



Flame After the Fumble

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Category: Romance

Description: Liza Wilde is looking for an escape. . .

Heading to Springs U is supposed to be the fresh start Liza needs to put herself first and chase her dreams of becoming an artist. After one intense meeting with Springs U's newest star wide-receiver, Hartley Knox, Liza reconsiders the promise she made to herself, swearing off athletes like her cheating ex.

Hartley Knox is looking for a home. . .

Home has never been in Hartley Knox's dictionary. He's been bursting at the seams to escape his absentee father for as long as he can remember. Heading off to Springs U means a new life to make a name for himself, and it didn't include falling hard and fast for the emotionally unavailable bombshell, Liza Wilde.

When Hartley is dealt career changing news and placed on academic probation, he's forced to rely on the one girl that plagues his daily thoughts to help him out of the mess he's created. Liza is adamant about remaining friends, but Hartley has a mastermind plan to create flames after his biggest fumble.

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Prologue

Hartley

I thought that night was a passing moment in time. A college memory that would fade quicker than it happened. A girl that I would see from time to time at parties, in class, the occasional night out and I'd smile, reminding myself of our passing friendship. I was incredibly wrong. Liza Wilde isn't a passing memory or a blip in time. She's everything.

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Hartley

"Let's go!" I scream from the top of my kitchen table, lifting the red plastic cup to my mouth to drink until there's only a few trickles left. Hazy vision invades the corners of my eyes as I sway back and forth to the chants coming from the crowd. Most of them are teammates or friends I collected throughout high school. I toss the empty cup on the floor, dripping more alcohol against the old tile.

Booming voices ring through my ears. "Hart! Hart! Hart!"

I reach out for an outstretched hand and a soft one interlaces with mine, helping me hop off the sticky table. "Thanks, baby. What's your name?"

She giggles and wraps her arms around me, scraping her long nails across the base of my neck. "You're funny."

I guess I know her. . . she clearly knows me, but who doesn't? I might as well enjoy my last party before I leave for college. Before I can make a move on this chick, a hard thump hits my back. "Dude, we're going to miss you this season." My high school quarterback, Leo, wraps his arm around my shoulder.

"Dang right. You'll never see another receiver like me."

"Mhmmm." The girl clears her throat as she stares back at me with a pout on her delicious red lips, goading me to pay attention to her. "We were talking." She rolls her eyes at Leo for interrupting whatever we were about to do.

He pats my shoulder again before turning back toward the living room. "Alright, I'll leave you two to it."

"It's your last weekend here." Her lips are so close, I can almost taste them. I lean in for a kiss, when another hand is placed on my hips and twists me out of the mystery girl's grip.

"There you are!" she squeals.

I reach out to steady myself against the wall, hoping it clears my vision. The new girl in front of me has jet black hair with piercing green eyes that cut through me. "Layla?"

"Leslie," she corrects.

Scooting closer, I wink at her and run my hands through my matted hair. "Uh huh, baby."

She bats her eyelashes and runs her tongue against her bottom lip. "How could you forget?" She takes a step closer and runs her fingers against the tender spot behind

my ear. “Kiss me.”

Don’t have to tell me twice. Pulling her flush against my chest, I grab her hair and go in for it. When her lips connect with mine, the sweet coconut taste consumes me. Tonight is zero stakes, just the way I like it. I likely won’t see any of these people again after I leave my hometown for my freshman year at Springs U in Florida.

“Psst.” A low whisper startles me as I break away from the kiss. Girl number two walks away, seemingly having gotten what she wanted out of me. “Sorry to bother you, but do you know if we still have peanut M&Ms?”

“Where have you been?” I throw my hands up and pretend that I’m shocked about Violet being MIA tonight.

“For real?” She crosses her arms over her pajama shirt and rolls her eyes.

“I just want my candy.”

I groan, hoping one of these days she’ll want to commit to a night of partying with her best friend. “Top of the pantry behind the honey nut Cheerios.”

“Thanks!” She does a little happy dance and scurries into the kitchen past drunk couples, rowdy football players, and random people I haven’t seen before.

Since Violet moved in with me after her grandpa passed away, she hasn’t been out much. She’d rather curl in her bed with a book and snacks than get wasted at a party. I still try to push her out of her comfort zone. But then again, I worry about her and want to protect her as much as I can while I’m still here. Coming from damaged households will do that to you.

She passes by with a handful of M&M’s on the way back to her bedroom. “Have

fun!”

I shake my head and give her the salute to enjoy her chocolate and books. My eyes scan the party as I lift my heavy legs to walk to the couch.

Tomorrow, my life will change. I’m ready.

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Hartley

Springs U Freshman Year

“I think that’s the last of it, Hart!” Violet hollers from behind the trunk of my used Honda Civic. She crams in the last few items that will fit without causing my car to explode. With my backpack slung over one shoulder, backward baseball hat, and phone in my hand, I’m ready for college. But leaving my honorary sister is the hardest part. Wrapping me up in a hug so tight that my circulation might cut off, Violet says, “I’m so proud of you, but I don’t know how I’ll make it here alone.”

I twist my arms around her frame, grabbing her head with one hand to keep her close to my chest. “You’re stronger than you think, Vi. Just remember, in three hundred sixty-five days, you’ll be right across the hall from me again.”

Her tears soak a little patch on the front of my shirt as she sniffles quietly, leaning away to wipe the tears from under her eyes. It kills me to see her hurting, but I’m doing this for the both of us. Life hasn’t been kind to her or me since we were kids. Violet had her grandpa, until she didn’t, and I “had” my dead-beat, alcoholic father. When everyone around us dropped the ball, we’ve always been able to count on each other, and that will never change.

She lifts her head to meet my eyes. “Promise?” she chokes out.

“Pinky promise,” I say, ruffling her hair in a way that always sets her off.

“Ugh, Hart!” She shoves my chest away and rocks her body side-to-side. “You know I hate that.” She stares at her reflection in my car window, frantically flattening all of the loose pieces of her dark brown hair.

“And you love me.” I shoot her my best smile to convince her that I’m not nervous about this move. The truth is, I am, but Violet worries about me more than she’d like to admit. So I put my brave face on until I hit the road.

“You’ll be back for Thanksgiving, right? I’m cooking the turkey all by myself for us.” She does a little happy tap with her feet. Violet’s a year younger than me, so she still has a year left of high school before she joins me at Springs U. Her aunt signed the emancipation papers the minute they came through, so Violet can live in my house by herself.

“That’s the plan. Don’t have too much fun without me here this year, and if you eventhinkabout throwing a party at the house—” Violet cuts me off with deep laughter before I have the chance to finish.

“I know. I know. I know! Don’t forget to invite you twenty-four hours in advance,” she explains while gesturing her hands for me to move on with my nonsense.

“It’s not a true party without Hartley Knox.” I wave goodbye to her, savoring the last moments we have together before I’m in the full college swing. Football season will roll around before I know it. I’m heading to Springs U on a full ride to play football—the golden ticket out of the torture that was my childhood. I try not to let my mind become consumed with worry about Violet. “I better get on the road to make it to the apartment before the leasing office closes.”

“Call me when you make it there, please.” She unwraps her arms from me and pushes my shoulder, playfully. This is the relationship we’ve always had. She’s my little sister, and I would go to war for her any day of the week. Being states away will be

difficult, but I knock that worry out of my head by focusing on what's ahead.

I walk over to the driver's seat as Violet slowly backs away from my car, throwing up a tentative wave. I crank the engine and roll all four windows down. As I back out of the driveway, I can't help my heart from cracking at the sight of Violet on the front porch. Her eyes look sad and her body language is off as she fiddles with her hands, finally wrapping them tight against her stomach. Honking the horn three times in a row, I shout, "I love you, Vi!"

She giggles and cups her hands around her mouth. "Love you so much, Hart! Don't be a stranger!"

With that, I peel off down the street where I spent eighteen long years. I'm finally free from the shackles of the man that most of my home town loves, but I despise.

My childhood wasn't the worst it could have been, but it certainly wasn't rainbows and butterflies, either. We didn't hurt for money—my dad always held a steady job as a construction site manager. To the public, he was a hardworking man who let loose every now and then. To me, he was neglectful in every sense of the word. He'd arrive home late into the night, the smell of booze permeating off his body. I didn't get theHey, how are you? How was school? Do you need help with your homework?greeting that most normal kids my age got. If I was lucky, I would get a small grunt. If I hit the lottery, he would sit at the kitchen table and scarf down his food silently. We lived in a middle-class neighborhood in a cookie-cutter house, but I was painfully alone.

I glance down at my phone to take a quick look at the GPS before crankingKendrick Lamar Radioto the highest volume.I throw my arm out the window, feeling the sweltering summer heat pass by and looking forward to my new life.

After a few gas breaks, my stomach growls, alerting me that it's time to grab food.

My eyes rake over the interstate signs with fast food options on them and I ultimately settle on a drive thru burger joint. Because I'm antsy to get back on the road, I try to open the greasy wrapper of the burger while simultaneously squeezing out ketchup and keeping my eyes on the road. The ketchup squirts on my shirt. Shoot. Running my thumb up the seam, I wipe it off and lick my fingers clean. It baffles me how I survive on my own sometimes.

After a few more hours on the road, I park at the leasing office where the ticket to my new life is behind those two glass doors. I pop in to grab my key at the front desk.

"Good afternoon, welcome to Coastal Leases. How can I help you?" The woman behind a small desk in the corner of the office waves me over to take a seat.

"I'm here to pick up the keys to my apartment." Thankfully, I filled out all the other forms online weeks ago, so I can head straight to my new home.

"Of course! I'll just need your ID."

I fetch my wallet out of the back pocket of my pants, pulling the ID out of the worn leather pocket. After I hand it to her, she nods with a small smile and digs in a drawer to fish out a labeled set of keys just for me.

"Aha! Here it is." Holding it in the air, she double checks the name and hands the keys over.

"Thank you for having this ready. I appreciate it." I flash her my charming smile in hopes that she'll develop a soft spot for me in case I need anything for the apartment.

Her cheeks blush as she looks down at her desk and fiddles with her blue pen. She looks young enough to be a Springs U student, so being friendly couldn't hurt. Walking out the door, I look back and flash her a wink before I settle in the car.

Fifteen minutes later, the cool air conditioning of my new apartment hits my face. I couldn't have picked a better place to live. It's fully furnished and big enough for Violet and I to live comfortably when she joins me next year. The echo of my footsteps rattle through the freshly painted, white walls as I plop down on the comfortable, brown couch. My mind wanders to the many football games I plan to watch in this spot. I'm ready to make memories here. I look around at the kitchen area. A plain wooden table with two chairs and two barstools are tucked under the counter cut out area. I envision laughing at that table with friends after cooking a meal or ordering fast food after a late night out at the bar. I'm ready to be happy.

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Violet. Pulling my phone from the zipper pouch of my athletic shorts, I tap her contact picture.

After a few rings, she answers. “How is it?!” She rustles around on the other side. If I had to guess, she’s already curled up in that awful purple blanket she loves. Every time she pulled it out of her bedroom at home, I was forced to pick purple fuzz off my clothes for days and watch her favorite reality TV show of the season. I can’t lie, those shows have grown on me since she coerced me into watching them years ago.

“It’s awesome. All of the furniture looks brand new, and it’s bigger than I thought.” Smiling ear-to-ear, I look around, basking in my new home for the foreseeable future. I made this happen. Since I received a full scholarship to play football here, my courses and fees are covered. When it came time to find a place to live, I knew the dorms wouldn’t work. I was sick and tired of being at other people’s mercy. I wanted a place I could call my own for both of us to live. I’ve always been her protector, and leaving for college wasn’t going to change that. We pulled an ungodly amount of all-nighters, applying for every scholarship, grant, and financial aid known to man. Thankfully, I managed to get the rent expense covered. Even better, I magically found a two bedroom cheap enough to be covered by my room and board allowance. Working part-time as a dishwasher back at home along with my father’s monthly ‘I’m sorry for being such a horrible person’ deposits into my account have set up my savings until I can find a job.

“Can I skip senior year?” Violet sighs into the phone.

“Nope, but I’ll hold down the fort until you get here. Everything’s okay at the house?”

“So far so good. Just quiet without you.” Violet’s voice is low and gravely, almost as if she was crying. It’ll take her a few months to get used to living on her own.

“You’ll get used to me being gone in no time. It’ll be so peaceful, you won’t even miss what it used to be like,” I say, downplaying the fact that being apart is hard on both of us. We’re a little codependent, but what can you expect when we’ve only had each other to rely on?

Violet lets out a rogue chuckle before replying, “You know that’ll never happen. I love you. Don’t get into too much trouble this year.”

I glance down, becoming distracted by the stain I earned on my t-shirt on the drive over. “Hey, do you know how I can get a stain out of this shirt? It’s new.”

“Ugh.” She pretends to be annoyed. “You know you’re going to need to find a girlfriend sooner or later for these types of questions.”

“Yeah, right.” I huff. “You know that’s not in the cards.”

“You never know. Someone may come in and sweep you off your feet.” She giggles and no doubt daydreams about the day someone locks me down.

My heart seizes as I place my hand over the worn cotton of my t-shirt, rubbing repeatedly over my chest. “I love you, Vi. Get some rest. Call me if you need me. Anytime. Okay?”

“I know.”

“Even if it’s to tell me you walked around school with toilet paper stuck to your shoe. I want to hear it all.”

She huffs, annoyed with my picking. “Goodnight, Hart.”

Putting my phone back into my pocket, I scan around my new home. I grab my keys off the counter before heading down the stairs and out to the car to unload all of my things. I hike each box up the cement stairs and into the cool apartment. I’m exhausted from the ride, and all I need to get through the first night is bedding, shower stuff, and clothes. I quickly throw the brand new sheets on the bed before taking the quickest, scalding hot shower known to man.

My eyes struggle to stay open, but if I don’t exhaust myself completely, it’ll take hours to fall asleep. Grabbing my phone from beside me, I mindlessly scroll through Instagram. A few of my new teammates posted pictures of their gear, some of the guys I played with in high school are repping their new college teams, and Violet posted a picture of her watching reality TV.

I’m reporting to summer workouts next week. It’s surreal that I made it to the collegiate level. I’ll be on the field with some of the best college football players in the nation. All I can think about is how proud Violet’s grandpa would be if he were still here.

“You’re a pain in my side and a headache I didn’t ask for, but I love you, kid. You deserve this.” His warm words were wrapped with a stone-cold expression. Grandpa Evans was the father figure I desperately wanted and needed. When he passed, it was devastating for us both. I made a promise to him to protect Violet in his absence, and I will make him proud.

Shaking off the memory, I click my phone off for the night, fluff my pillow so that it’s nice and soft, and force myself into sleep. This year is going to change my life.

Liza

“You’re really hitting Bourbon Street the night before you leave for college?” My sister, Willow, rolls her eyes and shakes her head in faux disappointment. She sits cross-legged on the carpeted floor of my bedroom as I apply my makeup for the night.

“For the hundredth time, yes. I want to have a little fun so I can leave this place on a good memory.” My body rattles with excitement, nerves, and the anticipation of what tonight may bring. But most of all, sadness ripples through me like a current that won’t leave the shore.

I pop a few curls in my dirty-blond hair to polish off the night’s look. I elected for a tight, black crop-top that shows off enough cleavage to gain interest paired with my favorite leather leggings to hug what little curves I have. It’s risky, but I’m out for revenge.

“Dad will be so thankful that you’re the one who leaves New Orleans.” She rolls her eyes, but follows up with an escaped laugh.

“He’s counting down the seconds until he can be free of the child that is constantly teetering the line of ruining the family name.” I throw my hands up in air quotes and do my best snooty impression of our dad. Although my dad isn’t afraid to show his moments of disapproval when I turn up hungover after a weekend of partying, he loves both of us unconditionally.

I’m not supposed to leave. Shaking my head, I fight back that thought before bile rises from my stomach into my throat.

“Yet again, the fate of this family lies on my humble shoulders,” Willow says as we both let out obnoxious laughs that can’t seem to stop. I grab her shoulders to steady

myself from the lack of oxygen from laughing so hard.

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“It always has, baby girl.” I shoot her a mischievous look and purse my shiny lips. Willow is two years younger than me, but more often than not she feels like the older one.

“Don’t forget to call me when you need a ride,” Willow reminds me with a worried look etched in her brow.

“Do I ever forget?” I throw her a wink before turning back toward the mirror.

“No,” she chews her fingernail before finishing, “just with everything that happened with Layne...” She stands up from her spot on the carpet to meet me in front of the vanity mirror. She lays her head on my shoulder and shoots me a sympathetic smile. “If you need me, call. Okay?”

As we stare at each other through the mirror, I put on my best fake smile to assure her that everything is right in the world. “I’m okay. I promise.” I do my best to convince my little sister that I can handle this. Going out the night before I drive hours to Springs U isn't self-destructive. It's definitely not because my boyfriend of four years, whom I planned my entire future around, cheated on me without a second thought less than a month ago.

Willow pulls me into a tight hug, squeezing her arms into my ribs. The kind of hug you give when you're deeply worried that the person you're holding isn't okay. “Don’t let him get in your head.” Her muffled reminder sets my jaw tight, but before she can see that, I wipe the hurt off my face and detach myself from the little worry-wart.

Honking vibrates through our French Quarter townhouse, alerting me to the fact that my ride is here. “See you later, stink.” I flip my hair over one shoulder and paint on my best game face for the night ahead. My ex-boyfriend, Layne, may have derailed my plans for the future, but tonight, I’m going to show him exactly what he gave up.

Growing up in New Orleans with a flower-child mom and a high profile lawyer for a dad isn’t the easiest, but you get used to it. My parents are polar opposites and have been separated for as long as I remember. They get along fine for the sake of Willow and I, but aren’t friends by any stretch of the imagination. When we became old enough to choose where we wanted to live, my choice was a no brainer. Mom and I always clicked. We’re both guided by our hearts, not our heads. We live in the moment, and we don’t get caught up in mainstream success. Willow, on the other hand, is my dad’s clone. If intensity, drive, work ethic, and seriousness could be bottled up into one person, Willow Wilde would be it. It made the most sense for her to live with him. Although we couldn’t be more different, Willow has always been my best friend. It helps that our parents live two streets away from each other, so we could walk to either house any time we wanted. The worry on her face tonight made me want to curl up in a ball and spill my guts out to her, but I can’t. If I do, I give Layne power over my thoughts. I don’t need him to ruin a good night. I refuse to let that happen.

“Ayy! There she is,” Zane hollers out the window.

Giggling all the way to the car, I open the back passenger door and squeeze in with the rest of my friends, placing my backpack purse on my lap. “What are we getting into tonight?” I ask the full car of muscular baseball players. My ex played with them all throughout high school, but luckily for me, they like me more than him. They’re all heading to college in a few weeks. The college we planned to go to together.

“Was thinking Bourbon Street to celebrate our girl’s last night before she leaves us.” Zane throws a pout over his shoulder in the dimly-lit car.

Perfect. Layne's stomping grounds.

"I'm gonna miss y'all so much." I lean my head on Berkley's shoulder who's entirely too big for the middle seat.

"Do you really have to leave NOLA, Liza?" Berkeley asks.

"You know the answer to that." I gulp down my feelings about leaving my best friends for Florida in the morning. Leaving my comfort zone to start a brand new life is terrifying. Mix in the fact that I'm fresh off a breakup and you get a hot mess.

This wasn't the plan. We were all supposed to go to NOLA South University together. That is, until Layne decided a one-night-stand was worth throwing it all away. That's when I made the last minute decision to enroll in Springs U. I can't stay here with the memory of what could have been etched into every path of my future. I refuse to be the sulking shadow, watching him achieve all of his dreams.

"One last hurrah then." Berkeley bumps my knee with his.

"Cheers to that." I kiss him lightly on the cheek, careful not to leave lip gloss residue, before I spend my last night in New Orleans in the bottom of a bottle.

"Shots!" I shout from the top of the worn down bar, my stomping grounds for as long as I could remember. I vaguely remember climbing up, but my vision is so blurry that I don't know if I managed to do it without making a fool of myself.

"I think you've had enough." Zane chuckles as he reaches for my waist to pull me off the bar. I cross my arms over my chest as I stumble to gain any solid footing tonight. Zane's family owns this bar, so when we show up with him, we aren't carded. Only close friends get this kind of treatment.

“And I don’t,” I say, slurring the ‘t.’

I try to scoot around him back to the bartender, but I’m met with a blurry figure shaking his head and mouthing, “You’re cut off.”

“Lameeeeeee,” I drawl out before stumbling back to the dance floor. Rolling my hips to the music helps drown out the pain and suffering that has consumed me since the day I walked in on Layne hooking up with someone else at a friend’s party. I was prepared to see him tonight. What I wasn’t prepared for was to see beautiful girls draped on each of his strong arms as I entered the bar. Girls who are prettier, older, and more confident than me. Layne smirked when he caught sight of me with his two teammates, but it didn’t do much to deter him from his arm candy he continued to give all of his attention to. A guy shimmies behind me and grabs hold of the fabric tightly coated on my waist. I lean my head back and rock my hips into him in an attempt to create a show for Layne in direct sight. My eyes roam to check if he’s watching, but his attention is honed in on the girls. The lights flicker around my drunken haze, and I’m suddenly dizzy from the overwhelming pain that is my life at the current moment. I planned to drink tonight, but I didn’t plan to get as wasted as I currently am. Oh well. You win some, you lose some.

“Last call!” rings around the packed bar from the bartenders as Zane and Berkeley find me in the crowd.

“Time to go home. You have a long drive in the morning.” I wrap one arm around each of them to allow them to guide my weight out of the bar.

“Where is everyone?” I slur out.

“Some are bouncing to another spot. We need to get you home.”

Luckily, the boys called a rideshare so Willow doesn’t have to see me like this. Not

like she hasn't seen it before, but I'd like to limit her worry. Once the boys place me in the middle of both of them in the small car, the floodgates open. The ringing in my ear vibrates so loud that I can't process what the boys are telling me. Rubbing smudged mascara from my cheek becomes my fixation until I can choke out words to process my drunk emotions.

"W-Why wasn't I good enough?" I whimper in a mixture of anger and devastation.

"You're too good for him."

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“Better now than later.”

“You’ll find someone else.”

The boys continue to pacify me with the same lines I’ve been fed by everyone around me since it happened. My breathing becomes quicker and what’s left of my tear-coated vision blurs around the edges. That’s the last thing I remember.

4

Hartley

If I could shoot the feeling of summer training camp in my veins, I would. The residue of freshly-mowed grass living permanently on my ankles. The rough leather football when it hits my gloves for a catch. The sweat dripping down my overgrown hair. And most importantly, the tired groans of teammates who didn’t take conditioning seriously. Sucks for them. The first few weeks of camp have gone smoothly. In college football, you need to make a name for yourself. You have to find a niche for scouts and coaches to notice your existence. Besides the fact that I’m the most skilled receiver on the field, I’m also the loudest. If you fumble the ball, you’ll hear it from me. If you slack on a tackle, I’ll question why you’re being so lazy. And if I beat you out on a route, best believe you’ll hear me in your ear the whole way back to the line. My mouth sets me apart, but it also earns me laps. Give and take. ADHD has kicked my butt in academics, but in football, I use it to kick drive my work ethic. It’s a gift.

With the loud screech of Coach’s whistle, we huddle up before being dismissed to the

locker room. I jog up behind the broodyrunning back who cringes at my existence. We came in together as freshman, and I'm determined to either become his best friend or get under his skin so much that he can't ignore me. As much as his attitude is in the gutter, he makes up for it on the field. The dude's a beast, and I wouldn't mind getting extra reps in with him.

"Study the playbook last night, Shane?" I slap my hand down on his shoulder with a crazy smile on my face. Most guys are bone tired and on the verge of puking after a grueling practice like this, but it fuels me.

"Sure did," he grunts out as he shakes my hand off his shoulder.

"Geniuses like me don't need to do all that." I wink as we pass into the cool locker room.

"Idiots like you will find yourself off the team in a year."

I'm so distracted by the monster tattoo crawling up his arm that the insult doesn't register. "Dude! That tat is sick. Where'd you get it?" I poke the tribal swirl that snakes up and down his arm. I don't have any, but I want one.

"Huh?" he asks as he, once again, jolts his arm out of reach with a disgusted look.

"Your tattoo. I want one. Let's go."

"Something is seriously off with you, Knox."

"Not the first nor the last time I'll hear that. So, do you want to go with me to lose my tattoo virginity?" Mock sweetness laces my tone. I'm nothing if not relentless and annoying to a fault.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to spend more time with you than I have to.”

I clutch my chest, feigning offense. “I’m starting to get the impression that I annoy you.”

“Bingo.”

“If you don’t, I won’t let you forget. I’ll bring it up every single day until we’re seniors. Then, after we graduate, I’ll move closer and bring it up more.”

He grunts. “If I go, will you shut up and leave me alone for the rest of the week?” Ryan Shane rushes ahead of me to his assigned locker and rips it open in annoyance.

“Sure, but I have a feeling we’re going to be friends by the end of the season.” I strip down and grab my towel for the showers. “So you might as well accept it now.”

“I don’t do friends.”

“We’ll see about that.”

After showering and changing, Ryan reluctantly drives us both to the tattoo shop downtown. I’m wired with excitement as the adrenaline of doing this pulses through my skin.

I reach for the volume to turn the sound on the radio up, but Ryan swats my hand away. “Does it hurt?”

“Nope.”

“Are you sure about that? It looks like it hurts.”

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He sighs and stretches his neck to flick his eyes my way. “You’re a football player who takes hits daily. I think you can handle it.”

“Will you hold my hand?”

“Don’t be a baby. You’re a grown man.”

I reach for the volume once more, hoping this time he doesn’t see me. “I’m serious.”

Instead of swatting my hand away, Ryan turns off the radio. “Cut it.”

I raise my hands in innocence. “Shutting up.”

The shop is empty, so it isn’t a long wait before a needle drives into my arm. I’m not a psychopath like my new friend, so I keep it simple for my first tat: my number thirteen on the inside of my bicep. It’s everything that’s saved me. Without football, I’m nothing.

My body winces at the pain of the recurring jab into my arm. “Ow!”

“Stay still or the lines will be crooked,” the tattoo artist scoffs as he continues to torture me.

“Classic.” Ryan huffs with his arm crossed over his chest, leaned against the wall.

“Have something to share, Shane?”

“Nope. It’s what I expected.”

“And what did you expect?” Annoyed with his judgmental aura, I push. “My number?” Keeping my arm still so my ink doesn’t get messed up, I stretch my neck to look his way. “I’m more than just a pretty face, Shane.” The corners of my eyes burn as heat rushes through my body as I’m transported back to the reason football means everything to me. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

He grins with understanding. “Likewise, but that’s not what I meant.” He laughs as he leans up against the wall. “I meant how you’re crying like a child for a fine line tattoo.”

“It hurts,” I whine in mock agony.

He shakes his head back and forth before whipping his phone out from his pocket. “Smile.”

I flash my pearly whites his way. “Send it to me so I can send it to Violet.”

“Who’s Violet?” he asks.

“Little sister and best friend.”

“Odd,” he shares as his jaw tightens in confusion.

“She’ll be at Springs U next year, but don’t get any ideas.”

Huffing out a breath and plastering on a hardened look, he continues, “I can get girls on my own, thanks.”

“Not this girl. She’s off limits.”

“Why? She’s yours or something?”

I make a vomit noise and point my finger down my throat. “Ew. No. I’ve never seen Violet like that. I just have a hardenough time fending off all the guys who aren’t good enough for her.”

“Almost done,” the tattoo artist mumbles as he puts the finishing touches on my number. He wipes it off a few times, removing the excess ink from my light pink skin. “Check it out.”

I get up from the black leather chair and get a closer look in the mirror. The black fine line letters jump from my pale skin and I can’t stop admiring the work. “It’s sick.”

The nagging sound of my alarm jolts my exhausted, numb body out of bed. I flip around, tossing my sheet off the bed to reach for the buzzing phone on the nightstand. The screen glows too bright for my sleepy eyes adjusting to the dark room. What scares me more is the fact that layered in front of a picture of Vi and I at my last high school football game, is the time: 7:00 in the morning. I have fifteen minutes to kick myself into high gear and head to the field in order to make it for our 7:30 a.m. report time. Shoot. I know I set my alarm earlier than that. Or did I?

Stumbling frantically out of bed, I throw on the nearest pair of shorts, a team shirt, and a pair of questionably stained socks. I jog into the bathroom to brush my teeth before bolting out the door and into my car. Breaking traffic rules is my specialty, and I don’t need Coach’s red flag radar on me during the first few weeks of camp. I’m talented, but being a liability is a quick and easy way to find myself off the team before the season starts.

Screeching into the parking lot, I tap my phone to do a quick time check: 7:21 a.m. Awesome. I have time to get to the locker room, throw my stuff down, and make it

with minutes to spare before the team huddles up. I speed-walk into the facility, turning a corner before slamming into a beast at the locker room door.

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“Seriously? What the...” Before he could finish his sentence, Ryan registers that it’s me that ran clean into him hustling into the locker room. “Hartley. Report time is—” He checks his Apple watch before scolding me. “In less than five minutes. You better have a good reason for barely making it.” He scoots to the side so I can gather my equipment. If he keeps up this lecture, he’ll be the reason we’re both late. I don’t have time to plead my case to daddy dearest at the moment.

“I’d love to chat, Shane, but as you can see,” I flail my hands around erratically while slipping my pads and cleats on, “I don’t have time for chit-chatting.” Jogging back to the locker room door I almost bulldoze him, but he stops me in my tracks.

Ryan meets me with a wary look, arms crossed over his chest, judging me, hard. “Gloves.” His lips curve into the smallest smirk I can barely tell is there.

“Huh?”

“Where are your gloves? You know how serious Coach is about showing up prepared with our equipment.”

“Shoot,” I mutter under my breath, mentally kicking myself for rushing out the house without my football bag. I elect to leave most of the important stuff in my locker to avoid inevitable situations like these, but I forgot to take my gloves off at the facility yesterday. I stuffed them in my bag when I jumped in my car. Grabbing my unruly hair, I run my hands through repeatedly, trying to muster up a plan to play this off to Coach without drawing too much attention to myself this early in the season.

Ryan juts his chin out toward his locker with that cocky grin plastered across his face.

“Check my locker.”

Busting open his locker, I’m greeted with extra socks, pads, tape, gloves, and Band-Aids. I’ve never seen a locker stocked with extras of all the essentials a football player could need. I grab the gloves and turn to him, a questioning look in my eyes, and he nods in permission.

“Who is this prepared? Now that I know you’ve got the goods, I can sleep in later and later.”

“My preparedness saved you today, so watch the smart mouth.”

I laugh, quickly grab what I need, and we jog onto the field together just in time for Coach’s piercing whistle. Ryan may act tough, but this proved what kind of person he is. After our conversation at the tattoo shop, we understand each other better. He harbors the same hurt in his eyes that are reflected in mine. He could have easily walked past me, writing me off as a screw-up who doesn’t take college ball seriously. Instead, he helped me, and something tells me his past isn’t as polished as his present.

After practice wrapped and I basked in a long, hot shower, I’m still wired. Practice helps the physical adrenaline that I experience on a daily basis, but not so much the mental. Sauntering to Ryan in a towel wrapped around my waist, I pat him on the shoulder and he greets me with the same annoyed look he always does.

“We’re going out tonight,” I say to Ryan as my way of thanking him for what he did earlier. He shakes his head back and forth, slings his equipment bag over one shoulder, and begins to leave. But before he can, I stop him. “Wait. It’s Friday, and we don’t have practice tomorrow.” I pat his shoulder and run through a mental list of reasons he should come out to decide which one would work the best. “I heard some of the older guys say Downtown Tap is lax on carding.”

“I don’t drink in bars,” he mumbles under his breath.

“Looks like I have a built-in designated driver.” My laugh vibrates through the almost-empty locker room, but the joke didn’t land.

“Are you done?” He cracks his neck side-to-side and grips the strap of his bag tighter.

“Look, what you did for me earlier proves you don’t hate me as much as you’d like me to think,” I admit. Why can’t I just say thank you and move on? “My. . . uhh. . . ADHD gets the best of me sometimes.” Grabbing the back of my neck with one hand, I squeeze the muscles, lowering my eyes to the cement floor.

As if my admission unlocks an internal understanding within him, Ryan says, “One night.” He sticks the number one up to my face. “I won’t make this a habit.”

“Meet me at my apartment at ten. I’ll text you the address.” I squeeze past him, throw on a t-shirt and shorts, and try to leave the locker room, but before I do, I add, “Leave your ego at the door. You’re about to witness the Hartley Knox experience.” His eyes roll to the back of his head before I sprint out to the car, eager for my first night out as a college football star.

5

Liza

“I love it so much!” Willow squeals into the phone as I flip the FaceTime call back to selfie mode after giving her a tour of my dorm room.

“I finally have it close to finished. I’m working on a piece to hang here.” I gesture to the wall space above my headboard. It’s the focal point of the room, so I need to make sure the art that is hung there is perfect.

“I’m sure it’ll be great.” She rustles the pages of her notebook unintentionally into the speaker before bringing her eyes back up to the screen. “Everything you create is.”

“Thanks, sis.”

“Sooo. . . Any plans for the night?” Willow tries her best to hold back a laugh. She’s the homebody with a judgmental mouth, and I’m the wild child who lives every moment like it’s her last. She knows better than to think I’m staying in on a Friday night.

“The roomie and I are planning to check out the bar scene. We heard one in particular doesn’t card.” I flip the camera to face me and do a little happy dance, causing my loose bun to bop around my head and Willow to laugh.

“Are college bars a thing during the summer?” She turns her focus back to whatever assignment she’s working on, no doubt it’s one that isn’t due for another month.

“Duh! Bars are a thing year-round.” I stick my tongue out at my sheltered little sister and continue my rant, “And thank goodness for that.”

“What’s on your face?” She gasps and leans into the camera so close that only one eyeball is in view.

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Darting my hands to my chin, I wipe aggressively. “Chill. It’s paint from class. We’re working on color blending.” I smile and let out a giddy laugh. Springs U offered a second term summer course for incoming art majors, like myself. It’s basically a crash course to prepare you for year one as an art major. After losing my vision of attending NOLA South with the only boy I’ve ever loved, this was the opportunity of a lifetime. It allowed me to get out of New Orleans as soon as possible to spend my first summer before college in my new home doing what I was born to do.

“You’re so artsy fartsy,” Willow hollers into the phone before bursting into a laugh.

“Don’t you mean the female version of Picasso?” I wink back before telling her to go finish whatever she’s working on before she has an aneurysm because she’s not putting her full focus on her work. She ends the call with her famous ‘be careful’ speech. She’s never had to worry about me. Layne had it covered. Until he didn’t. The memory takes over my body like a bad dream. How cool, calm, and collected he was explaining himself after getting caught. His scent burns into my memory. A mix of dewy sweat and alcohol. His words cycle over and over in my head.

We had a high school relationship. What did you expect?

It was one mistake. Can you blame me?

I don’t see what the big deal is.

All couples go through stuff like this.

Layne’s disgusting words that night ring through my head making me light-headed

and nauseous. The night after I walked in on him and a tall brunette with curves for days, making out on his bed, just a few short months before we were supposed to begin our adult life together, was an utter trainwreck. The first few hours I was shell-shocked and deep in denial. As time passed, I turned dangerously angry and confused about the boy I thought I knew. When the morning sun peeked through my bedroom blinds, I sobbed into a tear-stained soaked pillow until I ran out of tears to cry.

Hating every emotion I rolled through that weekend, I vowed to shove the hurt deep down inside where it can't see the light of day. Instead, I start prepping for what tonight will bring.

Shaking the thought of that torturous night out of my head, I pop into my roommate, Emberly's, room to see if she needs help with her makeup. We lucked out and scored the dorms that have separate bedrooms with a shared kitchenette and bathroom.

"Need help with anything?" I ask as I peer into Emberly's space-themed room. Glow in the dark stars decorate the ceiling and a galaxy light projects intergalactic images on the walls.

Emberly peeks up at me, sitting cross-legged on her floor. She's leaned in with barely an inch between her face and the mirror propped against her wall. I can already tell the eye-liner situation is dire by the way her hand is positioned around the liquid tube. Her eyes are stricken with panic and her hand shakes. "I tried to do it myself, but this is what happened." Turning her shoulders, she moves her hands away from her face to show me the issue. "I'm not used to the whole makeup thing."

"Don't worry, chica." I step bare-foot into the mood-lit room and join her criss-crossed in front of the mirror. "Eye liner is very tricky. It took me years of nights out on Bourbon Street to get the look just right." My head leans slightly on her shoulder, offering reassurance. When I met Emberly on move-in day, I could tell she was shy and a bit sheltered, maybe even harboring hurt deep within her soul like I was. Her

mom hovered fiercely, making sure she had all the necessities in her dorm. Emberly fidgeted with her glasses the whole time and second guessed every decorative decision she made. I, on the other hand, unloaded everything myself and couldn't care less what anyone thought of my artistic decisions. Mom offered to make the drive with me, but in my heart, I knew this was something that had to be done on my own.

"You don't have to. . ." She retreats within herself, scooting a few inches away from me. "Bring me out. I've. . .ummm. . .never been to a bar, and you clearly know what to do." She gestures her arms up and down, drawing attention to me. Her hands make a tight wrap around her legs, curled up to her chest as she shields herself. "I mean don't feel obligated, is all." She nods her head as if that would give me an easy out to run the town solo.

"No. No. No." I shake my head adamantly. "You are coming with me." I close the space between us and grab her hands from around her knees. "Because you're my friend, and friends hangout together." A warm grin spreads across my face.

"Are you sure?" she questions with hesitation. "I don't want to intrude."

"You aren't. I probably need you there more than you need me." I glance down, flustered at the thought of giving her my relationship history lesson this early in our roommate days. Reaching my hand out for the eyeliner and giving her a smirk, I say, "Let's get your cat eye perfect before we try on outfits."

She hesitantly hands over the eyeliner to the pro. I started wearing makeup younger than most, so tutorials became my best friend until I got looks just right.

"So, what are bars like?" I take a makeup wipe out and clear her lids before going to work. She tries her best to stay still while I apply the gel to her closed eyelids. Her soft skin is so easy to apply to.

“Depends. Most are loud, hot, and full of questionable decisions.” I laugh, trying to muster up the right words to explain bar life. “I’m just the type of chaos that loves it.”

Emberly’s cheeks blow up like a pufferfish, trying her best not to talk too much and ruin the perfectly straight line I’m aiming to achieve. “What do I do?” she whispers.

“Stay by me, and you’ll be alright. I promise I won’t leave you alone.” Placing the lid on the liquid eyeliner, I admire my work, making sure each side is even in length and thickness. “Ok. You can open your eyes now. If you don’t like it, we can redo it. That’s what makeup remover wipes are for.”

She flutters her eyes open and gazes at herself in the mirror. She tilts her head side to side to get a close-up of each eye, all the while her mouth has formed an ‘o.’ “Oh my gosh. I don’t recognize myself.”

“I think you look hot, but I’d be more than happy to start over. I tried not to apply too. . .”

Before I can finish, Emberly cuts in. “I love it.” She spins her head to look me square in the eyes. “I’ve never seen myself like this.”

I squeal and pump my arms into the air at my success. “Get used to it because you’ve just become my makeup muse!”

She throws her arms around my shoulders, squeezing lightly. “Thank you,” she mutters into my ear.

“Now you really look old enough not to get carded.”

This is going to be a good night. Nothing can bring me down.

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Hartley

Ryan rolls up to the apartment at 9:59 p.m. and honks his horn an obnoxious amount of times. I sprint down the stairs and fling myself into his passenger seat, slamming the door to annoy him.

“What took so long?” He’s already sporting a scowl with creases permanently indented in his forehead.

“This—” I gesture up and down my body, “—takes time.”

“Get over yourself,” he scoffs.

“Oh, I’m just getting started.” I shoot a wink to my teammate and adjust my hat to the backward position.

“Try not to embarrass me too much. We have a reputation as athletes to uphold.”

This guy wouldn’t know fun if it smacked him square in the face. “Wrong. We have a name to make for ourselves, and that starts with getting people to notice you.”

“You and I have different ways of getting noticed.” He white-knuckles the steering wheel in a death grip. He’ll learn to love me sooner or later.

“Touché. I do mine and you do yours. We’ll see who gets the bigger NFL contract.” I reach over the center console to pound his chest with my hand twice in acknowledgment, and that earns me a small chuckle of annoyance.

"Yeah, we'll see." Ryan takes the short drive to Downtown Tap and parks an ungodly distance from the door.

"How do you expect me to make it back to this parking spot when I'm drunk?" I wave my hands wildly, gesturing toward the far off spot and slam the door.

"You got a free ride. Quit complaining," he grumbles over his shoulder, passing by me with his hands stuffed in his pockets. I jog to catch up with him before joining the massive line of students waiting to get in. The bouncer checks each ID, making sure each person is at least eighteen years old. After that, he slips over twenty-one wristbands on each of our wrists.

"I think the rumors are true," I lean over to whisper into Ryan's ear.

Before I can continue, he pushes my head away and proceeds to stick his hands back in his pockets. "Woohoo. I'm tickled pink." His monotone sarcasm isn't lost on me as we make our way inside.

Once we're inside, I'm hit with the thick heat of the amount of people packed into this small building. The bar is split in half. One side is the more chill zone with pool tables, high-top seating, and access to the bar. The other side is plastered with neon lights, deafening music, and people grinding against each other. The walls are slightly tattered with paint chips missing, and my shoes stick to the floor already coated with spilled alcohol, but it's clear this is the spot to be. Doing a quick survey of who's here, I spot our quarterback, Mason, with a beer in his hand at one of the high-tops with a few of our other teammates. Ryan makes a beeline to them without saying a word, and I follow his lead.

"What's up?" Mason extends his hand out for a bro hug. He's wearing a smile that extends across his face. I've never seen this guy mad. "I see you guys found Springs U's hottest spot." Since Mason was red-shirted his first year, this is technically his

freshman year in football terms, but it's his second year at Springs U.

"I could get used to this," I toss out as Ryan continues to mumble and grunt under his breath. Could this guy let loose for one night? The rest of the football players here with Mason say their hellos before scattering. Some grab a girl and head to the dance floor, others hover around the bar, and a few hang back by the pool tables and high-tops to talk.

"Let's get a drink." Mason throws his arm around my shoulder and begins to guide us to the bar. "You coming, Shane?"

"No. I'm good." He crosses his arms over his chest as he leans back against the table. "I'll be here."

Mason and I maze through the crowd and weave through groups of people to access the front of the bar. It's insane how many people stop to pat Mason on the back on our short walk.

"I see I'm in the presence of Springs U royalty," I joke to my quarterback.

"You could say that." His smile fades and his jaw clenches slightly. "You can have it all too if you're willing to make a name for yourself."

"That's what I want," I answer as we order two beers from the bartender.

"Then take it." He grins. We all have a persona on the field, but in order to make a name for myself, my persona needs to carry over to my everyday life. The bartender slides us two beer bottles across the wet bar top. When I turn to head back to the team crowded around the high-top, I'm stopped dead in my tracks. Hovering on the edge of the dance floor and the chill zone is the epitome of sunshine in woman form. Her dirty blonde hair cascades down her exposed back as she effortlessly tucks a stray

piece behind her ear. She tosses her head back and laughs at whatever the guy across from her says. If I could turn the music off, I would, just to hear what her laugh sounds like vibrating through my chest. Some sort of glitter covers her cheekbones making her shine in the dark bar.

Knocking me out of my haze, Mason asks, “She caught your eye?”

Shaking myself back to reality, I look at him and reply, “Who is she?” My jaw scrapes the floor as my eyes drift back to the glowing light in the form of a woman sticking out in this dingy bar.

“No idea. I’ve never seen her, so she must be a freshman.” He pats my back before leaving me like a lost puppy. Before he makes it back to the table he shouts, “Hartley!” jolting my neck to the noise. He screams, “Better get to her before I do.” He rumbles into a full-blown laughing attack and shakes his head before leaving me to my own devices.

My feet move toward the mystery girl who has me hypnotized. You know what they say: don’t look directly at the sun for too long. It can cause permanent damage to not only your eyesight, but your entire body. I guess I’m a sucker for pain.

Liza

This is nothing like Bourbon Street. This thought plagues my mind as I walk into this crowded college-town bar. Growing up in New Orleans and roaming the French Quarter later than I should have as a teenager made me grow up quickly. My roommate, on the other hand, is shaking, rubbing her hands together and picking her nails every chance she gets.

Stopping on the quieter side of the bar makes the most sense. She needs to ease into this and not get thrown off the deep end. I grab her shoulders and turn her to face me. “It’s ok. You’re doing it!” I hype her up with a toothy smile. I’m in my element while she is being pushed out of her comfort zone.

“I’m so awkward.” She brings her finger up to bite her thumbnail before I intercept and wrap her hands in mine.

“Don’t look—” I lean in to whisper. “But the athletes at the high-tops are eyeing you up and down.”

“What?!” She panics with shallow breaths before disregarding me and looking anyway. “They probably don’t know why a girl like me is here.” Her face turns the color of a cherry tomato as she grips my arm so tight it’ll probably leave marks. I let out a deep laugh and toss my head back, flipping my hair out of my face.

Emberly quirks her eyebrow up in confusion. “What’s funny? Did I miss something?”

“Follow my lead, chica. Start laughing,” I giggle out to my roommate. “Nonchalance is key to drawing them in.”

“Drawing who in? I don’t want anyone drawn in!” she shouts aggressively in my ear. Every girl wants a little attention, and Emberly doesn’t think she’s good enough to reel in a hot guy at the bar. I’ll make it my mission to prove her worth to her. “Wait. Liza there’s a really tall guy coming this way. What do we do?” She removes her hands from my arm and switches to clutching her purse in a death grip.

“Act natural. Flirty.” I wink, tossing my hair over one shoulder.

“I don’t know how. . .” Before she can finish, the mystery boy cuts in and comes into view.

This one is all man. His dirty blonde hair curls up right below his ear and a gray hat flipped backward sits on top of his head. Guys don’t make me nervous. I’ve been around the best and worst of them my whole life, but his presence does something funny to my stomach. He towers over Emberly and I with an effortless smile, revealing his knee-buckling dimples. His corded muscles ripple from beneath the baby blue Henley shirt. My eyes travel down his body shamelessly, revealing khaki pants that hug his thick thighs down to casual Vans.

“Goldie, where have you been all my life?” The male model look-alike rolls the nickname off his tongue. His sea-green eyes pierce through every barrier I carefully built up brick by brick to avoid men like this.

“Nicknames before you’ve earned the privilege, I see.” I cross my arms over my chest, accentuating one of my best physical features. I know my assets and how to use them, thank you very much.

“Only for you, Goldie.” He winks before he continues, “Hartley.” He reaches his

hand out to shake mine. Placing my hand in his, his size hits me like a freight train. A large, warm hand envelopes mine. His thumb quickly brushes over the back of my hand before he retreats and sticks it back in his pocket.

“Liza,” I giggle out. Why am I laughing? Focus, Liza. Boys like this are dangerous.

“And you?” He gestures toward my frantic roommate.

“E. . . E. . . Emberly.” She doesn’t bother to lift her eyes from the floor. Baby steps. At least she spoke.

“Nice to meet you both.” A smug grin is plastered across his face as he rocks back and forth from the tips of his toes to the balls of his heels. His face paints a picture of total relaxation, but his body language reads differently. “Do you go to school at Springs U?” He focuses his full attention on me with the best eye contact known to man.

“Yep. I’m a freshman. You?”

“Me too. I moved in early for summer training camp.” He casually throws that piece of information in the conversation. My brain short circuits, processing the fact that he’s an athlete. The thought throws me back to a time where Layne and I were forever. Yeah, no.

“Is that your way of dropping the college athlete card?”

He laughs and bends over slightly, hands still firmly placed in the pockets of his khaki pants. “Depends.” He takes a few steps closer, closing the distance between the two of us. “Is it working?” My eyes close and inhale a deep, earthy scent. It’s a woodsy mix, intoxicating me more than the drink I so desperately need. His hand reaches for my chin as he tips it up slightly to catch my gaze before dropping his arm

back down.

“Let me think about it,” I sass as I tap my finger against my chin where his hand grazed. “No, you're trouble.”

He clutches his chest in fake shock, darting his eyes back and forth across both ends of the bar. “Who? Little old me? I’m a saint.” His eyes make their way back to mine. He leans in slightly and whispers, “What do you think you know about me, Goldie?” His warm breath and deep seductive voice sends goosebumps across both arms.

Not backing down, I lean in so close that our lips almost touch. “Hotshot athlete that can score any girl in this bar, but we’re nothing more than conquests. Been there. Done that. Got the t-shirt.” My hand lifts to his neck and gently rubs back and forth. His eyes darken and zero-in on my glossy lips. “See you around, Hotshot.” Dropping my hand and taking a few steps back, never losing eye contact, I throw him a small wave before linking arms with my skittish roommate and head straight for the dance floor.

“Teach me everything,” Emberly says as we find a small opening to weave through the flashing lights and sweaty people.

I look over to Emberly and plaster a fake smile across my face. I paint the picture that I’m completely unbothered because that was too close for comfort. I was seconds away from folding for Hartley. Deciding not to relive the past, I pulled myself away from his hypnotic gaze before I threw caution to the wind and crashed my lips into his without a second thought.

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“Valiant effort, but oh so much to learn.” Mason smacks my back with a thud once I’m back at my teammates’ table.

“Yeah, yeah, let me hear how I struck out with her.” I laugh, brushing off the fact that the sunshine girl spun my head on its axis.

“Are you ready?” Ryan huffs as he leans his back against the exposed brick of the old bar.

“Are you kidding me? We just got here!” I shoot back.

“Whatever.” He reaches into his pocket to pull out his phone. His fingers tap aggressively across the screen.

I take that as my opportunity to escape the fun police and dash around the bar to get a glimpse of Liza. After a moment of scanning the packed dance floor, I spot her. It’s impossible not to. The girl radiates light in her every move. A permanent smile plastered on her face and that laugh does funny things to my chest that I don’t want to dig too deep into at the moment. All I know is that I need more of her.

The roar of chuckles from my teammates vibrate through my ears as I shuffle through the crowd of sweaty bodies, for the second time, to get closer to her. Once I’m within arm’s reach, I tap her shoulder to gain her attention. She whips around and flutters her eyes.

“Miss me?” I whisper in her ear.

“Didn’t think I could get through the night without you.” She rolls her eyes, but leans in slightly.

“Where’d your friend run off to?”

She points across the bar to a lone high top. Her friend taps on her phone and doesn’t dare lift her eyes to meet the crowd. The table she chose is within arm’s reach of the football team’s table. I notice Mason’s eyes drift to the petite loner. He grins before turning his head back to our friends.

“Does that mean I have you to myself for the rest of the night?” I hook my thumbs through the loops in my pants as tightly as I can.

Taking me by surprise, she takes a step closer to me. “You can have me for a dance. You couldn’t handle this chaos if you tried.”

“Funny that you think your crazy outweighs mine.” I pull her closer and her cheeks flame at my words. “I’m up for a challenge.”

Before I can continue, she places her hand on my chest and locks those dark eyes with mine. Her bright smile flips into a frown, and her brows furrow as she bites her bottom lip with her top teeth.

“Sorry. I . . . I . . . need to get out of here.” She turns on her heel and hightails off the dance floor and into the brightly lit space toward the exit.

“Liza, wait!” I squeeze through the crowd once again, but my thick body doesn’t move as agile as her petite one. “Stop running!” Finally catching up to her before she leaves the bar, I gently grab her elbow. “Can we talk?”

She makes no comment, still getting out as fast as she can. Once we’re a far enough

distance to not hear the thumping music, she slumps down and criss-crosses her legs on the cement. I join her on the cool ground and patiently wait for her lead.

“I probably came across as a psycho back there.”

“You didn’t.” I chuckle. “If I did something to make you uncomfortable, I’m sorry. I act before I think.” My eyes shrink to slits. “The last thing I want to do is scare you off. I’m a lot for people.”

“No. No. No.” She waves me off. “You did nothing wrong. If anything, I liked it too much.” She releases an awkward laugh before jetting her eyes to the ground. Tossing her head back, she gives me the perfect view of her soft neck. “I barely know you, so I have no clue why I’m about to tell you this, but I want to tell someone.”

“Tell me.”

“Before I left for college, my ex cheated on me and broke my heart.” A lone tear travels down her cheek and glistens in the moonlight. I reach out and wipe it away before tucking her hair behind her ear. “He’s an athlete, and. . .”

I try my best not to expose the fact that her comment paper cut my heart. “I remind you of him.”

“Not necessarily, but in full transparency, you seem like someone I could fall hard for.” She shoots me a sympathetic smile. “And I can’t take another blow.”

“Don’t boost my ego too much, now.” I grip her knee and squeeze, laughing in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Another laugh escapes her, coming deep from her chest and shooting straight into mine. “I’m not saying that’s what you want, anyway, but I need to find myself

again.”

Tilting her chin up with my thumb, I say. “Me too.” Those two words relax the crease in her brow and allow her shoulders to ease.

“Friends?” She reaches her hand out to shake mine as I drop my hand away from her soft skin.

“Friends.” I place my large hand in hers and shake it a few times. “Come on. We have a bar to shut down.” I stand from the ground and reach my hand out to help her up. I throw an arm around her shoulder and guide her back into the building. She grabs my fingers on the side of her shoulder and whispers, “Thank you.”

9

Liza

“I’m dead.” Emberly’s groan echoes through the paper thin walls of our dorm room. Her voice through the wall startles my aching body. I turn over, wrapped in my warm comforter on the twin sized bed, hair fanning across the cool satin pillowcase.

Cupping my hands over my mouth, I yell, “Welcome to the nightlife!”

“Don’t think I’m cut out for it,” she groans.

Chuckling, I sit criss-crossed on the bed. “Come over.”

Footsteps tap against the tile floor until my door cracks open. Emberly stands in the doorway with an oversized sleep shirt tucked into plaid pajama shorts. Her jet-black hair is thrown on top of her head, as she rubs sleep from her eyes. I pat the small space next to me on the bed and she climbs up. “Last night was awesome, but I feel like I’ve been run over by a truck this morning.”

I shake my head and smirk. “You didn’t drink much, though.”

“Umm. . .” Her hands raise to her mouth to bite her nails. “That was the first time I’ve ever drank.”

Her cheeks flush pink in embarrassment. It should have dawned on me that Emberly had never drank alcohol before, but where I grew up, underage drinking is common.

“What? You should have told me.”

“I didn’t want to be lame. I already couldn’t do my makeup.” Her hands raise to touch her now flaming cheeks. “You’re way cooler than me, and it shows.”

I roll my eyes and look her straight in the eyes. “Stop. None of that stuff matters to me. I really like your company. Don’t be afraid to be your true self with me.”

She lets out a breath and laughs. “That hasn’t gone well for me in the past.”

I reach out to wrap her hand in mine. “What happened?”

She takes a deep breath and swallows before speaking. “A stupid boy.”

“If he made you feel like that, he isn’t worth it.” I open my arms wide to invite her in for a hug. “And I’ve learned that the hard way.”

She leans over the creaky bed and folds into my arms. “I hit the roommate jackpot.”

“Same. Do you have plans today? I was thinking about heading downtown to check out the boutiques and become more acclimated with the area.”

“I don’t. Mind if I tag along?”

I hop off the raised bed. “Duh!”

An hour later, we make it to the downtown shopping scene. Being single means being more independent, and that starts with doing things I want to do when I want to do them. Springs U is nestled in the heart of a small beach town littered with locally owned businesses right on the water. We’ve been window shopping along the cobblestone sidewalk for a few minutes before we catch a whiff of the savory smell

of cheese and bread wafting through the air.

I close my eyes and take a deep inhale of the scent. “Mhmmm.”

“I’m hungry,” Emberly says.

Linking my arm through hers, we walk a few shops down before we spot the entrance of the pizzeria. The sign reads that it opened at eleven, so we’re just in time for the first batch of fresh pizza. We walk up to the ordering counter and study the menu printed above.

“What are you thinking?” I ask.

“Doesn’t matter to me. I like anything with cheese.” She chuckles.

The dinging sound of the door to the shop opening rings through the empty restaurant, alerting the cashier of more customers making their way into the shop.

I rattle off our order to the cashier. “We’ll take a large pepperoni with extra cheese.” I tap my chin before continuing, “Oh, and can we get an order of the cheesy bread with two large drinks, too?” I laugh as I walk away to grab napkins and fill our drink cups. There’s no way we’ll devour all of this food, but that means more to save for later.

Emberly throws her hands up as she tails behind me. “No arguments here.”

“Long time no see.” A sultry voice hits me out of nowhere, traveling straight through my body from my head to my toes.

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I spin around from the drink machine, smacking him with my long hair in the process. His corded arms fold across his bulk chest leaving me staring like a fool. “Hartley. Are you stalking me?”

He chuckles before sticking his hands in the pockets of his khaki shorts. He looks absolutely devastating this morning in a worn, gray football t-shirt, hat flipped backward, and dimples out to play. “I wish.”

“Well, if you’re not following me, you must be here for pizza.” Awesome. Way to play it smooth, Liza. Of course, he’s here for pizza.

He reaches around my shoulder to grab a straw. “It would appear that way.”

“Yep.” I rock back and forth on the heels of my feet, not sure what to say to the man in front of me who manages to suck the air clean out of any room he walks into, apparently.

“I planned to take my mobile order calzone to go.” His eyes shift from mine to the order counter where Emberly waits for our pizza, blissfully unaware of my predicament. “But, now I’m inclined to stay and join my new friend for lunch.”

My cheeks flame at the thought of spending a casual lunch with the boy in front of me. “If you don’t mind crashing girls’ day. Then, sure.”

“Not a problem. I’ll grab us a table.” He saunters off across the small restaurant and settles into a worn booth by a window, sunshine reflecting off his golden skin and bright blonde hair. He pulls out his phone from his pocket and busies himself while I

meet Emberly at the counter to fill her in on this SOS moment.

“9-1-1. I repeat, 9-1-1!” I whisper-shout into the shell of her ear.

She’s startled at my quiet approach. “Why did you sneak up on me?!”

“This is serious!” My eyes track from her to where Hartley has made himself comfortable, waiting for us to join him. “Look.”

She follows my eyes and is met with the sight of Hartley waving at us from the booth across the restaurant.

“Aww. He seems nice. Didn’t you agree to be his friend?”

I roll my eyes and regret my words from last night. He does seem nice, but boys who look like that and damaged girls like me are a recipe for disaster. “I did.”

“Okay. . .” she drawls out. “I’m not seeing a problem here.”

“Ugh! I guess you’re right, but the minute I go starry eyed, smack me in the head.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be teaching me?” She laughs as our order is dropped off on the counter. “Let’s go.”

Emberly holds the pizza and cheesy bread boxes while I carry our cold drinks to the booth Hartley selected for us.

“Hey.” He juts his chin out and reaches across the table to help Emberly grab the boxes before scooting in the torn booth. “Thanks for joining me. It would have been embarrassing to sit alone.”

“No problem,” Emberly giggles out.

“Order for Hartley!” The white-aproned restaurant worker slides a to-go box across the takeout counter. Pushing himself up from the booth, he takes his sweet time to retrieve his order from the counter. “Lunch with friends is better than lunch alone. Don’t you agree?” He winks as he slides back into the booth with his food.

I decide to change the subject into safer territory. Preferably one that doesn’t heat my cheeks and release butterflies in my stomach. “So, you’re a football player?”

“Wide receiver.” He cuts the corner of his calzone off and lifts his fork to his mouth as he licks the piece of cheese dangling out of the dough. My eyes zero in on his tongue, his lips, and those stupid dimples that keep popping up at the worst times. “What about you two?” He points the fork between Emberly and I. “What brought you all to Springs U?”

“Running away from my problems,” I huff out.

Emberly’s eyebrows shoot up at my response, surprised by my honesty. What she doesn’t know is that Hartley knows more about me than I’d like to admit after meeting him less than twenty-four hours ago.

He stares at me sweetly, a small grin tugs at the corner of his lips. “I’m thankful you ran.”

Such a flirt. I nod and smile. “Me too.”

He directs his attention to my roommate who is now nursing her hangover with her second piece of greasy pizza. “What about you?”

“Oh. . .” She points to herself. “Me? I’m from here.”

His eyebrows raise in interest. “Really? Where’d you go to high school?”

“Springs Valley High.”

“No way! You must know—”

Before he can finish, Emberly cuts him off. “Nope. No. Don’t know anyone.”

Picking up on her discomfort, Hartley shifts the subject away from whatever Emberly is trying to hide. “Sorry. I’m glad you’re here.”

“Thanks.” She tucks a stray piece of her jet-black hair behind her ear. Her eyes bore holes into the table.

“Goldie, what part of the world are you running from?”

Unlike Emberly, I’m an open book. “New Orleans, and before you ask, alligators don’t camp on my front lawn.”

He lets out an uncontrollable laugh. “That’s a good one.”

I take a small bite of the extra cheesy pizza before setting it back down on the paper plate. “We’re trying to become familiar with the area. Any good spots?”

“Tons.” He leans back against the booth and places both hands behind his head, putting his corded muscles on full display. “According to the guys on the team, this is the best pizza in town. If you’re looking for a home cooked meal, Pat’s Diner is the best. I’ll take you.”

“Watch it, Hotshot. We’re friends. Remember?”

He shakes his head and runs his hands through his hair. His face reads that he loves a challenge. “Yeah, Goldie. Friends.”

10

Liza

“Hmmm.” I tap my bare feet to the music blasting through my phone against the cool tile floor of our joined bathroom. “I love this song.”

Emberly opens the door to her bedroom to peek at what I’m up to. “Almost ready?”

I pucker my lips and apply a light pink gloss before rubbing them together and checking the finished product. “Very close.”

“You look amazing!” She walks beside me and leans her head against my shoulder. “I couldn’t pull this off.”

“You absolutely can,” I huff. “You need to believe it.”

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “Yeah. Yeah. Self-confidence and all that jazz.”

“It’s a thing.” I run my fingers through the loose curls of my hair once more to create a relaxed look. Turning around, I check out the outfit I chose for tonight’s party in the mirror. I went with an edgier look, opting for my black leather zip-up corset top that makes my chest look phenomenal paired with my light washed jeans that hug my curves in the best places. “I wish you were coming, though. Are you sure? I can whip up a look for you in no time.” Clutching my hands together, I playfully beg Emberly

to join me at the house party we heard rumbling about from some girls down the hall. Apparently it's at Springs U's quarterback, Mason Miller's, house. The girls said his parties are always the top ones of the year, so of course, I need to make an appearance.

"I'm positively partied out for at least a few weeks." She plays with the loose bun thrown on top of her head. "I'll be more than occupied working on my blog."

"I get it, but I'll miss you." Reaching around her waist, I squeeze tight before stepping toward the door to stuff my keys into my back pocket.

"Call me if you need a ride." She waves goodbye before scooting into her solar system lit room.

"Will do!" I throw back before shutting the door and jogging downstairs to the rideshare I ordered.

Hartley

Thumping music from the DJ rattles through Mason's house. House would be modest. He lives in a mansion fit for a king. People crowd the winding staircase, hanging all over each other, leading up to the empty bedrooms. Mason's dad is a retired NFL player with loads of cash, hence the over the top college living arrangement. His parties are fully staffed with bartenders and a clean-up crew to follow behind the sloppy drunks spilling alcohol on the expensive marble floors. Nursing my beer, I take in the sights of the party. Of all the parties I've been to, this one takes the cake.

Mason catches my eyes from across the room, nuzzled with girls under each arm. "Dude." He parts the crowd and makes a beeline straight for me. "What's up?" He reaches out to shake my hand.

“Taking it all in.” Gulping down the rest of my beer, I continue, “This is insane, man.”

He laughs and instinctively wraps his arm around a third girl that knocks her hips against his. “A party fit for legends. We’re going to kill it this season. Your routes are looking strong.”

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“No doubt. I’m gunning for rookie of the year.” A leggy blonde finds her spot next to me. Her long nails rake down my back, sending goosebumps across my skin. Mason shoots me a wicked smile and turns back to the crowd with girls firmly placed under his arms. Her scent’s a sweet coconut smell, but her breath is minty as I turn my focus solely on her. “What’s your name, sweetheart?”

“Kali,” she whispers seductively against my ear. As a football player, it’s never been difficult to find girls, but college upped it to a whole new level. “Are you new?”

“New to you,” I growl. Her nails continue to rub my back, slowly making their way up to the base of my neck.

“Where’ve you been hiding?”

“Depends on who you. . .” My focus darts to a flash of blonde across the room. She’s surrounded by girls, tossing her head back and releasing a carefree laugh that sends a smile across my face. She’s torturing me in a tight, black top that accentuates her features in the best way. I know I should tear my eyes away, but it’s hard to pull my focus from the happiness that radiates from her eyes and the sound of her laugh, even from a distance.

“Did you hear me?” Kali taps my chest to regain my focus on her.

“Huh? Yeah, sure. I’ll see you around.” Gently removing her arms from my neck, I pat her shoulder and push through the crowd to talk to Liza.

Pulling off my backwards hat, I comb my hands through my thick hair before tapping

her shoulder. “Goldie.” She whips around and plasters that smile across her face at the sight of me. Her attention alone sends warmth through my body and a nervousness I typically don’t feel.

She crosses her arms across her chest and gives me a mischievous look. “Are you following me, Hotshot?” Alcohol permeates from her breath, clearly having had a few drinks since she’s been here. “Or am I just that irresistible?”

“Just trying to be a good friend and welcome you to the party.”

“Friends do that.” She laughs and cups her hands over her mouth.

“They do.”

“This place is ridiculous.” She waves her hands, gesturing the magnitude of the mansion and party. “I didn’t expect this.”

“Yeah, neither did I. Must be nice to have a full staff clean up after house parties. I’ve always had to do it hungover the next morning.”

“Same! It’s a rite of passage after hosting a party, in my opinion.” She turns her head to look around once more. “I figured you’d have your flavor of the night by now. Need help scoping one out?” Her wink sends a jolt straight through my chest.

“Nah. There’s only one girl I really want to impress, but sadly, she shoved me in the friend zone.”

She taps her chin and puckers those shiny lips to think. “What a shame. She sounds like a real babe. Probably out of your league, though.”

“Definitely out of my league. Doesn’t mean I won’t keep shooting my shot.”

She shakes her head and reaches for my wrist before dragging her eyes to the point where our skin meets. A jolt of electricity ripples through my hand and up my arms where we share contact. Her cheeks instantly flush, and everything around us fades to black. There's no noise or distractions, just the two of us, alone in our little stolen moment.

Her lustful eyes drift up, connecting with mine. "I . . ."

A broad body shuffles in behind her. "Liza."

Her eyes flutter, ripping away from mine before I'm met with the back of her head. "Locke!" She throws her arms around his neck as he spins her around twice before dropping her back to the ground. "I didn't know you were coming."

Why is she so friendly with Locke?

"Come on, baby. I wouldn't miss a party." He catches my attention. "Hey, Knox." He juts his chin out to acknowledge me.

My jaw clenches tight and my hands white knuckle grip by my side. "Locke." Of course she's cuddled up with this stellar guy. "How do you two know each other?" I wince out, pointing to the pair.

"Uhhh. . ." Locke looks up, trying to remember where he met Liza.

How could anyone forget the moment she storms into your life?

"A few weeks ago at a party, right, Liz?"

"Yep," she responds, popping the 'p.' "You cut in at the perfect time." She twists slightly to catch my eyes again. "I need a drink." Dropping his hands to the small of

her back, he rubs the leather clenching her skin before moving forward.

“Follow me.” He takes off toward the bar and Liza follows behind, passing me with a flip of her hair.

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Cupping my hands around my mouth, I yell, “Goldie!” Locke is too far into the thick crowd to hear, but Liza’s head snaps back, her eyes filled with something I can’t quite figure out. I wave for her to take a few steps closer to me. “If you needed a drink, all you had to do was ask.”

“That’s the thing,” she rolls off her tongue, the sweet smell of alcohol rolling off her tongue and her proximity turns my mind to mush. “Getting a drink with Locke is unserious. He knows the score.” She reaches to the top of my arm and rubs her nails down to my fingers, sending goosebumps across my skin. “Getting a drink with you would mean more, and I can’t have you thinking I can give you anything but here and now.”

I swallow the sensations she brings out in me. “You’re right.” My thumb rubs across her fingers, still firmly planted on my sweaty hand. “Here and now will never be enough for the two of us. Would it?” I shoot her a wink to her before forcing myself to unlock our touch. Never taking a moment to look back at her. Because that would mean seeing her join Locke at the bar, kiss him, maybe grind on him to dance. Yeah, I can’t do that to myself. What I need is a distraction, and Kali from earlier will do the trick.

11

Hartley

Sophomore Year

“Knox! In my office. Everyone else, get in the shower because you stink on and off

the field.” Coach walks off the field, ending another grueling summer practice in the Florida heat. His face sports a permanent scowl of disgust for our on-field performance. We had a decent season last year, but we’re competitors, and it’s never good enough. We always want more, for ourselves, our team, and our program. I managed to make a splash with impressive receiving yards and acting just nutty enough during my interviews to earn a few Sportscenter clips. NIL deals rolled in, and I shamelessly accepted one for sports headbands. I’m glad I play at a time where college athletes can be paid for brand deals. Apparently, I made a fashion statement last season with my colorful headbands to push back my flow.

“What did you do now?” Ryan hits me with a disappointed look and scolds me like a father would—if I had one worth anything.

“You know, just being my star-studded self.” I glance over at him with a wry smile, downplaying the knots in my stomach at Coach’s tone.

“Would you take something seriously for once? Coach was fuming.”

“No need to worry until I have to.” I wink as Ryan shakes his head and turns into the locker room. I continue down the vacant hall and knock on Coach’s office door.

“Come in,” he says.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” I paint on my best charming persona and remind myself that nothing can get to me.

“Sit.”

Yep. He’s definitely mad.

He rustles with a packet of papers on his desk before slipping on his reading glasses.

Flipping an official-looking document toward me he says, “Care to explain this?”

I reach over his wood grain desk and lift off the cushioned chair to grab the paper from his hands. Typed on it is my official college transcript and my stomach bottoms out, raising bile up my throat to the tip of my tongue. I’m aware that I didn’t light the world on fire academically during my freshman year of college, but it’s never warranted a meeting. Sophomore level classes will hit me hard. I haven’t checked my averages from last year, but most of my quizzes were returned with failing grades. I cross my leg over my other and lean back in the chair. “It looks to me like this is all the evidence I need to confirm that football is my future.”

“Funny, Knox. I’m glad you’re taking this so seriously.” He guffaws before wrapping his hands together and leaning over the desk. “The dean of this university brought this to my desk this morning. He wants to know why the Springs U breakout star has a 2.0 GPA.” He doesn’t scream or flail his arms around. His tone is flat and his eyes dark, making this a scarier conversation. “The dean doesn’t peruse in my office all that often, Knox.”

“I’ll do better this year,” I assure my coach. “It’s the first grade check.”

“You better hope so, because you’re on academic probation.”

“Probation?! What does that mean?” My voice raises as I grip the arms of my chair tighter, veins undoubtedly popping from my forehead.

“It means that if you don’t bring your GPA up to a 2.3 by December, you’ll be off the team.” Coach levels me with a hard look as he leans over his desk.

“I . . . I . . . can’t. Football is everything. What. . .” My breaths quicken and a weight the size of an elephant is planted directly on my chest. Dark circles creep into my vision making it hazy in the fluorescent light of the office.

“I’ve referred you to the Department of Academic Excellence. I suggest you pay them a visit before the semester begins and secure a tutor.” He slides a class schedule across the desk to me. “And I’ve worked with the dean to tweak your schedule. You shouldn’t have a problem getting higher grades in these courses.”

“Thank you, Coach. I won’t let you down.” I nod, grab my new schedule, and turn my back to exit his office.

As I crack the heavy wooden door open to skirt out, Coach says, “Don’t let yourself down.” Gulping the freshly rising bile, I throw a silent head nod over my shoulder, not stopping at the locker room for my equipment on the way out the facility.

I drive home in silence, processing the breaking news Coach laid on me. Probation isn’t an option, so I need to figure out how to start strong this semester, grades wise. Sliding my keys into the pocket of my athleisure shorts, I take a deep breath and fold my new schedule into a tiny square to shove in the same pocket. I try my best to sneak in without alerting Violet, but she’s got the senses of a cat, and swarms me the minute I walk through the door.

“How was practice?” she asks all giddy, still sporting her polka dot pajama set.

“Same old, same old. Sweaty, hot, and grueling.” I run my hand down my face in an attempt to convince Violet that my mood is because practice maxed me out.

“I don’t know how you do it.” She purses her lips and rocks back and forth on her feet. “I cooked sausage, egg, and cheese biscuits this morning and saved one for you.”

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“You’re the best, Vi.” I drop my keys on the side table and thrust the fridge open to retrieve Violet’s mouth-watering concoction. Being away from her last year was rough. I missed moments like these. It reminds me that she’s my family. Unrolling the sandwich from the paper towel wrap and popping it in the microwave buys me a few seconds to gather myself before heading back into the main room. I slap the greasy goodness on a paper plate and meet Violet on our worn-down couch to eat. She sits criss-crossed with a blanket curled over her body.

“Get this.” She taps my shoulder, signaling she wants my full attention on whatever excites her. “I’ll technically be classified as a sophomore this fall!” She squeals in excitement and jiggles on the couch cushion. She continues, “With the credits I took online this summer and my dual-enrollment credit from last year, I have enough hours to qualify.”

“I’m so proud of you, Vi.” I put my plate on the ground to hook my arm around her neck and pull her closer, messing up her hair in the process. “You’re a genius.”

Laughing while pushing me away, she says, “Not a genius, just determined not to fail.” There’s that sick feeling rising from my belly, again. She’s working her butt off to make sure she has a bright future, and I’m screwing mine up. Not wanting to burst her bubble, I decide now isn’t the time to bring up my academic woes and potential football probation status. Besides, Violet doesn’t need any extra worry or stress on her plate. I’m supposed to take care of her, not the other way around. I’ll figure it out.

I pick my paper plate up and stuff the last bit of the delicious breakfast sandwich in my mouth before tossing it into the trash. “I think I’m gonna take a nap. Holler if you

need anything, sis.”

She nods vigorously and hightails it to her room to continue working on whatever assignment is currently on her mind. Slamming the door shut, I throw my aching body on my queen-sized bed and shove my face into the cotton pillow to muffle my groans. Why can't I buckle down and make better grades? For as long as I could remember, school has always been a source of frustration in my life. It's always been difficult for me to complete anything or hold my focus long enough to comprehend. I piled up a collection of notes home from my teachers, but after years of receiving D's and F's, I was sent an official note from the principal.

To Whom it May Concern:

After data collected throughout the school year, your child, Hartley Knox is in danger of failing. He is frequently inattentive in class and fails to complete his work.

My dad never cared about school forms, so I brought it to the most important man in my life: Violet's grandpa. I'll never forget him patting me on the back and giving me a speech about how this doesn't define me. He did hours' worth of research to conclude that I had all the traits of ADHD and did his best to help me cope.

I always knew what I needed to get in class to stay on the football team, but I got cut a lot of slack in high school for being the resident star wide receiver.

Blowing air out of my mouth, I grab my phone to make an appointment with the Academic Center that Coach set me up with. I need to swallow my pride and find a tutor, or my dream of playing professionally will go up in flames before it starts.

This place smells. I scan the room while waiting in the lobby of the Center of Academic Excellence at Springs U. My roommate mentioned that students could sign up to be a paid student tutor here. You can sign up for your specific major and accept jobs on a class to class basis.

“Liza Wilde,” the official-looking lady calls me. It’s completely unnecessary considering I’m the only one in the room.

“That’s me!” I pop off the dated fabric chair and follow her to the back office. She flips her auburn hair over her shoulders and her heels click as she walks down the vacant hallway. We reach her small office with a desk littered in paperwork, with nothing personally identifying on the walls. I would hate to work here.

“So, you’re here to apply for a tutoring position?” she asks, logging in to her iPad without making eye contact.

“Yes, ma’am. I’d like to sign up for art classes only.”

She flips the tablet to face me and points to a tiny text box on the screen. “Sign this, and we’ll contact you if we have a student that meets your specific skill set.” I scribble my signature on the screen and wait for her to print out my confirmation. That was easier than I thought. “Thank you.” I nod before exiting into the dismal lobby and back out to the scorching heat of main campus during the summer. I reach into my purse to check my phone, but before I grab it, I tumble into a rock hard individual and fall to the floor.

“Shoot!” The deep timbre of his voice rattles through my bones as he leans down to place his hand on my back. “I’m sorry.” I tilt my chin up and meet the mischievous green eyes of Hartley. “We meet again, Goldie.” He wets his bottom lip seductively and grabs a hold of my hand to help me off the floor. I dust off my floral sundress, making sure dirt didn’t get on the bright yellow outfit. “Didn’t see enough of me this

weekend?”

“It’s all good. I should know better than to multitask while walking.” I chuckle. “And yes, I’ve seen more than enough of you this weekend. Did you really have to jump through a table?”

“Bad girl, Goldie,” he teases. “I’m surprised you caught me jumping through the table with the way you and Locke were down each other’s throats all night. That’s a good way to evoke my puke and reflex.” He tips his head to the side and shakes the memory. “What brings you to this side of campus?”

I hate the way my cheeks flame at his words.

I decide to ignore his jab at Locke and I’s arrangement. “Putting in an application at the Academic Center.” I throw my thumb back and gesture to the building behind me. I clutch my purse to distract my hands from touching his body.

“What a coincidence.” He tilts his head slightly and looks through the full-length glass window. “I am, too.”

Feigning surprise, I allow myself to crack a smile. “You’re applying to be a student tutor as well? That’s awesome.”

“Oh no, Goldie. I’m signing up to be tutored.” He grabs the back of his neck and rubs nervously. Seeing Hartley nervous is new to me.

I blink in astonishment. “Well, good for you for being proactive and all that jazz.” I nudge his chest and laugh. Hartley brings out all of my emotions when he’s in my presence. That’s why I try to avoid him, even though it’s the last thing I want to do.

“Yep, football requirements. Speaking of football. . .” He crosses his arms over his

chest and taps one foot on the newly-bricked walkway. “How’s Locke treating ya?”

I roll my eyes to the back of my head. I knew he wouldn’t let it die. This couldn’t be any more awkward if we tried. “You know us. We’re just having fun.” My mouth tips down slightly, wiping the smile from my face as I peer to the ground again. I can only commit to “just having fun” nowadays since my mind is still royally screwed up from my breakup with Layne.

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I'll always love you, Liza. Forever isn't long enough. When I sign my first MLB contract, we'll get married and move far away from here. Shaking the haunting thoughts from my mind, I remind myself that Layne is long gone and I need to let it go.

"I've got to make sure you're good, is all." He catches me off guard by pulling my body into his chiseled chest with a warm hug. He rocks me side to side and gently kisses the top of my blonde hair before pulling away. I steal one deep inhale of his earthy scent before it's gone. He's done this more times than I can count, but each time knocks me off kilter.

"How's your flavor of the week?" Hartley is known as a bit of a playboy on campus, but the way he acts around me starkly contradicts the party boy aura he lets on to the rest of the world.

"Wouldn't have any if you'd put me out of my misery." He winks and cracks both of his knuckles. "No one comes close to you."

My hands dart to my fiery cheeks in a weak attempt to cool them off. Hartley and I run in the same circle since I've started a loose relationship with his teammate, Locke. Hartley makes it a point to make contact with me wherever we are, and the flirting has kicked up a notch since that night we met. Who am I kidding? I live for any attention.

"You know I'll always wait," he whispers under his breath before flipping his backward hat to its correct position.

“I know.” My heart contracts in my chest and is moments away from bursting at the seams. “But you really shouldn’t.” If it would be anyone, it would be him. Every stolen moment between us this past year brings me closer and closer to caving into temptation, but I remind myself that loving a boy like Hartley is dangerous territory. It’s heartbreak waiting to happen, and I can’t allow myself to give in to something like that again.

"What do you need from me to be ready?" His eyes are pools of reflected hope.

I lift my fingers to my mouth. He's asked me this question before, but I give him the same answer each time. "I don't know."

He huffs out a breath. "Let me know when you figure it out."

Hartley

Liza was the last person I expected to bump into outside of the Center for Academic Excellence. That girl can turn any moment, big or small, into my favorite part of the day. We’ve stayed friends throughout the past year, and I admit, I went on a bit of a wild streak: girls, parties, and drinks. What can you expect from a Division One football player with the world as his oyster? Especially after the girl he’s been pining after for the better part of a year continues to stick him in the friend zone and maul his teammate at parties.

Liza has been in a “situationship” with one of my teammates for months now, and I get downright murderous when I see them sucking face at football parties. She’s not mine, but I’d do anything for her to be mine. I should have spent the last year convincing her that I’m the one. Showing her that I would drop everything for just a chance at dating her, but instead, I flirt my heart out with her then, turn to self-destruction, hooking up with the second prettiest girl in the room night after night. I made it clear that I wasn’t interested in a friends with benefits arrangement. She’s too

special.

“Mr. Knox. Follow me, please.” The stiff clerk escorts me to the back office so she can log me in the system for tutoring. I lounge in the office chair and wait for her to look up from her iPad.

“Coach mentioned that he stopped by and set some things up for me,” I explain.

“Yes.” She continues to click buttons on the tablet without making eye contact. “I’m pulling up your course load now. It looks like you have manageable courses selected for the fall semester.”

“Thank goodness.” I sigh in relief, needing the extra confirmation from her. “I need to bring my GPA up to at least a 2.3 to get off of academic probation with the team.”

“That shouldn’t be hard to do.” She flips the tablet screen to face me so I can get a good look at my classes and expectations coming my way. “Let’s start with Art History 101. It’s a basic elective course that can count towards all majors.” Flipping the screen back around, she clicks aggressively and nods to herself as she finishes the forms. “You’re all set with a tutor. All sessions take place in study room two in the library.” She slides a small neon green paper square across the desk that explains how to gain access to the Springs U Study Hall App. “You can edit sessions through the portal. It also allows you to message your tutor through a secure platform. If you have any issues with your tutor, please contact us and we’ll rematch you.” Slowly standing up from her desk, the woman escorts me back to the main waiting area.

“Thank you.” I extend my hand to shake hers before leaving just as quickly as I came. I’ve got this.

Springs U Study Hall Portal

All students and tutors will create a unique username to protect the personal phone numbers of each student. You may chat with your match on the portal as a safe and secure platform.

Class: Art History 101 Fall Semester

CreativeArtist1: Hi! I am assigned to be your tutor for Art History 101. I'm also taking the class this semester, so it will help keep us accountable for projects, tests, and papers. How does the second week of class sound as a starting date?

StarAthlete13: See ya then, CreativeArtist1 ;)

CreativeArtist1: I hope you plan to take this seriously. Art isn't as 'easy' as you may think.

StarAthlete13: I take art very seriously. Are we going to finger paint?

CreativeArtist1 has logged off

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Hartley

"Have you managed to run your tutor off yet?" Ryan drowns on with his daily nagging.

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“Nope. Today’s day one.” I lick my lips and laugh on my way to the cafeteria. The first week of class has gone without a hitch, except for myslighttardiness on the first day in a writing course Coach signed me up for. It would have been fine if Violet wasn’t in the same class, more than ready to scold me for not taking school seriously enough. She’s always known about my struggles with ADHD, but I don’t like burdening her with more than she already has going on.

“Would you do us all a favor and at least try to make this work? As much as it pains me to say, we need you out on that field.” His jaw tightens as he cracks his neck on each side. Ryan is the most serious guy I know, and I’m scared of how he would take me getting benched for grades.

“No worries. I’ve got this as long as you stay far away from baby Vi.”

“For the millionth time, I won’t screw up again,” he scowls.

Last week threw me a curveball when Violet and Ryan decided to play tonsil hockey at the back to school bash. I wasn’t there to witness it, but Violet’s teary confession did enough for me to pummel him in the grass at practice the next day. Violet thinks the only reason I wasn’t there was to hook up with the gorgeous girl who agreed to leave the party with me, but the truth is, I was sick to my stomach watching Liza and Locke flirt all night. The way he touched her hips, but his eyes drifted to other girls in the room. The slimy look on his face when he kisses her like a conquest. I hated every second of it, but she’s hardwired to believe that every future relationship would be like her last one. So instead of giving me a chance to show her something real, she settles for noncommittal jerks like Locke.

Walking into the cafeteria earns us a few stares and whispers. When you're two of the biggest collegiate athletes in the nation, people notice.

"Hey, Hart!" Violet waves from a few tables over and gestures for me to join her and her friend. I throw up the 'one second' finger and turn to Ryan.

"That's my cue to dip." Ryan thumps my back with his hand and cuts in the opposite direction of the girls' table.

"You can't hide forever, lover boy!" I cup my hands around my loud mouth and scream loud enough to embarrass my burly friend. He shoots back a death glare before picking up his pace out of sight.

"What's up, Vi?" I weave through the packed lunch area to give her a tight hug. Sitting across from Violet is my biggest temptation at Springs U. "Always a pleasure, Goldie." I lick my top lip and drop my gaze to take her in. It always pulls the cutest shade of pink to her cheeks. She drops her eyes to the table before lifting those thick lashes and rolling her eyes to the back of her head.

"Are you ever going to tell me how I earned that nickname, Hotshot?" She purses those glistening pouty lips and laces her hands together on top of the table, not one to back away from a war of words.

"One day." I wink and divert my attention to Violet before she reads too much into this conversation and gives me the third-degree back at the apartment. "Love to see this." I gesture my hand to both of them. "My two favorite girls in the same place."

"Watch out, Hotshot. Vi is here to become the football team's biggest distraction." She giggles and drops her head back to rest on her neck. I stare too long at her exposed neck and begin wondering what her skin would taste like.

“I’m not stealing anyone. Don’t get him in a tizzy,” Violet scolds her. I’m known to cause quite the scene, and when it comes to Violet, no fight isn’t worth it.

“I don’t know. . .” She places her hand under her chin and locks those deep caramel pools in with mine. “I’ve heard things.”

“Whatthingshave you heard, Goldie? If your information source is Locke, then I’m deeming it fake news.” I throw my backpack on the floor and scoot into the booth next to Violet.

“Wouldn’t you love to know?” She tilts her head slightly, trying her best to bait me into the banter she loves. “I have to split. See y’all later.” She scoots out of the booth and throws her bag over one shoulder. Her hair flows down her back, hitting her right below the shoulder blades. She has a few flowers picked from the campus garden weaved in small strands of her beachy waves. Her head tilts over her shoulder, allowing her to blow a friendly kiss to Violet. Violet makes a show of pretending to catch it before I have my best friend to myself.

“Do I even want to know, Hart?” Violet hits me with a stoic look that tells me she’s onto whatever Liza and I do when we’re around each other.

“If there’s anything to know, you’d be the first.” Spending too much time going back and forth with Liza puts me in a time crunch to make it to my first tutoring session on time. Coach would rip me apart if I was late on the first day. Word travels like wildfire on this campus. Instead of buying lunch, I steal a few chicken strips off of Vi’s plate and book it to the campus library I’ve never stepped foot in.

Luckily, I have mad skills in the speed walking department, so I make it to the library entrance with five minutes to spare. Entering through the turn-style door, I do my best to not disturb anyone studying at the open tables. I spend a minute peering around each corner to make sure I’m heading in the right direction. I travel down a musty

hall, and spot a small sign that hasn't been updated since the 80's reading: Study Rooms. Bingo. I peek through the exposed glass into the empty first room to get an idea of the setup. As soon as I open the door of the second study room, my heart drops to my stomach. Sitting in a worn down wooden chair with a laptop, papers, and pens scattered across the matching table is my golden haired kryptonite.

"Liza, I think you have the wrong room. I have a reserved spot here today." I decided not to jump to conclusions. Brush it off as an honest mistake.

"No." She shakes her head and furiously clicks the keys on her laptop. "I'm scheduled to work in this room tonight. I'm meeting my new tutoring student." She flips the laptop to face me, and I walk closer to get a better look. The chat between CreativeArtist1 and StarAthlete13 burns through my eyes.

I rub my hands together. "Looks like I'm your student." I gulp, hiding the smirk that's threatening to burst out, and selfishly loving the extra one-on-one time this will give me with her.

Inhaling a deep breath and dropping her head into both hands, she slowly lifts back up, leaving her hair a tousled mess around her pristine face. "This can't be real," she groans.

"Oh, it's real. Let's get our art history on." I slam my bag down on the table and empty its contents across our space. I don't know the first thing about good study habits, but I hope that Liza will teach me.

"Look, Hartley." She leans over the table only inches away from my face. "If this is going to work, we can't goof off like we normally do." She exhales and I inhale every drop of her sweet-cinnamon scent. "Art is serious to me. It's going to be my career one day."

Note to self, dive more into the hot, tortured artist thing another time.

“You don’t have to worry.” I reach over and tuck a stray piece of hair behind her ear. Her eyes follow my hand’s every move. “I need your help. My football career depends on it.”

“Let’s get to it, then.” She flips open my binder lying on the table. It’s filled with notes and sheets I must have stuffed in from the bottom of my bag.

I point my finger at the array of supplies she drops on the table. “Where’d you get all of those?”

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She rolls her eyes at me in annoyance. "Class?"

"I might need to borrow your notes and class copies." My hand grips the back of my neck and rubs. "I misplaced mine."

Her eyes soften. "That's fine." She grabs an extra binder out of her backpack and slides it across the table. "Here. You can have this one. There's colored tabs inside that will separate your classes. Keeping everything in one place will help."

"Thanks." I grab the binder and place it in my backpack. My cheeks heat at the intimacy of her seeing me at my most vulnerable state. Not many people see the real me. The me who doesn't play off everything as a joke. "I don't mean to be this way."

Liza reaches across the table and rubs my hand. "It's okay. We all need a little help sometimes, but you're going to need to work hard. Are you an art major, now?"

I chuckle. "No. Coach changed my classes around to give me a better chance to improve my GPA."

I roll my eyes and huff in annoyance. "So, he thinks art is the easy way out? He sounds like he's never stepped foot in an art class." She crosses her arms over her chest and taps her foot against the floor. "Art takes focus, precision, concentration, and—"

I cut her off, "I believe you."

She smiles and loosens her grip on her chest to relax. "I guess we should get started."

We spend the rest of our session reviewing week one notes and making flashcards of the important art eras our professor went over in class. Liza is in the same class, but a different time and day. At the end of the session, I realize the major problems I have on my hands.

My tutor is smoking hot, and I haven't been able to get her off my mind for the past year.

She's my tutor. Which means she's off limits.

She's areallygood tutor, and I can't risk messing this up.

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Liza

"Unbelievable!" I shout into my dorm room and slam the door behind me. I must have scared Emberly out of her room because she pops her head out her door and dashes to me.

"What's wrong?" She connects her fingers together and rocks back and forth.

"Long story. Take a seat, girly pop." I gesture for her to join me on our couch in the shared living space. It's seen better days, full of creases and cracks. The cushions are worn, and both of us sink when we sit, but it's really comfy. Emberly tucks her feet under her and puts her arm across the back of the couch, giving me her full attention.

"Ugh, today was my first tutoring session," I say, running my hands down the front of my face.

"Was your student the worst?"

“Worse than you could imagine.” I rest the side of my face on the cushion and face my roommate. “He’s tall, muscular, and easy on the eyes.”

“That’s a bad thing?”

“His name is Hartley Knox,” I groan.

That peaks her attention. “Hartley, Hartley, Hartley. The quintessential lover boy who loves to lay it on thick?”

“That’s the one.” I let out a defeated breath.

“He seemed to really like you, Liza.” She places her hand on my thigh for support.

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“That’s part of the problem. He’s funny, ridiculously hot, and easy to talk to, but I need to stay far away from him.”

Her eyebrows raise. “Does this have anything to do with your ex?”

“Everything has to do with him.” I’m pathetic. He’s still on my mind and I can’t shake it. I don’t want him back, but he messed me up for anyone else.

Art isn’t your future, Liza. You won’t have to work when I sign my first MLB deal.

It’s a silly hobby. My games are more important.

With Layne, I doubted myself and my abilities constantly. I can’t give my heart to someone who will smash it into pieces again or dull my sparkle.

“I don’t have much experience in this department.” She lowers her head down in embarrassment. “But I imagine there’s good guys out there, too.”

Emberly comes out with me every now and then, but she’d much rather stay home. “I promised myself that I wouldn’t start dating again for at least a few years,” I remind her. “Casual is fine, but Hartley and I wouldn’t be capable of casual.”

“What are you going to do about the tutoring situation?”

“I have no idea,” I whimper. “I need to set ground rules with him.”

“Then start with that, and you can request a different student at any time.” She stares

at me with a sympathetic grin.

“Thanks, roomie.” I reach over and pull her into a hug. Squishing my cheek to hers, it hits me how much I love having her as my roommate again for another year.

Reaching out from under the covers, my hand grabs for my phone to stop the obnoxious dinging sounds inches from my head. I swipe my hands through my hair and blink a few times to shake the blurry vision. Groaning at my day ahead, I try not to pre-panic. I have a full day of my favorite art classes, and I refuse to let my second tutoring session with Hartley dampen my spirits. Who knows, maybe he will take this seriously and keep the flirting down to a minimum.

I slide the makeshift mirror-door to the side to pick out an outfit for the day from the cramped closet. I push the tightly packed clothes to the side to check out one option, a pink sundress. I’m looking for something simpler today, so I squeeze the outfit back in. I finally land on a light-wash denim dress paired with tan sandals. My hair falls in natural waves, and I don’t have the energy to straighten it. Pulling the strands from the front of my face, I use a daisy clip to pin them together in the back.

Emberly’s classes start later than mine, so I’m careful to not slam the door when I leave. Jogging down the stairs allows the Florida sun to hit my skin from the windows and bring me to life for the day. I take the short walk to the Jennison Art Building, named after some old guy that used to go here. My first class of the day is a sketch class, and so far, it’s my favorite course of the semester. We’re learning about how to level-up our sketches, adding movement and depth. I take my unofficial assigned seat and pull out my leather sketchbook and lead art pencils. I splurged a little this summer and bought professional supplies for my new art courses. I take a few spare minutes before class starts to adjust myself at the cold table. Luckily, most of my classes have tables instead of cramped desks, so we have plenty of space to work on our designs.

“Welcome, future world changers of the art realm!” A booming voice carries through the classroom. Professor Gibbs waltzes in, dressed in his typical eccentric style. Today, his long, gray hair falls loose around his shoulders. His signature beard-braid is the star of the show along with his tie dye suit jacket and purple velvet pants. “We’ve been doing a lot of talking the past few weeks. I think it’s time we put our hands to work and create!” he continues on with an eager clap. The quirky artist gives us direction for the piece we’ll create in class today. The parameters are simple: create a piece with movement.

I flip the sketchbook open to the first blank page and get to work on the background elements. I land on a nature piece, since that is the simplest way to show movement, in my opinion. Channeling my Louisiana roots, I begin sketching massive oak trees, paying close attention to the knots that jut out of the grass around trees with that much history. I add in moss that curves in one direction to create the wind movement needed to show the humid breeze that bristles through the swamp. Once I begin sketching, the sounds of mumbling students and the tapping of art supplies on the table muffle out. I’m transported into a world where I become the piece of art I’m working on. The loud ringing of an alarm jolts me out of the little world I’m busy creating back to the present.

“Time’s up for the day.” Professor Gibbs skips to the front of the room with a huge smile on his face. “I ended a few minutes early to explain a semester-long project you’ll need to start working on.” Scooting my chair forward, I lean in to hang on his every word. My interest is piqued. “Each of you will create a ten piece portfolio that you will turn in at the end of the semester.” My face lights up at the thought of creating more pieces to add to my ever growing collection of original art. “The piece you created today is entry number one. . .but there’s a catch.” He smirks mischievously. “The following nine pieces must have a consistent theme that is different from the piece you created in class today.”

What? My comfort zone has always been natural scenes, specifically things unique to

New Orleans or the South. The whispers buzz around the room, others feeling similar to me.

“There’s a method to my madness.” He fake cackles as if he’s a Disney villain. “Whatever you sketched today is your comfort zone. Humans have an instinct to go to what they’ve always known. We all need a push to be great, but that doesn’t define our greatness.” My classmates’ heads nod up and down, and silently acknowledge that he’s got a point. “The artists that begin my class seldom recognize the ones that leave.” He looks to the side and grins, lost in thought. “Now go break the barriers of your confined artistic abilities! As always, I’m here anytime for advice.” With that, the class scuffles out the door. No doubt all of us are igniting ideas for the sketch portfolio project.

Hartley

4:54 p.m. glares at me from my cracked iPhone screen. I have six minutes to order and make it to the study room on time. Our first session was. . .awkward. I can understand Liza’s apprehension about tutoring me. I don’t carry the best reputation around campus, and I’m sure she thinks I’m an academic blow-off who only cares about partying. The only version of me she sees is the plastered flirt who makes reckless decisions. Cool for a friend, not so much for boyfriend material. That couldn’t be farther from the truth. As a result, I’m waiting in this ridiculously-long Starbucks line to order her favorites as a peace offering. Once I finally reach the counter and place her order, I do another time check: 4:58 p.m. Thankfully, the coffee shop is attached to the campus library, so I’ll have no issues making it right on time. To my surprise, I’m greeted by an empty study room, so I take a minute to place her treats on her side of the table and wait.

Rushing in with heavy breaths, Liza says, “I’m so sorry, I got caught up—” Once the door gently closes behind her, she lifts her head up and stops cold at the items in front of her. “What’s this?” Her face goes pale as if she’s seen a ghost and not a sugary

beverage and treat.

I flash her a dimpled-smile that stretches across my face as I lean over the table to get a closer look at Liza's expression. She's breathtaking in all denim with those little flowers in her hair I crave the sight of. "Your favorites."

"How do you know my favorites?" She walks to the table and picks up the dripping plastic cup and tilts it around a few times. The cut strawberries dance around the ice cubes as she watches. Setting the drink down, she opens the crinkly paper bag to take out the chocolate cake pop sprinkled with edible confetti pieces.

"Well, I hate to blow my cover, but here it goes. . ." I close my eyes in faux worry, then take a deep breath before cracking my knuckles. "I'm kind of obsessed with you."

"Yeah, right." A soft giggle releases from her chest as she walks around the desk to playfully shove my shoulder. "Thank you, Hart. This made my day sweeter."

If that doesn't swell my chest with pride. I may screw up a lot of things, but I live for moments like this where I get it right. "Anytime, and look, I'm sorry if I caught you off guard last week. I'm serious about this." My smile fades to a stoic seriousness. "Coach put me on academic probation. If I don't get my grades up this semester, I'll be benched or potentially kicked off the team." I grip my thighs as worry washes over me. Liza doesn't respond. Instead, she listens intently as she bites her bottom lip in concentration. "I know you probably think I don't take anything seriously, but that's not the case."

"What is it then?" she asks.

"I have ADHD." I grip the back of my neck and rub, methodically to keep my composure. "I want to do well. It's just hard to focus. By the time I take a test, all the

information feels like it's dumped from my brain. I don't know how to fix it." I'm typically an open book, but Violet is the only other person who knows about my in-depth struggles with ADHD. I don't need anyone's sympathy, but it's important for Liza to see the real me behind the show I put on for the rest of the world.

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“Hartley, I had no idea.” She reaches out to touch my arm, and a zap of electricity runs through my body at the warmth of her touch. My eyes travel down to the spot where our skin meets, and she retracts her arm as if it was a mistake. “I was surprised last week, but I’m up for the challenge. Plus, art’s my thing. If anyone can help with this subject, it’s me.” She places both hands under her chin and frames her angelic face. Small glitter pieces dance around her skin in my mind.

“I appreciate this, Goldie.” With that, we drop the conversation and dive into this week’s assignments and studying. Before the session ends, Liza shocks me by saying, “Should we exchange numbers? It’s kinda weird to chat on the portal since we’re friends.” Scrunching up her nostrils, she looks to me for approval.

“I thought you’d never ask. What happened to your no numbers rule?” I ask with a cocky grin.

She gives me an,ugh, he’s right,look. She doesn't give my number out to many people.

“Things change,” she huffs. We exchange contact information before parting ways for the night. When I reach the apartment for the night, I’m mentally exhausted, but per usual, my brain races a mile a minute with no off switch.

Me: Thank you again for tutoring me. I owe you big time.

Goldie: My treats were payback enough :)

Me: Nope. I don’t think so.

Goldie: I thought you were “obsessed” with me. Shouldn’t you know what I like?

Me: I’m obsessed, but I’m not a mind reader. You’ll need to think of something else, so you’ll be adequately paid back ;)

Goldie: I have something in mind. . .

Me: Shoot.

Goldie: We’ll talk soon, too much to text.

Me: Whatever it is, I’m in.

Goldie: Night, Hotshot.

Me: Goodnight, Goldie.

15

Liza

Idon’t know what I was thinking last night when I texted Hartley about my potential idea to pay me back, but it definitely wasn’t the girl I’m looking at in the mirror tonight. Get it together. You need to be on top of your game. The first home football game of the season is upon us, and I can hardly wait to scream my lungs out and shake what my mama gave me until the last call at Downtown Tap. I throw a few essentials in an overnight duffle to bring to Violet’s apartment. We’re getting ready together tonight, and I promised her the ‘good makeup.’ She’s so fun to doll up and mold like my own personal doll. Emberly lets me create a look for her every once in a while, but Violet lives for it, and I’m using that to my advantage.

Knocking on my roommate's door, I don't wait for a reply before I pop my head through the crack. "Emberly, are you sure you don't want to come?"

"Yep." She continues to tap on her laptop while her outer space mood lighting shines around the room, casting a blue hue on everything. "Don't forget to call me if you need a ride. I'll be up." She spins around in her rolling desk chair to face me with a shy grin.

"Love ya, Em." I gesture hand hearts her way. "Text me if you change your mind." I shut her door behind me, because if she's in the dorm alone, it makes her feel more secure. Slinging my pink duffle bag over my shoulder, I text Violet to let her know I'm on the way. I take the short drive to her off campus apartment. The sky is my favorite mix of orange and blue, slowly shifting from afternoon to night. Her apartment is close enough to campus that I can spot the bright stadium lights in the distance, signaling game day is upon us.

Violet doesn't like when I knock because it scares her, so I let myself in and sigh in relief at the sight of Hartley already being gone. I don't have the courage to talk to him about what I'd like in return, and I worry he'd make a big deal over it.

"Your fashionista friend has arrived!" My voice echoes through the apartment before I spot Violet flying from the connecting bathroom through her open bedroom door.

"Come in here," she replies, and I drag my surplus of hair and makeup products to her room. I spread it out on her fluffy white comforter, allowing her to pick and choose whatever she wants to use. Her eyes land on the pop-up makeup shop that exploded on her bed and clutches her hands over her mouth. Meeting Violet at the back to school bash was the highlight of my month. She certainly knows how to polarize a room without trying. Ever since then, we've been close.

"You didn't have to bring all of this. I don't want to waste your stuff." Her fingers

raise to her mouth as she chews on her already short fingernails.

“No worries, chica. This is what friends do for each other.” I wrap her in a bear hug before grabbing a handful of makeup products from the bed and settling in criss-cross in front of her full length bedroom mirror. “I’ll take this spot. If you need any help in the bathroom, just shout.”

“You’re the best.” Her cheeks redden and she grins before grabbing a few Morphe products from the bed. Good choice, baby Vi.

I start with foundation and carefully dab to apply it smoothly across my face. I reach into my makeup bag and pull out my orange beauty blender to pull it all together.

“So. . .” I drawl out loud enough for Violet to hear from the bathroom. “How are you liking college?”

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With zero hesitation, she says, “I love it.”

“Yay!” I smile at my reflection in the mirror. Deciding it’s time for winged eyeliner, I dig in my bag once again to grab my favorite liquid tube. “Any cute boys catch your eye?” I’m officially snooping because anyone with eyes can see how Ryan’s looks at her, and it’s anything but platonic.

This time, she does hesitate. “Not really.”

“Come on, Vi! Getting ready for a night out is prime girl talk time.”

“Umm. . .” Her trailing voice echoes across the bathroom and into the bedroom. “There is one, but you have to promise you won’t say a word to anyone.”

I do a little happy dance and take a few breaths before replying, “I swear. Now spill.”

“Ryan is kind of cute, I mean he’s definitely not interested in a girl like me, but he is cute.”

Sadness passes over me. Violet’s confidence in herself is next to none, and it’s now my mission to change that. “Why wouldn’t he be interested in you?”

“Come on, Liza. He’s him, and I’m me.”

This conversation calls for eye contact, so I get up off the floor and walk into the bathroom to meet her by the mirror. “Okay. . . I need more details.”

She flusters under the intensity of the conversation, placing the straightener down on the heat resistant cover. “He’s a football player who can have anyone he wants.” She blinks a few times. “And I’m a wallflower.”

“Hey.” I grip her shoulders and turn her to face me. “Don’t sell yourself short. You’re smart, funny, and gorgeous. Ryan would be lucky to have a girl like you.”

A soft smile appears as her cheeks heat from the compliments. “We’ll see.”

After close to an hour of makeup and hair, Violet steps out of the bathroom looking so stinkin’ cute in Hartley’s jersey and ripped up jean shorts. She twirls around, but quickly starts tugging on her jersey and looking herself up and down. “Does it look okay? I don’t know. . .”

“You look hot,” I squeal. “These football boys won’t know what’s hitting them tonight. Especially number nine.” I purse my lips and wink, teasing Violet for her obvious crush on Springs U’s resident brooding running back.

She shakes her head and folds her arms over her chest before darting her eyes to the ceiling. “I don’t need a boyfriend right now.” Her chin juts out right before she rolls her eyes. Not convincing, baby girl.

“Sure,” I drawl out. “Tell yourself whatever you need to hear.”

“Is that Locke’s jersey number?!” Violet grabs the back of my jersey to get a closer look.

Busted. Locke is only ever on my mind when he’s in direct line of sight. He’s never had an effect on me like another golden retriever named Hartley does. Plus, Locke’s in the ‘no commitment’ zone which is just fine with me. “Uh, yeah, it is. He gave it to me last year. I haven’t had a chance to get another one.” I shrug, trying not to make a

big deal out of it.

“No way. Let’s switch. You can have Hartley’s for the night, and I’ll wear Locke’s. I barely know him, so it’s fine.” My bodyfreezes, but I know I can’t let Violet see the effect Hartley’s name has on me, so I launch into her arms.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

There’s no way Hartley will let me live this one down. The scarier thought is that I like the feeling of his name and number plastered on my back for a whole stadium of Viper fans to see.

16

Hartley

We won the home opener, and there’s only one appropriate way to celebrate a win. Buzzing from the adrenaline, I step out of the steaming shower and throw on my signature look. Khakis, SU Football Henley, and red Air Jordans. I top off the look with my backwards hat.

“Let’s go,” Ryan grunts out next to me.

“Woah there, party animal. I thought you didn’t want to run around with us losers tonight. Isn’t that what you said?” Giving Ryan a hard time is one of my favorite pastimes, and I manage to live under the layer of his skin closest to the bone.

“Yeah, well, I changed my mind.”

“That’s enough explanation for me.” I smack his back, and we sling our gear bags over our shoulders as we make our way to his car.

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“Is Violet coming out?” Ryan asks sheepishly as he grips the steering wheel with enough force to peel the leather.

My eyes form slits. “Nah.” I glance his way, but he doesn’t make eye contact. “Not really her scene.”

He doesn’t reply, so I keep the conversation quiet for once for the remainder of our trek to town.

Ryan parks, and we skip the wrap-around line to get into Downtown Tap. Football player perks are alive and well. We draw a crowd of fans after home games, and the owners wouldn’t want us to leave to hit up another bar. I bump elbows with a few of my teammates and flirt with a few girls fawning over me before escaping to the bar for my first drink. I order a whiskey sour and the bartenders turn a blind eye to my age as per usual. My eyes scan around the bar before deciding on my next move.

I spot a few of the offensive players at a nearby table, so I join them. Ryan has a bombshell saddled on his lap. Color me surprised, he may actually let loose and have fun for once.

Mason pulls me for a hand shake before he starts in on Locke. “Your girl is here and she looks just as edible as usual.”

Locke’s girl? He doesn’t have a girl to call his, unless he means. . . A fiery blonde captures my eye. She’s swaying her hips on the dance floor, tossing her hair over her shoulder without a care in the world. She throws her head back and releases a belly laugh that I can’t hear because of the deafening music. Locke and I don’t have issues.

He's a bit of an egotistical showboat, but some say the same about me. The only thing about him that turns me into a psychopath is that he can have Goldie, and I can't.

RIP Hartley Knox. Cause of death: stuck in the friend zone with a girl who plagued his thoughts year after year.

Suddenly, like a man possessed, Ryan jumps to his feet, launching the girl that was on his lap clean off when he darts for the dance floor. She hits him with a disgusted eye roll before turning her attention to another guy. I need another drink for a night like this, so I throw back the remaining liquid in my plastic cup and order another. Ryan must have gotten lost, because I don't see him, but I'll allow the fun police to have a night of debauchery for once.

I lost sight of Liza when I walked back to the bar for my second drink, and I try my best to convince myself that I'm not aimlessly searching this packed bar for her, but that's exactly what I'm doing. I finally find her in the throngs of sweaty people on the dance floor. The sight of her brings an effortless smile to my face. I take a minute to watch her in her element. She hasn't stopped giggling. Guys have their eyes glued on her, but she doesn't notice. She's a party of one, and I'm in awe of the firecracker in front of me. I've never stopped caring for her since the moment I met her, and I'm starting to think I'm out of my depth with how much she's on my mind. I convinced myself that being her friend and occasional flirt buddy at parties would be enough.

She moves her head slightly at the end of a fast-paced song and locks eyes with me across the dance floor. Instead of rolling her eyes or turning away, she points to me and wiggles her finger for me to join her.

A stronger man would have walked away. A respectful man would have accepted being thrown in the friend zone and forgot about her a long time ago, but I'm neither of those things.

Who am I to deny my girl?

17

Liza

Contrary to popular belief, I'm usually not as drunk as I act. I have an alcohol tolerance that rivals a forty-year-old man with a beer belly. It's not about how many drinks I can down to black out, it's about the fun of dancing, meeting new people, letting loose, and forgetting about it the next morning. "I Came Here for Love" blasts across the bar that's at max capacity with how we're packed together like sardines on the dance floor. That's when I lock eyes with the man I can't keep my head on straight around. His hair is darker due to the lighting and the sweat he has dripping down his neck. He's smirking and biting his bottom lip without taking his eyes off me. How long has he been watching me? The thought of Hartley's eyes on me as I throw myself around the dance floor, not leaving much to the imagination, has heat creeping up my neck. I coat my hands with the wet condensation that drips from my plastic cup and wipe it over my cheeks and neck.

If he wants a show, he'll get one. I wiggle my finger for him to join me.

Without hesitation, he pushes through the sea of bodies until he's pressed against me. He leans in and tucks a piece of damp hair behind my ear before whispering, "Hey, Goldie."

Why does his voice have to be so hot? Get. It. Together. Liza.

"Watching me, Hotshot?" I'm well aware that I'm treading into very dangerous territory. Not only is Hartley the boy I packed away in a far corner of my mind to protect my heart, but he's also my tutoring student. Why not blur the lines more?

“Always,” rolls off his slick tongue. I turn around and press my back to his chest, taking my eyes off him to hone in to the rhythm of the music. Before I can sway to the fast paced song, he flips my body around to face him again, our faces too close to touching.

“You’re wearing my jersey,” he growls, tilting his neck to the side.

“I am.” I smirk, knowing this has some sort of effect on him.

He jolts my back to his chest again, landing flush to the heat radiating from his hard body. His arm climbs up my side, grazing a sliver of my stomach until he makes it to my neck, coated with heat and goosebumps that have nothing to do with the temperature of the bar. His enormous hand travels a few inches down to my shoulder, and he grips tight. His mouth hovers over the shell of my ear before he says, “When you wear my jersey, you’re mine.” My head tilts back to rest on his chiseled body, and I betray myself by letting out a desperate moan that only Hartley can hear. “If you’re not ready to be mine, don’t tease me like this.” He balls the extra fabric of his jersey on my body into his fist and tugs on it.

Despite how intense this interaction is, I manage to fire back with a sultry roll of the tongue, “I’m not anyone’s, and I never will be.” I suddenly feel the loss of his warmth pressed against my body. Turning around to see where he went, I only catch the back of his hat bouncing through the crowd. I’m left stunned silent in the middle of the dance floor by the man who was only ever supposed to be my friend. No. He’s not going to walk away like that. This is exactly why I don’t need to get involved with him. He’ll become an unhealthy obsession I can’t kick. Just. Like. Layne.

Scooting to the calmer edge of the chaotic scene closest to the bar top, I wait patiently for Hartley to reappear from wherever he ran off to. After what feels like forever, standing by myself, I catch sight of his back on the dance floor. Is that. . . Yep. He’s cozied up with a bleach blonde. From the looks of it, she’s shorter than me, so she fits

perfectly under the crook of his overextended arm. They inch closer and closer. Fresh bile rises to my tongue at the sight of her giggling and throwing her arms around his neck. I can't watch this. Frantic to one up him and drown the image away, I fumble over to the table the football team claims for the night and spot my golden ticket.

"Locke," I call out to my on-again-off-again boy. His eyes dart around, unable to find who called his name, so I raise my voice louder. "Locke!"

His eyes meet mine and that ridiculous mullet bounces as he saunters from the table towards me.

"What's up, babe?" He's so casually unbothered at all times. This is exactly what I need to get my mind off Hartley's intensity.

"Kiss me." I grab his veiny forearms and pull him closer to my chest. "And don't ask questions." He locks his muscular arms around my waist and leans in for a fiery kiss. His tongue darts out, and I grant him access to my mouth while his other hand grips one of my legs to lift it up to his height. By the time we both pull away from the sloppy kiss, my hair is tussled and I quickly swipe under my eye to check the eyeliner situation. To my horror, it smeared. Peering to the side, I scan the bar, hoping my intended audience is watching. That's when I spot him. There he stands staring directly at me with his blonde hair, mossy eyes, and an expression I can't quite read painted on his face. He isn't wearing his usual boyish grin and showing off his million dollar dimples. He suddenly tears his eyes from mine and shakes his head, taking him out of the moment. He removes his ball cap for a brief moment to run his hand through his thick waves before jetting to the back exit.

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The feeling of revenge I wanted doesn't hit. Instead, guilt tumbles over me like a tidal wave. Shoot. I didn't mean to createthatmuch of a show. Locke wipes his lips and winks while I purse my lips and roll my eyes at myself for being so petty.

"Kiss me like that and I'll never ask questions." He laughs as I give him a playful shove, letting him know he served his purpose for the night.

I grunt and waltz past him. "You're annoying." I lose sight of Hartley in the packed crowd, but I want to find him, so I push and shove through the gyrating bodies of sweat and sin. Standing on my tiptoes, I search for a backward hat and unruly blonde hair, but I come up short. Outside is the next logical place to check, so I squeeze into the thin, dark hallway housing the dinghy one-stall bathrooms until I reach the back door across from the storage closet. Pushing the heavy door open, I walk outside to the courtyard connected to the bar that very few people visit. It's nice and peaceful when you need a moment away from the head pounding music and musty heat of a packed bar. Sitting on the cool cement, head hanging between his bent knees is Hartley. He doesn't notice me, so I take a moment to bask in his presence. A glass beer bottle sits next to him, he picks up the dripping long neck to take a swig before pummeling it into the brick wall across from him with a loud crash.

Not able to help myself, I jump in. "What's your problem?"

His eyes, bloodshot from the liquor, bore into mine with anger and confusion written all over his blown out pupils. "Myproblem?" He grunts and shakes his head incredulously. "If you think I'm the one with the problem, you're farther out of touch than I thought."

“Excuse me?”

He reaches for the plastic cup sitting next to him and swirls his drink around a few times before gulping the remnants and sending it flying behind the broken bottle.

“You heard me.”

I cross my arms over my chest and walk closer to him, now standing above the lunatic. “Are you jealous because I kissed Locke?”

Tell me you’re just as jealous as I was.

Placing his hands on the ground, he lifts himself up and backs me up until my back touches the bricks. His arms fall on both sides, locking me in with him. “Yes.”

“Why?” I hiss.

“Because this is a game I don’t think I’m interested in playing anymore.”

“Unbelievable!” I shout louder in his face. Since no one is out here, I allow my bubbling frustrations to rise to the surface. “I told you from day one that I can’t commit, and here you are throwing bottles at the wall because of it.”

A menacing smirk passes over his face, as if he has the upper hand, “That’s not why I’m losing my mind, Goldie.” His warm breath tickles my cheek, making my body painfully aware of his closeness. “It’s the fact that you want me the way I want you, but you won’t allow yourself to give in.” Leaning closer, he whispers, “I lose my head when I know that I’m the clear choice, but he gets to taste your lips on his.” My body betrays me as a quick gasp escapes my traitorous lips.

“He’s nothing but a distraction.”

“A distraction.” He pushes off the wall, putting distance between us, and I almost whine at the loss. “From what? You being with me?”

“No!” My back is still pressed against the cool brick wall where he left me, and my legs unable to move to him.

He takes a few steps back toward me. His body heat engulfs my space once again. “You’re lying.” He’s challenging me to back down and give in to my desire for him, but I won’t. I can’t.

“I don’t care who you speak to, kiss, or hook up with.” I step into his space with pure confidence, calling his bluff.

“If you don’t care. I guess I need to find a distraction for the night. Just like you did.”

My jaw clenches as I bite my tongue so I don’t plead for him not to do just that. “Go right ahead. I’m leaving, anyway.”

“Fine,” he snickers.

“Fine!” It’s officially time to go before I continue to make rash decisions to make a boy I have no intention of dating, jealous. I storm out to the parking lot before I take a seat on the curb to shoot a quick text to Violet asking if she’s ready before throwing my hands in the air in annoyance. I walk toward the gate.

Violet: I left with Ryan (tongue out emoji)

Me: Yessssss. Have fun. I’m headed home all by my lonesome :(

Violet: ngnkslnkdsjvi

Violet: Srrrrrryy I didn't lock my phone

Me: Lol talk to you tomorrow chica ;)

I knew those two were inevitable. I switch to the rideshare app and request a car. I'm not in the mood to walk back to the dorms by myself tonight, and I'm certainly not in the mood to watch the show that Hartley's promised. I'm a tipsy mess, and I need to figure out what to do with the feelings brewing inside me as soon as possible.

Hartley

My veins thrum as hot blood pulses through them. I take a deep breath, attempting to calm myself from the inexplicable jealousy pounding in my chest. Liza isn't mine. She's made that fact abundantly clear with her words every chance she gets, but her actions tell a different story. I'm starting to regret those drinks I had because now I can't drive. If Liza thought I was bluffing about finding a girl to take home, she was right. She's all I see, but I needed to get under her skin the way she did to me. Ryan texted letting me know he was leaving and assured me that he would swing back around if I needed a ride, but I need to be alone right now to process all the wires tangled in my head.

One thing that's always worked in calming my overwhelming thoughts is the water, so I take the two mile long trek to the small beach alcove on the outskirts of town. The beach at night is unmatched, and it's exactly what I need to drown out the thoughts of her. By the time I reach the rocky shore, the temperature has dropped a few degrees, misting my skin with a cool breeze and dewy air. I sit at the first spot I see and toss pebbles into the water, watching them skip through the calm waves.

I left her on the dance floor because I didn't trust myself not to cross the boundaries she set for us. The last thing I expected was for her to run off to Locke and put on a production for the entire bar to see. My head reminds me that she doesn't see him as more than a fun time. My heart shattered at the sight of her making out with him tonight with her leg hiked against his thigh. I've seen them kiss plenty of times before tonight, but this hits different. It physically pained me to watch it, but like most train wrecks, I couldn't tear my eyes away. The first place she looked after that kiss was where I was standing on the dance floor. I want to tell myself that she did it to bait me

into fighting or chasing after her, but I've thrown myself at her more times than I can count for more than a year. If she wanted me, she could have me.

"Ugh," I groan, allowing my voice to travel into the dark waves that dribble against the shore. I'm too amped up tonight. Violet looked like she was having a blast, and I don't want to ruin her night.

Me: Staying with a friend tonight. See ya tomorrow morning, sis.

Violet: (thumbs up emoji)

Guess I'm sleeping on the beach. Wouldn't be the first time and won't be the last. I lay down and rest against the cool touch of sand against my cheek. My hands dig into the sand and slowly allow small pieces to trickle through the gaps in my fingers as I lift them up. Repeated actions slow my mind down at night, so I do that over and over, until I drift into a buzzed sleep.

My body jolts me up before dawn the next morning. Wiping the drool from the corner of my mouth, I quickly check the time on my phone. Coach called a Sunday morning film session, so I take the peaceful morning walk back to my car and drive straight to the field.

Film practice moved painfully slow. I'd rather be running plays or doing drills. Sitting idle during film makes my skin crawl and my mind wander, so I decide to go for a run before heading back to the apartment. Rustling through a bag of clothes I keep in my car for moments like this, I find athletic shorts. That's all I need since the humid temperatures of the Florida heat force me to skip the shirt. Popping in my ear buds, I scroll through my workout playlist to find a song that'll pump me up for the run, but my wandering fingers slide to Morgan Wallen radio. "Wasted on You" seems fitting for my mood, so I click it, turn the volume up as far as it can go, and turn my brain off. After a two mile run around campus, I call it quits and head back to the

apartment. I don't want Violet to worry about my whereabouts, and if I'm gone too long, she will. I jump in my car and pull a clean towel from the backseat to wipe the sweat dripping down my face. I put on my favorite hat sitting on the passenger seat and drive back home.

I need a long, hot shower and a nap, I think to myself as I pull my keys out of my zipper pocket to open the apartment door. The sight that greets me is not one I was expecting. On my couch is a sleeping Violet, curled up in her favorite fuzzy blanket—that's nothing new. The part that nearly jolts me out of my own skin is my teammate with his arms wrapped around her body, enjoying an afternoon nap. At a loss for words, my jaw hits the floor. I pace back and forth around the small living space, planning my next move. This isn't happening.

Unable to keep my composure any longer, I scream to the two traitors nuzzled together. "Someone better tell me what's going on right now before I lose my mind!"

My best friend groans and lets out a drawn out yawn before replying, "You already have, Hartley. I'm exhausted, and you're acting like a maniac." She remains nuzzled against Ryan's chest, unphased by the anger brewing inside of my body.

Violet and I rarely disagree or argue, but now isn't the time for her blasé attitude. "I will not lower my voice when my best friend is about to get naked on our couch with my teammate." Throwing my hat on the floor, I point directly at the two traitors. They think I'm losing my mind?

"We were not about to get naked," Ryan and Violet simultaneously answer followed by a lighthearted chuckle. Awesome. Great. Super. They both find this funny.

"Liars. He's grabbing your hand, and you were cuddled up against him. I will take you to the ground, Shane." I lunge toward him, but he doesn't move an inch away from my little sister. Instead, he scoots closer and wraps his arms around her tighter.

Hmm. Interesting.

“Enough.” Violet leaves his embrace on the couch to scream in my face. “Cool it. We’re hanging out, and it’s none of your business. I didn’t question you about where you were all night. Let’s not forget that I’m an adultnapping with a boy on the couch. No rules have been broken.” I wish I could tell her about my night and how broken I was. Seeing the girl I can’t stop thinking about all over another guy hurt, but that’s not the pressing issue at hand.

Taking a deep inhale, I allow my mind to process what I’ve seen for a moment. Violet doesn’t bring guys around that often, and if Ryan is going to protect her, this might not be a bad thing. “Is this a thing? If this is a thing, let me know right now. No sneaking around. Be upfront with me.”

Violet lifts herself up from the couch and slowly backs away into the hall. “It might be. That’s for us to decide. Also, you might want to go on a wine run tonight because I accidentally drank all of yours.”

“You little—” I run after her in a fit of laughter before catching up and tackling her on the bed. I might not love the idea of Violet “hanging out” with Ryan, but she’s right. She’s not a little girl anymore and can make her own decisions. If he breaks her heart. . . Ryan Shane will see the crazy he wishes he never unleashed.

19

Liza

Hartley and I have a tutoring session today, and it’ll be the first time I see him since the home opener. My stomach rumbles with sickness as I think about how that night went down. I toss my backpack down and rummage through my things to find my sketchbook. I need to start brainstorming ideas for the portfolio project with a clear

mind. I settle for a shaded grassy area under the huge oak tree at the center of all the old buildings that surround it. I've spent countless nights thinking about this portfolio project and what I'd like to draw as my common theme. One idea has consumed my thoughts, but it requires me to enlist the help of him. My pencil dances along the thick art paper, carving yard lines, stands, and end zones. Art always helps to clear my mind when it's scattered. After drawing a background I'm satisfied with, I stick my supplies back in my backpack and trudge across campus to our session.

Walking into the muggy library, I scold myself for not allowing enough time for a coffee stop before our session. I make my way through the racks of books until I reach our study room. I sneak a peek through the surrounding glass before entering to see a worn-out Hartley hunched over the wooden table. His head rests in his hands as he massages his eyelids repeatedly. My breath catches when I see what's sitting across from him. A large strawberry acai drink with a small brown bag, no doubt containing a chocolate cake pop. My favorites, again. My tense muscles soften and a cheesy grin spreads across my face. My hand shoots up to my chest at how sweet the gesture is.

"Hey." I tentatively walk into the room, not sure how to act around him.

His head pops up from the tight grip of his hands as he shoots me a lazy smile. "Sup, Goldie." That smile forms into a mischievous grin I've grown to look forward to more than I'd like to admit. Of course he's acting like we didn't cause a scene like two complete psychos outside of the bar the last time we spoke.

"Mine?" I grab the cold drink and tip my head in question.

He scoots the drink across the table. "All yours."

"Thank you." I peel the wrapper off the green straw and poke it through the lid to take the first sip. "You're spoiling me, now."

“It’s nothing.” He shrugs and grabs the back of his neck to rub.

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Ask him, Liza. I place my drink on the table, allowing condensation to drip and pool around. Taking a deep breath, I muster up the courage to ask him the question I've been beating around the bush about.

"So, umm. . . I have to ask you something. . ." I refuse to make eye contact with those distracting pools.

He leans back in his chair, tipping the two front legs in the air. A picture of ease. "Hit me."

"I have this project." Tapping my fingers on the table nervously, I continue, "It's an art portfolio, and it's a big deal for me."

Cutting off my nervous rant, he says, "Nice." His soft tone encourages me to spit it out.

"The catch is, we're not allowed to draw what we normally do. My professor wants us to 'step out of our comfort zone'." I reach up and show air quotes with my fingers.

"I like this guy."

My bratty eyes shoot up and lock in with his. "I have an idea, but it would require your assistance." I lean on the table, letting out a nervous laugh.

"Goldie." He reaches across the table and grabs my hands in his. Well, that's new. "What do you need from me?" The tenderness in his voice rolls right off his tongue, and I really need to get it together before I forget what I need to ask him.

Gripping my sweaty hand tighter, he leans over the table, leaving little space between us.

Not sure how to handle our sudden closeness, I spring out of my chair and pace back and forth across the small study room. “I want to draw the movement of football, but not just in one place. I’d like to focus on one player in different scenarios throughout the season.” My voice picks up in excitement as I rattle on about the potential of how awesome this could be.

“I’m listening.”

“I want to draw a player in the locker room, getting ready for practice, on the practice field, after the game, on campus, during a game, the possibilities are endless.” I count each idea off on my fingers, suddenly inspired by how epic this could be.

“Do you want me to be your muse?” His cocky nature returns in full force.

“I do,” I reply with confidence.

“I’m in.”

Letting out a sigh of relief, I laugh. “But you don’t know the specifics, yet. What if it’s too much to handle?” I raise my finger to bite my pinky nail. “I’ll have to spend a lot of time with you for the next several weeks to get the shots I need.”

“Still not hearing anything that wouldn’t make my day better.” He winks.

“You’re sure? Like really sure? This is a big deal, Hart.”

“Liza, look at me.” His voice turns stern and serious as I lift my chin to meet his eyes.

“I want to do this.”

“Okay.” I nod. “Thank you.” He moves to walk away from the table. “Oh no, no, no. Get your notes out so we can make sure you pass your quiz.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

With that, we get to the nitty gritty of his art history content. He has a quiz later this week, so we double down on the flash card review, until he knows these artists like the back of his hand.

“I think that’s enough for today.” I slam my binder shut and shuffle the color coded flashcards I made him for this quiz back in a Ziploc bag. Tossing the bag across the table, I say, “Keep these in case you need to review a few more times before the quiz. It couldn’t hurt.” I sling my light book bag over one shoulder and turn to walk away before Hartley stops me in my tracks.

“Wait!” His volume evaporates the quiet bubble of the study room. “When and where do you want to draw me first? I’m at your beck and call.” He crosses his arms over his chest and bites his bottom lip, looking too good for me to drag my eyes off of him.

“Uhh, are you free tomorrow?”

He responds with a silent nod.

“We could start with a locker room session if you’re okay with that.”

“Let me run it by Coach. If we get there before report time, we’ll have the locker room to ourselves.”

“That would be perfect. Thank you again, Hartley. It means a lot to me.” My cheeks blaze in a fiery heat.

“See you tomorrow.” He juts his chin out, and my eyes linger on his last word longer than usual. I squeeze out the study room before I do something stupid like giving him a kiss on the cheek. Woah. Where did that thought come from?

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I'm about to double, maybe even triple, my weekly meet ups with him. If I thought things were tough now, they're about to get a whole lot harder. After taking the dark walk back to my dorm room, I'm spent. My key wiggles into the door, just as my phone pings.

Hartley: Got the all clear from Coach. Is 7 too early?

Me: Yay! Nope. See ya then.

Hartley: ;)

20

Hartley

The discussion with Coach went smoother than I anticipated. Once we got past the initial shock that I was actually participating in a class project that wasn't mine, he agreed fervently to allow us use of the locker room. Did I disclose that this project involved a firecracker of a woman who could bring me to my knees with her laugh? No. Those are details that I'll iron out as they come.

"Anyone here?" Her sultry voice echoes through the empty locker room.

Deciding to play around with her, I holler back, "Are we playing Marco Polo now, Goldie?" I peek around as she turns the corner into the main locker room area.

I'll never get tired of the sight of her. Her slick straight hair drapes over one shoulder

as she tosses the other half over the other. She's in one of those dresses she likes, this one with tiny embroidered roses over the black fabric. She's always a vision, and I'll need to practice some serious self-control if our time together is about to increase substantially.

"Hartley! What the . . ." She drops everything she's holding, and it slams to the concrete floor sending echoes across the room. Her hands fly to her mouth then to her eyes as she sticks one hand out and backs away frantically. "Put some clothes on! Geez!"

A belly laugh erupts from deep in my core. "Don't be silly, Goldie. I'm fully clothed." Fully, being the word in question, but I'm wearing boxers. That should count for something, right? "Isn't this what a muse is supposed to wear?"

She peeks one eye in between the slits of her fingers as she continues to wave her hand toward me. "This isn't that kind of art! You're supposed to be natural." Her laugh rattles out, and the sound does something funny to my chest.

Reaching to the bench next to me, I grab the pair of gray joggers I wore here and slip them on. "The coast is clear. My pants are on."

She peeks through those slits again to confirm that my pants are, in fact, on before she drops them to her hips. "What is wrong with you?!" she scolds. This side of her riles me up even more. Let's go, babe.

"Come on." I grab my hat off the bench and flip it backward before making my way across the empty room to her. "Is this your first time seeing a man in his boxers, Goldie?" I throw my hands on my hips and give her a playful grin.

"Excuse me?! For your information, no, it is not, but you caught me off guard."

I throw my hands up in mock innocence as she shakes her head from side to side in disapproval. She should know to expect the unexpected.

“Can we forget this happened and start the sketching?” She chuckles.

“After you, my lady.”

Liza spends the next few minutes explaining my role in this project. She begs me to act like ‘she’s not even here’. She’s everywhere to me, but that feels a little too intimate for a friend to say, so I bite my tongue. According to her, the perfect shot would be of me packing and unpacking my things into a practice duffle bag. She also asks me to go about my pre-practice routine as I normally would so she can capture movement. After about thirty minutes, she pops off the bench and announces that she has what she needs.

“Can I see?” Walking towards her, I reach for her sketch pad, but she clutches it to her chest while her mouth forms a little ‘o.’

“No way!” She shoots me a disgusted look. “You never show anyone the initial sketch. First sketches are horrible.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

“No.” Pursing her lips, I realize this is a battle I won’t win.

Inching closer and closer until her back hits the wall, I brace my arms out along both sides of her. Her breaths are staggered and her sass from a minute ago is long gone. Leaning down slowly, I graze her ear with my lip before whispering, “I’ll respect it, but if you show anyone, it better be me.” Taking a long swallow to gather myself, I back away to watch the way her throat moves up and down. My eyes zero in on the small parting of her lips.

“Who else would I show it to?” Her voice is strained.

Licking my lips, I allow my cockiest smirk to surface. “I don’t know, Liza, but it better not be your boyfriend.” I push off the wall and back away before I lose control and claim her as mine.

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” she spits back.

“That’s not what it looked like last weekend.” Jealousy sears through my veins as the picture of her making out with Locke resurfaces to the forefront of my mind. That should have been me.

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Taking small steps forward, the minx closes the space I put between us, folds her arms over her chest and purses her lips before tilting her head to the side. “Next time. . .” She inches even closer to where her hot breath lands on my mouth. “Do something about it.” Shimmying past me, she’s out of sight before I can register the challenging words she threw down.

Do something about it? I’ve wanted to do something about it since the moment we met, but she’s the most complicated puzzle I’ve ever challenged myself to solve. She’ll have to give me more than a little show to convince me she wants me as more than just a friend, study partner, and muse. The thought alone sends red hot fire through my body.

The next few days are consumed with practice and studying for this pill of an art history quiz. I will never, I repeat, never use any of this information after this class is over, but it’s a GPA booster if I can pull it off. Liza created a deck of magic flashcards color coded with important information to study. The color matching does something to my overactive brain allowing the content to stick easier than I’ve experienced in the past. I’ve said silent prayers for days that I pass this quiz. A buzz sounds off in my pocket, so I unzip the secret pocket in my athletic shorts.

Vi: Wanna meet for lunch?

Me: Don’t have to ask me twice. When?

Vi: Now if you’re free.

Me: OMW

Perfect. I need a distraction from the imminent doom of the art history quiz, and my best friend is the best at that. Making my way from the library, I take a shortcut through campus to the cafeteria. I catch a glimpse of Violet seated by the glass window, distracted by her phone. My chest warms at the sight of her, and my muscles unwind and relax. Seeing her happy makes all of the hard work of getting us both to Springs U worth it. Walking through the entrance, I approach the table with caution. Violet is easily spooked and I don't want to disrupt her zen.

Sliding into the seat across from her, I throw my bookbag down and stick my phone in the front pocket.

"Hey, Vi."

"Hart!" She reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. "I miss you." She pouts, but quickly cracks a smile. "Since when do we go days without seeing each other?!" she complains, and I can't disagree. We haven't seen much of each other lately, and I hate that. I've been consumed with football, tutoring, and Liza.

"It's tragic, but I'm in the business of changing that."

She giggles before reaching over the table to push my shoulder. "How's football going?"

A lump in my throat forms at the thought of losing the game I've dedicated most of my life to, and that brings that stupid art history quiz back to the forefront of my mind. "Same old, same old." I shrug my intense worry about the situation off, but Violet seems to see through my facade with slits in her eyes.

"Really? We're doing this now?" She glares my way, trying her best to show intimidation. "You're lying." Crossing her arms over her chest, she amps the glare to a full blown scowl.

“That readable?” I shrug.

“We’ve known each other for too long to put up a front. What’s going on?” she asks with concern in her tone.

“It’s nothing, Vi. I’ve got it handled. No need to worry.”

“I’ll always worry.” She leans over the table, commanding my attention with her shaky voice.

“I know you will, but I’m the one watching out for you, remember?”

“Not true. We watch out for each other.”

“I’d tell you if there was a problem, but I swear I’ve got it handled.” I wink in a picture of nonchalance.

She hits me with a suspicious look, but drops the conversation for the time being. Removing myself from any more questions, I slide out of my seat and walk to the campus quick service counter buying a large pineapple and pepperoni pizza for us to share before returning to the table.

“Woohoo!” She does a little happy dance looking at heat steaming off of the sweet and salty pizza.

“Soooo,” I drawl out. “How’s Shane treating you?” I tighten my fists in hopes of remaining calm. If I lose my cool every time we talk about her relationship, she won’t disclose the details, and I need those to determine if Ryan is a dead man or not.

“Everything is—” Her cheeks flush pink as she avoids eye contact. The tell-tale sign of Violet Evan’s crush. Here we go. “Great.” She hits me with a smile so bright that it

meets her eyes, giving me confirmation that she's genuinely happy.

"He's treating you right? Taking you out? Being respectful?"

"Of course. The most respectful." Her teeth sink into her bottom lip, and her mind wanders away from our conversation.

"He better be." Displaying distaste about their little "relationship" will only hurt Violet and I's friendship, and she's my lifeline. I don't know what I'd do without her.

"You know I'm always here, right, Vi?"

"I do, and I love you, Hart."

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“I love you, too. Enough mushy talk for the day. Tell me about the new 90 Day Fiancé season. I need to catch up.”

“Oh my gosh.” She sits up straight in her seat and rests her elbows on the table. “You won’t believe who they casted again this season!” she squeals as she fills me in on our guilty pleasure show, not leaving out any details.

After our reality TV update, my bookbag vibrates against my thigh, indicating a notification.

Liza: Good luck on the quiz tomorrow. You’ve got this, Hotshot.

I let out a chuckle and stare at my phone like a complete idiot. I haven’t seen Liza since our first session for her art portfolio project, and I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought about that day ever since. She has a way of reeling me in, releasing me back, but keeping bait on the hook to lure me in every single time.

“Earth to Hartley.” Violet’s waving hand in front of my face snaps me out of my Liza induced haze. I place my phone face down and try to play it cool.

“Yeah?”

“You were staring at your phone like someone sent you a love letter. Spill!”

“Nothing to spill.” I wink at her and that scowl returns in full force.

“Sure. Ok.” Violet whips her head back and forth in disappointment. The last thing I

need is her head filled with hopes of Liza and I becoming something.

“I know you. All these secrets will bubble up inside until you explode and finally tell me. I’ll wait it out.” She gets up, pointing her fingers to her eyes and back at me without a second look.

21

Hartley

I think I died and went to heaven. That or an out of body experience. Maybe this is a dream. I slap my cheek harder than intended to confirm that this is in fact not a dream. I throw my fists in the air and pump up and down, unable to control my excitement. Class ended five minutes ago and everyone else is long gone, but I’m glued to my seat staring at the results of the art history quiz I submitted.

“Mr. Knox.” My professor startles me out of the moment I was having. “You’re acting erratic and my next class starts in five minutes. Would you please leave for the day?”

“Sure. Yes. Absolutely!” I scream across the empty classroom as I slam my laptop shut and stuff it in my bag. I’m on top of the world, and there’s only one person I want to talk to.

Me: Switch your major to education.

Goldie: How did it go?!

Me: You’re looking at a C student.

Goldie: What?! That’s amazing!!

Goldie: How are we celebrating?

Me: You. Me. Hot Wings.

Goldie: OOOOOO love it. Your place?

Me: I'll be back soon. Come over whenever.

I lock my phone with a sense of relief and a weight lifted off my chest. My worries are a little lighter for the first time in weeks. You did it. It's just one quiz, but I'm used to failure in the classroom. This quiz gives me a sense of hope that I can juggle both school and football. I owe Liza more than just hot wings. She executed the perfect study plan, and I pray she stays around to help me out for the rest of the year. I take the trek to upperclassman parking, hop in my car, and speed home to clean up a bit before she gets to the apartment. I've never cared about what my place looks like to girls, but I have an overwhelming urge to impress Liza.

"Vi!" My booming shout echoes through the empty apartment. Phew. By the lack of response and absence of tapping feet on the wooden floors, I think it's safe to say that Violet's not here. She's been spending more time with Ryan, and I'm happy if she's happy, especially if he gives her an outlet for all of her pent up anxiety she holds within herself. A part of me still sees her as a naive girl who needs fierce protection from the world. The promise I made to her grandpa is tattooed in my brain forever, so I can't get comfortable with her new relationship this quickly.

Whisked away by my thoughts, a vibration hits my thighs. I reach into my pocket to grab my phone.

Group Message: Offensive Legends

Mason: Downtown Tap tonight at 10.

Ryan: pass

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Me: Can't. I have a date.

Ryan: Seriously?

Mason: Don't tell me. . .

Me: None of you all's business. I won't be out though.

Mason: Loserrrrrrr

Ryan: Why am I in this group message again?

I would skip a night out at the bar to spend a minute with Liza any day of the week. Shaking my thoughts away for the time being, I run the vacuum over our shaggy rug harboring snack crumbs in its fur. After it looks good enough, I move to the kitchen to tie the full garbage and replace it with a new bag, but before I take the garbage to the can downstairs, I remember all the empty water bottles Violet's been complaining about. I scoop five bottles with only drops left and toss them in the freshgarbage bag. I nod my head in acceptance at this rush clean. Gold star for me.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Knocks rattle the apartment door, hopefully, announcing Liza's arrival. Sliding my socks on the hardwood floor, I stop in front of the door to let her in.

"Hey!" She greets me with that radiant look and a small wave that cracks my heart wide open and allows light to pour in. Her arms are covered with plastic grocery bags

full of items. She rocks back and forth on her feet in excitement before she drops the bags on the ground and squeals. “I can’t wait any longer.” My ball of sunshine leaps into my arms, and I spin her around twice, inhaling the sweet cinnamon scent of her damp hair. I allow my hand to travel down to the small of her back as I lower her down to the floor. She locks in on my eyes and tilts her head slightly to the side. Her hands still looped around my neck. “I’m so stinkin’ proud of you!”

“This was all you, Goldie.” My cheeks flame. Well, that’s new. My hands travel from her back to her hips. I squeeze before dropping them to my side. Her hands drop shortly after. “What’s all this?” I peer around her at the grocery bags piled up at the door.

“Oh, you know, just a mega surprise.” Liza spins around, picks up the bags, and goes to the kitchen to place them on the counter space. “Come see.”

I follow her lead into the kitchen as she unloads the items. First, she takes out two packs of crescent rolls. Then, she takes out a giant bag of powdered sugar. Finally, she removes a gigantic bottle of Hershey’s chocolate syrup.

Her hands fly out in a grand gesture. “I present to you, drumroll please.” I take that as my cue to pound the counter with my fist to give her the drama she wants for the moment. “The world’s best ingredients to make homemade beignets!”

“Beignets?!” I gasp and fly around the counter to be by her side. I drop down to one knee. “Will you marry me?”

She giggles and swats my hand away before I get any crazy ideas like actually marrying her. I probably would do it.

“Seriously, I wanted to do something special for you. You killed that test.”

I don't take compliments well, so I deflect with a joke. "The stupid football player finally earned a passing grade. It's a story for the ages." I flip my hat backward and turn away to hide my emotions, but a cold hand grabs my wrist before I can make the full turn.

"You're not stupid." She levels me with furrowed brows and a frown. All hints of playfulness are long gone. "When we say those things about ourselves, we start to believe they're true."

I have no verbal response for the heated sensation in my chest and my elevated heart rate. Liza makes me feel like I'm something more than just a NCAA figurehead. She sees me for more than the jokester who causes trouble to get a rise out of people and deflect from my shortcomings. She sees past the exterior to who I really am, and that terrifies me. She must notice that I'm pale as a ghost, so she grabs my hand and rubs it tenderly.

"Come on. I'm teaching you how to make these."

"The New Orleans girl brings beignets to Florida."

"Someone has to."

If I thought academic Liza was a vision, kitchen Liza is downright torturous. I've had to watch her lick the excess ingredients off her fingers after each step. The fact that I haven't groaned at the sight should earn some type of award.

"If beignets are this easy to make, why don't more places serve them?" I question as I help her lift the first batch of rolled crescents out of the fryer oil.

"This is the shortcut way to make them." She continues her methodical steps without missing a beat. "The real secret lies within the walls of Cafe Du Monde."

“You’ll have to bring me one day.” Ripping open the bag of powdered sugar, I carefully hand the goods over to Liza, because, according to her, there’s a right and wrong way to apply the powdered sugar.

“Watch and learn.” She grabs a pinch of powdered sugar from the bag. “It’s a sprinkle, not a douse.”

Following her lead, I pinch some of my own and help her finish off this batch.

“Now we let them cool for a minute or two before digging in.” She admires the fluffy goodness in awe.

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“You’ve got a little something.” My hand reaches to the corner of her mouth to wipe away a speck of rogue sugar that landed too close to her plump lips. She lets out a small gasp, barely audible if I wasn’t so close. Her eyes never leave mine, and her body doesn’t flinch. Once the sugar is wiped away, I bring my thumb to my mouth and lick off the sweetness that was just planted on her face. “Tastes sweeter for some reason.” I shoot her my dimpled smile.

“That’s the brand,” she whispers out. “It’s sweeter than most they sell here.”

“Nah.” I shake my head in disagreement. “It’s you.”

22

Liza

Woah. Stupid heart, can you hear me? Because you’re really not helping a girl out at the moment.

I came to Hartley’s with the intention of celebrating his success. It’s a big deal to go from failing everything that’s assigned to earning a C on a pretty tough quiz. What better way to celebrate than homemade beignets? He had to go and act all hot with the little powdered sugar stunt, and now my head is all sorts of fuzzy.

Am I being too harsh with my no dating rule? Am I allowing Layne to ruin me for other guys without even realizing it?

After we gorge ourselves to the max on sugary beignet goodness, Hartley and I stay

in the kitchen to talk for a while before he clears our plates.

“I want to see the all famous Hartley Knox’s bedroom,” I say.

His eyebrows shoot up in mischief, so I quickly correct myself. “Not like that.” Crossing my hands over my chest, I shake my head at the gorgeous specimen of a man standing in front of me.

“I have to warn you, Goldie. It’s a war zone.”

“It couldn’t be that bad. It looks great here.” I turn to get a closer look at the living space, and it’s well kept with a cozy lived in vibe.

“Yeah, that’s because Vi and I share this space, and I’m forced to keep it halfway decent. My bedroom has the green light to be a pig’s sty,” he admits with a grin. The thing about Hartley is that he’s unapologetically himself, no matter what anyone thinks of him. “But, if you insist.” He walks toward a hallway and I follow behind, anxious to see another piece of him. We reach a cracked open, white, wooden door. He pushes it open with so much force that it bounces off the wall behind. Turning around to face me, he says, “That’s why they invented door stoppers.” I roll my eyes to the back of my head and laugh, stepping into the carpeted bedroom. He flips on the lights and fan, and I’m greeted by a sight that catches me by surprise.

“You build Legos?” Three shelves above his bed are filled to the brim with the most intricate Lego sets I’ve ever seen. Superhero models, cars, and model heads are only a few, but they are breathtakingly intricate, each tiny piece put together to make the massive collection.

Grabbing the base of his neck, he shrugs and rubs back and forth. “Yeah. Not many people know about it, but it keeps my hands busy.”

I walk slowly to the shelves, but I can't reach. I crawl onto his unmade bed to gain more leverage until I'm eye-to-eye with the sets. I can see the tiny pieces joined together to make the big models. The sound of a deep breath escapes from behind me, so I whip my head around to see Hartley rocking back and forth on his heels. "What?"

"Nothing. . ." he hesitates. "It's just you in my bedroom. I'm getting used to the sight at the moment." His hand drags over his face while his neck cracks side-to-side. I shake my head and continue my admiration.

My fingers trail the intricate pieces linked together to make huge master pieces. "These are amazing. It's like a form of art."

"Nah. I wouldn't go that far. Just something I like to do to pass the time."

Dropping down to my knees on the cushiony bed, I slide my feet off the end and dangle them while I continue my conversation. "You're not very good at taking compliments, are you?"

His eyes soften, relenting to how well I can read him. I'm not seeing Springs U's top wide receiver, or the loud party animal that hits up Downtown Tap on the weekends. Instead, I see the boy who wants to do right so badly, but oftentimes puts himself to the side for others.

"Never got them as a kid, so I guess I'm not."

Woah. That took me by surprise. It doesn't take a genius to figure out Hartley's family is MIA. He never has anyone cheering for him in games, except Violet of course, but he's never mentioned them negatively.

"Why's that?" I'm pushing my luck, but I'm craving to know the boy behind the

goofy charm. With his hands stuck in his pockets, he meets me on the bed and takes a seat beside me, bumping my knee with his.

“Never met my mom. She didn’t want kids, so my valiant father offered to raise me.”

“You and your dad don’t get along?”

“He was just. . . there, not emotionally. More like a warm body that you want to shake and wake up out of a drunken haze. I never went without the things I needed. Besides having a real dad.” His tongue pops to the side of his cheek, as his eyes narrow, bringing him back to memories that are better left uncovered.

“That’s not okay, Hart.” My hand inches toward his, gently rubbing his thumb.

“It is what it is,” he says, staring at the ground. “Lots of people had it worse, so I can’t complain.”

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“Don’t downplay it,” I snap firmly. His Caribbean-colored eyes wander from the fuzzy carpet to my thumb that continues to rub circles around his. His eyes slowly rake up my body and meet mine with glazed hurt coated over them. “You deserved better.” His hand squeezes mine before traveling at a torturous pace up my thigh, then to my arm. His touch fires goosebumps everywhere. He makes his way up my shoulder and to the base of my neck. His eyes darken with each slow touch, never leaving mine.

My brain powers down because I’m tired of fighting whatever this is between us. For one day, hour, minute, or even second, I don’t want to think about anything but the undeniable attraction I have for the man behind the hurt eyes. His eyes dart down to my glossy lips before I wet them with my tongue. He takes a deep breath, moving his body slightly. As if I can read his mind, I nod my head, and that’s all it takes for his lips to meet mine in a blazing fury. His hand never leaves my neck, holding steady like he never intends to let go. Mine lace around his body, pulling him closer in. To get a better angle, I break contact to tuck my feet underneath me, but I don’t stay in that position long because his strong grip flips my body onto his lap. His skin blazes with heat as I open my mouth, allowing him in. My heart pounds out of my chest while my mind only focuses on the feeling of his lips on mine. He doesn’t hesitate to deepen the kiss and prolong our connection. His initial taste is spicy, but the aftertaste is sweet, similar to his personality.

I finally break our connection and I stare into his dark, lustful eyes for longer than I care to admit. My hands stay firmly planted on his chest, our foreheads still touching as my breathing begins to even out. When the reality of what we just did dawns on me, I jump off his lap and scurry to grab my purse.

“I . . . I . . . shouldn’t have done that.”

“Why?” He leans back on his elbows with a cocky smirk painted on his face. “Was I that bad of a kisser?”

“No,” I snap. “You know why.”

Realization flashes across his eyes. His easy smile quickly turns into a scowl. “Because you’re scared I’ll be like him,” he retorts with understanding and frustration balled into one. “Yeah, I remember.” Pushing himself off the bed, he invades my space until I’m backed into the wall with no escape from his intoxicating presence. “Newsflash, Goldie. Your ex was an idiot to let you out of his sight for even a second.” His hands caress my lips as he rubs gently. Then, he pops his finger in his mouth to taste. “So sweet.”

“You c . . . c . . . can’t say things like that,” I answer, flustered with how intense he is.

“I can and I will. I take what I want, and I think you’ve known for a while that I want you to the point of insanity.”

“So did he and look where that got me.”

“It landed you in the arms of a man that won’t ever take a minute of the time you spend with him for granted.” He braces his muscular arms on both sides of me. “Let me prove that to you.”

I inhale his spiced scent and close my eyes for a second, grounding me to the present. Why am I fighting so hard against what I want?

“I don’t know.” I shift my lips back and forth. My brain becomes a running wheel that won’t stop conjuring excuses for why I can’t give in to him. “It’s not that

simple.”

“When’s our next art session?” He flips the script, changing the subject from my uncertainty.

“Umm. Next week? I’d like to sketch you practicing on the field next.”

“It’s a date.” He winks. “And yes I mean a real date.”

“Not a date,” I mumble as I gather my things together to leave.

“Keep telling yourself that!” he hollers out as I close his bedroom door, catching a last minute glimpse of him sprawled out on the bed.

23

Hartley

Next week is here and I’m buzzing with excitement for afternoon practice. This isn’t an ordinary practice, though. Liza is coming to sketch, and the primal part of me is ready for her to see me break a few legs on the field with my superior route running. What she doesn’t know is that I planned a date that is too good to refuse after I finish up. Kissing Liza was everything I thought it would be, and as I predicted, she became flighty after. Texts were left unanswered, and she came up with every excuse in the book to avoid my presence until she had to see me to work on her project. I’m going to prove that I’m not her loser ex and that I can give her everything she wants and needs out of someone.

I won’t mess up this opportunity to prove myself to her.

“Done daydreaming, Knox?” Mason yells, jolting me out of my head and back onto

the field.

“Maybe I am. Maybe I’m not.” Standing with my helmet in hand, I jog toward him. “The world may never know.”

“You’re a certified nutcase.” He laughs and shakes his head. “How are the grades looking?” As team captain, Mason gets weekly reports from Coach about who’s struggling academically. It holds us accountable while also having a teammate check in instead of the coaching staff.

“Better. The tutoring has been working.”

“Well good, man.” He pats my back. “You’re more talented than you give yourself credit for.” A closed lipped smile forms across his face. “Or maybe it took a certain bubbly blonde to kick you into gear.”

I knew it wouldn’t take long for word about Liza tutoring me to travel to the locker room. A few of my teammates passed by the study room while we were there, and they did a double take before leaving. Football players are the worst gossips on campus.

“She’s amazing isn’t she?” I smile at my captain, but envision Liza’s laugh and the crinkle her nose makes when she does.

“Wait. . .” He pushes my shoulder to face him. He tilts his head as if he’s searching my face for a secret code. “You like her,” he says matter-of-factly.

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“And what if I do?” My annoyance comes out because it’s none of his business who I’m pursuing.

“Liza doesn’t do relationships,” he deadpans. “And you know this already.” Crossing his arms over his chest and letting out a concerned breath, he continues, “You know what she has going with Locke.”

“I can change her mind.” My jaw tightens at the thought of Liza not believing that I can be good for her. “And she and Locke are nothing.”

“You do you. I just don’t want you getting hurt in the process.” He pats my shoulder again before backing away. “Or a brawl between teammates in the locker room.”

“Aye, aye, Cap!” I salute him as Coach whistles, signaling the start of practice. I throw on my helmet and smack it a few times before running to the huddle.

After the first few warm up drills, I take my helmet off to wipe the sweat and grass from my forehead. Glancing into the empty stands, my eyes land on her in a white tank top tucked into a flowy, black athletic skirt. Her pencil scribbles onto the sketch pad that rests on her knees. As if she can feel my eyes on her, she glances up from her work and waves, showing off how comfortable she is when she’s sketching. Her hair is half up half down, as it flows in the rare, cool wind. I wink, push my helmet back on my sweaty head, and join the rest of the guys for playbook walk throughs. I texted her earlier, asking her to wait for me after practice, so I could tell her bye, but I have other plans.

Once Coach lets us off the hook for the day, I take the quickest shower of my life in

the locker room and speed out without talking to my teammates, earning questionable looks from Mason and Ryan. I hustle out of the facility and meet her by my car as promised.

“Goldie.” I jog up to her and wrap her fitted frame into a hug. What I really want to do is toss her on the hood of this car and kiss her until her lips swell, but I’m balancing between showing her affection and realizing she’s a flight risk. “Did you get the sketch you wanted?”

“Even better.” She twists and bites her bottom lip. “Seeing you out there gives me all sorts of ideas.”

My face lights up and twists in mischief with ideas of my own.

“For sketches!” She lightly smacks my chest and laughs. “You might never get rid of me.”

“Sounds like we need to do this more often.”

“Maybe.” She shakes her head and laughs. “Why did you want me to wait for you?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Walking to the passenger side, I open the door and gesture for her to take a seat. “Get in.”

“Excuse me?” she sasses. “I don’t get in a man’s car without knowing the destination.”

I lean in close and tuck a stray piece of hair behind her ear. “Do you trust me?”

“I’m working on it.”

“Then, give me a chance to earn it.”

“Fine.” She shuffles to join me, and I wait until she’s buckled in to shut the door and slide across the hood to my side.

“Have you lost your mind? You could have dented your hood!”

“And lose the wow factor of how cool that moment was? Never.” I crank up the engine and place one hand on the wheel before peeling out of the parking lot and onto the highway. We drive in tranquil silence for a few miles before detouring off course down a makeshift gravel road.

“I’m trying, really I am, but this is getting sketchy.” She grips the door handle and taps her feet on the floorboard. She shifts uncomfortably in her seat, changing positions every few seconds.

I chuckle, but give her no indication of where I’m bringing her. “Don’t stress. We’re here.” I park on the edge of the overgrown brush and hop out of the car to grab her door. She scoots out and pats the wrinkles out of her outfit before gathering her hair to one side and stroking her fingers through the strands. “Here.” I reach my hand out for her to place in mine in order to guide her through the wild area. She intertwines her smooth fingers with my calloused ones as I lead her through the overgrown, grassy hills. A few steps before we reach the surprise location, I drop behind her and place my hands over her eyes. “Follow me.”

She nods and allows me to guide her blindly the rest of the way to the field.

“Okay, we’re here.” Batting her eyes a few times to adjust to the sun, she takes in her surroundings.

“How did you know?” Her hands clasp over her mouth as she takes a few steps

forward to admire the bountiful wildflower field in front of us.

“Lucky guess with the assortment of flowers you stick behind that pretty little ear.”

“This is amazing. How did you find this place?” She crouches down and strokes her hand over a patch of yellow, purple, and white mini daisy looking flowers.

“I explore the outskirts of town when my mind feels too full. It keeps me sane. I stumbled across this field last year. It reminds me of you.”

After admiring the flowers, she picks one of each and hands the makeshift bouquet to me. “Could you?” She gestures to the nook behind her ear by moving her hair away, creating space.

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I nod my head and twist the thin stems together so they don't fall out. I lick my lips nervously and inch forward, placing my hand on her shoulder to steady myself before adorning her with nature's growth. She closes her eyes, giving me a closer look at the light glitter that shimmers on her eyelids in the afternoon sun. She inhales a deep breath and keeps them closed, centering herself in the moment. "The smells are what I love the most."

"Why?"

"It reminds me that the world is bigger than me. It's filled with beauty all around us. My problems seem insignificant when I immerse myself in a place like this. I used to sneak out as a little kid and wander around the overgrown forest areas back home." She smiles, bringing a core memory to the forefront of her mind. "I liked searching for clovers, moss that fell from the oak trees, or dandelions. After, I would go home and draw it how I remembered."

"I get it." It's the reason I know about secret garden in the first place. Solitude brings me peace when everything feels too out of control. "You're a wildflower, Liza."

"How so?"

"Wildflowers are uniquely beautiful and different in their own way. They work together in a field like this one." I sit on a patch of flat grass and help her down with me. She leans her head on my shoulder, reaching over to pick a few more flowers beside me. She inhales the sweet floral scent again and again. "I wasn't sure how they worked, so I Googled it. They're harmonious, but are significantly different from the same species rooted firmly next to them. They don't care that they don't make sense

to most of the scientific world.” I snake my hand around her arm, touching her warm skin. “They make sense to each other.”

She lifts her head off my shoulder and meets my lazy stare with vulnerable eyes, desperate to give in to whatever is holding her back. She leans in and presses a gentle kiss to my lips. It’s soft, quick, and full of unspoken promises.

Her lips tremble as she blinks to cast away the sneaking emotion. “I was wrong about you. You’re not like him.” Her eyes tear away from mine.

My body is ablaze from her lips meeting mine. The first time she’s initiated contact, and that’s not lost on me.

I don’t speak another word, too worried to scare her off. Instead, we gently lay our backs to the dewy grass and look to the clouds, getting lost in the puffy white clouds that can be anything we want them to be. We don’t need words or empty promises. All we need is each other.

24

Liza

I’m a goner.Cause of death: Hartley Knox’s charm.

I’m still floating on cloud nine after he managed to pull off the most heartfelt and touching surprise. I don’t always wear flowers in my hair, but it’s something that connects me to the beauty and artistry of nature, like it did when I was little. Layne always reminded me how “childish” and “immature” he thought it was, but Hartley sees me for the real me without any walls or barriers. The harsh reality is that I’m falling for him. It’s not like I didn’t see this coming from a mile away, but I was able to live in my bubble of denial until he made it his mission to prove he can beatfor

me. Maybe the growth I've been through this year has allowed me to open up again.

We're less than twenty-four hours removed from our date, but I'm itching to see him again. There's not much of a chance to steal a glance of him on my side of campus, so I settle for hoping that I'll catch a glimpse in the lunch hall later.

My favorite class of the week is here, and I'm anxiously anticipating showing off my rough sketches for the portfolio project to my professor and some of my classmates. It always helps to get multiple sets of eyes on a piece before adding color.

"Welcome, Liza!" my outspoken professor shouts and saunters over to the table I sit at every week. Since this is a self-paced class, it provides more one-to-one coaching with the professor. "How are your pieces coming along?"

"So far, so good." I flip open my sketchbook to the piece of Hartley in the locker room. Each time I look at it, I fixate on a new detail I didn't see before. Today's fixation happens to be his muscles rippling on the page.

"Wow," he lets out as his fingers trace my pencil sketch. "I have to say, you're stepping far out of your comfort zone."

Insecurity creeps up on me and heat spreads up my neck, undoubtedly causing red blotches to form. The thought of my piece not being good enough nauseates me. "It's just a rough sketch. I'm thinking about changing this." I point to the background behind Hartley's body. The small pieces of equipment in his locker aren't bringing enough detail to the piece. "I should have caught this already." I reach into my art pouch to grab an eraser, when he stops me.

"Woah. . . what are you doing?" His eyes are filled with confusion.

I fidget through my pouch, unable to find that stupid eraser. "You're right. This

material is way out of my comfort zone and I need to fix some things to make it perfect.”

“Liza, take a deep breath with me.” He inhales deeply and rolls his hands in front of me to encourage me to do the same.

I let out a long breath and force my shoulder muscles to relax.

“This,” he runs his fingers across the page, “is amazing.”

“Really?” My voice lights up at the compliment.

“I can see how much this subject matter resonates with you. The movement of the piece is brilliant. It feels as if I’m in the moment with the subject.”

“Thank you.”

He pats my back. “Keep up the good work.”

A wide smile spreads across my face, causing my cheeks to ache. I spend the rest of the class working out the final kinks on my first two sketches before it’s time to leave. This class sucks me into a space where time flies, and my mind finds peace in the strokes of my art.

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I leave the art building on the far side of campus and take the long trek back to the commons area to grab a pre-made salad for lunch. My mind is still on the portfolio, and I don't want to waste too much time before getting back to work. Campus is bustling with loud students eating lunch, hanging out, and hammering out last minute assignments before the next class. I dip into the small grab and go market and open the refrigerator section to pick a pre-made Caesar salad. When I turn around to wait in line to check out, my body freezes, unable to move from the spot where my feet are firmly planted into the ground.

Standing a few feet away, with his backpack slung over one shoulder, is the boy I was hoping, but also not hoping, to see casually on campus. He's not alone. An entourage of football players surround him, but that's not what triggers me. Trying her best to keep his attention is a gorgeous girl with long, black hair. A slit of her stomach is visible in a cream colored crop top with jeans that hug her curves. She's laughing and placing her hand on his shoulder, confident enough in herself to shoot her shot.

Not again.

He's a player who entertains any girl who gives him the time of day.

You're not special.

How could I be so stupid?

My stomach twists into knots, and I'm suddenly not hungry anymore. Before I can duck behind a shelf to save myself from further mortification, Hartley's eyes tear away from the rest of the players to the flirtatious girl before he lifts her hand off his

shoulder and takes a step away. My breath evens out at the sight of him shrugging her off, clearly not interested in her company or touch. I turn to walk to the checkout counter, but before I can, Hartley's gaze travels in my direction. His stare stops on me, and the easiest, dimple popping smile spreads across his face. She's persistent and keeps placing her hand on him. He shrugs the girl's hand off his shoulder once again, giving her an annoyed look before he leaves the group and walks towards me.

"Goldie." He reaches my frozen body, my hands still holding that stupid salad, and places both hands on my hips. He drops a gentle kiss on my cheek before taking off his hat and raking his hands through his messy hair. "I've missed you."

"Just buying this." I lift the salad up and try to squeeze around him to the checkout counter, but he steps over to block my escape. "I'm really busy."

"When can we hang out again?" His hand reaches for the dangling strap of my backpack and replaces it on his empty shoulder. "We should meet up for your project soon."

"Umm. . ." I bite the inside of my cheek to muster up an excuse to not see him. "I might go in a different direction for the project. My professor doesn't think it's working."

"What?" Confusion fills his face as he takes another step forward, breaking the bubble I strategically placed between us. "There's no way he didn't like what you drew."

"You're spiraling, Goldie." His hand reaches up to rub my cheek. It travels to my furrowed brows as he rubs to relax the muscles that have tightened. "Tell me what's wrong."

I let out a nervous laugh. "Wrong? Nothing's wrong. Why would you think

something's wrong?"

"You look like you've seen a ghost."

The girl that was handsy with Hartley just a moment ago appears by his side, but his eyes never tear away from mine.

"Want to grab lunch?" Her chest touches his body, as she's uncomfortably close to him. "My treat."

He shakes his head. "No. I'm having lunch with my girl."

The girl's eyes widen, zeroing in on me. Scoffing, she rolls her eyes and turns away, embarrassed by his blatant rejection. "Whatever."

"You could have had lunch with her." I point at the girl, walking away to grab another football player's attention. "I don't want to ruin your plans."

"Ruin my plans? Wait. . ." He looks behind him to the group he left and back at me. "Were you jealous?"

I point to myself and laugh. "Me? Why would I be jealous?"

"Because you think I'm him, and I'm not." He laces his fingers through my free hand. "Let's buy your salad and get out of here."

We wait in the short line to purchase my lunch and begin the short walk back to the dorms. I haven't said a word since my embarrassing overreaction in the commons, and I don't intend to speak first.

"Contrary to popular belief," he catches me off guard by scooping me up into his

arms and carrying me the last few blocks to my dorm room, “I’m a one woman kind of guy these days.” He winks and holds me tight to his chest. “That woman is you.”

25

Liza

Group message: The Girlyies

Me: I need girl time. Are either of you up for a walk around campus?

Me: I’m not above bribing you with a milkshake date after.

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Violet: I'm in. Ryan's leaving for the away game in a few! What time?

Emberly: My eyes hurt from staring at the computer screen.

Me: YASSSS. I'll pick you up in an hour, Vi. Emberly, come in my room you psycho.

Emberly: HA. I'm too lazy. Come to mine!

Violet: Perfect!!

After busting in Emberly's room and scooping Vi up from her apartment, we park in the farthest lot on campus to get our workout on. Distraction always helps when I'm spiraling, and there's no better distraction than my two best friends. I ask them to skip the earbuds today because we have way too much to talk about on our walk. I haven't had a chance to hang out with both of them in a while, and I miss venting about our life problems and figuring them out as a team. I straighten my spandex shorts, covered with a ruffle pink skirt and make sure my black workout top is adjusted correctly. Vi is in her usual running shorts and t-shirt. Emberly opted for leggings and a sports bra.

"So, what called for the impromptu campus walk?" Emberly eyes me with suspicion. We've grown to read each other well, and it's not like me to randomly beg both of them to take a walk. I'd much prefer just the milkshake. "Something on your mind?"

I blow out air and flip my ponytail off my shoulder as we pick up the pace on the empty sidewalk lined with beautiful daisies and freshly mowed grass. "Possibly."

“Oh, Liza, my head has been so stuck on Ryan lately, I haven’t checked in like I should. I’m so sorry.” She slows down her pace to bite her nails before I reach over to grab her hand in mine.

“No one would ever blame you for throwing all of your energy into that tattoo specimen of a man.”

Violet giggles, and her cheeks flame to a deep red color.

I continue, “I do need to talk to y’all about something, though.”

“Would this have to do with your complicated tutoring arrangement?” Emberly purses her lips and briefly allows a cocky smile to crack through.

Way to be subtle.

“What tutoring arrangement? Oh no. I’ve missed more than I thought!” Violet squeals.

“Promise you won’t be mad.” Keeping my eyes forward, I steady my pace before dropping an info dump on Violet. Emberly knows bits and pieces, but this will be a total shell shock to baby Vi.

“I could never be mad at you, but you’re really making me nervous. Spill!”

“I’ve kind of been tutoring Hartley for a few weeks now in Art History class.”

“You know. . .” she drawls out. “Not seeing the problem here.” Sweet baby angel is so naive.

“Hartley and I have had a, you know... friendship since freshman year, and I didn’t

want anything to mess that up. I couldn't let anything mess that up," I continue to explain. "Tutoring was going well after the initial awkwardness subsided, so I asked if he'd help me with my sketch portfolio project for one of my classes this semester."

"He probably ate that opportunity up." Violet shakes her head and smiles to the ground.

"Why do you say that?" I know Hartley has a thing for the spotlight, but he wouldn't gain anything from this besides helping me complete an assignment.

"Because he loves you," she blurts out with absolute certainty while my jaw hits the concrete, stopping me in my tracks.

"I told you!" Emberly points and squeals. She's crawled out of her shell this semester and I love seeing her confidence in herself grow.

"What did you just say?" I take the opportunity to sip on my ice-cold water, gulping it down to buy more time before I eventually have to respond.

"Isn't it painfully obvious?"

"Obviously not!" I scream.

Violet stops walking to face me. "Let me break it down for you. Hartley doesn't do anything long-term because loss scares him. I've noticed him sneaking out and jetting off to 'study' over the past few weeks." Violet crinkles her nose and jumps as if she won a prize. "He wouldn't give me any info on who he was hanging out with, so I took matters into my own hands." She laughs and bends over, holding her stomach.

That tiny menace. "And how did you do that?"

“I had Ryan eavesdrop on him in the locker room. Hartley isn’t very good at keeping up a facade or talking low.”

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“Wait, that still doesn’t explain how you came to the conclusion that he’s in love with me.” I’m grasping at straws, trying my hardest to debunk Violet’s sleuthing skills.

“Liza, I’ve known him my entire life, and I’ve never seen him in love. He’s different with you. He stares at his phone and waits for messages. He drops his plans to meet up with you, and he passes up a night out at Downtown Tap if it meant seeing you.” She shows off the brightest smile as she shifts from side to side. “I should have known it was you. You’re tailor-made for him.”

“I’m not,” I blurt out before thinking.

“Why do you think that?” Emberly hops back into the conversation. “Let’s compare him to your ex for a minute because I know that’s what’s freaking you out.”

I exhale. “There’s a bench up there,” I point a few blocks ahead, “This feels like a sitting conversation.” We speed walk to the roomy metal bench and begin hashing out my past, present, and future.

“Let’s start with Layne,” Emberly leads. “How did he make you feel at the best point in your relationship?”

“He. . .” I pause, thinking this through. “He made me feel important. I was always surrounded by a group of people when I was with him.”

“What else?” Violet chirps in.

“We couldn’t keep our hands off each other. Everyone wanted to be us.” I nod.

“Anything else?” Emberly leans her elbows on her knees to meet my eyes.

“Uhhh. Not that I can think of.”

“Hart’s turn!” Violet bursts at the seams with excitement.

I have a feeling she’s already planning our wedding and future baby names in that overworked mind of hers.

“Hartley makes me laugh, even when I don’t want to. He notices little things about me that I didn’t realize.”

“Like what?” both girls ask, sitting forward.

“For the past few tutoring sessions, he brought me my go-to Starbucks order. I’ve never told him what I like or showed up to tutoring before with my drink in hand, he just notices me with it around campus.”

“One point for Hart.” Emberly holds her hand up to count. “What else?”

“He brought me to a wildflower field and said the beauty of it reminded him of me.” Heat blooms to my cheeks, so I rub my wet hands over them to cool off.

“Ugh. I’m sorry, but I’m dying inside,” Violet swoons. “Who knew Hart could be such a lover boy?”

Emberly braces my bouncing knee with her hand. “Keep going.”

“He won’t take no for an answer, despite all the times I’ve told him I’m not interested or that I just want a friendship. He hasn’t given up on me.” Betraying me right there on a campus bench, my eyes swell with moisture. Why am I getting emotional?

Emberly wraps her arms around me. “Layne abandoned you, and that’s not okay. You didn’t deserve that. No one does.” Emberly’s perceptive juju unleashes the floodgates for tears to spill down my dewy face.

Violet joins the hug and squeezes me. “Hartley won’t abandon you, Liza. You’re it for him.”

I nod, at a complete loss for words. “What if he doesn’t feel the same way? Or he gets bored and wants someone else? I’m nothing special, and I’ve seen the girls he hooks up with. They’re models.”

“Youarespecial,” Emberly says in a stoic tone. “You do everything you can for everyone around you. Let yourself be happy for once.”

She’s right. They’re both right. No matter what the long term outcome is, I owe it to myself to give this a chance. Rubbing the tears off my cheeks, I chuckle like a maniac until I have the right words to express my feelings.

“I guess I need to tell him how I feel.”

They both squeal and pull me into a double hug full of sweat, love, and acceptance. The three of us couldn’t be any more different, but our hearts are built the same.

26

Hartley

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:16 pm

It's homecoming weekend at Springs U, which means tons of pointless gatherings around campus before the big game Saturday night. The university tries their best to schedule an easy opponent to help ensure a win, but I don't take any game lightly.

Giggles echo through the apartment as Violet, Liza, and Emberly get ready for the bonfire.

"Is this necessary?" Emberly groans from the bathroom.

"Of course it's necessary!" Liza yells.

And there it is. A soft smile tugs against the side of my lip. I know exactly where this is going.

"Just because it's a bonfire doesn't mean we can put our makeup on the backburner. Eyeshadow adds the drama, and I live for the drama."

That's an understatement. Liza will find any excuse to dress up. Can't say I'm complaining, though.

Tapping sounds hit the wood floor as Violet comes into view. She waves to me and continues into the small bathroom to join her friends. "She's right. We want to look good for homecoming."

"Uhhh, of course the two of you want to be made up perfectly. You have smoking hot football players as your arm candy," Emberly huffs.

“Shhhhh!” Liza attempts to quiet down her friend, but the damage is done. I know she’s been talking about me to the girls, and that does something funny to my chest.

My grin has morphed into a full-blown smile. Unable to eavesdrop any longer, I stick my hands in the pockets of my shorts and walk slowly to the bathroom before knocking. “Is everyone decent?”

“Yeah, come in,” Violet replies.

When I push the cracked door open, my heart stops in my chest at the sight of my girl. Her eyes meet mine as she continues to apply lip gloss before rubbing her plump lips together and popping them. She’s in a Springs U football sweatshirt, but the collar is cut off so that it drapes off one of her shoulders. She never ceases to take my breath away, but the charged energy between us has been palpable lately.

“Hey.” She fixes her eyes back to the mirror as she continues to check her makeup before spraying some sort of mist across her face. “Ready for tonight?”

“Now I am.” My attention stays laser focused on her. Muffled comments come from both Violet and Emberly, but I can’t make out what they say when Liza looks like that. She’s close to giving in to what we both want—making this thing between us official.

Hard knocks rattle against the door. Violet squeezes in the small space around me to fly across the main room to answer.

Walking into the living room, I leave the girls to finish getting ready. I crash on the couch in my favorite worn spot, just in time to catch Violet opening the door.

“Baby.” Ryan’s eyes rake across Violet as she twirls around.

She laughs, molding her body to his in a tight hug. “You like it?”

He reaches around her back and holds on to her. “I like everything you do.”

When he notices me on the couch, he unwraps his arms from Violet to shake my hand. “Hart.”

“Never thought we were ones for formalities, but if you insist.” I reach out to shake his hand, making light of the awkward tension that builds when the three of us are in the same room.

A cocky smile forms across his face. “Never thought I would be dating your sister, but here we are.”

I push myself up from the couch and walk toward Ryan, cracking my knuckles with intent to set him straight. “Watch your mouth, Shane.”

My shoulder muscles tense and my jaw clenches, but before I can hit him with a smart aleck answer, Liza stomps in and rolls her eyes to the back of her head. “Would you two cut the tough guy act for one night?” Folding her arms across her chest, she licks her top lip, no doubt tasting the sweet taste of her lip gloss, before continuing, “He’s got it bad for her.” She points from Ryan to Violet. “She’s got stars in her eyes for him, and you need to come to the realization that she’s not a kid anymore.”

What can I say back to that? I love it when she puts me in my place. “Sorry, babe. I can’t focus on much right now.”

Violet shakes her head and grabs Ryan’s hand to guide them both to her room, giving us a rare moment of privacy.

Liza walks to the edge of the couch, nudging her legs against my thigh. Her arms are

still crossed, guarding her from herself. “Why is that?”

My hands cradle her waist before gently tugging her onto my lap. She doesn't put up a fight. Instead, she uncrosses her arms and places one across my shoulder. “All I could focus on was the way you were putting me in my place. Bossing me around like I'm yours.” Her cheeks flush and she swallows. My eyes follow the bob of her neck. Inching closer, my lips graze the shell of her ear. “But you're not mine, are you?”

I lift her frame and place her on the open spot next to me. I get up off the couch and turn back for a second to see her stunned face exactly where I left her. Her lips pursed into a pout and her flushed skin heated from the little encounter.

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Liza hasn't spoken much since our moment in the main room, but I don't miss the way her eyes scan the bonfire to find mine more often than not. Ryan and I dropped off the chairs and snuck away to take care of team obligations. Rubbing elbows with alumni and donors is at the top of Coach's priority list to make the dean happy.

"You're having quite the year, kid." An older man, who must be in his late sixties, extends his hand to shake mine.

"Thank you, sir." I nod and stick my hands back in my pockets, not sure how to keep up the small talk.

His eyes level with mine, and a serious look passes across his face. "Got any interest?"

"From scouts?" He nods, encouraging me to proceed. "Not yet, but hopefully next year my name will gain traction."

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a card and pen. Jotting down a name and number, he slides the card into the palm of my hand. "That's my brother's number. Call him when you're ready to get serious about your career."

My eyebrows furrow as I read the scribbled name and number on the worn card. "What does he do?"

"He's an agent. A big one at that. He'll score you a sizable rookie contract."

"Are you talking about the NFL?" My insecurities tumble out of my mouth. My

biggest fear was always not being good enough to make it to the next level. The NFL has always been my goal, but getting there is another story.

“Hartley,” he scolds. “You’re a sophomore and you’ve got NFL material written all over you. Those routes you’re running this year? Only a handful of guys in the nation can do what you do. Don’t second guess that.”

Swallowing down my choked up emotion, I say, “Thanks for this. I’ll give him a call.”

He nods and turns around to join the rest of his alumni friends at the huge burning fire.

“Who was that?” Ryan asks as he shuffles next to me. His jaw is set tight as he cracks his neck on both sides.

“One of the football alums. He gave me this.” I pull the card out of my pocket to show Ryan. “It’s the contact information for an NFL agent.”

“Nice.” He pats my back. “You should call him.”

“You think?”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t know. I want to play in the NFL, but don’t know if I’m cut out for—” I stop talking when he turns to walk away.

He glances over his shoulder. “You are. Come on. The girls are probably wondering where we’ve been.”

I jog to catch up with him, and before long, we spot Violet and Liza lounging in camping chairs as close as they can get to the roaring fire sparking embers. They're both laughing and shoving gooey s'mores into their mouths. I decide to sneak up behind Liza to catch her off guard.

Wrapping my hands across her shoulders, she doesn't even flinch before looking back at me with those big eyes full of hope and promise. "Goldie."

"Hotshot."

"Did you miss me?"

"You were only gone for a half an hour." Her lips form into a smirk as she tries to hide the smile creeping across her face. "I hardly realized you were gone."

I unfold the extra chairs Ryan and I brought to cozy up next to her. "Keep telling yourself that."

She shakes her head as a shiver racks through her body. "I will."

"You're cold."

"No, I'm okay."

"That wasn't a question, babe." I unroll a blanket from the bag we packed and drape it over her.

She nuzzles against the warm stitches of the fabric and tucks her icy fingers underneath. Her eyes are locked into the fire as sparks ignite and pop close enough to reach us.

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“Why do you have to make it so hard?” she whispers almost inaudible.

“Make what so hard?” I ask.

“Not falling for you.”

My chest fills with a warm sensation. Pounding overtakes my eardrums at the thought of Liza being mine and only mine. “It’s too late for me.”

Her glossy eyes shift toward me, but now it’s my turn to tear away from hers and stare into the fire.

27

Liza

Ugh. Why does he have to be so ridiculously charming?!

My brain continues to return to the moment we shared by the bonfire. Hartley has done his best to prove that he can be what I need, but something still holds me back. Every time I come close to acting on my feelings towards him, my mind short circuits and freezes. Just another trauma response Layne injected into my system the night he betrayed me. If he could do it, anyone could.

I need a night to gather my thoughts, alone. I brush my wet hair until it’s slicked and dripping onto my back before wrapping a towel around my body. Grabbing the matches, I light my favorite peppermint hot chocolate candle. Condensation covers

my icy, dorm window on one of the rare cold nights in Florida. I plop onto the high set bed, pick out my pink jammies with little gingerbread men on it, and slip on my fuzzy white socks. I twist my damp hair in a pile on top of my head and begin searching my drawers for the supplies I need to create killer nails. A date with my store bought acrylic nail kit is a must for thinking about long-term life decisions. Emberly is out for the night. She mentioned something about a project with a hard deadline, so I have the place to myself.

Taking a seat on my rolling desk chair, I begin on the right hand first, applying the nail glue to my pinky finger. Just as I push the first nail down with a firm force, my phone buzzes on the edge of my bed, nearly falling to the tile floor. I roll my chair over and flip my phone screen to see who's calling. My throat constricts when Hartley's name flashes across the screen. He's not just calling, he's FaceTiming.

No way can I answer when I look like this.

I click the red decline button and shoot off a text.

Me: Sorry, I can't answer right now. What's up?

Hartley: Wanted to hear your voice. We just got back to the hotel, but Ryan took a walk to call Violet.

Me: How did the game go?

Hartley: We won easy, but I'm beat.

Me: Took some hard hits?

Hartley: You could say that.

Hartley: *picture of dark bruises along his hip bone*

Me: HART!

Hartley: Yes?

Me: That looks terrible. How are you walking?

Hartley: Haha. It's a part of the game, sometimes you take hard hits, sometimes you don't.

Hartley: I miss your face, too, why can't I see you?

Me: Told you I'm busy.

Hartley: May I ask what's got you so busy?

Me: I'm putting on nails.

Hartley: Okay. I'll join you.

Me: No can do. I already showered and washed off my makeup.

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Hartley: Who cares?

Me: I do.

Hartley: Please. It'll help my bruises heal.

Me: Why are you so difficult?

Hartley's name flashes across the screen with another FaceTime call. I inhale a deep breath and click the green accept button. I was not prepared for what's across my screen. Ashirtless Hartley, sprawled across white sheets with one arm behind his head and the other holding the phone up.

"Goldie." His hooded eyes boar daggers through my defenses. The intimacy of the moment grabs hold of my skin as heat flares across my face. "You're so pretty."

"Stop." My eyes tear away from his as I'm reminded what I look like in hot pink pajamas, messy wet hair, and a bare face free of makeup. "I'm not pretty after a shower."

He raises himself off the pillow, grimacing when he shifts to put pressure on his bruised hip. "You don't honestly believe that, do you?"

"It's a simple fact."

"You," he runs a hand down his sleepy face, "looking like that," he breathes in and releases, "are what my dreams are made of, and they're anything but innocent."

My hand grips the desk chair, as I fight the natural attraction I have to this man. I swallow twice before continuing. “Did you call to feed me compliments all night?”

Letting out a small chuckle, he shakes his head in disagreement. “No. I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” My hand clamps over my mouth, but it’s already too late to take back the traitorous admission I made. “I meant. . . it’s lonely here without you constantly annoying me.”

He groans and positions himself back on the pillow. “Call it what you want.”

I need to change the subject. “What do y’all usually do after away games? I’m surprised the team isn’t out at one of the bars after the big win.”

“They are.”

My nose scrunches up in confusion. Hartley is the life of the party, not the homebody who returns to his room for an early night in. “Why aren’t you?”

“The only thing I could think about was taking a hot shower and talking to you.”

Layne would never skip a party, even when I begged him a time or ten. “Since when do you skip a night of celebratory drinking?”

He yawns and stretches his arm above him, putting his giant muscles on full display just for my viewing. “Since you.”

My feelings are still under lock and key. I haven't technically avoided Hartley since he came back from his road game last weekend, but I've also made zero effort to see him. He's texted me more than a handful of times asking to hang out, but I've come up with a believable excuse every single time. Strolling into Starbucks on winter break has become my routine. I welcome the five person deep line in front of me. It gives me a chance to mindlessly scroll social media and catch up on my missed texts. Besides my fellow coffee lovers, campus has been a ghost town. Most college students leave for break and come back well into the new year, but not me.

My mom jet set off to Europe with her boyfriend, and my dad has his head buried so far into work that he probably doesn't even realize it's the holidays. Luckily, my sister begged Dad enough to convince him to buy her a plane ticket to spend the holidays with me. She's set to land tonight, and I'm itching to hug her again. The line continues to scoot up slowly. Grabbing my phone, I check the notifications that have been buzzing in my pocket.

Willow: I'm soooooo excited to spend the week with you!! Can you believe Dad actually went for this?!

Me too, girl.

Hartley: If I didn't know better, I'd think you're avoiding me.

Hartley: I miss you, Goldie.

My heart accelerates in my chest. I miss him, too, but I'm terrified to see him. Seeing him flusters me in the best and worst way, causing me to forget all the reasons we shouldn't date. Admitting my feelings means opening up my heart again. Opening up my heart again means giving another man the power to shatter it. I know I can't avoid him forever, so I bite the bullet and reply.

Me: Avoiding is too strong of a word.

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Hartley: Then what word would you use?

Me: Strategically being in different places at different times.

Hartley: Ahhh so the definition of avoiding

My throat constricts as I type out my next message.

Me: As much as it pains me to say, I miss you too, Hotshot.

Hartley: Now we're making progress. When can I see you?

Hartley: I'm nothing if not persistent, and I told you I'd fight for this. Even when you get squirrely.

Me: Aren't you back home for the break?

Hartley: Nah. Vi went to Ryan's for the holidays, and where I grew up doesn't feel like home. It's just me, Christmas lights, and the best spiked eggnog known to man.

Me: That sounds perfect

Hartley: Then what are you waiting for?

Me: My sister flies in tonight to spend the holiday with me. I can't abandon her.

Hartley: Bring her. I'd love to meet her.

Hartley: Seriously, come over, or I'll have to come get you.

Me: I'll see.

My heart wants to leap into his arms, craving his touch, but my head screams to be careful. I'm not lying, I really will think about it. I might even run the idea by Willow and hope she shoots it down.

After nursing my holiday tea all day, I can't help but wish I ordered hot chocolate instead. After cleaning up the dorm a bit, it's time to pick Willow up from the airport. An entire week with my little sister away from our parents' influence is exactly what I need to recharge my soul. The airport near Springs U is small in comparison to the Louis Armstrong airport in New Orleans, but it's perfect for our quaint little beach town. I arrive early to the near empty airport, so I pick a comfy seat away from everyone and scroll through my camera roll until Willow takes her phone off of airplane mode. After ten minutes of scrolling, my phone pings.

Willow: I'M HEREEEEEEEE

Without wasting another minute, I jog to the escalators and impatiently wait to see Willow face-to-face since I left for my sophomore year of college this summer. I bounce back and forth until the sight of her warm, auburn hair comes into view. She waves hysterically and bounces up and down as she descends the moving stairs. Her lime green suitcase is hard to miss. I run to the base of the escalator and pull her into my arms when she gets her footing on solid ground. She shoves her rolling luggage forward and grips me tight.

"Umm, excuse me," an older man with gray hair and a beard says impatiently. Can't he see that I'm having a moment with my baby sister?

"Sorry!" Willow jolts out of the hug and moves her body and luggage away from the

man's path. "We didn't realize." The man scoffs and continues on his merry way. It's surreal having Willow here. I want to show her that she doesn't need to worry about me and I'm doing better than ever. As we make our way into the crisp Florida "winter", just cool enough for a thin sweater, Willow hits me with the question she's been itching to ask since she boarded the plane. "What trouble have you been getting into?"

I chuckle lightly and shake my head back and forth. "Trouble wouldn't be the right word, but I have gotten myself into a bit of a . . . situation." I shoot her the smile that seems to work my way out of anything I'm cornered into.

"Do I want to know?" She sighs as she stuffs her luggage in the trunk.

"That's debatable, but you know I'll tell you anyway."

"Yeah. Yeah. Get it out now. I can't take a week of being your therapist." She laughs and wraps her arms around my neck, tighter this time. Her muffled voice rings in my ear. "I missed you so much."

"You too, babe."

We unlock and hop in the car, me ready to lay it all out on the line for my sister, and Willow bracing herself for the chaotic storm that comes with my life decisions.

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Hartley

Dancing around the kitchen, I belt out my favorite Christmas songs as I pound my hands with force on the kitchen counter for the drum effect. I take a cleaning wipe, duster, and broom, to every surface in the apartment. After Liza gave me a strong

might, I decided to take matters into my own hands and manifest our night. She may not be ready to admit it, but she has feelings for me, too. I mentally remind myself to thank Violet for the portable water kettle she insisted on packing from her grandpa's house to bring to the apartment. In her words, it's a "must have" and I will "thank her for it one day". That one day is today. I think I have everything I need for an epic hot chocolate bar. I grabbed all the goods from the store this afternoon in hopes that Liza will show up tonight.

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The kitchen counter is loaded with peppermints, marshmallows in all different sizes, chocolate, and caramel syrup. I even bought the more expensive disposable coffee cups with the snowmen and gingerbread men on them. That has to count for something. Since I haven't worn a shirt all day, I guess it would be appropriate to throw on my favorite tacky Christmassweater with the gingerbread man with one leg bitten off and wait by my phone for Liza to either confirm or deny our date.

As if she can read my mind, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I grab it, hoping to see a notification from Liza.

Goldie: Is it too late for us to come over?

Me: The party never stops at the Knox residence.

Goldie: You're ridiculous.

Me: Only for you :)

It's go time.

Liza

"You should have known better than to tell me this information willingly." My little sister hops in the passenger seat, excitement beaming in her doe-like, teenage eyes.

"Yeah, I thought you'd have my back and agree that it's a terrible idea to prance around the apartment of the guy I may or may not have a slight crush on all night."

My fingers tap against the steering wheel as my knees bounce sporadically. The nerves hit me like a freight train as we get closer to Hartley's house.

"Come onnnn." Willow nudges my shoulder and laughs from deep inside. "What have you done with the spontaneous, party girl I used to know?"

I roll my eyes and bring my nails to my mouth to bite, only to remember I have acrylics on. "She's caught feelings, that's what."

"Is that such a bad thing?" Her voice levels me, all playfulness gone. A more tender side presents itself.

"I don't know." Inhaling a deep breath, I get ready to unload my feelings on the short drive over. "Maybe not. The breakup with Layne just hurt so bad, and I don't want to ever feel lost like that again." I gulp and remember this is just my little sister, the person I disclose everything to. "You know better than anyone how bad it was."

"I know," she whispers. "But, from what you've told me, Hartley seems cool, Liza. You can't assume everyone is going to toss you aside like that loser did."

I pause. "I want to tell him how I feel, but I've been avoiding him ever since I've come to terms with my feelings." Groaning out dramatically, I pull into a parking spot directly in front of the staircase that leads to his door. My head drops to the steering wheel, and I lightly pound against it. "Why do I make everything so complicated?"

"Look." Willow unbuckles her seatbelt and tucks her feet underneath her, propping herself higher. "I'll feel him out tonight. You trust me more than anyone, right?"

"Right."

“When we get back to your dorm, I’ll give you my honest opinion on the guy, okay? You just need to relax and enjoy yourself with someone who you definitely like.” She opens the car door and pats my back with encouragement as she waves her hands for me to step out of the car. “Come on!” Before I know it, she’s racing up the staircase.

Throwing the car door open, I fly to the fourth step and grab her arm. “Stop!” I whisper-shout to my obnoxious little sister.

I shoot her a serious glare. “It got you out of the car, didn’t it? Let’s go feel out your man.” She takes the rest of the stairs two at a time, and I struggle to keep up until we reach the door.

“You do the honors.” My sister gestures to the door, and I knock three times. Before I can land the fourth knock, the apartment door flies open to reveal a vision of a delicious Hartley Knox in all his backward hat glory. He’s absolutely devastating in a Christmas sweater, splattered with cookie dough chunks, and black sweatpants that hug his muscular thighs to perfection. Of course, he’s wearing a crooked smile that makes it virtually impossible to form a coherent sentence.

“Goldie.” The nickname that once irked my nerves now leaves me speechless as it rolls off his tongue. My eyes hone in on his plump lips. His tongue pushes along his bottom lip and peruses back and forth. “Enjoying the view?” His brazen ability to call out the obvious shocks me out of his induced haze and back to reality.

“Uhh. . .” Stumbling across my words, I can’t seem to form a sentence when he looks this good. Instead, I divert the attention to my little sister. “This is Willow.” Reaching over to pat her shoulder awkwardly, I sport a tense smile and take a step closer to her.

“Hartley.” He extends his large hand to shake hers. “Nice to meet you.” She places hers in his without a second thought. “I’m so excited to meet the guy that’s consumed so much of Liza’s time this year.” She winks, fully enjoying embarrassing me.

“Trust me, the pleasure’s all mine.” He turns his back to us. “Come in. I have a surprise.”

Giving Willow the meanest death glare I can muster up, I mouth, “Really?” She sticks her tongue out and follows behind Hart into the kitchen.

“Ta da!” The sight of his transformed apartment takes my breath away. I assumed we’d come over, chill on the couch for a little while, and head on our holly jolly way, avoiding feelings all together, but this. . . this is more than I expected. The kitchen counter is covered with Christmas coffee cups, boiling water, and hot chocolate packs.

“I created a hot cocoa bar.” He stares at the counter with pride, placing his hands on his hips. “Since we didn’t go home for Christmas, I wanted to bring the Christmas spirit to us.”

“Wow!” Willow squeals and shoves a handful of chocolate chips into her mouth. “This is awesome.”

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“Hartley. . .” I let out. He squeezes past my sister, who is distracted by the many different forms of chocolate at her disposal and settles in next to me. His hand intertwines with mine and I stare into his eyes for the first time since I’ve come to terms with how I feel about him.

“Don’t thank me,” he cuts in. “I didn’t do this to be thanked.” His hand reaches to my wavy hair and tucks a piece behind my ear. The heat from his body sends a jolt of electricity from my fingers to my toes. His hand reaches to grasp behind my neck and cradle the spot that elicits goosebumps all over. My ears hollow out for a split second, taking my mind back to the night of our first kiss. He leans in delicately and whispers into the shell of my ear, “I love to see you happy.”

Speechless, I zone out, consumed with emotion over the thoughtfulness he put into this. “We need to talk about us.”

That lazy grin returns as his thumb traces the skin on my neck. “That we do.”

My eyes flit nervously at the prospect of this discussion. “When should we do it?”

He looks over his shoulder at Willow making herself at home at the hot cocoa bar that’ll no doubt put her in a sugar coma later tonight. “What about now?”

“N. . .Now?” I stutter.

“Why not?”

“I. . . I. . . I think my feelings have changed,” I blurt out. There’s no turning back

now. The train has left the station ladies and gents.

“How so?”

He’s going to make me spell it out for him, isn’t he?

“I don’t think we can be just friends anymore.”

A stern look passes over him as his jaw tightens. “If we’re not friends, Liza, what do you want to be? I need you to be very clear.”

Gulping down the scared, lonely, abandoned girl I once was, I replace her with the fierce, confident, woman I’ve grown into. The one Hartley has helped me grow into.

“I want to be more.”

“More?”

“Yes, more,” I huff, annoyed at how he’s forcing out every drop of honesty I have. “I won’t be perfect,” I admit, in hopes it scares him away before we begin. “But I don’t think a day has gone by since we’ve met that I haven’t been tied to you by an invisible string.”

“Liza,” he moans and throws his head back. “I’ve always been yours.” Cupping my cheeks with his warm hands, he bites down on his lip before planting a tender peck on my lips. “Even before I realized it.”

“That’s it?” If Hartley is anything, it’s intense, and that kiss is not the level of intensity I want or need.

A rumbling laugh escapes him as he lets go and fiddles with his hat. “That was

nothing, Goldie, but we have an audience.” Glancing over his shoulder, my sister comes into view. She’s staring at us and doing a happy dance as she sips on her holiday treat.

“Told you!” she screams.

Hartley grips my hip and tilts us both to face her. “You’ve been talking about me?”

“As if your ego needed anymore inflating.” I chuckle. “I need hot cocoa to deal with you.” Balancing on my tippy toes, I plant a peck on his cheek, marking him with my clear lip gloss. For the first time in a long time, I’m not consumed with cynical thoughts of how this boy will inevitably break my heart. Instead, I’m overcome with thoughts on how he will patch up every piece that was ever shattered and glue it back together so tight, no one can hurt me again.

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Liza

“I hate to say this, but I told you so,” Willow gloats as she sprawls across my cool bedding. Her phone is planted on her stomach as she gazes at the ceiling. “You had me worried that he would be Layne 2.0.”

I climb on the bed and tuck myself in next to her. “I don’t want to put either of us through that, again.”

“He’s funny, and he doesn’t let you squirm.”

I prop my elbow up and rest my head in my hands. “Squirm?”

She wiggles her toes and nods her head in excitement. “Yep. You’re an expert at

squirming and avoiding your feelings. He doesn't let you."

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My mind wanders to the perfect night we just experienced. He thought out every single detail with only a small percentage that I would show up. Maybe I've been ignoring all the effort he's been putting in. "Hmmm. I've never thought about it like that."

"Plus, he's hot." She giggles and kicks her feet under the blanket.

I grab my pillow from under my head and shove it over my face. "He is, isn't he?" Inhaling a deep breath, my mind hones in on my biggest reservations. "What if he isn't any different?"

She huffs and rolls her eyes. "Don't go there."

"Really, though. What if everything starts out shiny and new, but he gets tired of me, just like Layne did."

"He won't."

"How can you be so sure?"

She props herself up on her elbows to look me straight in the eyes. "The looks he gives you. He doesn't see anyone but you." She sticks another finger up to count. "The way he begged you to spend a few hours with him at the apartment with your little sister. Layne didn't do either of those things."

Layne didn't beg me to spend time with him. It was always the other way around. I was there, but more out of convenience than need or want. "You're right."

“I know I am.” Willow looks out of the window into the night, reaching over to trace her name on the foggy window made possible by the stark contrast in temperature from the warm, cozy dorm. “This is the best Christmas ever, and it’s just starting.”

Hearing Willow’s admission sends a flood of relief through my body. I was starting to feel guilty about her missing the traditions we usually have in New Orleans during Christmas. She wouldn’t get to visit City Park on Christmas Eve to see the lights or shop at our favorite mall and experience the chaos of last minute shoppers. “I hope you don’t regret missing out on everything we used to do.”

“Liza.” She grabs my shoulder and squeezes. “The best part of Christmas has always been you. You know Dad’s too busy working, and Mom’s too on a whim for me.”

I let out an uncontrollable laugh and grip my stomach. Mom and Willow have always been too different to understand each other. “But how do you like hanging out with me when I’m Mom’s clone?”

“You and Mom are hippies, but you’ve never left me.”

Her honesty hits me in the chest. I’d felt like a major burden lately with how much I had fallen off the rails in the months prior to leaving for college. Partying too much. Coming home too late or worse, not coming home at all. Changing my life plans to relocate to a new city hours away from home. “I would never leave, Willow. You kept me afloat when I thought I was drowning.”

“That’s what sisters are for.”

A tear wells in the corner of my eyes, and I bat it away before getting all mushy right before bed. “Always, my girl.”

Hartley

Goldie: Are we still on for the pre-game run through today?

Me: Yes, want me to pick you up?

Goldie: No, it's okay. I'm going to head back to get ready with Vi after I sketch what I need.

Me: See ya soon.

Things have been. . . normal since Liza and I became whatever we are. In a way, we're still in limbo. She's not officially my girlfriend, yet, but she's more than my friend. I made that much clear over winter break. Hearing her confess her feelings warmed my chest. All the hard work I put into throwing myself into making us work paid off. I always wanted to think she saw me as more than an annoying friend she couldn't escape or a carbon copy of her toxic ex, but hearing her words changed everything. We've both been tied up with school, football, and art, but when we do see each other, I can't keep my hands off of her.

When classes resumed after winter break, Liza went to the Center of Student Excellence and resigned from the tutoring gig. She said her moral compass wouldn't allow her to accept money for tutoring since we've crossed professional boundaries. Her words, not mine. Luckily, we still study together at the apartment, and since she's started helping me, my GPA has risen enough to temporarily lift the academic probation I found myself on at the beginning of the year.

Still staring at my phone like a lovesick puppy, I shake my head and click it off to gather a bag together to head to the field in a few minutes for pre-game walkthroughs.

"Hart! Are you still here?" Violet's soft voice carries through the echoey apartment

into my room.

“Yeah, come in. I’m getting my gear together.” The pitter-patter of her slippers on the hardwood floor treads closer to my room. Knocking gently on the cracked door, she peeks in from behind the white wood. Her beady eyes look tired, in a way I haven’t seen them look in a long time. “What’s going on, Vi?” Making quick strides across the room, I meet her at the door and open it fully for her to come in. She slips in, shoulders slumped, and drops down on my bed.

“I don’t know,” she lets out while she gnaws on her red fingers that have been picked over for days. “I haven’t been able to sleep, and I constantly feel like something bad is about to happen.”

Plopping next to her on the bed, I develop a game plan for how to talk her through this one. Violet’s OCD hasn’t reared its ugly head as much since her and Ryan have made things official. Maybe that’s because he sees more of it than me now, but regardless, I hate seeing her this way. “Wanna go through the grounding techniques?”

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“It won’t help,” she snaps.

“Let’s just try.” I rest my hands on my knees and continue, “They help me clear my head before a game, anyway.” She tilts her head up and nods. “Five things you can see.”

“You, the comforter, the floor, your messy clothes everywhere, and my shoes,” she lists out like a robot. She knows the drill by now.

“My turn. I see my football bag, the pillows, the door, my gray joggers on the floor, and the TV.”

We continue the countdown all the way until we reach one. By now, her breathing has slowed and her eyes aren’t as dilated as when she entered. “Does Ryan know?”

“About this?” She points to her head and shoots me a quizzical look. “How could he not?” She laughs to hide her true feelings about how much this disorder affects her.

“I just want to make sure he’s supporting you through it. That’s all, Vi.” I care about Vi like my own blood. She’s the only thing close enough to family that I have, and if Shane can’t accept her for everything she is, then he and I are due for a one-on-one.

“He does.” Her eyes ease into a gentle memory and her lips turn up into a small smile. “Thank you for this.”

“You never have to thank me. That’s what brothers are for.” Pulling her into a tight side-hug, I squeeze her before jumping off the bed and slinging my duffle back over

my shoulder. “I’ll see you tonight, right? Liza said she’s getting ready with you.” Her lips purse into a curious look, as if she’s caught me in some sort of trouble.

“We’ll be there.” She winks before scurrying back into her room.

I make it to the field just in the nick of time. Even if it meant being late, I would never abandon Violet when she needs me. Football doesn’t trump family. I sprint out the car, spend less than five minutes in the locker room to throw down my stuff, and haul it onto the field with a minute to spare before Coach’s first whistle. I take the minute to myself to stretch out my hamstrings and quads on the sidelines while glancing into the stands to spot my girl front and center with her sketchpad on her lap. “Goldie!” I shout.

Her head snaps up, popping the bubble she was in, and the smile that crosses her face should be painted across my heart forever. She shuts her work and waves at me with her art pencil weaved between her fingers. Glancing back, it looks like Coach is in a heated conversation with Ryan, so I take the rare opportunity to jog over to her and climb up the metal bars, putting us face-to-face.

“What are you doing?!” She giggles and cups her hand over her mouth. “You’re crazy! Coach is going to make you run laps for being distracted on game day.”

Running my hand through my long, disheveled hair, I place my chin on the metal bar in my best attempt to feign innocence. “Worth it.” She stands from the metal bleachers and walks to the railing, placing her bare hands over my gloved ones. Her nose is rosy pink from the Florida sun, and her hair is neatly French braided with small wisps framing her golden skin. “I want you to have something.” Reaching under my pads and into my undershirt, I pull out the chain I haven’t gone without for one game since high school. A small silver #13 hangs from the worn metal. I unhook it and hold the memento in front of her.

“What is this?” She gently strokes the chain in my hand and looks up to me with a confused look.

“It’s my lucky charm.” Reaching around her bare neck, I clamp the chain in place. It hangs lower on her, but the sight of Liza wearing my number around her neck jumbles my insides like never before. “I want you to wear it.”

She snuffles, choked up at the intimate moment. “Hartley. . .” Her eyes flutter as she looks down at the necklace. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” My worn glove reaches out to rub the necklace now splayed across her collarbone. “You’re my lucky charm, now.” Her hand flies to her chest and holds the necklace in place.

“I love it.” Her throat works up and down as she swallows all the emotions and feelings I see on her face, but she struggles put it into words. “This means a lot to me.”

Suddenly, the piercing sound of Coach’s whistle blows, and he screams, “Knox, get down here, now!”

Liza’s eyes grow wide as she scurries back to her seat and shoos me away with her hands. “Go!”

I jump backward off the railing and sprint to the huddle. I didn’t plan on handing over one of the most important things I own to the girl whotechnicallyisn’t even my girlfriend, but Liza is special. If she only knew she’s every single word Shakespeare wrote into one. The one’s I paid attention to at least.

Liza

It's game time, but it's not a regular game. It's the first game where my. . . maybe boyfriend is playing on the field. My heart pounds a mile a minute, but I can't let Violet catch on to my nerves. I'll never hear the end of it before the game starts. Instead, I'm rocking back and forth in an obnoxiously long nacho line at the stadium, fiddling with the necklace Hartley gave me earlier today.

You're my lucky charm, now.

How does he seem to say things straight out of the romance novels I devour, courtesy of Violet? I fumble across every sentence when he's around. I don't remember feeling this level of nervousness around Layne, but then again, did I care enough to feel all the things I thought I did? I'm starting to question our failed relationship more and more as Hartley continues to set the bar exceptionally high.

Violet's head suddenly whips around to talk to two strangers behind us in line. "Who is out tonight?"

One of the guys replies, "Rumor is Ryan Shane is out for the game."

"Oh, that's not true. He's my boyfriend and he's definitely playing," she says with confidence as I continue to fiddle with the chain around my neck.

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“Could just be a rumor,” the other guy answers with a nonchalant shrug.

Violet turns back around and hits me with a confused stare. She leans over and whispers as soft as she can over the crowd. “Did you hear those guys? They said there’s a rumor that Ryan isn’t playing tonight.”

“What? No way. Ryan would have told you if he got hurt.” I’m not phased. One thing is certain—that boy is obsessed with her. She would be the first to know if he was injured and out for tonight.

“I guess it’s just a stupid rumor. When you’re good that happens.” She shrugs off the comments and we finally make it to the front of the line, order a boat of loaded nachos to share, and shimmy to our seats to watch the pre-game warmups.

My favorite part is the booming music through the stadium as we watch the guys do their thing. I make a mental note of some things I’d like to sketch later to capture this electrifying moment for my portfolio project. Before long, I spot Hartley as he runs straight to me with his sweaty blonde hair flopping on his shoulders. One hand grips his pads while the other flies through his hair, moving it away from his face. I wave frantically and blow him a kiss matched with a playful wink. If he’s going all in on us, I need to show him effort as well, but panic settles over my body when he approaches us. His jaw is set in stone, and his usual goofy playfulness is replaced with stricken anger. I scan the field, remembering what those guys said in the concession stand line. Leaning over to Violet, I scream over the rowdy crowd, “Where’s Ryan? I don’t see him with the running backs.”

Violet scans the field and quickly comes to the same realization. She jolts off the

bleachers and descends a few steps to make it to the metal barrier between the stands and the field. I follow close behind and catch her asking Hartley, “Where’s Ryan?”

“Vi, I’ll have to explain after the game. Some shady stuff went down. I can’t let myself go there or I’ll lose it.” His eyes shift to lock with mine. His pupils are blown and full of hurt, anger, maybe both. Nothing needs to be said between us. I nod, continuing to clutch the number thirteen chain between my fingers so tight it’ll bruise, giving him and Violet space to sort this out.

“Where is he?” she asks with clear panic in her voice.

“I don’t know. No one can reach him. We’ll talk later.” He tries to reason with her, but she’s out of our section before he can finish.

In a split second, I look to the exit to see the back of Violet’s head flashing through the crowd. I also see a lost Hartley in front of me and I don’t have a clue what to do.

“Go,” he mouths.

“But. . . you. . .”

He cuts in before I can finish my chaotic thought. “She needs you. Please. For me.”

Nodding frantically, I dash out of the crowd and out the exit in an attempt to catch up with the speed demon. “Violet! Violet, wait! I’m coming with you. What’s going on?”

“It’s Ryan. . . He’s. . . I don’t know. . . Hartley said—” She’s a babbling mess, and her thoughts are all over the place. I need to put my friend hat on and put my worried feelings for Hartley on the backburner. They can wait until after the game.

“Well, I’m not letting you drive by yourself. You’re too upset!” Placing my hands on my hips, I take a moment to catch my breath from sprinting through a college football stadium. “Don’t fight me. I’m coming.”

“Get in,” she says, and I release a sigh of relief that she won’t face this alone.

As we take the usual short drive into town, each block feels like an eternity.

What did he get himself into?

Why is he missing?

My mind races as I try to hold my composure for Violet’s sake. “What did Hartley say happened?” I ask timidly. I know she’s in a fragile state, and I don’t want to rile her up even more.

“He said something sketchy happened, but he couldn’t talk about it.”

“Maybe he’s hurt.” Although, I doubt that’s the case. My stomach twists and turns with the same feeling I had moments before I walked in on Layne cheating on me. Something’s not right—and I don’t think it’s an injury.

“If he got hurt, he would have told me. I have a feeling this is worse.”

I nod in agreement, even though I pray this is all a big misunderstanding. After driving in circles around town for hours, we stop at Downtown Tap to check it out as a last ditch effort. Ryan doesn’t drink, so the bar seemed like a longshot, but anywhere is worth checking at this point. Violet hightails it out the car and speedwalks past the bouncer and into the bar. I do my best to keep pace, but I fall behind. When I make it past the entrance, the sight is gut-wrenching. Hunched over the sticky bar lined with more empty glasses than I can count, is Ryan. He’s in bad

shape—that much I can tell from a distance—but what’s worse is the agonizing look on Violet’s face as she comes to the realization that everything isn’t okay.

I keep my distance, giving them space to sort out the situation at hand. The booming sound of Ryan’s voice hits me square in the chest from across the barren bar when he says, “Figured yourbest friend would have mentioned how much of a screw-up I am.”

Hartley.

Stepping outside of the bar for air, I curl my legs into a ball against the exposed brick wall. Slipping my phone from my pocket, I text Hartley. I’m not sure if the game is over yet, but it has to be close.

Me: We found him at Downtown Tap. It’s bad, Hart. What’s going on?

Hartley: *link to sports article*

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When I click the link he sent, my heart barrels out of my chest. My mind moves at a thousand miles a minute while I register the magnitude of this. Ryan got caught up in a sports betting deal. Even worse? He bet on his own game. I know enough about sports from dating an athlete long-term that betting is one of the cardinal sins. He won't play after this. I click back to our text thread to see I missed one text from him.

Hartley: How is she?

Me: Not good. They're arguing in the bar. How are you?

Hartley: It doesn't matter.

Me: It does. You matter to me.

Hartley: I fumbled. Cost us the game.

Me: Where are you?

Hartley: Leaving the field, going to the apartment

Clicking my phone off, I lift myself off the concrete sidewalk and head back into the bar to check on Violet. The potent smell of liquor and bad decisions hits my nostrils, as well as a red-eyed, sobbing Violet. Slamming into my chest, she grips my shoulders in sheer panic and clenches onto the fabric of my jersey.

Reading her expression, I take control. "Let's go." She nods frantically and allows me to lead us back to her car. She fishes her keys out of her purse and drops them into the

palm of my hands to drive us back home. We take the somber drive back in the darkness of the night, and I manage to keep my mouth shut and allow her to talk to me when she's ready. As we pull in, my mind wanders to Hartley and how he's taking this. Since we have the car, he must have walked or caught a ride back from the field. The dome lights dim as I put the car in park. Violet's eyes stare ahead at nothing, but I imagine she's thinking about everything all at once.

"C. . . Co. . . Could you—" She tries her best to form the question her brain is thinking.

"I'm staying." For both her and Hartley.

Guiding her exhausted body upstairs and into the apartment, I help her into the bed and climb in next to her. She rolls over and tucks her covers under her hands like a foil-wrapped burrito. With the lights turned off, her bedroom illuminates with moonlight peeking through the sheer curtains she hung a few weeks ago. The midnight haze casts shadows over us. Leaning up on my elbow, I peek over to check if Violet's sleeping. I'm greeted with her heavy-lidded eyes staring at the wall.

"It doesn't seem like it, but everything will be okay," I whisper softly, not to startle her. "It feels like your heart is being ripped out of your chest with no medicine to ease the pain." I rub her back to soothe her into sleep. "You're stronger than you think."

"I hope so." Her voice cracks before one of her hands untucks from the comforter and grips over her mouth. "I don't know how I'll be able to trust him again after this."

I snuggle closer to her and squeeze her into a tight hug. "You may or may not. Just know I'm here for you, regardless. I'm your ride or die."

We lay there like that for what has to be over two hours before her breathing steadies and the first snore leaves her mouth. The sight of her like this reminds me of the night

my life came crashing down before me. I wish I had a friend to stick by me through it all and to tell me that everything will be okay, eventually.

Now that I know Violet is asleep for the night, I throw around the idea of checking on Hartley. Part of me wants to make sure he's doing okay, but the other part doesn't want to over step.

The impulsive side of me takes over as I roll out of bed with as little movement as possible to not wake Vi. I move through the apartment at sloth speed, careful not to creak the old wooden floors before I make it to Hartley's cracked, open door. Darkness peaks through the crack, giving me the evidence I need to know he's asleep, but as I turn to head back to Violet's bed, a raspy voice calls out, "Goldie?" That voice stops my tiptoes dead in their tracks as my body flies around to meet the man behind it.

"It's me," I whisper back.

"Don't leave."

My fragile heart cracks at the sound of him pleading with me to stay, so I enter the dark room, reaching my hands out to feel around so I don't run into furniture or trip over his clothes piled on the floor.

"Right here," he says, making a patting sound next to him under the sheets. Breathe, Liza.

"I don't want to. . ." My breathing picks up as my chest rises and falls with anticipation and trepidation. "Intrude."

"Please."

Before I can overthink myself being in his bedroom, I slip my socks off and scoot next to him, careful not to touch his legs with my freezing toes. His warmth is everywhere when our bodies are this close, and it takes all of my will power not to scoot against him and cuddle. “How are you?”

“Could be better.” His voice is filled with a mix of anger and sadness, but he mostly sounds tired.

“Tell me what happened.”

“I fumbled. It wasn’t even close,” he scoffs as he pulls his hands down hard, running them over his face.

“It’s not all your fault, Hart. Football is a team sport, and you’re allowed to feel the way you did.”

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His voice goes softer, more tender as he continues to share his horrible night with me. “I should have blocked it out of my head, but I couldn’t.”

“I can’t believe it. Why would he do something like this?”

“I’m done trusting people only for them to stab me in the back,” he admits. “I’ve been blindsided too many times.” He exhales. “I’m tired, babe.” His vulnerability shocked me into silence. “The team aside, he was supposed to be there for Violet. I trusted him.”

“Maybe there’s more to the story. Is it worth hearing him out?”

His hands rub over his tired eyes as he contemplates my suggestion. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t have to do it all, you know.” My hand slips across the invisible barrier I built between us and interlaces with his warm, calloused one. “She’s strong.” Violet’s grown a lot since I’ve met her, so I’m sure she’s leaps and bounds past what Hartley sees her as.

“If I don’t do it all, who will?” His hand grips onto mine tighter. He slowly rolls over from his back to his side, so I do the same. Even though it’s too dark to see much, I still feel his eyes piercing into me through the pitch black. “I don’t have anyone.”

Without question, I say, “You have me.” My free hand reaches up to trace patterns over his strong jaw. “I’m here to stay.”

His breath whooshes out as his shoulders shift further down. His presence draws

closer seconds before his lips are on mine and I crumple into his strong arms. Arms that hold it all together for everyone but himself. We only part for small breathes before going in for more again and again.

“I’ve waited—” His fingers run through the long strands of hair that cascade well down my back. “—too long—” His teeth nip my ear, forcing me to suck in a deep breath from both pleasure and pain. “—to hear those words come out of that pretty little mouth.” His lips move to my forehead for a gentle kiss, ruining me forever for anyone else. He pulls back slightly and traces his fingers up and down my blazen arm.

“I should have said it a long time ago, when I realized I couldn’t get rid of you.” I giggle into his bare chest and inhale his woodsy smell I love so much.

“And when was that, Goldie?”

“Freshman year?” Even though he can’t see my face in the darkness of the bedroom, I tap my chin to think. “At the bar where we first met.”

He digs his thumbs into the curves of my hips, my spandex boy shorts riding up inch by inch. “Since you’ve loved me since the day you met me, you shouldn’t have a problem being my girlfriend.” So matter-of-fact. So cocky.

Instead of feeding into the cat and mouse game we’ve played for too long, I give him the truth. “No. I think I would like that.”

“Finally,” he groans out.

The days following Ryan's massive admission have been a mix between chaos and solitude. Violet gets a little better with each passing day. Taylor Swift, wine, and chocolate are to thank for that. I've set up camp at their apartment to make sure Violet isn't alone, but each night, after her eyes close, I shuffle down the hall into Hartley's bed. We spend most nights talking about anything and everything until the sun peeks through the curtains, yelling at us to get an hour or two of sleep before class the next day.

Hartley's stark anger towards Ryan has shifted to indifference. Violet chooses to talk her feelings out with me when Hart's not around to avoid a massive blow up like the one outside their building the morning after the truth came out. Not one of Hartley's finer moments, but I have his back no matter what.

"There's my girl." Hartley juts his chin out and wraps his strong arms around my waist from behind in the middle of my favorite spot on campus, the courtyard. Benches, willows, and cobblestone line the area creating a peaceful oasis in the midst of final's week stress.

Lifting my head slightly, I plant a wet kiss on his flushed, rosy cheek, no doubt coming straight from a workout. "Trying to scare me?"

"Nah, just can't keep my hands off of you." We both throw our backpacks on a free table and sit across from each other. This meetup has become our routine, a few minutes of quality time when we can.

"I'm stressed," I groan, dropping my head into the palms of my hands.

"Look at me." His muscular arms plant atop the wrought iron table. His warm breath fans across my worried face as I peek one eye through the slits of my hands. "No one is better at this than you."

“You don’t know that.” My voice comes out whinier than I’d like.

“I do.”

“How?”

“I don’t need to see anyone else’s work to know yours is the best.” He wraps my hands in his, exposing my face, etched with worry, for him to read.

“But. . .”

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He cuts me off. "I see the hours you spend on every waking minute of each piece. The smallest line in the wrong place. A color not working with what you're trying to portray." His crooked grin makes an appearance, and I can't help but release one of my own. "Plus, you have the best model."

Clapping my hands together, I put on a show. "There it is!"

Leaning over the table, he kisses me with a surprising amount of force for the middle of campus. Then again, Hartley doesn't care what anyone thinks. "No more doubts. Okay?" He lifts himself off the seat, the print of the bench pressed into his jeans as he walks away. I try not to stare, but who am I kidding? Of course I stare because Hartley Knox is mine, and it feels better than I ever would have imagined. He flips around with his hands cupped around his mouth and shouts, "See you tonight!"

He leaves me giddy at a table by myself. At least my mind is on my smoking hot boyfriend, and how those jeans curve in all the right places, not the art exposition tonight. Since most art class finals are portfolio based, I turned mine in last week for final grading. My professor called me in a few days later and asked if I would like my sketches to appear in the annual campus art exposition. I can't believe that my art is good enough to put on display. This is a huge deal because alumni, donors, and art influencers from the area attend to spot the next up and coming artists from Springs U. This could be the break I need to score a local internship doing what I love in the place I've grown to love the most.

I flip my wrist over to check the time on my watch. Emberly is supposed to meet me here so we can get ready together at the dorms before we pick up Hartley and Violet. I take in the scenery around me. The wisps of the hanging moss from willows

surround the paved area of my little slice of heaven. Birds chirp as they pick up crumbs of food dropped by bustling students through the main hub of campus. What was once a last minute detour to escape my mess of a life has turned into exactly where I belong.

“Hey.” Emberly’s soft voice catches my attention and snaps me out of the sappy thoughts that fill my mind.

“Hey! Ready?” Jumping up, I join her in tow to take the trek back to our dorm room.

“I’m so excited for tonight.”

“I can’t decide what I am.” Raising my hand to my mouth, I chew on my nails. Remembering the fresh coat of nail polish I added a few days ago for tonight’s event snaps me from my trance. “I want to be excited, but this is the first time anyone will see my final sketches. I want everything to be perfect.”

Glancing my way, a reassuring smile takes over her face. “It’s going to be great. Hartley loves everything you do.” She adds a knowing wink.

“What if he doesn’t like how he’s portrayed?” Art is subjective, after all, and he may hate the perspective I took of him in each scene.

“He will love it. You could finger paint a stick figure of him on a rock, and he would swear up and down it’s better than the Mona Lisa.”

An unexpected laugh roars out as I clench my stomach. “He would say something like that, wouldn’t he?”

“Oh, and can you—”

“Yes, I’m doing your makeup. Duh!” Placing my hand under my chin, I make a prissy pose and pout my glossy lips to one of my best friends. “You don’t have to ask. I like treating you like my personal Barbie doll.”

“I know, but I don’t want to be a burden on your big night.”

“Never.” As we approach our dorm, I feel so much better about tonight than I did earlier today. I need to get over my fear of failure and enjoy my successes with my friends who have become family.

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Hartley

My palms are drenched with sweat as I pace back and forth, carving a path into the already worn wooden floors of the main room. “Are you sure you’ll make it?” I rage into the phone at Willow.

“Yes. I’ve told you a million times already!” Willow shouts into the phone. “I’m walking to the rideshare as we speak.”

“It won’t work if you’re not—”

Willow cuts me off in a mocking tone, “Here before she gets here. I’ll be there. Stop worrying so much!” The fire in this girl is exactly like her sister, and I don’t know if that should make me smile, laugh, or fear the future of two spicy alpha personalities in my life.

“Text when you’re close.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Her end clicks off before I can quadruple check her ETA. When

Liza asked me to be her date to the annual art exposition, my heart exploded. I knew she would want her sister there, but with her being here for a week at Christmas, another flight would be out of the budget. I took it upon myself to sneak around to get Willow's number and forge a plan to surprise my girl with her favorite person. As much as Liza tries to downplay it, tonight is important to her and for her career as an artist in the area. I want her night to be perfect because she deserves it, and because I love her. I think I've loved her for a while, but when she opened herself up to a real chance for us to work, my heart confirmed it.

"Hart! Is she close?" Violet's voice echoes from her bedroom. Her heels click on the hardwood floor as she waltzes out the room. Her head tilts to the side as she puts in one earring without the help of the mirror.

"She says so."

Planting herself on the couch, she rests her head on my shoulder in reassurance. "She'll be here." A quick grin crosses her face. It lifts ten pounds of worry off my chest to see Violet smile again after what happened between her and Ryan. According to her, they're "working things out" by "taking time for themselves". I'm trying to let Violet take the lead on this, but as the person who's always stepped in to protect her, it's hard to maintain my composure. "She's going to love this."

"I hope so." I want to do it all the right way when it comes to Liza. I thrum my fingers against my thighs, bounce off the couch, and head into the kitchen to put away dishes. I wasn't sure how fancy this event was, so I went with black chinos and a gray polo. I busted out the brown loafers I haven't worn since Violet's grandpa's funeral. Wearing a hat wasn't an option, so I styled my hair the best I could while still looking like myself.

Ding. Our apartment doorbell rings and I jump out of my skin at the thought of Liza and Emberly arriving before Willow.

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“I’ve got it!” Violet yells as she flings the door open, allowing the cool night air to trickle inside.

“I’m here!” a sassy voice booms, and my shoulders relax at the squeaking of Willow’s entrance. She pops around the door into view. “I can’t wait to be here with you guys next year.”

Violet’s eyes bulge in shock and excitement. “You’re coming to Springs U?!”

“Yes, ma’am.” Throwing her hands on her hips. “And you are?”

“Oh.” Red flushes Violet’s cheeks in embarrassment. “I’m Violet. I’ve heard so much about you. I feel like I already know you.”

“The Violet who was a total queen in truth or dare?!” And that’s my cue to plug my ears because if I hear the story of Ryan and Violet’s kiss one more time, I may break something.

“Umm. . .” She bites her lip and behind her dark eyes, flashes the entirety of her and Ryan’s relationship in a matter of seconds. “Yeah. The one and only.”

Willow pulls her in for a hug, and her muffled voice speaks into Violet’s hair, “I want to be you when I grow up.”

Clearing my throat, I interject. “Okay.” The last thing I need is Violet having an emotional breakdown about Shane in the middle of Liza’s art exhibition. “Let’s go over the plan.”

Knock. Knock. Knock. Pounds into the wooden door announce Liza and Emberly's arrival. So much for a plan. Willow's hands dart over her mouth as she lets out soft squeals and points to the door.

She mouths, "That's her."

So I mouth back as I throw up my hands in worry, "You think?!"

I throw my plan of hiding Willow somewhere in the apartment out the window. Instead, I turn off my worried brain and let the pieces fall where they may. Squaring my shoulders, I march past Violet and squeeze past an excited Willow to greet my girl at the door. What surprises me behind the aged wood is pure sunshine. Her hair curled down one side of her shoulder, her brown eyes glimmering with hope as she stares daggers into my heart. Her dress is a deep pink, almost purple color, and her strapped heels are tied off with a satin bow. I've never seen her like this, so my mouth runs dry and parts as my eyes continue to slowly rake over her.

"Done staring, Hotshot?" I say with a teasing smile.

Taking a few steps forward, I kiss her gently on the cheek, careful not to mess up her makeup. That time will come later. "Never." So entranced with Liza, I didn't even notice Emberly standing a few steps behind her in a navy blue pants suit with her hands folded over her chest. "Oh. Hey, Em."

"Hey. Can we come in now?" she asks, flipping her watch over to check the time.

"Yeah. Yeah. I have something to show you." Resting my hand on the small of Liza's back, I guide her in, thankfully giving Willow enough time to get out of plain sight.

"A surprise?" Liza's face lights up with mischief.

I shift my weight from side to side and stick my hands in the pockets of my dress pants. “Something you couldn’t get through the night without.”

“SURPRISE!” Willow pops her head up from her crouched position behind the kitchen counter, scurrying to wrap her sister in a bear hug.

Liza's mouth forms a surprised ‘o’ shape as her eyes shoot to mine over her sister's shoulder as she hugs me back. “Willow?! How. . .”

“It was all Hartley’s idea,” Willow gloats on and boosts my ego with every word. “He wanted this to be special for you.”

Liza’s eyes well with appreciation as she unlocks her arms from around her sister and makes her way across the room to me. “Hart. . .”

My hands grip both sides of her hips as I roll the fabric of her soft dress to center myself in the moment. “You deserve to have everything you want, Goldie.”

“This is. . .” Her thumb rubs a rogue tear traveling down her cheek. “Thank you.”

“Not to ruin the moment because I would love to watch this unfold all night—” Violet’s soft voice cuts in and brings us back to reality as she wipes away a stray tear from her cheek. “But if we don’t leave soon, we’ll be late.”

“Let’s go.” Willow ushers us out of the crowded apartment and all of us hop into Liza’s small car. With the amount of people crammed in, Emberly decided to drive, giving me the perfect opportunity to have Liza on my lap for the short drive to the art building on campus. Peppering kisses up and down her neck, forming goosebumps across her arms and legs, my hands wander up the slit of her short dress to squeeze her thigh.

“Mmm. . .” Her soft moans, only meant for me, rattle into my ear, and I begin to question if I’ll make it through this event without gluing my hands to her body every few minutes.

“We’re here,” Emberly announces as she parks in a close enough spot for the girls not to complain about the distance in heels. We get out of the clown car and allow Liza to lead the way to the exposition. Her hand intertwines with mine as we approach the door.

Inhaling a deep breath, Liza turns to the group. “This is it.”

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“I’m so excited!” Willow shrieks.

“This is going to be the best,” Violet says.

Kissing her cheek, I whisper just for her, “You’re amazing, baby.”

With the extra encouragement, Liza pushes the glass door open and we’re met with a crowd of both young and old art enthusiasts. Show time.

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Liza

On top of the world doesn’t begin to describe the feeling coursing through my veins. Hartley flew my sister in to make sure this night was everything I imagined. I never mentioned the idea of Willow coming down because I knew it would be virtually impossible with her school schedule and her visit not too long ago, but he did it.

My mind swirls in a lustful frenzy with Hartley on my arm as I knock elbows with some of the most influential people in the Florida art community. I introduce myself to each one and direct them to my exhibit.

“I need to see it.” Hartley turns on his boyish charm as he sticks his hands into his dress pants pockets. “You can’t hide it forever.”

“Let’s go.” Nodding my head to the back room of the exhibit, we make our way through some of my classmate’s art pieces. Intricately painted pottery pieces, huge

watercolor canvases, and woodwork line the walls creating a masterpiece at every turn, but my stomach churns when my exhibit comes into view. In a small cut out corner lies some of the best pieces I've ever created. The title of my collection of art hangs on a glass plaque with vinyl lettering:

More Than the Gamesketched and painted by Springs U sophomore visual art student, Liza Wilde.

Hartley leaves my side and beelines straight toward the sketches I've spent months perfecting with him as my muse. He's close enough to see every speck of paint I used on the canvas and every small imperfection if he wanted to.

Slowly cozying up to his side, I cross my arms over my chest and eagerly wait for his response. "So. . ."

"Baby. . ." His voice trails off. His eyes never leave the art hung on the wall. He focuses solely on the piece I drew of him in the locker room. One of the first ones after we made the deal to help each other out. I focused the most on his facial features that day. His intense eyes show flicks of light as he concentrates on his gloves. His carved muscles outlined by his practice shirt, that dimpled grin drawn across the canvas waiting to jump out at anyone that looks its way. I should have known back then how far gone I was for him, but staring into the art I created, it hits me how much denial I was in.

"You're talented." He gulps down. "I don't think anyone's ever seen me like this." His voice drifts off, focusing on the emotions deep within himself. "More than a football player."

"You're everything," I answer without hesitation. "In fact, being a football player may be the least interesting thing about you." His head tilts to meet my lazy gaze full of promises I intend to keep.

I catch a red hue spread across his cheeks. “How so?”

Tapping my finger on my chin, I pretend to mull his question over. “Let’s see, you care fiercely for the people in your life. You make sure I feel like the only girl in a room full of people, and—” A smile spreads across my face. “You’re mine.”

He lets out a soft chuckle and laces his fingers with mine. “I want to hear it again.”

“What?”

“What I am to you.”

“Everything.”

His hands cup my cheeks and my eyes seal shut, rolling to the back of my head. Without opening my eyes, his lips land on mine and everything else ceases to exist. Time stops. It’s just us in a fancy room by ourselves, surrounded by my work, completely connected to the boy I love. Woah.

“Liza! Oh my gosh, this is amazing!” Emberly and Violet both chant as they enter my little corner of the exhibit.

Jolting from the warmth of his lips, my hand nervously flies through my curls as I’m hit with the reality that we aren’t alone.

Hartley’s hands grip my hips so tight it’ll probably leave marks. He breathes out with his eyes locked on me, refusing to let go. “Why’d you stop?”

“We have company.”

“My question remains.” He’s closing the distance again as his rough hand cradles my

jaw. He tilts my chin to meet my eyes with a mischievous smile. “Why did you stop?”

Shaking my head and letting out a loose chuckle, I reply, “You’re unbelievable.”

“Sorry!” Violet backs away as she gnaws on her already short nails. “We didn’t mean to interrupt.”

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Shimmying out of Hartley's forcefield, I join my best friends across the room. "Absolutely not."

"Sorry I'm late," Mason gasps as he runs into my nook of the exhibit. "Didn't think it would take me that long to make it across town."

"Why is Mason here?" Emberly whispers into my ear and grips my elbow as Hartley meets him halfway to shake his hand. "I didn't know he was invited."

Confused about her snippy tone, I wonder why she cares if Mason is here or not. "I'm sorry, chica, I didn't think it would be a big deal. Hartley invited a lot of the guys."

"It's not a big deal." She shakes her head, ridding her mind of whatever took over moments ago. "Sorry. I'm overreacting. Tonight is supposed to be about you." She quickly covers her worry with a fake smile, but I don't want her to be uncomfortable.

"Is there something I'm missing. . ." My voice trails off in question.

"Em," Mason's commanding voice runs a shudder through her core as she blinks repeatedly before glancing his way.

"I've got to go." She takes a few steps back before darting to the bathroom.

"I'm coming, too!" I dash behind her as we weave through the crowd to the one-stall restroom.

"What was that?" My worried voice echoes in the empty bathroom as I twist the gold

lock behind me, trying to figure out why we just ran away from Mason in the middle of my art exhibit. “And don’t you dare say nothing because that little stunt was far from nothing.” Tapping my foot on the marble floor, I wait not-so-patiently for her to spill the tea.

“Mason and I. . .” She takes a deep breath, and I notice her hands shake at her side as she struggles to get through the story. “Have history.”

I inch closer to her as she grips the granite counter of the sink, not surprised by her admission. It seems like everyone has history around here. “History?”

“Yep, and that’s where it’s staying. In the past.”

“Are you sure about that?” My hand reaches for her back. “History has a way of repeating itself.”

“Ours won’t,” she snaps.

“Okay.” I back off, realizing she’s not ready to talk about it yet. “I’m here when you’re ready to talk about it.”

“Thanks, Liza.” She gives me a forced smile. “I’m sorry for making this about me. Let’s go back and celebrate you and your killer art.”

Nodding my head, we hook arms and meet the rest of the group where we left them. Violet and Hartley argue over whether the clay creation they’re staring at is a dog or a wolf. Willow’s taking selfies with my sketches and posting them to her Instagram story. But what catches my eye is Mason off in a corner, away from the rest, running his hand over his freshly cut hair and flattening his large palms over his Armani suit. Mason’s eyes catch mine and I give him a sympathetic smile and a shrug, wishing I knew more to help. Emberly makes no attempt to be in his vicinity, so she shoots off

to occupy her time with Willow's unhinged posting. His eyes trace her every step and pain travels over his hazy irises. His hand flies to his chest as he rubs back and forth across the rich fabric. It dawns on me that their history is bound to become a part of the present sooner or later.

My shoulders sag as I see Mason alone in the corner. I sneak away from the group to see what's up. "You've got it bad, my friend."

"What?" Mason asks quizzically as he continues to stare googly eyed at Emberly across the room. She's ignoring him like a pro, her back facing us while her laugh echoes across the room, as she points at different works of art for Willow to pose by.

I shake my head. "You're love sick."

"Me?" His eyes scrunch up as his jaw drops open in protest. "Nah."

Shaking my head at his oblivion, I retort, "I call it like I see it."

"What do you know?"

"That there's history between the two of you, and it doesn't take a genius to see that."

He scoffs and folds his arms over his chest. "She hates me and wants nothing to do with me anymore."

I tap my finger on my chin, pretending like I'm mulling his epiphany over. "And Hartley is nothing more than an annoying friend." I reach up to pat his broad shoulder over the sleek fabric of his expensive pressed suit. "Looks like we both know how to lie to ourselves, huh?"

"And what do you suggest I do?"

“Every girl wants someone to fight for them.” My eyes wander to my boyfriend as he chuckles with Violet. A smile spreads across my face when I catch a glimpse of him. I’m thankful he didn’t stop fighting for me. “Looks like you need to suit up for the battle.”

Nodding off, his eyes wander somewhere else far away from the room we’re in. “We’ll see.”

36

Hartley

“Impossible!” I yell as I grab strands of my hair and pull harder than I should.

“The drama,” Liza retorts patiently as she continues to quiz me on the modern era of art history through color-coded index cards. Her usual study strategies have worked for the past few weeks, but I’m hitting a roadblock with this content. “You’re too wound up to focus on the key words.”

“Don’t even. . .”

Before I can finish she cuts me off by grabbing my sweaty hands and pushing deep into the crease between my thumb and pointer finger. “Pressure points and deep breathing.”

“We’re wasting time.”

“If centering you is what it takes to retain this content, we’ll stop as many times as we need.” She pushes harder on the spot that makes my toes curl and turns the loud noise circulating in my brain off all at once. “Deep breath for seven seconds.”

She counts off each second and then instructs me to hold the air in for three seconds before releasing it out. We repeat that five more times, and I have to admit, my mind isn’t as loud as it was before we started her silly exercise.

“How do you feel?” she asks with a knowing look.

I lean over my crossed legs to give her a kiss on her warm cheek. “Better.”

“I hate to say I told you so, but if the shoe fits.” She wets her tongue before licking the flavored gloss off her bottom lip.

“You have a knack for seeing past my antics. Where were we?”

In the next half hour, I manage to get a grip on most of the vocabulary words and timeline features that will be on the final tomorrow. I’m not aiming for perfection, just passing.

“You’ve got this.” Closing her binder made especially for me and my study routine, she lifts herself off the floor and places everything back in her book bag. “After your last final tomorrow, we can celebrate.”

I rub my hands together and bite my bottom lip at the thought of celebrating with Liza all to myself. “What do you have in mind?”

“I was thinking. . .” Chuckling and rolling her eyes, she slips on a pair of fuzzy socks to warm her perpetually freezing toes. “You. Me. Downtown Tap. Buy one get one margaritas and a dance floor.”

Dropping to one knee, I make a scene of opening up a fake ring box. “Will you marry me?”

She laughs so hard she snorts. “Get up!”

“It’ll be fun. We haven’t gone wild in a hot minute. I figured we’re due for a night of bad decisions.” I wink.

I wrap her up and swing her around in circles before dropping her back down. Goosebumps raise across her arm as I lean in to nip her earlobe, knowing it riles her up. “I love making bad decisions with you.”

She raises her chin to meet my gaze. “Only if you pass the final.”

“I wouldn’t dream of messing this up.”

Staring back at me on the screen are the results of my last final of the semester. The key to a night filled with deliciously bad decisions with my girl relies on the percentage I’m about to unveil on the next screen. The testing center is filled with students completing their online finals. The great thing about an online final is the immediate results. Before I click continue, I send up last minute prayers that this goes as well as I felt answering the questions. Confidence in academics is a foreign feeling, but with the help of Liza and her non-traditional studying habits, I’ve grown to feel good about my ability to pass a test on my own. The blue submit button bores holes into my tired eyes. I hover the mouse over the button and click before I spend another minute worrying about the score on the next screen.

The page glitches for a moment before loading the results tab, and my heart thumps in my chest. I’m met with an 88% staring back at me. I just got a B on a final. I can’t remember the last time I scored anything higher than a D on a high stakes test. Slamming my laptop shut, I stuff my materials into my backpack and sprint out of the testing center where I’m allowed to take my phone out.

Me: Looks like bad decisions are in order.

Goldie: What’d you get?!

Me: You’re dating a B student. Not to brag or anything, but I’m kinda a big deal.

Goldie: kfajgjwnbpownagp HART, I'M SO PROUD.

Goldie: Heading back to the apartment?

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Me: Come see me, babe.

Goldie: OMW

Liza

Thanks to the surprising lack of traffic, I beat Hartley back to his apartment. I was so excited when he sent me the text about his final grade. He's worked so hard this semester and has taken all of my study tips and tricks in stride. Now it's time to celebrate. Jostling in my car with nervous energy, I glance over to see Hartley's car pull in the parking spot next to mine. His music booms through both cars and he's dancing without a care in the world as he parks. He shifts his gaze to mine and hurries out of the car, slamming the door in the process to reach my driver's side.

He flings open my door and picks me up from the car seat to walk up the stairs, cradling me in his arms. The giggles won't stop when he's in a mood like this.

My arms brace around his neck as he takes the stairs two at a time, clearly in a hurry to reach the door. "Ready to make questionable decisions with your girlfriend?"

"Nothing—" He nips my ear. "—is questionable—" His tongue flattens along my cheek until he makes his way to my lips. "—when it involves you and me." Hartley's breath feathers along my lips, so I lean in a half inch and kiss him so deeply. I'm surprised the neighbors who just left their apartment aren't rolling their eyes at us.

"I'm all yours. Tonight. . ." Rolling my head around in a circle, I hit him with slanted mischief in my eyes. "You call the shots."

“Get ready for the best night of your life.”

37

Liza

After a ridiculous amount of attempts to peel Hartley off of me long enough to pick out my outfit out of the options I packed, pop a few curls in my hair, and create the perfect night out makeup look, he finally obliged. I think it had something to do with the red lace number I had laid out on his bed for the special occasion. I opted for my riskiest outfit that I brought to college: a red romper with a lace top, a small bow that meets in the middle of my chest, and a cut out of skin exposed between the top and shorts piece. I used to wear outfits like this weekly on Bourbon Street with my friends, but I wanted to be different when I got to Springs U. Someone who didn't accept how she was treated in the past any longer. It took me a hot minute to get there, but I'm finally believing in myself again.

“Babe,” Hartley's powerful voice booms through the closed door I forced him out of a half hour ago. “Almost ready?”

Applying a last minute coat of my darkest lip gloss in his mirror, I pop them together and take one last look at myself before revealing the look to him for the night. Stepping into the living room, I make a show of throwing my curly hair over one shoulder and placing one hand on my hip. “Ready.”

I find Hartley crouched over his phone on the couch with both elbows digging into the faded denim of his jeans. His head lifts from the screen to my lustful eyes at the sound of my voice. “Goldie. . .” He stands from his seat and wastes no time meeting me in the middle of the small apartment. His hands lay gently on both sides of my neck, allowing me to inhale his clean scent. I wish I could bottle it up for rainy days. “You are stunning.”

Heat blossoming in my cheeks causes my eyes to drift away from the intensity in his. “You’re not too bad yourself.”

Wasting no time, he flips his hat backward and kisses me in an all-consuming type of way, making me question why I fought this attraction for so long. “Mine,” he growls into my lips.

“Yours,” I whisper back after breaking our connection. I poke his chest and take a few steps back. “Bad decisions, remember?”

He laughs and grabs his wallet from the kitchen counter. “Ride’s here.” Wrapping his arms around my bare shoulders, he guides me out the door and down the steps into the damp night air.

Finals week is officially over, meaning Downtown Tap is packed with students ready to let off steam from the stress of the semester. Hartley and I don’t get carded by the bouncer. Him, because of his unspoken perks of being a Springs U football player. Me, because of my Liza Wilde charm—and possibly the outfit. We skip hellos and head straight to the bar, weaving in between the thick crowd of wasted college students. Getting a drink takes a little more effort on our end. Drinks tip over at every turn and I do my best to avoid getting this outfit dirty. I’d like it to last longer than a few minutes inside the bar. Hartley’s hands haven’t left my hips, guiding us to a sliver of open space at the noisy bar.

He leans in and talks directly into my ear, “What do you want first? My guy’s working the bar.” He nods his head toward the familiar bartender.

“Margaritas for two,” I yell back so he can hear me over the pounding music and loud voices. He nods before he shifts his attention to the man working the bar in front of us. Perks of dating a football player? Bar service with extremely low wait times. I can’t help but admire how devastatingly hot he is taking charge and allowing me to

breathe and lean on someone for once. Once our drinks are ready, Hartley and I split up; him to greet the other football players and me to converse with a few of my classmates.

“Hey, Liza!” Cady waves enthusiastically, her bright blue hair bouncing up and down. Being an art major means I have the opportunity to meet some pretty awesome people who inspire me to care less about what others think of me. Cady and I have had a few classes together the past two years, and we clicked instantly.

“Cady.” I wrap her in a tight hug, careful not to spill my drink on her beautiful, velvet tube dress and chunky heels. “Are you having fun?”

“When alcohol is involved, I’ll always have a good time.” She sticks her tongue out showing me her tongue piercing.

“Yeah, can’t argue with that.”

“Where’s that hot arm candy of yours?” She winks playfully.

I shake my head and fold my arms over my chest, the condensation of my plastic cup dripping on my arm, cooling my hot skin off just a little. “He’s with the team.”

“That boy’s in love with you,” she states matter-of-fact in the middle of the bar. I’m feeling the effects of my first drink. “It’s so obvious.”

“Sure.” Hoping to steer this conversation into safer territory, I divert back to art. “So, how’s the internship applications go—” Before I can finish, a large hand grips my waist and flips me around. Ice courses through my veins. My gut instinct knows it isn’t Hartley’s warm grip or calming presence.

“Long time no see, babe.”

I whip my neck around to meet the calculated voice I never wanted to hear again. So much pain, memories, and self-doubt creep into my mind in a matter of minutes before I confirm what I already know without seeing him.

“What are you doing here, Layne?”

38

Hartley

“My man!” Mason heads through the huddle of drunk girls and football players to bro hug me. We’ve always been friends, but with Ryan’s situation, we’ve grown closer. Stetson, one of the Springs U baseball players in our close circle, is close behind.

“Hey.” Jutting my chin out, I stick my hands in the front pockets of my jeans.

Stetson reaches out to shake my hand, so I remove them from my pockets to return the gesture. Mason grips me and pats my back with a thump.

“Where’s Liza?” Mason’s eyes wander behind me for my petite blonde queen. If there’s anything to love about Mason, it’s his loyalty and protectiveness towards his friends. Liza falls within that category since we’ve been attached at the hip as of late.

“She saw a friend from class, so I dipped away before I consume her for the rest of the night.”

Mason shoots his million dollar smile, girls swarming behind him yet he doesn't even notice. "You're obsessed, man." He reaches around to curl one of the girls under his arm.

I shake my head and try to remember a time where that was me. "You'll never change. A true savage, dude."

"Nah, I'm trying to be good. Figured I'd give it a try."

I laugh. "Good luck with that."

"Umm." He looks behind my back again and scans the nearby crowd. "Did Em come out with you two?" His face distorts into a more serious look with his jaw clenched and his brows furrowed tight. Stetson shakes his head as if he can see the writing on the wall. He's a quiet dude from what I've seen and heard. Doesn't talk much but is always watching.

"No. Liza asked, but she said something about wanting to avoid drama." I shrug my shoulders. "What's the deal with you two?" It doesn't take a rocket scientist to decipher the tension between those two at Liza's art exhibition.

"Nothing to tell." He sucks in his cheeks and lets out a defeated breath. "Not anymore."

"Go with that," Stetson pipes up.

Mason lets out a shaky breath. "Let's table this conversation for another day. Preferably one where I'm sober."

"I'll catch you all later." I leave Mason and search for Goldie in the thickened crowd. Stetson follows, saying something about needing to go for a walk. I'm taller than

most people here, so it isn't hard to spot who I want, but my stomach bottoms out when I see Liza with her arms folded over her chest, tight lips, and darting eyes with a massive guy standing too close for comfort.

"Why is Liza talking to that guy?" Stetson spits out, clearly having no lost love towards the man.

"No idea," I manage out, fists curled up tightly.

"Guy's a jerk," he scoffs. "We play them tomorrow, but he's well known amongst the team as a trash talker on the field." Stetson's voice muffles into the background. All I can focus on is getting to Liza.

"Wait, he plays baseball?" My jaw clenches as my fists curl, realizing who this guy is.

"Yeah. No lost love between the two teams."

She doesn't catch my gaze, so I push my way through the crowd, once I'm closer I see the logo on the back of his shirt, NOLA South U Baseball. Her ex is here in our bar, stealing our bad decisions night away from under my nose. My eyes narrow and my pupils dilate, seeing dotted rings around my focus. All I can think about is getting to her before he crosses a line.

Liza

"Not the warm welcome I was expecting, sweetheart." His condescending tone dripping from the lips I once swore I would kiss forever. Now, all I feel is disgust. Layne is polarizing in a crowd, someone you can't miss even if you tried. He towers over me in a purple NOLA South Baseball polo with khaki pants and the Nikes he's always worn. What once was irresistible to a naive high school Liza, is now hard to

look at for completely different reasons. “We play Springs U tomorrow. Thought I’d try to find my girl. Knew you’d be out. Can’t take the party out of the girl, I see.”

“What do you expect me to say, Layne?” I muster up as much sarcasm as I can in my shocked state. “Thank you so much for cheating on me. I’m so happy to see you!”

He scoffs loudly, dismissing my feelings like he always does. “You’re still on that?” He inches closer and closer, almost backing me into the sticky bar wall. The already small space closes in on me in the worst way. I’m suddenly finding it difficult to breathe. He takes up all the air. “I’m an athlete, Liza. It meant nothing. You know it’s always been you.”

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“That’s a shame because it ruined me for a while,” I let out for the first time. We’ve never discussed that night in detail, and it feels good to get my feelings off my chest. “I’m better now. No thanks to you, but to myself.”

He rolls his eyes, once again not hearing my words fully. “We had it good. I miss you.”

“Sure.”

“We were never anything, me and that girl. She was a random hookup. You, on the other hand, are the love of my life.”

“Funny way to treat the love of your life.” He’s unbelievable and hasn’t changed a bit.

“Don’t you think it’s time to move back to New Orleans? You had your fun and got it out of your system. Move in with me, and when I get called up to the MLB, you can follow me.”

“This isn’t a phase, Layne, this is my life.” Standing straighter than I was before, I walk into him, bumping into his solid chest causing him to back up a few inches. “I love it here, and I couldn’t think of anything more repulsive than being your girlfriend again.”

From my left side, a hand wraps around my shoulder and spins me to face him. Him. That touch sends thousands of magnetic shocks through my system and warms my belly in the best way. “Goldie,” he breathes out, kissing my cheek with his signature

goofy smile, but with a hint of tension behind it that only I could notice. “What did I miss?” For a split second, I forget we’re in a muggy college bar with hundreds of random people swirling around us. I forget my toxic ex is standing inches away from my current boyfriend, asking me to move in with him. All of my worries melt away, and it’s just the two of us.

“Absolutely nothing,” I say back with the confidence I’ve grown into here with Hartley and my friends. “Can we go, please?”

“Whatever you want.” His hands move to my hips with a little squeeze. He laces his sweaty fingers in between mine, but before we get too far, Hartley turns around and says, “Oh, Layne, is it?”

Layne’s eyes are filled with fury because he can’t have or control me. Not anymore. “Yeah.”

“Don’t even think about making a move on my girl again. Got it?” Before Layne’s rebuttal, Hartley guides us out the bar to wait outside for the rideshare. Once we’re in the car, I finally have the words to speak on the bizarre night.

“Thank you.”

“There’s nothing to thank me for. Let’s not give him another breath, okay?” He squeezes my hand and rubs his rough thumb back and forth across my skin. His jaw is still firmly set in a tense position, indicating that he’s reeling from seeing my ex.

“Hart,” I breathe out, gripping his hand a little tighter, but he doesn’t look my way. He still stares out the window, stuck inside his own head. “Hartley, look at me.”

He jolts from his view of our college town back to me in the dimly lit rideshare. “Are you okay?” He searches my eyes for any indication of pain or worry, but he finds

none.

“Yes,” I continue in an attempt to free him from whatever barriers he’s hiding behind.

“The real question is, are you?”

“I will be.”

We pull up to his apartment and he guides me out the car on his side. The darkness of night caves in around us and light drizzle of midnight rain hit my charged skin. The random rideshare driver leaves without a word and my feet feel like bricks planted on the damp cement. Hartley clamps his hand over mine and lightly tugs to usher me up the stairs, but my body refuses to move. His head darts back as he takes his hat off and runs his fingers through his long blonde hair.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Snapping you out of your trance.” My hands grip his broad shoulders and gently massages into his tense muscles. The rain drips from the ends of my hair as it mats to my forehead. My shoes squish with water as I shift my weight back and forth never removing my eyes off of his. “He means nothing.”

“I. . .” His eyes fill with passion and a million emotions swirling around at once. “He hurt you.” He pulls me closer, now flush against his wet chest. “I wasn’t there to protect you. You looked. . .” inhaling a deep breath, he shakes his head and continues, “scared.” His voice breaks in pain all geared to me, standing in front of him.

“He can’t hurt me anymore, Hart,” I whisper. “I handled him.”

“I should have been there to protect you,” he snaps.

My hand moves to his soaked hair. My fingers run through the front of it all the way through the tips by the base of his ear. “You’ve done more for me these past few months than anyone has ever done.” My fingers trace his lips wiping droplets of water off with each pull. “I trust you. I didn’t think I would ever trust another man again.”

His mouth opens to respond, but before he can, I cut in to say what’s been on my heart for weeks, “And I love you so much it hurts.” Before I know it, his lips crash into mine as he grips the base of my neck and runs his hand up to the back of my head. This kiss is unlike any I’ve experienced with him. It’s hungry, passionate, and all encompassing. It’s like he can’t get enough. I can’t, either. I never will.

He pulls away, only inches, and cups my chin tenderly. “I’ve loved you for a long time, Goldie.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I whisper.

“You needed time.” He bites gently on my lower lip, his eyes are just slits as he takes in the moment. “I needed you to come to me.”

“I don’t think there was ever a time where I could resist falling into you. Even when I fought it.”

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“Are you done fighting it?” He smirks as he leans his forehead on mine.

“Yeah, Hart. I’m done fighting it.”

39

Hartley

“Mmm.” Whiffing in the scent of Liza’s cinnamon spiced hair is my favorite way to wake up. “I love you.” I nuzzle my nose into the crook of her neck. By the way a lazy smile spreads across her face, I can tell she’s reluctantly awake, too. Her fuzzy socks grip around my calf and she cuddles into my shirtless chest closer than she was before.

One eye peeks open. “What was that?”

I tickle her belly, causing her to roll around the bed and wrap herself in the covers. “You heard me, Goldie.”

“So what? I want to hear it again.”

“Liza.” I pinch her side causing her to flip back over to face me. “I’ll scream it on the rooftop if you’d let me. I want everyone to know you’re mine.”

“I like the sound of that.” She giggles.

“Who would have thought my persistence would get me the girl of my dreams?”

Rolling those beautiful eyes, she sits up criss-cross on my bed. “You mean constant aggravation?”

I scoot up, back flush against the bed frame as I shrug in feigned ignorance. “My tendencies have grown on you, and you know it.”

“They have.”

“What do you want to do today?” Wrapping her up in my arms, I pull her to straddle me. My fingers fiddle with the ends of her hair as she stares at my bare chest, unashamed at her blatant ogling. “Finals are over. The world is our oyster.”

Biting her bottom lip, she looks distressed at the thoughts running through her head. “Why do you look stressed?”

“I don’t know if you’ll like my idea.”

“I like all of your ideas.”

“No, you don’t.”

“If you like it, I love it. Now tell me.”

“Bring me home. To your home where you grew up. I want to see everything.”

Within seconds, my mouth goes bone dry and I cough out to buy time to answer the last thing I expected her to say. My instinct is to come up with any excuse to avoid going back.

Her hands plant firmly on my chest as she continues, aware that I’m stalling. “I want it all, Hart. The good, the bad, and the ugly.”

“But. . .” My mind races, unable to articulate a response. My first reaction is to tell her no. I want to protect her from that place at all costs, but the other part of me likes the thought of replacing the fractured memories with sweeter ones.

“You aren’t that person anymore,” she assures me with a soothing voice. “We could bring Violet, too. She needs to get out.”

She’s right. Violet’s been struggling with her and Ryan’s breakup worse than any of us could have expected. Her mind keeps her up all night. Luckily, Liza and I have been here to pickup the pieces. I’ve always known how to help her, but everything I do makes it worse, and she’s starting to scare me.

I nod repeatedly before I can change my mind. “Yeah. I want you to see it.”

A few hours later, our bags are packed and loaded into the car. It didn’t take much convincing to get Violet to come. She’s terrified to stay here alone, and with the state she’s been in the past few weeks, I wouldn’t feel comfortable leaving her. I booked us two hotel rooms right outside of town for the night, and we’ll head back to Springs U in the morning. Going home is one thing. Spending the night in the four walls that forced me to grow up too quickly is another. I don’t think I’ll ever get to a place where I’m ready for that.

Liza reaches back to squeeze Violet’s knee in reassurance. “I’m so glad we’re doing this together.” Violet cracks an almost-smile, but her hollow eyes quickly shift back out the window distracted with her racing thoughts.

My sarcasm is ready to roll. “Ready to uncover my past demons and bask in the place that single-handedly screwed me up?” I drop a tender peck on her lips with my hand on the steering wheel.

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Liza shakes her head in disbelief and grabs my free hand as I shift my car into drive. “You’re perfectly screwed up in the best way.” I’m not entirely sure what to say to that unhinged statement. My girl plugs her phone in and takes control of the music for the beginning part of our drive. Her playlist is a mix of Tate McCrae, Olivia Rodrigo, Morgan Wallen, and a sprinkle of Taylor Swift’s angrier songs.

After the first few hours, Violet passes out in the back, leaned against the door with a pillow wedged under her neck, while Liza mindlessly scrolls on her phone. I glance in the rearview, to make sure Violet is still sleeping before word vomiting what’s been on my mind for a while. “Why me?”

Liza’s nose scrunches up. She places her phone in the cup holder and tucks her feet beneath her. “What?”

“Why me? What made you choose me?” My grip on the wheel tightens, and I can’t manage to look over until she answers me.

“I was scared at first. . .” She trails off before continuing. “I didn’t want to go through what I did with Layne. That breakup killed me. I started getting trashed every other night to numb the pain. It was toxic coping, and I couldn’t relive that.”

My jaw clenches as I crack my neck, a habit when I’m frustrated. “You shouldn’t have had to go through that.”

“You’re right, but I did and I came out of it knowing I didn’t cope well.” Her hand lands on my thigh and squeezes. “I was scared of myself, but then you came along, and proved that I didn’t have to be scared anymore.”

“Tell me more.”

“I did my best to push you away every chance I had, but you still loved me through it all.” I cave and look over to her before pulling my eyes back on my road. “The little things you did for me showed me you cared even though I was giving you crumbs.”

“I’ve never been good enough,” I blurt out, not sure where that admission came from. I know it’s true, but I’ve never spoken the words out loud. “My mom left before I was old enough to know her. Dad stayed, but was as absent as you could be. The two people who are supposed to love you the most didn’t think twice about abandoning me physically and emotionally.”

“Hart. . .” she mutters. “It was never about you being good enough. It was about me feeling worthy to love someone again.”

“I don’t know why someone like me gets to love someone like you. It seems unfair, like you deserve someone better than me.”

“Don’t.” Her ferocious voice comes to play. “Family isn’t always blood. It’s who we choose to show up for day after day.” She glances at a sleeping Violet, then her eyes land back on my side profile. “It’s who we vow to love no matter how much they mess up or push us away.”

Liza unlocks a realization in me that should have been clear for years. The only family I want or need is sitting in this car. My girlfriend, pushing me out of my emotional comfort zone to take on the hurt of my past alongside me, and my best friend, now snoring, who desperately needed a break from her own mind. This is what family is. Not who made me, but who’s shaping my future.

“Promise me,” I let out sternly.

“I promise.”

This girl. “You don’t know what I was going to ask.”

“I don’t need to. I just promise. Whatever you need. I promise.”

My new favorite words roll off her tongue as we pull into the driveway of my childhood home.

40

Liza

Seeing where Hartley grew up has been brewing in my mind for weeks. I have a desperate need to know everything about him, and that can’t happen without letting me into his past. He isn’t shy about his childhood or his disdain for his parents, but seeing and hearing are two different things.

“Here we are,” Hartley scoffs before turning the car off and hopping out. Violet woke up about fifteen minutes ago. Still groggy, she yawns. “Welcome to our old home, Liza.”

“My dad’s not home, Vi. Shocked?” She bites her fingernails and shakes her head in mock disbelief.

“It wouldn’t matter if he was,” she replies.

We step up two white bricked stairs to the worn, wooden entryway. The grass is longer than usual for a neighborhood, and the garden weeds are overgrown in every direction. The wooden planks on the front porch are dry rotted and paint chipped. Hartley bends down and pushes one of the planks down with force. “I used to keep up

with this, but per usual, Dad let it go.”

I bend down to rub his back in the crouched position we’re in. “It’s okay.” He tilts his head, allowing my presence to center his focus.

“Let’s go in.”

Hartley sticks the key in the lock and opens the creaky door. Once we’re all in, he reaches around to flip on the lights. The house is as common as any I’ve seen. The living room is put together, no trash out or foul smells emitting from the kitchen. I follow Hartley’s lead into the kitchen space. With the exception of a few dust bunnies, the house isn’t bad. “This is where I learned to cook.”

“I owe it to this space for making you a little chef.” I lean into his chest and kiss him on the cheek.

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Violet tiptoes next to us. “I’m going to head next door and grab a few things I left. Hart, you’re good?”

“As good as I can be.”

I leave his side, catching a glimpse of something magnetized to the fridge. My hands fly out to the worn school picture of bleach blonde Hartley missing his two front teeth. “This is adorable.”

Snatching the picture out of my hand, he rebuttals, “I was always a charmer.” He inhales a deep breath and grips the photo harder. “I remember it like it was yesterday. Dad couldn’t bother to fill out the picture form, and it was very important to me to order school pictures.” I rub his back to urge him to continue to process the memory. “I ran to Violet’s house, sobbing about how I wouldn’t have school pictures this year. That’s when her grandpa stuffed ten dollars in my hand and scribbled onto the form.” His eyes twinkle with fondness for the man credited for raising Violet and molding him into the man he is today. “He was the best.”

“He sounds incredible. I wish I could have met him.”

“Me too.” He sticks the picture back under the magnet and turns around, gripping my hand in his.

I yank him back without thinking. “Can I keep it?”

“Keep what?”

“The picture. It’s a memory worth keeping.”

He smiles, and his dimples make an appearance. “Yeah, Goldie. You should keep it.”

The next stop on the house tour is his bedroom. Needing a little extra force to push the jammed door open, we make it through the threshold. I’m sent back in time noticing his outer space curtains and football bedding draped over his twin sized bed. There isn’t much furniture besides the bed and a few shelves drilled into the wall. The shelves house what I can only assume are Hartley’s football trophies. I walk up to them and dust off the plates to get a closer look.

I snatch one off the shelf in the shape of a microphone and flip my attention to Hartley. “Wait. Wait. Wait.”

“Here we go.” He laughs.

“You won a singing contest? Why haven’t I heard your vocals?!” I place one hand on my jutted out hip and push the trophy into his chest.

Taking the trophy from my hand, he flips it to face him and reads the golden plate. “It was a middle school talent show.” He shakes his head back and forth, and lets out a belly laugh. “Violet wanted to enter badly, but she was terrified to perform by herself in front of a crowd. I didn’t care about making a fool out of myself, so I told her we should do a duet.”

“This is the best untold story I’ve ever heard.”

“Needless to say, I’m a winner, so we took home first place.”

“Cocky much?” Moving closer to him, I wrap my hands around his neck.

“The proof is in the plastic trophy, Goldie.”

“You’re ridiculous.” I plant a kiss on his nose and then on his lips.

“I like this,” he whispers. “Making better memories in this place.” A small smile spreads across his face. “Now when I envision my home, you’re in the memories.”

“I like the sound of that.”

After the house tour, Hartley drives us a few blocks down to a small park with overgrown grass and a rusty swing set.

“It’s locked,” I say at first sight of the gate denying us entry.

“Watch and learn.” He extends his interlaced hands in front of him, stretches, and cracks his knuckles before moseying up to the lock. Violet giggles behind us, and I begin to realize I’m missing something.

Sneaking up behind me, Violet whispers in my ear, “It’s fake.”

Hartley jolts the lock and chain down a bit, and the weight of the creaking gate flings open with reckless abandon. He gestures his arms out as if to say ladies first, so Violet and I enter and walk through the ankle high grass.

“I’ll be in my spot.” Violet flashes us a grin, waves, and jogs off to a far corner of the park.

“What’s her spot?”

“A wooden bench around the playset. It’s tucked away behind a huge oak.” He smiles, reliving a memory that they share. “There’s always a bird’s nest on one of the

thinner branches that Vi likes to visit. She used to call them her children.”

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“That’s adorable.”

“Yeah. We’re both screwed up.” He chuckles.

Hartley and I settle on the metal swings. I can’t remember the last time I saw, much less played on, a metal swing. This one has character. Rust crawls up the chain links like a vine, carving years of laughter and memories.

“While Violet was off talking to the birds, I was here. . .”

“Doing what?”

“Thinking. Losing myself in what ifs.”

“That will eat you alive,” I say, wrapping my hand around his as rust flakes off the handles. “What haunted you?”

“What if I’m never good enough. What if I let her down. What if my mom was right to leave. . .”

Dragging my feet through the sand beneath to slow my swing down, I jolt my head his way. “She wasn’t.”

“You don’t. . .”

“I do know. I also know you wouldneverlet Violet down. You saved her.”

He flips his hat around and cracks his knuckles once more, no sound coming from his calloused hands. Barely audible, he releases what's been on his mind, "What if I let you down."

"Hart, that's too much pressure. You can't take on the world. No one expects you to."

"I want to be that guy for you. The one that takes everything on." He stares off across the park, kicking small rocks under his feet as the swing rocks forward. "The one that loses himself in the one he loves."

Coming out more aggressive than anticipated, I snap, "I don't want that." His eyes haze with confusion. "I'm sorry. I . I meant I don't want a prince or knight in shining armor. I want a partner. Someone who can go to battle with me. An equal."

His chest heaves as he exhales an audible breath. "I could do that."

"You already have," I reply, leaning over to kiss him on the cheek.

"I'm new to this," He points at me and then back at himself, "boyfriend thing. I've never wanted a girl like I want you."

"Want to know a secret?" I ask.

"Hit me."

"You're my first love." I stare down, unable to face the passion in his eyes when he looks at me like that.

"No," he argues. "You loved Layne."

"I thought I did." I nod with finality. "But, now I know I didn't."

“How do you know it’s different?”

“Loving Layne felt like what I wassupposedto do. He was my boyfriend. We’d been together for a long time, and I thought that’s what it should be like. He’d planned our entire lives out, and I went with every plan.”

“Why’s that?” he questions with no judgment in his tone.

“That’s the thing. I don’t know. I put my dreams on the backburner for him. My sole purpose in life was to follow him and make him happy.” My eyes mist at the memories of broken promises, false love, and dreams being taken away from me before I’d had the chance to reach for them. “With you, it’s an all-consuming love. One that feels like breathing life into my lungs for the first time.”

His lopsided smile cracks through the hard exterior. Words of affirmation do it for him. “One where I don’t need to suppress my goals or be anyone other than myself.”

He doesn’t reply or fill the silent void with any fluff words. His energy tells me everything I need to know. I’ve got him, and he’s got me for the long haul.

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Hartley

Lovesick doesn't adequately describe the hole punched into my chest the day Liza left Springs U for the summer. Well, she won't be gone for long. Her plan was to visit her mom for a week, her dad for a week, and spend a week doing the things she loves before coming back to school early for her second term art class. She loved her summer course last year, and said she wanted to do the advanced level credit course this summer. She's also picking up hours at the diner to keep herself busy until the fall. It's been two weeks of texting her shamelessly that I miss her every few hours, FaceTime at night, and pushing myself hard in the workout room to numb the noise in my head. She's due back next week, and I don't think I can make it any longer without her.

Laying in bed, I'm flipping through Netflix shows to watch before workouts when the door slams closed.

"Hart!" Violet yells. The volume sends a shiver down my spine, causing me to fly off the bed, taking the comforter with me to the living room.

My eyes scan Violet, no sign of scars, blood, or tears. "What's wrong?!"

"I want to show you an exercise I learned at therapy today." Her smile is back for the first time in months. She's the Violet I love again. My hand grips my chest and rubs back and forth to ease the clenching that occurred moments ago.

"Sounds good."

“Come sit!” she squeals and pushes me on the couch. “It’s a grounding technique that promotes mindfulness.” She lifts both hands and begins tapping each finger to her thumb. She then rubs the finger around her thumb before moving onto the next. “You know how my mind drifts anywhere but where I’m at?” She nods, waiting for me to begin the exercise.

“Yeah. . .”

“Well, it brings you back to the moment by using the sensation of touch. Your mind focuses on the touch of your fingers together and the texture of your skin, placing you firmly in the present.” Her eyes contain a sparkle of hope.

Convincing Vi to start therapy again was no easy feat. It took begging, pleading, and ultimately an intervention from Liza and I to get her to agree to one session. Thank God for that because her and the new therapist were a match made in heaven. She’s making real progress. She even admitted to talking to Ryan again as friends. Everything he did was for his mom’s medical bills. He acted on what he thought was right at the time. Although I hated him for it, taking a step back helped me realize that I may have done the same thing in his position. As much as I hate the idea of Ryan Shane anywhere near Violet after the stunt he pulled, at one time he would have done anything for her. Maybe that will come back. She claims he’s working on himself, too, and he’s happier than he’s ever been. I hope so.

“I’m proud of you, Vi. It’s hard to be brave and admit you need help, but you did it and look at you now.” I ruffle her hair in a way she can’t stand to mess with her.

“Thank you for never giving up on me.” Tears well in her eyes. “Grandpa is beaming down in awe at the man you became.”

Shoot, now I’m getting teary eyed.

“I hope he is.”

“He would love Liza, too.” She laughs cupping her hands around her mouth. “Those two would gang up on you.”

“Maybe he sent her. . .for me.”

Before she can cry anymore, she envelopes me into the tightest hug and squeezes for extra support. “I know he did.”

A loud thumping pounds three times on the door. Violet pushes off my chest with a smirk. She’s up to something. I hope she ordered wings. Stretching as I get off the couch, I open the door expecting our usual food delivery driver, but instead, I’m wrapped up by the blonde bombshell who stole my heart.

“Honey, I’m home!” Her voice rings in my ear as I process who bolts from the door and becomes twisted in my arms.

“Goldie,” I roll off my tongue. “What are you doing here?”

Unwrapping her legs from my waist, she plops in front of me, never unhooking her hands from my neck. She mindlessly fiddles with the ends of my hair. “Surprise! I came back early. Vi knew, but I swore her to secrecy.”

Glancing back at where I left her on the couch, Vi scrunches her legs to her chest and wraps her arm around them. The smug look on her face is all the evidence I need.

“I’m glad you’re back, but are you sure you won’t miss cutting your time short at home?”

She kisses my lips as my hands roam to her curvy hips where they’ve made

permanent indents. “Home is where theHartis.” Giggling at her word choice, I press my forehead to hers.

“Say it again.”

Her nose scrunches up and her pouty lips pucker in defiance. “You’re always forcing my feelings out more than once.”

“So.” I bite her neck hard enough to leave a mark. “What.” I polish off her sweet skin with my tongue roaming from her collarbone up to her chin. “I have something for you.” Guiding her in the apartment, Violet gives her a quick hug and retreats into her bedroom.

“A present?” Her eyes gleam with anticipation.

“Close your eyes.” I tip toe into the kitchen and reach to the back of an empty drawer. The little box is the only thing lying inside. I’ve wanted to do this for a while, but also didn’t want to come across as the crazed guy that moves at lightning speed. She rocks nervously back and forth from her heels to her toes. A mischievous grin written across her face. “On the count of three. One, two. . .” Before I make it to three, her crystal eyes flutter open, now framed with thick mascara across her long eyelashes.

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“What is this?” Her hand flies to the already opened box, revealing a key coated in pink glitter.

“A key to the apartment.” Her fingers cradle the key rubbing methodically back and forth across the coarse glitter coating. “Will you move in with me, Goldie?”

“Yes,” she blurts out, then quickly corrects herself. “Is Violet okay with this? I don’t want to intrude on y’all’s space.”

“I’m more than okay with it!” Violet hollers from her cracked bedroom door. I knew she would eavesdrop. When I passed the idea by her when Liza left to visit New Orleans, she had no hesitations. I was worried that this would push her back into a funk, reminding her of the rocky waters her and Ryan are currently navigating, but instead, she took it in stride. She’s growing, and I’m proud of the person she’s becoming.

Chuckling lightly, Liza grips the key tighter, her huge smile forcing her eyes to squint. “I’d love to move in. Violet may hate our new bedroom paintings, but. . .”

“Goldie.”

“Yeah?” She smirks mischievously.

“You’re not sharing a room with Violet. You’re sleeping in our bedroom.”

“Well, that depends. . .” She taps her chin as if this is taking her time to ponder over.

“How do you feel about abstract art across the wall?”

Unable to go a second longer without kissing her, I pull her into me and never intend to let go. “Anything you want. Anytime. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

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Epilogue Hartley

one year later

“You look delicious.” Liza nuzzles between my neck before licking a line from my collarbone up to my lips. “And I’m starving.” Every time I wear a suit, Liza claims it’s not fair because she can’t focus on anything else.

Groaning at the sight of her before me almost causes me to throw her on the bed and forget about the engagement party. “You’re trouble.” She’s in a strappy champagne colored dress that hits her right above her ankles. Her hair is tied back into a ponytail with pearls placed strategically across the slicked back area. Her heels bring her close to my height, but what stops me in my tracks is the desire flaming in her pupils. The same look we’ve given each other for over a year now. I never get tired of seeing her like this.

“That’s why you love me, though.” Planting a wet kiss on my cheek, she clicks her heels across the wood floors as she passes around me to grab her purse off the bed. “Can you believe they made it here?”

“No.” Flashbacks of Violet and Ryan’s tumultuous road to where they are now brings back stinging memories full of hurt and betrayal, but I’ve got to give it to the guy. He’s done everything in his power to fight for her, and I respect it. On top of that, we’ve all seen him change for the better. “But, I’m glad they did.” Unable to keep my

hands off of her, I sneak up behind and grab her hips, placing my chin on her shoulder as we rock back and forth.

“I’m going to cry watching you walk her down the aisle.”

I chuckle and almost tear up at the thought of walking my baby sister down the aisle in absence of her grandfather. “It’s not for another year, baby, we have time.”

“I know, but it’s going to be so special.”

Liza and I are approaching one year of living together. Mason swore we were crazy moving so quickly, but it felt right so I went for it. We’ve had our good days and bad, but I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else except right here with the girl of my dreams.

A soft knock rattles against the door frame, causing Liza to slip from my grip to answer.

“Hey!” Liza squeals as she wraps one of her best friends into a tight hug. Emberly walks hand in hand inside with her new boyfriend, Gage. He’s the second baseman on the Springs U baseball team. We’ve talked a few times and he seems like a chill dude.

“Are you ready for this?” Emberly asks Liza. The girls have been counting down the days until the engagement party for weeks. I’ve been a little less excited at the thought of Violet becoming a married woman soon.

Gage grips Emberly by the hips and kisses her cheek before leaving her side and greeting me. “What’s up, man?”

“The usual. Going to my little sister’s engagement party and trying not to think about the actual wedding day.”

He laughs, sticking his hands in his pockets. “I get it. My sister is still in junior high, but I’m going to be a tyrant when she gets her first boyfriend.”

“Would you two stop going all papa bear and enjoy yourselves!” Liza complains. “This party has taken every ounce of my blood, sweat, and tears to plan, and I’ll die if it’s not perfect for Vi.”

“It’s going to be perfect, baby. Ready?” I ask the group before leaving the apartment to drive us to the beach for the party. Violet wanted to keep it low key, just our closest friends and Ryan’s mom. Her only request for Liza as her official party planner was to pick a place where she wouldn’t need to wear heels.

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As we pull up to the private beach cut-out, I take a deep breath, centering myself for the changes that will come our way this year. Liza and I are entering our senior year in the fall, and I'd love to find a house for us to buy when I sign my first NFL contract in a new city. Violet and Ryan are living in the apartment with us until Vi graduates.

"Hart, it's gorgeous." Liza grips my arm as I throw the car in park. She admires the sunset hitting the water in such a way that the light reflects off in a rainbow. "She's going to love it."

Since Liza wasn't willing to give up the heels, I retrieved her from the passenger side and guide her through the patchy sand to the tables. White linens drape across the three long tables with just enough seats for everyone to fit. Liza leaves my arms to fine tune the bouquets that she set out this morning. "You outdid yourself." Walking up to her, I saddle along her side once again.

"I hope she feels the same way. They should be here—" She glances at the rose gold watch on her wrist, a Christmas present that I spent hours picking out to match her aesthetic. "—in about fifteen minutes."

"You killed it, Liza!" Emberly shouts as her and Gage fight the sand to make it to the tables. The waves crash against the pebbled rock shoreline creating a quaint background soundtrack to the night. "It's stunning." Gage lets go of Emberly's balled up dress allowing it to flow against the sand.

"Parties here!" A familiar voice tumbles in from around the corner. "Who missed me?"

“No one,” Emberly mumbles.

“Be nice,” Gage assures her as he rubs her back. This guy might be too nice to match the energy Em is throwing down today.

Coming into sight, Mason rolls up barefoot with dress pants and a cuffed white dress shirt. Mason’s family is loaded, and he spares no expense on his outfits. In one hand is a plastic cup, halfway downed. Here we go. . .

“Are you drunk?” Liza sneers as she trudges through the sinking sand toward Mason, red hot anger simmering from her cheeks. I follow her to be back up if needed. She isn’t always right, but that’s my girl. And if she stands on something, I’m with her.

“Chill, Liza. It’s a party.” He reeks of alcohol and his pupils are wider than normal. “The happy couple.” He gestures his hand holding a drink toward Emberly and Gage, sloshing some out onto the sand in the process.

Liza powers forward, so close he could taste her breath as she warns. “If you even think about ruining this night for Violet and Ryan, so help me—” She jams her fingers into his chest, spit firing out of those pouty lips. Angry Liza is hot.

“How about I go sit down like a good boy and zip my mouth shut?” His eyes roll as he scoots past her, shakes my hand, then plops into one of the chairs with a white seat cover draped over it.

I grab Liza’s neck and slowly massage out the tension. “Breathe.” I nip her earlobe in the place she likes, granting me the pleasure of seeing the goosebumps rise across her bare arms. “I’ll handle him.”

Leaving my girl to tend to last minute details, I take a seat next to Mason to settle this before Liza throws him out.

Mason hasn't been himself lately, on or off the field. "No cover ups. No excuses. What's the problem?"

"Nothing you can fix," he slurs, steadying himself with his forearm resting on the table. "I messed it up, and now it's done."

"Messed up what?"

"That!" he shouts loudly across the empty beach and throws his hand out toward Em and Gage. They're laughing while dipping their toes in the cool water where the sand meets the waves. "I have to sit here and watch Mr. Perfect with my girl!"

Hunching over and dropping my elbows to my knees, I push his shoulder back to gain his attention. "Emberly isn't yours, dude. If you want her to be, do something about it."

"Doing something about it would mess it up more." His eyes never leave the back of her black hair. Sadness takes over as his mind takes him to the past, away from his current pain.

"Let's talk when you're sober." I stand to walk away. "Oh, and don't think about pulling anything tonight."

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Epilogue Liza

"They're coming!" I yell across the beach cut out to my boyfriend, friends, and Mason, who nearly ruined everything I've worked on for weeks to make this super special for Violet. She deserves a fairytale wedding experience, starting with a gorgeous engagement party. She's missed so much of her life due to other people's

mistakes. It's time for someone to make her feel as special as she makes us feel. Hartley's eyes dart my way, a lazy grin spreading across his hard features, as he gets up from the table and sprints across the beach my way. He's a total vision. My hands fly to my cheeks as they flame from the sight of him, and how lucky I am that he didn't give up on me.

I start clapping the minute I see Violet turn the corner with her fiancé on her arm. She's smiling ear-to-ear and waving to us, but Ryan's eyes never flinch from her. Ryan's mistakes took a huge toll on their relationship, but he's paid his dues and committed to change. I can't help but commend him for that.

"I can't believe this," Violet's voice muffles into my shoulder as she tackles me, causing my balance to stumble. "It's everything I ever wanted." She's in a strapless, white, satin dress, barefoot, hair cascading down her back in a half up-half down look. Her eyes show no fear and genuine happiness glints from her blue irises. Her eyes fly to Hartley next, and he's wearing the most proud look with his hands stuffed in his pockets. He steps forward and extends his hand out to Ryan, a peace offering. Ryan's eyes mist, as he sticks his tattooed hand in Hartley's and nods repeatedly—a silent understanding.

Violet jumps at Hartley and latches her arms around his neck while he twists her around in a circle before dropping her back down to the sand. "I'm so proud of you, Vi. You deserve to be happy."

Her eyes shift to Liza as her nose scrunches up. "You do, too."

"I am." Hartley juts his chin towards Ryan to continue. "Go have fun. I'll catch up with you later." Violet scoots away from her once protector into the arms of her new one, and the sight has me close to losing it. My hand raises to my belly and rubs, the motion becoming a habit before I realize where I am. I need to tell him. I took a pregnancy test a few days ago and the lines screamed positive only a few minutes

after the pee hit the stick. I've been trying to figure out the best way to tell Hart, but my fears of abandonment creep into my mind, convincing myself to prolong the inevitable.

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“Let’s go sit.” Hartley ushers us to an empty table away from the noise of the speaker I turned on. Violet and Ryan toast champagne glasses with his mom. She isn’t walking as much or far as she used to, but she’s here, and that means the most to the both of them.

He places me on his lap, both of us facing toward the water as he rubs circles on my wrist. “What’s going on in that mind of yours?”

“Nothing,” I blurt out too quickly.

“Goldie, tell me.”

“I’m scared,” I admit.

“There’s nothing to be scared of. I’ve got you, forever.”

“I’m. . . Earlier this week, I. . .” He cuts me off before I have a chance to speak.

He grabs my chin to twist my glittery face to his. My hands play with the ends of his hair. “You’re pregnant.”

“I’m—How did you know?!”

“Found the test in the bathroom. You’d make a horrible detective, babe.” He chuckles as his large palms cups over my stomach. “I was waiting for you to come to me.”

“You’ve known for days and let me freak out about how to tell you?!”

He grins and faces the ground. “You could say that.”

“Why?”

“You needed to come to terms with it on your own. Sort it out in that beautiful head of yours. I was prepared to wait it out for as long as you needed.”

“Aren’t you scared? Mad? Nauseous?”

“No. No. And No.” He slowly rubs back and forth on my belly, making butterflies come to life and flutter around inside. “I want it all with you in whatever order you’ll give it to me.”

“Are you sure you want this? With me?”

“More sure than I’ve been about anything. You’re it for me. My present and future. My one way home. I love you, Goldie.”

“Love you, too, Hotshot.”