



Bring Her On

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Description: She should have just been a cheer-camp hookup, but fate decided to toss Echo Rosenthal back into my life ten years later. She coaches the Heartwood Bulldogs, the squad that beat my Corsica Tigers at the New England Cheer Championships. Now we're both headed to Nationals and I have one thing on my mind: revenge.

My squad is fired up and ready to go—until the Rosedale High School gym burns down. Guess who has to host them for practices a month before Nationals? Now I, Kiri Kentwood, am forced into even closer proximity to Echo and she's really starting to get on my nerves, not to mention she's in ridiculous shape and can still do a standing full. Bitch. I can't decide which is worse, that I want to ram a set of poms down her throat, or that I want to shove my tongue in her mouth.

As the pressure builds toward Nationals, I can't get her out of my mind and, after a huge argument, we end up right back where we started: in bed.

We're headed for a battle, and I don't know which one of us is going to come out on top, but I'll be damned if I'm going to lose to her again: on the mat or off.

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One

“So, Coach Kiri, we’ve heard a lot about the rivalry between your squad and the Heartwood High School Bulldogs, who beat you at the New England Cheer Championships in March. What did you tell your squad after you got second place?”

I had to literally bite my tongue to not say the first thing that came to my mind. I glanced at my athletic director, who had set up this whole thing, but she was busy watching my cheerleaders do their warm-up stretches. Fucking hell.

I took a breath and tried not to get distracted by the journalist’s chest. She had a lot going on there, and her shirt was working hard to keep itself together.

Focus, Kiri.

I ran my hands through my short hair, pushing it back from my face, but it just flopped back.

“What I tell them is this: it doesn’t matter if they win, as long as they did their best on that day. Sometimes things just don’t work out. Cheerleading is a subjective sport, and what a judge will like one day won’t be the same the next day. You can hit every single skill and still not come out on top. But that doesn’t mean I’m stepping off the gas. My squad is going to be ready for Nationals.”

There, that wasn’t too bad. I didn’t sound like too much of a competitive bitch, even though I was a competitive bitch.

The journalist made a few notes in her notebook in a swirling hand. “Do you think your team is ready for Nationals?”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. This was one of those times when I wished it were socially acceptable to carry around one of those stress balls in my hand to squeeze. I clenched and unclenched my hands instead and was grateful this wasn’t a video interview.

“We are. We’ve upped our difficulty, we’ve polished the dance, and we are pumped and ready to win.” Right now my squad didn’t look anything like that. They were goofing on the mat and my assistant coach, Dom, was out today and he usually cracked the whip during the warm-up.

“Do you have anything to say about your coaching rival, Echo Rosenthal?” It took everything in me not to cringe at the mention of her name. Why were they bringing her up? This interview was going to kill me.

“What do you mean?” I asked, trying for a laugh and making a sound that was more like someone imitating a laugh. This was a complication I hadn’t foreseen, but I should have. If only she knew the truth of our rivalry, she’d have a whole different set of questions for me.

The journalist leaned forward, which made me blank out for a second. “What do you think of the way she coaches her squad?”

I wanted to get up and leave right now, but then I’d have to explain why Echo’s name made me lose it, and there was no way I was explaining to this hot stranger my history with Echo Rosenthal.

“I think she’s very talented, and I think she should be prepared. Because we’re coming for her, and her squad.” I had to add the last part so I didn’t seem like I had a

personal vendetta, even though I had a personal vendetta.

There was entirely too much chatter and not enough stretching happening on the mat. It was the perfect excuse to end this thing. “Are we almost done? I need to start practice.” I also needed another assistant coach, but that wasn’t going to happen. If we did well at Nationals, maybe. I got to my feet and stretched my arms above my head. I was twitchy and stressed.

“Yeah, do you mind if we take some pictures?”

I nodded. She’d brought a tall and silent photographer with her and I’d had all the kids sign release forms. The journalist and photographer duo were also coming to our dress rehearsal on Saturday to take more pictures when everyone would be in their uniforms.

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“Thank you so much, Kiri.” The journalist, Megan, got to her feet and turned off the recorder on her phone. I was still trying not to stare at her tits in the white button-up that was barely holding together under her blazer.

“Thank you,” I said, shaking her hand. Her fingers were slim and soft and I couldn’t meet her eyes. I was such a sucker for pretty women, and all women were pretty. It was a dilemma.

The minute I stepped away from Megan and put my coach hat on, I forgot about her boobs. It was time to work, and not think about boobs or Echo Rosenthal.

At the thought of her name, a memory brushed a finger along my spine. I closed my eyes and took a breath and focused on what was in front of me. Clearing my throat, I projected my voice so anyone near the gym would hear me.

“Okay, everyone, let’s get this started. We’re going to go through the first half, up until the pyramid, making little fixes and tweaks. I swear, if you don’t count your music, I am going to make you run laps and do push-ups. Full out, plus stunts. You drop anyone, you’re doing laps and push-ups. No flyers hit the ground, you hear me? Graham, are you good to tumble?”

My senior co-captain with the floppy hair and goofy smile gave me a reluctant thumbs up. I needed his tumbling skills more than I would admit to anyone. Graham had busted one of his toes a few weeks ago and had been off it ever since, but I’d gotten a note from his doctor that he was good to go last week, so it was time to get back on the mat.

“Okay, everyone in the opening formation.” I realized that since it was just me coaching today, I was in charge of the music. “Hold that thought.” I scrambled to hook my phone up to the portable speakers.

“Ready!” I yelled, before I hit play. I stopped it after about three seconds.

“What was that?” I stood at the front of the mat. No one wanted to make eye contact with me. “That was like a two out of ten on the energy scale. I know you’re tired, but suck it up.” In the corner of my eye, I saw the photographer taking pictures of me. I definitely looked like a bitch now. Oops? I glanced at Camille, the athletic director, but she was busy on her phone and wasn’t paying attention. As long as she didn’t give me a look to shut up, I figured I could go about my normal coaching business. If they thought this was bad, they should check out the wrestling team. Those coaches were on a whole other level, and our wrestling team still sucked.

“Can we try that again with a bit more enthusiasm?” I stepped in front of MacKynzie, my tiny little flyer and tumbler. “Show me energy eleven.” That was our code phrase to give me the brightest smile she could possibly find with the most energy, lighting up from the inside. It was a phrase to flip that switch and turn it on.

Mack delivered and I moved on to Ciana, Graham, Kevin, Elizabeth, and then to each member of the squad until they gave it to me.

“Okay, everyone at the same time. Energy eleven.” I clapped my hands and they all smiled as if they’d been shot in the ass with a sunshine dart.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” I said. “That’s what I want to see, every time. I want you to perform at eleven every time. Go all out, every time. Because if you’re used to being at eleven? It feels easy, and then you can push it even more when you’re ready. So let’s go.”

The photographer snapped and snapped and I hoped I looked good. Megan stood watching me and making more notes.

I started the music again and let them go beyond the first few seconds of the routine. We got all the way to the second stunt sequence before one flyer came down and I had to stop them and talk through what had gone wrong and how to fix it for next time.

I'd recently made a change and jacked up the difficulty of the second stunt, adding in a tick tock, where the flyers are being held in the air switched from one standing foot to another and back. They also did a heel stretch in between, pulling one foot up into their hand, which was the newer part.

I missed Dom so much right now. Running practice by myself was kind of like corralling a bunch of overgrown, sassy toddlers, many of whom were taller than me.

We got through the rest of practice without any major mishaps, and I ended up calling it early. Nationals were still a month away, so we hadn't started two-a-day practices yet. That would come soon and then they werereallygoing to hate me. I also had more plans to tweak the pyramid, but I needed to run it by Dom first and see what he thought, or if it would be too much for them.

"Be good, don't hesitate to call me if you get stuck anywhere," I said, making eye contact with each and every one of them. I was a coach, but my job could be much more than that, and I wanted them to know that they could trust me with anything, whether they were drunk and needed a ride home, or they had a problem with a teacher, or they had a problem with a friend. I was here for all of it.

Megan and the photographer left, letting me know that they'd see me at the dress rehearsal on Saturday. I waved goodbye and breathed a sigh of relief that I wasn't under the spotlight anymore. Camille had disappeared, probably to her office to deal

with some athletic crisis (there was always one), so it was on me to make sure the gym was clean and to lock up.

I waited until every single one of the kid's cars had pulled out, or they had been picked up, before I locked the gym, got in my own car, and blasted the radio. On came an old pop song that I knew all the words to and I sang along at the top of my lungs as I drove back to my place, just a few minutes from the school.

"I'm home," I said, walking through the door and bracing myself. Three cats came running and meowing to greet me, as they did every day. Well, two came running. The third took her sweet time, as if she was in no rush. I was lucky to be graced with her presence.

"Hello my babies," I said, leaning down to pet them. Spaghetti, my Maine Coon cat rubbed his head into my leg; Meatball, his sister, leaped up on her hind legs to bump my hand; and Cupcake, my pure white princess, sat and waited for the others to calm down before she pranced over and sat at my feet.

"Oh, am I allowed to pet you?" She blinked at me and I scratched her behind her left ear, her favorite place.

"Come on, my darlings, let's eat." They followed me into the kitchen, all screaming at my feet for their bowls, as if they hadn't been fed in a thousand years. I set their bowls down and they chomped down on the wet food like tiny wolves.

I sighed and turned on the television, putting on a movie I'd seen a million times as some background noise as I made myself a dinner of steak and broccoli and a microwaved potato that I ate while I sat on the couch and kept the plate out of the reach of kitty paws. I flipped through my movie options, but dealing with the cats was entertainment enough.

After dinner, I put the dishes in the dishwasher and rubbed my tired eyes. I should probably start diagraming the changes to the pyramid and work out the counts, but my brain was completely overloaded.

I should also do some more work for my full-time job, but that wasn't going to happen either. Coaching couldn't pay all my bills, so I did work as a freelance writer for different websites, some cheer-related, some not, and I also did some social media management, graphic design, and marketing. My mortgage was cheap, and my only indulgences were travel in the off-season, and collecting scary vintage jewelry that looked like it was probably cursed.

I lay my head back on the couch and closed my eyes. It was way too early for me to go to bed, but way too late to think of starting anything but a book that I'd already read before.

I picked a book off my shelves that called to me and sat on the couch with a blanket and all three kitties. I was sweating within moments, but I wouldn't dare move them.

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The words on the page weren't making an impact in my brain. I was still thinking about the interview earlier and the fact that Echo had been mentioned. Why couldn't I get away from her? When I went away to college I thought I would never hear from her again, except maybe on social media every now and then, but never to actually interact with. I didn't know that she was going to end up back in Maine and coaching the team that would beat mine at a competition.

I swear, when I'd found out she was coaching the Bulldogs, I almost choked and fell off a chair at the same time. I'd been out having a drink with Dom and a few other friends, and it had come through the cheer whisper network.

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" I'd screamed in the bar, but I'd been drowned out by the sound of the Patriots scoring a touchdown on the TV, so I hadn't completely embarrassed myself.

The former Heartwood High School cheer coach had retired after twelve years. She'd built the program from the ground up, much like my squad. I'd stepped in three years ago to an already-winning program, which had been to Nationals before. We hadn't qualified for the past two years, and I would do anything to get them back to that level. I knew what I was up against in our division, and I knew that cheer teams from Maine were at a disadvantage, but I wanted it for my squad. I wanted to show the cheer world that teams from places other than the south could win big. Echo's team had also been racking up the championships and going to Nationals forever as well, so we were the underdogs.

Ugh, why was I still thinking about Echo? I hated it. I hated the memories that bubbled up and consumed my attention. I hated that we had a history.

No, I couldn't let anyone know that when I was baby lesbian at cheer camp I'd hooked up with the hot tumbler with the long red hair and the freckles all over her back.

Why had I let my lust take over my brain? Just because I'd been sixteen and horny and she'd hung out at my room too late because my roommate had ended up going home early with an injury and I had the place to myself.

It really was my own fault: I'd kissed her first.

I slammed the book shut and startled all three kitties and was rewarded by several sets of claws digging into my flesh.

Yup, time for bed.

“YOU'RE NEVER ALLOWED to leave me again,” I said, walking into Dom's office and putting my arms around him. He was so broad that my arms only reached the middle of his chest.

“Okay, okay. I get it,” he said, laughing. I was an only child, but if I could have a brother, I would have chosen Dom. He was a few years younger than me and we'd graduated from the same high school, about a half hour away from Corsica. We hadn't known each other, but had gone through the same cheer program, and he'd been an assistant coach and gym teacher at Corsica for five years.

Sometimes I wondered if he was angry that he didn't get the head coaching job, but he told me that he didn't want it. Too much pressure, and he had a cute husband that he adored and wanted to spend time with. I just had the cats, so I was happy to be the one sitting up at night and working out choreo in my head, or dealing with the teen

drama, or meeting with the athletic director to beg for new mats, or volunteer for the booster club. I'd do it all.

"That'll do, K." Dom patted my head. He always called me K, or Coach K. The squad had picked up on it and I was trying to get used to it. "What is that look on your face? I know that look." He stared down from his height into my eyes.

"I want to tweak the pyramid?" I said, but it sounded like a question.

Dom ran his hands through his dark curls, making them spring and stand up all over the place. Dom was painfully handsome, and he knew it. He sat down behind his desk and I took one of the spare chairs that creaked whenever I so much as breathed. He needed new furniture in here. Most of the stuff in here was older than both of us combined.

"Are you serious? Do you think they can handle that?" I didn't really know, which was why I wanted to ask him. I handed him a coffee from the good coffee place down the street.

"Tell me what you think."

I went through the changes, and he shook his head at me.

"Look, if they can pull it off, it's going to be spectacular. If not? It's going to be a disaster."

I gave him a look. "That's our entire sport, Dom."

He pointed at me. "That's true. Okay, I say let them try it. And if it doesn't work, it doesn't work, hopefully without any breakdowns."

I wanted to avoid those at all costs. I sincerely loved every one of those kids and I wouldn't push them further than I thought they could go.

"Sounds like a plan." I sat back and sipped my coffee, trying not to be envious at the adorable pictures Dom had on his desk of him and Heath on their wedding day. Ninety percent of the time, I was absolutely fine with being single, but every now and then, a cold knife of loneliness would stab itself in my chest and it was hard to breathe.

I looked back up at Dom's face.

"You okay?" he asked.

I plastered a fake cheer smile on my face. "Yeah, just thinking too much."

"Thinking about anything or anyone fun?" He wiggled his dark eyebrows up and down and his brown eyes twinkled. I knew that if I let him press hard enough, I'd spill everything. Dom was one of the only people in the world that I was almost completely nakedly honest with. It was one of the reasons we worked so well together. No bullshit, no games.

"Not really," I said, and pressed my lips together to keep my tongue from telling him that I had been thinking about Echo. Dom knew that Echo and I had a history, but he didn't know any of the dirty details, although he was smart and probably had figured it out and just chose not to bring it up because he was a good friend.

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“Okay, okay,” he said, raising his hands in the air. “I won’t press you. But if you wanted to tell me . . .”

I glared at him.

“Message received. Anything else you want to get off your chest?”

I swung the conversation back in the direction of cheer, a safer topic, but my mind was still thinking about Echo.

She was coming back into my life in a big way.

Two

“Where is your bow?” I asked Mack, my most-important flyer, who had apparently forgotten she was a cheerleader today. She’d forgotten her uniform somehow, but we had extras on hand that fit her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, threatening to cry mascara tears all over her already made-up face. “I don’t know what happened. I thought I had everything in my bag.”

I could tell she felt completely awful, so I gave her a hug and told her I had emergency bows for situations like this.

“You might not be prepared, but I am.” I spent many hours of my life going over every single contingency that could happen, so that we would never be surprised.

My squad knew that even if someone broke their leg in the middle of a routine, we would be able to stop, regroup, and go on again, and nail it. I regularly would pull people from stunts and throw the alternates in, just to keep them on their toes. No surprises, ever.

I pulled out the bow and slid it onto her ponytail and gave her a little extra hairspray. Big bows were back in now, and I was pleased. If your bow wasn't half the size of your head and covered in rhinestones, what was the point?

"Hey, it's okay. Leave that at the door. Breathe." I made her do some breathing exercises a few times with me until she seemed to be focused on the performance again.

So much of what I did as a coach was be a surrogate mother, so it was no wonder I didn't have any energy left for dating. I also didn't have time.

Dom led everyone in warmups and putting up a few stunts, and then I gave the rousing pep talk. I told them to look at the crowd. Their friends and families were here to support them, as well as local press, and other members of the community. Megan and the photographer lurked in the periphery, and I smoothed my hair. I'd taken extra care with it today. We all needed to look good today.

Everything was set to go, but I was momentarily thrown off my game when I saw a flash of red hair climbing the bleachers. No, it couldn't be her. I was just seeing things.

I turned my attention back to my squad and we all put our hands in and did our little call and response cheer that we did before every performance. I didn't like to say I was superstitious, but I was wearing my lucky earrings and rings, and had a quarter in my pocket, as I always did before they performed. Sticking my hand in my pocket, I rubbed the quarter five times.

Showtime.

The kids did amazing, everything hit and they were ecstatic when they got off the mat. I gave them a few little tips and pointers and then let them run and hug their friends and families and bask in the performance. I was proud of them.

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“They did good,” Dom said, putting his arm around me. “And guess who else did good?”

“You?”

“Well, yes, me. That’s a given.” He bumped me with his hip. “But you. You’re doing an amazing job this season.”

I never really knew what to do with compliments, so I just ducked my head to hide my blush. I turned around to chat with one of the parents and that’s when I saw her, walking down the bleachers again.

My mouth dropped open and I snapped it shut as I was going to respond to the parent.

“Could you excuse me for one moment?” I shot Dom a look and he stepped in. We had been working together long enough that he could read my face as if I’d spoken aloud.

It took me a second to find her again. She’d slipped into the leaving crowd.

“Hey, Echo!” I yelled, maybe a little too loudly. She paused with her hand on the gym door to leave. People streamed around us and she had to decide to turn around and face me, or open the door and pretend she didn’t hear me.

She picked the second option, and I wasn’t going to let that stand.

I pushed the door open as she speed-walked to the parking lot.

“Echo! Don’t walk away from me. What are you doing here?”

People were staring, but I didn’t care.

Echo pivoted on her heel and turned around fully. Her hair flowed over her shoulders in the breeze, as if she was posing for a hair product commercial.

Seeing her again was as intense as seeing her the first time: a visceral punch in the gut. The freckles across her nose made me clench my fists.

“What are you doing here?” I stepped closer so I could lower the volume of my voice and not create so much of a spectacle.

A calm smile spread across her face. “Just enjoying the show. It was open to the public.” She gestured to the people walking around us.

“It shouldn’t have been,” I muttered. I didn’t like seeing her. It made me feel too many things at once. I wrapped my arms around my stomach to try and hold myself together.

“You’re welcome at our practice any time, Kiri.” The smile twisted into something else. Something that made my heart pound in my chest.

If there was one thing I hated,hated, it was her using my name. She didn’t have a right to my name.

“Oh, so I can watch someone do a bunch of half-assed jumps? No thank you.” It was a dig, and we both knew it. If I wasn’t careful, my temper was going to flare and then I would say things that shouldn’t be said in public.

She tilted her head to the side and narrowed her eyes.

“Are you making fun of my squad?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” I had to close my eyes and take a breath. “Just go away. I don’t even know why you came, except to steal our stuff.”

She rolled her eyes and let out a little laugh that was more like an exhale than anything else.

“Please, this is not that cheer movie from twenty years ago. Grow up.”

“You grow up!” I snapped. Perfect comeback. So witty.

A smirk played on Echo’s lips and then she gave me a little wave. “See you in Orlando, Kiri.”

I wanted to hurl the smartest one-liner that would have her shaking in her heels, but she was gone before I could say anything, let alone anything smart.

Looking up at the sky, I had to swallow the urge to scream. A hand tapped me on the shoulder and I almost did scream then, but for a different reason.

“Hey, what was that?”

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I found Dom looking down at me.

“I don’t know what she was doing here. What the hell was she doing here?” I rubbed my hands on my arms, even though it was a balmy evening. Echo even affected my ability to regulate my body temperature.

“I thought that was her. You haven’t seen each other since New Englands, right?”

I nodded.

It had been almost ten years and then there she had been, right next to my squad, warming up on the mat. She’d made them all come over and wish my team good luck, but there was such an edge of sarcasm in it that I wanted to drag her off the mat by her gorgeous hair. I’d barely been able to focus on getting my kids ready, and Dom had to give me a pep talk in the hallway.

When Echo’s team had won, it was like smiling while simultaneously being stabbed. I clapped and pretended I was fine losing to her, and that winning didn’t matter. Sure, I wanted it for my squad, but I also wanted to beat her, bad. Fuck sportsmanship. She and her squad were going down in a month if I had to put on a uniform and get on the mat myself.

Dom put his hands on my shoulders and I grounded myself in his eyes.

“I’m good,” I said, “I promise.” I shrugged him off and went back into the gym to talk to a few people before making the squad put the mats away. I heard plans about parties and hoped they were going to be responsible. Megan and the photographer

said goodbye and that the story would be out on Wednesday and my stomach turned a little.

My plan had been to head home and grind myself into the ground with work, but Dom shoved me toward his car.

“Get in. We’re having a drink.”

We picked up Heath from his and Dom’s house, and called a few other friends to head down to our favorite grungy bar, The Trap, that happened to be owned by a pair of motorcycle lesbians that had adopted us as part of their family.

“Hey, Lou,” I said, when I walked in and saw who was behind the bar. Lou had gray hair shaved close to her scalp and always wore a leather vest with lots of pins all over it.

“Get over here,” she said, coming around the bar and pulling me into a rib-cracking hug. She hugged Dom and Heath and Penny and Katie and Jason and Tom. Yes, all of my friends had paired off. I was the seventh wheel, but what were you going to do? I had six people on the lookout for a future wife for me.

“Susie in the kitchen?” I asked Lou. Her wife had once worked as a sous chef for a Michelin star chef, but had fallen in love with Lou and had moved to Corsica so they could open a bar together. True romance right there.

“Yup. Special is lobster bisque, garlic Caesar chicken sandwich, and our salad is summer vegetables,” Lou said, wiping the bar down with lemon-scented cleaner.

Sure, you might not think you should get gourmet food in a dive bar with grimy mirrors and an actual vintage spittoon in the corner, but you would be wrong. You could get all that and more at The Trap. There were even homemade pies every day.

We grabbed a table in the corner near the taxidermied bear called Brutus. Several of us hung our bags on his arms.

“I swear, his eyes are following me,” Katie said, glaring up at Brutus.

“You say that every time,” Penny said with a sigh. “If he was going to kill you, he would have done it one of the other times we’ve been here.”

Katie’s eyes narrowed “Maybe he’s just waiting for the right time.”

Penny ignored her wife and looked at me. “So, how’s it going?”

“Good. Um, I had an encounter.” No use hiding it with this group.

Jason braced his elbows on the table and put his chin in his hands. “Oh, this sounds like it’s going to be good.”

“Hold on, I think I need a drink first,” I said, sitting back and looking toward the bar.

“I got you,” Dom said, taking everyone’s drink orders. I was starving, but not even Susie’s food could tempt me with my stomach full of knots about Echo.

Dom came back with a vodka soda with lime for me, and drinks for everyone else. We passed out menus, and I could feel all the anticipation as we all put in our food orders.

I took a sip from my drink to prepare.

“Spill,” Katie said, pointing to me.

“Okay, so you will never guess who showed up to the exhibition today.”

There were a few wild suggestions before someone got the right answer.

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“Shut up, she did not,” Penny said, her eyes wide.

“She did,” I said, gulping my drink. I needed to slow this down. Alcohol got me wasted so quickly that if I had this too fast, I was going to be under the table.

“Why was she there?” Heath asked.

I threw my arms up and they crashed down onto the table with a bang. “I don’t even know, that’s what’s so frustrating! Like, she’s seen our routine. Was she trying to see if we’d made more progress since the last competition? Was she trying to steal our shit? I don’t know. Maybe she was just there to fuck with me.”

I mean, it was working. I was currently losing my shit over her.

Kiri = 0

Echo = 1

“Whatever, I don’t want to talk about her, someone else say something interesting,” I said.

There was a long silence.

“Katie got a toy caught in her vagina today,” Penny said, as Katie did a spit take all over the table and we were all drenched in beer. Katie spent the next few minutes wheezing and trying to breathe as the rest of us cleaned ourselves up and tried not to die from laughter.

“Why would you tell them that?” Katie said, sucking down water, her face as red as her lipstick.

“Because I thought it was interesting,” Penny said.

“You’re terrible.”

“You married me,” Penny said, pointing to her ring.

“Shit, I did, didn’t I?”

They shared a look that made my heart ache. Why was I so sensitive lately?

“I might regret asking this, but how did you get a toy stuck there?” Tom said, and Jason and Dom let out groans.

The food arrived and for a few moments the topic of the toy in Katie’s vagina was forgotten, but it got brought back up a few moments later and Katie moaned and turned red again.

“I’m not talking about this. Someone else say something interesting that doesn’t have to do with my junk,” she said.

“We have an announcement to make,” Dom said, looking at Heath.

“You want to tell them?” Heath asked.

“Yeah, I do.”

I had a feeling I knew what it was about, but I waited for confirmation, my sandwich poised halfway to my mouth.

“We’re adopting a baby!” Dom said, throwing his arms in the air.

“Mazel tov!” Tom yelled, and everyone cheered.

“What’s going on over there?” Lou yelled from the bar.

“Dom and Heath are getting a baby!” Katie yelled and Lou came over to offer her congratulations, and a free round. We got so many free drinks from her it was ridiculous.

Talk turned to talking about Dom and Heath’s future baby, a much happier topic than thinking about Echo showing up today.

“Youhaveto let me do the nursery,” Katie said, gripping Dom’s arm. She worked as an interior designer, so it would have been offensive not to use her.

“As soon as we have more details and we know for sure, you’re on our speed dial,” Heath said.

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I was so excited for Dom. He and Heath were going to be amazing dads, so that was something bright to think about instead of the Echo bullshit.

The group had formed before I moved to Corsica, and they'd kind of adopted me when I came to coach and started hanging out with Dom. It was nice to have a circle of friends who were also queer and who I could relate to on a deep level. I'd been so worried about that when I moved, that I wouldn't be able to find friends. I had a few long-distance friendships, but being able to call someone up and be at their house a few minutes later was a blessing.

"I'm so freaking happy for you," I told Dom as he drove me back to my car at CHS.

"I've been wanting to tell you for ages, but we didn't want to get anyone's hopes up in case it fell through, which it still might. We're trying to prepare ourselves for disappointment."

"It's going to work out," I said, and he slid me a look.

"How do you know?"

"I just know." I reached out and squeezed his hand.

The kitties were apoplectic when I got home, because they'd had to wait a few hours for their wet food. Poor dears. They were never going to forget this treatment.

"Jail for mother for one thousand years," I said, as they chomped down as if they'd never eaten before.

I scrolled through my phone, looking for baby items to buy for Dom and Heath and trying to decide if I wanted to get another snack, or if I was just bored. That usually led me to my favorite used jewelry site and in a few weeks a ring that had belonged to at least five people who had died mysterious deaths would show up at my door that I wouldn't remember buying.

I'd given the squad the day off tomorrow, and myself a day off as well. They needed time off to rest and for their muscles to heal. Pretty soon I'd be pushing them to their limits, but they'd done a good job today and deserved a break.

I was also extremely strict about school and homework getting done, so I hoped they would at least have some time for academics. More than a few times I'd been a tutor for one of my kids who needed some extra help. I shoved them toward Dom for anything math or science-related, and I handled all the humanities.

Grabbing a bag of ranch-flavored chips, I crashed on the couch and put on my favorite trashy reality show, and the next thing I knew, I was waking up from an impromptu nap.

"What the fuck?" I sat up and the bag of chips fell on the floor and spilled everywhere. The cats seized their moment and started licking and pawing at them, but soon decided that the chips were not kitty food and glared at me in betrayal.

"Fuck," I said, wiping my eyes, and then almost screaming because there was still ranch dust on my fingers that I'd just smeared in my eyes.

"Shit, fuck," I said, using my shirt to wipe my eyes. I got up from the couch and stumbled to the bathroom. Most of my lights were still on. I really had conked out.

I did my best to get the ranch seasoning out of my eyes and then washed my face. Not enough energy for an actual shower. I stripped out of the outfit I'd worn today and

left it on the bathroom floor.

I ran my hands through my hair and tried not to think about the dream I'd just had. It was vivid and . . . less of a dream and more of a memory. A memory of sweaty skin sliding across more sweaty skin. Of panting and trying to be quiet and the thrill of almost getting caught sharpening the edges of desire.

My hookup with Echo roared in my mind, along with the ghost of the sound she'd made when she came. Oh, I'd made her come again and again, and she had returned the favor. That was the only nice thing I could say about Echo: she gave excellent head.

"Fuck," I said again, and rinsed a face cloth in cold water and pressed it to the back of my neck. In the mirror, my cheeks were flushed, and my chest heaved as if I was out of breath.

This was going to be a long competition season.

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Since it was my Sundayoff, as well as the squad's, I treated myself to a hot yoga class, a pedicure, and then biscuits and gravy at The Trap. They opened for brunch on the weekends, and I couldn't pass that up.

"It's on the house," Susie said, coming out of the kitchen with a mimosa in one hand.

"You give me too many free drinks," I said, wiping my mouth to make sure it wasn't dripping with gravy.

"You deserve it," she said, pulling out the chair and sitting down with a grunt. Her curly gray hair was pulled back, and the apron that covered her front was stained, but her hands and fingers were immaculate.

"How's it going?" Susie asked. I both loved and hated it when she tried to mother me. I had great parents, but they had retired to Arizona, so I didn't see them in person often enough. We did text and video chat nearly every day.

"It's going," I said. "Just stressful. The next month is just . . . a lot." I had so many expectations on my shoulders. Yes, it was my squad that was going out on the floor, but I was on the mat with them every second, and I was the one the parents would come to if they weren't happy. I'd already dealt with more than a few parents who thought that their precious baby should be front and center when the precious baby couldn't even land a back handspring on a good day.

"You're doing a good thing for those kids. I'll never forget the good coaches I had

when I was younger. They kept me on the right path and helped me learn the skills I needed to become an adult.”

My face felt hot, and I looked down at my plate. I really needed to learn how to take compliments. “Thank you, that’s really nice to hear.”

“Anything else going on with you?”

I shook my head. “Not really. Just focused on Nationals.” I shrugged one shoulder. I knew what she was asking, but I just didn’t have much in my life outside of cheer. I was a little obsessed.

“Be sure to make room in your life for things other than work.” She glanced up and caught Lou’s eye, who gave her a wink. Susie winked back and beamed. Their love was so pure.

“I’ll work on that,” I said, and sipped my mimosa. The fizzing champagne tickled my nose and I almost sneezed.

“Do you want some gossip?” There were two things that Susie was amazing at: cooking, and knowing everyone else’s business. I honestly didn’t know how she knew, unless she had actual spies all around Corsica. She knew more even than Lou.

“Yes, always. Hit me.” I leaned in and she told me about the latest scandal in town, involving two sisters, one man, and an ill-fated text message that let one sister know that her man was banging the other sister.

I devoured the juicy details as well as my entire plate of food, and went home full and satisfied.

The kitties needed some playtime, so I threw toys around and dangled some feathers

in front of their faces before I got bored and started surfing the cheer blogs and social media pages.

I was always looking for new things to try or add to our routines. I couldn't make too many changes from here on out, but a few tweaks could get us a few more tenths of a point, and that could make the difference between winning and losing.

My fingers, of their own volition, took me to Echo Rosenthal's page. She posted regular videos and updates of her squad, and I found myself doing a deep dive and watching everything from the past two years like a weirdo.

More than an hour later, I had seen all the videos and started glancing through her personal pictures. There weren't a ton because she taught English at Heartwood High, when she wasn't coaching, and had probably scrubbed it before she got the job. Too bad I wasn't a hacker who could find all those old pictures she thought she'd deleted. I still remembered some of those pictures, and I might even have been in some of them. We'd definitely taken more than a few together at camp.

I didn't have any of those pictures left after a purge when I'd gotten a new phone. I almost wished that I did.

Spaghetti jumped on my lap and nudged my phone out of my hand, and I took that as a sign.

"Okay, fine. I'll stop looking up the hot mean girl." I didn't know two better words to describe Echo. It was a crime that she'd only gotten hotter with age. When I'd first seen her walking through the door with her squad at Championships, I'd almost walked right onto the mat during the tumbling warm-up and caused a collision.

It had been ten years, but I'd know her anywhere. I'd know her in the pitch dark. Her hair was longer and darker now, shading toward auburn instead of the lighter more

ginger shade she'd had when we'd first met. I hated how I knew the exact shade of her hair in the sun.

She'd also gained even more muscle than she'd had as a base and a tumbler at the age of seventeen. Echo was a fucking anatomy chart, each muscle group on obnoxious display.

Spaghetti meowed loudly, and I was getting the picture. My kitties were incredibly intuitive and knew when I needed to get out of my own head.

"Okay, baby, okay." I gave Spaghetti skritches and then Meatball was waiting and it was a kitty petting line. My phone was still on the floor and it lit up with a message. It was from my mom. I thought about texting her back, but I called her instead.

"How's my girl?" That was how she always answered the phone when I called her.

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“I’m good. I miss you.” Part of me considered dropping all my responsibilities and getting on a plane at least once a day. Sometimes you just needed your parents, even if you were fully grown.

“I miss you too. You need to visit more.”

I sighed. “I will, as soon as Nationals are over. I’m there. I’ll even brave the heat for you.”

“It’s dry heat,” she said, and I sighed. We had this argument at least once a week.

“How’s Dad?”

“He’s attempting to grow fruit trees.”

That took me a second to process. Dad was always getting into new hobbies, but this was a first. “Fruit trees?”

“Yes, he fancies himself the Johnny Appleseed of Phoenix.” That was quite the image, my dad, who could be mistaken for Santa Claus in the off-season, sprinkling seeds in pots and hoping for them to grow.

“I love it. Everyone needs a hobby. How’s book club?” Half of the reason I called my mom so often was to get updates from her book club, which were BANANAS. Like, Bravo should start following them around with cameras and they’d have the next reality show hit on their hands.

“Get this, Patty’s husband, the one who travels all the time? Has a secret family.”

I gasped. “Shut up.”

She told me the whole sordid tale about Patty’s philandering husband and his other woman and the three children they’d had together. Before the internet, it was a lot easier to hide your second family from your first family, but not so much anymore.

I didn’t tell Mom about the thing with Echo, but she could tell I was uneasy about something.

“Talk to me. I can hear it in your voice.” I couldn’t put anything past her.

“Well, there was a little encounter yesterday. I don’t really want to go into it, but remember Echo?” I told my mom pretty much everything, so she did know about Echo. I mean, not all the dirty details, but she was a smart woman, so she’d probably figured it out.

“Yes, she’s coaching now, right?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Anyway, she showed up at the exhibition and I confronted her and it was just . . . weird. Like, I have no idea what the hell she was even doing there, unless it was just to piss me off. Wouldn’t put it past her.”

That had to be it. What else could be the reason? I couldn’t find one.

“Maybe she wants to rekindle something,” Mom suggested, and I made a gagging noise.

“Ew, Mom. No. She was just there to throw me off. To mess with my head. You don’t know this girl.”

I didn't really know her either. One week of interaction did not tell you everything about a person. Plus, I didn't want to know her. Not even a little bit, social media stalking notwithstanding. That was research for my job as a coach.

"I don't know, Kiri," Mom said in a singsong voice. "I think she might be carrying a torch for you."

I sputtered.

"That's ridiculous. It was ten years ago. I'm sure she's got some hot wife who sits on her back while she does push-ups." The mental image of that made me shudder.

"Do you know that for sure?" Mom prodded.

"Look, I said I didn't want to talk about this, please?"

"Okay, okay. Oh, your father has come in from tending his fruit. He wants to say hello."

I tried not to think about what else "tending his fruit" could mean.

"Hey KK, how's life?"

"Hey Dad. It's good."

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We chatted for a little bit longer and he talked my ear off about his new endeavor. I was happy that he was happy, and I hoped his fruit trees didn't die like the time when he tried to set up an aquarium and ended up accidentally poisoning all his fish within the first week.

By the time I was done with my parents, the kitties were starving and I got up to feed them and realized that I needed to eat also and made a quick dinner. I needed to start meal prepping again, so I pulled some chicken out of the freezer and went through the pantry to see what I could make with it that would last a few days and would work for lunches.

I needed Dom to come over again and help me organize. He was an amateur chef and helped me learn how to use things like truffle oil and a microplane. I texted him and asked him what I should do with the chicken and he sent back the link to a recipe for chicken and veggies that you baked on a sheet pan. Thanks to Dom, I actually possessed a sheet pan. Before we met, according to him, I was living like an uncivilized troll. I tried not to be offended about that comment.

After dinner I was bored, so I started looking for a new ring. I really needed one with a red stone to go with this jumpsuit I'd just gotten and had plans to wear out when I went with my friends for a weekend trip to Portland. Sure, wearing ten finger's worth of rings was fun in Corsica, but it could be a little excessive for a trip to the grocery store.

I didn't find what I was looking for, but I did find myself back on Echo's page.

"I think I have a problem," I said to Meatball, who was sleeping on my feet. She

woke up and made that sweet little kitty noise they make when they get surprised.

“You are so cute, yes you are.” I scratched her head and sighed.

How could I focus on beating Echo without focusing on Echo? Was there a way to fuel my spite without thinking about her every five seconds? If there was, I was going to find out how to do it. There was nothing that made you get shit done better than petty rage. Let that fuel flow through my veins, baby.

My next week was Echo-free (at least in person), but the article came out about me and the team. I tried not to cringe at the pictures and the quotes, but Megan hadn't done me dirty and Camille was pleased with the results. She was sending it out to a bunch of rich alumni in hopes they would write some checks for the program. I was just glad that everyone would probably forget about it in a few days.

On Saturday, Dom pulled me aside and dropped a bomb.

“So, there is a situation.” His normally smiling mouth was pulled down, so I knew it was something serious. We pulled ourselves away from the squad to talk at the side of the gym.

“What's happening? Is Heath okay?” That was my first thought.

“Oh, it's nothing like that. Just that I got the news through the grapevine that a vandal set fire to the Heartwood High School gym last night and it's pretty much just a pile of ashes right now.”

My stomach dropped. How terrible. “Oh my god. But no one was there, right?”

He shook his head. “No, it was empty, but they lost everything and it damaged part of the school before they could put it out. They're pretty sure it's arson.” Dom showed

me the article in the statewide paper about it.

“Wow, this is awful.” My heart really went out to them. That was horrible. Corsica was about a half hour away from Heartwood, which wasn’t far enough for comfort.

“I wonder what the cheerleaders are going to do,” Dom said, scrolling through his phone and typing out a quick message.

“Shit, I didn’t even think of that.”

A burst of giggles and laughs distracted me for a second. I glanced back at the squad, which was supposed to be working on the dance, but they were having an impromptu dance-off. I’d yell at them in a second.

Dom looked up from his phone. “They’ll have to go somewhere. Or maybe this means their season is over? I don’t know how they’re going to practice. There isn’t a space around there that’s big enough.”

Both Heartwood and Corsica were pretty rural, without even the benefit of a YMCA or other community center with a large gym.

“Yeah, I don’t know. That sucks.” I spared a tiny bit of sympathy for Echo and then wiped it away. “Okay, that’s enough shenanigans, back to work.” I clapped my hands to get the squad’s attention, but it took me yelling at the top of my lungs. At this rate, I was going to lose my voice before the season was over.

We got through the rest of the practice with no major falls, just a few tears, and with me laying out the revamped pyramid.

“Okay, good job everyone. Remember, Saturday is all day. Don’t forget to hydrate, bring snacks, and I swear, if you stay up too late and whine that you’re tired, I’m

going to lose it.” There were a few snickers at that, but they were silenced with one glare from me. I had polished that glare over twenty-six years of life. Almost like I was meant to do this job.

We did our little cheer to end practice and then Camille walked in.

“Hey, Cam, what’s going on?” She and I were casual friends and hung out sometimes outside of the school, but she was one of those beautiful intimidating women that I always found myself tongue-tied around. To add insult to injury, she was hopelessly heterosexual and married to a man who looked like he’d just stepped off the stage from a fitness competition and owned a local CrossFit gym.

She sighed and rolled her shoulders and I tried not to stare. I really needed to get myself under control. I’d been lusting all over the place lately.

My lust completely died when she responded. “So, I don’t know what you’ve heard, but the Heartwood gym burned down and I had an emergency conference call and we’re going to offer ours to their cheerleaders to practice here. It’s going to be a nightmare busing them over, but the decision was taken out of my hands. The principals are cousins.”

I bit my tongue hard to stop a loud curse from coming out. So hard that I might have drawn blood.

I had to close my eyes and take a deep breath before I could respond in a voice quivering with repressed rage.

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“They’re going to practice here?”

“Yes.”

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“How is that even going to work?” I asked when I finally got my thoughts into some sort of order.

Cam shrugged one elegant shoulder “I’m not sure. It’s going to be a lot. We’ll have to get extra mats and maybe a curtain to divide the space. It’s my job to figure that out.” She gave me a lukewarm smile that showed how excited she was about the task. “It’s fine. I know I shouldn’t be talking like this. They lost their gym and it’s not their fault. I just don’t like it when my plans are disrupted.”

If there was one thing to know about Camille, it was that she was addicted to order and spreadsheets and schedules. She ran the department with the passion and care of managing an NBA team, and she had to deal with a lot of people demanding more money for their program, not to mention scandals and overzealous parents and coaches who went too far. It was a job I wouldn’t want, that was for sure. One of her eyes was twitching and she kept tapping one foot. Camille was stressed.

“We’ll make it work,” I said immediately. “Hey, it’ll be fine.”

She inhaled through her nose and then exhaled slowly. “I know, you’re right. I should have gone in my office and taken a minute before I talked to you. I don’t want you to think I’m being unprofessional.”

“I would never think that,” I said, and she smiled and it was like looking into the sun. Why were there so many beautiful women in my path recently? It was beginning to wear on me.

“Thanks. So, now I have to go on TV and do an interview about how we’re taking in the Bulldogs.” She made a face.

“Oh, yikes. I hope they don’t want to interview me.” The article last week was bad enough. I didn’t want to be on camera if I could avoid it.

“You might get tapped. Just be prepared.”

“I’ll make Dom do it.” He was much better for that stuff than I was, and he enjoyed it more.

“Make Dom do what?” he said, slinging an arm around my shoulder. If he wanted, he could use my head as an armrest, and he did, much to my constant chagrin.

“A potential TV interview because we’re taking in the Bulldogs and letting them use our gym,” Cam said.

He nodded as if he wasn’t surprised. “Makes sense. Where else are they going to go? We’ll have to divide the space somehow, but we can make it work. It’ll give us an up-close look at our competition. This could be the best thing to happen to us. They’ll be on our turf.”

I hadn’t thought about that. I guess he could be right, but all I could think about was that, for the next three weeks, I had to share a gym with Echo. She was going to be in my space, I would hear her voice, and I would see her all the time.

Cam started typing on her phone, oblivious to me and Dom.

“This is going to be a nightmare,” I said to Dom.

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“It’ll be fine,” Dom said, squeezing my shoulder.

It was time to go home, but I didn’t want to be alone at my house.

“Do you want to come over? I’ll order dinner, my treat.” Heath was away on a quick HR retreat that sounded like the most boring kind of retreat ever, so he had the house to himself.

“Deal,” he said. “I’ve been eating leftovers because I don’t know how to cook for one.” He’d grown up with eight brothers and sisters, and since he was the second oldest, he’d had to learn how to cook at an early age, and knew how to feed a lot of people from one pot.

“Awesome,” I said.

Camille’s phone made a sound and she answered it.

“Excuse me,” she said to me and Dom, and started walking toward her office, her high heels clicking on the gym floor.

“Stop staring at her ass,” Dom said, leaning down and whispering in my ear.

I glared up at him. “I wasn’t staring at her ass.” I had definitely been staring at her ass. It wasn’t my fault that it looked so good.

Dom drove his own car to my house and the kitties lost their minds when he walked in. They adored him, even more than they loved me.

“Oh yes, I love you, I do,” he said in a baby voice as he picked up Cupcake and Spaghetti. Poor Meatball put her feet on his legs and cried and cried. I scooped her up, but she didn’t want me.

“Brat,” I said.

Dom nuzzled the cats and then looked at me. “What are you in the mood for?”

“Cheese. Lots of melted cheese.”

I ordered a pepperoni and green pepper pizza, wings, and mozzarella sticks.

“Health is going to be so mad,” Dom said as I put in the order.

“It’s his fault for going out of town. There will be plenty of other times for melted cheese.”

Dom followed me into the kitchen where I got us both drinks before we planted ourselves on the couch to wait for the food to get here.

“This is going to be hell, Dom,” I said as Cupcake jumped in his lap and started kneading his thighs. He winced and picked her up before settling her back down. She curled up and closed her eyes with a kitty sigh.

“Maybe it won’t be that bad. We can draw a line down the center and they’ll stay on their side and we will have our side. We should definitely take the side with the locker rooms.”

That would be hilarious. They’d have the water fountain, but none of them would be able to pee.

“That’s mean, Dom. We’re talking about kids here. Not just Echo.” I pressed my fingers to my forehead. I felt a migraine coming on.

“Right, but you definitely want those kids to lose, right?”

Meatball climbed on me and sat on my chest. I looked at Dom over her floof. “I mean, yes. It’s going to be weird. How is this going to work out?” I groaned and Meatball glared at me.

My phone buzzed with a message from Camille. The Bulldogs were being bussed in tomorrow after school. We were going to have to share mats for a few days. I sent Dom the news and wondered how I was going to break it to the team. Immediately, I started typing up a set of rules in my phone.

If I didn’t set boundaries for them, they would push and then there would be a disaster and we’d figure out that it would have been a good idea to start with some guidelines.

I’d have to talk to Echo and work on how we’d divide the space and that was the conversation that I dreaded more than anything else, because that would set the tone for the next three weeks. My stress level was already high, and I didn’t think it could go much higher, but I had the sneaking suspicion that this was the calm before the storm. Not just a storm. A tornado in a hurricane with an earthquake on the side.

In one month this will be over, in one month this will be over, I kept saying to myself. I could get through a few weeks with Echo. Actually, it would be the longest we’d ever spent together, since cheer camp had only been a week.

I couldn’t lie: I was interested to see her coaching style. Now that I’d gotten over the shock and dismay of the whole thing, I was trying to find any silver lining or advantage. I also didn’t want to be a complete bitch and make them feel unwelcome,

no matter how I felt about Echo. Her squad didn't deserve to be painted with her brush. They were probably great kids. Probably. I'd have to wait and see.

I couldn't concentrate on work during the day on Monday. Normally all I needed in my home office was a latte and some good tunes to keep me motivated and focused. I'd worked non-freelance jobs before, but I really liked being in control of my own time. It also gave me the freedom to coach, which was the biggest perk. I barely made any money from coaching, it was purely because I loved cheer and wanted to share that with people since I couldn't get on the mat anymore myself.

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I could probably still do a split, but tumbling was out of the question. That had never been my strong suit anyway. I was much more comfortable at the top of a stunt.

The kitties slept at my feet as I chewed at my lip and tried not to compulsively check the clock every few minutes. After getting distracted from what I was trying to do in Photoshop for the third time, I groaned and closed the program. I wasn't going to get anything done, and it was almost time to get ready to head over to the gym. I might as well get there early and see if I needed to do anything for Camille.

I spent some extra time in front of the mirror, making sure my hair was looking right. The undercut on both sides was starting to grow out, so I'd need to clip it in a few days. I used a combo of gel and mousse to give the short dark waves on top of my head some volume and hold. I definitely wouldn't be mistaken for a former cheerleader now, though that was changing a little. Back in the day I'd had long hair all the way down my back, the better to make a high ponytail with. My scalp still ached from the weight of those ponytails.

I shuddered and turned my head from side to side. Looked good. Not one to wear much makeup, I brushed on some foundation, added a tiny bit of color to my cheeks, a dash of highlighter on my cheekbones, and a swipe of mascara and I was done. Belatedly, I thought that I should have done eyeliner to make my brown eyes pop a little more, but it was too late now.

Usually I dressed pretty casual for practice, but I found myself pulling out a new button-up that I'd gotten and leaving the top two buttons undone. My bra wasn't showing, but it gave the impression of cleavage.

“What am I doing?” I said to my reflection in the mirror on the back of my bedroom door. I did up another one of the buttons, but the shirt didn’t look right, so I undid it again. Loading my fingers up with my most-cursed rings completed the look.

“You need to calm down,” I said to my reflection one more time before I left the room, grabbed my bag, slipped on my leopard-print sneakers, and headed out the door.

My hands trembled on the steering wheel as I drove to Corsica. It didn’t take as long as I wanted it to. I pulled into the parking lot and turned off my car. It was time.

I headed into the gym and there were a few teens hanging around after school, loitering and laughing together. I still had about an hour before practice, so I headed for Camille’s office and knocked on her door.

“Hey,” I said, sticking my head in. She was on the phone and held one finger up as she finished the call.

“What can I do for you?”

“Actually, I was wondering if there’s anything I can do for you? To get the gym ready and so forth?” I asked.

She gave me a look as if I’d thrown her a life preserver as she was drowning in the ocean. “Oh my god, that would be wonderful. Can you divide up the mats and then we have the curtain thing, but we have to unpack it and put it together. And it’s not going to be soundproof, so just be aware of that.”

Oh, I had thought about that, all right. I planned to conduct my practices in whispers and constantly eavesdrop on what the team on the other side of the curtain was doing. It was only fair, since they were using my space. A tiny portion of my brain

considered setting up a secret recording device, but that might be taking this thing too far.

“Sure, I can set up the curtain. Where is it?”

Cam’s phone rang again and she rolled her eyes. “Corner of the gym. Big boxes. Can’t miss it. Come find me if you need help.” She took the call and I was dismissed.

Sure, I wasn’t in Cam shape, but I thought I could handle this shit. I was a lesbian; assembling things was part of my nature, or at least it was supposed to be.

I went back to the gym and found the boxes and started unpacking. Basically it was a set of poles that interlocked, and then you draped fabric over it to make the sections.

When I had difficulty getting the poles even out of the boxes, I realized that I was not going to be able to complete this task by myself. As I struggled to pull one of the metal poles out of the box, a pair of hands held the box so I could pull the pole out. I looked up and dropped the pole with an enormous clang, narrowly missing crushing one or both of my feet.

It was Echo.

“Sorry, you looked like you needed some help.” I picked up the pole and tried to yank it out of the box, which worked about as well as my ability to keep my cool around her. As in, not at all.

“Fuck,” I said under my breath as I set the pole down again. I tried to keep my cursing to a minimum around the squad, especially when their parents were around, but I didn’t know how this was going to go with Echo around. She pushed my swear button. She pushed a lot of my buttons.

“I’m fine,” I said, putting my hands up. “I’m fine.”

I wasn’t fine.

“Okay,” Echo said, looking at me a little warily.

Whatever moment we were having was interrupted by her squad traipsing into the gym, all chatting and making as much noise as possible, as teenagers were wont to do.

“Hey, set your stuff down and come help,” Echo said, her voice carrying across the space like a crack of thunder. They took their time, but they all set their things on the bleachers and shuffled over, some of them looking around warily. As if my team was going to jump out from behind the bleachers and scare them.

As I stood there, not knowing what to say or do, Echo organized her team and had the curtain set up in half the time it took me to try and get one pole out.

By the time they had divided the gym in half, my team had started to arrive, and Camille breezed in to see how it was going.

“Hi, I’m Camille, the AD, we spoke on the phone,” she said to Echo.

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Echo shook her hand and introduced herself, and then a group of other adults walked over. I had seen them before and knew them to be her team of assistant coaches. She had four, no joke. One was a professional choreographer on top of everything else.

Thinking about Echo's resources too much made my blood boil. Her team had all the advantages, but now they didn't have their fancy gym. No, they were stuck with the water fountain that only worked half the time, and the haunted locker room with the rest of us.

Camille broke the news about the mats and we divided them in half, which was going to throw both our squads off. This was one situation I hadn't had them practice for. There wasn't enough room for them to do their tumbling, or to do all of the stunts, so we'd have to pick and choose what we worked on.

"Thank you," Echo said, and I thought she was talking to Camille. I'd been trying to avoid her as I waited for my squad to get their act together and come over as a group so we could have a little chat about the ground rules.

"Thank you, Kiri," she said, and the sound of my name in her mouth sent a shiver down my back.

"It wasn't my choice," I said.

"I know, but still. Thank you."

She ducked behind the curtain but then poked her head back around again. "Do you know when the new mats are coming? My squad isn't used to using ones that are this

low quality. I don't want anyone to get hurt."

There it was.

"I'm not sure," I said, my eyes narrowed and my voice icy. "You can ask Camille."

She grinned at me. "Thanks."

Echo went back around the curtain and clapped her hands to call her squad to attention.

"You all are representing me, and the school, and I expect you to act with decorum. For those that don't know what that means, I want you to act like classy and gracious people. If you can't do that, fake it."

There was a ripple of laughter. I'd pitched my voice low, but the other group had their music on loud so I didn't think they would hear me anyway.

It hadn't even been an hour and I was already losing my mind. I was so used to having the entire gym and no other distractions. This was going to be a test of character for my team as well as me.

Kevin, my class clown, raised his hand.

"Yes, Kevin," I said, trying not to let out a heavy sigh at the snarky response or witty remark I knew was coming from his mouth.

"What if we can't fake it?"

I narrowed my eyes and looked at the whole squad.

“Then you get thrown in the snake pit, or I hack your social media accounts. Whichever is worse. And don’t think that I can’t.” I loved to claim that I could do things that I couldn’t, but I knew people who could. Dom’s husband used to work in IT and could do that shit with his eyes closed. One of the main reasons I never wanted to get on his bad side.

That seemed to terrify them sufficiently until we discovered a new problem: the curtain.

Instead of keeping us apart, I kept finding my team’s eyes wandering to the cracks in between the curtains, and when stunts went up, you could see the flyers popping up and down.

“This is a nightmare,” I said to Dom as we tried to get the kids to focus.

“It’s like wrangling toddlers that are hopped up on sugar. We need to give them something to focus on,” Dom said. He really was going to make a great dad.

I gathered the team in a circle. “Okay, if you can’t do this and not be distracted, I’m going to cut this practice and just leave. You can’t be safe if you’re looking over at what they’re doing. I’m not letting a bunch of you get hurt. It would be irresponsible. So, can I have you all committed to safety?”

That was one thing most of them could take seriously. They knew the injury and concussion rates of cheerleaders. Did they get reckless sometimes? Yes. But that’s why I was here to rein them in and give them parameters and make sure we had enough spotters who were paying attention. And if we didn’t, I would step in and spot myself. Not all of us had four assistant coaches.

They all nodded and agreed that they were.

“Okay, since we don't have a lot of space, we're going to do opening stunts, one by one, with counts. If you're not in the group, you have your eyes glued to the stunt and if a flyer hits the floor, you will be doing conditioning for the rest of practice, and I will not be happy. Understood?”

I was surly and on edge and I couldn't wait for this damn practice to be over. All of my energy was trained on maintaining my squad's focus, and there were twenty-two of them.

The first stunt went up without incident.

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“Come on, Mack, smile!” Sometimes the flyers concentrated so hard to keep their stunts in the air that they forgot about their facials.

The bases tossed MacKynzie in the air and she twisted twice before they caught her and set her feet back on the mat.

“Great! Next,” I said, and we moved from stunt to stunt. I had to snap my fingers a few times to focus wandering eyes, but overall, they did as good as could be expected.

All the stunts did well, only a few wobbles and one fall, but she didn’t hit the mat, so they didn’t have to do push-ups, crunches, and running like they would have if she’d hit the floor. Flyers had broken their spines falling from stunts and I wasn’t going to let that happen on my watch if I could help it.

Since they had done so well, I decided to take it easy on them and drill the dance for the second half of practice, working on performance of each person, having each member do it by themselves in front of the whole squad and compete to see who had the best showmanship. It was light and fun and they all got so into it. Team dynamics were important, and I wanted to give them these less-serious moments. Cheer was supposed to be fun, and I didn’t want them to walk away from their cheer careers and regret being here.

While they had fun, I let my attention wander to the other side of the curtain. I’d seen a few stunts go up and down, and she seemed to be working on getting her flyers to be sharper on the ground, and having the bases count each stunt. Nothing exciting. One of her assistant coaches seemed to be videotaping, something I would start doing

next week. The only way to make them see what they were doing was to show them what they were doing.

I grabbed Dom and had him make a note that we needed to film next week.

“This is why I need another assistant coach,” I said to him. “I need a spy. You think Heath would quit his job and pretend to be another coach for us?”

Dom laughed and shook his head. “They’re rattling you.”

I gave him a sharp look.

“What? It’s true. You’re totally rattled, look at you.”

I was literally standing there twitching. I could feel it.

“Shut up, Dom.” I said under my breath.

“You need to get over it. You need to lay your problems at the door. Isn’t that what you’re always telling them?” He gestured to the squad with his chin and I hated to admit he was right. I had to put this shit with Echo aside and give everything to this team. That was my job.

“Way to go, James!” I said as one of our more quiet guys gave a great performance. “That’s what I’m talking about. You gave me energy eleven.” I gave him a high five, which was silly because he was over six feet and I cleared five and a half on a good day.

Practice ended on a high note, and I felt good about what they’d put in for the day. Echo’s squad pushed the curtain to the side of the gym, out of the way and then everyone started sizing each other up as they rolled up the mats and put those away as

well.

“Should we introduce them? It feels weird that we wouldn’t,” I said to Dom as Echo walked over, her entourage of coaches following in her wake like supplicants. I hated this so much.

“I thought maybe we should have them get to know each other, since we’re here on your hospitality.” She said the word with a hint of sarcasm that I didn’t miss.

“Sure,” I said, because what else was I going to do?

We got the kids together and everyone went around the room and it was awkward and a little weird and I could tell they all wanted it to be over as soon as possible. Each person introduced themselves, said their pronouns, and said what their position was.

When we got around the room to the coaches, Dom said “I’m Dom, he/him, and I’m the assistant coach of the Tigers, and I was a base and a tumbler when I cheered.” He turned to me and I said that I was head coach and had been a flyer.

Echo was next.

“I’m Echo and I’m the head coach of the NECC champion Bulldogs, and I was a flyer and a tumbler when I cheered.”

No one could miss those passive aggressive digs and I could feel the steam coming from my ears. Dom reached out with his foot and pressed it against mine, and I bit down on my tongue to keep a yelp in as Echo’s assistant coaches introduced themselves.

Brit, Dede, Cece, and Carl. I stopped myself from rolling my eyes as they went. Finally, it was over and the Bulldogs gathered up their things.

Echo checked her phone.

“Okay everyone, bus is here, get your stuff together and make sure you clean up your trash.” She clapped her hands again and I was starting to twitch whenever I heard that sound.

Echo wrangled her squad and they headed out to the bus all chatting and making as much noise as they had when they’d walked in.

And tomorrow we would do it all again.

The minute the gym door closed and they were gone, I breathed a sigh of relief.

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“You need to calm down, right now,” Dom said, putting both hands on my shoulders and looking down at me.

“I know, I know,” I snapped. I needed to get out of here and see my cats. “I need to go home.”

“The same way we tell our squad to leave everything at the door, I want you to leave all of this shit here and not bring it home with you.” I had no idea how I was supposed to do that, but I wasn’t going to spend the rest of the night steaming about Echo.

“At least they cleaned up after themselves,” I said. Echo hadn’t done anything overtly nasty, which made it so much worse. If she just called me out or called me a bitch or pulled my hair then maybe I wouldn’t be simmering in impotent rage right now.

“Listen, this was the first day. Tomorrow will be better. They’ll keep to their side and we’ll focus on what we need to do, and then we’ll settle it at Nationals,” Dom said.

“I’m going to need you to stop always being the voice of reason, or else I’m going to go to Cam and have her promote you to head coach.”

He made a face.

“No thank you. I have enough responsibility.” Every now and then when Cam was busy managing a tournament or something, Dom would step in and help. He gave and gave and gave to this school, and he gave and gave and gave to me. I needed to be better about reciprocation.

“I am buying you the classiest stroller I can find,” I said, giving him a hug.

“Can you make sure it’s a jogging stroller? I want to be able to run with the baby.” I could totally picture him doing that and it made me smile.

“I can’t wait to see it.”

We left the gym and Dom locked up and hit the lights.

“Say hi to Heath,” I told him.

“Say hi to the kitties,” he said to me.

We parted in the parking lot and I headed home to my house full of cats, still hot and bothered about Echo.

Five

I was running late the next day because I’d taken my car to get serviced and had to wait forever for the mechanic to be done. By the time I got to the gym, Echo and her team were already there, busy setting up the curtain. Several of my kids were mingling with a few of theirs and I saw interest and wariness on both sides.

I hoped that there wouldn’t be any hookups. I didn’t need to deal with that drama on top of everything else.

Echo headed right for me as I set down my bag, and I braced myself for whatever she was going to say.

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“Listen, my team and I were talking and since we don’t have enough mats yet to go full on tumbling, we could have a tumble off. Everyone gets to show their skills and it will push them to go harder than they normally would have.” Her tone was brisk and professional.

I completely fucking hated that idea. This wasn’t cheer camp. I needed my kids focused, not playing around with their rivals. Why couldn’t she just stick to her side of the damn gym?

I couldn’t say that, though, or risk everyone knowing that she was getting under my skin. So I said, “sure, sounds like fun” and hoped my eye wasn’t twitching too much.

Echo announced to the two squads what we were going to do and I had to admit, they all seemed excited about it. I’d had plans to video some of the stunts today, but that probably wasn’t going to happen. Echo had hijacked my practice, and I was going to have to make it clear this wouldn’t be happening again.

Dom shared a look with me, basically asking non-verbally if I was okay. I shrugged one shoulder. What was I going to do? I had to be classy, not assy.

The tumble off was fun, I had to admit. A few of my kids went for skills they might not have gone for during a regular practice and one, Amy, ended up landing her first standing double back handspring back tuck.

“I knew you could do it,” I said, giving her a high five. “You feel good about putting it in the routine? I could use you.”

“Yeah, definitely.” She beamed and her teammates grabbed her up in a huge group hug.

One of the reasons we’d lost at New Englands was that our tumbling wasn’t as high-skill as Echo’s team. We made up for those points in other areas, but this was what happened when you didn’t have five coaches to work with your kids on tumbling drills all the time.

There was a vote after everyone had tumbled and a guy named Timber from Echo’s team was declared the winner. I had to admit, I’d kill to get him on my team. Maybe I could call his parents up and convince them to move to a different school district.

“They’re good,” Dom said in my ear.

“Yeah, but our stunts are better.”

He sighed and Echo clapped her hands.

“Okay, enough of that, let’s get to work. Get the curtains up, divide the mats, let’s go.” And everyone moved their asses, including my team. They listened to Echo better than they listened to me.

Having her here was like putting my coaching skills under a microscope and I didn’t like it. I didn’t like having my inadequacies shoved in my face.

When I’d come to Corsica to coach, the Tigers had already been winners. Their head cheer coach had been here for twenty years and had built the program from the ground up. Then the torch was passed to me, and I had never coached a high school team before. I’d helped out with peewee kids, and at gymnastics camps, but I didn’t have any high school coaching experience. Somehow, they hired me anyway, and I spent every damn day trying to prove that I could live up to the legacy I’d inherited.

I breathed a little easier when Echo's team was on the other side of the curtain again.

"Okay, are you all ready? We're going to do two stunts at a time, and yes, there will be video."

Dom had brought out the projector that I could use for my phone, as well as the white screen. Best investment I'd ever made as a coach.

There was a little grumbling, but I shut that down and made everyone who wasn't in the stunt spot. We counted out each stunt as a group and I started to have a bad feeling about this practice. Sometimes they were on, and sometimes the vibe was just off and falling became like a virus. One stunt would go down and it would get in the other flyer's heads and they'd psych themselves out and every stunt from then on would be shaky, or would go down.

This was one of those nights.

"Lock your leg!" I yelled as Ciana stood with a completely bent leg, trying to save a stunt that wasn't going to be saved if she didn't get stable and lock her damn leg. She didn't listen to me and came crumbling down, but was caught by the bases.

There were a few whispered curses from the bases and Ciana looked like she was about to cry.

I stared each of them in the eyes. "You have two options. You can let this stunt defeat you, or you can go for it again. If you really think you can't hit it today, I'd rather have you tell me that now so we don't keep slamming our heads against a brick wall all night, or have someone get injured. It's up to you."

I liked to put the power in their hands, because it was. It was up to all of them to work together to keep Ciana in the air.

“You can do this, C. You’ve got this. You could do this stunt in your sleep.” She nodded and turned her head from side to side, cracking her neck. She made eye contact with her bases and everyone else started pumping them up, letting them know they had this, and they could do it.

Ciana went up the in stunt there was a little wobble, but enough of us gave her verbal support that she dug in and finally hit the stunt sequence, coming down with a huge smile on her face and high fives from her bases.

“That’s my girl,” I said, pointing at her.

“Thanks, Coach,” she said, blushing a little.

We moved on to the next group, and I almost forgot about Echo.

Almost.

Her voice kept piercing the silence, along with the voices of her assistant coaches. Sounded like we weren't the only ones having a rough night. Her voice volume kept rising, and it got so bad that I actually ducked my head around the curtain.

"Hey, can you just lower the volume a little?"

She whirled on me and I almost took a step backward. I'd never seen her have such an intimidating look on her face. Add to the fact that she had a tank top on that put all her muscles on display, and I had to remind myself how to breathe. Her hair glinted with gold highlights under the harsh gym light.

"Fine," she snapped and turned back around. Okay, guess I was dismissed. Her squad looked red and sweaty and done. I wondered what they were having issues with.

It didn't matter. They were my competition. If they were doing poorly, it was to our advantage. Less than three weeks to go before we all got on a plane and headed to Orlando.

The last half of practice was spent with the video, going over each and every tiny thing. Championships were won and lost on fractions of fractions of points. Everything had to be on point.

I brought everyone together to end practice and let them know what we were working on tomorrow.

“Tomorrow we’re going to just pyramid. Once we get the mats, we’re going to start doing at least two full outs in every practice, and more on the weekends.” I heard whining, but I didn’t care. This was what it was going to take. I wasn’t asking anything of them that they couldn’t do.

“Do you want to look polished and good, or do you want to look sloppy and bad? It’s up to you.” The grumbling subsided a little.

I had to stay after for a little while with Dom to talk to a few parents that had questions about the travel arrangements and chaperones and all manner of other things that sports parents wanted to say to the coaches of their children’s team. I think I was very lucky in terms of cheer parents. I had a group of moms who were total booster club rockstars, and if I needed money for new uniforms, they had a check in my hand before I could say pom poms.

Every now and then we had an issue, but overall, they were great.

The bus for the Bulldogs was late and they were all antsy to leave, clogging the entryway to the gym. Dom and I couldn’t leave until they left, so I hung back in the gym messing on my phone instead. I had a few funny texts from my mom and an invitation from Katie and Penny for a pajama wine party that we tried to do a few times a month for girl’s night.

“Hey,” a voice said, and I looked up before I had time to process that it was Echo who’d spoken.

“What can I do for you?” I said, my voice dripping with sweetness. I didn’t think anyone was paying attention to us right now. She walked across the gym floor, as slinky as a panther. I hated how good she looked all the time.

She didn’t speak until we were standing with only a few feet between us.

“You don’t have to be so hostile, Kiri. It was ten years ago.”

I wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction of blowing up.

“It was more than that and you know it. Just go, Echo. Just go.” I closed my eyes and rubbed my forehead.

She stepped closer. “Why are you letting a little competition get in your way?”

“I’m not letting anything get in my way, least of all you,” I said.

“I mean, you already kinda did. Who won at New Englands?”

Oh, this was just ridiculous. I was about ready to scream at her when one of her assistants called out that the bus was there.

“Just something to think about,” she said, reaching out and drawing a finger down my arm. I flinched away from her.

“Fuck you,” I hissed.

“I’m sure you’d like to,” she said, turning around. “See you tomorrow, Kiri Kentwood,” she called over her shoulder.

“IMAY HAVE TO MURDERher,” I said as Katie poured me a glass of wine and slid it across the white granite countertop. It was a good thing I adored both Penny and Katie enough to come over to their gorgeous house because it gave me the worst house envy I’d ever had.

Penny shared a look with Katie before speaking. “Is there a history with her? You know, other than her team beating yours? Because murder seems a little extreme, unless she’s really that annoying.”

Crap. I’d said too much. I’d let my irritation get the best of me and hadn’t been in charge of what was coming out of my mouth.

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“She is really that annoying,” I said, hoping that would work and almost choking on a gulp of sauvignon blanc, and spilling a few drops down the front of my new pajamas that I’d bought specially for tonight.

Katie pulled a huge tray of nacho fries out of the oven, and we descended on them as if we’d never eaten food before.

“But you’re not going to sabotage her or anything, right?” Katie said, almost unhinging her jaw to fit as many fries in as possible in one bite. I admired her commitment.

“No, I would never do anything like that. I mean, I’ve thought about it in my wildest fantasies. I’m not a total bitch.”

“You have to be a little bit of a bitch. Otherwise we wouldn’t want to be friends with you,” Penny said, bumping my hip with hers.

“Damn right, let’s toast to that.” We each picked up a fry and tapped them together before chomping down. “Thank you so much for having me over. I really needed this.”

We moved from the kitchen to the living room, and I stared having anxiety about dripping salsa all over their white couches. Seriously, who had white couches? Not me. I had three cats.

“So, we had an idea,” Katie said, as Penny absentmindedly stroked her hair and I tried not to be jealous because Katie had someone to absentmindedly stroke her hair

and I didn't.

I'd been in a dating dry spell for longer than I'd like to admit. Sure, I'd been on a few here and there, but there wasn't a whole lot of a lesbian scene in Corsica. If I wanted to really quench my thirst, I'd have to head out for a night in Portland, and I was usually working or too tired for that. My last serious relationship had ended before I'd moved to Corsica, and I wasn't even sure if I wanted to dive into something serious and get my fucking heart broken, again.

"We wanted to go on a trip, along with a few of our friends. Somewhere tropical, where we can sit on the beach and get drunk and read, and we want to invite you to come," Katie said.

I had to set my wine down so I didn't spill it in excitement. "Everything you're saying right now is making me happy."

"Great!" Katie said. "It'll be us three, and then one of Penny's friends from work, Stacia, you know her." I'd met her at their various wedding festivities almost two years ago.

"And then my sisters, and Oliviana." The last was Penny's sister. I'd met and adored them all. It was a great group.

"Have you decided where we're going yet?" I asked.

Penny messed around on her phone for a few seconds and then my phone popped up with a notification.

"There's a group chat. Get your suggestions in now!"

Even though I was sitting right there with them, I started adding to the chat, basically

calling out any warm place I'd always wanted to go.

"Oh, Hawaii. Can we go to Hawaii?" Katie said, pouting at Penny.

"Do you have any idea how long it takes to fly there?" Penny shuddered. "No thank you, I can't stay trapped in a tin can with other people for that long."

"Dammit," Katie said.

The others joined the chat and we discussed the pros and cons and finally settled on Key West, since we wouldn't have to deal with leaving the country, and we'd still feel like we were getting away.

We toasted again and finished the rest of the nachos, moving on to the gluten free chocolate cupcakes with cream cheese frosting that Penny had made.

"The only thing that would make this better is if a hot girl was giving me a neck massage," I said, licking frosting off my finger.

Katie and Penny shared another one of their looks and then came at me, wiggling their fingers. I laughed and ducked out of their way.

"No, that's not what I meant! Not that both of you aren't hot. I want my own someone." They fell back on the other couch as we all laughed together and I poured myself a second glass of wine.

"I need a new hobby for when cheer season is over. I usually just stay in my house and work myself into the ground, but I don't want to do that this year." Once Nationals were over, I had most of the summer off from coaching while my kids were on their summer break. Tryouts couldn't happen until September, so I'd spend most of my summer prepping for the new season, but there was only so much I could do

without knowing who was going to be on the squad the next year.

“You should join our book club. It’s basically like this, but with more people,” Penny said, leaning back against Katie. They were a very expressive couple, and were always wound around each other. It was lonely sitting on the loveseat perpendicular to them by myself. They didn’t even have an animal that I could force to cuddle with me.

“What kind of books do you read?” If I was joining a book club, then I was actually going to do the reading. I’d do the talk shit and drink wine, but I also wanted to discuss books.

“We vote on it every month. It’s been mostly new stuff, with a few classics mixed in. All genres,” Penny said.

“Cool, if you don’t mind me joining?”

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“No, we’d love to have you,” Katie said.

I was in. “Sweet.”

“And . . .” Penny said, “there’s someone I’ve been wanting to introduce you to, so that works perfectly.”

I narrowed my eyes.

“You’re inviting me to your book club to set me up? Do you not remember what I’ve said about setting me up?”

It was the one thing I’d asked my friends never to do. It had only led to awkwardness, heartache, and, in one instance, a trip to the eye doctor for a scratched cornea.

“I told you not to tell her that,” Katie said, playfully smacking Penny on the shoulder.

They stared at each other. “What? I wasn’t going to just let her walk in without warning her first. And if she takes the initiative herself, it’s not a set up.”

I waved my hands in front of them.

“Hey, sitting right here. I’ll still do your damn book club, but I refuse to be introduced to anyone.”

Penny snorted. “How is that even going to work?”

“I will be a ghost who occasionally makes really good observations.”

Katie squeezed Penny’s shoulder to stop her from protesting.

“Babe, just let her be a ghost and if something happens, then it happens. Let it go.”

Penny sighed in defeat.

“I just want you to be happy.”

“Believe me, I know.” I knew they wanted me to be happy. So did Dom and Heath and my parents and Camille and Jason and Tom and my cheerleaders and even their parents. The people in my life were constantly trying to fix me up with someone. Anyone. Their lesbian cousin from Omaha, the lady at the DMV who looked kinda gay. Any warm body. Most of the time, I understood that it was coming from a good place, but honestly, I was exhausted. Sure, I wanted to be with someone. I didn’t want to stay alone for the rest of my life. I wanted companionship. But I wanted it on my terms, in my timing.

“We just love you so much, you’re our favorite friend,” Penny and Katie got up and piled on top of me as I screamed and tried to wiggle away. We all ended up on the floor, laughing until we couldn’t breathe.

“This was exactly what I needed,” I said, rolling onto my back and catching my breath.

Six

“Is everyone ready to work?” I asked my kids on Saturday morning. I was met with bleary eyes and moans. “You know there are energy drinks in the machine? I wouldn’t advise you to drink them, but . . .” A lot of the squad had brought their own. I couldn’t condone caffeine use, but try dealing with a bunch of grumpy teenagers that hadn’t gotten enough sleep. I had to use whatever tools I had at my disposal.

“Oh, and I bought you all donuts.” Dom walked in with two huge boxes of donuts resting on each hand, and I would have kissed him if either of us would have enjoyed it. That got the kids excited, which was nice to see. Donuts were passed out, faces were smeared with frosting, and I even saw a few smiles. I pretended to ignore the cups of coffee that Dom had also brought and passed around. Once they were sufficiently sugared up, I called everyone to order.

“So this morning I want to work on pyramid, and then do a jump clinic after you’re warmed up. Lunch is on me,” more cheers, “and then this afternoon we’ll do two full outs, taping both.”

The Bulldogs weren’t here yet, not due for another hour, and I was relishing having my gym back again.

Since we had nearly a full day, I wanted to get them nice and warm, so Dom led the squad through some yoga and then laps around the gym for some cardio. They were just finishing up when the Bulldogs and Echo trooped in. They all had matching practice outfits on, as usual, and it irritated me. I’d love to have outfits for my squad for every practice, but we didn’t have the budget for extras like that, but maybe I

could pitch that to some of my booster parents and see if they'd go for it.

All the girls on Echo's squad had their hair done in high ponytails and their eye makeup on point.

I'd been an idiot for underestimating her. Of course she was going to fuck with me. When had she done anything else?

It brought me back to the first day we'd met.

I'd been heading into my junior year of cheer and had made varsity on my small-town squad, which wasn't really that hard to do. We'd finally scraped together the money to head to camp for the first time up north in the woods, and I was stoked to be away from my parents for a whole week, being completely steeped in cheer. I was pretty sure I cared more about my squad than my coach did. She was just a mom they'd roped into supervising us so no one died. Most of her time at camp was spent on her phone, fighting with her husband.

I'd been in awe of all the other squads and then they walked in, with Echo as captain, and I'd felt like I was falling down, even though I was standing up. Like everything had been swept out from under me at once.

Sure, I'd had crushes before, but never anything that completely all-consuming and immediate. I usually just fell for my friends, or girls I had known for a while. Never on sight. Never like this.

"Hey, Kiri," she said, snapping me back into the present moment. She looked different than she had in high school, sure, but even then, she'd been completely mesmerizing, at least to me.

"Good morning, Echo," I said, gritting my teeth.

“Is it still morning? We’ve been up for hours. We run on weekends at five thirty.” Her lips spread in a grin and she stared into my eyes as she clapped her hands and her squad started setting up without her even having to ask. Maybe she had them all drugged, or blackmailed. It was the only reasonable explanation.

My squad was fighting over donut crumbs and sleeping on the bleachers in mismatched clothes. Great.

I waited until the curtain was up and their music was on to lay into my squad in the lowest voice I could manage and still have all of them hear me.

“Are you doing this to psych them out? Because they definitely think we are a bunch of lazy losers right now.” Maybe that wasn’t a bad idea to let the other team believe. Let them underestimate us. Let her think we were a bunch of slobs. We’d show them up. We could eat donuts and kill it at Nationals.

I only had two goals for my first time at Nationals, since neither of us was going to win: to have my squad hit, and to have them score higher than HHS. If doing a little acting was going to help and get them to be complacent, good.

“Never mind, I’m not going to yell at you. Keep it up. Maybe do a lot of loud complaining and whining.” Echo annoyed me enough that it was time I returned the favor.

“Wait, you want us to complain loudly?” a voice called out.

I made eye contact with Kevin. “Yes, I want you to complain loudly.”

He grinned so wide that you would have thought I’d announced that I was cancelling practice and sending everyone to Disney early. One of the perks of going to Nationals was that we got to take one extra day and visit the happiest place on earth.

They took me seriously and, for the next two hours, there was nothing but whining and moans and groans and fussing. They'd clearly turned it up to eleven. I'd literally told them to do it and even I was annoyed and had to stop myself from telling them to knock it off.

The pyramid work was going well until I saw one side go down and heard the sickening slam of a flyer hitting the ground. MacKynzie. She was sobbing and cradling her hand to her chest. Dom and I shared a look and he got Camille on the phone. She was the on-call athletic trainer as well.

"What hurts, Mack?" I said in what I hoped was a soothing voice.

"My hand, my hand," she sobbed. I made everyone move back to give her some air as I tried to examine the injured hand. In my head, I begged that it was nothing major, but I didn't have a lot of hope from seeing how she'd gone down.

"Everyone do your laps, and crunches, and push-ups right now. I don't want to hear excuses," I said to the rest of the squad. Most of them looked pretty scared, which was good. They should be scared, this was dangerous, which was why you caught the flyers when they fell.

"Go, now," I said.

I finally got Mack to show me her hand, and what I saw made my stomach roll. At least two fingers were definitely, visibly, broken. Shit.

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“It’s going to be fine, Mack, okay? Just breathe, honey.” I pushed her hair back from her face as Dom stayed on the phone. The hospital actually wasn’t far away, so we got her standing and walked her slowly to my car.

“Dom, stay with everyone else and keep running what we planned on. I’ll be in touch. Make sure you have them condition again for dropping her.” He agreed, and also called Mack’s mom so she could meet us at the hospital. Dom and I had done this routine before and we each went with our strengths.

Mack’s cries had shifted to whimpers as I drove as fast as safely as I could. I left my car in front and walked her in, where she was descended upon by nurses.

From then on it was just a rush of x-rays, Mack’s mom showing up, Mack seeing a doctor to tell her that she had two broken fingers and would be out for at least two months. That made her cry harder than she had when the initial injury had happened. My heart broke for her. This was her senior year and it was officially over.

“It’s okay, baby, it’s okay.” Her mom tried to soothe her, but there was only so much she could do. They gave her pain meds and put a cast on her. I stepped out at that point to call Dom to give him an update. Camille had showed up to do damage control, which I appreciated.

“I can’t believe you told them to whine, this is a nightmare. I’m ready to quit.” I knew he wasn’t serious, but I understood where he was coming from. We needed to tell them to tone it down a little.

“Listen, I’m going to be back in a few. Mack’s all doped up and going home with her

mom. She's out, so we'll have to get a new top girl. I'm thinking Ciana, Becca, or Amy. They're the only ones who can really handle it. We can try each one of them and see how it goes. We'll have to move other people around. Shit, this is going to be exhausting." I rubbed my face and yawned.

"We'll handle it. They'll handle it. This has happened before and we've been fine. Tell Mack everyone loves her." There were shouts of encouragement in the background.

"Thanks. Tell them all to text her and wish her well, and give them hell for dropping her. I mean, blood coming from your eyeballs rage."

"Will do."

I hung up and went back to talk to Mack's mom one more time. She was used to her daughter getting injuries, including at least one concussion from her freshman year when I hadn't been the coach.

"She's a tough girl. She'll be fine. It's just that it's her senior year." That was the part that killed me. This was Mack's last chance on the mat in high school and now she was going to miss it. She'd already been accepted to college and planned to try out for the college squad, but it wasn't the same. There was a sweetness and a purity to high school cheer. Something you could never get back.

I hugged Mack's mom and said I would check in with her later tonight and headed back to the gym.

Everyone wanted to know how Mack was, and bombarded me when I first walked in. I saw contrition in all their eyes, so that was good. I told them as much as I could, and then looked up to see the Bulldogs coming around the barrier.

“Everything okay with your flyer?” Echo asked, and for a second, I could swear she was asking out of real concern, but the moment was so quick that I blinked and it was gone.

“She’s tough,” I said. “She’ll be fine.” I didn’t need to share Mack’s medical details with our rivals.

“Let us know if you need any extra spotters. We have a lot of alternates.” She even made an offer of help a dig at my squad.

“Great, thanks.” I turned away from her so I wouldn’t scream at her in front of everyone and put my attention on seeing what progress they’d made while I was gone.

It was nearly time for their hour lunch break and the food I’d ordered was arriving in a few minutes. I wondered what the Heartwood kids were doing for food, but I realized I didn’t care. Echo probably had kale smoothies on ice and protein bars or some shit. My kids were getting sandwiches and chips from a chain store and they’d suck it up and enjoy it. I wasn’t made of money and I was footing the bill with my stipend.

The jump clinic had gone well and I gave a few more pointers on pointing toes and arm positions and keeping smiles while some of them showed off and then we broke for lunch.

I was busy setting up and handing out paper plates and making sure no one made a mess when two of Echo’s assistants wandered by with tons of takeout bags. I saw the logo on them and knew that they were probably salads and sushi from the swanky restaurant about ten minutes away from Corsica where a bunch of rich people lived since it was closer to the ocean.

My squad definitely noticed, but then the nice food disappeared behind the curtain and we were left with our sad sandwiches and crushed chips.

“Right now, I don’t want to hear any complaining,” I said, pointing to them.

“I didn’t say anything,” Kevin said, putting his hands up.

Lunch was a mostly quiet affair, and one or two of my kids used the time to take a quick nap. I hoped they were fueled up because this afternoon was going to be grueling for them.

First, I sat them in a circle and made them tell me three things they were grateful for. It was a tradition I’d had when I was a cheerleader and it was one of the first things I’d instituted when I’d come on as a coach. Working hard was important, but it was also good to stop and take a breath and sit in gratefulness.

“I’m grateful for all of you, I’m grateful that Mack wasn’t more seriously hurt, and I’m grateful for my three cats.” They all laughed because I literally always said that I was grateful for my cats. I actually had a social media account for them that all my cheerleaders followed and they were always commenting on the pictures. It was really cute.

Everyone had some laughs and that lightened the mood from the darkness of Mack’s injury earlier. I had them meditate for a little while, which less than half of them took seriously as fits of giggles broke out periodically.

“Okay, let’s get back to work. Now that Mack is out, we’re going to have to move things around in the pyramid. Ciana, how would you like to try being top girl?” The blood drained from her face but she gave me a scared smile and nodded her head.

“Okay.”

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“Great. Becca, can you do Ciana’s part?” Becca was a minor part of the pyramid, so this would be a bump up. I had to arrange a few more things and by the time I was done, I had no idea if this was even going to work.

“Let’s do the first part up until the toss with Ciana.” Two stunts went up and down on the side as Ciana flew high in the back in a basket toss. Pyramids were designed to dazzle you with so much chaos that your brain couldn’t figure out what was going to happen next because it was always moving, always changing. The more ups and downs and tosses and levels you could add, the better.

I made them count it out a few times first, basically mocking up the stunt on the ground so the flyers knew what they were supposed to do when. Once I was sure they had it, I made them run through the first section. It was a little wobbly, but no one fell. I made them run it three more times before I added on a second part. Originally, I wanted to be doing full outs today, but plans had changed. I needed to get this pyramid nailed before I could move on to anything else. Tomorrow would be all about putting the new people into the formations that we’d already established.

We made it through about half the pyramid, and my spotters were extra vigilant, which made things go better. I was proud of them.

“Okay, let’s call it,” I said. I knew them well enough to know when they’d had it, and when I could squeeze just a little more out.

“Good job, everyone. I know that it wasn’t the day we’d planned, but I’m really proud of you all for stepping up, especially our flyers for rolling with it.” I made them all give themselves a round of applause and sent them on their merry way. Dom

started clearing up the detritus from a bunch of teenagers being around all day, and I sat down to take a minute for myself. I had the sudden urge to cry. When I saw one of my kids hurting, it was one of the worst feelings in the entire world.

A few tears dripped down my face. The Bulldogs were still practicing, and I just wanted them to leave. Couldn't they leave me to cry in the gym in peace?

"You okay?" a voice I almost didn't recognize said. Somehow she'd traipsed across the gym floor without making a sound. Guess she could be unobtrusive when she wanted to be.

I refused to look up at her and let her see me cry.

"I'm fine," I said, hoping my voice didn't sound like it was full of tears.

"It's hard, seeing them get hurt."

Was she trying to be nice to me? That shocked me so much I looked up.

"Are you being serious right now?" Her team's music was still going so one of her assistants must have been running things.

"Yes?" she said, as if she wasn't sure herself. "You don't have to be so hostile just because you lost."

It wasn't just about that.

"Yes, yes, you're better than me and always will be, blah, blah, blah." I made my hand into a fake mouth and pretended to make it talk to say the last part.

"So it's not just about the competition," she said, as if my reaction was some sort of

confirmation.

“Can you just go away and leave me alone?” I had to wipe my nose so it wouldn’t drip. I hated that she was seeing me like this. I didn’t want to be even remotely vulnerable in front of Echo.

“Fine, fine. I was just trying to be nice.” She couldn’t even do that without being sarcastic.

I bit back a scream and got up and went to find Dom. If I didn’t, I was going to yell at her and make a fool of myself in my own gym. Cam was calling me, so I took it.

“Hey, how’s it going?”

“Can you stop breaking your athletes? It’s really starting to get old.” I heard the exhaustion in her voice.

“We’re the only athletes in school that are still practicing, Cam,” I said.

“That’s true, but in a few weeks fall sports start and this used to be my quiet time of year. My time of rest and relaxation and prep.”

“I’m sorry?”

She gave me a tired laugh. “I love my job, I swear.”

“I know you do.” She really did. No one could doubt that.

“At least I didn’t have a parent threatening to strangle me.” That had happened more than once. Police had been called.

“Be thankful for small blessings.”

“You said it. Listen, I have to go, but we’ll talk Monday, if not sooner. Don’t break any more people!” she said.

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“I will do my best.” I gave her a little salute, even though she couldn’t see me. We hung up and I wiped the last of my tears. Talking with Cam had cheered me up after the awful day. The disaster could have been a lot worse, I kept telling myself. I’d had entire stunt groups go down before, broken noses, concussions, broken arms.

“Everything good?” Dom said, coming back over from his office.

“As good as it can be, where were you?”

His face lit up and I saw that he’d been crying.

“Heath and I might be getting a baby.”

“Shut up!” I screamed, and the sound echoed through the whole gym. The music had been turned off, so probably everyone heard me. I didn’t give a fuck.

I threw myself on him.

“Details, details!”

“Well, it’s not final yet, but we’ve been selected by a woman who’s pregnant and due in a month. We’re going to fly there right around the due date and be there for the birth. I asked our adoption agent if she wants to meet us to be sure, but she said that the woman wants us.”

“Oh, Dom.”

I hugged him again and we both cried together.

“Go home to Heath, what are you still doing here?”

“I have to lock up?” He said it like a question.

“Oh, give me those keys, I’ll do it.” That would mean I’d have to babysit the Bulldogs, but whatever. Dom’s news was more important.

He ran out of the gym, and I’d never seen him so happy. It warmed my cold, dead heart.

The other squad seemed to finally be wrapping up, which was good since I had a shit ton of work to get home to, and three angry cats. I sat on the bleachers with my phone, making a list of what I needed to get done for work tonight. It was a lot. I always got behind this time of year, so I tried to schedule myself so I wasn’t working literally all the time, but I’d said yes to a few things I shouldn’t have, and now I was dealing with the consequences of my own actions.

A pair of feet insinuated themselves in my view. I knew who owned those feet and I didn’t want to look up, but fighting the urge was like fighting gravity.

“Thanks for staying,” she said, and it was another weird moment where I thought she was being genuine.

“Whatever,” I said like a petulant teenager. I was feeling pretty petulant these days.

“I’m trying to be nice here.”

I looked down at my phone. “That must be a real challenge for you. My condolences.”

My head snapped up again at an unexpected sound: a soft laugh that slid down my spine and made me think of darkness and damp sheets and the giddy feeling of getting away with something.

Echo's squad walked past all together, and they did look a little worse for wear. The ponytails drooped, and some of them had exchanged their matching outfits for other clothes, so they didn't look as intimidating as they had this morning.

"We'll see you tomorrow, Coach Kiri," she finally said and walked out.

I sat on the bleachers and caught my breath for a few moments before I checked the gym, shut off the lights, and locked up. I had to drop Dom's keys off and stop at the grocery store for provisions. The former took way too long, and the store was almost closing by the time I got there and threw a few things into my cart, along with tampons, which I really needed.

I was in the potato chip aisle, trying to choose between salt and vinegar, ranch, and barbecue, when someone bumped their cart into mine. I ignored it, stuck on my chip dilemma. I should probably just get all three.

The cart bumped mine again, and I turned around to cuss the person out to find Echo Rosenthal smirking at me.

"Hi Kiri."

My mouth dropped open. "What are you doing here? Don't they have grocery stores where you live?" They definitely did, so why was she here? Why wasn't she on the bus? Seeing her so out of context was breaking my brain.

"I decided to get some snacks for my squad for tomorrow, but there aren't a lot of options in this town." Her cart was full of protein powder and various nut milks and

bags of beef jerky and carrot sticks and a bunch of other things.

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“What, no kale?”

“Kale?” she asked. “Who eats kale?”

“I mean, I assumed you did.” I gestured to her physique. Those muscles weren’t cut without a lot of work and a certain diet.

“Ew, I hate kale. Spinach is better.” She pointed and there were bags of spinach in the cart as well.

This was a ridiculous interaction, but I didn’t know how to end it, short of literally running away.

“Well, good to know,” I said, and threw all three bags of flavored chips into my cart. “See you tomorrow.” I pushed my cart away as fast as I could, determined to get the last word.

“Bye, Kiri,” she called after me, and I almost stumbled and fell face first into my cart. She couldn’t let me have even one. Echo always had to win.

Seven

“Okay, that wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be.” Which was really the kindest thing I could say after the second full out that we taped the next day.

The stunts were a complete mess after having to replace Mack, and at least two of my flyers were wiping away tears and trying not to let anyone see.

“Hey, it’s going to be an adjustment.” I had to pep them up. A lot of them were looking pretty defeated.

I was about to launch into what I hoped would be a rousing speech that would inspire each and every one of them as the music swelled and they all got up and hugged, when Cam walked in, looking more frazzled than usual.

This was not a sports movie.

“Hey, what can I do for you?” I asked her, stepping aside and leaving the inspirational speeching to Dom.

“Just wanted to let you know mats will be here tomorrow and I’m going to make sure they will be ready for you before practice. No more sharing.”

Thank fuck. We could finally work on sprucing up our tumbling, which was probably going to look pretty sad at first since the squad was a little rusty.

“Awesome, thank you. Everything else okay?”

“Yup, fine.” She gave me a tight smile that was clearly fake.

“Lay it on me,” I said. I didn’t really have the time, but Cam regularly stuck her neck out for me and my program. She was also kind and hot, which was a level just below mean and hot on my attraction scale.

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“Just dealing with a coaching situation. I can’t say much. But I would say you should definitely read the paper tonight.” She gave me a significant look and that was bad. Really bad. I could read between the lines that it meant a coach had done something illegal, and she was trying to do damage control.

“Let me know if you need anything. I’m not a crisis management expert, but I’ll do what I can.”

Cam sighed. “It’s fine. We’ll deal with it. And it’s better to get it out in the open. I’d had my suspicions, but I didn’t know anything for sure.” She rubbed her forehead and looked down at her phone, which lit up with messages.

“I’ll talk to you later.” She headed out of the gym and I turned back to share a look with Dom. He raised his eyebrows and I shook my head, in a gesture that meant I would talk to him later. This was nothing for teenage ears.

I was about to check in with the squad when my phone rang with a call from Mack.

“Hi Mack, how are you doing?” She sounded groggy, but otherwise chipper.

“Hey, I’m going to put you on speaker so everyone can say hi,” I told her.

“Hi, everybody,” she said. There were shouts and asking her how she was doing and joking that she’d just done this so she could get out of practice. It was sweet and lighthearted and I was glad she didn’t seem too devastated, or at least she was hiding it well. I planned on having a talk with her mother later to get the full story.

I decided to give the squad a break to get some water and have a few snacks. I'd front-loaded the day so we could get all the really hard crap over with at the beginning and let them rest a little bit at the end.

Tonight we were working on performance, dance, jumps, and the cheer. Just polishing every little corner of the routine until it shined as bright as it could.

While they had their break, it seemed like the team on the other side of the curtain was doing the same thing. I heard a strange sound and sort of leaned my head through a break in the curtain and couldn't believe what I was seeing.

Echo had brought in a table from who knows where, and had a blender set up and was making her team smoothies. She looked up, as if I'd called her name and I had to duck away, but she had definitely caught me peeking.

A few moments later, she ducked around the curtain.

"Can I offer you a smoothie?"

She had it in a cup and everything.

"You are on a whole other level," I said, looking at the cup with suspicion.

"Thank you," she said, but I didn't mean it as a compliment. "I didn't spit in it or poison it. It's strawberry, pineapple, and spinach, with some protein powder."

It sounded amazing, but I would drink my own blood before even a drop of that smoothie passed my lips.

"I'll pass," I said. I had my own drinks that I could be sure hadn't been tampered with.

“Suit yourself,” she said, taking a big gulp. “See? Not poisoned.”

“Maybe you’ve built up a tolerance,” I fired back.

“I’m not the Dread Pirate Roberts, and this doesn’t have iocane powder,” she said before she turned around, and it was annoying that she got the reference.

I inhaled through my nose and turned to face my squad. Every single set of eyes was watching me and had seen my interaction with Echo.

“They get smoothies?” Kevin said with a little pout.

“We have enough for more!” Echo called out, as if she’d been listening. As soon as I left tonight, I was going to find a way to make that curtain soundproof. Or I was going to murder her and put her in the blender. Either way.

I looked back at a sea of pleading faces. Some of them were legal adults, but they were pouting like toddlers who wanted candy. I guess it could be worse. They could be asking for dirty martinis.

“Go ahead,” I said, gesturing. and they all dashed to the other side of the curtain.

“I was not expecting that,” Dom said, blinking.

“Me neither. She lured them away with fruit smoothies like some kind of healthy witch.”

Dom patted me on the shoulder. “Well, you know what they say?”

I sighed. “What do they say?”

“If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.”

And he walked over to get in the smoothie line.

I did not have a smoothie, but everyone else did, and I tried not to glare too much. Both squads were definitely mingling well, to my surprise. We’d seen each other enough times to start learning names and start getting familiar. I could see tentative friendships forming, and I was proud of my kids for being so welcoming. Honestly, it could have been a complete disaster, but my teens were classy. Maybe a little rough around the edges compared to the Bulldogs, but I was proud of them. Things would be different when we got to Orlando, and I think everyone was aware of that, but for right now, they were a bunch of teenagers getting excited about smoothies.

“Your face is going to freeze like that if you keep scowling,” Echo said, sidling up to me. I hadn’t been surprised by her, I seemed to be aware of her no matter where she was. I had Echolocation.

“That’s what Botox is for,” I said, drinking from my water bottle.

“Baby, you don’t need Botox.”

I gasped and stared at her.

“You—” I clenched my water bottle so hard my fingers ached. I couldn’t think of a witty comeback.

“Yes, what about me?” she asked, stepping closer. Her scent attacked me until I couldn’t smell the gym floor, or the sweat, or the mats. I could only smell something that was a mix of grapefruit and . . . sage maybe? I was thinking too much about the way Echo smelled.

When I’d first met her, she’d smelled like cotton candy—her perfume at the time. I’d probably been wearing something equally as juvenile in too large quantities. Now I wore men’s deodorant because I liked the scents better, and sometimes added a little cologne, but I hadn’t today.

“I don’t know, what about you?” I snapped back at her.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Easy, Kiri. You’d think I was getting under your skin.”

She was. She was under my skin. She was in my thoughts, and in the way my blood pulsed in my veins, and my heart pounded in my ears. Being so close to her was turning me inside out and I didn’t know how much longer I could take it.

I’d been waking up from dreams about her. About us together.

“I’m fine,” I said, and she laughed lightly.

“Just keep telling yourself that.”

“What is your problem?!” I said, turning to face her. The gym went completely silent and I realized that I had yelled it. Oops.

The blood instantly rushed to my face and I wanted to melt through the floor.

“Calm down, it’s nothing to get your panties in a twist over.” How did she make

every single thing she said drip with innuendo and sexuality?

“Stop it,” I said, and I wanted to die right there.

“Fine, fine,” she said, walking away and leaving me to deal with the stares. What did I do? I ran to the bathroom like a coward.

I sat in the stall and tried to get myself together. Being in close proximity to Echo was just . . . I was losing it.

The door opened and someone walked in. I peered through a crack in the stall and almost told her to get the fuck out.

“Leave me alone,” I said, pulling back the curse word at the last second. It wouldn’t look good if one of the cheerleaders came in here and heard me cursing a blue streak. I couldn’t lose my job on top of everything else. Coaching fed my soul in a way that my other work didn’t.

“You okay in there?” She leaned against the sink and I wished for a sinkhole or a portal to open up and take her away. Take her away so she could stop driving me up a wall.

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it? Since those cheer camp days?” I decided it was ridiculous to sit in the stall and glare at her through the crack, so I stood up and yanked open the door so hard it slammed against the stall. She didn’t flinch.

“Why are you bringing this up?” I started to wash my hands for lack of anything better to do. Plus, I didn’t want her spreading a rumor that I didn’t wash after using the bathroom.

“Just thought that since we seem to have issues, we should go back to where we first

met, talk it out, and then we can move on.” She crossed her arms and tilted her head back, her red hair falling almost to her waist. I remembered what that hair felt like when I ran my fingers through it. So soft and silky.

“Can’t we just pretend it didn’t happen? Seriously, I don’t want to have this thing between us. It’s fun for you, but it’s not fun for me.” I slammed the button on the hand dryer to drown out her response. She waited until my hands were as dry as they’d ever been in my entire life before she answered.

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“It’s not that big a deal, Kiri. People hook up all the time. We were teenagers.” She shrugged one shoulder as if it was no big deal. “Unless your problem is that my team beat yours, in which case, there’s not a whole lot I can do about that.”

I waited to answer until my hands were bone dry. “I don’t care about any of it. I’m just annoyed that you’re in my space and as soon as this competition season is over, I’m not going to think of you.”

This was the biggest lie I’d ever told and we both knew that.

“Okay, Kiri. Okay. I’m not going to lie, it’s fun winding you up. You just get so cute and flustered. I like your hair like this.” She reached out and brushed her finger along the line of my undercut. I wanted to flinch away, but my body did the opposite. I leaned into her and she took another step closer.

“I think about those nights we had, Kiri. I think you do too.”

The room became as hot as a sauna, and I swear my body temperature rose at least ten degrees.

“I know we’re on opposite sides, but that doesn’t mean we couldn’t . . . revisit those nights. Just for fun. We’re both adults.” Was she suggesting what I thought she was suggesting?

“No,” I said, but that was the only thing I could say. “That is never going to happen.”

“If you say so,” she said, one side of her mouth turning up in a smirk.

“Come on, we should go back out there, or else rumors might start.”

I needed to regain my composure that she had disturbed, again.

Echo left the bathroom and I had to take at least ten cleansing breaths before I could push myself through the door and go back into the gym with a fake smile plastered on my face.

I made it through the rest of practice and got my kids out. The Bulldogs got on the bus, but Echo hung around.

“I don’t think I should leave you alone with her,” Dom said in my ear. “You might rip each other apart, or, you know . . .” He raised his eyebrows and I knew exactly what he was insinuating.

“That is never going to happen. Don’t be gross.”

I wished the idea of getting into bed with Echo was gross. I was trying to make it gross by picturing her naked and covered in garbage or snakes or something. Nope, still hot.

Dom’s phone made a sound and he looked at the message.

“Crap, I have to go. Heath needs me at home. We have a call with our adoption agent tonight for an update and we don’t know if it’s good news or bad news.” I gave him a huge hug and promised I wouldn’t strangle Echo, and then it was just the two of us and her blender.

“Why are you still here?” I asked with a sigh. The place was cleaned up, but she was taking her sweet time packing up the blender into an enormous duffle bag.

“Because I wanted to talk to you with everyone gone.”

“That is shocking information,” I said in a deadpan voice.

“You can’t say you’re not enjoying this. I see how you get when you think you’re getting to me.”

I knew I had gotten to her, too. If she said I hadn’t, she was a liar. I kept silent as she slung her bag over her muscled shoulder and walked toward me.

“I’m here when you’re ready to talk, or not talk.” She pulled something out of her pocket and held it between two fingers.

“Call me,” she said, and my mouth dropped open. She was literally handing me a business card with her number on it. Who the hell did she think she was?

Unable to form a response, she just laughed and headed out of the gym.

“Remember, call me anytime, Kiri. I’ll see you tomorrow in a more professional capacity.”

I waited to scream until she had definitely left. Then I looked at the ceiling and let the sound rip from my throat.

I told the cats all about it when I got home. They listened and blinked slowly and then begged for treats, which was typical.

“Thanks for listening,” I said as I pulled the bag with their treats in it out of the cabinet. I liked to make them work for it, so I put the treats in a few different puzzle toys and set them on the floor. As soon as I did that, the kitties had forgotten about me.

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“Can you believe that? She gave me her card.” I picked it up from the kitchen counter. Of course I’d brought it home with me. Still hadn’t ruled out ripping it up into little pieces and then setting it on fire, but right now, I stared at the card, the black numbers swimming in front of my eyes.

What did Echo want? Was this all part of some master plan to throw me off my game, which would then throw off my squad? I wouldn’t put it past her. She’d been a schemer when we’d met.

Echo had been the one to plan each of our rendezvous and think about all the contingencies so we didn’t get caught, and we hadn’t. Echo’s mind worked in mysterious ways, and that was one of the things that had really grabbed me at the beginning. Plus, her body. Let’s be real, I was superficial to the core and hot won out over smart more times than I was willing to admit.

Echo was hot and smart and mean. Deadly, vicious combination.

I turned the card over and over in my hands before setting it down, pouring myself a glass of wine, and having a think.

So far, Echo had been the one with the upper hand. I didn’t know what her plans or motives were, but I definitely needed to start fighting fire with fire.

It was time to make what was definitely a bad decision.

Eight

I didn't consult any of my friends about the text message I wrote, but I should have. I typed and retyped it at least ten times and made sure it struck the right tone.

"I can't hit send. You hit send." Meatball was in my lap, and I used his paw to hit send on the message. That way, I could say that it wasn't technically me. Plausible deniability was my friend.

"What a naughty kitty," I said to him as he blinked and licked my hand.

Now we waited for a response. My heart drummed hard as I waited to see the little bubbles that meant she was sending a return message.

It didn't take long for those bubbles to pop up, and then there it was.

Hey Kiri, you thinking about me?

I gnawed at my bottom lip, deciding how I wanted to play this.

Maybe. You shouldn't have given me your number.

Meatball meowed and pawed at the phone and I moved it out of his reach.

"No, your part is over," I said to him. "It's my turn now."

If I hadn't given you my number, we wouldn't be talking right now, would we?

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The tone was undeniably flirtatious, and it was my turn to crank things up to eleven.

What are you doing right now? I asked.

I sat there, wondering if I was making the right move, but there was no way to know. I was just tired of her having the upper hand all the time. I wanted to be on top. I wanted to be winning.

Wouldn't you like to know . . .

That was the exact response I'd been hoping for. I closed the message and set the phone down. Obviously I wasn't a total dick, I wasn't going to take this too far, but silence would give her something to think about.

Meatball yelled for attention and I rubbed his head.

"We're just doing a little sabotage, right? Nothing serious."

I could handle this. I could put our past aside for the good of fucking with a rival coach and come out on the other side absolutely fine. I could do this.

Echo hadn't texted me again, and that was starting to stress me out. When I woke up on Monday, I checked to make sure I hadn't missed anything. Nope.

I sighed and flung off the comforter, angering all of the cats, who jumped to the floor and started screaming about it.

“Yes, I know, I know.” First thing was bathroom and then the kitchen to feed the beasts and make breakfast for myself. I scrambled some eggs and plopped yogurt with fruit and granola in a bowl to go with the side of a massive cup of coffee drowning in vanilla creamer. The breakfast of champions, I hoped.

Once I had the caffeine flowing through my veins, it was time to go to the nook that served as my office. I think it was supposed to be a formal dining room, but I didn’t live the kind of lifestyle that required a formal dining room, so I’d filled it with books and an absolutely obnoxious mahogany desk with one of those lamps with a green shade you’d see in a gentleman’s library. It was home to my two massive desktop monitors and my rainbow light-up keyboard. Everything about my office made me happy.

I kept my phone by me and turned on some music to start the daily task of seeing what emails I had, what I needed to respond to, and what I could put off until later. There were always too many emails and not enough time for them, but I’d been freelancing long enough to have an intense flagging system to put them in different categories.

I got into my groove, but every now and then a notification would come through my phone and I’d jump as if I’d been pinched on the ass. The cats came and went and played on the floor as I tried to keep my focus while I edited one article, did a proposal for another, and then scheduled some social media posts for a client.

By lunch I still didn’t have a message from Echo, but I’d gotten through the work I’d needed to get through before the afternoon. I ate a salad standing up at the kitchen counter and then headed outside for a brisk walk. I tried to work out so my body didn’t fuse in a hunched position at my desk, but during competition season that didn’t happen as often as I wanted it to.

Still nothing from Echo. She’d fallen off the face of the planet, or at least from my

phone. Fine, whatever.

I burned through work in the afternoon and then it was time to get ready to head to the gym. Unfortunately, that also meant I was going to have to see Echo.

What would she say to me in person? Would she pretend our little convo last night hadn't happened? Would she be overly flirtatious? Echo was a puzzle I couldn't solve. I had no idea what she was capable of.

"I did something last night," I told Dom, when I walked into his office with a smoothie. I almost always brought him a little something when I needed advice as payment.

He looked at the smoothie and then at my face. "Oh god, am I going to need to sit down for this? Wait, I'm already sitting down." He winked as I handed him the smoothie. Banana strawberry, his favorite.

I dropped into the chair across from his desk. "So, after you left, Echo was messing with me and gave me her number. I may have used it to text her in a flirtatious manner, but my plan kind of backfired, and now I'm stressing out."

I sipped loudly through the straw of my smoothie.

"K, why?" Dom was used to my shenanigans, but usually I asked for his input before I ignored whatever advice he gave me and forged ahead anyway.

"Because I was tired of her always having the high ground, I don't know!" I sat back in the creaky chair and regretted my life choices again. The fact that I was supposed to be a role model for teenagers was a joke that I never stopped laughing about. I faked it as well as I could.

“Just focus on Nationals. Eyes on the prize. Shoot for the hoop. Go for the goal. Sink the putt.”

I gave him a look.

“You know I always reach for sports metaphors in times of crisis.”

“Am I in crisis? I don’t feel like I’m in crisis.” This was a lie. I always felt like I was in crisis when Echo was anywhere in my vicinity.

“No, you’re fine. Just don’t do it again. All we have to do is get to Orlando and make it through and hope for the best. Don’t get distracted.”

He had a good point. I couldn’t afford to be distracted. I had to be the rock for my team. I had to be the adult in the room, the one in charge. I wouldn’t let Echo mess with that, even if it meant I didn’t get to mess with her. The high road, I was taking it.

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“Thanks, Dom. I’m good.” I stood up and tossed the rest of my smoothie in the trash.
“I’ve got this.”

“You do got this,” he said, saluting me with his cup.

An hour later, my confidence had worn off, so I was back to faking it. Echo hadn’t said a damn thing when she’d walked in with her perfectly primped squad.

The promised mats were here, and all I wanted to do was drill my team on tumbling, now that we could. Obviously, if someone didn’t have a standing back tuck by now, they weren’t going to be nailing it in two weeks, so the goal right now as just to polish and tighten things up.

The new mats were gorgeous and big and still thick and had lots of bounce. I didn’t know where Cam had found the money in the budget, but I didn’t care.

“Okay, individual tumbling, let’s go.” I had each of my tumblers do their respective passes in the routine, stopping and critiquing and talking about technique as we went. Dom still had all his skills in his back pocket, so he was a better one to go to for this, so I let him take the lead sometimes. I could talk about body position until I was blue in the face, but Dom was the only one who actually knew what it was supposed to feel like in your body when you did a layout.

We worked late, and so did the other squad. I knew they had sleep and homework to do, but I needed to get a certain amount of things accomplished.

“I know you’re tired, but you’ve got to dig and find it for me. Do one more full out

and then I'll let you go." The looks I got in response led me to believe some were plotting my murder, but after a few seconds, they got to their feet and went to the opening formation. I held up my phone to tape, doing my best to ignore the volume of the music behind the curtain. I knew theirs as well as ours by now. I think I'd also absorbed their routine by osmosis. I liked it, they were doing a cute 90s theme. I wondered how much of the routine was input from Echo, and how much was a choreographer they'd hired and paid a bunch of money for.

We didn't have that kind of money, so Dom and I had done everything ourselves, and I was pretty proud of that. My little Easter egg was hiding Eye of the Tiger in every single one of our routines. This year it was part of our tumbling section.

The full out went okay, and I was pleased with them for pushing through.

"Good job everyone, go home, sleep, and then we'll be here tomorrow. Ice if you need to, and take it as easy as you can." They all waved and shuffled from the gym.

"They're going to sleep good tonight. Good job pushing them. They needed it," Dom said.

"Thanks. Sometimes it's hard to see the line until it's too late." I picked up some jewelry that someone had left and put it in my pocket. I'd find out who's it was tomorrow, or via text message later.

The other squad started putting everything away, and they looked as worn out as mine was. Dom and I hung around and waited for them to leave.

"You can go," he said. "I've got the keys."

"I know, I know. I just . . ." I trailed off, unable to come up with an excuse for why I needed to stay in the gym right now.

“Don’t do it, K. Just don’t do it.” He glared at me.

“What? I’m not doing anything.” I had definitely been watching Echo packing up her bag. No smoothies today.

“Go home, K,” he said, pushing into my shoulder. He was saying it as a joke, but I could tell he was partially serious.

“Okay, I’m going.”

“And no texting,” he added, pointing at me. “I mean it.”

“Okayyyyy,” I said, but it wasn’t a promise. I would just do my best.

My best wasn’t good enough when I got a message from Echo.

Hey Kiri

She always had to say that. She always did.

I ignored her and went back to work. I was burning the midnight oil in hopes I could get ahead on work for when I was going to be out in a little over a week and a half. We were hurtling toward Nationals and I was helpless to stop time, the runaway train that it was.

What do you want?

My tiredness got the best of me. I shouldn’t have responded, but it happened anyway. This time I didn’t use my cat to send the message. I did that all on my own. All three cats dozed on the thick cream and black patterned rug on the floor of my office.

Right now? A massage, a glass of red wine, and someone to talk to.

My blood froze in my veins. Was she fucking with me, or was she being serious? There was no way to tell the tone from the message, so I had to think about a response for a little bit. She sent another message before I could come up with something.

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You still there?

I exhaled a shaky breath before I wrote back. Yeah.

Does that scare you, Kiri?

I could see her face in my mind, but it was the face I'd known when we were both younger and more foolish. The only times I'd ever seen her be vulnerable were those hushed nights on a crappy thin mattress on the college campus that had hosted the cheer camp. I figured she'd just grown out of it, or she was better at hiding it.

You don't scare me, I lied.

I think I do.

There was a pause as she typed out another message. You scare me.

I almost dropped my phone. What was happening?

Has your phone been hacked? I asked.

I could almost hear her laugh in my mind as she sent me a laughing emoji.

No, I'm just tired and lonely. It happens sometimes.

I didn't know what to do with this version of Echo either, so I decided to wing it. Dom was going to be furious, but he wasn't in my shoes right now dealing with this.

You can't talk with one of your five thousand assistant coaches?I sent.

It was a little rude, but she'd been rude as hell to me, so it was fair.

I don't want to talk to them. I want to talk to you.

My response was one word:why?

She typed for a long time and I could tell she was deleting things and then typing again.

Because sometimes I wonder what would have happened after cheer camp. If we hadn't gone our separate ways.

That wasn't exactly what had happened. We'd promised to keep in touch and I'd sent her messages and emails and she ghosted me. Pissed, I gave up and figured she just wanted a fling. I'd been bitter for a long time about that, but got over it eventually when I went to college and was drowning in beautiful girls who could take my mind off that one-week stand.

You were the one who stopped talking to me, but whatever.

I hoped my tone was evident.

I'm sorry. I didn't know what to say. I wasn't out to my parents then. I didn't know what to do.

I did remember her talking briefly about her parents in those quiet moments as the sweat dried on our skin and we talked about the universe and our places in it as only you can do when you're sixteen. She'd been pretty quiet about her family, though, and I'd been too lust-crazed to ask deeper questions. We also hadn't had a whole lot

of time alone together anyway. Most of our days were taken up with dance practice and stunting and trying to throw new tumbling passes and our bodies were sore and worn out by the time the sun went down and we collapsed into bed.

I didn't know that. I thought you just got tired of me and moved on to someone else. I said.

I didn't.

Wow, a lot was happening and it was blowing my mind. I wasn't sure how many more revelations I could handle in one night. We were both exhausted and I wasn't in the right space to use my common sense.

She sent me another message. I mean, eventually I did date someone. Several someones. I'm not a fucking nun.

There she was. I snorted.

Some nuns did fuck each other, you know. I said.

I hoped that startled a laugh out of her.

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You're still funny.

Yeah, imagine that.

There was a pause and I yawned. I needed to wrap this up, but this conversation was so strange, I didn't know how to follow the normal protocol for ending one. Echo did it for me.

Thanks for listening, Kiri Kentwood. You're still good at that too.

You're still good at being hot. I replied before I could think better of it.

She sent the laugh-crying emoji. Thanks for the compliment.

And?

And what?

And you're supposed to say that I'm still good at being hot. I hadn't talked with anyone like this in so long, but I fell back into it with Echo with surprising ease.

You know you're hot, Kiri. You don't need me to tell you that.

She was right, I didn't, but it was nice to be validated sometimes.

Goodnight, Kiri

I sent the sleepy emoji. Night Echo.

Nine

“I did something bad again,” I said, and it was déjà vu with Dom in his office, the only exception that today I’d brought him a latte instead of a smoothie.

“You are giving me gray hairs,” he said, his head in his hands. “What is it now?”

“I talked to her, and it was weird, but okay. I mean, she was honest and open and it kind of freaked me out, but I think we can be cordial now, for some reason. Like we needed to do that to move on.” At least, that was the situation I was hoping for.

“I mean, that’s good, right? So it wasn’t a bad decision.” He stood up and we walked together into the gym. “To be honest, I’ll be glad when this season is over. I’m ready to do dad things and prepare for next season. I have lots of theme ideas.” His eyes went so wide that I took a step away from him.

“Dom, you’re scaring me. What do you have in mind?” I had heard tons of his theme ideas and some of them were great, and some of them were not so great. It was about fifty-fifty so far.

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“That’s for me to know and you to find out when I decide you get to find out.” He loved holding his ideas over me until I begged him.

“Rude,” I said as we waited for the team to come in. A few non-cheer kids were hanging around and bouncing a basketball. Dom and I sat on the bleachers and said hello as the squad trickled in. They definitely looked tired after last night. I should take it easy on them, but I didn't exactly have that luxury. I could spend some time watching and dissecting video, which gave their bodies a break for a little while.

Dom set up the projector and the kids started putting the mats out. The other squad walked in, and their mood was the same as my team’s: deflated. Even Echo looked tired, and I’d had to put extra highlighter under my eyes to draw the attention away from my dark circles. Just one night with not enough sleep and I looked like a zombie. Not cute.

I was giving the squad a night of rest on Friday, which I hoped they used wisely. I didn’t think Echo was giving hers a day off, but I just couldn’t have a miserable squad on my hands. At this point, one night off wasn’t going to make a massive difference. I mean, come on.

Echo exchanged a look and a nod with me as she walked by, but that was it. I shrugged at Dom when he sent me a questioning look.

Time to work.

The next few days were uneventful, for which I was grateful. I didn’t need more injuries or emergencies or strange texts from Echo. Friday night rolled around and I

went out with my friends to The Trap, and Lou brought over the drink she'd come up with to celebrate the group going to Nationals. I had no idea what was in the damn thing, but if I didn't slow down, I was going to drink five of them and end up passed out on the floor.

"To Kiri and Dom and the Tigers!" Heath said, and we all toasted.

"Do you have baby news?" Katie asked, grabbing a wing from the massive basket we'd ordered. Susie made her own sauce, and it was magic.

Heath said, "Not yet. Still waiting. We'll get the call when she goes into labor and then we'll be on a red eye. Just please send good vibes because we don't know if it's all going to work out. We'll have to be there for a few weeks to give her time, just in case she changes her mind. We'd be disappointed, but we don't want a mother to give us her baby and then have regrets. That would be the worst-case scenario."

Dom and Heath really were the real deal. I just adored them both.

"We're rooting for both of you," Penny said, squeezing Dom and Heath's hands.

"On another note," Tom said, "are you going to get any down time next week? Any chance to sit in the sun?"

"Uh, not exactly, but we are taking one day for Disney, but I'm going to be wrangling a bunch of hyped up teenagers, so it's not really going to be a day off for me," I said. Sure, a lot of their parents would be there as chaperones, but I was still in charge if anything went south.

"K, I will do something for you," Dom said, putting his hand on his heart. "If you decide you want to go to the spa in the hotel and have a day of self-care, I will take the squad to Disney."

It was like he had volunteered to throw himself in front of a bus for me.

“You would do that?”

“I would, my dear.” He kissed me on the cheek and I almost started crying.

“Hey, Kiri, there’s someone at the bar you should definitely check out. I know how much you love redheads,” Penny said. The way we were sitting, my back was to the bar, and I hoped beyond hope that she wouldn’t be there when I turned around.

My hopes disintegrated as I stared at Echo, sitting at the bar, drinking a beer, and chatting with Lou.

“Motherfucker,” I said under my breath.

“Oh,” Dom said. “That’s interesting. What is she doing here? Has she moved to Corsica?”

“Wait, I feel like I’m missing something,” Jason said, craning his neck to see around Tom.

“Oh my god, do not all look at her at once,” I said, trying to duck my head so we didn’t draw attention. My friends were anything but subtle.

“Is she looking over here?” I asked in a hushed voice.

“No . . . oh, crap, she saw us,” Heath said, since he had the best view. “And she’s coming over.”

“I swear to god, if you embarrass me, I’m going to poison you all,” I hissed.

“Hey, Kiri,” she said, and I raised my head and hoped the darkness hid the extent of my blush. I could feel it radiating all the way down to my chest.

“Hi,” I said, and it came out as a little squeak.

“Hey, Dom,” she said, nodding at him, and then it was silent as she waited for someone to introduce her. Dom opened and closed his mouth a few times before taking the lead.

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“Right, sorry. This is Echo Rosenthal?” He said her name as if he wasn’t sure of it. “Uh, this is my husband Heath, that’s Jason, Tom, Penny, and Katie. Echo’s the one who coaches the Bulldogs, who lost their gym in that fire.”

“Did they ever catch anyone?” Tom asked.

“Yes, it was a senior prank gone horribly wrong.” She shook her head and her hair swished back and forth. She had it down and it was a brilliant red under the lights of the bar. She didn’t look tired now. She looked gorgeous.

“Are you alone? Why don’t you sit with us?” Heath, said and I tried to kick him under the table for suggesting it, but he dodged me. Even Dom was giving him a look.

Echo smiled at everyone, but it was definitely directed at me.

“That would be lovely.”

And that was how Echo ended up crashing my Friday night. I saw her at the grocery store, and now at my bar. She was like a virus, infiltrating my entire life. What was her deal?

I watched in horror as she pulled up an extra chair, set it right next to me on the end of the table and proceeded to act like she’d known my friends for her whole life.

I’d never seen her so at ease with people before and it just further served to confuse and infuriate me. These were my friends. Didn’t she have her own friends?

Sure, she'd said that she was lonely last night, but that didn't give her the right to ruin my night off.

Still, I watched her as she laughed and chatted and my friends, even Dom, warmed to her. I didn't know what to say. Dom nudged my leg under the table and gave me a look that I guess meant I should be more friendly, but why? I couldn't add anything to the conversation.

Then Lou came over and Echo got introduced to her and somehow we ended up with an extra plate of beer cheese dip, which was one of my favorite things ever.

I ate it angrily while Echo talked about her life, and I reluctantly learned more than I wanted to know about her. She was also an only child, and had a cat, which surprised me. I guess I just didn't see her as the kind of person who would have an apartment and a cat and who would buy groceries and get gas and pay taxes. She'd always been more of a concept, a memory.

Seeing her as a person was unnerving.

"So, Echo, what do you do for fun when you're not harassing Kiri and Dom?" Penny asked. She'd had a few drinks and I wished she hadn't.

Echo laughed. "Not much. Cheer is pretty much my life, but I do enjoy hiking, climbing trees, throwing axes, and making custom dollhouse furniture."

I just stared at her.

"Wow," Dom said. "That's a seriously cool list."

"Can you tell me more about the custom dollhouse furniture?" Katie asked, her eyes gleaming. Five minutes later she and Echo had their heads pressed together above

Echo's phone as she scrolled through her social media accounts and shop for her creations. I would be lying if I said I didn't look everything up on my phone under the table.

The cognitive dissonance in my brain was almost unbearable. If I had just met Echo in her current iteration, not in the past, and didn't hold the grudges that I couldn't let go of, I would have been on her like white on rice. Just absolutely would have jumped her bones. I mean, I already had, but that was the past.

I didn't want to like her. I didn't want to enjoy her laugh, or the way she kept tossing her hair over her shoulder. I didn't want to like the way she asked my friends questions about their lives and was clearly listening and paying attention to the answers. I didn't want to like any of this, yet here I was, with the girl I'd sworn to hate for the rest of my life, and my ice-cold heart was doing something I didn't want it to do: thaw.

Lou called me over to the bar and leaned on it, her leather vest displaying her old-style tattoos. I looked from the anchor on her bicep to her face.

"Can I give you some advice?"

"If I say no, you're going to give it to me anyway. That's your job." She snorted and pointed at me while grabbing a glass and then filling it up with one of the beers on tap for a guy down the end of the bar.

"You got that right. So, here's what I'm going to say: let it go."

I glanced back at the table, and Echo.

"Let what go?" I asked, turning back to Lou.

“You know what. Let it go.” She waved her fingers. “Trust me. Life is too short to hold a grudge that might fuck up your happiness and your future. If I hadn’t let go of a grudge, I wouldn’t have married Susie, but that’s a story for another time.” I knew most of the logistics of how they had met, but this part was news to me.

“Okay, Lou,” I said, pushing away from the bar.

“You take my advice. I’m an older, wiser lesbian. We always give the best advice.”

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I laughed and went back to the table. Echo was telling a story about a memorable hike where she'd stripped naked to go bathing in a river and her clothes had been stolen by some raccoons.

“So, there I was, completely naked and chasing two raccoons, hoping they didn't have rabies, and hoping that no one saw me.” She paused for dramatic effect. “And we crossed the trail just as a local bird watching society was looking for a rare owl or something and I ended up ruining their day in more ways than one. Got my clothes back, though.”

I couldn't help it; I was dying from laughter. The image of a naked Echo running through the woods after two raccoons and startling some bird watchers was one of the funniest fucking things I'd ever heard in my entire life. My friends seemed to think so too, and the entire table dissolved into wheezing guffaws. That story was just too much, and it cracked through my shell.

I was warm from the alcohol and the camaraderie. I was vulnerable, so I got up to head to the bathroom for a break. I felt her following me, but I didn't say anything until we were both inside the bathroom and alone together.

“Why are you here?” I asked. “What are you doing in my bar?”

“Would you believe me if I said that I ended up here by accident?” There she was, leaning against the sink again, only the bar bathroom was a lot darker than the bathroom in the Corsica gym.

“No, I would not.” I stared into the cracked mirror.

“I did, I promise. I got in my car after practice and decided to drive around and then I stopped in for a drink. Swear.” She held both hands up.

“That’s only somewhat plausible. Did you enjoy having the whole gym to yourself?”

“It was strange and quiet, to be honest. I ended early because it felt wrong to be there without your team. The athletic director was there to supervise, and she was keeping her eyes on me. She’s a force to be reckoned with. Much better than the guy we have at Heartwood. He’s been doing the job for thirty-five years and still thinks cheerleaders are bimbos, but he begrudgingly gives us funding.”

That sounded like a nightmare. I was so lucky to have Cam in my corner.

“I didn’t plan to sabotage your evening. You looked like you were having fun and I crashed it. I’m sorry.” For once, I actually believed her.

I sighed. “Whatever, it’s fine. I’m not a complete heartless bitch.”

Echo smirked. “Most of the time.”

“Hey!” I said, attempting to give her a playful shove, and then pulling back at the last minute so I just ended up losing my balance and falling into her. She caught me and my hands gripped her shoulders. They were firm, but soft as well. We stared into each other’s eyes, and for a moment, I didn’t know how to breathe.

The door opened with a bang.

“Oops, my bad,” a drunk and stumbling dude said, pushing away and heading for the men’s room. That was my wakeup call. I stepped away from Echo and went back to my friends. Being in enclosed spaces alone with her wasn’t good for me.

My friends went silent as I rejoined them so, clearly, they'd been talking about me and Echo and what we'd been doing in the bathroom.

"That was kind of quick for a hookup, but no judgment," Penny said.

That earned her a kick under the table.

"It's not like that," I said.

"Oh, I think it is," Katie said, her eyes glittering from the combination of the drama and the amount of drinks she'd had. She was stopped from further speculation by Echo returning.

"This has all been lovely, but I need to get back to my neck of the woods. I have a morning run with my team I have to get up for."

Ew, she actually did the run with them? That sounded horrible. I made my kids do conditioning, but I wasn't about to get down and do it with them. I'd rather die. Yoga was much more my speed now, or swimming, or walking.

Echo spared a goodbye to everyone, and left with one long look at me that gave me far more questions than answers.

"I think I need another drink," I said as the door of The Trap shut behind her.

I had a second drink at The Trap, and headed home earlier than I would have if I didn't have to get up and focus on my squad all day tomorrow.

Ten minutes after I'd walked through the door, a text message came through from Echo.

You looked really hot tonight.

The compliment made me feel some kind of way.

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Aren't you supposed to be sleeping up for your big run?

I fell asleep and then woke up and I'm bored she said.

I shook my head as I typed my response: It's not my job to entertain you, Echo.

You're right. I'm sorry. Again. Have a good night.

I didn't want to end on that note, so I sent another message. When did you start lifting weights?

There was an understandable long pause. I threw a toy for the kitties to chase in the living room as I waited to see what she'd say to that.

I've always lifted weights, but I got more into it during college. Stress reliever after a breakup. Now it's just part of my life. Why do you ask?

Just curious.

Can I ask you a question?

I guess? Now I'm scared.

Don't be scared! It's silly.

Go ahead.

Can you go outside right now?

My stomach dropped into my feet.

You're not going to be on my lawn waiting to stab me or declare your undying love, are you?

I was part joking, part serious. You couldn't be too careful.

No, I promise. Just go outside.

Curious, and still a little nervous, I went outside.

Okay, now what?

Look up.

I did and gasped. It was a full moon. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the moon absolutely glowed.

It's a blue moon, she sent after a few moments.

It is. It's beautiful.

I doubt I would have noticed it if it wasn't for Echo drawing my attention to the sky. So often I got wrapped up in my work and just put my head down and didn't take the chance to look up at the sky and stop moving for a second.

I stared at the moon and breathed the summer air and let my thoughts slow down.

Thank you for making me look up at the sky.

You're welcome, Kiri. Anytime.

Ten

All I had left were Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, and then we left for Orlando on Thursday afternoon. Friday was the first day of competition, and then those who made it past the prelims got to perform on Saturday. No matter what, we were headed to Disney on Sunday, and I was still considering taking Dom up on his offer to let me stay at the hotel and have a day off.

It was crunch time and I wished that the kids weren't still in school, but they had two weeks left and I couldn't get them out of classes. My seniors definitely had senioritis bad, and I didn't see what point there was in keeping them in class when they weren't learning anything, but it wasn't my call to make. Education was important, yes, but at a certain point, you had to throw in the towel and let them go for the summer.

One more week and it would all be over. I'd say goodbye to my seniors, which was going to make me cry, again. We'd already had our athletic banquet and I'd given them all praise and awards, but we knew we still had Nationals. Once that was over, this squad was in the books, and we'd have to look forward to next year.

I always got strangely calm about the lead up to competitions, and this was no different. My focus narrowed, and I knew that, at this point, there wasn't a whole lot more we could do. The routine was what it was, my athletes were as good as they were going to get, and all I could ask was that they tried their best and forgot the rest.

Monday passed in a blur. I barely had the time or energy to eat and work, let alone talk to Echo or think about her. Much.

On Tuesday, my kids were on edge and jumpy and I didn't know how manage them. Dom and I tried, but they were just not having it.

"Hey," a voice said behind me, and I whirled around to find Echo, leaning around the curtain.

"What?" I snapped, and then winced.

"Why don't we do something to take the pressure off?"

I walked over to talk with her so not everyone could hear.

"Don't you need to drill them perfectly one more time?" I asked, crossing my arms.

"If they haven't gotten it by now, they're not going to. Why don't we have them perform for each other just for fun?" she asked.

That didn't sound like fun at all.

"I don't think so."

Echo rolled her eyes as if I was being difficult. "Fine, then let's take this damn curtain down and have a freaking dance party."

That I could agree to. I never said no to a dance party, even when it was suggested by Echo.

It was probably a little too symbolic as both squads shoved the curtain away and moved the mats together until we had one huge space that covered almost the entire gym. Talk about plenty of tumbling room. I hoped we got to keep the mats even after the other team left. There was already a fundraiser the replace all the old equipment

(which I'm sure was insured), that had exceeded its goal, so the Heartwood cheerleaders were going to be fine when their brand new gym was finished before the start of the next school year.

I made Dom choose a song and he cranked up the speakers. After a few seconds of reluctance, the dance fever hit everyone and it was on.

I saw my kids pull out viral dance moves and bad-on-purpose moves and there was so much movement you couldn't tell who was on what team anymore. Dom threw himself into the fray, and then a few of my squad dragged me in and then all the adults were in the mosh pit of teens, laughing and dancing and having the best time.

A circle formed and, one by one, each person showed their best moves as the rest of us cheered them on. That led to a few people throwing tumbling in and then Echo shimmied into the center and did a fucking standing full and everyone lost their minds.

She stood up from the trick and winked right at me.

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Bitch.

One of her assistants (I still couldn't remember their names) did the worm, and that got a lot of support, as well as two girls from Echo's squad doing a choreographed routine that they had clearly known for most of their lives.

When it was my turn, I pulled out my tried and true move: the shopping cart. That elicited both laughs and groans and I didn't even care. I pulled a toe-touch out of my ass that wasn't as good as it was in high school. Yoga had kept me limber enough to throw a decent jump, or at least it felt decent when I landed.

They cheered for more, but I put my hands up in defeat and semi-limbed back to the edge of the circle.

I needed to do more cardio. Maybe I should be conditioning with the squad.

The dance party slowed down and everyone sort of collapsed on the mat together in a pile.

"Good job, everyone," I said, clapping. "I think we can end on that note. Tigers, I'll see you all tomorrow for the sendoff party." Dom had organized a party for all the cheerleaders and their parents at the local VFW hall so we could all eat spaghetti and have some team bonding before we flew out on Thursday.

"And Bulldogs, I will see you all at the restaurant for our sendoff party." Of course they were having one at a restaurant. Mine was a spaghetti potluck.

Everyone rolled up the mats and put them away and there was chatter between the two groups, almost as if they were friends. Their room block at the hotel in Orlando just happened to be next to ours, so we were going to see a lot of each other the rest of the week.

I circled up my squad to say goodnight.

“This is it, everyone. In two days we get on a plane. Sleep, if you can. Try and pack earlier rather than later, because you will forget something. I can text you the packing list. This is going to be an amazing week, and all I ask is that you give me energy eleven. You’ve got this. I’m so proud of everything you’ve done so far this year. You’re amazing, you’re awesome, you’re the best. We’ve got this, Tigers. We havegotthis.”

They all whooped and cheered and then we did our signature chant to end the night. The Bulldogs had their own and we ended up each doing ours at the same time, so the gym was just a big bowl of noise for a few moments.

I got all my kids out the door, and Echo put hers on the bus and sent them off. She was doing that thing where she packed her shit up slowly and I shared a look with Dom.

He just shook his head and tossed me the keys for the gym and walked out.

A few seconds later, I got a text message from him.

Don’t do anything bad.

I snorted and looked up from my phone to find Echo walking toward me, her bag over her shoulder.

“Something funny you’d like to share?” she asked.

“Not really,” I said.

She set her bag down and started pulling something out of it.

“What are you doing?” I leaned over to see what she was pulling out.

“I thought we could take a little trip down memory lane.” She pulled out two cans of the horrible energy drink that had gotten us through cheer camp in the past, along with the hot, crunchy snacks we had gorged ourselves on.

“How did we consume these two things at the same time?” I said with a shudder. I did not want to read the ingredient label on either product.

Echo pulled out the first level of the bleachers that had been pushed back to make room for the cheer mats.

“You up to see if it’s as great as we remember?” She sat down and nodded at me.

Dom had told me not to do anything bad, but this wasn’t going to be bad. It was going to be fine.

Echo and I cracked open the cans and clinked them against each other.

“To Orlando, and may the best team win,” she said, and then burst out laughing. “I couldn’t even say that with a straight face.”

“You can’t do anything straight,” I said, pointing my can at her.

“That’s true.”

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I smelled the drink and it brought back so many memories. It instantly yanked me back to those summer days when anything had seemed possible, and I had never been so happy to be surrounded by cheerleaders.

“You go first,” she said, looking into the can as if something was going to jump out and bite her.

“We used to suck these things down. This isn’t a big deal.” I took a sip and nearly choked. “Oh god, it’s terrible. Why did we like this?”

I tried another sip, just to see if it was better than the first one. It was worse.

“It can’t be that bad,” she said, and then I relished the look of horror on her face as she sipped and then swallowed the noxious liquid. She put her hand over her mouth and then set the can down. “That was probably one of the worst things I’ve ever put in my mouth. How can our memories be so faulty?”

“No idea.” I grabbed a bag of the crunchy cheese curls and hoped that they wouldn’t disappoint me. I crunched into one, and it was just as good as I remembered. One for two.

“Okay, eat these. They’re good,” I said, pushing the bag toward her.

“I’m scared,” she said, but she picked up the bag. After a few moments, she opened it up and nibbled the end of one piece. Pondering, she thought about it before shoving the whole thing in her mouth.

“Much better,” was her verdict.

We sat and crunched and the sound echoed through the empty gym.

“I can’t believe we’re leaving in two days. It’s so weird,” I said. I still had to do laundry and pack. Oops. Do as I say, not as I do.

“It’s going to be awesome. They’ll do good. I mean, neither of us is winning.”

I gave her a look.

“We both know it’s true,” she said.

“Fine. But I still want to beat you. I don’t care if we come second from last. As long as you’re last.”

Echo shook her head back and forth slowly and then finished her chips and pulled a wipe from her purse to clean her fingers like some kind of princess. I just licked mine off like a normal person, but then she passed me a wipe.

I snatched it from her fingers and she scooted closer to me, moving the cans of discarded energy drinks. One moment there was space between us, and the next she was right there.

“I thought about revisiting one more thing from our past, if you’re up for it.”

There was no reading between the lines needed here.

“Do you really think that’s a good idea?” I could hear Dom’s voice in my head, telling me to put a stop to this, to push away from her and go home.

I didn't listen.

I leaned closer to Echo, and the combination of the energy drink and the crunchy snacks on her breath was weirdly arousing. Maybe it was just Echo. She was arousing.

"What are we doing?" I whispered, staring deep into her eyes. On the surface, they were brown, but they were so much more than that. Dark caramel and honey and chocolate. All delicious things swirled together.

"I don't know, what are we doing?" she said, her breath whispering across my lips. I was millimeters away from kissing her and I wanted to. I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to do a whole lot of other things with her. Things we'd done in the past, things that had rocked my world and opened new doors and that I still thought about to this day.

Would it still be the same, kissing Echo? Would her lips still set my blood on fire and make me forget how to take a breath? Or would the kiss fall flat? I didn't know which would be worse, honestly.

I didn't want to want her, but I did. The wanting had built and built, and tonight I didn't think I had the ability to say no.

"What are you waiting for, Kiri?" I had to close my eyes and think for a moment. I inhaled and reminded myself that we were in the Corsica gym and, if things escalated at all, we would not want to be on a hard gym floor, and there was no way I would sully the cheer mats and still be able to look my squad in the eyes.

I stood up on shaky legs and held my hand out.

"Come on."

She didn't ask where we were going as we gathered our things up, shut the lights off,

and locked the doors. Echo followed me to my car and got in when I unlocked the door, tossing her bag in the back.

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I kept the radio off and didn't say anything as I drove us to my house. I was afraid if I said something that I would change my mind. I just had to keep driving. Mere minutes later I pulled into my driveway and shut off the car.

"I have cats. Just so you know. Three of them."

"I love cats," she said. "Your house is adorable."

It was. That was why I'd picked it. I'd been thinking about a completely different place and then drove past this one and there was a real estate agent literally shoving a FOR SALE sign in the lawn. I took one look at the house and put in an offer.

"Don't you want to see it?" the real estate agent had said, but I'd just shrugged and said sure, but it wasn't going to change the fact that this was my house and I was meant to live here.

"Thank you," I said to Echo. "I can take you back, if you want. Or you can come in and we'll see what happens." We both knew what would happen when she walked in the door. The air was charged with it. My skin prickled with the awareness of her, of her breath, of her heart beating in the enclosed space.

I looked at her under the glow of the porch light.

"Let's see what happens," she said, opening the door and walking toward the porch.

"This is a bad idea," I said to myself, before I got out of the car and followed her to the front door.

The cats attacked me before they saw Echo, and then all three of them froze with the entrance of a newcomer.

“They’re all friendly and love people, but take a few seconds to warm up,” I told her.

“Hello babies,” she said, crouching down and holding her hand out for them to sniff.

Meatball was first, approaching Echo slowly and then sniffing her fingers. After a few seconds, Meatball gave Echo’s hand an experimental lick, and then rubbed her head on Echo’s leg. Spaghetti was next, and then Cupcake last.

“Aren’t you beauties, yes you are. Your mama must have to vacuum all the time,” she crooned to them in the cutest voice.

“That’s what robot vacuums are for. I have three. One for each cat.”

“Good plan,” she said, standing up and glancing around. “It looks just like I thought it would look.”

She took a few steps toward the living room and I watched her.

“You imagined my house?”

She nodded and turned around to face me. “Lots of times.”

I moved around the space, turning on lamps to give the space a soft glow. The cats ran from me to Echo, begging for attention. I got them fed and gave them fresh water. When I went back to the living room, Echo had made herself at home on my couch.

“Do you want something to drink?” I should offer her something, right? I mean, she’d brought me the horrible energy drinks and the crunchy things. It was the least I could

do.

“Whatever you have. Or water.”

I just wanted water, but I also wanted to be fancy, so I poured water into wine glasses and added a slice of lemon on the side.

I brought the glasses over and handed one to Echo. She sipped and gave me a puzzled look.

“It’s water,” she said.

I pointed to my glass. “But classy.”

She laughed and took another sip. “I totally thought you were giving me straight up vodka or something.” She had taken off her shoes and pulled her legs up on the couch, as if she was getting cozy.

This wasn’t what I expected. I kind of thought the instant the door closed, she was going to start ripping my clothes off, but we were more in the position to have a lovely chat about the weather. Had she gotten cold feet? Had she changed her mind and was trying to be polite?

“You can go, if you want. I’ll take you back.” I set my glass of water down.

“I don’t feel like going home alone tonight,” she said, draining the rest of her water and putting her glass next to mine.

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Our eyes met and I inhaled and the sound was so loud, even over the kitties chomping down their dinner and fussing at each other.

“I don’t feel like being alone tonight either.”

She leaned toward me, pushing forward until she was almost on her hands and knees facing me.

“That makes two of us.”

I had a second to brace myself before she pressed her lips to mine. For a second, I didn’t know what to do, and then it was like my lust furnace kicked on and I remembered what kissing was, and what I was supposed to be doing. I gasped, and she took the invitation to push closer, to slip her tongue in my mouth and I had a shock of memory of the first time we had kissed, and she’d done the same. The past and the present, layering on top of each other.

My hand reached for her face, to bring her closer to me. Echo pressed me back, until I was lying against the arm of the couch and her body covered mine. I stretched out under her and the contact lit up every nerve in my body, even though we still had layers of clothes to keep us apart. For now.

The kiss had only been sweet and kind in the first few seconds, and then it had turned into something desperate and feral, driving us both more and more wild.

Now was the time for the tearing of clothes, for the searching for hidden skin, for the desire to ignite and consume both of us.

Our mouths parted, but only so we could attempt to undress each other at the same time.

“You’re wearing too many clothes,” I whined, as my fingers tried to get her naked all at once.

“It’s a lot easier to yank off a cheer bra and shorts, isn’t it?”

The last time we’d done this, we’d definitely been wearing far less clothing.

Echo took both of my hands that were struggling with her buttons and hems and held them.

“Let me do it.” Her hips straddled mine and she sat up, pressing her hips into me so hard that I saw stars. Echo pulled her shirt over her head and then undid her bra.

“Are your tits bigger?” I asked. They definitely looked bigger than I remembered.

“I had them done. You like?” She looked down at me as I gazed her perfect chest.

“Very much.”

“You can even touch them if you want.” I did want, so I reached up and squeezed one. Echo threw her head back and moaned.

“Mmmm,” I said. I probably could have spent the entire night just messing with them, teasing her nipples, and re-learning every inch of her magnificent body.

I made a disappointed sound when she stood up.

“Hold on, I’m coming back. Why don’t you take something off? It’s only fair.”

I sat up and removed my shirt and bra.

“Just like I remembered,” she said, running one hand up my belly to cup one of my breasts. It felt good, but it would feel better if she would hurry up and take her pants off. There was a time limit on tonight and I didn’t want either of us to lose our nerve.

Echo got her pants off, and stood next to the couch looking down at me in all her naked glory.

“Fucking hell,” I said.

She laughed and then did a pose like she was in a fitness competition, flexing for me as she turned around and then flexed her ass. Unable to resist, I raised my hand and spanked it. She yelped a little bit, but giggled and turned back around.

“See? I remember what you like.”

“I’ve learned a few things in ten years, Kiri.”

I raised one eyebrow. “Have you now? Why don’t you show me?”

“What’s the password?” That was what she’d said that first night, and I remembered the answer. It didn’t require a verbal answer, but a removal of clothing.

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I flipped the button on my jeans and started to shimmy them down my hips. I struggled a little bit, so Echo helped out by pulling the bottoms off my legs.

The cats chose that moment to come over and see what was going on, and Cupcake decided to jump onto my naked body.

“No, Cupcake, this is not the time,” I said, gently pushing her onto the floor, where she gave me a glare.

“Come on, let’s take this somewhere else,” Echo said. We stood up and I walked toward my bedroom. As soon as we were through the door, she pushed me against it, pressing her entire body to mine. Her curves were different, but still familiar.

Echo cupped my face with her hands and stroked her fingers on my undercut.

“This is so distracting,” she said with a laugh. I’d buzzed my hair just the day before, and the ends were still blunt and fun to touch.

“You can pet me later.”

Echo smiled in a wicked way. “Or maybe I should just pet you in a different place.”

One hand stayed on my face and the other traveled down the center of my body, past my navel and right to . . .

“Fuck,” I said as she brushed one finger right down my center.

“Yes, that’s the plan,” she said. “I’ve been dreaming about fucking you for ten years, Kiri Kentwood.”

I couldn’t form the words to tell her that I’d been dreaming about this too. I tried not to, but those fantasies always found me. Tormented me.

“And I’m going to fuck you into oblivion.”

One of her fingers dipped inside me and I gripped her shoulders so I wouldn’t collapse on the floor.

I struggled to get my bearings, but I did, and my eyes snapped open.

“Not if I fuck you first,” I said, pushing her shoulders.

She didn’t move, so I tried again. Nothing.

“That played out totally differently in my head,” I told her, and felt my face go a little red. “It’s not fair that you’re taller and stronger than me.”

“But you’re prettier,” she said, and I could tell she was trying not to smile at my feeble attempt to take the upper hand.

“You’re hotter,” I countered.

Echo shook her head and started backing toward my bed, right until the back of her legs hit the edges of it.

“That’s debatable.”

I followed her toward the bed and tried again. I put my hands on her shoulders and

pushed her back. This time, she let me, until she was lying completely on the bed.

For a moment, I savored the image of Echo spread out in front of me.

“This mattress is much nicer than those horrible dorm beds,” she said, running her hands over my comforter.

“You’re welcome,” I said.

“Hey, Kiri,” she said.

“What?”

She sat up and crooked her finger at me.

“Get that hot ass over here.”

Eleven

I had no idea this was going to happen tonight. The whole situation was completely surreal as I climbed onto the bed and Echo spread her legs to make room for me.

“What are you going to do next, Kiri?” Hearing my name from her mouth sent a bolt of heat right between my legs. It had always been attractive to me, and I’d been angry about it. I’d been angry about my desire for her.

Anger wasn’t heating my blood anymore. It was something much hotter.

“I’m going to fuck you,” I said. I sat back and tapped my chin with my hand, as if I was thinking about something. “I can’t decide if I should use my hands or my mouth. Hmmm.”

“Both,” Echo said. “Definitely both.”

I sighed dramatically. “Okay, if that’s what you want, I guess.”

“Will you stop teasing me, you asshole?”

“That’s not a very nice thing to say to the person seducing you. Maybe I won’t fuck you now.” I crossed my arms.

“Is this revenge for New England? Because you’re doing a really good job of pissing me off right now.”

I could tell she wasn't really mad, just sexually frustrated. Well, that made two of us.

"Touchy, touchy," I said, shaking my finger at her.

"Yes, touchy, touchy is what I want you to do," Echo moaned. "Right now, please." Her hands clutched my comforter in frustration.

"Well, since you said 'please,'" I said, putting my hands on either side of her and bringing my face within inches of hers. "I guess I can do what you want, Echo."

One of her hands reached up and stroked the side of my face. "I only want you." It was a tender moment that almost felt out of place with all the talk about fucking. "Now please fuck me?" She patted my cheek and smiled.

There it was. That was more like it.

I reintroduced myself to Echo's body with a lot more finesse and confidence than I'd had the first time. When we were teens we'd been enthusiastic, but fumbling, and there had been a lot of checking in to see if the other one was actually liking what we were doing. Those few times with Echo weren't my first experiences, but they were still early in my game and now I was ten years older and wiser and fuckier.

As much as I wanted to tease her and take my sweet time, I was also super fucking horny and ready to get to the main event. I made quick work with my hands and mouth on her spectacular breasts, making sure to treat her nipples right until they were hard as rocks and she was writhing and begging. I still remembered that she loved having them sucked on, hard, so I gave in to her. I gave her what I knew she wanted, what I remembered she wanted, but I also tried a few new things I'd learned in the intervening years.

I didn't think I was some sort of sexual Sappho, but I could get the job done and I

hadn't had any complaints yet.

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Periodically, I would return to her mouth and kiss her hard and deep, using my hands at the same time to trace her skin and map those gorgeous muscles. I couldn't wait to feel those powerful legs wrapped around my ears as I ate her out until she came so hard she couldn't move.

I complimented her muscles with kisses and bites and licks as I made my way down her body, and she settled right between her legs. Our eyes locked as I lowered my head over her.

This part was a little different: in high school we'd both gone bare, but now there was a small sprinkling of red hair in this sweetest of places. I kissed the top of her and she shoved her hips against my mouth.

I left little kisses on the insides of her thighs and watched her wiggle as I moved away from the area that she begged me to touch.

“Please, Kiri, please.”

She got her way when she begged like that. I licked her up and down her core and she almost sighed in relief, as if she'd been waiting for this for almost ten years.

I let my mouth do the work of tasting and teasing and taking my own pleasure from hers. I fucked Echo Rosenthal with just my tongue and was ready to come from the power of it as I felt her tremble every time I plunged my tongue inside her. Echo's legs shook and she made all kinds of sweet noises that only drove me harder, faster.

Echo's first orgasm hit her and I congratulated myself and my tongue on my work as

her legs trembled and her thighs crushed my ears and she made the most delicious noises I'd ever heard.

She rode out the waves and then looked down at me with flushed cheeks and hair that was all over the place. That was one of the upsides of having short hair: it didn't get my way when I was getting sexual.

"You have the most amazing tongue. You have definitely been practicing since last time," she said.

I made a face and rested my cheek on the inside of her thigh.

"I had no idea what I was doing back then. I'm shocked you even came." She had come, a lot. I was going to top that tonight, or break my tongue trying.

"I mean, it's not that hard, as long as you know where and what to lick," I said.

I smiled up at her and she reached down to stroke my hair, which was still styled, thanks to my intense styling products.

"Come on, baby, your turn." She sat up and I flopped onto my stomach before getting up. I pulled a towel out from under my bed and used it to wipe my face, which was a mess.

"Is that how we're doing this? One for you, one for me? That wasn't what I planned." I pouted at her.

"What did you have planned?"

I pushed her hair back from her face and then opened the drawer of my nightstand and handed her an elastic for her hair. I was always prepared for my conquests. I also

had a bunch of other things in that drawer, and the one under it, including a wide variety of sex toys for every taste, and lubes for all occasions. I aimed to please, even if I was just pleasing myself.

“Whoa, you have an arsenal,” Echo said, peering into the drawer before I closed it.

“See anything you like?” I asked. Sometimes I was nervous to show my stash to a partner, since some people had hang ups about toys and sometimes even lube. I didn’t know how you could enjoy good sex without lube, but sex education in this country sucked, so I did my part to teach any of my partners about the joys of lube.

I met Echo’s eyes.

“Maybe,” she said, reaching for one of my favorite lubes, and then the smallest of my butt plugs.

“Oh really?” I said, raising one eyebrow. “Is that where you want to go with this?”

“Mmm, definitely. But first, I’m going to see if you still taste as sweet as I remember.” This time she shoved me back on the bed and I moaned just from her strength. She could literally bend me in half and toss me around and it turned me on so much that it hurt. The increase in her muscle size had just increased my attraction to her.

Echo pressed me down on the bed and stared down at me, a vicious smile on her face. “You may have learned a few things with your tongue, but so have I.”

With that, she threw both my legs over her shoulders and the only word to describe what she did was devour. Echo devoured me, and the intensity of the way she used her mouth and her tongue and her sneaky fingers was almost too much. I came so hard and so fast I gasped for breath as my entire body pulsed with ecstasy so fierce, I was

worried that it might kill me and then the night would be over.

“Good job, baby,” she said, kissing my belly with the most smug and self-satisfied expression on her face.

“That wasn’t fair,” I panted as my legs trembled with little aftershocks. She knew I was too sensitive right now, but I had no doubt she was going for seconds, and then maybe thirds. I was absolutely going to let her.

Oh no, Echo please don’t make me come so many times I actually black out, that would be awful.

“I don’t play fair, as you should know.”

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That was true. She played dirty, and she'd obviously learned more with age.

"Uh huh," I said, at a loss for anything else.

"You ready to go again, baby?" The term of endearment was new, but I didn't mind it. I actually liked it a lot, almost more than the way my name sounded in her mouth.

"I guess," I said, looking up at the ceiling and hoping I was going to make it through tonight.

"No, that's not good enough. I need an enthusiastic yes."

"Yes," I said, with as much enthusiasm as my wrung-out body could muster.

Echo laughed.

"Okay, I'll take it."

She sucked hard on my clit, and it shocked me. "Yes! Yes!"

Echo laughed as she licked me up and down and all around, using both hands as well to drive me to a second, somehow more powerful, orgasm.

"If this is your attempt at trying to kill me so I can't show up and coach at Nationals, you're well on your way," I said.

She laughed. "That wasn't my plan, but it is now."

After a few more orgasms, we both needed to refuel, so we headed to the kitchen and got waylaid by the cats, who demanded attention. We'd both put on robes so it wasn't too weird.

"Do you ever wonder if cats think about why we wear clothes? Or if they just think we change our fur?" Echo asked, as I mined the fridge and pantry for sustenance.

I had a tray that I used when I had Katie and Penny over that Dom had given me to make charcuterie, so I loaded it up with tons of chips and crackers and cheese and anything else I could find that was quick and easy that we could eat in bed.

"I have literally never thought of that, but now I'm going to wonder," I said as I picked up the tray and started back toward the bedroom. Echo picked up a few bottled waters so we had some hydration.

Back in bed, we munched and I stared at her.

"I didn't know this was going to happen tonight," I admitted. "I mean, did you plan this with that little stunt of the energy drinks and snacks?"

Echo picked up a cracker and placed two pieces of cheese on top before shoving the whole thing in her mouth.

"No, I didn't know this was going to happen. I definitely didn't know you were going to invite me over. I figured if we fucked it was going to be on the cheer mats, or in one of our cars. Doing it in a bed is much nicer. Plus, snacks."

I wasn't sure if I believed that, but it didn't matter. No going back from tonight. We were going to fuck until the sun came up and deal with the consequences after. That would be a problem for future Kiri and Echo to deal with.

“I had no idea this was going to happen, but it seems like it was inevitable now. I guess I was just in denial.”

Echo chuckled and picked up another set of crackers and two cheeses. She must really like cheese.

“I think there was denial on both sides, to be fair,” she said.

I crunched on a chip and chased it with one of a different flavor. They really should make a bag that had all the flavors in it, all put together. Maybe that was a million-dollar idea. I should pitch it to Lay’s.

“What are you thinking about, Kiri?”

My brain had drifted off, thinking about chips.

“Chips,” I said, layering the three flavors together and eating them at once. Delicious.

Echo shook her head at me. “You are strange and wonderful, Kiri Kentwood, and I knew that the second we met.”

My face turned red, and I wished I hadn’t turned on all the lights in my bedroom because I’d wanted to see every inch of her naked body. “I’m not sure if I should take that as a compliment or not.”

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“Oh, it is. You’re not like anyone I’ve ever met, and I feel like an asshole for not reaching out to you sooner, for not contacting you. I’m really sorry about that. I know I’ve already said it, but I mean it, Kiri. I’m so sorry about that.”

I reached out and squeezed her hand and said something that I never thought I would say, “It’s fine, Echo. It was a long time ago, and I’m over it. Mostly.”

She looked up at me through dark eyelashes, her expression vulnerable and unsure. “Is there anything I can do to help you get over it?”

I raised and lowered my eyebrows suggestively. “I think you’re already on your way.”

“Is that so?” She took the tray and set it on my dresser along with the water bottles. “Then I’d better get back to work.”

By the sixth orgasm, I decided I was over the past with Echo. Sure, we still had our rivalry, and that wasn’t going anywhere, and she still pushed my buttons, but I was moving on from that past hurt.

“You ready for something fun?” she asked, fetching the lube and the little plug.

“I’m calling 911, because you are attempting a murder via orgasm,” I said. My body was drenched in sweat and I was going to need a shower before I could collapse in exhaustion. I didn’t know where her energy came from, but I was living for it.

“I just want you to remember me, that’s all.” She lubed up the toy and I closed my

eyes as she prepped me, but opened them to watch her. I wanted this burned into my memory so I could never forget it.

“Okay, tell me if you want to stop anytime. I’ll try and be gentle,” she said.

“Echo, this isn’t my first butt-plug rodeo. I’ve ridden before. Many times.”

She burst out laughing and it took her a while to recover.

“I’m sorry, that was hilarious. I’m sorry. I’ll get serious and sexy again.” She used the hand that wasn’t holding the lubed plug to wipe a few tears from her eyes.

“Hey, if you can’t laugh during sex, what is even the point?” We’d had a lot of nervous giggles those first few times, and when we’d gotten a little more comfortable, there was a shared intimacy in our jokes.

“True enough. You ready?”

“Fuck yeah,” I said.

Echo rubbed my leg as she teased my ass with the plug, then dipped the absolute tip in, and out, and in. Incoherent sounds came from my mouth as I did whatever I could to beg her for more. No, she was Echo Rosenthal, hot and mean, and she’d turned the mean all the way up.

I was practically sobbing by the time she pushed the plug all the way inside me. The sensation was so much, and then she put her fingers inside me too, and the combined pressure from both places was too much and I came again, harder than I ever had in my entire life. Harder than I knew was possible. There were stars and fireworks and explosions and it was all so good, and so much and I let myself just drown in it, because what else was I going to do? I gave myself over to pleasure, and pleasure

alone, and it gripped me until it had wrung me completely out, and there was nothing left but a buzzing my ears and soft tingles all over my skin.

I whimpered as she slowly pulled the plug from my body and took it to the bathroom to wash. When she came back, it was with a wipe to clean me off a little.

“I’m dead. This is my corpse talking.” I could barely even keep my eyes open.

“You’re beautiful when you come, Kiri. So fucking beautiful.” I opened my eyes and found her gazing down at me with a look that made me feel a whole lot of things I wasn’t ready to feel.

“I’m so sweaty.” Even my fingers were damp.

“Sweaty and gorgeous. Come on, let’s get you clean.” Echo pulled me to my feet and marched me to the bathroom where she turned on the shower and shoved me in.

It was a quick shower, but Echo was so tender, a contrast to the way she’d been with me earlier, making me come. She washed the product out of my hair and made sure every inch of me was soaped and rinsed.

“Why are you being so nice to me?” I asked, and she gave me a shocked look.

“I just made you come like ten times, Kiri, and you’re asking why I’m being nice? What is your definition of nice?” She slicked my hair back from my face so it lay flat on my head.

I let my hands rest on her hips, pulling her closer. One of the best parts of this house was the huge walk-in shower that had room enough for several people to be comfortable.

“I don’t know. It’s just a lot to adjust to. Tonight has been a lot,” I said.

It really had been. So much, so fast.

“Well, I figured it was now or never because we have to get on a plane on Thursday and then we’ll be in competition mode and I have to go back to pretending to dislike you in public.”

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I put one hand up.

“Hold on. You were pretending to dislike me? You were just acting?” This revelation was breaking my brain.

“I mean, sure, I definitely had a little bit of irritation over how everything went down with us, but that was more irritation at myself for being such a dick. I messed with you because I love winding you up. You get so cute and huffy.”

I opened my mouth and gaped at her. It was as if she’d turned the entire world upside down.

“I’m so confused right now. I thought you were just an asshole,” I said.

Echo lifted one shoulder. “I mean, I’m still kind of an asshole.”

“A hot asshole.”

“You’re hot,” she said with a smile, planting a hot kiss on my lips. That led to us making out in the shower so long that the hot water ran out and we yelped to get out and dry ourselves off with towels.

“Since it’s like, almost morning and I’m not an asshole, you’re absolutely welcome to stay. Or I could call you a car to take you home. I’m chivalrous like that.”

Echo used the towel to wring out her long hair.

“Oh, are you now? I think I’ll stay. Your bed is nicer than mine and I have the day off,” she said.

I had no idea where she lived, or what the place looked like. There was still so much that I didn’t know about Echo Rosenthal.

I didn’t know if I was going to have a chance to find out. Everything about the two of us was unknown, except for what was happening in the present moment and, right now, I needed some fucking sleep.

“I can lend you some clothes, but I think you might break my shirts,” I said.

“That’s okay, I don’t want to Hulk your clothes.”

That image was unbearably funny for some reason and I couldn’t stop laughing.

“You need to get to bed, you’re silly from the sex,” Echo said, pushing me toward the bed. In the end, we both got under the covers naked, because it seemed rude to wear pajamas when she didn’t have any with her.

“Did you set an alarm?” Echo asked as my eyes drifted closed. I was so tired, I didn’t even know if I could fall asleep. Too much work.

“Uh huh,” I said, reaching for my phone on the nightstand and then turning on a few alarms.

“Good,” she said with a sigh. “Goodnight?”

I opened one eye and looked at her. “Why did that sound like a question?”

“Because it’s not really night anymore.” The light had changed during our carnal

activities and now the room was filled with that soft blue-gray light that heralded the coming of the sun. The next few days were going to be rough, but I didn't have any regrets.

Yet.

“Well, what do you want to say? Goodalmostmorning?”

“Sounds good,” she said. “Goodalmostmorning, Kiri.” She kissed my forehead and I puckered my lips to ask for a mouth kiss. Echo gave me one and I was asleep mere seconds later.

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My alarm went off fartoo soon.

“No,” I moaned as I turned it off for the third time.

“Also no,” Echo said in a scratchy voice.

I opened my eyes and turned on my side to find a very naked Echo stretching her arms above her head, the covers all the way down to her waist, revealing her luscious body. Okay, so that made things a tiny bit better. Only a tiny bit though.

Our night of debauchery was over and it was back to reality, and Echo was back to being the complicated woman I had fucked. Again.

“Enjoying the view?” she asked and then shimmied her shoulders a little bit to give me a show.

“You’re very good at that, you should charge money.”

She grinned at me with her hair spread out on my pillows.

“I’ve taken a burlesque class or two in my day,” she said, and then sat up, careless about her nudity. We were comfortable around each other in a way that I didn’t expect and wasn’t sure how to process.

“Oh, have you? I’d like to see some of those moves. But later, because I am so

hungry I could eat my pillow.” The snacks we’d had hadn’t been enough.

“Same,” she said. “But you don’t have to feed me. I can grab something later.”

I gasped dramatically, as if she’d offended me. “You think that I would bang you into oblivion and then send you off without a hearty breakfast? Do you know me at all?”

Her smile was soft and guarded as she reached up and dragged one finger down my cheek.

“I don’t really know you, Kiri, but I want to,” she said.

Things were getting a little too intense this early, so I escaped from the bed to the kitchen, taking a moment to don a robe so I didn’t burn myself. Naked cooking was only sexy in the abstract.

I made pancakes and bacon and poured us each a glass of orange juice. The tray from last night’s snacks came in handy again and I made a note to thank Dom for it. I just couldn’t tell him what occasion I’d used it for.

He was going to murder me for sleeping with Echo, but what was done was done.

“Breakfast in bed,” I said to her, setting the tray down. She’d been messing around on her phone and had draped the other robe around herself, much to my disappointment.

“I’m so spoiled,” she said, sitting cross-legged and reaching for the tray to help me.

“Hold on, I just have to get the syrup.” I raced back to the kitchen to fetch condiments and butter and silverware.

Echo and I lay in bed together and ate, feeding each other bacon and pancakes from

each other's plates as if we'd done this same thing hundreds of times.

"This freaks me out," I admitted, as she pierced the last bite of pancake with her fork and ate it. Typical.

"What does?" she asked after she chewed and swallowed. I'd noted that she drenched her pancakes in both butter and syrup. Echo enjoyed excess.

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“Being here like this with you. Less than a day ago I would have said that I’d have a better chance of fucking Kristen Stewart than you, and now things are . . . blurry.”

Echo set her fork down and sipped her orange juice. Everything she did was sexy, and this simple gesture was no exception.

“Things don’t have to be blurry. Cheer is going to be over in a few days, and then . . .” she trailed off and shrugged one shoulder.

“We’re still going to be rivals next year. And I still literally don’t even know your middle name.”

That made her laugh. “It’s Marie, in case you were wondering. What’s yours?”

Middle names weren’t the point, but I told her anyway. “Anna.”

“Kiri Anna Kentwood. It’s a really nice name.”

“Thank you, I did not get to pick it myself, but my parents did a good job.”

“I think so.”

Silence fell between us and I realized that we had a lot to do today and should get moving. I had to take Kiri back to her car, I had to pack, and I had to just . . . get my mind right.

“This doesn’t change anything that’s going to happen on the mat,” I said as I got

dressed in new clothes and Echo put on the same outfit from last night.

“I know,” she said. “It doesn’t have to. We’re still going to kick your ass.” With that, she smacked my ass and I tried not to moan at the memory of her doing that last night as I begged her for more.

“That’s what you think,” I said, zipping my jeans and then brushing my hair with some water to style it. I didn’t think anyone was going to be at the school to see me drop off Echo to get her car, but I didn’t want to take a chance, so I ended up cramming a baseball cap on my head and wearing the most aggressive sunglasses I had. So much for styling my hair.

“You look like a celebrity trying to avoid detection as you get your morning coffee,” Echo said when she saw my ensemble.

“Do you want anyone to know about this? Because I don’t. Can you imagine?” I shuddered to think about it. I didn’t need my cheer squad to know about my sex life, thank you very much.

“Fair enough,” she said with a sigh. We both got into my car and I burned rubber to get her to the school.

“I’ll see you later, bye,” I said, almost shoving her out the door.

“No kiss?” she asked, and then pouted. “I gave you a kiss last night when you wanted one.”

My eyes darted around to make sure that no one was going to see us. It was a school day and the parking lot was full. At any moment, the bell could ring and students from my squad could walk outside and see us.

“If I kiss you, will you leave?” I whispered, as if someone was listening in.

“Yup,” she said, puckering.

“Fine,” I leaned forward and gave her a peck and she sat back with a frown.

“That wasn’t good enough.”

“Oh my god, Echo, this is ridiculous, we’re going to get caught.”

“Kiss me like you mean it and I’ll go.”

This time I pressed my lips against hers like I had last night, and added tongue for good measure. Her mouth opened and, after a few seconds, I forgot that we were in the Corsica High School parking lot. I was just Kiri, making out with Echo, the hottest girl I’d ever seen.

Echo pulled away first and my vision swam. Blurry again.

“That’s more like it,” she said, tapping my nose with one finger. “I’ll see you later, Kiri.”

She got out of my car and I sat there for a second getting myself under control. She drove away before I did, but eventually, I put my car into drive and headed back home to pack for Nationals.

The team dinner at the VFW hall was so much fun that I couldn’t stop laughing until I cried. And then I got emotional and cried. It was a mélange of emotions.

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Dom had made a slideshow of some of our sillier moments and goofy videos and it all was almost too much for me. I had so much riding on my shoulders this year. The team had been used to winning, and then I'd come and had sunk the ship for a few years, but I guess I was making up for it now. We needed to do well. I needed them to do well, or else I didn't know how much longer I could coach them in good conscience.

The cheer parents were amazing, and I gorged myself on spaghetti and was a good sport when I got a little roasted by some of the kids. It was all in good fun. Cam even came and made a little speech about the spirit of the Tigers and I definitely cried about that. She didn't get to come with us to Orlando, but I wished she could have.

"What happened to you last night?" Dom asked, his tone one of innocent concern, but I knew the truth.

"Nothing," I said, slapping another piece of cake on my plate for dessert. Carbs. I needed carbs.

"You did something, and I'm going to find out what it is tomorrow. You're stuck with me on a bus and then a plane." Ugh, I didn't want to think about that. Too stressful. Herding all these teens onto a plane was going to make me lose it, even though I had help. I had my anxiety meds on standby.

"I'm not going to ask you right now, so you can have until tomorrow to come up with your story." He grinned at me and went to sit back at the table.

Great. I hoped he wouldn't judge me too harshly for my night with Echo. Honestly, I

didn't care if he did. It was awesome, and I wasn't sorry about it.

Echo texted me later that night.

How was your party?

I bit my lip to keep from smiling, even though no one could see me but the cats.

Good. I ate my weight in spaghetti and meatballs, as one does. You?

It was nice. My kids are pumped. I hope you're ready, she said.

I am ready. Ready to kick your asses.

BRING IT, she said, and I laughed.

We messaged back and forth about silly things, our favorite gay movies, whether or not ravioli is a sandwich, our best birthday presents ever. The conversation meandered around and found myself telling her things that I would only tell my parents or my very closest friends. Echo was easy to talk to, when I wasn't intent on hating or being annoyed by her. The talk went well into the night and I realized that I needed to get some sleep. I also needed to pack.

I guess I'll see you in Orlando, I said. That was strange to think about. In less than five days, it would all be over and I'd have to see what was going to happen with Echo going forward. So much of what happened in the next days would determine which path we'd take. I hated not knowing what the future held. Hated it.

Have a safe flight, Kiri.

Even though I'd tried to sleep, I hadn't, and I was tired as I stood on the bus and

called out everyone's names to make sure they were present, and made sure all the chaperones were accounted for as well. It was a full house, and I got things a little fired up as we headed out, and the parents not coming with us waved and honked and cheered in the parking lot. Even Mack and her mom were with us for support; Mack's cast signed by the whole team in red and blue.

It wasn't until we were underway that Dom came and sat next to me in the front seat. I was going to let the parents manage to strike fear into the hearts of the teenagers for now. If things got rowdy, I could always crack the whip.

"What did you do the other night." It wasn't a question, more of an accusation.

"Listen, Dominic," I said, using his full name that he hated, "you're not my dad, and I'm not accountable to you. I can do what I want. I'm an adult, you know."

Our eyes met and he sighed and looked at the ceiling of the bus.

"You're right, you're right. I shouldn't meddle. Heath says it's one of my biggest flaws." That was true.

I put my arms around him. "Sometimes it's good when you meddle. And I may have made a bad decision, but it was kind of inevitable." Echo sure felt inevitable when we were together.

"Okay, I just have one question," he said, his eyes twinkling, "was it good?"

"It was so good," I said, shivering with the memories.

"You should see the look on your face right now," he said.

"What do you mean?" I felt pretty safe having this conversation under cover of the

bus noise. The teens were wild and the bus was none too quiet as it rumbled over the potholes on the Maine roads.

“You look like you’ve been fucked just right.” He only mouthed the word at me.

I touched my face. “Is it that obvious?”

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“Just to someone who really really knows you. You’re fine. I’m sure everyone else will just chalk it up to excitement about traveling.”

Good. I was usually a nervous flyer, but I was too worn out from all the sex to get too worked up. I probably should have gotten some more sleep last night, but I hoped that I could catch a few hours on the plane. We were flying out of Portland on a direct flight, which was a blessing. I couldn’t imagine trying to get this entire crew through an airport to rush and make a connecting flight.

The Bulldogs had flown out earlier than us, since the airport in Portland was so small that they couldn’t accommodate two entire cheer teams on one flight.

I wondered where Echo was in the sky, and if she would let me know when she landed. I wondered what it was going to be like to see her after everything.

We got on the plane with no incident, even though the kids were totally hyped up. They got a lot of nasty looks from some older travelers, but at least they knew not to take their fucking shoes off and wander up and down the aisles like some people.

The flight went well, and Dom took charge of them so I could catch some makeup sleep.

I had a text from Echo when we landed that she was in the hotel and the team had gotten here safely. If I said I hadn’t breathed a sigh of relief, I would have been lying.

“Stop sexting,” Dom said in my ear.

“I’m not,” I said, but maybe I would be later when I was alone in my room. Somehow both Dom and I had gotten our own rooms, free of cheerleaders. I wasn’t going to have much time to enjoy it because the second we got to the hotel near the conference center, my nerves kicked in.

“I’m freaking out a little bit,” I said to Dom as we checked everyone into the hotel and distributed room keys, and we registered for the competition.

“You’re going to be fine,” he said. “We’ve got this. I’ve been here before, even if you haven’t. I’ll show you the ropes.”

I nodded, but the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach didn’t go anywhere. It just kept getting worse as I sent the kids to their rooms to drop off their bags and then made them convene in an empty ballroom to do run through of the routine, with music, without stunts. I wanted to keep it so fresh in their mind that they didn’t even have to think about the counts and their muscle memory would take over.

After a few jitters, we had a good practice and went to dinner. The hotel was crammed with dozens and dozens of cheerleaders. It made me miss my youth a little bit, but also I was happy that my kids got to be part of this. They didn’t know how lucky they were.

Dinner was organized chaos, and it was a full-time job just keeping track and making sure we had everyone. This was when those matching outfits would have come in handy. Each team member did have a Corsica High jacket, but they weren’t wearing them inside in Florida.

“Next year,” I said to Dom as I wolfed down my second slice of pizza, “we’re getting multiple matching outfits.” We had one set that had finally come in for tomorrow, but that was it. I still needed to distribute them since I didn’t trust the team to remember to pack them. I’d flown down here with an entire bin full of backup shit including

poms and uniforms and bows. Our team didn't even use poms in the routine (they could be hazardous), but I'd brought them for the parents to wave in the audience.

"Speaking of matching outfits," Dom said, using his drink to motion to the entrance to the restaurant, "here come the Bulldogs."

I turned and looked over my shoulder. There she was, with her squad. They had their matching outfits and practice bows. Yes, they had special bows just for practice. That was another item I wanted to add to my list to get for my squad.

Echo seemed to be searching for something or someone and our eyes locked after a few seconds. I inhaled sharply, and a rush of warmth suffused my body. I felt my face going red.

"You're blushing," Dom sang. We were at a table by ourselves, thanks to some miracle, so we could talk relatively freely. The kids and the parents were all buzzing and laughing together.

"Shut up," I said, shoving him, but he didn't move.

"Just don't do anything bad, again. Gotta stay focused."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I'm the head coach, remember? That's my line."

"I wouldn't have to coach you right now if you hadn't slept with the enemy."

I groaned and finished my pizza. "Listen, let's not talk about that, or her. It's all about them." I looked at my squad. My goofy, amazing, annoying, silly, talented squad. They'd all put their complete hearts into this season and I wasn't going to let them down.

I stood up and walked to the center of the tables they'd pushed together and sat down in an empty chair.

"Hey, Tigers? Can we take a minute and do grateful?" Everyone said their gratefuls and then it came around to me.

"I'm grateful for all of you, I'm grateful for second chances, and I'm grateful for my three cats that I miss very, very much." Katie and Penny were cat sitting and kept sending me periodic videos and pictures so I could make sure my babies were okay.

There were laughs about my cats and then one of the teens asked if they could go to the pool. I'd told them to bring their bathing suits just in case.

"You can go to the pool as long as people are willing to supervise," I said. More than a few of the chaperones said they would, and I knew that I was going to send them thank you baskets when we got back for being so cool about everything.

"Okay, pool time!"

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I wanted to swim, but I didn't want to drown in a hotel pool full of thrashing and overexcited teenagers, so I sat on the edge and tried to read a book as Dom texted with Heath.

"Any news on the baby front?" I asked.

"Still waiting. The due date is in two weeks, so we're hoping she won't go while I'm here, but if I have to, I will get on a plane and Heath will meet me there."

I reached out and squeezed his hand.

"Let's hope it's after Nationals, but if you have to go, you have to go. I'll handle this." I waved my hand in the direction of my squad, who were having chicken fights in the pool.

"We both know that's not true, so I'm going to hope she doesn't go early," he said.

I let the squad have a little more pool time and then herded them all upstairs for showers and bed. Tomorrow they'd get up early and prep for prelims, which weren't happening for our division until tomorrow afternoon.

When we'd registered, I'd gotten our warm-up and competition time and I wished it was sooner in the day, so they wouldn't have to sit with the jitters for hours, but no such luck.

I made sure all the chaperones were set and then went to my room and shut the door. Blissful silence. If I wasn't so nervous, I would enjoy this a whole lot more. If I were

just a regular guest, I would have ordered room service and watched a terrible movie.

Actually, there was nothing that said I couldn't do that, so I picked up a menu and started scanning it when there was a knock at my door.

I looked through the peephole and found Dom.

"Hey, just checking on you. I'm going to bed. I'll knock on the door in the morning just in case," he said.

"Thanks, that would be great."

We hugged and he headed to bed, but I did one last room check before I went back to my room and ordered some food and flipped on the TV. The food came pretty fast and I wrapped myself in a fluffy robe as I lay on the bed and tried to pick which bad movie I was more in the mood for.

If I let myself think too much, I'd go off the deep end of anxiety and spiral and then I'd be no good to anyone. I took one of my pills, just in case, and left another one out on my nightstand in case I needed it in the middle of the night.

I was tired, but sleep wasn't going to happen, unless I literally took a sleeping pill, but that could make me hard to wake tomorrow, and I didn't want to risk it. Maybe I should have roomed with someone else. At least there would be someone to talk to, to distract me from all the stress.

The calm I'd had the past few days had given way to the storm, and I couldn't settle down. I got up and paced around the room, flicking through channels, not pausing long enough to even know what the show was before moving on to the next option. I couldn't go on my phone, because there were just messages of good luck and too much cheer stuff that only made things worse.

I was about to break down and call Dom to come and hang out with me when there was a knock on my door. A soft knock, followed by a new message on my phone.

I'm outside.

I opened the door and she slipped in, looking up and down the hallway to make sure that no one had seen her. I closed and locked the door, just in case.

"What are you doing here?" I whispered. She wore a pair of black yoga pants and a loose tank that did all kinds of favors for her figure. I couldn't take my eyes off her. Why was she allowed to be so hot?

"Why are you whispering?" she said at a normal volume.

"Because you're not supposed to be here, Echo. What if someone sees you? How are we going to explain that?"

"I've never gotten caught sneaking into your room before," she pointed out, which was fair, but we had a lot more at stake now if we got caught. At camp, if she'd gotten caught in my room, the first assumption wouldn't be that we were hooking up, and we planned to say that we were just hanging out and the adults probably would have believed us. Sometimes being assumed heterosexual came in handy.

That wouldn't work now. We were both out, really out. My entire team knew both their coaches were gay. Their parents knew. The article that had come out a few weeks ago had talked about it.

"What are you doing here?" I asked again.

"I wanted to see you," she said, walking into the room and turning around to face me.

“You did?”

She nodded and flopped on my bed, spreading her arms out and sighing happily.

“Yeah, I did. Are you nervous?”

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I took a few steps toward the bed. I knew what would happen if I joined her. It crackled in the air, making me tremble.

“I don’t think we should talk about the competition right now,” I said.

She rolled onto her side and looked up at me, a sultry smile on her face.

“What should we talk about, Kiri?”

I slid the robe from my shoulders. “I don’t think we should talk at all.”

Echo sat up and pulled her shirt over her head. She had a bra on, but she made quick work of discarding it.

“I was hoping you’d say that. The only thing that gets my mind off competition is sex, and well, I haven’t had you here the past few years and it was horrible. Get over here.”

We crashed together on the bed, and it was a struggle to get naked again, but this time we knew that there was a time limit, so we got down to business.

“Fuck, you’re so hot,” I said, running my hands up and down her body. “We’re going to have to make this quick. I have to do a room check soon.”

“Then we’ll make it quick,” she said, shoving me down and straddling me, placing a hot kiss on my mouth and sliding her hand down my stomach. I didn’t see why we couldn’t get two things done at once, so I took one hand from where I’d fisted it in

her hair and squeezed her ass before sliding it between us.

We stroked each other and I plunged my fingers inside her as she did the same to me and the sensations were enough to make me want to cry. Echo and I moaned into each other's mouths and stroked and thrust, getting faster and more frenzied.

"More, I'm close," she said.

"Me too," I gasped, and then I felt the contractions with my fingers and that set off my own orgasm. I moved my hand and she ground her hips into me, drawing out the pleasure with each other until she lay on me, panting in my ear.

"Thank you," she said, rolling onto her back and smiling at me. "That was great."

"You're welcome? I mean, I got something out of it too." I flopped onto my stomach and stared at her for a few moments.

"I seriously wish we could just fuck all night, but that's definitely a bad idea. I'm going to go back to my room. Okay?" It made sense. The longer she stayed with me, the bigger the chance that we'd wind up getting caught by someone.

"Yeah, fine," I said, still unable to think clearly through the sex haze.

"Sorry, I wish I could stay. Good luck at prelims tomorrow. You're going to do great, but my team will do greater." She kissed me on the cheek and got dressed almost as fast as she'd gotten undressed. Echo listened at the door and stared out the peephole for a long time before opening the door and sticking her head out into the hallway.

"Bye," she whispered, before scampering away, and I was left naked on my bed and wishing she could have stayed longer.

Thirteen

Somehow I eventually got to sleep, but the call of my alarm, and Dom's knock on the door, came too early. The sex with Echo had helped take my mind off things enough to let my body rest, so I sent her a message to thank her.

You're welcome, baby.

Breakfast was a nightmare as I had to encourage a bunch of teens with nervous stomachs that they had to eat something to fuel them through the day. I passed out almond butter packets to the ones who were refusing to eat anything, just so they'd have something to burn for fuel. From then on it was a rush next door to the convention hall where the competition would take place. Prelims were held indoors, but the Finals would be outside under the Florida sun, if we qualified.

There were dozens upon dozens of squads, and I had to admit, they looked far more professional. I had done my research and knew who was probably going to end up qualifying in the top ten spots for Finals. Our division had over thirty teams in it, so we had to wait a while for our time on the warm-up mats.

Some of my kids had never been to Nationals and trying to get them to focus on me and not the chaos around them was a challenge. I didn't know when Echo's team had warmups, and I hated that I wondered if I was going to see her before we got to perform.

"Okay, let's do this quick. I want to do tumbling, stunts, and pyramid." There was no point in going over the cheer or the dance, or the other little transitions, since we

wouldn't need the mat for those.

I counted out the stunts and it was not going well. Everything was going down, and I could see the nerves getting the best of them.

"Okay, take a minute," I said after the fourth fall. At least everything was getting caught. The flyers just weren't confident in their abilities.

"We've got this. Come on. I would not have brought you down here if I didn't think you could do this. Remember New Englands? Just do what you did there and I will be happy. Don't do this performance for me. Do it for yourself. Do your absolute best, that's all I ask. Energy eleven."

I made eye contact with each and every one of them and smiled.

"You've got this, Tigers. Let's go."

We broke and started over, this time everything was hitting and then I moved on to the tumbling, and then we ran the pyramid once, making tiny tweaks.

A woman with a lanyard and a t-shirt with the competition's logo on it came to tell me that our mat time was up, and that we were going on fifth.

I gathered the squad in the hallway and told them we were going fifth.

"This is good. You want to go near the beginning, or near the end. In the beginning, you get to set the tone for the other squads. If you're in the middle, you get lost in everything else. This is good." I rubbed the quarter in my pocket. I had every single piece of lucky jewelry on my fingers, wrists, and ears. The jingle of metal when I moved was strangely comforting to my ears.

Dom and I herded the kids to the dressing area to get their uniforms on. Then it was touch ups on hair and makeup, making sure we had all wrists and knees and ankles taped that needed to be taped for support, making sure shoes were tied and securely on feet, and keeping them occupied.

We didn't go backstage until we were third in line to perform. I was doing my best not to panic, but I kept clutching onto Dom.

"Don't look now, but Echo's team is going on two after us," he said.

I turned around and looked. There she was, all dolled up and looking so sexy. We made eye contact and she winked at me. I winked back and hoped that no one saw me.

The backstage area did have a few mats so the cheerleaders could stretch and a few could do last-minute tumbling practice. I told them not to do too much because I didn't need an injury while they were all jumpy and nervous.

They could barely hear me over the other team's music, and I had to keep them together but, too soon, it was our turn. I gathered them all in a huddle.

"You've got this. I love you all. Have the best time. Do your best. Make yourselves proud. I'm already proud of you. Be there for each other. Soak it in. You will remember this moment for the rest of your lives. Energy eleven." I could close my eyes and remember being on the mat myself. It was one of the best feelings in the world, hitting your routine, smiling at the crowd and drawing on their energy. The best fucking thing in the world.

We did our group cheer and I hugged every single one of them before leaving them in the back and running to the front of the stage where the coaches were supposed to stand and watch. Dom grabbed my hand and held it so hard that I thought he was

going to break my fingers.

Our little area was right next to the stage, but we were down in a pit, so the stage floor was level with my chest. Not ideal, but I could still support from the sidelines. Our parents and supporters were in the audience and the announcer called out “Performing next, the Tigers of Corsica High School!”

My entire body shook violently, and my heart pounded so loud, I was sure everyone could hear it. My cheerleaders took their places, and then there was that moment of silence before the music came on. I rubbed the coin in my pocket five times and let out a shaky breath.

The music started, and I screamed and cheered and jumped up and down and lost my mind and my voice as I did my best to support them with my energy. When the first stunts hit, I took a breath. When the second stunts hit and I saw the looks on their faces, I knew it. They had it.

“Corsica Tigers, the red and the blue, you’d better watch out, we’re coming after you!” I screamed the cheer along with them and held my breath for every stunt, and even though there was a tiny wobble in the pyramid, I breathed a sigh of relief when it was over. The dance came at the end of the routine, and they fucking nailed it. They hit, they hit, THEY HIT.

Dom picked me up and we screamed as the team screamed and jumped up and down and some collapsed to the floor after the music ended.

Dom and I ran backstage and there were tears and hugs and I realized I had probably done permanent damage to my vocal chords, but I didn’t give a flying fuck.

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“I could not be more proud of you, every single one of you.” There were more sweaty hugs and then I herded them backstage and then to the front to see their parents and supporters.

Now we just had to wait. They’d done all they could.

I joined them in the stands and hugged everyone all over again.

“All the other teams have had one fall,” one of the moms told me. She was my favorite because she knew enough about cheer to add up deductions. Each fall, each bobble, each failed tumbling pass was a different deduction. She could watch a routine and add them up and give me a range she thought that the routine might be in.

“How did Heartwood do?” I asked, and a few of the parents shared looks. We’d been backstage still when they’d gone on and hadn’t come out until after they were done.

“Two falls. One stunt and one tumbling pass.”

Wow.

“Did the flyer hit the mat?” I asked.

“No.”

That was good. A flyer hitting the mat was pretty much the biggest deduction of all. The judges were a little more lenient on tumbling, but it still wasn’t good to have a tumbler fall.

I made eye contact with Dom.

“What do you think?” I asked him.

“I didn’t see it, so I can’t compare, but I think if they had two deductions then . . .”

We were probably going to beat them. That had been my goal this whole damn time, but there was a miniscule part of me that felt bad for Echo’s squad. Having an off day was expected, but the worst time to have an off day was when it counted. Her kids were probably devastated.

The team and I had to wait hours until the scores were announced, so the only options were staying and watching all the other teams, or go to one of the holding areas. I didn’t want them to get all in their heads about their performance compared to other squads, so I gathered them up and headed back to one of the spare rooms.

Some of the parents had gone out and bought snacks, so I made them eat, and then Dom pushed a protein bar into my hand.

“You haven’t eaten all day.”

“That’s not true,” I told him, but I took the bar. “I had an almond butter packet this morning.”

My body still vibrated like a tuning fork. Too much adrenaline. It wasn’t going to be until later tonight that I had a huge energy crash and would probably sleep for like ten hours straight. I’d done the same thing at New Englands.

Dom stood over me and watched me eat the bar and then I made him eat one, along with drink some water.

It seemed like we had to wait hours and hours for us to be directed to go back to the auditorium.

I wondered where Echo was. How she was feeling. What she was doing. I had the feeling that she was back in the stands, watching all the other teams. That seemed like what she would do.

The squad kept themselves entertained by making silly videos and posting them online, taking pictures, and playing games. They were still on the high of performing so well. Honestly, the results didn't even matter. They'd done their best and the rest was out of their hands.

I paced the floor and typed out a text to Echo for lack of anything better to do with my time.

How did you do?

Her response was almost instant.

One tumbling fall, one stunt fall. It's fine. They'll be fine.

I knew it wasn't fine.

I'm sorry, that sucks. I didn't know why I was comforting her, but it seemed like the right thing to do. A few days ago, I probably would have gloated, but that seemed mean to kick her while she was down.

You're going to beat us. I'm not happy about it.

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I didn't expect her to be.

I'm sorry? And you don't know that. Judges are human, after all.

I know you did well, Kiri. You don't have to comfort me. I don't deserve it.

No, she didn't, but I was doing it anyway.

Come over later. Like, very later.

She didn't answer, and that stressed me out. I could feel her upset through the messages. Maybe this wasn't the right time, but I couldn't help the urge to be nice to her.

The sex had changed things between us, and I'd gotten myself into a pickle. This wasn't the right time to try and sort everything out. We'd have to wait until we got back, but I hoped she would come over tonight and I could see how she was and hear about everything.

At long last, we were called back to the floor and all thirty squads somehow each crammed onto the mat. They were going to call out the top ten squads, and then everyone else would be required to leave the floor. Then the top ten would stay on the mat and they'd announce who got what place, one by one, until the top spot. The scores for today would be thrown out, and tomorrow the top ten teams would get a fresh slate to perform with.

I herded my kids into the back and went out to the front to wait. I wanted to be

realistic, but I also wanted to leave room for hope of a miracle. It could happen, right? Something amazing could happen.

Dom and I waited in the stands with the parents, all holding hands and holding our collective breaths as each team was announced. I watched my kids and my heart broke when the last top ten team was announced and it wasn't us. The Heartwood Bulldogs didn't make it either.

Even though they knew it was a long shot, they were still crushed, and I had to hug and comfort for a while, along with all the coaches of the other losing teams.

"Listen, you did your absolute best. You couldn't have done anything else. You did Corsica proud, and now you get to go to Disney." That made them smile a little, but it would take some time for those broken hearts to heal. Everything feels like the end of the world when you're a teenager in high school. I knew, I'd been there, and those memories still stung.

Everyone gathered their things and we went back to the hotel. The top ten teams would be up late tonight, practicing and perfecting for the performance tomorrow. I wanted to go watch, but I didn't think a whole lot of my squad did. Dom and I were splitting up and he would take one group to the pool and I'd take the ones that wanted to watch to the stadium.

I made them all eat when we got to the hotel, since they hadn't eaten for much of the day. I had my first full meal, and I definitely planned on late night room service again.

"You good?" Dom asked me.

"I mean, sure, I'm disappointed. I can't not be. But I didn't think we'd make it. I'm interested to see the teams tomorrow. Maybe I can get some inspiration for next

year.”

“I texted Cam about everything. She wants the video as soon as you have it.” There were strict rules about video at competitions, but one of our parents had snuck in her phone and taken video. As long as no one posted it online, we wouldn’t get in trouble.

“Cool.”

The cheerleaders were crashing from the intensity of the day, so I herded them all upstairs to their rooms. Off came the cheer makeup, the ponytails were taken down, the uniforms tossed back into suitcases.

It was over.

There was always a letdown after a competition, and I was feeling it hard. It was an aching feeling, a relative of loneliness. A feeling of what now?

I checked all the rooms and made sure everyone was headed to bed before going back to my room. Dom was hanging out and watching TV with me and we talked about the performance and the day and reviewed our score sheet. Being around so many other cheerleaders always inspired me, and seeing other routines gave me ideas for things I could do with the squad, so we went over a few things we’d seen.

“We really need a tumbling coach,” Dom said. “That’s honestly where we’re weakest.” It was true. There was no way we could ever hope to move up without some serious work on tumbling, which would take years. Standing fulls were not built in a day.

“We need to get a more robust feeder program going, too.” When you started kids out at three and four and five teaching them skills, by the time they were in high school

they were already on another level than kids who started when they were teenagers. That's why it took so long to make a program successful.

"We'll get there again, K. We will." Dom sighed and closed his eyes.

"I'm so damn tired. If I don't go now, I'm going to fall asleep." I stood up and grabbed his arm, helping him get to his feet as he yawned.

Dom got out the door and I watched to make sure he made it back to his room, which was next to mine.

Then I was alone and I was so bone weary that I couldn't even think. Somehow, I mustered the strength to order room service and put the robe back on.

The knock came at the door and I got up to let the room service person in, but found Echo.

"Hey," she said, her voice limp. Her mouth was turned down and her eyes were red.

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“Come in,” I said, stepping aside and looking up and down the hallway to make sure that no one was watching her come into my room.

I shut the door and she stumbled over to the bed and fell facedown on it.

“You gonna be okay over there?” I asked, not sure what to do. Echo flipped onto her back and sniffed.

“I’m fine.”

I’d never seen her cry before, and I wasn’t sure what to do about it. This was new territory.

As I tried to figure out what to say to her, there was another knock. Room service.

I let the guy in and gave him a tip. He seemed tired and did not give a fuck that Echo was in my room. I mean, really, he had no idea what the situation was.

“Do you want something to eat?” I asked, pushing the tray over to the bed.

Echo sat up and wiped her eyes with her hands.

“What did you get?”

“Fries and a grilled cheese sandwich and cake and chips and guac.” She raised her eyebrows as I listed everything off.

“I was hungry,” I said, and handed her a cloth napkin.

“Do you have any ketchup?” she said, reaching for a few fries. I handed her the bottle and she banged on the bottom to get it out on one side of the plate.

The grilled cheese sandwich was cut in two diagonally and I picked up one half.

“Do you want half my grilled cheese?” I held it out to her and for the first time since she came in, she smiled a little.

“Yeah, thanks.” She took it from me and dunked that in the ketchup, much to my horror.

“What are you doing?”

“Eating my grilled cheese. You should try it.” She chomped down on the sandwich and I grimaced. No way. Ketchup did not belong with grilled cheese.

Echo and I ate, and she grabbed the remote and put the TV on. She flipped through until she found an old show that I had seen a million times before. It was one of my comfort shows that I watched when I needed something that made me feel good. Guess it was one of Echo’s comfort shows too.

We ate and watched and I kept stealing glances at her to see how she was doing. She’d stopped crying, but she didn’t seem to want to talk, so I let her be silent. It didn’t matter as much if she got caught here now. I guess I’d stopped caring so much. Besides, we weren’t doing anything bad right now. Just sitting and eating and doing nothing.

“What was your score?” she asked. Dom and I had gotten our sheets back, along with comments from the judges. I was going to use them to build next year’s routines.

I told her. She shook her head and smiled.

“You bitch, you beat us.”

“We did?” I hadn’t even been thinking about it. Somehow, in the midst of everything, I’d forgotten about my own vendetta. Guess I wasn’t very good at vendettas.

“Yeah, you did.”

Laughing, I jumped up on the bed.

“Fuck yeah, in your face, Echo! Now who’s gloating?” I jumped up and down and laughed while she watched me, her eyes narrowed, but she started laughing when I did a ridiculous dance that involved a lot of hip action.

“What are you even doing right now?” she asked.

“My victory dance. I knew it, we won, you lost, we won.” I posed dramatically.

“You’re fucking ridiculous.”

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“Yeah, a ridiculouswinnerrrrrrr,” I sang, still dancing on the bed.

“You’re going to be completely insufferable forever, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Yup. Never going to let you forget it.”

I flopped back down on the bed because I was out of breath from the jumping. I crouched on my knees and approached Echo and got right in her face.

“We wonnnnnnn,” I said, and she cracked another smile.

“You’re such a pain in the ass.”

“A little ass pain never hurt anyone.” I stared deep into her eyes and tried not to blink. Hers were so pretty.

Echo was the first to close her eyes, but it was to kiss me, and I kissed her back. The food was forgotten as we lay back on the bed together, kissing and touching each other. This time, we were unhurried. I wondered what it would be like to have uninterrupted time with her, to touch and explore. All of our moments had been with a specter hanging over us. A time limit. What would it be like with all those barriers gone?

She broke the kiss.

“What are you thinking about? I can tell you’re thinking about something.” My fingers drifted through her hair. She’d worn it down and it was perfect.

“I was just thinking about what it could be like, without worrying about being caught. That’s all we’ve ever been, these little hookups.” Would we even have anything if the thrill of doing something bad was no longer a factor?

“Do you want more?”

“It depends on if it’s what you want.”

Echo snorted. “I asked you first.”

“I mean . . . yes? I think we could try it. See how things go. I just worry about getting my heart broken, as silly as that sounds.”

She stroked the side of my face.

“That’s not silly at all. I’m scared of the same thing. But we won’t know if we don’t try, right? No risk, no reward.” She was right. I was always telling my cheerleaders that they needed to go for it, and here I was, not taking my own advice.

“So you want to? To give it a try? Put everything behind us and be my girl?” I made a face at the last part. “Sorry, that sounded better in my head. You will learn this, I am not as smooth as I would like to be.”

I wasn’t smooth at all, but I didn’t need her to know that just yet.

“I think you’re pretty smooth sometimes, Kiri. You’ve got a lot going on,” she said.

I didn’t know about that, but the compliment made me blush.

“You should probably get back to your room. Loser.” I added the last part and she smacked me on the ass.

“Is that supposed to be a punishment? Because it’s definitely not.” I rolled onto my stomach. “Do it again.”

Echo groaned and stood up.

“I’m not going to spank you because that’s the only way you’ll learn. It’s for your own good.” I looked up at her and pouted.

“Meanie.”

She leaned down and gave me a hot kiss before standing back up.

“The meanest.”

Fourteen

The next day at breakfast, I let the team know that they beat the Heartwood Bulldogs and they were ecstatic. Ironically, the Heartwood cheerleaders walked in only a few moments later to line up at the omelet station and waffle bar. Echo pretended to ignore me, but it was really obvious. I stared at her over the rim of my latte.

“I don’t know if I can handle the sexual tension in this room right now,” Dom said, looking at me.

“Don’t be gross,” I said. “There are children present.”

“Then stop looking at her like that.”

I couldn’t.

Echo also got in line for an omelet and I glanced at Dom. “I’m trying. There’s . . . a lot going on. We have a lot to chat about when we’re alone.”

Dom raised his eyebrows.

“I can’t wait to hear about it.”

I couldn’t wait to tell Katie and Penny that they didn’t need to bother setting me up with the girl in their book club. I had found my own girl and we were going to give it a shot. Everything would probably blow up in my face but, for right now, there was hope and promise and butterflies in my stomach.

After breakfast we split the squad up and I took those who wanted to watch the Finals with me. Their eyes got big when they saw the performances of the top ten teams and, I had to admit, so did mine. I made notes on stunts and transitions and tumbling and music, and even bows.

One team had a base who got hit right in the face with the back of a flyer's head and her nose exploded with blood. The coaches rushed onto the mat and stopped the routine, and my stomach dropped for the coaches of that team. They were allowed time to clean up, reset, and do their routine again at the end and they nailed it. If I were judging, they would have been my winning team.

During the awards, all the teams came on the mat and the scores were announced in order from last place to first. Since all the squads had gotten their scores already, they could pretty much tell where they had placed once the announcer started listing the places and scores, but it was an unwritten rule that the winning squad couldn't celebrate until they had actually been announced as the winners.

As I suspected, the team that had the mishap with the base was the winner, and they totally deserved it. Everyone hoisted the injured team member up in the air and gave her the trophy. I wiped tears from my eyes and hoped no one was judging me. I always cried when teams won, even if they weren't mine. Seeing the absolute joy on the cheerleader's faces got to me.

I took the kids back to the hotel for lunch and decided I needed some time for myself. I checked with the chaperones and went up to my room and filled the bathtub and dropped in a bath bomb I'd brought with me specifically for this purpose. I hadn't known if I was going to be able to use it, but I was seizing my moment.

Before I got into the tub, I ordered some more room service. I had racked up quite a bill, but I didn't care.

The room service arrived: chocolate mousse and strawberries and ginger ale because I didn't think it would be responsible to drink on this trip. But I'd had them put the ginger ale in a fancy glass, so it was almost like champagne.

I slid into the tub and rested my head on a rolled-up towel and just . . . let myself soak. I'd been going, going, going for weeks now, and it was nice to pause. If only I had my kitties on the side of the tub to yell at me to get out of the bad water, this would be perfect.

I ended up falling asleep in the tub, lulled by the warm water and soothing scents of the bath bomb. I woke up when the water started to chill, so I drained some and then filled the tub again and didn't get out until I was entirely pruny.

Not sure what else to do with myself, I got dressed in some casual clothes and texted Dom to see how everyone was doing. He said the kids were still in the pool and he was going to herd them to dinner soon.

I told him that I'd meet him downstairs and answered a few of my text messages. I had all kinds of things to get back to in Corsica on Monday that I was trying not to think about. So much work that I was putting off. It had been hard for me not to open up my emails and start answering them. I'd put on an out-of-office message, but that didn't stop people from messaging me and asking for projects with ridiculous deadlines that I would never agree to anyway.

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Dinner was fun and rowdy and I kind of wanted to get the kids back home to Corsica, because there was a lot of trouble they could get into in Orlando and I didn't want to be the one in charge of dealing with it.

I wasn't naïve, I knew that at least one of my kids had probably smuggled alcohol down here in their suitcase. I also knew that there were hookups happening as well, no matter how vigilant the chaperones were. I mean, I'd literally done it myself.

Tomorrow they headed to Disney and I'd made the decision that I wanted to hang around the hotel and maybe even get in the pool since it wouldn't be filled with teenagers. Maybe I'd sit in the sun and read a book or something.

What are you doing tomorrow?Echo asked me, just as I was pondering what to do the next day. As if she'd read my mind.

My kids are going to Disney and I'm staying here. What about you?

Interesting. I am also squadless. What a predicament.

Indeed.

What do you think we can get away with?I asked.

I looked up and felt my face going red, even though no one knew what I was texting about.

I have a lot of ideas, Kiri. A lot of ideas.

I slept in and got room service breakfast. I was going to die when I had to go home and cook for myself again. Having food at my beck and call was the ultimate luxury.

Was Echo a good cook? I had no idea, but I wanted to find out. I bet she was. She seemed like she would be.

She and I had come a long way since then. A long way in a short time.

After a shower, I dried my hair, styled it, and put on some shorts and a tank. I hadn't heard from Echo yet, so I texted her.

There was a knock on my door a few minutes later.

I opened it to find her grinning at me, her hair in a sloppy bun on the top of her head and her arms on display in a tank, paired with the cutest little yellow skirt I'd ever seen.

"You look amazing, wow," I said.

"So do you. I love your hair like this." She came in and I closed the door. "So, Kiri, what do you want to do with our day? Should we get naked now, or chat for a few minutes and then get naked?"

I picked up my bag and put it over my shoulder. "I think we should try and get to know each other with our clothes on. Wow, I cannot believe I just said that."

Echo leaned against the bed and then looked out the window. It faced the parking lot where there were still a few cheerleaders doing jumps and fooling around, even though the competition was over.

"You want to talk and get to know me, ugh, that sounds like the worst." She made a

face, but she was joking.

“Okay, fine, we can do that. Where do you want to go? What would you like to do?”

I grinned because I’d been waiting for her to ask me that exact question.

“You’ll find out.”

“This isn’t technically Disney,” I said as the car dropped us off, “but it’s still fun.”

We were at what people called Disney Springs, a place full of shops and restaurants and lots of places to walk, but no rides other than a merry-go-round. There was also a chocolate shop and bowling and live music.

“I don’t know about this,” she said, but I took her hand and started walking. I had to stop when she wasn’t walking with me. I got yanked back and looked at her in confusion.

“What are you doing?”

“Uh, holding your hand and taking you on a walk? Isn’t this what we’re supposed to be doing?”

Echo looked down at our linked hands and up at me, her mouth opening and closing a few times. I almost laughed at how stunned she looked.

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“Is that too much?” I tried to drop her hand, but she only gripped my fingers harder.

“No, this is exactly what we’re supposed to be doing.” This time she took a step and so did I and we walked together.

There were dozens of other couples and kids and families swarming the walkways, but I was only thinking about Echo.

“So, I have some questions,” I said.

“Should I be scared?” she asked.

“Maybe.” Her eyes went wide. “No, I’m kidding. I just thought we should actually get to know each other if we’re going to try this thing. What was your major in college?” I knew she’d gone, but that was about it.

“Kinesiology with a minor in biology.”

I nodded. “That makes exact sense.”

“What about you?”

“Journalism and graphic design.”

“That also makes sense.”

We had to squeeze together to get through the crowds, and I asked her if she wanted

to go into any of the shops. We strolled in and out, browsing, but not buying. There were samples to try in the chocolate shop, and I caved and bought a few items, including a frozen latte and chocolate chip cookies. Echo got hot coffee and I shuddered, imagining drinking something warm in this weather.

“Weirdo,” I said as I sipped my latte with relish.

There was some live music at one of the stages that we bopped to, and that started a whole different discussion about our favorite music, and we found a lot of common ground there, thankfully. She could drink hot coffee as long as she still liked Billie Eilish.

After walking around for a little while under the pounding Florida sun, we both realized that we’d forgotten to bring sunglasses and had to stop and get some. Echo looked good in literally everything she tried on, but she settled for a pair that looked vintage.

“You like?” she asked, posing and blowing me a kiss.

“Gorgeous.” I actually did kiss her then, and it was amazing. I’d missed this kind of thing so much, and I couldn’t stop smiling at her.

I settled on a pair of aviators that almost made Echo drag me into the bathroom to fool around, which I discouraged.

“I’m not getting banned from this place, Echo. We can do that back at the hotel,” I said.

“Fine, fine. I guess one of us has to be the responsible one.”

I made a face. “Ew, I don’t want to be responsible. Who wants to be that?”

“No one.”

I let Echo pick where we ate lunch, and she picked a restaurant right on the river that ran through the area.

“This is beautiful,” I said as we watched the boats go by with people on tours.

“You’re beautiful,” she said and then we both started laughing. “Sorry, that was really cheesy.”

“Cheese is literally one of my favorite things, so you’re in good company.”

I could not stop grinning at her and watching her hair catch the light and how she moved her hands when she talked.

I was falling and I didn’t know how to stop it, or even if I wanted to. I hadn’t been lying when I said I wanted to protect my heart, but was that even in my power? I could tell Echo right now that we weren’t going any further, we were just going to stop everything right now, and I was never going to speak to her again, but that wouldn’t stop me from feeling these things. These little tendrils that had taken root and started to grow under the warm Orlando sunlight.

We capped off lunch arguing about flared jeans and then spent the afternoon bowling, where she eviscerated me and was insufferable about it.

“I still beat you at Nationals,” I said as she did a little shimmy and victory dance like I had the day before on the bed in the hotel.

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“Still won at bowling. You still lost.” She pointed at me and did a moonwalk in her bowling shoes while I glared at her and willed my heart to beat a little bit slower.

Dom gave me updates and pictures of the kids on rides and I was so glad they got to have that time. Those memories were going to last for the rest of their lives, and even if they would be sad about losing, they’d have this day.

“What are you smiling about over there?” Echo asked me, leaning over my shoulder.

“Dom has been sending me pictures and videos. They’re all so cute, I’m going to miss them so much.” Even Mack got in on the action and rode all the non-water rides with her cast, her arms in the air and a joyful scream on her face.

“I know what you mean.” Echo sat back and sipped on her soda. We’d both agreed that drinking, even if we weren’t with our squads, was not a good idea. You never knew who was out and about and might catch a picture of you.

“I feel like we’ve been through so much, and now they’re just going to be gone and I might not hear from them again. We’re such a part of each other’s lives for such a short time and then it’s over. And it will never be the same.”

Echo set her drink down and scooted closer, putting her arm around me.

“It’s hard. It really is. But they’re not going to forget. I’ve seen you, Kiri. You’re a great coach and they adore you. You’re much nicer than I am.” I wasn’t sure if that was true.

I wiped a few stray tears. “Sorry. I try not to get emotional about it in front of other people.”

“It’s okay to have emotions, you know. You don’t have to hide them.”

I sniffed and she handed me a napkin.

“I know, I know.” I blew my nose and cleared my throat. “Okay, that was ridiculous. You ready to go?”

“Yeah, I’m ready. You want to go back to the hotel and hang in my room?” she asked.

“Sure.”

We held hands until we got into the car to take us back to the hotel.

“So maybe not the best to PDA in front of everyone. At least not until we figure out how we’re going to move forward. I don’t want to deal with fifty bazillion questions and speculations,” I said.

“Good point.” She unlinked her fingers from mine, and I tried not to feel the sense of loss that came with the removal of contact. Things would be different when we got back home. The two of us could go on dates and hang out and do whatever we wanted. I could meet her cat and her friends and see her apartment. I was beyond curious about her apartment.

“So, remember when I texted you that night that I wanted red wine and a massage?” she said as we sat at a red light in the back of the car. The driver hummed softly to himself.

“Yeah?” I said.

“Well, we can’t do the red wine, yet, but what do you think about getting massages in my room?”

“I think that sounds like one of the best ideas you’ve ever had.”

She grinned and rested back on the seat. “Good.”

“How in the hell did you get this room?” I asked when she opened the door of her room after swiping the key.

“I had some points, so I upgraded,” she said as I took in the palatial suite.

“This puts my room to shame.” I walked around the main living area with a couch and huge TV and balcony with a view of the pool, and then glanced into the bedroom with the absolutely massive bed and double the number of pillows that were on mine. She even had a little kitchen area with a microwave and fridge.

Echo called and booked the two massages and passed me a bottle of water.

“I can’t believe we have to leave tomorrow,” I said.

“Our flight isn’t until the afternoon. You?”

“Ours is at nine. Kill me.” My main job tonight would be harassing the team into packing all their shit, checking their rooms to make sure they had packed their shit, and then triple checking to make sure they had packed their shit. There would be no missed flights, not on my watch.

“That sucks, sorry,” she said. “It’s going to be so weird, going home. It ends so

abruptly. We're doing a party at one of the parent's houses on Friday night."

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“We’re having one too. My parents will use any occasion to have a potluck. It’s really sweet.”

“Back to reality,” Echo said with a sigh. “You ready for it?”

“Not really. I’ll have to wallow for about a week.” She sat down next to me on the bed.

“Need anyone to wallow with?”

I smiled. “I could wallow with you.”

“Can we wallow naked?”

“Oh, yes, nudity is definitely required for wallowing.”

We were interrupted by the arrival of the massage tables and massage therapists. They set us up next to each other and Echo and I went into the bathroom to put on robes.

She reached out and tweaked one of my nipples and I slapped her hand away.

“Not now, we can do that after they leave,” I whispered.

“I’ve never been so eager to get a massage over with,” she said.

Without further incident, we went back into the room and got our couples massage

and chatted with each other and the massage therapists as we got our bodies worked on. I think Echo's massage therapist had a crush on her, but mostly because she appreciated Echo's muscles. It was only fair, Echo's musculature should be appreciated.

Our plans of getting sexy after the massage were interrupted when we were both so drunk on the endorphins that we ended up taking a nap together instead.

By the time we woke up, I knew the team was going to be back soon, and I needed to make my way back to my neck of the hotel.

I got dressed slowly and tried not to feel sad that I wasn't going to get to see Echo again until we got back to Maine.

"What are you doing on Tuesday night?" I asked as she lounged on the bed, still in her robe.

"I don't know, do you have any ideas?"

"I was thinking we could go out to dinner. Maybe somewhere halfway between us?" That seemed like a fair compromise.

"Are you asking me on a date?"

"Yes, I am asking you on a date," I said.

She got up and skipped over and placed a kiss on my mouth. "Yes, I will go out with you, Kiri. Do you want to pick the place?"

I put my arms on her shoulders.

“No, you can pick. I don’t really care.”

“You have any food allergies?” she asked.

“Nope, I’m good. As long as there is something with cheese, I’m happy.”

She kissed me again. “I think we can accommodate that.”

I kissed her hard, almost as if it was the last time. We were being ridiculous, acting like we were separating for a thousand years instead of for a few days. Plus, we could always text each other.

“I’ll see you back in Maine,” I said, pressing my forehead to hers.

“Have a safe flight, baby.”

Fifteen

Someone pounded on my hotel door and I thought for a second there was a fire or an earthquake as I jolted out of sleep. It was four a.m. and I had been hoping to get a few more hours before I had to rouse the cheerleaders and chaperons and get them on a shuttle to the airport.

Somehow I stumbled to the door and got it open without hurting myself.

“Whaaa?” I said as Dom stood outside my door, fully dressed.

“The baby is coming. I have to get on a red eye flight. Heath is meeting me there. I have to go.” His eyes were wild and frantic, and that roused me into wakefulness.

He had to get to the airport, now.

“Okay, did you pack?” He looked at me as if I’d spoken another language. “Come on.”

I took him back to his room and started throwing shit in his suitcase. Even though I’d told him to pack the night before, he hadn’t. Whatever, it didn’t matter. I got everything I could find in his suitcase, made sure he had his wallet, called him a car and told him to get his ass downstairs.

“You’re having a baby!” I said, throwing my arms around him. “You’ve got this. Please update me on everything. I’ll handle the squad. Give Heath a hug for me.”

He still looked a little bewildered when I shoved him into a car that was set to take him to the airport.

Unable to get back to sleep, I paced around my room and double checked my suitcase and tried to watch TV until it was time to knock on all the cheerleader's doors and get them up and ready to go.

"Dom had to leave so you're stuck with me," I said as I took in the sleepy faces. They did not want to move, so I encouraged them to use the little coffee makers in their rooms and I would look the other way. That helped to pep them up a little and I also ran downstairs and got some bagels and handed those out.

Somehow, we all managed to get on the shuttle and to the airport with plenty of time to get everyone through security. I didn't breathe a sigh of relief until everyone was in their seats on the plane and we were taking off.

I did it.

The seat next to me was empty, since it was reserved for Dom, so I let myself stretch out and relax, putting up the arm rest and laying on my side to rest.

The next thing I knew, the flight attendant was shaking my shoulder and telling me that we were landing. I didn't know what it was about planes, but I always fell asleep, no matter what time the flight was.

Back to Maine, back to reality. The cheer season was over. I tried not to cry as I hugged all the kids and sent them back home when we got back to Corsica. Mack cried on my shoulder and I held her tight.

"I'm going to miss you all, and I know I speak for myself and Dom. You have all taught me more than I could ever teach you."

At least I waited until I was in my car to really break down. When I walked through the door, the kitties attacked me and I nuzzled their fur and put my face on their bellies and that helped me feel a little bit better.

“I missed you little assholes,” I said, rolling around on the floor with them. The three of them meowed and pawed at me and stuck to my side for the rest of the day. They liked to let me know I was never allowed to leave them again. I promised I wouldn’t, but I kept my fingers crossed behind my back. I had my girl’s night in Portland in two weeks, and then my vacation with Katie and Penny next month that I was very much looking forward to.

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Summer was here, and I was ready to work hard and play hard. Echo was definitely going to be part of that plan, and I wondered if she was on the plane right now. Her flight was due to land at eight, and then it would take her over an hour to get back to her apartment.

If I said I wasn't counting down the hours, I would have been lying. First, though, I had to get my laundry done and restock my fridge.

I was folding laundry when Dom messaged me that he had arrived, and had met Heath. They'd checked into their rental and then had gone right to the hospital. Labor was progressing, but they still had a while to wait.

I sent him good luck and hoped that it would work out. The second the ink on the paperwork was dry, Katie was ready to storm into their house and make a nursery happen in a few hours. I'd never seen her so excited about anything before.

Echo didn't reach out to me until later that night. I was off from my nap on the flight, so I wasn't tired, even though it was my normal bedtime. I'd been puttering around, waiting for her. I'd even started answering emails to pass the time.

Back home. Sad and lonely.

SameI said. Already missing the kids.

We lobbed texts back and forth for hours and there was that feeling in my chest again. That feeling of falling. I wanted to ignore it, but it was getting louder, as if someone had turned up the volume.

I feel asleep with my phone in my hand, right in the middle of writing a text.

A baby girl arrived the next morning, seven pounds, three ounces, twenty-one inches long, healthy, perfect. Heath and Dom had been in the delivery room and had both gotten to hold her just after she'd been born. The birth mother was on board with the adoption, but there was still time for her to change her mind.

We already love her so much, K. She's ours. I know she's ours.

They had her name picked out, Marissa Isabelle, and her birth mother had agreed to it. Now they had to wait two weeks and bond with their little baby and (hopefully) come back to Maine with her.

My emotions were so close to the surface that all the pictures Dom sent me made me cry all over again. I could barely concentrate on work, so I went for a long walk instead and watched comfort movies with the cats, and had a late lunch at The Trap and filled Lou in on what had gone down at Nationals.

"Any news on that girl you had your eye on?" Of course she asked me about Echo.

"Maybe," I said, stabbing a shrimp with my fork. Susie made a dynamite shrimp scampi that I ordered every time it was on the menu.

"And?" Lou asked.

"And we might be dating? I'm not even really sure. It's very murky right now. I'm supposed to see her for dinner tonight." Echo had picked the restaurant, an authentic Mexican place that was known for its bottomless margaritas and guacamole they made at the table in a real stone mortar.

"So it seems like you've let it go," she said with a smirk.

“I mean, there wasn’t much to let go. I built a grudge on something so small. But over the years it just kept growing and I don’t know. I’m bad at grudges, I guess.” I twirled some pasta with my fork, and succeeded at splattering sauce on my shirt. At least it wasn’t the shirt I planned on wearing for my date later.

“I think that’s a good quality to have. Some grudges are important, but some aren’t. They’re not worth wasting your time and energy on.”

“I guess.” I wiped my shirt off. “I feel like I still don’t know anything about her. We’ve barely spent any time together. I keep waiting for something bad to happen. For some awful secret to come out.”

“Maybe she doesn’t have an awful secret.”

“That’s what my mom would say. I don’t know.” There was no way to know if this thing with Echo was going to work if we didn’t try it. That was the hardest part.

“I have a good feeling about her, and my good feelings are never wrong,” Lou said, and then went to pour drinks for a couple who waited at the other end of the bar.

I’d never been more nervous for a date in my life. Not even my first date, which happened when I was fifteen. My parents had driven us to the movies and we’d been too shy to even hold hands.

Echo and I had agreed to meet at the restaurant and I was jumpy and shaky the whole drive. I was the first to arrive and spent the time waiting for her arranging my hair and making sure there were no stains on my shirt. I’d stacked my fingers with just about every ring I owned and I could barely bend my fingers, but the metal soothed me.

I was fiddling with my thumb rings when someone tapped on my window and I

almost died from shock. It was Echo, trying not to laugh at my shock.

“Don’t do that to someone,” I said as I hit the button to roll the window down.

“Sorry,” she said, but she was still holding in a laugh. “Do you need a minute?”

I narrowed my eyes and put the window back up and opened the door.

“No.”

Once I calmed down, I had a minute to appreciate her outfit. Holy shit, she was so fucking hot. Her hair was pulled back into a loose braid down her back and she wore this white gauzy dress thing like an escaped nymph. A nymph that enjoyed bodybuilding on the side.

“You look incredible, holy shit.” She did a little twirl and laughed.

“You look hot, Kiri. Seriously.” I’d decided to be daring with a button down that dipped really low, and had foregone a bra to show a little extra skin. My leather shorts hugged my ass and made me feel like a badass. Plus, they had pockets big enough for my phone.

“Thanks,” I said. Echo grinned at me and then pulled me close and stroked my face.

“You’re so sexy, I don’t even want to take you into that restaurant. I want to take you right to the backseat of my car,” she said in my ear, and then kissed me deeply. I stood there, completely under her spell as we made out against my car.

Echo made me feel like kissing was new, something I’d just discovered, and not a thing I’d been doing for years. She pulled away with a groan.

“I want to get you into bed, but I’m also starving.”

As if it heard what she said, my stomach rumbled.

“Sounds like I’m not the only one,” she said, taking my hand. “Come on.”

The restaurant smelled of hot peppers and freshly fried chips. We got seated and both agreed that we needed margaritas.

“Less than two weeks of school and I’ll be free for the summer,” Echo said, raising her frosty glass. I clinked it with mine, trying not to slop the frozen drink over the side. I’d have to be careful not to get wasted on this thing.

“Cheers to that,” I said. “What do you do when you’re not in school?”

“I do random catering jobs, like for weddings and stuff, and then I sell my dollhouse furniture and pick up odd jobs here and there. Sometimes I weed gardens. I like to be outside in the summers, and if I get paid while doing it? That’s even better.”

I found her completely fascinating. Way more fascinating than I was.

“When was your last relationship?” I asked as I chomped down on the complimentary chips and salsa.

Echo used a spoon to put just the right amount of salsa on a chip. “Uh, two years ago? It was brief. Just weren’t right for each other. You?”

I told her that my last date had been more than a year ago and my friends had been trying to set me up.

“Mine do that too, all the time. I can’t make them understand that just because someone else is a lesbian, doesn’t mean we’re meant to be together.” That sounded so familiar that I burst out laughing.

“My friends are all queer, but they do the same thing. Do your cheer parents try and

set you up?” I found myself leaning closer to her, as if I needed to be as near to her as possible without actually sitting on her lap.

“Oh my god, yes.”

The two of us commiserated about the horrors of being set up until our entrées came, and before I knew what had happened, we’d been talking for nearly three hours. Our server kept coming to ask if we needed anything else in an effort to turn the table over. Even though it was a Tuesday night, the place was packed.

“I think we’re getting the hint that we should take this somewhere else,” I said, leaning close to her. I was buzzed just enough from the margarita and her cheeks were pink from the alcohol.

“And where might that be?” she said.

“Your place? It’s only fair since you’ve seen mine.”

“Sounds great.”

I agreed to follow her to her house, but she’d also given me the address in case I lost her and needed to use my GPS.

Echo’s place was in a town called Holland, and it was much fancier than Corsica, that was for sure. Probably due to the lab that attracted scientists from all over the world. Echo’s apartment was in a swanky building that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a city, but it was smack dab in the middle of a smallish town.

I parked next to her in the lot and looked up at the building.

“Wow, this is really nice.”

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“That one is mine,” she told me, pointing out a balcony on the second floor. There was a bench and a barbecue and several potted plants on the balcony.

“You ready?” she asked, squeezing my hand and then leading me to the entrance.

“Yup,” I said.

“You ready to meet Murphy?” I’d forgotten about her cat.

“Yup,” I repeated.

“You a little nervous?”

“Yup,” I said for the third time. Why was this so nerve-racking? Echo had seen my place and I hadn’t been flipping out about it then. Why was this different? I couldn’t put my finger on the reason.

“It’ll be fine, come on.”

A horrible sound greeted us when Echo unlocked the door. It was unlike any cat sound I’d ever heard, but there was a little hairless blob at Echo’s feet, making the noise.

“Oh, I know, you are such a sad kitty,” Echo said in a high voice as she picked up the blob. The sound stopped.

“This is Murphy and he’s kind of an asshole sometimes, but that’s why we get

along,” Echo said.

“He’s so wrinkly,” I said, reaching my hand out tentatively to the hairless cat. He blinked wide blue eyes at me. How could something so strange also be so cute at the same time?

“He is my wrinkle king.” She kissed the top of his head and then walked through the apartment. “I need to feed him. You can make yourself comfortable.”

I took stock of the apartment. It was clean and cozy. Less decorated than mine, and fewer tchotchkes, but I liked it. She favored a more subdued color palate, but sprinkled throughout the space were pops of red, which was clearly her favorite color.

The apartment was nice, and clearly new construction. Stainless steel, granite, white walls, and black matte fixtures. No frumpy lamps like at my place. Katie said I had the decorating instincts of a grandmother.

“What’s your verdict?” Echo asked as she came back toward me. I was still in the little entryway. I hadn’t made it to the living area yet.

“I like it. Fancy.”

“I’ve been here about two years? The place I had before this was a complete disaster. I wouldn’t have let you come over if I was still living there. Would you like anything?” She slipped off her shoes and I did the same, leaving them on the little rug beside the door.

“Would I be a total dork if I asked for some tea?” I said, going to sit on her couch. It wasn’t white, but it was close to being white and I envied her the hairless cat. No dark hairs left on the furniture like at my house. Maybe she was onto something.

“You would not be a dork because that’s what I was going to have,” she said. Echo brewed some water in the kettle and brought over two mugs, both with the logo from Heartwood High School on them.

“It’s weird having you here,” she admitted.

“It’s weird being on a date with you, to be honest. I mean, I know we did a date in Florida, but this feels more official.”

“I know. We never really dated, did we?” She pulled a blanket off the back of the couch and put it over her legs.

“No, we just kind of locked eyes and then fucked when we had a spare moment.” That made her laugh.

“Are you still mad at me?” she asked, dunking her teabag in and out of the mug.

“I mean, I’m still a little hurt. I don’t think that feeling is ever going to go away. It hurt, because I had real feelings for you then.” I had real feelings for her now, and I couldn’t untangle which feelings were from which time.

“I had real feelings for you, Kiri. I did. Things with my parents . . . Let’s just say that they were not supportive when I came out and I haven’t talked to them in over four years.” Holy shit, that was awful.

I compulsively squeezed her hand.

“I’m so sorry. That’s awful.”

“I know,” she said, wiping a few tears. “It is what it is. I’ve moved on. I’ve been in therapy over it. They’d rather throw their only daughter away than admit that they

were wrong, and that's something they'll have to live with. I have good friends, who are dying to meet you, by the way, and one of my co-workers has sort of stepped in and I spend Christmas and Thanksgiving with her family every year. I'm not alone, but it still hurts when people are asking me what I'm doing on a holiday and wonder why I'm not visiting my parents."

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I had no idea about any of that. It made my heart ache for her.

“Do you need a hug?” I asked, setting my tea down on the coffee table.

“Okay?” she said as if she wasn’t sure. I leaned over and gathered her in my arms. She was so strong, but even strong people needed someone to lean on sometimes.

“I’m sorry your parents suck. I’m sorry they can’t see how amazing you are.” I rubbed her back and stroked her braid and held her. This was the first time she’d ever felt fragile in my arms.

“Thank you,” she said, through tears. “I don’t like to cry during dates, but here we are.”

That made both of us giggle a little and I pulled back to look at her face.

“Will me taking my clothes off make it better?”

“I’m not sure, but you should try. I’ll let you know.” I stood up and unbuttoned my shirt, flinging it over the back of the couch.

Echo stared at me and then turned her head to the side, considering.

“I’m not sure, can you show me a little more?” I flipped the button on my leather shorts and then shimmied them, along with my underwear, down my legs, kicking them under the coffee table. I did a slow turn.

“How about now? Feel better?”

Echo stood from the couch and walked toward me. Her hands dragged down my body, coming to cup my ass.

“Muchbetter.”

Sixteen

You were seen, justso you knowDom texted me the next day when I was on my lunch break.

What do you mean?

Denise saw you with Echo at dinner. You are not as sneaky as you think you are.

Freaking Denise. She was one of the cheer moms who’d had two kids on the squad and was regularly a pain in my ass. Her oldest daughter had graduated last year, and her youngest was a junior now. Somehow, she seemed to know everything about everyone, which was probably because she worked as a nurse at the local hospital. I didn’t remember seeing her at the restaurant, but I’d also had my attention fully on Echo and in my margarita glass.

What did she say?I asked.

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Why was Denise talking to Dom about me? He should be in baby bliss, not dealing with petty gossip.

She told Callie, Callie told Heath, you know how it goes.

Callie worked at the hospital too and was Heath's sister. I should have known that was how it would get back to Dom.

She just doesn't know when to keep her mouth shut I said.

No, she doesn't. And all of Corsica knows about it by now.

Cool, awesome, great.

I should have expected this to happen. Echo and I weren't trying to hide anything. I just hoped Denise hadn't seen us making out in the parking lot.

No doubt all my cheerleaders knew about it, and I hoped none of them, or their parents, thought that I was betraying my job at Corsica. That had been a consideration.

I messaged Echo. So one of my moms saw us and now everyone is going to know.

She responded right away. Yup, one of my parents saw us too. Maybe we should have just stayed at your house and not gone out in public, but the cat is out of the bag now. How do you want to handle this?

I mean, what was I going to do? Stop dating Echo? No way. I wasn't going to live my life by what other people might think. Fuck that.

I don't care what they think. I want to keep dating you if you want to keep dating me and we'll deal with what comes. Cheer season is over, so what are they going to do about it?

She had to go back to her class, but I thought about it for the rest of the day. I was going to see everyone on Friday for the celebration banquet and I knew that I was going to have to answer some questions. At least I had two days to prep my statement. Probably something along the lines of "it's none of your fucking business" but with less cursing.

I missed Echo. I had seen her less than a day ago, but we'd been sending texts back and forth and had another date planned for this weekend. She'd showed me the little office she had where she worked on her dollhouse furniture with itty bitty tools that I would break or drop if I tried to use them, and now she wanted to show me another one of her hobbies: ax throwing.

There was a recreation center in her town that had archery and ax throwing and I could tell she was really excited about it. I was flipping out a little about it, but then I decided it would be fun if Echo could stand behind me and teach me how to throw the ax and I could pretend to be helpless and then we could go back to her place and fuck all night. Ideal date, really.

Maybe it was better to get the fact that I was seeing Echo out sooner rather than later. I hoped people would be supportive, because I knew they wanted to see me happy. Echo made me happy, and that was that.

Echo was making me more than happy. We could talk about literally anything and she was one of the funniest people I'd ever met. The raccoon story wasn't even the

most hilarious story that had ever happened to her, and she would get me laughing so hard I struggled to breathe and had tears streaming from my eyes. She was also still a pain in my ass, but I enjoyed it more now. Mostly.

I'd defend our relationship if I had to. That realization that we were in a Relationship, with a capital R, was sobering. When had that even happened?

Are we in a relationship? I asked her.

I mean, yes? What else would you call what we're doing?

That was a good point. I guess I just hadn't said that exact word yet, or thought about it in those terms. There hadn't been time. I was still kind of recovering from Nationals exhaustion and getting back to work and then this thing with Echo. It was new and bright and confusing and great, but all the best things were.

So I can call you my girlfriend? I asked. Somehow, we had not talked about this in the myriad other topics we'd covered.

I mean, I've told all my friends that you're my girlfriend so I hope so. Unless you don't want that label? I should have checked, sorry.

This conversation was blowing my mind a little. She'd called me her girlfriend in front of her friends?

Wow, okay, yeah. You're my girlfriend.

Glad we got that sorted out she said with a laughing emoji. Speaking of my friends, do you want to meet them next weekend? I didn't want to throw you at them all at once right away.

It seemed fair, since she'd met mine already.

Should I be worried? I asked. I knew a little bit about them already, there was Spencer, who was married to Leah, Lola and Heidi, who were also married to each other, and then her only single friend, Audra. Of course, I had asked if anything had ever happened with Audra, but according to Echo, nope. I was choosing to trust her on that, because I had no reason not to, but my insecurities were still there, lurking in the back of my mind. I knew that Audra was a knockout. Of course I had already stalked them all online. It was research into Echo's life. I wanted to get along with her friends. I would definitely have an issue if every single one of my friends didn't like my significant other. Big red flag.

No, they'll be cool. I hope. I'll have a talk with them. That made me totally nervous, but it also made me realize that I hadn't told my parents about Echo, so I picked up the phone to call my mom.

I'd talked with her briefly after Nationals, but it had only been texts since then. She was busy with her book club, planning a huge used book sale that was taking up a lot of her time. Even when she was retired, she couldn't slow down. She still swam at the local pool four days a week before the sun was up. Someday I wished to have her energy and vitality.

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Putting my exchange with Echo on hold, I called my mom.

“Hey, how’s my girl?” she said. “I was hoping you were going to call me this week so I could get all the details of the competition. Your father and I even paid for some app so we could watch it. Took forever to figure out, but then there you were!” I loved that she and Dad had done that.

“Some of those teams were amazing, I couldn’t believe those were high school kids. We ended up watching the whole thing for days. Your father was exhausted afterward,” she said.

“How are his fruit trees?”

“Somehow not dead? Don’t tell him I said that.”

I laughed and changed topic. “Listen, I have something to tell you.”

“I’m guessing from the tone of your voice this is a good something?”

“I hope so,” I said. “You remember Echo Rosenthal? The girl I was friends with at camp?” My mom didn’t know the extent of our “friendship” and she never would.

“You mean the girl you were completely infatuated with? Sure.”

“I wasn’t infatuated with her, Mom.” I put my feet up on my desk, leaning back in my chair.

“Oh yes you were, don’t lie to me. What about her? Do you have something to tell me, Kiri? I had the feeling you had something cooking. A mother always knows.” Well, at least mine did. She basically knew all my news before I told her.

“We’re seeing each other, officially. She’s my girlfriend and it’s new and I don’t need any input, thanks,” I said. My mom was going to give me her opinion anyway, but at least I could try.

“Fine, fine,” she said, acting all huffy. “But I would like to know about her. You know your father wants to come up for a visit while you’re off this summer.” This was news to me, but very welcome news.

“That would be great, when were you planning? I have that trip with the girls, but other than that I’m pretty wide open.” My house had a guest room, so they wouldn’t even need to get a hotel.

“Probably early August, but I’ll get you a firm date when I can check flights. Now I have even more reason to come and see you. I want to meet your girl.” I didn’t think of Echo as my girl, but hearing my mom refer to her that way put a smile on my face.

I’d have to tell her and Dad about Echo’s parents, and reassure her that they were completely supportive.

“I’ll have to check with her if she’s okay with that. If we’re still together.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that. I can hear it in your voice.”

“Mom, stop it.”

She teased me some more and then Dad came on to talk about his trees and I had to do the whole thing over again and tell him all about Echo.

“Do you want to know her blood type, because I’m not actually sure what it is. I’d have to check on that,” I said.

He chuckled. “I’m just your curious dad. I like to know about the important people in your life, especially the most important. She sounds great, Kiri.”

“She is great.”

I didn’t hear any other gossip about me and Echo, but I heard whispers when my cheerleaders and their parents arrived at the gym and saw me setting up for the final banquet. I’d been here for hours, and I was ready to eat one of the tables.

It was another potluck, and I had given specific instructions that I hoped would be followed this time. We didn’t need forty sad trays of lukewarm, unseasoned macaroni and cheese.

I’d made a chopped salad for some variety, and as people started arriving, I could sense they wanted to ask me about the rumors, but were too polite. Well, not everyone was too polite. Denise came in and plopped her tray right down, peeling off the tinfoil and revealing . . . a lukewarm, unseasoned macaroni and cheese. I didn’t need to taste it to know. This time she’d covered the top with Goldfish crackers in the shape of a heart, for some reason. I tried not to visibly shudder. I would be avoiding that shit.

“Hey, Coach, how’s it going?” Denise asked, her beady eyes gleaming. I’d never seen someone with so much repressed glee before. Seriously, this woman needed to find a new hobby. Weren’t kids supposed to be exhausting? When did she have the time?

“It’s going great, thank you so much for bringing . . . that.” I gestured to the pan.

“Oh, it’s everyone’s favorite. If I didn’t bring it, there would be riots.” She laughed and I laughed and I wondered if she was full of shit or completely delusional, or both.

Denise leaned closer and spoke in a loud whisper that anyone who was nearby could pick out. “I saw you and the Heartwood coach at Miguel’s the other night. Was that a business dinner or . . .” she trailed off and let out a little laugh.

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I was completely and utterly saved from answering by the arrival of Cam, who breezed over to me and grabbed my arm.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a second? It’s important.”

“Of course. Excuse me, Denise.” I stepped away from her as Cam led me away.

“I will never be able to thank you enough for what you just did,” I said when Cam had pulled me into a corner of the gym.

“I could tell you were drowning over there, so I figured I would throw you a lifeline. I know you’d do the same. Denise is something else.” I looked over and found Denise fluttering around, fake smile plastered on her face as if she didn’t talk shit behind everyone else’s back.

“What was she pestering you about?” Cam asked.

“Uh, remember Echo? The Heartwood coach? We’re kind of seeing each other and she was at the same restaurant and now I’m sure everyone knows, but no one has the balls to ask me about it, besides her. She straight up asked me if it was a ‘business dinner’ like it’s her business.” I wished I could tell her to fuck off, but then I’d get fired.

“I’ll talk to her. That is none of her business.” Cam looked like she was ready to burn shit down, but I knew she’d been dealing with the likes of Denise for years and had been looking for a reason to tell her off for a while now.

“At least next year her last child will be a senior and then I will be rid of her. I look forward to that day, but then someone just like Denise will take her place. Such is life.” Cam looked off into the distance and then back at me. “Anyway, I’ll have a talk with her. No worries. How’s Dom doing?”

I showed her a picture of Dom and Heath and little Marissa.

“Oh my god, I’m dying. I can’t wait to meet her.”

More people were starting to arrive, so I was needed to help organize things, and Cam had to talk to Denise, so she went in one direction and I went in the other.

The squad finally arrived, and they were all dressed up in their finest, and it was so cute to see them all dolled up. I gave lots of hugs and received many in return and then I had to get up and make a little speech as people were sitting down.

I’d made a little video of all the pictures from Nationals, and had gotten the official video file, so I could show the performance to the parents on the projector.

“I can’t tell you all how proud I am of what this team did. No one could have asked for more. They gave me what?” I put my hand up to my ear and the squad yelled out “ELEVEN!” in unison.

“I didn’t even tell them to do that, I swear,” I said, and there were chuckles in the audience.

“I’m going to miss this family, this squad, but I know that you’re all Tigers for life, and you’ll always have a home here at CHS. Thank you for trusting me, and thank you parents for trusting me with your children. It’s an honor to be their coach, thank you.”

After a round of applause, I played the video and then everyone ate while music played in the background. I made rounds, stopping by each table and reminiscing and sharing jokes. I wished Dom could be here, but I was sending him pics and updates and video messages from all the kids.

Cam was also doing her thing, and Denise seemed subdued when I made it to her table. I'd saved her for last, and I hoped that symbolism wasn't lost on her.

Cheerleaders and parents and relatives filled their plates and laughed and I wanted to bottle this moment because this was really it. All of them had brought their uniforms to turn in, which was also part of the night. After dessert, they all got in a line with their uniforms folded up and placed them in the uniform box where they would wait for another year, or another cheerleader.

Once the box was closed, I put my hand on it for a moment and said my own little goodbye to this season. Then it was time to pack up the leftovers, shove Denise's awful mac and cheese back into her hands, and call it a night.

Cam and I were the last two in the gym, putting away the tables and making sure the floor was clean. I got out the broom and did a few sweeps.

"Another cheer season over," she said, balling up some paper that we'd used to line the table and then tossing it into the trash can in the perfect shot. She'd been a state champion twice in basketball.

"In the books," I said, shaking out the broom into the same can and then putting it back in the closet.

"You did good, just so you know. You're exactly what this team needed." I didn't know about that, but it was still nice to hear.

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” She gave me a hug and said that she’d lock up and I could go home.

The first thing I did when I walked in the door was call Echo. Sure, I was seeing her tomorrow, but that didn’t matter. I wanted to see her tonight. I needed to see her tonight. I was in a prime mood to wallow, and the cats weren’t as helpful as they should be in that pursuit.

“Hey, what are you doing right now?” I asked.

“Uh, do you want to know what I’m actually doing, or what I wish I was doing?”

I put the phone on speaker so I could feed the angry cats at the same time.

“Both?” I said.

“Okay, you get to decide what’s real and what’s fake. So, I am either sitting on my couch, eating two-day-old cold pizza and scrolling through reality TV star’s social media accounts, or, I am at a fabulous party surrounded by dozens of friends who adore me, wearing a fabulous designer dress.”

I listened and didn't hear anything in the background except for Echo chewing.

“Will you be offended if I say the first thing? It doesn’t sound like a bad night to me. Unless you want to spice things up a little bit and come over. I can make fresh pizza and you can eat it off my ass.”

There was a pause and a shuffling sound.

“Fuck, where are my keys?”

“So how would you feel about meeting my parents?” I asked as she handed me an ax. It was heavier than I thought it would be and I wished I had said yes to a less-intense date. At least I got to eat after this.

“Do you mean, like, right now?” she asked, stepping up to the area where the ax-throwers stood. The firing range? I had no idea. Echo was clearly comfortable with this whole thing and I was out of my wheelhouse. Next date, we were doing something I picked, like reading books on the beach, or walking through the rich area of town and trying to peer in the windows to see what their living rooms looked like.

Echo wound up and threw the ax with perfect precision, lodging it in the target to the cheers of the other people around.

“No, I mean like this summer. Maybe in August? They’re coming up to visit and they want to meet you. It’s absolutely fine if you don’t want to. No pressure.”

Echo moved aside and then it was my turn. I’d been given lessons on how to do this safely, but I was still convinced I was going to lose an appendage on this date.

My first attempt to throw the ax just . . . didn’t even go anywhere near the target.

“This is like archery camp all over again,” I said.

“You went to archery camp?” Echo asked as we picked up our second axes.

“Yeah, I read a book and thought I could be an archer for some reason. I was completely obsessed and begged my parents to sign me up. Then I went and it was so embarrassing, that they literally gave me a participation award, because everyone else earned a certificate.”

It wasn’t a memory I enjoyed.

“That’s so cute,” Echo said.

“If by cute, you mean pathetic, then sure.”

Her second ax hit right near the first one, and my second was another fail.

“Hey, come here,” she said, taking both my hands and pulling me close. Echo wrapped her arms around me and held me tight, rocking us back and forth a little.

“You’re so cute and sweet and sexy and amazing. I’m so lucky we have this second chance. It’s almost like we needed those years to come to our senses.”

I leaned back so I could look her in the face.

“Do you think so?”

“Yeah, I do. I’m not sure if things happen for a reason, but it feels right that you’re back in my life, Kiri. Doesn’t this feel right?”

It did. I’d never felt anything so right as having her arms around me. She kissed my forehead and then my mouth and I forgot all about throwing axes until someone whistled and told us to throw the axes or get out of the way.

“Oops?” I said.

“Not sorry,” she said, picking up another ax and hurling it directly into the center of the target.

“It’s okay,” she said later as we fueled up on burgers and fries and local beer.

“What’s okay?” I said through a mouthful of burger.

“Meeting your parents. I’m okay with it. I think. I mean, your parents sound great. I guess I’m just a little wary around parents because of mine, but everything you’ve said makes them sound like wonderful people.”

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I wiped my face and set my burger down. I was so hungry that I had to slow down or else I was going to choke.

“They really are great people. They’re going to adore you. I mean, they do already. I might have talked you up, and they remember me mentioning you back in the day.”

Echo raised her eyebrows. “Oh, really? You mentioned me? What did you say?”

“Well, I didn’t tell them that we banged at camp, that’s for sure. I just told them I’d met a girl and we’d sort of had a thing and I might hear from her. I came out to them when I was like, ten, I think? So they’d been wondering when I was going to start dating. All of my crushes up until that point had been short-lived.” That was an understatement. My shortest crush was one week one a friend who I thought was flirting with me, but she was just being extra friendly to make another friend jealous and I got caught up in the whole thing. Being a teenage lesbian was rough sometimes.

“Do you think they’ll like me?” she asked in a soft voice.

“Yeah, I do. They like who I like.”

“So that means you like me.” She bumped my shoulder with hers.

“Yes, I think it’s fair to say that I like you, Echo. I like you a lot.”

She put down her burger and wiped her hands. “Well, that’s cool because I love you.”

I almost slid right off my barstool.

“Was that too much?” she asked.

I put both hands on the table, because I needed something to hold onto.

“Did you just say what I thought you said?”

“That I love you? Yeah, I definitely said that.”

I gaped at her. Those words had caused an explosion of thoughts in my brain and I didn’t know what to do.

“You okay?” Echo put her hand on my shoulder and leaned closer to look into my eyes. “Did I break you? Kiri?”

“Sorry, trying to breathe.” I put one hand on my chest. Yes, my lungs were still doing their thing, expanding and contracting, and my heart was pumping along.

“Shit, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said it like that.”

I took a moment and stared into her eyes. Let myself completely get lost in their depths, and flipped through all the things that had happened in the past ten years between us. The laughs, the moments, the teasing, the fighting, the grudge, the reconciliation, the blossoming of new feelings.

I wasn’t the sixteen-year-old with a crush on a beautiful girl who was out of my league. I wasn’t the teen hiding under the sheets and hoping she didn’t get caught. I was a twenty-six-year-old woman and I was . . .

In love. I was in love with a girl named Echo.

Totally and completely and madly and deeply and all of those other words. I’d known

I was falling, and I'd known that it was happening, but it took her saying the words for me to realize that there was no other word for the way I felt about Echo.

"It's okay," I said. "I mean, I wouldn't have picked this location, exactly, for that kind of declaration. And flowers would have been nice."

Echo rolled her eyes. "And?" she asked.

"And what?" I wanted to wind her up a little bit.

"And do you have anything to say?" Her face was starting to get a little red, like it did when she was riled. It was totally mean to do this, but she'd pulled so much shit on me that this was only fair.

"Oh, that. Sure, it's great! So sweet of you. Thank you so much."

I picked up my burger and took a bite as she gaped at me.

"Are you serious right now?"

I chewed and put my burger down again. "No, I'm not serious, Echo. I'm not that much of an asshole."

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Her eyes narrowed slowly. “But you’re a little bit of an asshole.”

“I am. I’m an asshole who loves you.”

She made the cutest squealing noise in the world and jumped off her stool and grabbed me into her arms. I had no choice but to be swept up by her.

“Really? You love me?” She set me down on my feet and gazed into my eyes as the most adorable smile graced her lips.

“Yeah, Echo, I love you. I think I’ve always loved you, from that first moment. It was like gravity shifted.” That was how it had felt, anyway.

“I knew it too. Knew it when I saw you. I didn’t know who you were, or anything about you, but I knew I had to be around you. Near you. I’m so lucky you feel the same way.”

I wanted to argue with her that I was the lucky one, but I couldn’t because she started kissing me and I was completely lost for a little while. There were hoots and hollers in the restaurant, and we broke apart and giggled.

“I’m so glad you’re in my life, Kiri Kentwood,” she said.

“I’m so glad you’re in my life, Echo Rosenthal. Even if you make it way more complicated.” She definitely did that. My life had been cozy and comfortable before her. There would be hard times together, I knew that. We would face obstacles together that would try and drag us apart. We’d managed to come back together after

ten years though, and that was saying something.

I wanted her by my side for the next ten years, and the years after that. Wherever she was, that's where I wanted to be.

"Do you think Murphy is going to be okay with having a few more siblings?" I asked as her fingers dug into my hips and made me think of all the things we were going to do to end this night right.

"I think he's going to have to get over it," she said. "Are you asking me to move in with you?"

I shook my head. "No. Not yet."

I met Echo's friends and she'd been right to warn me. They were a lot. I'd thought my friends were something, but hanging with Echo's was on a whole other level. First of all, each one of them was more gorgeous than the last. I'd never seen so many beautiful people outside of a movie or an influencer group selfie.

Then there was the absolute energy. They all talked over each other and riled each other up and had no issues with confrontation. I sat there a little stunned as two of them went at it about what appetizers we should order.

"We fight about the small stuff so we don't fight about the big stuff," Echo said.

"Got it."

Once I adjusted, it was fine, but I definitely needed a few hours to recover after being around so much. Echo came home with me that night because my kitties had been showing some separation anxiety with me being gone so much.

“But you’ll hang out with them again?” she asked as we curled together on the couch and she ran her hands on my undercut.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll get used to it. They all seem really great.” That was the other thing about Echo’s friends: they were all seriously accomplished. Two of them had doctorates in fields I’d never even heard of, and one had just moved back to the U.S. after working overseas for a year for some tech company. A bunch of beautiful high achievers.

“They are, and they all really liked you. Just so you know.” She pinched one of my toes and I yelped.

“Good. They’re really intimidating, just so you know.”

“I guess,” she said, thinking about that. “I guess I’ve just known them for so long that it doesn’t register.”

“You’re intimidating, Echo.”

She didn’t seem to be aware of the effect she had on people. Eyes went wide and followed her when she entered a room. People seemed to have opposite reactions: either they checked her out, or scurried to get out of her way.

“I am not. That’s just silly.”

“You are. Have you seen your arms?”

Echo lifted one arm and flexed, muscles popping. “You mean this arm?”

“Yup, that one. And the other one.”

“These arms?” She flexed both and stuck her tongue out at me.

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“Mmmm, yes, those arms.” I lost my train of thought. All I could think about now was what those arms could do. Both of us forgot about her friends for a good long while.

Somehow, even though I wasn’t coaching at the moment, I felt like I was busier than ever. Being in a relationship apparently took up a lot of time. I had to move things around and reprioritize. I’d gotten out of practice at dating.

“I’m really bad at this,” I said as we rushed to get in the car. We were picking up Dom and Heath from the airport with Marissa. Katie and the rest of the gang were at the house, putting together a nursery. Katie had literally been storing shit in her garage since she found out they wanted to have a baby, even though she said she wouldn’t. Couldn’t help herself.

All of us had chipped in to fund the nursery as our impromptu baby gift, but we were throwing a baby shower for them as well. Any excuse to buy more cute baby clothes.

“Bad at what, baby?” Echo said, calmly waiting for me to get my shit together. I found my wallet at last, threw it in my bag, and we were out the door.

“Bad at dating,” I said as I backed out of the driveway.

“I don’t think you’re bad at dating. You seem to be doing well to me.”

“You’re just saying that because you love me. You have to say that.” She laughed and turned the radio on.

“And because I love you, I’m going to tell you that you need to be more confident in your abilities, Kiri.”

I knew that. I knew she knew that. I knew she knew I was working on it.

“Right, you’re right. Sorry.” I pressed my lips together to stop disparaging myself further. I hadn’t known how often I had negative thoughts about myself until Echo pointed it out, and I wanted that to change. I didn’t want to feel like shit about myself. I didn’t want to be so bad at handling compliments.

“Hey, don’t apologize. It’s okay.” She took my hand, squeezed it, and then kissed it. “Which of my flaws should we talk about, just to make it fair?”

“How about the fact that you put ketchup on everything? What is up with that? It’s disgusting. Also: you have got to start cleaning your hair out of my shower drain. It’s a real problem.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Okay, let’s go back to talking about your flaws, I don’t like this,” she said.

We somehow managed to get to the airport and pick up the new dads with their tiny little bundle all wrapped up in a carrier. It was a comedy of errors as we all tried to get the damn thing in the backseat of the car, and much consulting of the internet for the right way to do it. Health and Dom were nervous as hell, and I couldn’t blame them.

“Oh my god, this is the most stressed I’ve been driving since I took my driver’s test,” I said as I drove exactly the speed limit and cars honked and passed me in anger.

“Just keep your eyes on the road, baby,” Echo said in the seat next to me. “I can take

the wheel if you want.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m fine.” I looked in the rearview to see the new dads just staring in wonder at the sleeping baby.

“Hey, Echo, how do you feel about kids?” I asked.

“Other people’s kids, or my own?”

“Your own,” I said. This was an important question, and I should have asked it sooner.

“I’d like to have some. Not sure if I want to actually give birth, but yeah, kids would be great. What about you?” She was definitely nervous about the answer, but I was relieved.

“I’m definitely up for kids someday. It’s always been my dream to coach my own kids. I’m sure they’ll hate it at the time, but I think it would be awesome. If they don’t want to cheer, that’s going to break my heart.”

Echo laughed. “Same. It’s good to know that you want kids. That’s kind of a big thing for me. I mean, if you didn’t, I’m not sure if we could move forward. I would never want to force someone to have kids they didn’t want. That’s basically what my parents did.” She shuddered.

I hated any mention of her parents. I couldn’t wait for her to meet mine. They’d sweep her right into our family, whether she wanted it or not.

“I’m sorry. I wouldn’t want that either. A few of my friends don’t want kids, but I definitely do,” I said.

“Same page?” she asked.

“Same page,” I said.

We made it back to Heath and Dom’s without any incident, and there was a huge party and banner waiting for them. They both cried as they carried the baby through the house to the nursery, which was decorated in soft grays and yellows and with little animal decals on the walls, and a mobile with elephants and foxes on it.

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 4:37 am

Dom held the tiny baby in his arms and placed her into her crib.

“It’s perfect,” he said, holding Heath close. “Thank you all so much. This is exactly what we wanted.”

He turned on the mobile, and the adults moved into the living area to let sweet Marissa sleep, but one of the dads had to check her every two minutes to make sure she was breathing, even though they had a baby monitor.

“I’m so happy for you,” I said, giving Dom the biggest hug.

“I’m so happy, but I’m so scared,” he said, his eyes a little wild. “I feel like I haven’t slept in a thousand years.”

“Why don’t you and Heath go and take a few minutes? Everyone can watch her.”

Dom shook his head vigorously. “No way. I don’t trust anyone else with my daughter.”

I put my hands up. “Okay, okay. But the offer is there.”

Heath came back and informed Dom that Marissa was still breathing.

The party was short-lived, since we didn’t want to intrude for too long on the exhausted dads’ hospitality. Echo and I stayed to help. She tackled the kitchen and put away the food that everyone had brought, and I threw their laundry in the wash.

Heath fed Marissa while he rocked in the nursery, and Dom came out to grab one of the new burp cloths they'd received as a gift.

"You're doing so great," I said as I moved some of the wash to the dryer.

"I don't feel like I am, but thank you. Just wait until it's your turn. Have you and Echo talked about that yet?"

I smiled. "We did today, but you were too busy with baby fever that you didn't notice."

"Just you wait, K. Just you wait until it's you. It's fucking terrifying."

Marissa let out the tiniest of cries and Dom was gone, bolting to the nursery even though Heath was already there.

"They're so cute together," Echo said when I finished the laundry and set the baskets of clean, folded clothes in Dom and Heath's bedroom.

"They are. You think we should head out?" Everything that could be done was done.

"Yeah."

We said goodbye to the little family and headed back to my place.

"So, how many kids are we talking?" Echo asked as we walked into the house. The cats did their usual scream welcome, but now they did it to both of us. They adored Echo, maybe more than they loved me.

"You mean for us? Don't you think it's a little soon for that?" We'd been dating for less than a month. Even in lesbian terms, that was too soon.

“I mean, it’s good to be on the same page, right?”

She did have a point.

“Two? Three? More than one, but not enough to form a basketball team,” I said.

“What would you say if I said I wanted ten?”

I almost fell over. “Are you fucking serious? You want ten kids?” My voice squeaked.

Echo burst out laughing. “No, but it was totally worth it to see your face. No, I’m good with two or three.”

“Thank fuck,” I said, putting my hand on my racing heart. “Don’t scare me like that.”

She put her arms around me. “But it’s so much fun.”

“Yeah, fun for you.”

“Don’t pout, baby,” she said, and then she kissed me and bit my bottom lip. I stopped thinking about kids. “Come on, let’s go practice making a baby.”

I gave her a look. “Do we need to talk about how babies are made?”

“Do you want to be talking right now?” She stepped away from me and stripped off her shirt.

“You can’t just take your shirt off to shut me up,” I said, crossing my arms and trying not to drool.

“It works, though,” she said, undoing her bra and tossing it away. “Come on, follow the clothes.” Her shorts were next, and then her underwear. She paused right in front of my bedroom door and crooked her finger at me.

“Come and get it.”

“Yes, you will come,” I said, following her. Echo let me toss her on the bed, and then it was my turn to strip.

I got naked and reached into the fun drawer. Echo had added her own supply of toys and I knew which ones were her favorites by now. We were both adventurous in the bedroom, so we were completely on the same page.

“You ready?” I said, holding up the scarf.

“I’m always ready for you.”

“That’s what you think,” I said, and tied the blindfold around her face.

A few hours—and a shower—later, we lay on my bed, passing a container of ice cream back and forth.

“Do you always want to live in Maine?” she asked me. I paused, with my spoon about to dig out a big chunk of chocolate.

“I don’t know. This is where I grew up, so I’ve never known anything different. I might be open to living somewhere else.”

“Somewhere warmer, hopefully?” she asked.

“My parents live in Arizona. I’m sure they’d love it.” Oh my god, what a nightmare. I loved them, but I couldn’t be around them like that all the time.

“I’m thinking more like California. Or maybe Seattle?” she said.

“It rains all the time there.”

“A little rain never hurt anyone,” she said.

We talked and argued and decided that we weren’t ready to move anywhere. Besides, we didn’t even live together yet.

“How would you feel about giving up that gorgeous apartment?” This had been a sticking point for me. I adored my house, and I didn’t want to give it up. Plus, I’d have to sell it, which would take time if I went forward.

“I think I could do it for the right person,” she said, scraping the bottom of the ice cream container.

“Am I the right person?”

She held the last spoonful of ice cream up for me. “Yeah, baby. You are. You’ve always been the right person. Just took me a long time to figure it out.”

“That makes two of us,” I said. “But we got here in the end.”

She set the empty container and spoons on my nightstand and kissed me. “This is right where I want to be. With you.”

“Everything is better with you,” I said.

Epilogue

“Our second daughter!” my mom said after she’d hugged me. Echo and I had come to pick them up from the airport, and Echo had looked like a deer in the headlights, but she put her arms around my mom anyway.

Dad was more subdued, but he hugged Echo as well.

“I told you not to do that,” I said in my mom’s ear. “You promised.”

Mom waved me off and Echo showed off her athletic prowess by loading the bags into the trunk of my car.

“Are you okay?” I asked as my parents got in the backseat.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” she said. “I’m really good, I promise.”

“Just used the safe word if you need to bail.” That made her laugh.

We were still together and my parents had come up, partially to help Echo move all her shit into my house. She’d given up the lease on her apartment, and we were moving in together. I’d gotten rid of some of my “old lady shit” as she called it, and so she was moving some of her sleek and fancy pieces to my cottage. Our styles were completely different, but Katie was going to help us merge them somehow. Murphy had already moved in, and he got along with his kitty siblings really well.

School was starting soon, and Echo was going to have a longer commute, but she

swore she didn't mind. She'd made a lot of sacrifices for me, so I was trying my best to give her space in our home.

Meshing of two lives was bound to cause some bumps in the road, but we were committed. She was still going to coach the Bulldogs and I was still going to coach the Tigers. People would talk, there would be rumors, but we didn't care. We were gross and in love and all that other crap didn't matter.

"So now that you're living together, that means it's not long until we'll be having a wedding and then some grandbabies? I'm not getting any younger." I locked eyes with my mother in the backseat. She had a terrifying gleam in her eyes.

"Mom! Seriously. Too soon." I looked at Echo, but she was trying to hide a smile.

"I'm just saying," Mom said, getting huffy.

"Not the time, Mom. Can you just cool it?"

She stared out the window. "Fine, fine."

Five minutes passed.

"But can you maybe give me a timeline?" she asked.

"Mom!"