinic? What are the people expecting us to do?"

I grit my teeth, wishing I had more information about that. "I'm not sure. This is the least amount of information for any event I've ever been part of. I would think that coming up with a plan with your roomies would be a good idea, though. It's never good when the kids suffer because of lack of communication." I scan one of the emails again and see an apology for the late information. "It sounds like their communications director had her baby early and they weren't prepared."

Now I feel bad for being irritated.

"I'll talk to the guys and we'll come up with something."

“Perfect. Let me know what I can help with. There will probably be a few cameras around, and they might need you to do an interview, so prep for that. I’ll be there to help. We can even call your mom beforehand if needed.”

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He laughs, the deep rumbling doing something to my chest. "I don't know if that would be any better, but I guess whatever will help the cause."

We hang up, and I smile, thinking of Clark interacting with the kids. He'd always been good with the ones in our neighborhood as a teen and had even helped a bunch of the younger field rat siblings get excited when they saw him.

I'm curious to see what he comes up with for tomorrow. It'll be a good time to get shots of all the players on my camera, and maybe I'll do an impromptu interview to help him get used to it.

I spend the afternoon creating posts and trying to get things started for the social media platforms.

There's a call from Coach Martin around dinnertime, and while I'm mentally exhausted from the day, I know I probably shouldn't let it go to voicemail.

"Hey Coach," I say, leaning back on the wall in my bedroom. I glance around and see that I've moved so much while working in my bed that I've pulled the comforter almost all to the one side.

"Jessa, how did things go today?"

"They went well, Coach. How can I help you?" When I'm not in the mood for small talk, my filter slips.

"That's a great question. I was thinking about Clark and figured I'd check in. How are

things coming along with him?"

"There's some progress, not a ton, but enough to give me hope."

"Good, good. Is there anything I can do?" he asks.

"Not unless you can think of anything that would help him get over this. I'm planning to do some fake interviews, and I've worked on his wardrobe. The guy needed help with his style."

Coach Marting chuckles. "That's awesome. I'm grateful for that. He's a good-looking guy who loves his comfort."

"Well, hopefully he's a little more ready to go. Also, does the organization not have a camera crew or social media people? I thought that was just standard stuff."

"You would think that, but we'll get there. Stockton just bought out the company less than a year ago, and while sometimes their movements feel slower than we'd like, they'll get around to it. I'll push that along, though."

"Well, I started a new profile for the team. The other one only had a few strange posts anyway."

"Yeah, that was probably Penny. She was the granddaughter of the old owners and they kind of let her do what she wanted."

"That makes sense. It might not be big money at the beginning but every bit helps when we're trying to help the guys progress. I've got a camera and can get that started, if you're okay with it?"

"That's outstanding, Jessa. If you need to be on the field to get shots for any of this,

you have my approval. Anything that will help the guys get the recognition they deserve, I'm behind it."

I tear up a bit. Would Brock's career have looked different if he had someone like Coach Martin in his corner?

He'd been injured, but the coach hadn't given him the time of day when he came back the following year, looking at him as damaged goods.

"Thanks, Coach. That means a lot for even me, and I don't play."

"You know where to find me, Jessa. Have fun and I'll see you soon."

"Oh, before you go, have you heard about anything for this event tomorrow?"

Maybe the organization had sent the more intensive and detailed instructions to him.

"Yeah, it's going to be a good one. The Play It Forward organization donates the equipment and our guys will show up to interact with the kids."

"Do you have a time frame? I'm worried the guys won't show until noon and then the kids will miss most of the activities."

"Let me check on that." I wait for his words, my pen poised to write it down.

"Okay, it looks like we'll need to be there for registration at nine and then the day ends at three thirty."

I hadn't planned something that long. "That helps. Are we filling the slots for registration or how is that working?"

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"No, they'll have a couple of people who come and do it. I think we can just play a few games and make it fun for the kids. I wish we had something the guys could sign for the kids."

Nodding, I try to think of something that would work. If they haven't had a camera person for their club, which makes it feel like this club is still in the nineteenth century, then they probably don't have some great action shots to create cards with.

But I took pictures at practice.

My photo editing skills are even more rusty than using a camera, so it might not be a good idea to try anything fancy.

"I'll see what I can do," I say.

"Thanks for all you do. We're already making progress in the few days since you've been here."

I laugh. "I don't think I've done much of anything yet."

To be honest, I'm a little let down by my progress so far. The athletes I'd worked with in the past had been easier than Clark, although not as interesting.

Maybe it's the oldest daughter people pleasing in me taking over with those thoughts, but I'm hoping to get rid of some of that now that I'm not living at home.

I plug the camera into my older laptop and start scrolling through the pictures I took



the other day at practice. Maybe there's something I can do with these.

It's going to take a miracle.

17

Clark

"Okay, team. We need to be all in today, all right?" I say. Each of my teammates is in a circle around me, and I feel like we're getting ready to head out onto the field for the first game of the season. That's not for another week, though.

"How hard can it be?" Jackson asks.

I laugh, knowing if the sun doesn't kill our energy, the kids will have drained it right from our souls. That tidbit comes from several summers of experience back home. I smile as I think of Jessa telling me I'm good with kids. Something about that makes me turn to look for her.

"Hard," Burton says, tossing a ball into the air and catching it in the pocket of his stick.

"Stay hydrated and if the drill doesn't work, improvise," I say. "Tweak it so the kids catch on or play a game."

We're sitting in the shade, and I watch as the line of kids and their parents winds around the cinderblock building in the middle of the baseball complex. This is the largest park closest to downtown Salt Lake, with the baseball fields and a grassy area that can hold at least four or five full-length lacrosse fields.

That's a lot of kids, even for the number of guys on our team.

We're going to have to get creative.

I glance around and am surprised Jessa isn't here yet. I figured she'd be the first one to the fields. But then again, I don't know how much of her job is just babysitting me or if she has to do other things as well.

I pull out my phone to call her.

"Hey, Clark. What's up?"

"Are you planning to come to the field today?" I ask, trying to figure out the easiest way to ask that. I don't want to be super needy, but what I want to ask her makes it sound that way.

"Yeah, I just have to swing by the printer and then I'll be there."

"Would you be able to go to my house and grab the water guns in the garage?"

There's a long pause and then she says, "Yeah. I guess. What are you going to do for water?"

Good question. "There's a big bucket for our random sports crap. Just dump it out and bring that. There's a hose here we can fill it up with."

"Anything else?" She sounds like she's taking our lunch order.

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"That would be a huge help. Thank you!" I say loud enough to tease. Shutting the phone, I lean back against the tree, trying to work up the energy to entertain dozens of kids.

"What are you all doing over here?" A lanky guy asks.

I turn to look at him and am about to shoo him away when I see he's wearing a Play It Forward T-shirt.

"We're just waiting for the camp to start."

"Well, this is the best-looking lacrosse camp we've had so far on the tour," the guy says.

Tour? "What's your name?"

"I'm Milo. I work for the organization that heads this up."

"Have there been a bunch of camps so far?" Stack asks.

Milo nods. "From over twenty sports. I think this is my thirty-fourth camp. Which is why I had to bring the coffee this morning, you know? I mean, I don't think I'd be able to function once the kids get going if I didn't have the caffeine pumping through my veins."

"Any advice?" I ask, folding my arms over my chest. I might be competitive, but I don't need to be for a camp. It's not like anyone here is going to another one of these

and will compare notes. Well, except Milo here.

"Keep the kids going. They'll be fans for life. There was a time when a kid came to one of our baseball camps and he loved it so much he decided to?"

"Okay, boys," the gal from registration says, walking over. "We have five different colored shirts, so we'll just need the kids to be in that many groups. You'll need to keep track of the younger ones so they don't wander, especially for bathroom breaks."

We all nod, knowing that's probably a friendly reminder.

"Oh, Milo. When did you get here?" I squint to read her nametag. Stephanie.

"Just a few minutes ago. I didn't realize the directions like north and west were so important when putting them into the GPS, so I ended up out by the Salt Flats. I might have to take a ride out there later. I think I saw an endangered bird."

I glance at my teammates, trying to figure out if this guy is for real or not.

"Well, it's good to have you here," Stephanie says, giving him a smile. "Do you want to lead out the hillside talk?"

"Absolutely." He turns to us and says, "Okay, tell me your names."

I point to myself and say, "You want our names?"

He nods.

"Clark Denton."

"Burton."

And so on down the line. There's no way this guy is going to remember this.

The registration line finally dies down and all the kids have their gear on and cleats tied. The players are all sitting on a small hill that leads from the baseball fields down to the large grassy area. This must be time for the talk.

"Welcome, families," Milo begins. "This is such a great time to learn about sports. We're excited to be partnering with the Salt Lake Lancers for this event. If you're here for the street hockey event, that registration will start in about thirty minutes."

I turn to look at Burton and mouth, "Street hockey?"

"Yes, Clark, street hockey," Milo says, turning to give us a look. How in the world did he hear that?

"Okay, we're ready for the groups to be split up. Remember, various charities have donated all of this equipment and it is yours to keep. We only ask that if your player decides not to play in the future, that you donate it to a club in need rather than selling it."

They get all of that gear for free? I could've used something like that as a kid.

"We've got sixty players ready to go. We'll let Clark assign where the groups will play and enjoy your day."

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I'm surprised by the sudden responsibility I now have, but I nod and get moving, knowing we've got to look like this was planned all along.

"Okay, when I call out your colors, I'll point to the coaches you'll start with this morning. You'll be with them until we switch."

It doesn't take long to get the kids all split up across the park.

We're about thirty minutes in and I'm working with the smallest group. With them all dressed in their tiny lacrosse gear and helmets that make their heads look giant, I can't help but grin. They look so cute.

"Okay, get a little lower to scoop the ball," I say to one of them and show what they're supposed to do. "Think of how you sit in a chair."

"A big chair, or a little one?" one kid asks in a high-pitched voice.

It takes a few seconds for me to think that through, hoping I'm answering it so they can understand.

"One you don't have to climb on. You can just walk over and sit on it."

I walk around as they pass the ball back and forth, every once in a while getting an actual catch. They get so excited at this age, and I love it. It makes me think of how much I loved lacrosse at that age. How I still love it.

I glance up at the hill and see Jessa there, a whole wagon of stuff next to her. She's

got the camera out and is taking pictures.

"What do we do next, Coach?"

Grinning, I say, "We're going to do another drill before we have a drink break. Does that work?"

"Yep," the boy says, nodding and running back to his spot.

Jessa has moved on to other groups. It's cool she has the talent of taking pictures. It seems like her talents have quadrupled since I knew her in high school.

I leave my group with Finny and walk over to check on the wagon. She's got a lot more than was in my garage.

There are water guns and water balloons, along with several hula hoops and a bowling set. I'm not sure what we'd use those for, but I guess I just have to think in terms of lacrosse skills and come up with something on the fly.

The kids get a water break, and we leave them in the shade for a few minutes to beat the crazy heat wave we've got going through this area.

"Hey," I say to Jessa when I walk up to her. "How's it going?"

She turns to me, and I see she's got slight bags under her eyes. "It's going. How are things for you?"

"Good. It's going to be a long day."

"I'm sure it will feel great at the end."

"Thanks for getting that stuff."

She turns to look at the wagon and says, "No problem. Hopefully, it helps. I added a few things, trying to find anything that could work for lacrosse drills. I figured you could set up the bowling pins and have them try to throw a ball and get a strike? Then the hula hoops would be good for a Tic Tac Toe or something? I think I remember that as one of Brock's favorite drills when he was younger."

"I totally forgot about that one. Thank you."

She grins. "Of course. I'm glad I could help. Is that an outfit we bought?"

I glance down at the shorts and my Lancers T-shirt. "No. I figured I'd try to represent the team since we're all here together."

She nods and taps her forehead with her palm. "I'm even more of a zombie than I thought."

I don't get a chance to ask why she's a zombie because the buzzer on my phone goes off.

It's time to get back at it. We rotate the groups before settling into the same drills. We can use the water guns and other things for after lunch.

We make it through to the lunch break and I see Jessa talking to one kid. She's got the camera trained on him, asking him a question. Even though I'm not a fan of the camera, I walk over, curious to hear what this little guy will say.



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"Why do you like lacrosse?" Jessa asks.

"Because you can like smash other guys when you're playing," he says, his face so animated, "And you can do some sneak plays where you trick the other team and then score. It's the best."

"How long have you played?" Jessa asks.

"This is my second year. I'm seven." He grins, showing a few missing teeth.

It's then I realize that the surrounding boys laugh at his answer, but he just smiles wider.

Maybe I can take a lesson from this kid.

For all the things Jessa has put me through, she's shown me a few things that need to be fixed, and I'm determined to do it.

Because what if this kid decides to play after high school and college? What if I can pave the way to make his life better in this sport?

The day flies by and the kids have an overall great time, which is good, because I'm dead. My legs are tired, and I'm pretty sure I got sunburned.

"Clark Denton," Jessa says, holding up the camera. "How would you say the day turned out?"

There's a quick shiver of fear running up my spine before I turn and say, "Well, I think it was an enjoyable experience overall. What did you think?"

She grins and says, "It was good. We have one more thing we need you and your team to do before the kids go home."

She points to a long table set up with something on top of it. "Will you sign a few things for the kids?"

I walk over with her, surprised to see a whole poster on the table of most of my teammates. Along with that are little individual cards, as well as dozens of lacrosse balls.

"Where did you get this?" I ask, surprised by it. The pictures look like us from a practice, but the colors of the pinnies have been changed to the Lancer teal color. They're all interposed, with one picture blending into the other.

"I worked on it most of the night. Luckily, there was a printer available to make those on short notice."

"Did you pay for all of it yourself?" I ask, knowing it must've cost a small fortune. Not that I know what her finances are, but there's a sliver of gratitude she'd be willing to just give herself to make the kids happy.

She shrugs. "It wasn't that much. Anything to help the kids, right?"

I call the guys over and have them sit in the chairs behind the table, markers ready to sign the posters and balls.

Jessa helps the kids line up and they bounce around, so excited to get some signed items. It might not seem like a big deal for us, but seeing all these kids excited for a

signature from lacrosse players is like the perfect circle moment, since there weren't any pros close to us when I was this young to enjoy.

After signing one poster, I glanced up to see Jessa, poised with her camera taking pictures of the group.

The woman is selfless and all things good. I might not be able to stop myself from falling for her, but is that really the worst thing in the world?

18

Jessa

I got some great shots of the guys today and the interview with the little ones melted my heart.

The biggest surprise was that Clark didn't shy away from the camera when I was recording him.

Once I get home, I find a few pictures to add to the social platforms and then settle in for a bubble bath. After staying up so late, it feels nice to relax and not have anything pressing for a few hours.

I get out and dry off, putting on my pajamas so I can veg the rest of the night.

There's a knock on the front door and while I still jump a bit from the sudden noise, at least I know it's mostly safe in this neighborhood.

"Hey Clark. Come in."

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He'd been so cute with the kids today. And while I should guard my heart, it's pretty hard to keep anything intact after seeing how cute he was, especially when explaining the littlethings. He's so dynamic and excited about the sport that the kids absolutely loved it.

"I just wanted to check in and see how things were with you. Thank you for those posters. I can't imagine all you had to do to make them look like that. And the kids thought it was the greatest."

"I was talking to Coach Martin last night and came up with the idea. I'm glad it worked out."

"Do you need anything?" Clark asks, and I glance around.

"I don't think so. What about you? Is there anything you need from me?"

He grins and shakes his head. "No. I don't think so."

"You did amazing on that one question interview I gave you today." I reach out and pat his bicep but realize too late that that was a bad idea. A terrible idea. The guy is strong, and I don't need any help to sway my feelings to him right now.

He laughs, lifting his hand to rub his neck. When he looks at me, his face is flushed. "Well, I had to follow the example of that one little boy you interviewed."

"He was pretty great, huh?"

Clark nods and turns to look at the TV screen. I'd paused it when he knocked on the door.

"Are you watching the detective show?"

"Yes, I love it. Well, I already told you about it." Why is the panic rising inside me?

"Do you mind if I cash in that rain check?" he asks.

I'm stunned that he's actually wanting to learn more about something I like. Is this just another trauma I have from Dan's lack of interest in anything I cared about?

"Absolutely. I make no promises that I'll be awake by the end of it though."

He laughs and nods. "I get that. I might fall asleep, too. It was a long day."

We take a seat on the couch, and I throw him a small blanket from the basket next to it. It's nice having my stuff here, even if the place isn't completely decorated yet. I might as well secure my position for SMG before I get too settled.

The couch is a lot smaller than I thought it was before, but that's what happens when it's holding more than just me.

We're basically right next to each other, and my skin is burning. In a good way, I guess? I'm not sure right now. My brain is all muddled.

"Are you good?" Clark asks, sitting so close I'm constantly glancing down at his lips. They look very kissable right now.

"Yep," I say, my voice squeaking. What is my problem? I'm closer to thirty than twenty. I shouldn't be freaking out like this. "Do you need, uh, a drink or

something?"

He has a somber look on his face, like he's trying to decide something, and then he says, "No, I think I'm good for now."

Why does it feel like my nervous system has rioted and now I'm not sure how to react? This has never happened before, even with Dan.

Am I spending too much time with Clark?

I focus on the TV, trying to mentally recite all the lines, but I'm highly aware of Clark next to me. How in the blazes do I get myself into these situations?

Okay, this isn't a common occurrence, so I can't even complain.

"What you did for the kids today, it was something special," Clark says, his words silky like milk chocolate.

"Thanks. You did most of the work."

"Who figured out when we were supposed to be there? That we'd have to come up with a game plan? That was all you."

I nod, still feeling unsettled about something. As much as I love working with Clark, do I love the stress of the unknown on a daily basis?

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He uses his elbow to nudge me. "What's wrong? You look like you swallowed a sweet pickle."

I then exaggerate my expression because there isn't a lot worse than a sweet pickle. It's got to defy the law of the taste buds, but in a bad way.

"I don't know. It's hard to figure out my place now, you know?"

He turns to look at me more clearly. "What do you mean?"

"Is this the best career for me? I don't know if I'll even last here longer than a month."

"Did you not get an offer?" he asks. "I know little about business, but I know contracts. Do you have a contract you signed with the Stockton Group?"

I nod, remembering what I signed. I'd been so excited for any chance to leave my past behind that I didn't go over it with a fine-toothed comb like I typically do.

"Well, look at that and see. Maybe you have the option to stay but in another capacity."

"What do you mean?" I ask, my brain reeling as I'm trying to figure that out.

"Well, is reforming athletes the thing you're most passionate about?"

"I don't think a job has to always be about passion."

Clark bites his bottom lip as he looks at me, as if he's trying to figure out how to steer the conversation.

"You don't have to eat, sleep, and drink the job you're part of, but you want it to be sustainable and has you excited to do it every day. And if this isn't what you want to do, then build what you want while you have this job."

He's speaking facts and I have to remember it's okay to try different things. Which is hard when I've had it so ingrained in my brain to stay the course and finish out everything to the very end. But like my last job and boyfriend, that didn't serve me well.

"So, the question I have for you is what do you see yourself doing in five years?"

I thought I knew. I thought this was the locked-in career for me because I had success a few times. But as I walked around with my camera at the park, getting interviews and working on things for the social media platforms, that was exciting and fun to me. Putting together the poster took longer than I wanted but it filled a creative well I haven't been able to tap into for a long time. Probably since high school.

"Is it weird I love taking pictures and highlighting the players?" I ask, holding my breath for his answer.

He shakes his head. "Why would that be weird? You did an incredible job on the posters. The editing you did was great. I'm sure the it wasn't easy to get it to look like our uniforms."

"But what if I get sick of that, too? What if I switch and it's not everything I want it to be?"

"Then move onto the next thing. Life isn't supposed to be boring and endured. You're



supposed to love it, or at least big chunks of it."

I let out a long breath, trying to let his words sink in. There's so much I need to work on in life, but am I willing to take the leap and try something else, even though I was sure coming out here to work with the athletes would be worth it?

"Just promise me one thing," Clark says, looking at me seriously.

"Yeah, whatever you need."

"Just don't stop until I get through these endorsements."

I laugh and nod. "Absolutely."

"I actually emailed them to see if you could come with me when we have to re-film the spots from before."

Raising my eyebrows, I say, "You want me to come with you?"

His expression melts my insides. "Yeah, I think I'd feel a lot more comfortable if you were there behind the camera."

I nod, trying not to read into that too much. "I think I can make that work."

We go back to watching the movie in silence, the tension between us comfortable.

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I sigh, feeling like he'd helped me unpack a few of the burdens I'd been carrying around. I'm falling for Clark and fast. But is it just because he's the complete opposite of Dan? Or because I haven't given him credit for being an exceptional human before?

That's going to have to be tested before anything happens.

19

Clark

"You can do this," I say to myself in the mirror. We're a couple of days past the detective-show-watching conversation. I've been through the pain of getting two suits tailored for me as well as more mock interviews with Jessa behind the camera. I don't know what it is, but when she's there, I can relax so much more.

I'm in the green room at the recording studio in Chicago for STX. I'd taken Jessa's suggestion and wore a suit when we walked in today. The directors seemed to be impressed by the change in my attire, which I hope will trickle into my ability to speak the lines I'm given.

I've got an obscene amount of makeup on, and I have to make a few faces just to make sure I'm still in there. The Man in the Makeup Mask.

I've changed into my Lancer uniform. There's a ball and stick and I pick it up, tossing the ball into the air and catching it, trying to push down the nerves.

"Are you ready?" Jessa asks, walking into the dressing room. She's dressed a little fancier than her usual business suits and looks beautiful.

"As ready as I think I'll be."

"You'll be amazing. You've already improved. I'll be right there behind the camera, cheering you on." She smiles widely and it makes me more grateful for her.

And then, thinking about the camera again, I walk over and pull Jessa into my arms. She's stiff for several moments and then relaxes into me, molding right into my body.

She tightens the pressure, and I wonder if she knows how much I need this.

When we pull back a bit, we're so close I could plant a kiss on her soft lips.

"Remember, the only people you need to worry about teasing your words is you. Be like the little boy from the camp. Fearless about what you have to say. You are a superstar athlete. Are most of the people who attacked you before watching everything from their couches, not doing anything on their own?"

I blink at her and nod. I'd never thought of it like that before.

Without thinking, I lean over and press my lips to hers. It's quick and light, but I want to continue, although I'm not sure how she feels.

We pull back and she looks at me with starry eyes, like she's trying to figure out what just happened.

"Denton," a voice calls just outside the door. "You're needed on set."

I don't want to let go of Jessa. I want to keep holding her and just enjoy this moment

for a while longer, but I've got to do this hard thing to pay the bills and build a small reserve for the future.

She gives me another hug before releasing me. "You can do this. I believe in you."

20

Jessa

What the crap just happened?

Did I really kiss Clark Denton? I guess technically he kissed me. And it was the best kiss I've ever had, although short.

It wasn't some kind of routine done out of obligation, but there was a promise in it.

I'm in a sort of fog as I walk toward the cameras and get into position so I can be the background support Clark needs. I'm not really sure I'm doing a good job of anything right now.

Was there a moment I thought we would kiss on my couch at the new house? Yes. But I hadn't even given it a thought for today being a good kissing day.

And we didn't even get that much into the kiss. Like it was a good, simple kiss.

But it was way more impactful than any kiss with Dan ever was.

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So much for keeping things strictly professional. Or was that just a knee-jerk response to him being nervous about being up there in front of the camera?

My stomach sinks as I rationalize the kiss away. That has to be the thing.

I try to paste on a smile and am as supportive as possible when they guide Clark through the next several spots.

"What's your name?" the cameraman asks during a break when the director walks Clark through his next movements.

"I'm Jessa."

"Steve. We're glad you're here. I'm not sure what you did, but this has been thousands of times easier than the last time he was here."

I chuckle and shake my head. "I doubt I had much to do with it."

"I don't know," Steve says, glancing between me and Clark. "I'd have to say you're calming his nerves. The way he looks at you is something else, too."

I see nothing different in how he's looking at me, but my brain is good at changing reality to make it easier to digest.

Clark struggles with a couple parts, but he's looking more relaxed than I've seen him yet with a camera in his face. Even the director seems to be patient, which I wasn't expecting after what Clark had shared on the plane over here.

“Cut,” the director says and claps. “One down, a few more to go.”

Clark’s shoulders slump, as if relieved to even have gotten that far. When he looks up at me, I can see how drained he already is and we’re not even at the halfway point of the day.

“What’s the next spot to film?” I ask Steve.

“It s like the one he just did, but with some more of the lacrosse gear added.”

They set it all up and Clark is still there in the warm lights, looking like he’s going to melt at any moment.

“Action!” the director calls.

“When I’m on the field, I need gear that—” Clark pauses again before saying, “That gives me... uh... what’s the word again?”

He either needs a break or to do something different.

I walk up to the director and say, “Can I make a suggestion?”

The guy turns to me, raising an eyebrow. He’s probably not happy to be interrupted, but Clark is going to spiral and shut down if we don’t do something different.

“How about we do an informal question session? We can incorporate the brand into the spot, but that way he doesn’t have to act for every spot you’ve planned?” It’s a long shot, but I’m hoping he’ll understand why I’m asking.

The director turns to Clark. “What do you think?”

Clark blows out a breath. “I’m here for whatever you need. A break from acting out the parts would be nice.”

The director nods and waves to some people behind him. “Let’s set up all the equipment behind Clark. We’ll have him sit in a chair and get one for the lady. I hope this works.”

“Why don’t you have him stand?” I say. “He could play with the ball and stick. That way, we’re displaying some of the equipment while he’s answering questions.” If he’s got something to do, it takes some of the pressure off.

The director nods and waves to take the chairs away.

I stand just off camera, holding the script. I scan through it, trying to make mental notes on what I can change to make it workable material.

I point to him, and he says, “When I’m on the field, I need gear that, that gives me?—”

“Confidence. Comfort. And hopefully a functioning memory,” I deadpan.

Clark laughs and says, “I knew there was a C-word in there somewhere.”

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“I’m thinking the C stands for ‘Can’t act under pressure.’” I try to keep a straight face, but crack, especially when I think of us laughing together in the sand.

He leans his stick against his shoulder and says, “Harsh, but valid.”

“Let’s chat,” I say, throwing the script over my shoulder. He watches the papers as they fall to the ground and even I’m a little nervous. Maybe that was too over-the-top?

“Are you all right?” he whispers, glancing nervously over to where the director is probably standing.

“You’re not a script guy. You’re a people guy... underneath all that tightly wound, camera-shy, silent-sports-hero energy. It’s just me asking you questions. You answer like we’re not filming. Or better yet, like you’re hanging from the monkey bars.”

“Monkey bars?” the director asks, and I’m sure he’s ready to step in and stop this process. But with the visible changes in Clark’s body language, we’re making progress.

“Batman?” Clark asks, grinning.

“Maybe not that far,” I say, laughing. “Okay. First question: Favorite pre-game snack?”

Grinning, he says, “Peanut butter straight from the jar. Don’t judge me.”



“Ew. I was expecting trail mix, not a spoonful of desperation. You know they make bread for a reason, right? Put the peanut butter on there and add bananas or honey or some kind of jam.” I wrinkle my nose. “Remind me to never let you near my peanut butter.”

“The question is, do you like creamy or chunky?” he says, and the banter is in full swing.

“Chunky all the way.” I can sense the unease in the people behind me, so I switch to a question we can tie into this spot.

“Okay, next one: What’s the most underrated piece of gear in your bag?”

Clark throws the ball into the air and says, “My backup mouth guard. It’s mint flavored.”

“That’s disgusting and weirdly specific.”

“You’re the one who wanted actual answers.” He tilts his head, as if challenging me.

I nod, glancing at the stick in his hand. “What stick is your favorite and why?”

His grin fades the tiniest bit, but he looks at the stick in his hand. “This one is good, but my favorite is the STX Stallion 900. It’s lightweight and stiff, which helps me as a middie when I’m battling for the ball. It’s light and makes scooping ground balls easy.”

I turn and look at the director, who’s got his jaw on the floor right now.

Giving Clark a wide grin, I say, “For those of us who don’t know a lot about lacrosse, what is a middie?”

Clark laughs and says, “I play in the middle of the field, meaning I have to run back and forth several times, whether we’re on offense or defense. I take the face-offs, or the starting battle for the ball.”

“What are some of your pre-game rituals or superstitions?” I’m sure fans of Clark Denton would love to hear about some of these.

“I make sure I’ve eaten enough before the game and then I have a few high protein, high-carb snacks to keep my energy up for the rest of the game. As far as rituals, I usually go through the same routine and make sure I’m dialed in mentally.”

“Do you wear the same pair of socks every game?” I ask, trying to be serious.

The horror in his eyes causes me to laugh. “Absolutely not. I own at least a dozen pairs of the same type of socks, so I’m always wearing at least one of them, but I do know how to do my own laundry.”

“What made you want to partner with STX?”

He’s able to answer without any hesitation. “It’s a brand I’ve been able to trust since I was a kid. Sure, the quality of the stick I have now is way different than the one I used when I was eight, but I think the company makes a great stick that’s durable and can grow with the player.”

“Would you ever let someone use your stick during a game? Maybe they broke theirs and need it for a few minutes.”

Laughing, Clark says, “As long as it’s not Burton, probably. That guy breaks sticks like they’re toothpicks.”

The room laughs, and I’m grateful we’ve been able to make it to this point.

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“Okay, last question. How does STX help support your game on and off the field?”

This one takes him a moment to think about, but I couldn’t be more proud of his answer.

“When I’m in the game, I know I can rely on the stick to do what it needs to do. The fact that the stick is so reliable means I don’t have to do all the research to make sure it’s the one that will help me with my job. That gives me more time to train, to get my body to the point that the stick is an asset instead of a liability.”

I grin at him, so excited that he’s able to get through all that.

“Let’s take a few minutes break before we get to the next spot,” the director says. He walks over to me and puts a hand on my shoulder. “I’m not sure what you just did, but is there any chance you can help us with the next campaign?”

I chuckle. “Whatever helps us get through everything Clark needs to film by the time we’re scheduled to leave, I’m game.”

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Clark

“I can’t believe we made it through all that,” I say, breathing a sigh of relief as we walk out of the filming studio. It was dark when we got there, and it’s dark now, so I guess my exhaustion is valid.

“You did amazing,” Jessa says, all smiles.

Shaking my head, I say, “There’s no way we’d have gotten that done in one day if you weren’t there. And that improv section where you just asked me questions. Brilliant.”

She blushes and glances away. “Well, it’s a good thing it did. I was tempted to call your mom to talk some sense into you if it didn’t work. I knew everyone would be judging you if it got to that point, though.”

“To be honest, I would’ve been fine with the judging. I just wanted to get that all done and make sure I can pay the bills for the rest of the year.”

I lift my hand to hail a cab only to find a bunch of them are already occupied.

“I’m so hungry,” Jessa says.

The large table of food they had during the entire set was good at first, but by the end, I didn’t want any finger sandwiches or little melon balls.

“Me too. Should we go somewhere?” I ask, still trying to flag a car.

“What if we order it to us? Back to the hotel?”

I sigh and nod. “That sounds great. You can come to my room, and we’ll keep watching that show.”

“The paranormal one?” Jessa asks, her eyes going wide with excitement.

When I nod, she says, “That would be even better. I’m so glad you like it.”

We finally get into a cab and the driver weaves through the traffic for over fifteen minutes. We take that long to figure out what to order. Thank goodness for delivery, because I'm exhausted.

The hotel is fairly nice, with several amenities we haven't had time to take advantage of. The hot tub would be nice, but I'm too tired to have to change into a swimsuit and then change again after it. What's mind boggling is that standing all day as I read lines and try to open myself up for the camera is almost more exhausting than a full lacrosse game.

I won't admit that to Burton, though.

"I'm going to change and then I'll knock." Jessa gives me a small smile before disappearing into her room. I'm next door, so I go in and take the fastest shower of my life, knowing I won't want to do it later when we've watched a few episodes of the show.

The knock I hear first turns out to be the delivery guy from the Chinese food restaurant. Then Jessa knocks a few moments later.

"That smells good," she says, leaning down and breathing it in.

"Let's eat. How was your shower?" I ask. It takes a split second before I'm wishing I hadn't said anything that calls up a visual of Jessa not fully clothed.

"Good after today." She puts a large blanket on the bed before taking a plate from me.

We dish up the variety of foods from the boxes and sit on the floor to eat.

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“What was your favorite part about today?” she asks.

“Definitely when you swooped in and saved me from acting out at least two of those clips,” I say without hesitation.

“What was even better was seeing the director’s face when you answered like you had designed the sticks yourself.”

I grin and lean back against the bed. This is one of those moments where I’m so grateful for the people in my life, most of all Jessa right now. She could’ve let our issues from the past take over, but she dove right into helping me.

We finish up our food and settle onto the large king bed. There’s space between us, which almost feels like the danger zone to cross. It isn’t until she brings it up that I remember the kiss from this morning. A lot has happened since then, okay?

“Did you mean to kiss me in the green room?” she asks while staring at the TV. Luckily, this hotel is equipped with smart TVs, so we can sign into our own streaming services.

My chest constricts for a moment, and I can’t believe I forgot.

“Yes,” I say, the word just above a whisper.

She says nothing for a bit and the suspense is killing me.

“I won’t do it again if you don’t want that to happen. I’m sorry. It was a line I

probably crossed and?—”

She reaches over and covers my mouth with her hand. “I just wanted to check that you hadn’t done it because you were nervous or anything.”

Shaking my head, I tug her hand down enough that I can say, “I might’ve been thinking about it since the park.”

Laughing, she says, “I thought you were going to kiss me on my couch.”

“There was some debate at that point, too.”

There’s a moment of hesitation and I lean over, pressing my lips to hers. Her fingers run through my hair as she presses closer.

My brain is both jumping for joy and freaking out that I’m kissing my best friend’s older sister.

A phone rings and we break apart for just a moment before joining lips again. Is this what I’ve been missing out on in my life? Because I will gladly hang out here for days, just to enjoy this.

The phone rings again, and Jessa leans back to look at the screen.

“Oh, no! It’s Daphne.”

“Who’s Daphne?” I ask.

“My boss. The one who hired me to work for Stockton Media.”

I shrug, not sure why she looks as guilty as a kid who’s been in the cookie jar. I don’t

mind her stealing cookie kisses.

“Hey Daphne.” She tries to make her voice bright, and then I watch as the smile slips from her face.

“I haven’t seen anything. I was there to help Clark with his endorsements, just like you asked.”

Another long pause and I see her lip tremble.

“Understood. Okay, I’ll be in tomorrow when we fly back.”

She hangs up the phone and silent tears streak down her cheeks.

I scoot over and wrap my arms around her, wishing we could go back to moments ago and not answer the call.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. She turns, so she’s buried her face in my chest, and I increase my hold on her, hoping to take whatever pain she’s feeling and lessen it somewhat.

She finally blows out a long breath and says, “I just got fired. I’m supposed to go in and pick up my final papers tomorrow.”



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I push her back just enough to see her face. “They fired you? You’ve done nothing but work your tail off since you’ve been here. What reasoning did they give?”

She leans forward and logs into her own social media account, pulling up a picture of us kissing in the green room.

“You can’t tell that’s us,” I say, waving to the picture. I mean, I’m happy we look that good together, but I don’t want to show it because of what she’s going through.

She swipes to the left and I see another picture of us, only inches apart. You can definitely see it’s us.

“What’s wrong with that?” I ask, trying not to gloat.

She slumps back against the pillows, and I have to turn to see her face.

“She specifically told me not to get into a relationship with you.”

And now I’m speechless.

It takes several moments for my brain to restart. “Your boss told you the day you started you couldn’t date me?”

Her eyes are closed, but she nods, another tear slipping down her cheek.

“Why would she do that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe to avoid any scandals?”

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

She sits up, a sudden fire in her eyes as she says, “Really? I’m just repeating what I assume is the reason for it.”

Leaning back, I say, “Jessa, I didn’t mean that about you.”

Something about my words helps her relax somewhat. I reach over to tug her toward me gently, waiting for her to decide if she wants to accept my hug or not.

“If you want, I can go talk to her. Try to get your job back,” I say.

She shakes her head. “No, it’s no good.”

I’m not sure what else to do to help her. “I could say it was my fault. I’m the one who kissed you.”

She gives a mirthless laugh and says, “I didn’t pull away though, did I?”

“Do you want to fight for this job? Or do something else?”

“I don’t know.” She sits up again and starts folding her blanket. “I think I’m going to go to bed.”

“No, Jessa. Stay a bit. I don’t want you to be alone.”

She gives me a flicker of a smile before she waves and heads out the door.

I’m frozen, looking at the wall for several moments. Who was on set and had access

to take those photos?

I might have to do some digging.

22

Jessa

I think I only got twenty minutes of decent sleep last night.

The panic of moving into my rental and now having to figure out how to pay for that or break the lease and head back home had me reeling.

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But I don't want to move. I've learned so much from taking the leap, it would feel worthless if I didn't try to figure out something else.

I got up early and started the job search.

Clark was so kind the night before and while it had been nice kissing him again, I'm not sure hanging out with him will be a good idea. What if I have to move? The heartbreak will only be worse.

And my ultimate fear is that I'll do to Clark what Dan did to me. If I can't take care of myself, I'd be a crappy girlfriend. Not that he asked me. Before Daphne's phone call, I wondered if we'd take our relationship further. Now I'm in pure survival mode.

We get up and head to the airport. I try to be kind to Clark but also shut down any major conversation. I don't need to add to the stress I'm already under.

"Do you want to come over for dinner?" Clark asks as we're in the rideshare we're splitting to get home.

I give him a small smile and shake my head. "I'm good. I think I've got a few things I need to eat before they go bad. Thank you, though."

As much as I'd love to hang out with the guys, I'd probably be a downer right now.

Once in the house, I change out of my clothes and settle into my bed. Not the best place to work, but I need comfort as I scour every job listing within thirty miles of here.

With what SMG will give me as a final check and the savings I had before this, I'll be able to hold out for all of two months before I'll have to go back home. Unless I can find a job.

My phone notifies me I need to head into the Stockton Group main offices. I change into a business suit, not wanting to give Daphne the satisfaction of seeing me this way. With some makeup and a quick twist of my hair, it's time to head out.

When I walk out to my car in the driveway, I glance across the street at the guys' house and then over to Nora's. She's sitting on the porch, so I wave before getting into my car.

I make the drive in silence. Am I moping? Absolutely.

This job had been the first to give me a chance to figure out what I want to do with my life. No, I haven't applied for any jobs that help image, but I've sent in my information for anything to do with marketing and photography.

I walk up to the desk in the reception area. This is my first time in the offices since I'd done everything else through online video chats.

"May I help you?" the woman behind the desk asks with a smile.

"Yes, I have an appointment with Daphne. My name is Jessa Stratton."

"Let me call up to her." It takes another minute before I'm given a visitor badge and sent up the elevator to the third floor.

Another man walks into the elevator and smiles at me. There's gray around his temples, but I can tell by the expensive suit he's wearing that he's probably upper management.

“Who are you here to visit?”

“Daphne.”

He smiles and nods. “Are you a new hire?”

I swallow, wishing I could say something different. “Kind of. I’m heading up to pick up my last check.”

He frowns. “That’s not good. Can I ask what happened?”

“It might be better to ask Daphne what happened.”

The doors to the elevator open and I walk out, trying to remember the instructions from the gal downstairs.

“Her office is just over here,” the man says, pointing to a door about three down from where we’re standing right now. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“Jessa Stratton.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Jessa. I’m Ollie Stockton. I hope you’ll give us another chance soon.”

I try to smile, but it probably looks like a grimace at this point. Maybe if I hadn’t been fired so quickly, I would try again.

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I walk forward, breathing in and out slowly to calm my nerves.

Knocking on the door, I enter when I hear Daphne tell me to come in.

“Ah, Jessa. Thank you for coming. I just need you to sign a few papers and then we can move on.”

I can only nod, because I’ll probably cry if I say anything right now.

I sit down at the table and read through the documents.

“You can just sign down at the bottom. I’ve got a lot to do today.”

“You’re firing me. The least I can do is read through and make sure I’m not in default of anything else.”

Daphne’s glare is icy, but I go back to reading the document. It’s both petty and for my protection, so I’m going to continue this for as long as possible.

There’s a knock on the door and I turn, curious who it is.

I didn’t expect the guy from the elevator to be there.

“Come in, sir.”

“Actually, can I have you come to my office for a moment? Jessa, if you’ll just stay here, we’ll be with you in a moment.”

I'm confused by this sudden interruption, but I guess I'll continue to read the papers, so I'm not anxious with Daphne breathing down my neck.

At least fifteen minutes tick by and I've finished reading everything there. I lift the pen and get ready to sign at the bottom. At least there's no non-compete clause.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Jessa." I turn to see the guy from the elevator again. "I apologize for the inconvenience you've had. You're good to go."

I point to the papers. "I came here to sign my exit papers."

He nods and walks over to sit on the edge of the desk, facing me. "There was a mix-up with that. It seems Daphne fired you under the wrong circumstances. She's no longer with the company."

I blink a few times, trying to figure out what he means. Her stuff is all here.

As if on cue, she walks in with a cardboard box that says copy paper on the outside and starts putting stuff from her desk into it.

I stand, walking out into the hallway. "So, you're not firing me?"

"Absolutely not. I got a call letting me know everything that has happened in the last couple of days and you're good to go. It sounds like you've done amazing work with our star lacrosse player, so I'll have someone reach out with your next project."

I frown. "Clark wasn't exactly a project. And I don't know if he's all the way done."

"What are you saying?" he asks.

"I'm saying that I don't know if I want to work with anyone else in that capacity



while in this organization.”

He folds his arms over his chest and says, “Okay, is there something you’d rather do? We have an opening for Daphne’s spot.” He gives me a small smile.

Shaking my head, I say, “I don’t have the experience or stress capacity that would work for a job like that.”

“If you don’t want to onboard new hires, and you’d rather not continue work with Athlete Image, is there something you’d like to do?”

“Why are you trying to keep me on so bad?”

“From everything I’ve learned about your help with the lacrosse club, we need more people like you. I may be the owner of this company, but I care about making sure we have quality people at every level, which is why Daphne got the boot today.”

I freeze, putting together all the pieces in my brain. He’d said his name is Ollie, but I hadn’t focused on the last name. Ollie Stockton. Owner of Stockton Media Group.

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It's only then that I think about what I want. "It might be a downgrade, but I would love to help the marketing of your teams. I can take pictures and create videos to increase fan engagement. That's something severely lacking for your current teams."

He nods and gives me a slow smile. "My friend Milo mentioned there were some incredible posters at the Play It Forward event. Was that your work?"

"You know Milo?" I ask, surprised by that. The main guy from the charity had been quirky, to say the least.

"We've worked with them before, and I've met him several times. What a great guy. He's been able to grow that program exponentially in the last few years alone. I also heard the guys did a phenomenal job with the kids. One of my good friends brought his son to it. I think I heard something about you interviewing him?"

"Yeah, I interviewed a few kids that day."

"Well, you have your wish. You'll handle all of our social media for the Salt Lake Lancers."

I grin, surprised at how relieved I am to still have a job. "Will you send me the pay information and a document to sign for it? I need to talk to someone now."

It probably wasn't the best idea to leave Clark without talking much or saying a whole lot of anything, but I'm ready to remedy that mistake now.

"Sounds good. Thank you, Jessa. I look forward to meeting with you again."

Hopefully it's not for a long time.

23

Jessa

I knock on the door to Clark's house, surprised I don't see his car there. There are a few others, but it's possible whatever they have, they just carpooled there.

"They had to head to the field," Nora says, grinning at me from her porch.

"Oh, thank you. I'll head over there, then. Did they say they had practice?" It was a little early for that, but maybe Coach Martin is trying to get a few extra reps in before the first series this weekend.

She shook her head. "Something about a press conference. It might be good if you're there."

I frown, wondering why it would matter if I'm there. Sure, Clark has made a lot of progress in his communication, but it's not like I have to hold his hand to get it done.

I thank her and drive over, wondering what the press conference is for. To be honest, the track athletes I worked with were from a smaller school, so I wasn't used to anything extra.

When I pull up to the arena, I'm surprised at how many cars are there. Is there a scrimmage I didn't know about? I grab the camera bag from my trunk and walk in.

I follow the signs for the press conference and am surprised by the large room. There's a table set up, covered in the Lancer logo and colors. Several microphones are spread out over the table and at least forty people sitting in the seats, chatting

amongst themselves.

Coach Martin comes out first, followed by Clark, who's dressed in one of the suits we'd had tailored. The fabric forms to his physique so well.

I can't believe I was in his arms just twenty-four hours ago.

Behind him are the other roommates, each of them dressed in a variety of button-up shirts, slacks, and some with a tie.

I wonder if Clark made them do it.

They sit down behind the microphones, and I can only see Clark through a break in the people in front of me.

"Thanks for coming everyone," Coach Martin says. The room quiets down, and all eyes are on the table in front. "We're here to talk a little about what's coming up this season. We'll make our announcements and then we'll open it up for questions."

There are several cameras out, and while Clark is still looking a little uncomfortable, at least he's not ghostly white, like in the past.

"First thing on the agenda is that we've chosen Clark Denton as the team captain for this year. He's a fine young man and makes sure the team plays at a higher level every day. We're happy to have him."

"Are you sure he's the best choice for that?" a voice says from the crowd. There's something familiar about it.

"I do, in fact, think he is, or else I wouldn't be up here announcing his name," Coach Martin says with narrowed eyes.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:58 am*

A man stands and I can only see the back of him and a sliver of his profile, but my brain is still blanking on where I've seen him before.

"You want the guy who got his girlfriend fired from this organization to be responsible for an entire team? The guy can't even speak on camera."

I want to jump up and defend Clark, but he's already speaking before I can form a response.

"Actually, I've learned a lot from her over the past little while. Invaluable things about perseverance through hard things and that it's okay to laugh at yourself when things don't go to plan."

The man shakes his head and says, "I don't know if there's any coming back from your last viral interview, Denton."

Standing, I say, "I'm pretty sure he just proved he can."

I glance over at Clark and he's grinning. All eyes are on me, and I hear a few people murmuring, wondering who I am.

"I don't know what your beef with Clark is, but you're probably the worst reporter I've ever seen. It's one thing to get a story, but another to tear the athletes down who put their whole heart and soul into prepping for their sports. Maybe you didn't get the chances you thought you deserved, but if I were your boss, I wouldn't want you to taint my company any more than you already have."

The man glares at me. “So, Clark needs his girlfriend to defend him?”

I laugh and say, “He doesn’t, but I’ll gladly do it anytime I can.”

“I think it’s time to go, Richards,” Coach Martin says. He gestures to a larger bodyguard-looking guy, who makes sure to escort the reporter from the room.

“Okay, where were we?” Coach Martin jokes, glancing down at his notes.

The press conference goes on for another twenty minutes, but I can’t stop smiling at Clark. He’s grinning like he’s just scored the game-winning goal, and my cheeks hurt from smiling so much.

When it’s all done, I get a text from him.

Meet me outside the locker room.

I have to weave through a bunch of reporters to get to the door and then practically run to where he is.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, pulling me into a hug. Before I can respond, he’s cupping my face with his hands and pulling me in for a heavenly kiss.

“I wanted to see you. Nora said you’d be here.”

“Did everything go okay with your boss?”

I nod, grinning. “She got fired and I got my dream job.”

His eyes grow wide. “Are you the team photographer?”

“Kind of. I’ll be making sure the social media is up to date. That means I get to travel with you and everything. I mean, if you want that.”

He uses his pointer finger to tilt my chin up so our eyes are locked. “I absolutely want that. And what they said about you being my girlfriend. I want to call you that, if you’re okay with it.”

Laughing, I say, “Absolutely. Who knew I’d fall for my brother’s best friend?”

“I definitely did not,” he says, laughing. “But I cross my heart that I’ll do everything I can to make you happy.”

I lean over and give him a slow kiss, savoring the moment before I pull back. “That’s a job only two people can fill. And I’m all in when it comes to you, Clark Denton.”

## EPILOGUE

Eight Months Later

It’s amazing how one small choice can lead to so many great ones.

Moving to Utah was the best thing that could’ve happened to me. It’s like I’m a new person, and I can’t stop smiling about it.

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 1:58 am*

We made it through the season and the guys lost in a heartbreaker to the Rattlers in the championship game. But the number of people who've gained interest in lacrosse over the past several months has increased way more than I thought it would.

Creating content to highlight the guys is definitely my passion, and it's pretty great that I get paid for something I love so much.

One of my posts featuring Clark went viral, far surpassing the original one that started all of this in the first place.

I focus on the course in front of me, making sure to keep my feet moving. Running my first marathon hasn't been easy, and there were a few times I thought I might as well quit, but then I think of Clark facing his fears and pushing through the hard, and I keep going. One mile, then two, and now I'm almost to the finish line.

He was supposed to join me here but tore some of the tendons in his ankle a few weeks ago while playing basketball with his roommates. But he made sure to be there to support every one of my longer runs to train for this, and I can't wait to see him at the finish line.

My ear buds died around mile twenty and I'm just trying to keep my brain focused on the steps ahead.

"Go Jessa!" a voice calls from the sidelines. I turn to see a somewhat familiar face. It takes me a second or two to recognize Milo from the event we did last spring.

I wave and keep moving forward. We're getting closer and the crowd is louder,



giving me a shot of energy to pick up the pace.

I see Burton first, his height making him stand out. Then Stack and Finny. Jackson is leaning over to hear something Nora is saying to him. But there's no Clark.

The finish line is less than fifty yards away and I push myself that last little bit, hoping Clark will be there.

There are a lot of people at the finish line, and I bend over, trying to get the air back into my lungs. Someone walks over and puts a medal over my neck.

"Congratulations on the finish. Enjoy your medal." I glance up at the woman and give her a weak smile. I stand up as I try to catch my breath, scanning the crowd for Clark.

He promised he'd be here. What would've held him up?

I try not to be too disappointed, knowing that he's never given me any indication that our relationship had become stale. It's hard to let go of that past trauma though, but I've been working on it.

I glance down at the medal and hold it up, wondering why I would be given a gold one when I was probably middle of the pack in my age group.

The words, "WILL YOU MARRY ME?" are engraved on the front of it.

I frown, wondering if I'd gotten the wrong medal.

Then there's a cheer from the crowd that causes me to turn around. There, walking out from behind the roommate squad, is Clark. He's limping because of his foot, but he's dressed in one of the suits we bought last year, looking like he just stepped out of a magazine. I can't believe he's mine.

I want to hug him, to tell him I'm so happy he's here, but he's wearing the suit and I'm covered in sweat.

"I did it!" I say, grinning as I half-stumble over to him.

"Yes, you did amazing." He smiles, but it falters a bit. "Well, I have a question for you."

"Please don't ask me when I'll do another one of these. Right now, I'd say probably never."

He chuckles. Keeping eye contact with me, he slowly bends down so he's on one knee. And then it's like everything starts clicking.

"Jessa Lynn Stratton, will you be my forever interviewer and the love of my life by becoming my wife?"

He opens a small box and there's a cheer from the audience closest to us. I clap my hands over my mouth, trying to will away the tears fighting to take over.

The guy hadn't been late and hadn't missed my finish. He was prepping to propose.

"Yes, Clark. That is one offer I can't refuse."

I pull him up and give him a kiss, ecstatic that I'm actually getting married to the man I adore more than any other on the planet. The yin to my yang. And the one I can't imagine my future without.

"If you didn't say yes, I was going to take him for you," Nora says with a laugh.

"I don't think Clark can handle either of you feisty ladies," Stack says, grinning at

Clark.

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He rolls his eyes. “She said yes,” and then he leans forward and gives me another kiss on the lips. “How about we head back so you can change? Maybe we should go do something to celebrate.”

“You’re injured and I’m already as stiff as the Tin Man. Maybe takeout and a movie night?”

“What my fiancé wants, my fiancé gets,” he says with a little wink.

I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy. We walk out of the finish line area and I turn to him, lifting the medal so he can see it.

“How long have you been planning this?” I ask.

He gives me a half-smile, looking almost shy. “I knew I’d marry you the moment you stood up for me in that press conference last year. I was hoping to run the marathon with you and do a whole elaborate thing, but I had to make do with what I could physically do for you.”

I pause a moment. “You knew clear back then?”

His look is sheepish, and I lean over and kiss him again, this time making sure it’s filled with all the promise of my love now and the future.

“I love you, Jessa,” he whispers, taking my hand in his.

“I love you too, Clark.”

Who knew a leap of faith would lead me to one of the best outcomes in the future?  
From irritation to love, I'd do it all again.