



# Play the Field

**Author:** *Cara Porter*

**Category:** Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** I never expected to see her again.

After she broke my heart to pursue her softball career, I never wanted to see Cat Collins again.

But here she was, leaned up against the chainlink fence of the softball field.

And after an injury and a two-year bender, she was asking me to help her get her training back on track.

Could I trust her with my heart again? More importantly, I could I trust myself?

Asking Cleo for help wasn't something I ever planned on.

But after the accident, my career had taken a nose dive, and my reputation was in shambles.

If I had any hope of returning to my professional softball career, I needed to get my life on track.

So what better way to figure out what was wrong with me than going back to where it all began: the day I broke Cleo's heart.

**Total Pages (Source):** 69

# Page 1

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1

CAT

The crowd roared as the sand and clay crunched under my feet. Dropping my bat, I took off toward first base – the sound of my wood bat cracking against the softball ringing in my ears.

The helmet dampened the sound of our opponents' chaotic coordination as they struggled to keep up with me. Everything was distant, the mayhem of the game alluding me. I sent the ball deep into the outfield, only bothering to check where it had landed once I was rounding first base.

“Go home! Go home!” My coach’s cry came from the third baseline.

Nodding, I clenched my jaw and pumped my arms harder, turning on the gas to my speed. I rounded second without a thought, hearing the ball starting to soar through the air toward me as I hit third.

From third, my faceless coach pointed to home plate. An eager catcher, covered in head-to-toe padding and a metal face guard, held their glove at the ready.

I hesitated, unsure if I could make it. But my coach insisted, their voice indistinguishable. “Run, Collins.”

So I did. I let the cleats into the sand, trying to suck in as much air into my tired lungs as possible. But just as I was nearing home plate, the catcher stood upright and ripped

off their mask.

My forehead wrinkled as my feet skidded to a halt just a few feet from safety.  
“Cleo?”

As the words left my mouth, an umpire hollered, “Yooourrrr OUT!”

My body jolted awake as the muffled crowd cheered through the TV. Cold air traveled through my nostrils as I blinked away the sunlight.

As I sat up, the empty beer bottles next to me on the couch clattered together. My hands wiped at my face. When I opened my eyes again, my team – it still hurt too much to say former – rushed onto the field into an open embrace.

The commentator was nearly yelling. “And that’s it! New York Rise manages to take home another Championship even without their former star pitcher, Cat Collins.”

Shaking my head, I set the glass bottles on the coffee table wherever there was room. I grabbed the remote and turned off the TV, unable to take another second of them celebrating. The throbbing headache teasing my temples certainly wasn’t helping my temper either.

I stood from my spot on the couch, an indent on the expensive furniture from my ass being planted on it nearly every day for the last two years.

I wiped my mouth with the seam of my white tank top as I walked to the kitchen. Looking toward the windows, I winced in the bright afternoon light. My apartment, purchased after our first championship, looked out on the Manhattan skyline.

Pulling up my phone, I scrolled to my agent’s number. I clicked her name and waited as the dial tone sounded in my ear. It rang and rang. After the third, I knew she

wouldn't answer.

Under my breath, I cursed. "Fucking asshole."

Once her voicemail answered and the familiar beep cued me, I cleared my throat. "Hey, Tommy. I just wanted to touch base about next season. Give me a call back as soon as possible." I hung up the phone, setting the hunk of metal on the marble countertops. Rubbing at my aching temples, I hoped that I had managed to not sound as hungover as I was.

My fingers tapped against the cold stone of my kitchen counter. Turning to the fridge, I flung the door open and grabbed a cold beer from the top shelf. I scanned for something to eat but all that was left inside was a many days old pizza.

Aligning the bottle cap with the edge of the sturdy counter, I smacked my hand down on the top and popped the cap off. A crisp hiss came from inside as I brought the cool glass to my lips.

I set the beer down on the counter, the glass clattering harder than I meant it to. Picking up my phone, I started scrolling through my socials. Immediately, I was bombarded with dozens of posts of the Rise's Championship win; pictures of the ladies holding the gold trophy and carrying each other on their shoulders flooded my feed.

Shaking it off, I switched to my burner account. There was really only one person I wanted to see and they had blocked my main account years ago.

I didn't bother following anyone on the unmarked "meowyme" user. The feed on this account was just endless cat memes and ads. Tapping the search tab, I typed in their name. In just a millisecond, Cleo Fontaine appeared. Under the username "thatcleofont", they posted once every few weeks.

I tapped their profile and started to scroll. There was only one new post since the last time I checked their page. Clicking into the post, I let my finger slide between the pictures. They were mostly pictures of the bookstore, the one they'd inherited from their parents. But slipped in among the shop, was a picture of Cleo in a t-shirt jersey. It was bright orange.

Laughing to myself, I smiled at the phone. They fucking hate orange.

My mind started to wander, thinking about what it would be like to watch them play now, as an adult. The last time we'd really gotten to be on the field together was early into college.

They were probably slower now like I was. As if I were there myself, I could picture them coming back to the shop after practice – covered in sand and sweat. I would lean on the counter and smile at them, asking how the game was. They'd tell me about their game-winning home run and head upstairs for a shower.

I'd tend the shop while they got cleaned up, then they'd come downstairs and I could watch Cleo fill the new books onto the shelves.

## Page 2

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The doorbell would ding with a customer who would greet both of us. I wouldn't be a stranger but instead a friendly face.

But my phone buzzed with a text from my brother.

Just checking on you. We'd love to have you visit. Miss you.

I turned it over, letting the screen face the counter.

As I bit my cheek, I looked across my living room to the framed jersey above my couch. The light green lettering of my name and number lay on top of the black fabric: Collins 23. There was still a sand and clay stain from the Championship game visible through the glass.

The daydream of Cleo's shop was nice, a comfort on my darkest days.

But my jaw clenched. It isn't the life I chose.

They would never want to see my face again, not after the way I left them. And now, I would live with that for the rest of my life.

Taking a swig from my beer, I let the bitter taste fill my mouth. I needed to get back on the field, it was the only way to make losing Cleo worth it.

“Thanks for coming, everybody.” I waved to the strange collection of book club members as I grabbed the paper plates from around the center of the shop.

Stacking plastic cups, Daryl walked around the circle of chairs. “Did you read the book this time?”

Once I heard the front door close, watching an eight-month-pregnant Zoey waddle out onto the curb, I shook my head. “I didn’t have the time. We got a shipment of new releases that needed to be put out.”

Daryl shrugged. “Fair enough. So I guess that means you didn’t have time to go on that date with Leah’s friend?”

Turning away from her, I rolled my eyes. She’d been desperate to set me up ever since she got all booted up with Leah last summer. But if I didn’t have time to read the book club novel, I certainly didn’t have time for a date.

“Sadly, no. Although she sounds great. I just don’t know if I have time right now.” I shrugged.

Daryl tossed the dirty cups in the garbage and leaned against the counter. “Cleo, you’re in your thirties and have your own business. When do you expect to find time?”

Raising an eyebrow, I eyed her. “Like you’re one to talk. You didn’t find someone until you were fifty.”

With a sigh, Daryl groaned. “You are very irritating.”

“You think everyone is irritating.” I winked.

Clicking her tongue, Daryl stood up straight. “Look, it’s your life. I just think you want a partner in all of this and you’re too wonderful of a person to not get that.”

I almost laughed at her sincerity, it was wildly unlike Daryl to actually care but maybe Leah was having an impact.

After saying her goodbyes, Daryl walked herself out and the shop fell silent. I let out a sigh as I looked around. Everything was in order, at least as close to order as Cleo’s Shelf ever was.

Checking my phone, I realized I needed to start closing up if I had any hope of meeting Bri for drinks on time. I grabbed my keys and started to shut off the lights as I meandered through the store. Once I made it to the front, I scanned the store before walking outside and locking the glass door.

Cricket’s was only a ten-minute walk from my shop on Main Street. It wasn’t a walk most people would love at night but I’d grown up in New Winford so it was more relaxing than terrifying.

I put in my headphones, letting them blare into my ears with sapphic indie pop. My prairie skirt flowed in the late July air as I walked down a steep hill toward the bar. Cricket’s, one of New Winford’s only bars, was located just on the edge of a horse farm. Off of Main Street, the bar was basically in the woods.

It only took about three songs before I was walking up to the front door, my feet making the old wood steps creak.

“Did you seriously walk again?” Bri called through the lot, shaking her head.

Turning to look at my friend, I shrugged. “It’s barely even evening.” The crickets would have disagreed with me, but the sun was still setting over the mountain as it



neared 8 pm.

## Page 3

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Bri groaned as she hugged me from the side. “You’re ridiculous. I’m driving you home.”

It was an argument we’d have later, once we’d gotten our bitching session over with. Between Bri’s work for Victoria Bradley and her budding romance with Sarah Greenwood, there was a lot to discuss.

I pushed open the door to Cricket’s, a flood of country music and neon lights washing out onto the old porch.

The entrance was clear enough for us to push inside and find a spot right at the bar right by the door, but the dance floor was starting to fill up with line dancers.

Sliding into my stool, I waved down the bartender, Kyle. Once I had his attention, he wiped off the counter on the other end of the bar and made his way toward us.

“Hiya, what can I get you?” Kyle smiled, happy to see his regulars.

Bri clicked her tongue. “I’ll take a draft, your choice.”

Nodding, Kyle turned to me. “And for you?”

“Whiskey, neat. Please.” I rested my chin on my palm and leaned against the sticky counter.

Kyle was already walking away when Bri turned to me with a raised eyebrow. “That’s a little heavy, everything okay?”

I took in a deep breath, letting the stale air of our small town bar fill my lungs. Considering how I wanted to answer, I tried to get in touch with myself. I wasn't entirely sure why I felt so heavy today. But here I was, ordering a whiskey and feeling like my chest might burst with frustration.

"I'm honestly not sure." I let the deep breath out. Shaking it off, I gently smiled at Bri. "How are you holding up?"

Bri was about to slam her forehead into the bar but Kyle placed her glass right in the smack zone. Instead, she nodded her thanks and took a sip. "Good. The table is kicking my ass but seeing Sarah is... nice." Her cheeks flushed pink as the words left her lips.

"Good." I giggled as I took a swig of my whiskey. As she talked, catching me up on all things Sarah, my eyes wandered to the TV set over the bar. There were a couple, most of them playing men's sports. But one of them was playing the highlights of what looked like the National Women's Softball Championships.

I scanned the field for a familiar number but twenty-three never appeared.

After a moment, Bri could tell she'd lost me. So she followed my gaze to the TV and sighed. "Okay. Can I please set you up?"

"Why does everyone want that so badly?" I shook my head, using my drink's small, black straw to stir the amber elixir. "I'm busy with the store, and the league, and my family. I don't need anyone else."

Raising her hands in surrender, Bri nodded. "I know. I don't mean anything by it. I just wish you weren't still hung up on that loser." She tilted her chin toward the TV.

My body tensed at the words. "I'm not hung up on Cat." Even just saying her name

made my blood boil. I reached for my drink and let the whiskey burn my throat as it traveled into my lungs, warming me from the inside out.

Trying to change the topic, Bri slapped the counter. “Did you hear about Jessica?”

“No.” I laughed, already excited for whatever tea Bri had for me.

Before I knew it, Bri was launching into a long diatribe about the last recreation softball game and how Jessica had been a sore loser at Wagner’s after when the teams grabbed lunch.

We stayed like that for a couple of hours, until Bri felt sober enough to drive and I was tired of watching all the people who had been good enough to actually qualify for the major softball leagues.

Throwing our tip on the bar, Bri and I walked into the parking lot. “Get in my truck.” Bri insisted.

But I stopped in my tracks and felt the cool breeze that blew through the trees on a hot summer night. “I’d really rather walk.”

Rolling her eyes, Bri sighed. “Fine, but text me when you’re home.”

“Of course.” I gave her a hug and headed back up the huge hill to my apartment on Main Street. New Winford was one of the safest towns in the country, our crime rate was only risen by rebellious teenagers trying to flip extra cash for some weed.

I took in the fresh summer air, letting it fill my whiskey-warm lungs. But every time I blinked, I saw that bastard’s face.

It’s not that I was hung up on her. I was hung up on how she left. It was cruel and all

for her to just throw her career in the toilet after an injury. More than anything, I thought it was embarrassing for her.

But I never wanted to see her face again. I knew that for sure.

## Page 4

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3

CAT

My phone blared in my ears.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

“Fucking hell.” I wiped the sleep from my eyes as I sat up on my elbow, only to be smacked in the forehead with a pounding headache. I muttered under my breath, “Jesus.”

Blinking the pain away, my shoulder aching as I moved, I grabbed the phone and read the caller ID: “Tommy”.

“Finally.” I pumped my fist and swiped right on the name. “Hey.”

Clearing her throat, Tommy spoke, “Sorry for missing your calls. How are ya?”

I scoffed, she was bold as always. “Uh well, I’m in pain. But I want back in next season.” It took a lot of effort to cover up my slightly slurred words, the night before having gotten out of hand again.

“Right.” Tommy sighed, taking a minute to think.

My heart pounded in my chest as I waited for her to say something... anything.

Clicking her tongue, Tommy said, “Look, with your injury, I don't know if you'll ever qualify again. But more importantly, your reputation is in the garbage. The team wouldn't take you back even if they needed you. And after yesterday, they clearly don't.”

“Ouch.” I sat up, crossing my legs. My blackout curtains were mostly closed, keeping me in a dark sanctum of misery. Stretching for the remote, I opened the blinds and exposed my dank apartment to the late morning sun.

“I'm sorry, Catherine. But there's no point in protecting your feelings. I'm your agent, this is my job.” Tommy paused. “Frankly, I've been urged to drop you. But I'm taking a cue from a colleague, and I'm not going to let you fade into oblivion. Which means, I need your help.”

Nodding, I stood from my bed. I rubbed my temples and scrambled to find some painkillers, scattered liquor bottles obscuring the medicine from me.

“What do I need to do?”

Tommy chuckled. “Step one, sober up.”

Smirking, I popped the ibuprofen bottle. “Who says I'm not?”

“The dozens of paparazzi photos of you partying with about five women in lower Manhattan last night.” Tommy quipped.

Even through the phone, I could tell she was being won over by my charm again. All I had to do was keep her believing in me. With her connections, there was nothing I couldn't get.

After a second of silence, Tommy continued, “I need you cleaned up enough to book

some ad spots. We need to raise your star power again. Ideally, you'd get some good pictures at the gym, maybe a salad restaurant."

I opened my mouth to answer but before I could speak, a guest room door swung open. Two half-naked women stumbled out from inside. Blinded by the light, they giggled and covered their eyes. They both wore tiny g-strings and whatever t-shirt they could find in the dresser.

Pressing my finger to my mouth, I shushed them.

Through the phone, Tommy sighed. "You know this is your last chance right? I can't keep going out on a limb for you, even if I believe in you as much as I do."

I let the sigh out of my lungs. Of course, a part of me knew. But I wasn't willing to accept it. If I lost Tommy's support, I'd be down to just one person: my brother. I wasn't even sure if he had my back at this point.

I bit my lip, considering whether I thought I could really stick to this promise.

But I didn't have much of a choice. It was this or oblivion.

"Okay. Tell the paps I'm going to the gym later."

I could hear Tommy's smile through the phone. "That's what I like to hear. Give me a few weeks of clean behavior and I'll start shopping ad spots."

"Consider it done." I nodded and hung up the phone. My eyes wandered to the girls on my sofa, my famed jersey hanging over their heads.



## Page 5

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It's now or never.

4

CAT

I walked over to the girls on my couch, clicking my tongue as I considered what to say to them.

Before I could get any words out, the blonde lifted her drooping eyes to mine. "Cat, can we go out?"

That's typical.

I smiled at her, watching as she eagerly waited for me to suggest some incredible bar that would be open this early. "I was actually thinking about hitting the gym."

"Ew." The brunette next to her laughed.

Even from across the coffee table, I could smell the alcohol from our late-night partying. My mouth salivated at the thought. It would be so easy to fall right back in, to let the liquor wash over my tongue and feel the waves of alcohol make my memory fade.

"We should go out instead." The blonde, whose name must have been Ashley, bit her lip.

Clenching my jaw, I shook my head. “I really shouldn’t.”

The pair rolled their eyes in sync, like a pair of groupie robots designed to make my career fall further apart than it already had.

Attempting to hold strong, I walked toward the front door. “Thanks for the fun night... or week, I guess. But I really need to get back on track.” The cold, metal door handle sent a jolt through my skin as I pulled it open for the two women.

They looked between each other and the apartment building hallway for a long moment before letting out a massive collective sigh and peeling themselves off my couch.

The brunette slunk toward the elevator, clicking the down button, as the blonde stopped in front of me. She placed her hand on my shoulder, leaning into my ear with a low whisper. “Give me a call when you decide to have a good time.”

Swallowing hard, I nodded and gestured toward the door. “Will do.”

As soon as she crossed the apartment’s threshold, I swung the door closed. I couldn’t risk another second around those two. They were stunning, funny, and a good time. If I wanted to get back to my career, I couldn’t be distracted... not my anything.

Leaning against the door, I pulled open my phone to a new text. It was from my friend Billie:

Heard about a new spot to try tonight. You game? I can be at your place in twenty.

Jesus. I shook my head. Everywhere I looked, temptation awaited.

Peeling myself off the door, I strode across the room. “I’ve gotta get the fuck out of

this city.”

Instead of responding to Billie, I pulled open a text thread that had gone cold. The last text was sent a few months ago, a brief birthday message I’d shot out just before midnight in the hopes that my younger brother wouldn’t notice how close to missing it I was.

He was in my phone as Daniel the Maniel. Refusing to be called Dan since we were kids, he had denied me the ability to call him “Dan the man.” So, this was my big-sister-compromise.

My chest tightened as my finger hovered over the keyboard.

Shaking off my anxiety, I closed my phone and strode across my luxury apartment to my bedroom. There, I grabbed a duffel bag from my closet and started to fill it with clothes. Only when it was nearly full did I reach for my softball clothes. I tossed in my worn-out cleats, a couple of sports bras, and my old high school jersey. Delicately, I placed my leather glove in a nook near the edge of the bag.

Once it was full to the brim, I zipped the duffel bag closed and slung the black strap over my shoulder.

I walked to the front door, scanning the apartment for anything I may have missed. But there wasn’t anything I would need more urgently than I needed to get out of this city.

So I grabbed my keys and opened the door, heading for the elevator bank that my two groupies had taken downstairs just a few minutes ago. Hopefully, they wouldn’t be lingering around the lobby. But even if they were, I was heading straight down to the parking garage.

The elevator dinged when it arrived on my floor. The heavy metal doors swung open for me, an empty cabin waiting. Stepping inside, I pushed the button for the garage and tried to take a deep breath.

The doors thunked closed, locking me away, as the elevator dropped down toward the basement level. I was downstairs just as the anxiety of what I was about to do sunk in.

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When the doors opened to the chilly, underground garage, I let out the breath I'd been holding in and stepped onto the asphalt.

I dug into my jeans pockets, the denim lightly scraping against my hand as I fished out my car key. Clicking the unlock button, my black Mercedes Benz flashed its headlight from a few feet away.

I flung open the sports car's trunk and tossed it in my duffel bag. The slam of the trunk sent a shiver through me.

What the fuck am I doing? A lump grew in my throat as I walked around to the driver's side door.

My body thudded into the black leather seats, the smell of a new car rushing into my nose. I bought the car after my injury. But living in the city and drinking the way I had been, I hadn't used it much at all – just over three hundred miles on the odometer.

Gritting my teeth together, I opened my phone and pushed the car's ignition button.

The text chain with Daniel stared back at me.

I let my fingers type, no longer stopping the words from flowing from my brain to the screen. The text read:

Hey bro. Can I come stay with you? Need to get out of my routine.

I wished I could say more. But everything else that needed to be said would sound better in person.

After a moment of contemplation, I let my finger fall onto the send arrow.

With an anticlimacticwhoosh, the text sent.

I let the air slowly release from my lungs, a gust of air slipping out from between my lips. New Winford was the only safe place for me... even if it meant running into my ex.

5

CLEO

The sizzling vegetablesin the skillet felt like a lullaby; the soundtrack of my mom's house. My eyelids drooped as I watched her jump from the stove to the cutting board on the small peninsula where I sat.

"Thanks for coming to help." She lifted the wood board and slid the cut-up onions into the hot pan.

I sucked in a breath, the spices tingling my nostrils. "No problem, meal prep day is a big deal." It probably didn't hurt that I didn't have much else going on. But even if I did, I always tried to make time for her.

Spatula in hand, Mom stirred the ingredients together. The smell of curry filled the room as she worked. "Anything new at the store?"

"Nope, same old. Business has been slow." I shrugged as I looked around the house. "Missing it?"

Whipping around, she rolled her eyes. “My life is so much calmer without having to share a bookstore with your dad.”

After he passed, Mom handed the keys over to me. She had no interest in running that place without him – even if it was a wildly stressful day-to-day life. Plus, I’d had ideas about the place for years and I could finally try some of them without my dad’s input.

A silence settled over the kitchen, only the rumbling of the exhaust vent and the crackling skillet broke through. Until eventually, Mom bit her lip. “But I’d give a lot to have one more day with him in that place. Even if it did smell a little mildewy.”

I looked up at her, her mind angered back to those late evenings closing up shop. Her eyelids grew heavy at the warmth of the memory.

“Well, a dehumidifier handles that problem pretty quick.” I teased.

Startling back to the stove, Mom winked. “And that’s why we put you in charge.”

For a few minutes, her full attention stayed on the stove. Just watching her, I could see the memory of my dad lingering around her. A part of me wondered if I’d ever feel a love like that. The kind that haunts you once it’s gone.

Maybe I already have. I swallowed hard at the thought. If Cat was it for me, I had a lonely next few decades ahead of me.

Biting my lip, I pulled out my phone’s notes app. I scrolled down to a list titled “Ideas I’ll Never Write” and found my way to the bottom after a few liberal swipes.

My finger hesitated over the keyboard, trying not to indulge the paranoid thought that my mom was staring me down from the stove. Every time I blinked, my mind filled

with the images of a developing story. The plot came to me in those moments of darkness behind my eyelids.



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Taking in a sharp breath, I surrendered and let my thumbs meet the glass screen. All of these ideas were messy, half-baked plots that were missing most of the ingredients. And between the shop, softball, and my social life, I never had time to flesh them out in any way.

But I wouldn't be able to sleep if the idea stayed caged in my skull. So instead, I released it into the endless void of notes app concepts.

If a hacker found this, they'd be able to have an entire career off of my ideas. The thought made me chuckle, drawing my mom's eyes back to me.

"Another one?" An eager smile took over her face, desperate to know what I had come up with.

Shrugging, I locked my phone and put it screen down on the counter. "Nothing worthwhile."

She shook her head. "You say that about all of them, Cleo."

I couldn't stop my eyes from rolling. "Because they're all just silly little thoughts."

Letting out a sigh, she turned back to the skillet. "Everything's just a thought until it's on the page. Do you think any book in that store started as something other than a silly little thought?"

Of course, she wasn't wrong. But she was my mom. She thought everything I touched was gold. In reality, it had been years since I'd exercised that muscle. I

wasn't even sure I had it in me anymore.

"I'm just saying, the bookstore wasn't everyyourdream." She raised her hands in surrender before turning back to the stove.

Biting my lip, I went back to my phone. But this time, I pulled open my phone to a text from Bri.

Dude. She's off the deep end.

My forehead wrinkled as I clicked the link she'd sent. The webpage loaded to a TMZ article headlined:

Former Softball Pro, Cat Collins, Flees NYC After Weekend Bender

As a habit, I tried not to gossip about people I knew from high school. New Winford was a small town and rumors spread like wildfire on the ridge on a dry summer day.

But Cat was different. She was the only person I'd ever let myself fall for. The years we spent together were some of the best I'd ever had. And it still didn't feel like it had been worth the fallout.

A part of me wished I could trust myself to reach out to her to ask if she was okay, or if I could help her in some way.

I typed out a quick message back to Bri:

Let's hope she stays the fuck out of NW.

Cat decided to go no-contact with me. And if it was what she really wanted, I would honor that. Even if it meant letting her spiral out of control.

Turning on her heels, my mom smiled at me. “Ready to eat?”

6

CAT

I left my windows down as soon as I crossed the George Washington Bridge, letting my hair whip back in the wind. By the time I was cruising through the mountains of the lower Hudson Valley, the sun was starting to lower in the sky.

Having made the drive plenty of times, I knew I couldn't go too far above the speed limit without getting pulled over. So instead, I chose to enjoy the slower pace.

I turned the dial up on the radio, letting the sound waves spill out of my car and onto the asphalt. LAWSON's latest song blasted between other pop icons, and a few I didn't recognize.

Before I knew it, I was peeling off the highway and onto the rugged country roads that led to New Winford.

It was only a few minutes before I slowed the car down onto Pond Hill Rd. As my Benz climbed the steep hill, I looked at the neighbors' houses. They hadn't changed much at all; a few of them had fresh coats of paint, but the rest looked exactly like they did when I used to walk up the hill from the bus stop.

At the crest of the hill, I turned onto the uneven gravel driveway. Luckily for my car, the usual potholes had been filled. Daniel must have done it early in the spring since the new rocks seemed perfectly compacted into the former craters.

Shaking my head, I pulled my car around the back where a porch light stayed on as the sun lowered behind the mountains.

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Once I was parked, I pushed off the ignition and grabbed my duffel from the back seat. I sucked in a deep breath of fresh country air as I walked around to the front of the house. Daniel had asked me to park around back to reduce the odds of the paparazzi swarming his kids on their way to school.

With any luck, it would be some time before anyone realized I was back in New Winford. But as I trudged up the hill to the front door of my former childhood home, I knew it was only a matter of time.

I tried to shake the feeling as I walked up the flagstone path.

Before I could even walk up the steps to knock on the door, it swung open.

A nervous smile from my brother greeted me. "Hey, kid."

"You're only three years older." I rolled my eyes, trying to stop the smile at the corner of my mouth from spreading to my cheeks.

Daniel opened his arms for a hug. "I know, but it bothers you so I'll keep doing it."

Wrapping my arms around him, we gave each other a light squeeze and a couple of pats on the back before separating.

"Hungry?" Dan clapped his hands together.

I nodded and followed him inside. From the kitchen, I could hear a sizzling pan and some light music. When I walked inside, Daniel's wife waved at me.

“Hey, Meredith.” I smiled at her, offering a soft wave.

Even before any words left her mouth, I knew she was hesitant about my presence. And I couldn’t blame her. If all I heard was what the tabloids wrote about, I wouldn’t want someone like me anywhere near children.

But she smiled at me anyway. “It’s good to see you. It’s been a while.”

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s on me.” Swallowing hard, I looked down at the counter. “Is there anything I can help with?”

“Nope, we’re just about ready. Babe, can you get the kids?” Meredith turned to Dan.

Walking toward the hallway, Dan hollered at his children. “Guys, dinner is ready and your aunt is here.”

Meredith rolled her eyes. “I mean, I could’ve done that.”

I shook my head as I laughed. “Glad to see he hasn’t changed.”

Before she could even respond, Meredith’s eyes darted up to the stampede storming down the hallway. Two sets of heavy steps pounded against the creaky hardwood floors.

“Hi, Aunt Cat!” The little voices said in unison.

Laughing, I knelt to hug the two kids. “How are ya?”

At eight and five, Lily and Jacob had no idea what kind of baggage I’d lugged into the house. They were just excited to spend time with their aunt who always brought expensive gifts.

Lily nodded. “Good.”

“Me too.” Smirking, Jacob copied his older sister.

As Dan walked past, he ruffled his kids’s hair and grabbed a stack of plates from the cabinet. Handing them to Meredith, he looked over his shoulder. “Kids, take your seats, please.”

They took off toward the dining room, just on the other side of a pass-through from the kitchen. Hoping up onto their chairs, the two of them got comfortable while Meredith dished out fajitas.

“That looks and smells amazing, Mer.” My mouth started to water as I peeked into the still-crackling pan.

She smiled, pride beaming on her face. “Thanks. It’s a new recipe so hopefully, it’s worth the effort.”

Dan kissed her cheek as he started to take plates to the table. Behind him, I grabbed another two plates.

After dishing for herself, Meredith trailed behind to the table where we set down plates and took our seats. The table was the same one that had lived in this room thirty years ago when my parents first bought the house.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Daniel and Meredith had changed some things about the old barn house when they bought it from our parents but a few things remained.

A fresh coat of white paint and some new artwork made the room pop.

Once everyone was seated, we all dug in. I picked up my fluffy tortilla and took a bite. “Wow.” I groaned as I chewed. Every time I came over, I was reminded just how good a cook Meredith was.

Everyone at the table nodded their agreement, even the kids were quiet as they shoveled the delicious fajita into their mouths.

“Well done, babe.” Daniel smiled at his wife from the other end of the table.

“Thanks.” She blushed at the compliment, still giddy for his affection.

It was sickening how sweet they were. As I ate, the image of Dan first bringing Meredith to this very house flashed in my mind. She was so nervous then, a far cry from the fiery sister-in-law I came to know.

Daniel was beaming the entire night, thrilled for his family to meet the woman he knew he’d married. And sure enough, here we were years later.

It wasn’t long before the kids had finished their food, tapping their fingers against the table as they waited for something to happen.

Turning to them, Daniel smiled. “Kids, do you want to start getting ready for bed

while we talk with Cat?”

Lily was out of her seat before the words even left her dad’s mouth, and Jacob was eager to follow his big sister’s lead.

As they disappeared down the long hallway, Dan and Meredith let out a collective sigh.

“So, Catherine, how are you?” Meredith asked as she took a sip from her small glass of wine.

Letting out a sigh, I shrugged. “I could be better.”

Daniel laughed. “So it seems.”

“Rude.” I whipped my head around to eye him. “But that’s why I’m here. That city is toxic for me right now and I just need somewhere to get right.”

Sighing, Dan leaned forward on his elbows. “We’re happy to have you here. But you know I have to say this: if you’re staying here, all of that party-girl shit has to stop. We can’t have our kids around it.”

I nodded. “I know.”

Meredith’s eyes softened, her guard falling just enough to reach her hand out. She wrapped her fingers around my hand and smiled at me. “Can you do that?”

Releasing the breath from deep in my lungs, I clenched my jaw as I met her gaze. “Yeah. I’m here to get back on track. This is my last at-bat and I’m not going to miss.”



CLEO

I slammed the small sedan door behind me as I hopped out of my car, slinging my backpack over my shoulder. It was a crisp weekday morning, the spring dew covering the fresh-cut grass.

As I walked over to the field, where a few of my teammates were warming up, a yawn escaped my mouth.

Catching the tail end, Bri looked over her shoulder and raised her hands at me from across the parking lot. “Tired already?”

I shook my head as I made it to the chain link fence where Bri’s fingers interlaced with the metal. Stretching her back leg, she looked up at me. “You alright?”

“Yeah, just didn’t sleep well.” I smiled at her, trying to dismiss her concerns as quickly as possible.

Raising an eyebrow, Bri watched me as I entered the dugout. “Because of the rumors?”

My head tilted before I could stop it. I wasn’t entirely sure what she meant. In reality, it had been my book idea swirling in my mind that had stopped me from sleeping. But now I needed to know what rumor Bri thought was juicy enough to keep me up at night.

“What rumor?”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Bri cleared her throat and sat on the bench. "It's better if you don't know."

Rolling my eyes, I set my bag on the dusty ground and took a seat on the rickety bench. The dull green paint had faded over the last decade of use. I reached into my bag and pulled out my cleats.

As I did, my notebook fell out of my bag. It flipped open a couple of pages, where scribbling from the night before filled the pages.

Before my exhausted body could reach for it, the leather-bound notebook was in Bri's hand.

My shoulders slouched. "Don't read that, asshole."

Bri scoffed and stood up from the bench, getting the book out of my reach. "Yeah right."

Shaking my head, I went back to my shoes. The last thing I wanted was to know what anyone thought of these underdeveloped ramblings about a story I'd never write. I tried to hide my nervous blush by keeping my head down.

But from the corner of my eye, I could see Bri lifting her eyebrows as she read.

After a moment, she lowered the book and let the hardcover close on the pages. Placing the book delicately back in the backpack, Bri shook her head and sat next to me.

Sighing, I looked up at her frustrated face. “What?”

“I just know you’re going to let that die in that stupid notebook.” Bri crossed her arms as she leaned back on the bench. Her jaw was clenched with frustration.

“It’s just scribbles. It’s not even a full idea.” I shrugged, tightening the laces on my shoes with a double knot.

Scoffing, Bri leaned forward to interrupt my gaze. “It’s always going to be just scribbles if you never actually work on them.”

Once my shoes were tied, I stood up and grabbed my glove as I stretched out my tired muscles. “I don’t have time to write. The shop is a lot and then there’s practice and my mom and...”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it.” Bri bit her lip as she followed my lead, pulling herself off the bench. “But I guess this means you did hear the rumor.”

“What do you mean?” My forehead wrinkled, trying to figure out what exactly my friend was alluding to.

Bri tilted her head. “Cat?”

Laughing, I shook my head. “What about her?” I felt my stomach drop at the sound of her name. It was rare to hear her mentioned to me by any of my friends – except for updates on her wild benders.

Looking over her shoulder, Bri lowered her voice. “Look, I don’t know if any of this is true.”

“Spit it out.” I slapped her shoulder with the leather glove, a dull clapechoing off the

cement blocks of the dugout.

“She’s back.”

Shrugging, I scoffed. “Like in the pros?”

Bri shook her head, her eyes softening as she scanned my face. “No, like here. In New Winford.”

My throat tightened at the thought. “Fuck.”

“It’s just a rumor, I could be wrong. Someone said they saw her but she could’ve just been visiting Daniel.” Trying to ease my mind, Bri rested a calloused hand on my shoulder.

There was always a chance that it was just a short visit, that it was nothing to worry about. But a part of me knew it was more than that. It wasn’t Christmas or Thanksgiving and as far as I knew, Cat didn’t come home for anything less.

Pounding in my chest, my heart ached a familiar pain. I shook my head as I watched my teammates finish their warmups. “What am I supposed to do with that information? Hide away in the store, hope she doesn’t remember I run it, and pray she knows better than to talk to me?”

Bri shrugged. “Probably. But knowing better might be the problem.”

Shit. The last thing I wanted was for my ex to come back into town, especially after she broke my heart all those years ago. But New Winford was a small place. There were only so many places I could hide from Cat before she found me.

CAT

The house was quiet for the first time since I'd arrived. It had only been about a week since I parked my car in the driveway and the slow pace of New Winford was starting to eat away at me.

Of course, hiding away and refusing to participate in any of the activities of the town wasn't helping.

So I slipped on my Air Force 1s and a black ballcap. Daniel had sent me the little league information before they left the house, wanting to make sure I could tag along if I changed my mind. But for the most part, I still remembered what fields the town park dedicated to kid games.

I grabbed my keys from the hook by the door, using my free hand to hold the extra keys, mail, and other junk from tumbling to the floor in the jostle.

Throwing open the front door, I walked out of the house and locked the door behind me. I was about forty minutes behind my brother and his family. The game was probably moving along by now.

I pressed the unlock button on my Benz key fob, the headlights flashing at me as they did. Slipping inside, the crisp scent of the new car filled my nose. I hadn't been driving much since arriving back in New Winford. Instead, I'd been opting for walks or hiding inside.

But when I pressed the ignition button, lighting up the engine, my chest rumbled with

excitement. It was a quick drive over, but that didn't mean I wasn't going to enjoy the luxury ride in the meantime.

Backing out of the driveway, I checked both ways for any oncoming cars. I peeled out of the driveway once the coast was clear and whipped the car down the road. Dan's house was only a few minutes from the fields and the drive was pretty easy.

Situated at the back of town, the New Winford Town Park bordered a heavily wooded area where a playground was nestled inside. The park itself felt like the town's transition from suburbs to truly rural.

I pulled my car into the gravel parking lot which was already full of cars and trucks. Giving my Benz some room, I settled for a spot near the back where it was less likely to be scuffed by too-busy-to-care parents trying to shuffle their kids home after long days on the fields.

Turning off the engine, I climbed out and headed toward Field 7 where I knew Lily's game was in full swing. Because she was so little, the game was toward the back of the park which meant I had to walk through every other little league game in town.

The age ranges were diverse, everywhere from tee-ball age to late-middle school. My ears filled with the sound of metal bats and baseballs landing in gloves.

I walked the path toward the back of the park, where the path narrowed. To my right, a game of ten-year-olds was in full swing. For a moment, I stopped and looked on. I made my way to the chain link fence just past the dugout.

Letting my fingers interlace with the chilly metal, a sigh escaped my lungs. At the plate, a young boy was ready for the incoming pitch. The pitcher wound up and released the ball from his grip.

My eyes scanned the field, the game was a mix of boys and girls. Raising my eyebrows, a small smile crept onto my cheeks just as the crack of the little kid's bat filled the field. The crowd on the bleachers a few dozen feet away erupted into cheers.

A familiar voice hollered, "Go, baby!" I let my head turn just far enough to peek at who it was. Her face was just as familiar as her voice but Sarah Greenwood looked a little older than the last time I saw her. Seated next to her and now with a baby bump, was who I could only assume was her sister Zoey.

They watched the field carefully as Sarah's son zipped to home base. But just as I thought the coast was clear, Zoey's partner turned to look at me. Her eyes flicked away from my face quickly.

If Daniel's gossip over the years had stuck in my mind, I was pretty sure the woman was Robin Lowell – a local contractor.

But I quickly turned back to the game, not wanting to draw more attention than I already had. I'd done a decent job of keeping a low profile since I'd returned. Of course, I'd mostly just stayed in Dan's house and avoided going anywhere I'd be recognized.

Sarah's kid settled back into the dugout as his family sat back down on their bleachers. Even from here, I felt like I could hear every word of their gossiping.

So, I unlaced my fingers from the chainlink and kept walking toward Lily's game. A part of me wondered if I should have asked Sarah if she knew where I could find Cleo and if she had any updates on what my ex had been up to.

But I knew Sarah from a distance over a decade ago. And she certainly wouldn't divulge information to an ex whose heart I broke years ago.

It wasn't long before I was approaching the bleachers of Field 7 where a bunch of parents delicately clapped as their kids clumsily moved around the field.

I slid onto the cold metal seats next to my brother.

"You made it." He smiled, reaching his arm around my shoulders to give me a light side hug and a pat on the back.

Nodding, I took a look at the field. Once I got my head around the score, the plays, and the teams, I sat back on the bleachers. "How's she doing?"

Daniel chuckled. "Well, it's seven year olds. So she's having a good time."

"Good." My shoulders dropped as I tried to embrace the joy on the field. When I closed my eyes, I could still remember how it felt to be that little out there. This was the age where the love of the game really grew.

"Dad would hate this." I bit my lip as I looked over at Dan. The field and the stands were calm, with no crazy yelling or attempts to make the game more serious.



## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Looking up from Jacob's little hands which were working on a coloring book, Daniel smirked. "We had to stop inviting him."

Our parents had stayed in New Winford for some time after Dan had kids. But once he bought the barn off of them, they decided to move down south for easier winters. It had been a couple of years since I saw them, no longer traveling for League games near their new home.

I giggled. "I believe that."

In a familiar silence, we watched as the kids moved around the bases. Out on the field, Meredith stood on the first base line, coaching the little ones that got to her.

"I saw Sarah Greenwood by Field 4."

Dan nodded. "She's everywhere if you look around. She and Dani Lawson run this place."

Biting my lip, I sighed. There was a question plaguing my mind but I knew Daniel would be annoyed by it. So instead, I shook it off and tried to get my mind off of Cleo. It was hard to believe they would have given up softball after school.

They loved the game and if I hadn't done a bit better than them at bat, they would've gotten my scholarship.

"What?" Dan whipped his head to look at me, knowing I was keeping something inside.

Shrugging, I met his gaze. “Is there a rec league or anything?”

Dan raised an eyebrow. “Why are you asking?”

“I’m curious.”

Rolling his eyes, Dan scoffed. “About the league or your ex? Don’t you think it’s better to let them go?”

He wasn’t wrong. Cleo and I had a messy last few years. The end of our relationship had been far more bitter than it should have been. It was a regret I carried with me in everything I did. And it would be a lie to say I didn’t want to make it right.

But I was almost certain Cleo would want nothing to do with me. Especially now that my life was a total disaster.

I pleaded with my brother, widening my eyes in a desperate attempt to beg.

Eventually, he groaned. “Yes, there’s a rec league. But I think you should leave it alone. If you need practice, call some old teammates, not them.”

“Thank you.” I patted him on the back. “Where do they meet?”

Shaking his head, Dan crossed his arms. “Nope. You’re gonna figure that out. I’m not enabling you to reach out to an ex.”

A grin took over my face. I loved a challenge. But I knew one thing to be true: if I had any hope of getting back to my life, I was going to need to get back to my roots. And Cleo was the key.

CLEO

The bird chirping was fucking annoying.

I clacked my fingers against my laptop, each key making a light tap that satisfied my ears. Flicking my eyes to the nearly empty document open on the screen, I groaned.

This is infuriating.

My chair squeaked against the wood floors as I pushed my chair away from the desk in my tiny office. Usually, the morning birds were a comfort. But now they just kept interrupting my attempts to write. I only had a few minutes before I needed to take off for my softball game.

I'd woken up early because the bright fall sun streamed into my bedroom. So I'd gotten dressed, ate breakfast, and then sat in front of the screen, begging words to flow from my mind down into my fingers.

"Ugh." I leaned back in the chair and let out a sigh.

After a moment of trying to steady myself, I checked the clock. It was just about time to head to the game but it was the last thing I wanted to do right now.

At least it would be a convenient excuse to avoid this idea for a little longer.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:39 pm*

Standing from my desk, I pushed in the chair and slammed my laptop shut. I tucked in my loose jersey – a cotton t-shirt. The waistband of the tight, white polyester pants was loose enough to slip the shirt into.

I walked through my clean apartment, a small place above the bookstore that I'd been in for as long as I could remember. The sun was peeking through the east-facing windows as New Winford started to wake up.

By the front door, I slipped on my game-day slides and tossed my dirty cleats into the worn duffel bag stationed by the exit.

Before I left, I scanned the couch for Finn's usual napping spots. The tabby cat was perched on his cat tree, soaking in the early morning sun after getting his breakfast.

I smiled at his sweet, sleepy face. "See you later, Finny."

He only lifted his head when the front door opened, droopy eyes barely opening to see where I was going.

I took the stairs down to the street quickly, barely holding on to the railing.

When I stepped outside, locking the door behind me, I poked my head to the doorway next to the apartment entrance. It was the front door to the bookstore, securely locked with all the lights inside turned off.

With an assured nod, I headed behind the building to the tiny parking lot where my Corolla was waiting for me. It was a few years old, some dinges decorating its sides.

But it did the job and I didn't need much.

I tossed my bag into the passenger seat and hopped inside, pulling out of the parking lot and making the quick drive through town to the park. Unlike the kids leagues, which played at the New Winford Town Park, the rec league was relegated to a small field at a park just outside of town.

Once I parked and hopped out of my car, I could already hear the sound of softballs smacking into leather gloves as my team warmed up. Hopefully, Bri wasn't waiting for me.

But as I crossed the dewy soccer field that led to the chainlink fence of the softball diamond, I saw her tightening her cleats in the dugout. She let out a massive yawn just as I entered the concrete cave.

Patting her back, I chuckled. "You look like a bag of shit."

Bri rolled her eyes. "I'm starting to think you don't know how to be nice."

With a shake of my head, I led Bri out to the field to take our positions as the game was about to start. As we walked, she told me about her late night in the hospital with Sarah Greenwood's entire family.

We walked about twenty yards apart. Raising my voice, I watched as the first batter stepped up to the plate. "What were you doing there?"

"Robin asked me to come help with Sarah's kids while we waited for her to get there." Bri shrugged, a light blush teasing her cheeks.

I tilted my head, my eyebrows wrinkling. "Where was she?"

Leaning down into position, she quipped, “On a date.” Our pitcher got into position as she prepared to throw the first pitch of the game, forcing me to hold back my gawking as I prepared to receive the play.

“Christ,” I muttered. The more Bri talked about her complicated love life, the less I wanted to date. A part of me wanted to want it more. But after the way Cat had hurt me, I wasn’t sure love was worth the risk.

10

## CAT

As soon as I cut the engine of my car, I could hear the plays being called out across the soccer fields. Just the sound of an adult game brought a light smile to my cheeks. It’d been a while since I heard a softball game in person, having been too embarrassed by my career’s rapid decline to show my face at a game.

But now, as I crossed the dewy grass toward New Winford’s rec league, I felt a deep sense of longing; the kind I had refused to let myself feel because I knew it would be impossible to stay away.

I followed the sound of the game across the empty soccer field. Taking in a deep breath, I felt the cool morning air fill my lungs. The summer air was quickly turning to an early fall chill. I couldn’t remember the last time I was home for the leaves to change.

As I got closer to the field, where a gaggle of women was already an inning into their game, I smoothed the top of my hair which was drawn back into a tight ponytail.

I’d debated coming here for a while now. The last thing I wanted was to corner Cleo, which is why I decided not to drop by the bookstore. But here, they could leave easily

after spitting in my face.

I wasn't sure how they would feel after all of these years. But I had a feeling they would want to help me, even if their better judgment said not to.

The bleachers were empty, except for one woman who sat with a crochet hook and a ball of yarn as she watched who I could only presume was her partner. Turning her head to examine what stranger was approaching, the woman offered a polite smile as she turned back to the game.

Nodding toward her, I slid into a spot near the top of the small set of seats. Only three rows tall, it was easy to climb up to the third row.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:39 pm*

I needed a decent vantage point to find Cleo here. As I settled onto the cold, slightly damp metal, my eyes worked quickly to find them. Thanks to social media, I wasn't completely clueless as to how they would look now. Honestly, they hadn't changed much at all... at least not in the pictures.

The first place I checked was the infield, knowing that Cleo was our star catcher back in high school. But none of the players within the diamond looked like them. I swallowed hard. What if they aren't here?

But just as the thought crossed my mind, my eyes settled on Cleo. Their hair was in a loose bun, tucked into a baseball cap that matched their bright blue jersey. A lump grew in my throat as I met their gaze.

Even from here, their blue eyes were as clear as the water in Bali. But they looked away fast; it was a clear tell that they knew exactly who I was. They stood up straight as the shock set in.

I was almost certain that rumors of my arrival to New Winford had already spread but they must not have believed it.

From the bleachers, I saw their mouth move as they talked to the person crouched next to them. Their eyes darted to me, widening when they saw who I was.

But the game wasn't going to stop and both Cleo and their friend got into position as the pitcher wound up for a new pitch. I watched as the neon yellow ball hurtled toward home plate. Taking in deep breath, the batter swung as the ball approached.



Acrackrang out across the field as the player took off toward first base.

Unfortunately for them, the swing had sent the ball flying right toward Cleo who was already positioned underneath it.

The glove clapped around the ball as it landed in Cleo's palm.

"Out." The umpire called from behind the plate.

With the inning apparently over, the blue-jerseys ran toward the dugout. No one moved faster than Cleo. Are they going to try to avoid me?

11

CLEO

I have to get the fuck out of here.

Shaking my head, I started to shove my glove and water bottle back into my bag.

Bri came up behind me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," refusing to look up from my hands, I nodded. "I just need to go home. Tell the team I'm sorry."

With a chuckle, Bri put a strong hand on my shoulder. "Dude, deep breath. If you go now, it'll be easy for her to just walk straight up to you."

She wasn't wrong. Without any of the other players leaving the field, I'd be an open target. "Shit."

I'd have to wait until it got a little more crowded. With any luck, the little league fields would fill up soon and the parents along the sidelines would be enough to hide my departure.

My leg started to shake as I sat in the dugout. Our batting order was already set and the opposing team was making their way out to the field. But I could feel Cat's eyes on me like a sniper with its sight on their target.

Trying to help, Bri took a deep breath. "She probably doesn't even realize it's you."

Even as the words left her mouth, I knew it was generous. With every second that passed, I regretted every post I'd ever made on social media. I'd left my ex a roadmap to find me. Hell, I've been on the same softball team since I moved back to New Winford after college.

And now, all Cat had to do was take one look at my page and she'd know exactly what jersey to look for.

My head fell into my hands. "Fuck. Even my number is on IG." Looking down at my stomach, the number printed on the shirt felt like a scarlet letter. The itch to sprint across the fields and hop in my car felt impossible to ignore.

There was no way in hell that I could step up to the plate and bat.

"What can I do to help?" Bri turned toward me, sighing.

With a shrug, I gritted my teeth as I looked for a way out. "Can you just go talk to her while I run out of here?"

Bri's forehead wrinkled. "Is that going to work?"

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:39 pm*

“I have no idea, but I doubt she’ll be rude enough to interrupt you.” It was a guess. But I’d known Cat since elementary school and I knew her mother didn’t raise her to be rude. Even if she wasn’t the best to me at the end of our relationship, I knew she wasn’t a monster.

Standing from the bench, Bri nodded. “Consider it done. I’m not going to hug you goodbye so we avoid raising suspicions.” In a matter of seconds, Bri had transformed into a spy. And this was her most important mission.

She stepped out of the dugout, fixing the tuck of her jersey as she walked across the grass toward Cat. Waving, Bri tried to look friendly. They’d known each other in school, through me and a couple of seasons of Varsity softball. I tried to convince myself that it wasn’t totally unbelievable that Cat would be willing to have a random catch-up with Bri.

I watched out of the corner of my eye as Bri approached Cat. Even from here, I could see how awkward Cat felt. Her hand rubbed the back of her neck like she was still sore from her last game.

My chest tightened at the shit. Time to go.

Grabbing my bag, I said goodbye to the team and pulled the brim of my cap lower. I hadn’t bothered changing out of my cleats, instead letting the metal chock dig into the sand.

I lowered my gaze to the ground, knowing it was risky to meet her eyes. Taking off toward the parking lot, I could feel Bri resisting the urge to check on me. But even

from the corner of my eye, I saw Cat stand from her place on the bleachers.

As politely as she could, she tried to brush past Bri. But the wall of muscle wouldn't budge, redirecting to some other friendly chatter.

The sound of my cleats clicking against the old asphalt of the parking lot felt celebratory. There was no way Cat could catch up to me at this point.

Relief truly set in when my small Corolla was backing out of the lot and moving down the road toward town. Only then did I let myself look in the rearview where I could see the miniature-sized Bri and Cat still at the field.

But now, Bri's hand held Cat's shoulder. From this distance, it was impossible to tell where their conversation had led. Luckily, I knew Bri would fill me in on all the details later. I just needed to get home, shower, and open the shop.

The hot water felt incredible on my body, and a part of me thought I might never leave the old shower ever again.

Duty calls. I sighed as I turned off the water and stepped out of the tiled stall.

I'd hardly played at all this morning but my body felt tense from seeing Cat, like I'd played all nine innings without a break.

Once I was dry, I quickly threw on loose-fitting jeans and an oversized t-shirt. Tossing my hair into a loose top knot and leaving the other half down, I checked myself in the mirror. Business was about to slow as the end of the summer approached. So looking done up was becoming less and less of a concern.

Not that anyone really cared what the dorky bookstore owner looked like anyway.

I grabbed my tote bag, placing my laptop and my current read inside, before heading down the apartment stairs. Checking my pockets, I made sure my keys jingled before I let the door slam shut.

But as I looked up from my bag, I stopped in my tracks. Shit.

Outside Cleo's Shelf, Cat Collins was pulling on the front door. She was trying to open it despite the sign obviously reading: "Closed".

The sound of my apartment door clicking shut was enough for her to lift her head and meet my gaze.

My heart stopped beating as I looked into her green eyes. It had been years since I looked at them this close, close enough that I could slap her... or kiss her.

"Cleo." She swallowed hard, her nerves suddenly bubbling up into her throat.

Shaking myself out of whatever haze she had put me in, I walked past her. "No." I cleared space for myself near the door and started turning the lock. Whether or not I wanted Cleo here, I certainly wasn't about to have this conversation on the street outside of my business.

As I pressed past her, I could smell her familiar scent. Something about it had matured, the musk of her sweat a little less sweet. But something in me still recognized her.

"Please." Cat turned toward me, not relenting on the space she was taking up in front of my bookstore's door.

Pushing it open, I didn't hold it – hoping it would slam into her face and she'd take the hint.

But before the door's auto-close spring could work its magic, Cat slammed her hand against the glass and followed me inside.

I couldn't stop myself from rolling my eyes. I'm gonna have to clean the door now.

Nonetheless, I pressed toward the counter as the familiar smell of bookstacks filled my nostrils and mostly replaced the overwhelming musk of Cat's presence.

She moved toward the counter where I was setting down my tote bag. "Cleo, seriously. I'm trying to talk to you."

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“Well, I’m not trying to talk to you.” Rolling my eyes, I started to work my way through the shelves. Maybe it was naive to assume she’d take the hint and give up. After all, it wouldn’t be the first time Cat quit on me.

Rolling her eyes, Cat followed behind me. “Cleo, come on.”

As she trailed behind me, I started to pick up my pace and zipped between the shelves. I was nearing a jog as we weaved between the shelves. When I thought I was starting to lose her in the fiction section, I slowed just a bit and took a peek behind me.

I stopped moving after seeing she wasn’t there.

Finally, I let out a deep sigh.

“This is ridiculous.” Cleo’s voice sounded behind me.

Whipping my head around, I gawked at her. She’d gone around the shelf to intercept me on the other side.

I turned on my heels. “Yeah, it is, maybe you should stop.”

She stood in place for a moment, trying to evaluate which way I would go. Hoping to fake her out, I rounded the corner to change aisles. But as soon as I did, Cat’s head popped into view from the other side of the bookcase.

“Why can’t you just give me a second to speak?” Cat shook her head as she got

closer to me.

Instead of facing her, I turned back the way I'd come.

But there was her face again.

I clenched my jaw, trying not to think about the way she'd broken my heart. "Because you're a fucking asshole and I'm not doing this again." If I let myself picture it too clearly, tears would roll down my face. And I wasn't in the mood to give her the satisfaction.

I moved farther down to another shelf, putting some distance between us.

But when I reached the next corner, her face appeared again. "How long are you going to make me do this?"

Pivoting, I went back the way I came. This time, I could hear her footsteps picking up from the other side of the shelf. And just as I reached the corner, Cat materialized in front of me.

Groaning, I slammed the pile of books I'd accumulated into her chest. "Nothing can be this important."

She winced as the heavy books slammed into her lungs. When I turned away again, I could hear her setting the pile on the floor. This time, the sound of steps quieted.

Was she finally taking the hint?

I let my shoulders drop as I rounded the corner of the farthest bookcase. At the back of the store now, the smell of old novels was inescapable. There wasn't a single sound in the entire store.



Until she appeared in front of me, startling me back a couple of shelves into the corner bookcase. I was out of places to hide.

Something in her face made my heart warm. I knew I shouldn't let it, that Bri would be disappointed I'd let her win me over with those green eyes. They were the same glowing emerald I'd looked into at fourteen, at nineteen, at twenty-one. The same eyes I fell in love with and the exact same that broke my heart.

Cat's chest heaved as her jaw tensed. "Everything's on the line, Cleo. Please."

12

CAT

I was still catching my breath when Cleo finally nodded. "What do you want?"

Not wanting to rub it in, I tried to keep my face from forming a goofy smile that I knew would piss them off. "I came here to apologize."

"Well, that's rich." Cleo rolled their eyes and slowly brushed past me, no longer trying to escape me. As they moved, a waft of old books and fresh-cut flowers filled my nose. I still wasn't sure how they managed to smell so intoxicating.

I followed them to the stack of books I'd set on the floor. "I'm serious. I'm sorry I ditched you."

Cleo scoffed as they turned to look at me. "That's the best you've got? Ditched me is an interesting way to describe it."

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Shrugging, I raised my hands in surrender. “I know I was a dick, okay? But I’m here to own it.”

“Then own it.” Cleo’s chest heaved as they tried to catch their breath.

Watching them, I could see how badly I’d hurt them. Even years later, they wanted me to explain the gory details; to spill my guts on the wood floors of this family bookstore.

I sighed. “I’m sorry I wasn’t a good girlfriend in the end. I let my fame get the best of me.” Even as the words left my mouth, I knew it wasn’t enough. It wasn’t the whole truth. But I wasn’t sure we’d ever be able to talk about that, that it wasn’t entirely my fault.

Before they could press harder, I got closer. “Look, I need your help. I’m basically begging you. My career is a mess and I can’t get back in shape after this stupid fucking injury.” Just saying the words, I felt the ache in my shoulder radiating out.

“But you trained me in high school, you practiced with me in college. You made me the player I was. And I need to get back there.” My throat tightened as the words left my lips. A part of me feared that without them, I’d never step foot on a softball field again.

Cleo let out a sigh as they filed books onto the shelf. It was clear they had a meticulous system, each book fitting in the exactly correct spot. They pulled each book toward the front of the shelf, making sure all of the spines were lined up.

They didn't say anything for a minute.

In an attempt to fill the silence, I looked around the store. "It's weird to see you run the shop."

Cleo froze for a moment, unsure how to respond. But they kept moving toward the back of the store to put away another book.

Following behind them, I bit the inside of my cheek. "We used to hang out here all the time. Even before we started to date."

A light chuckle escaped Cleo's lips as they refused to look at me. "My poor parents. We were terrors."

"You were a terror, I was polite as hell." I couldn't stop the smirk from taking over my face.

When Cleo turned around to roll their eyes at me, a smile played at their cheeks.

So my charm does still work on them, even now? I tried to calm the part of me that was excited, not just to have a way to get their help. But the part that wanted them to look at me the same way they did when we were teenagers.

Even now, with their shoulder-grazing bob, they still had the same sarcastic look when they got annoyed with me.

They filed away the last book, rubbing their hands together as they looked around the store.

My eyes caught on the vintage chairs in the back corner of the store, creating a cozy reading nook. I still remembered how it felt, the old leather rubbing against my

sweaty thighs, watching Cleo read in the chair opposite me over the edges of my selection.

“We had our first kiss over there.” The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop them.

Cleo swallowed hard, loud enough for me to hear from a few feet away. “I know.”

Shaking my head, I rubbed the back of my neck. “Sorry.”

Instead of answering, they just raised their eyebrows and headed back to the desk. A part of me wondered if the spot haunted them; if looking at those chairs every day stung. I’d been able to get away from every reminder of them. Anything I saw on their socials was a choice, something I decided to torture myself with.

But this store, this town, they couldn’t walk away like I had.

“So what exactly are you asking me?” Cleo hopped up onto their stool at the counter, leaning on the palms of their hands with suspicious eyes.

I nodded. “Right.” Sucking in more air, I bit my lip. “I need you to train me.”

13

CLEO

A part of me couldn’t believe she’d been bold enough to even ask. “Seriously?”

Cat shrugged. “Why not? We played together our whole lives, you know my weaknesses, you know my strengths.”

Of course, she wasn't wrong. I hated to admit that I used to watch her highlight reels, checking her form every game.

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“Plus,” Cat continued, her charming smile leaking onto her cheeks, “You aren’t afraid to call me on my bullshit. And I really need that now.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Can you handle that?”

It was hard to believe she could. Toward the end of our relationship, Cat had become quite averse to critique. And if— it was a big if — I was going to help her, she’d have to take the notes I gave her on the chin.

“Yes.” Cat struggled through the word.

But I knew her well enough to know she wouldn’t say it if she wasn’t sure. Cat was many things, but a liar wasn’t one of them.

Looking into her green eyes, I swallowed hard. They were stunning, even now in the dim light of my bookstore. I wanted to believe I could handle this. I wanted to trust myself to help an old friend and not fall for an old lover.

But god, her face was gorgeous and she’d only gotten more charming with age.

“I don’t know.” I managed.

With a nod, Cat sighed. “That’s not a no.”

Biting my lip, I checked the time. “Book club starts soon. I’ll think about it, okay?”

“Sure.” She tapped her fingers against the counter, taking another look around the

shop. “You’ve done a really great job with this place. I hope you’re proud of it.”

My chest tightened at the words. I had no idea how badly I needed it. As she turned to walk away, I watched her.

Over her shoulder, Cat looked back at me. “You still have my number?”

“I deleted it,” I confessed with a smirk.

The corners of Cat’s mouth turned up into a smile. “You still have it memorized.”

It wasn’t a question, more a statement of fact. And she was right, I did. I’d repeated it to myself for decades, knowing that if the day ever came I’d want to have it. Even if it was smarter for me to keep her as far away as possible.

I watched her leave the shop, the ding of the doorbell announcing her departure. But as she left, she brushed into an older woman heading inside. Daryl was just arriving for book club, looking confused as all hell to see the Cat Collins walking out.

As she approached the counter, her salt and pepper hair messy from a windy drive, Daryl scoffed. “What in the fuck is a pro softball player doing at Cleo’s Shelf?”

Watching Cat cross the street, her head hanging low, I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Looking for a book on ancient history.”

Daryl tilted her head, not entirely sure what I meant.

“We used to date, long before I was hosting book club.” Coming out from the counter, I started grabbing the wood folding chairs from the supply closet near the checkout.

Raising an eyebrow, Daryl grabbed a chair and started unfolding it. “So what is she trying to dig up?”

For a moment, I hesitated. Daryl was sort of new to my life – at least relative to how long I’d known Cat. But she’d become a close friend and seemed to be an expert in finding love later in life. Maybe she had some wisdom to share.

“You heard about her career?” I bit the inside of my cheek.

With a nod, Daryl scoffed. “Every lesbian on this side of the Atlantic has heard about it.”

I couldn’t stop myself from laughing, next to the WNBA, sapphics loved softball and Cat was an out and proud queer woman. She’d accrued quite a fan base over the years, something I’d watched from a safe distance.

“We used to play together, in high school and a bit in college.”

“While you dated?” Daryl shook her head, already knowing the answer.

Shrugging, I set out the last chair, completing our circle. “Yep. She’s back in town, wanting to get her shit right. And she wants me to help train her back to health.”

“Yikes.” Daryl walked around the circle and made sure each chair made a perfect circle. Putting her hands on her hips, she looked around the usually brewed coffee.



“I’ll start it now.” I chuckled.

As I worked on filling the filter and getting the new pot brewing, Daryl browsed the “New Releases” shelf at the center of the store. “How do you feel about all of that?”

I scoffed as the coffee machine started to sputter out the brown elixir. “I have no idea.” Turning to face her, I shrugged. “I want to believe I could handle being close to my ex. But that breakup was... nasty.”

A knowing “mhm” left Daryl’s throat. But instead of speaking, she left me in silence as she watched on.

“I don’t actually think I’d fall for her again. She was such a bitch at the end and her life is a complete mess. But I don’t know that I want to invite her back in.”

Daryl nodded toward the now-full coffee pot. Grabbing a paper cup, she passed it to me to fill. “What happens if you don’t help?”

It was a question I didn’t want to consider because the answer was obvious. “Honestly, she’ll probably hang around here longer. Her career is a mess, she’s been partying non-stop.”

“All roads lead to New Winford.” Daryl winked as she watched me fill the tiny cup. She’d been around long enough to know that this was true. This small town was a magnet, a guiding stone for the lost and lonely.

With a sigh, I passed the cup back to her. “It seems like it.”

“And if you do?” Daryl pressed.

“If I do help?” Once she nodded, I groaned. “At best, I get my friend back and help her get the fuck out of here. At worst...” I couldn’t even bring myself to say it.

She fails and it’s my fault?

We fall back in love and she rips my heart out?

We actually hate each other even more?

She ruins New Winford for me forever and I have no choice but to flee to Canada?

The options felt endless and all of them were just as depressing as the last.

Sensing my anxiety, Daryl let out a deep sigh. “Well, dear. I have a feeling she’s not going to let you say no. But if you do help her, she might get out of town faster.”

As the words left her lips, the front doorbell rang as the other members arrived at the store. Daryl winked at me, leaving me with the thought as she took her favorite spot. Before Daryl had met Leah, I thought she was just a grumpy florist with no desire for love.

But what had become clear to me since their New Winford Garden Showdown victory, was that Daryl had been an unapologetic cupid in town.

As Zoey and Bri made their way inside, followed by our newest member, Abigail, I tried to push the thought aside. Maybe Daryl was right: the sooner I helped Cat recover, the faster she’d be out of my life. And right now, I couldn’t handle letting her in longer than I needed to.

## CAT

I tapped my finger against my phone as I looked over my brother's backyard. The house was quiet, his kids at school; Dan and his wife at work. But the silence wouldn't last long, the kids were already on their way home and Meredith wouldn't be far behind.

Flipping my phone over, I peeked at the screen. Still nothing.

It had been just over twenty-four hours since I saw Cleo at the bookstore and they still hadn't texted me. Maybe they did forget my number.

Rolling my eyes at myself, I placed my phone, face down, on the balcony railing. A cool chill hung in the breeze as the seasons started to change. There was a crisp sound to the wind as the leaves started to dry out.

I closed my eyes, listening to the light rustle and the chirping birds. If I had any chance at getting back on a softball field, I needed to find a way to recenter myself when this anxiety took over that wasn't grabbing a bottle of tequila.

Just as my breathing started to slow, the phone started to vibrate on the balcony railing.

"Shit." I panicked as I flipped the phone over and saw their number. A part of me thought I should have deleted it years ago, but now I was glad I hadn't.

Before I could doubt myself, I swiped right on the call and held the hunk of metal to my ear. "Hey."

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“Eager much?” Their voice sounded through the speaker.

With a shrug, I answered, “Maybe.”

There was a pause as Cleo thought for a moment. Even through the phone, I could hear them trying to calm their smile. “We should talk more about this.”

“Agreed. When?” I tried not to sound panicked or nervous, clenching my jaw as I waited for their response.

Cleo thought for a moment. “Can you meet me at Bear Mountain in an hour?”

“Yes.” The words left my mouth before I could think about it too hard.

“Cool, see you then.” Before waiting for my reply, Cleo hung up the phone.

I swallowed hard as I lowered the phone. Looking down at my clothes, I realized I needed to change.

Hustling inside, I ran to the guest room where my suitcase was sprawled open on the floor. A volcano of clothes spilled out onto the hardwood.

The loose, green sweatpants I already had on might be okay for a short hike but my shirt was an old, boxy t-shirt from college; one I’d picked up from a club fair for free and never tossed.

I hunted for a sports bra, still zipped away with the rest of my delicates. I’d been

wearing boxers for weeks, not bothering to wear any of the sexier panties I had in my suitcase.

I pulled out the black bra and slipped it on. Looking in the mirror, I shrugged. It was kind of a shame I couldn't just wear this because I looked kind of good. The sweatpants were casual but showed off my ass and the sports bra was sporty but would give Cleo a peek.

But that wasn't what this was about. This was about making things right, with Cleo and my career.

Shaking the thought, I grabbed a flannel and buttoned it halfway up. I don't need to be a prude.

Once I was dressed, I grabbed my car keys and headed for the kitchen. I took a water bottle from the fridge on my way to the front door, locking it behind me.

In my car, I rolled down the windows and tossed my hair up into a bun. It wasn't a long drive to Bear Mountain but if I knew anything about Cleo, they would be early and annoyed if I was on time.

I started the car and made my way out of New Winford's small suburbs and into the mountain. My Benz, although nice, was not built for the curvy, steep roads of the ridge. But she made it up anyway.

The sun was streaming in through my windows, making it impossible to notice just how lovely of a day it was.

By the time I was turning down the gravel path toward the Bear Mountain parking lot, I was about fifteen minutes early. As the nearly empty lot came into view, I spotted an older Corolla with a familiar figure leaning against its hood.

My throat tightened at the sight of Cleo. They were in most ways entirely the same. But looking at them from this distance, I could see their age. When I blinked, I could see the years passing before me. They turned from a twenty-three-year-old still figuring it out into a grown adult with a path forward.

I felt my chest tighten at the loss. But I shook off the feeling as I parked next to their car.

As soon as I turned off the ignition and hopped out, Cleo rolled their eyes. “When did you become punctual?”

Before I could think about the words, I quipped, “When I realized you thought it was a competition.”

I rounded the back of my car, standing just a few feet from them now. We both stood there, frozen. A part of me wanted to hug them, to wrap my arms around their body and feel their warmth. Another – maybe larger – part knew that I couldn’t ever do that again if I ever wanted to leave New Winford and go back to my career.

“Ready?” Cleo asked as they swallowed their nerves.

With a nod, I walked toward the trailhead where a rusted gate stopped cars and ATVs from driving down the dirt path.

I buried my hands in my pockets as we walked in silence. A gentle breeze blew through the trees, the change to fall really beginning to set in now. A part of me thought the quiet between us should have felt more strange.

But there was a warmth in it that I had forgotten about.

Clearing my throat, I killed it. “So, what’s new?”

Cleo rolled their eyes, trying not to laugh at my timing.

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Were they thinking the same thing I was?

“Like you care.”

I whipped my head around to glare at them. “What is that supposed to mean? Of course, I care.”

Scoffing, Cleo crossed their arms. I watched the lean muscle of their arms tense as they tried to keep to themselves. Despite having quit pro softball nearly a decade ago, they were still in amazing shape. Clearly, the rec league was far more serious than I had anticipated.

They took a minute to dial back their attitude. “I just assumed this was about you.” Meeting my eyes, Cleo bit the inside of their cheek.

“I mean part of it is.” I let my right hand leave my pocket to rub the back of my neck. “But we were best friends before...”

“Right.” Cleo nodded.

The same silence took back over the forest as we trekked uphill, toward the cliffside. This time, it wasn’t nearly as comfortable. Instead, all of the unspoken endings lingered in the air like a leaf that refused to fall.

Making their own attempt to squish the awkwardness, Cleo shrugged. “So what is this plan of yours? You went on a crazy bender for two years post-injury and suddenly, you’re ready to get back out there?”



“Something like that.” I took my other hand out of my pockets, wiping the clammy sweat onto my sweatpants.

The trees started to thin out as the path turned into large, flat rocks.

I shrugged. “I got tired of living in a pit of despair. And the last time I felt like I had direction was here.” Hesitating, I swallowed the lump in my throat. “With you.”

Maybe it was just the hike, but Cleo’s chest rose and fell rapidly. “Because I was such a good co-star and coach?”

“Right.” I put my head down as I watched my step.

Before I could say anything else, the tree line stopped completely and opened instead to a stone clearing that overlooked a steep cliffside and a sprawling valley.

“Wow,” I muttered, awestruck by the view.

Raising an eyebrow at me, Cleo laughed. “It’s been that long since you’ve seen a view like this? I assumed you’d done plenty of traveling as a pro.”

My shoulders dropped as I looked out. “I saw the inside of more luxury hotels than stunning views.” Peeking over at them, I tried to pretend like I was taking in the sights. But really, I just wanted an excuse to take them in.

I didn’t get a good look at them when I was chasing them down in the store. But here, the warm sun lit up their face. The slightly yellow leaves cast a gorgeous golden hue through their deep brown hair.

In light like this, it was obvious that their hair wasn’t black. But the dark locks looked almost jet black in any other lighting.

“Luxury hotels sound nice.” Their voice shook me from my trance, forcing me back to my aching body. The cold wind sent an ache through my shoulder.

Looking away, I walked a few feet from the cliff's edge. As I approached the steep drop, my chest tightened.

Cleo watched from a few feet away. “You know, if I do this, I’m not going to take it easy on you.”

A smirk took over my face as I met their green eyes. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“And you know that it isn’t going to just be about the practices right?”

My forehead wrinkled, my stomach dropping into my ass. “What do you mean?”

15

CLEO

I rolled my eyes. “Your shoulder isn’t the only problem with your game.”

“Yeah, right.” She quipped, immediately annoyed.

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Walking closer to the edge of the Bear Mountain cliffside, I peeked down. “So you don’t want my help?”

As I walked past her, I felt her eyes exploring me. Down from deep brown hair to my legs, clad in tight leggings. She lingered on me, in a way that I hadn’t felt in years. My chest tightened under her gaze. A part of me had craved her like that.

Lifting a finger, Cat shook her head. “Not what I said. Explain yourself.”

I didn’t need to think about my answer – there was no point protecting her feelings at this point. “You’re impatient and too focused on what comes next. When an inning is going your way, you start to flop. Your pitches get weaker and more inaccurate because you’re so concerned with keeping up the momentum.”

There was a silence as she thought about it. But she moved closer to the edge of the smooth rock that overlooked the New Winford valley. “So you have watched my games?”

“Only when they’re on in Cricket’s.” I shook my head. It was a lie, but she didn’t need to know that. The last thing I needed was for my ex to know that I’d been following her career for years, that I’d read every tabloid article about potential girlfriends and late nights out.

How embarrassing, to have spent so many years pining after the woman who had ripped my heart out just to end up standing next to her, unable to stop myself from blushing?

Biting my lip, I continued. “You’ve always thought a lot about the future. You’d picked out the best college to be a pro by the time you were twelve. Now, you’re going to have to be right here, right now.”

I turned to meet her green eyes, the yellow flecks in them drawn out by the yellowing leaves behind us.

After a moment, she nodded. “Okay. But I want something in exchange.”

“Are you in a position to bargain?” I laughed.

“Of course I am,” Cat winked as she stepped closer to the edge, even with me now. “You have to start thinking about the future.”

Crossing my arms, I shook my head. “My future is already set. I’m good.”

Cat scoffed. “Bullshit. You’ve always just let the river carry you – let me pull you in the direction I was headed.”

She was right. Even when I knew I didn’t really want to be a professional softball player, I just followed Cat’s lead. She was smart and driven, it was hard to be in her orbit and not know where I was going. So instead, I just let her gravitational pull guide me.

But she knew she’d won when I didn’t fight back. “It’s settled then,” she stepped closer to me. The smell of her swear was carried on the crisp fall air. “We’re going to help each other.”

Just a couple of feet away from each other, my mind started to short-circuit. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be this close to Cat Collins ever again. My blood boiled at how easily she could win me over again.

Shaking myself out of it, I steeled myself. I'm not falling for that charming swagger again.

Instead, I turned on my heels, leaving Cat and the view behind me. "Tomorrow morning at Vanderkill Park, 6 am. We'll start then."

I knew Cat's jaw had dropped. "Are you kidding?"

Looking over my shoulder, I chuckled. "Do I look like I'm kidding?" Sure enough, her mouth was gaping open with shock. But that's why she hunted me down, she knew I wouldn't let her get away with slacking. Not now, not after everything she'd put me through.

It was typical for Cat to assume that everyone would do things her way. That was exactly why our relationship stopped working, it became the Cat Collins show. And there was no room for me.

Cat's vision for her life was crystal clear. And mine... well mine was still a bit cloudy. More like driving without a glasses prescription than an all-knowing oracle.

But more than anything, I knew I needed to get her out of this small town as quickly as possible. The longer she was here, the worse the longing brewing in my chest would grow. And I couldn't afford to risk my heart in Cat's hands ever again.

16

CAT

By the time I was pulling into the driveway of my brother's house, the sun had completely set over New Winford.

As I parked my car, out of the way of Dan's and Meredith's, I watched silhouetted figures move inside. The warm glow of the living room lights illuminated a cozy home, full of games and joy.

I bit the inside of my cheek as I watched them. Of course, I knew I could have had this life if I'd wanted it. But it wasn't in the plan. I was destined to be on the field, kicking up sand with my cleats and winning championships.

I shook the feeling as I hopped out of the car and walked inside. "I'm back," I called through the house as I shut the front door.

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“Dinner’s just about ready!” Dan hollered back from the kitchen.

When I appeared at the threshold, the kids looked up from their homework and waved. “Hi, Aunt Cat.”

“Hey, kiddos.” I smiled at them as they went back to their workbooks. Looking around the counters, I turned my attention to Daniel who was wiping sweat from his brow. “Need any help?”

He scoffed as he looked up from the pan full of steaming risotto on the stove. “Very typical of you to walk in as I’m finishing and ask to help.”

Frowning at him, I took a seat at the table next to my niece and nephew. “How was your day?”

“Hectic. The mayor doesn’t want to approve any more housing but we need it pretty badly.” Dan groaned as he pulled five plates from the cupboard.

Laughing I picked at the skin near my fingernails. “Yikes. I guess you can thank Zoey and Jamie for that one.”

Before I knew it, Dan was delivering plates of steaming food to the table and setting them in front of us. Just as everyone took their seat, the front door swung open and Meredith’s voice called from the entryway. “Sorry, I’m late!”

Dan stood from his chair and grabbed her plate from the microwave. In a hurry, Meredith tossed off the light jacket she had on for the chilly evening. She walked

around the table and gave Lily and Jacob each a kiss on the head.

Placing a ceramic plate in the empty table setting, Dan kissed his wife on the cheek. “Hi, honey.”

“Hi, thank you.” Meredith sighed as she leaned back into the chair.

It was easy to see how exhausted she was. But as Dan poured her a glass of red wine, she sat up and tried to be in the moment with her family.

Dan held the bottle up. “Want any, Cat?”

My throat tightened. It had been a week since I’d had a drink and a part of me wondered what harm one glass would do. But I shook the thought, knowing Cat would be expecting me first thing in the morning.

“No, thanks.” I reached for my glass of water as everyone dug into their food. Looking over at Meredith, I smiled. “How was your day?”

She sighed, both relieved someone asked and dreading answering. “Not bad. I’m still adjusting to being back in an office. And the commute.”

Nodding, I blew a raspberry with my lips. “No kidding, the drive down to the city is no joke.”

Daniel had mentioned that Meredith went back to work at her law firm when I first got back to New Winford. Money had been a little tight and she missed having something outside of the kids to focus on.

I took a bite of food as the table’s conversation moved on to the kids’s days. The risotto melted on my tongue, the warm rice exploding with flavor. I couldn’t stop



myself from shaking my head at the delicious food.

“How was yours?” Daniel eventually turned his attention back to me.

With a mouth full of food, I hesitated. After I’d swallowed my bite, I answered, “Weird. I went on a hike with Cleo today.”

“Fontaine?” Dan nearly choked.

Wrinkling my forehead, I laughed. “Yeah, how many Cleos do you know?”

Daniel shook his head. “Just the one.”

In an attempt to not be too invasive, Meredith looked up from her food. “How did that come about?”

“Honestly?” I asked, waiting for their nods before I continued, “The last time I felt like my career was on track, was when I was playing with them.”

Dan pursed his lips as he considered it. I could tell that he was playing through my highlight reel in his mind. Of course, I knew it was true. I’d been replaying that film in my head every day for at least the last five years.

Sighing, Dan took a sip of his wine. “What did they think about that?”

“They agreed to help me train.” With a shrug, I went back to my plate. “But I have a feeling they only said yes to get me out of New Winford as quickly as possible.”

Meredith nodded. “But that’s what you want anyway, right?”

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The words pierced my chest. I knew she hadn't meant it to feel so cold, but it was hard to hear that my motives would be so transparent. The worst part was, she wasn't even wrong. That was why I asked for Cleo's help.

But now, I wasn't sure what I wanted. Being away from the paparazzi and the pressure was a relief, I felt like I was actually breathing for the first time in a decade.

Shaking my head, I filled my fork with food. "Yeah, I want to get back on the field."

Dinner finished pretty quickly, Lily and Jacob had excused themselves to get ready for bed while I cleaned up the kitchen. After the days Meredith and Dan had, I wasn't about to let them wash dishes.

By the time I was closing the door to the guest room for bed, I was exhausted. Between the emotional exhaustion of seeing my ex and the physical exertion of a hike, my body was begging to fall into the plus duvet draped across the queen bed.

I pulled off my flannel, the sleeves damp from the sink, and let my sweats drop to the floor.

It was already 11 pm and I had to be at the field just seven hours later.

Deciding it was easier to get ready now than in the pitch black of a weekday morning, I went over to my suitcase and opened it. Inside, a pile of dirty clothes spilled over the edges.

I dug my hand through the fabrics, hunting for my sports bra, an old t-shirt, and some

of the pristine, white polyester pants. Once I had grabbed all three items, I tossed them on the small, wicker bench at the foot of my bed.

There was one last thing I needed as I leaned down and pulled the stuffed duffel bag off the floor.

I shoved my hand inside, a part of me nervous to even look at it as my hand met the familiar leather. Tugging the new glove out, a part of me wanted to throw it down like a hot pan. But I had to get used to handling it again.

So instead, I sat down on the mattress and took in a deep breath. I cracked the glove open with both hands, trying to stretch out the leather. It was still stiff. It was sent to me a year after my injury, hoping to come back to the field with some new, flashy gear to distract from my slowing pitch.

But the team didn't take me back.

It collected dust in my closet while I pretended not to see it.

After a moment of breaking it in, I tossed it down to the pile of clothes on the bench. Hopefully, it would serve me well in this new phase of my life.

Leaning back into the pile of pillows, I tried to steady my heart rate. I couldn't tell if I was more nervous to try and play softball again or to be alone with Cleo again.

I stared up at the ceiling for a minute, turning out the light as I thought about their face. They had aged but somehow looked exactly as I expected them to. And underneath the slight wrinkles and the few grays starting to bleed into their dark brown hair was the same Cleo I'd fallen in love with.

Shaking my head, I closed my eyes as I tried to erase their face from my mind.

That wasn't what I was here for. I was here to play the field and get back to my life. A life Cleo couldn't be a part of anymore.

I had never wanted to be blinded by the morning sun more than when I woke up to the blaring alarm near my face and a pitch-black sky.

Rolling over, I slammed my finger down on the "stop" button and peeled myself off the pillow. My eyelids dared me to fall back asleep, like they had thirty-pound weights attached to each eyelash.

Get the fuck up.

But my brain wasn't listening.

Cleo is waiting.

It was a desperate attempt... that worked. My eyes jolted open as I sat up in one swift motion. I forced my feet onto the cold hardwood outside the bed as I stood from the mattress.

Blinking away the sleep, I threw on my sports bra and old shirt. If the bra hadn't been so tight and rigid, I would've been too comforted by the warmth of the too-small t-shirt to stay awake.

I grabbed my phone from the nightstand after I pulled up my white softball pants.

Coffee. Need coffee.

Shoving the hunk of metal into my pockets, I grabbed my equipment bag from the closet and tossed the new glove inside.

As the guest room door swung open, Dan zipped down the hall toward the kitchen. “Morning, killer.” Looking down at my shining-white pants, he laughed. “Haven’t seen you in those in a while.”

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Rolling my eyes, I reluctantly followed him down the hallway. He led the way to the massive carafe of coffee that was freshly brewed on the machine.

When I rounded the corner to the kitchen, the pot of brown elixir felt like finding the holy grail. I poured myself a cup into a to-go mug and pulled out my phone. There were a few unanswered texts. Most of them were from unsaved numbers who I didn't care to respond to. But one was from my agent:

Call me when you're free. Want an update.

I tapped my finger against the cup of coffee, unsure if Tommy would appreciate the wake-up call. But I'd known her a long time and I think she'd earned a little bit of punking. So I clicked her contact name and clicked "call."

After a few rings, Tommy's groggy, panicked voice sounded. "What's happening, doctor?"

"What?" My forehead wrinkled at the question. Was she still asleep?

"Shit, sorry." There was shuffling on Tommy's end of the phone and I couldn't quite tell if the apology was directed toward me or whoever was keeping her company. "I just figured if I got a call from you before six in the morning, it was probably an ER doctor looking for someone to inform."

I rubbed my forehead. "Ouch."

"Yeah, sorry. What's up?"

Clearing my throat, I shrugged. "I just wanted to give you that update. I'm back in New Winford and I'm heading out to practice right now."

Tommy's voice grew concerned. "With who? Your brother?"

"No," I hesitated to be honest. "My ex?"

"Oh, dear god." Tommy buried her head in her hands. "Why do you insist on causing me so much trouble?"

As I headed for the door, I waved goodbye to Daniel before leaving the house. I did my best to shut the door quietly but it was already nearing six which meant I was going to be late no matter what. But I knew Cleo would find a way to hold every minute against me.

Walking to my car, I shrugged. "It's not trouble. Cleo Fontaine had what it took to go pro. They just didn't want to."

"I remember the name from your college days." Tommy groaned. From the sounds of it, she was pouring her coffee as I ducked into my Benz.

"I was at my best when we played together. They know my game better than anyone." I started my car and set the mug of coffee in the cupholder as I tried again to convince myself this was a good idea.

Through the phone, Tommy sighed. "Look, I have no choice but to trust you right now. But if this doesn't work..."

"I know, I'm done." Before I hung up the phone, I pointed out, "But hey, one week with no bad press is an improvement."

With a light chuckle, Tommy said goodbye. “Don’t call me before 8 am unless you’re on a stretcher, got it?”

“Heard.” I hung up the phone and drove my car out of the driveway.

One thing was clear, it was going to be up to me to prove that this plan would work; that investing my entire future back in the one person from my past who had every reason to sabotage me was a good idea.

High risk, high reward... right?

17

CLEO

I knew she couldn’t be trusted.

The thought repeated in my mind on an endless loop with every passing second. Looking down at my phone as the cold, metal bleacher dug into my ass, I shook my head.

Fifteen minutes late. Bitch.

At this point, the fall dew collecting on the stands had been absorbed by my workout leggings. I was tired, pissed, and cool. God help whoever found me in this state.

From behind me, a car door slammed and her grating voice sounded. “I know, I’m sorry.” It was like she’d read my mind, somehow still buried deep into my psyche.



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Standing up, I wasn't ready to take her shit. "I don't want to hear it, Cat. I had like one rule."

"Not true, you had a few actually." Cat raised her hands in surrender as she intercepted my eyeline. "Come on, it was fifteen minutes."

I rolled my eyes. "Do you don't think I have a use for that time? You think the best thing I have to do with my day is show up at this run-down field and help your ass?"

Shoulders dropping, Car chuckled. "God. I forgot you weren't a morning person."

That stupid fucking smile. It had gotten me into so much trouble over the last two decades, long before we ever fell in love... and clearly long after we fell out of it. But I clenched my jaw, determined not to give in this time.

"Look, we're both already here. Think of this as a way to get revenge." She was starting to plead, desperate for my help. I would've been lying if I'd pretended I didn't like her like that – so in need of me that she had no choice but to come off of that high horse.

Eventually, I rolled my eyes. "Fine. Drop your bags, I want fifteen line drills. One for every minute."

A stupid smirk took over her face. Underneath, a slight dread lingered. Nonetheless, like a well-trained player, Cat dropped her bags on the bleachers and headed for the field. She stretched her long arms as jogged toward home plate where an orange cone marked her starting point.

Even from the bleachers, I could see Cat's injury. She was tentative as she lightly pulled her right arm across her chest – wanting to warm up the muscles without straining them too far.

A sudden tightness hit my chest. It was strange to see her like that. She wasn't a teenager anymore. Hell, she wasn't even a young adult. Instead, Cat Collins was an aging professional athlete, struggling to hold on to her career.

Once the weight of what she'd asked me to help her with set in, I walked out onto the field and hollered. "Faster. You've got two years to make up for."

Shaking her head, Cat laughed as she started to wheeze on her tenth round running between home plate and first base.

I used each run to assess another part of her figure. She was still in good shape, despite spending the last couple of years partying. But her endurance had dropped significantly as had her accuracy.

There was a lot of work ahead. But if she could manage to show up on time, we might be able to make this work. By the time she was running her last lap, I could hear Cat's wheezing from the fence line.

Once she crossed the dirty white, rubber home base for the last time, I nodded. "You can do better."

Keeled over, Cat shot daggers into my eyes. "I didn't see you doing this shit."

"I wasn't late." I winked. "Okay, get on the pitcher's mound."

Cat's forehead wrinkled. "Why?"

Rolling my eyes, I sighed. “Catherine, you’re a pitcher. So get to pitching.”

As she shook her head, she crossed the distance between us and faced me. Sweat dripped down her face despite the chilly morning air. “That’s how I got injured.” It was obvious using her full name bothered her.

Good to know for later.

“Correct. And I need to see how bad.” I stared her down, unrelenting on my point. At this stage, she needed to know I wouldn’t be bullied into doing this half-assed.

Cat’s chest heaved as she still tried to catch her breath. “Fucking fine.” Grabbing her glove from her bag, she stormed over to the pitcher’s mound. As soon as Cat’s foot met the rubber at the top of the sand, her body tensed.

I could only assume that she was being put right back into the day of her injury.

Shaking my head, I tried to erase the sound of her yelp from my mind. I’d watched the clip online once I heard. But it was so much worse than I could have imagined. A crack released from her right shoulder as the ball launched from her hand toward home plate.

But no one would pay attention to where the ball landed, only to the screaming pitcher keeled over herself at the center of the field.

Standing before me now, Cat sighed. “Are you serious?”

A part of me worried I was just torturing her, not thinking about what could happen to her arm if I was reckless. But I nodded. “Yes, Catherine. I need to see where your form’s at.” Biting the inside of my cheek, I continued, “Don’t go too hard. We’re looking for form, not a strike.”

Cat's jaw clenched as she thought about the instructions. I'd never known her to take it easy.

But as she got into position, I took my spot behind home plate. Bending down, I crouched in place. My feet dug into the sand as I put my weight on my heels, holding my glove up in front of my face.

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Maybe it was a mistake to not wear a face guard while catching the throw of a professional softball player who also had a decent reason to throw a ball directly into my face. But I was willing to bet I could still handle whatever Cat was dishing out.

“Ready?” I called out, sensing Cat’s procrastination.

Cat looked up from her feet as she nodded back to me.

From here, it almost looked like there was a sadness on her face, something that my cue had triggered.

But I tried to focus, knowing I needed to pay attention.

Keeping my eye on the ball, I watched Cat bring her hands together near her chest. When she was ready, the ball moved into her right palm as her gloved hand dropped toward the center. Rocking on her heels, Cat lifted the neon ball over her head and wound it in a windmill.

As her right hand rocketed forward from her hip, she stepped toward me with her left foot while dragging her right behind her.

“Fuck.” She winced as the ball released from her grip.

I lifted my head as a flash of yellow flew into the chain link fence. Yikes.

Shaking her head, Cat grumbled. “Sorry.”

I jogged to the softball and tossed it back to her. “You’re good. Deep breaths.”

“Yep.” She was already frustrated.

On the next pitch, I watched her arm specifically. I hoped that after a few throws, I’d be able to pinpoint where her problem area was.

As she stepped back to the rubber and performed the same pitch, I noticed a glaring error. Instead of her arm going all the way above her head during the wind-up, it was coming far out from her body.

She’s trying to avoid pulling the same muscle.

The ball clattered against the fence as it landed far off its mark again.

“Goddamnit.” Cat threw her hands up in surrender as she turned away from home plate, facing the outfield instead.

Rather than hunt down the ball, I crossed the grass between home and the pitcher’s mound. The sun had risen higher in the sky, its warm rays evaporating the dew that had covered the field just a half hour earlier.

When I got closer, I reached out a hand to Cat’s shoulder. Gently, I placed my palm flat on her right side. She flinched slightly at the touch, crossing her arms slightly.

“It’s okay.” I used a light pressure to turn her around.

Looking at me, Cat shook her head. “Sorry. I just thought it would give out.”

“Did it?” I tried to intercept her gaze as she stared down at the ground.

“No.” Cat’s jaw clenched.

For a moment, I looked around the field. With a shrug, I let my hand drop from her shoulder to her bicep. “You need to breathe. We’re just practicing, okay?”

Cat nodded. “I know.”

“The more you get caught up in thinking about getting hurt, the more likely you are to actually hurt yourself.” That seemed to be enough for her to lift her deep green eyes to mine. I felt my throat tighten under her gaze, her arm flexing under my palm.

Her jaw muscles flexed quickly. “I hate this glove.”

Chuckling, I nodded. “It’s too stiff.”

“Yep.” A smile took over her face.

“Let’s go again, but this time, just be loose. It’s just a game of catch between old friends.” I winked as I let my hand fall from her arm, knowing it was too dangerous to touch her any longer.

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Without waiting for her answer, I went back to the plate and got into position.

But from the mound, Cat bit her lip. “Is that all we are? Old friends?”

I was glad she was so far away as a blush took over my face. Of course we were more. “Friends” didn’t even scratch the surface of the history playing out on this ball field.

“That would depend on how the next throw goes.” I quipped, trying to draw us back to the moment.

“Bet.” Cat smiled as she drew her hands to her chest, preparing her pitch.

In one fluid motion, Cat’s arm wound the ball over her head and down toward her hip in an even windmill. Before I knew it, the ball was flying toward my head.

Lifting my glove, the ball made a loudsmack as it met the leather. A cloud of dust rose in front of my face, the familiar feeling of catching one of Cat’s perfect strikes rushing back to my body.

Cat smirked as she held up her glove. “How was that?”

With a nod, I tossed it back to her. “Getting there.”



Being back on the field was a mixed bag. But being back on the field with Cleo felt like a dream.

By the time we were walking back to our cars, we were back to teasing each other like the old days. It was familiar but somehow entirely uncharted territory.

“All I’m saying is, I’m not the only one whose form is off. Those rec women are letting you get away with murder.” I raised my hands in surrender.

Rolling their eyes, Cleo shoved my shoulder. “Yeah, right.”

“Ow!” I hollered as I feigned pain.

“Grow up.” They groaned as we approached the parking lot, the gravel crunching under our cleats.

A silence fell over us as we watched a couple walk into the field with their dog. New Winford was awake now, as stay-at-home parents brought their toddlers to play at the park and retirees strolled through town.

Our cars, parallel but a few feet away, forced us to stop walking forward. Instead, we stood in an awkward standoff, unsure who would decide to turn back to theirs first.

But I cleared my throat as Cleo rocked on their heels. “Sorry again that I was late. I appreciate you coming out to help me.”

They nodded. “Yeah, happy to help. Your pitch was getting cleaner by the end there.” Their hair was slicked back from sweat. Looking at their face, I felt my throat tighten. They’d grown more beautiful since our twenties, light wrinkles freckling their skin.

“That was all you.” I rubbed the back of my neck, my equipment bag rustling as I

moved. I still wasn't sure what exactly had worked about their methods. It may have just been stripping back to basics.

But a part of me knew that it was just having Cleo there.

Cleo shrugged. "Probably. See you next time?" Without waiting for my answer, Cleo turned around and headed toward their Corolla, unlocking the car as they moved.

Watching them for a moment, I felt my stomach flip. I hated watching them walk away. I'd let them do it one too many times.

"Cle," The nickname was out of my mouth before I could stop it.

It stopped them in their tracks, looking over their shoulder. "Yes, Catherine?"

"I forgot that I was so good back then because I was trying to impress you."

My heart pounded harder every millisecond that they didn't answer. I wasn't sure why I'd said it – other than the fact that it was probably true. But a part of me needed them to know that it wasn't just the coaching; it was their presence too. That even now, after all of these years, I still wanted them to be amazed by me.

Chuckling, Cleo opened their car door. "Well, I guess you don't want to show off anymore." They winked at me as they hopped inside the small sedan, and turned on the ignition.

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Frozen in place, I couldn't bring myself to turn toward my Benz. Instead, I watched them pull out of the parking lot and into the street. While watching the road, they waved goodbye and disappeared from view.

I wasn't sure what was getting into me. Other than a lowkey obsession with seeing what they'd been up to. I'd never questioned whether or not our breakup was the right call. But spending time with them, like this, like we had when we first fell for each other...

I shook my head. I knew what I was here for. I needed to get back to my team, to my career.

And Cleo was a means to that end. I wouldn't let them be anything more.

"Everyone out!" Daniel hollered as he parked the car.

The sliding of the minivan doors pulled me out of my trance. I hadn't stopped thinking about Cleo since I left the field that day. And I was hoping this outing would help me take my mind off of them for a couple hours.

Lily and Jacob tumbled out onto the asphalt parking lot, Meredith hopping out after them from the passenger's seat.

I stepped out into the bright afternoon sun and bustling noise of the New Winford Farmer's Market. At the edge of the festivities, the parking lot was relatively quiet compared to the chaos that awaited us on Main Street.

Daniel gave my pack a bat as he locked the car with his key fob and walked ahead to hold his daughter's hand. He'd been desperately trying to pull information out of me since Cleo and I practiced together. But I hadn't relented.

After all, I wasn't exactly sure what there was to tell. We had a decent time. I had a lot of work to do. And I was obviously still attracted to them despite how terrible our last few months together had been.

As I walked on Main Street, a flood of pedestrians and shoppers pushed against me as they made their way back to the parking lot. Once I broke through the bottleneck, the market opened up to the wider street where dozens of vendors stood under a rainbow of tent colors.

Lily and Jacob had already stopped in front of the goat cheese stand where the farmer had brought two of his calmest goats to entertain the kids.

It was wildly overwhelming and a welcome reminder that New Winford was still the quaint small town I remembered from being a kid. Even if the farmer's market was more crowded now.

As I moved down the street, peeking into each stand, I tried to find something worth stopping for. But I wasn't doing much cooking these days and I didn't really have anywhere to put any trinkets that looked cool.

Eventually, I stopped in front of a bakery tent. The display case, conveniently on wheels, was full of fresh loaves of bread, pastries, and sweet treats. Eyeing the tightly wrapped brownies, I smiled at the woman manning the tent.

"How are you, sweetie?" She asked, a gentle smile returning mine.

I nodded. "Good, thanks. These look amazing."

Waving me off, she shrugged. “Fresh-baked this morning. Let me know if you need help finding anything.”

“I’m going to have to come back for sure. This is all amazing.” I shook my head as I took one last look at each item before turning back to the street and marching along.

A cool breeze passed down the center of the street where the crowd parted slightly. Fall was starting to take hold, the leaves sounding more crisp by the day. For a moment, I slowed my pace and lifted my face toward the sun.

Just be here. I took in a breath, trying to feel the warmth on my face. It wouldn't last forever. Soon it would be too cold to really take it in.

I shook my head. That’s a later problem. One more time.

Closing my eyes, I let the fresh air fill my lungs. The sound of giggling kids and market bartering filled my ears. But underneath all of that was the rustle of tree branches brushing together.

My cheeks warmed as the sun kissed them lightly and a hint of apple cider donuts hit my nose. Just as my shoulders began to drop, a familiar voice whispered into my ears. “How does that feel?”

A smile crept onto my face.

19

CLEO

“Like being right in this moment.” She smiled as she slowly let her eyes open, lowering them to mine.

I wasn't sure I'd ever seen Cat Collins so relaxed, but even then a layer of tension rested on her heavy, broad shoulders.

"Hi, stranger." I waved as I took a small step back. Looking her up and down, I couldn't help but notice how the tight waffle-knit shirt hugged her muscular arms.

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Cat licked her lips, coming back to the Farmer's Market. "Small world." Her eyes drifted down my body, over the loose tunic shirt that hid my figure from her. But I wanted to believe that she could still picture what was underneath.

"Small town," I quipped back.

Drifting down to my hands, Cat's eyes landed on my netted produce bag. I'd stopped at my usual stand and purchased the ingredients I would need for a comforting chili.

"What are you going to make?" She nodded toward the loaded bag – carrots, onions, and potatoes peeking out.

Lifting the bag up, I looked back at her emerald eyes. "Just some chili. I try to make a big batch of stuff once a week. Then me and my mom swap."

Cat pursed her lips together. "Very endearing. Where's your go-to tent?"

My face lit up at the question, unable to hide my excitement. "Oh, Abi's stand right at the center. It's always reliable. They have a new farm hand who has helped up their game a lot." Pointing over at the red tent just a few yards away, I watched as Abigail rolled her eyes at Savannah, the farm hand I'd mentioned.

She seemed great at managing the ranch, but not the best with people. But that's why Abi was there.

Before she could answer, Cat's attention was drawn to a small child who grabbed on to her leg. "Aunt Cat, can you buy us candy? Mommy and Daddy said no."

My eyes widened at the sight. “Oh my god, is this Lily?”

Nodding, Cat smoothed out the frizzing hair on the top of Lily’s head. “It sure is.”

“Wow, you’ve gotten so big.” I scoffed as I looked at her. It was hard to believe so much time had passed; I still remembered meeting Lily as a newborn in the hospital. Cat had cried holding her for the first time. And as I held her small head in my hand, I pictured having my own kid with Cat.

Things change quickly. I swallowed hard as three more familiar faces appeared.

“Look who it is.” Daniel smiled as he threw open his arms to give me a hug.

Shaking my head, I wrapped my arms around him. “For such a small town, I feel like I haven’t seen you in years.”

Meredith eyed me. “Avoiding us?”

“You’re hard to miss.” I teased as I gave her a hug.

From the corner of my eye, I watched Cat squirm. She shoved her hands deeper into her pockets as she tried to avoid just how odd all of this was. Dan and I had been pretty close back when Cat and I were together. Once Cat was touring the country and going pro, Dan and I were left in New Winford in her magnificent wake.

Looking down at Lily, Cat cleared her throat. “Do you remember Cleo, Lil?”

With a suspicious eye, Lily examined me. A vague recognition washed over her face. “I think so.”

I winked down at her. “It’s okay if you don’t, it’s been a long time since your aunt



and I were together.”

“Feels like yesterday.” Shrugging, Dan reached for Jacob’s hand. “And this is our youngest, Jacob.”

From his dad’s legs, Jacob gave a shy wave as he looked down at his feet.

“Nice to meet you, Jacob.” I waved back, unsure how this interaction would end. A part of me hoped we could live in it forever, that we could stand in the center of Main Street and pretend like the last five years hadn’t happened.

But that would be naive.

Looking at Cat, I knew that I needed to get her out of town as quickly as possible. She was here to get her life back on track and if I’d learned anything over the last decade it was that there was no room for me in it.

20

CAT

“Can we chat for a second?” I looked at Cleo as I nodded my head toward the edges of the market.

Suddenly suspicious of me, Cleo’s eyes flicked from my face to my brother and his family. “Why?”

“I just had an idea for practice.”

Daniel sensed his intrusion. “We’re gonna keep looking, just come find us when you’re done.”

“Cool.” Nodding, I watched them leave and disappear into the crowded street. Although it was more private now, I still craved that feeling of being with Cleo alone on that field. I wanted nothing more than to hunt down that feeling, like we were the only two people left on the planet.

Placing a gentle hand on Cleo’s elbow, I guided us to behind a blue tent down a small alley between the flower shop and the chinese restaurant. “Sorry, I can’t think with that many people around.”

“Right.” Cleo’s forehead wrinkled.

Coming to a stop, I let out a sigh. We stood in silence for a moment as I caught up to myself.

“So practice?”

“Right.” Nodding, I knew they were on to me. But I looked back at the farmer’s market where the local pizzeria was setting out tables for lunch service. My mind flashed back to sitting there with Cleo in high school after practice.

I shook my head and rubbed my temples. “Does everywhere in this town remind you of us?”

With a laugh, Cleo shrugged. “It used to. But I’ve been here without you for a long time. I guess it’s the benefit of not running from it.”

Ouch.

I hadn’t meant to run, I really was busy with training and ad spots. Maybe it was a convenient excuse, to avoid shit like this. Running into my ex at the farmer’s market wasn’t exactly my idea of a good time.

“You held my hand for the first time over there.” I nodded toward the pizza shop, the red outdoor table sending a visceral memory through my body.

Face flushing, Cleo followed my gaze.

“We’d finished practice and were getting slices with the other girls. You put your hand on my knee under the table.” My throat tightened as the sensation came back to me, their warm palm against the bare skin of my rough knee.

Cleo bit their lip. “I didn’t even know I was gay, I just wanted to be closer to you.”

Turning to look at her, I swallowed hard. We were only a foot away now, our breaths intertwining as they left our noses. “Do you still want to be close to me?”

“I don’t know.” Cleo’s blue eyes pierced mine, a pain hiding in them that I’d never seen.

I took my cue and took a step back. “Yeah, that’s fair.” With my hand, I massaged the back of my neck as a sudden tension rose through the tight muscles.

But I felt a hand clasp around my wrist, turning me around and pulling me closer. My heart raced in my chest as I looked at Cleo.

Their eyes flicked between my eyes and my lips, their own chest rising and falling faster than I'd ever seen. "I hate how badly I've wanted to do this." They groaned as they pulled me closer, letting their lips press against mine.

Stunned for a moment, I froze until I remembered the soft skin of their plush lips. I took in a deep breath and kissed them back. My lips parted as we stood there, our hands pulling the other closer. I gripped their loose jeans by the belt loop and tugged their hips toward mine.

A slight grunt escaped their mouth, traveling into mine, as they kissed me harder. They let their tongue tease my lips, begging mine to join theirs.

But when we pulled apart for just a moment, our eyes met and my chest tightened.

What am I doing?

21

CLEO

"Sorry." I shook my head as I pulled away, my head spinning from the kiss.

I had no idea why I'd done it. Even now, I could feel the pain that Cat had caused deep in my chest. It was the same unrelenting sadness that infected my entire life for years after she left. But here I was, putting my heart on the line again. For what? A hot kiss with my ex?

Cat swallowed and tried to intercept my gaze. "It's okay. I..."

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Before I let her finish, I dropped my grip on her arm and turned back toward the market. “I’ll see you at practice.”

“Cleo, please.” Cat called after me.

But I couldn’t look back. Instead, I pressed into the crowd. With any luck, I would disappear into the fray and not run into any former in-laws.

Why did I do that? I rolled my eyes at myself, falling for Cat’s charm again. I knew what she’d done to me, how she’d hurt me by leaving me in her dust. But I couldn’t stop myself from wanting to be close to her.

With my bag of produce in hand, I headed down Main Street toward my building. From across the market, I caught Dan’s eye. Waving bye to Cat’s brother, I offered a polite smile. Even from this distance, he knew something was off. I was almost certain Cat would get a questionnaire when she got back to the group.

But I broke through the crowd and crossed the wooden barricade back onto the sidewalk.

My heart was still racing when I got to my place, not wanting to open the door. Instead, I pulled out my phone and called Bri. When she picked up, I bit the inside of my cheek. “Can I come over? I need someone to talk to.”

She hesitated for a second, checking something. “Uh yeah, do you mind if Sarah is here?”

“Totally fine, as long as she knows how to keep her mouth shut.” As the words left my lips, I knew there was no shot. Sarah Greenwood was one of the most involved people in town, she knew everything about everyone. And she wasn’t afraid to share if it meant a little matchmaking magic.

Bri chuckled. “I won’t promise that.”

Rolling my eyes, I walked to the parking lot behind my shop and got in my car. “Be there in ten.”

I hung up the phone as I started up the small sedan, unsure what I would even say to my closest friend.

By the time my car was rolling down the rough, gravel driveway of Bri’s mountainside property, I still wasn’t entirely sure what had come over me at the farmer’s market.

With any luck, Bri would help me make sense of it without insisting that I was still in love with my ex. Because I wasn’t. I was just confused.

Shaking the thought, I parked my car next to Sarah’s massive SUV and walked to the side door. I knocked on the wood, trying not to peek through the glass to see where Bri was inside. After a second, I heard footsteps approaching the door.

“Hey. You okay?” Bri asked as she swung open the kitchen door.

Nodding, I sighed. “In some sense of the word, yes.”

We hugged quickly before Bri left me inside and walked me to the living room where a fire raged in the wood stove. A neat stack of ax-chopped wood was piled next to it.

Sitting on the couch, Sarah waved at me. “Hi.” She smiled at me gently, trying to be sensitive to whatever might be going on. I could tell that she was clad in one of Bri’s many flannels as she snuggled under a fleece blanket.

“Hi, Sarah. I see it’s Jason’s weekend?” I looked between her and Bri as my friend found her way to the couch, weaseling under the blanket to cuddle up with Sarah.

With a nod, Sarah patted the empty cushion. “Indeed. Tell us everything.”

“Gross.” I groaned as I tossed myself down on the couch. “I hate talking about my feelings.”

Bri laughed as she wrapped an arm around Sarah’s shoulders. “Just start at the beginning.”

My mouth opened to speak but nothing came out. I wasn’t entirely sure I knew where to start. Ten years ago? A week ago? This morning?

Settling on the Farmer’s Market, I shrugged. “I went to the market today to get my groceries for the week and stumbled upon, guess who?”

“Cat Collins.” Bri and Sarah nodded in unison as they said her name.

“Rude, this is my story.” I rolled my eyes.

Raising her hands in surrender, Bri chuckled. “Sorry, what happened?”

I let out a sigh. “She was standing in the center of Main Street like taking it all in and we started chatting. But then her brother and his family appeared and it was so weird and awkward. Lily is so much bigger now but I like... remember her being born. I wastherein the hospital with all of them.”

Sarah winced. “Yeah, that’s... I’m not one to talk honestly.”



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A laugh filled the room. It wasn't that long ago that Bri had gone to the hospital to see Sarah's sister's newborn. But in all fairness, Zoey and Robin were also Bri's friends so it wasn't all that strange – just a little complicated.

“Yeah but it was so weird. We broke up years ago but it felt like... normal.” I confessed, my chest hurting at the thought. It was hard to believe how much of the Collins family lore I'd missed in just five years of being away.

Bri nodded. “Yeah, it's strange. What happened next?”

Biting my lip, I tried to consider how honest I should be. “Cat came up with some weird excuse to pull me to the side and we walked down the alley across from Pete's Pizza.”

“An alley?” Sarah scoffed at Cat's boldness.

Using air quotes, I pursed my lips. “To talk about practice.”

“What'd she say?” Bri leaned forward, too invested in the drama.

My eyes were caught by the flames licking the glass of the woodstove, instantly sending me back to the warmth of Cat's kiss. “Nothing. She asked if everything in town would ever stop reminding her of me.”

Sarah giggled. “That's pretty smooth.”

This was the part I really didn't want to confess, what came next. I swallowed hard,

trying to avoid telling them. “I told her time helps. And then she started reminiscing about the first time I held her hand at the pizza place.”

“Oh, I remember that. All the softball girls were so scandalized. Our star pitcher and catcher having a fling was a huge deal.” Bri looked up at the ceiling, the rush of memories coming back to her as we talked.

Sarah eyed me. “And then she kissed you, right?”

Damn, she’s good.

“No.” I shook my head, looking away from both of them as the illicit confession spilled from my lips. “I kissed her.”

Bri gawked at me. “Cleo, what? Why?”

Giving her arm a light smack, Sarah glared at Bri. “Because being in the same room as an ex is very difficult. Especially when it was as complicated as y’all’s breakup was.”

It was easy to forget that the vast majority of New Winford was well aware of my breakup with the one and only Cat Collins. No one in town could understand why I had ended things with a professional softball star. From the outside, we seemed to be a picture-perfect couple.

But I shrugged. “I don’t know why. I mean, she’s still gorgeous. And god is she charming...”

“But you know she’s just going to break your heart again.” Bri shook her head.

Tilting her head, Sarah raised her hands. “We don’t know that.”

Bri scoffed. “What the playboy is suddenly ready to settle down? All that asshole ever did was string you along. She didn’t even have the guts to end it with you. She made you do it because she was too cowardly.”

“I don’t think that’s fair.” I swallowed hard.

It was far more complicated than that. I’d gotten my feelings hurt by her success, letting jealousy get the best of me. Not that Cat had been much help in that department and the pictures of her nights out post-game certainly didn’t help while I was back in New Winford and struggling to keep the bookstore open.

Lowering her gaze to mine, Bri nodded. “I know. I just don’t want to see you get caught up in her storm again. She’s selfish and she’s only here as a means to an end. Once she’s all healed up, she’s going to skip out again.”

“Yeah.” I looked to Sarah who offered an optimistic shrug.

I only had a day before our next practice, having set Mondays as our scheduled day. But I needed to use that day to get my head right. Because right now, I couldn’t be trusted in the same room as Cat Collins – not with that charming smile and the good girl act.

I had to be more careful if I had any hope of getting out of this with my heart intact.

22

CAT

I wasn’t sure I’d ever wanted a weekend to end faster.

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But as my Mercedes rolled up to the softball field on Monday morning, I wished I could go back to Sunday. I'd been tortured by my kiss with Cleo since the farmer's market on Saturday, feeling Cleo's lips on mine every time I closed my eyes.

When I got out of my car, I realized they hadn't arrived yet. I made a point to be early this week, not wanting to risk pissing them off again.

So I grabbed my bag and headed over to the field where I stretched and warmed up. By the time Cleo's Corolla was driving into the lot, I was ready to roll.

Watching them walk over to the field, I couldn't stop myself from looking at their body. Their hips swayed with each step, easy to see in the skin-tight leggings that Cleo wore to our practices.

A cold wind blew against my face, cooling off the blush rising in my cheeks. As they got closer, Cleo avoided meeting my gaze.

It surprised me that they might be a little embarrassed about kissing me. And to be fair, I was surprised that they made the first move. I assumed if anything was ever going to happen between us, I would make a fool of myself by trying to make a move on them just to get rejected.

"Hey." I waved.

"Hi. Ready?" Cleo swallowed hard as they walked past me and into the dugout. Tossing their stuff down, Cleo quickly changed into their cleats.

Unsure how to handle myself, I clapped my hands together. “How was the rest of your weekend?”

Their blue eyes flicked up to mine, a raging glare on their face. “Fine, thanks.”

Rolling my eyes, I sighed. “You don’t have to be an ass, ya know? If you didn’t want to kiss me, you can just say it was a mistake and we can move on.”

Without another word, Cleo stood up and walked out onto the field. With each step, they tossed the ball from their right hand into the gloved left hand. A loud thud resounded across the grass with each throw.

“Get your bat.” They called back to me.

Groaning, I slid the metal rod from my bag and walked out to the field. They do not need to be this rude.

“What are we working on, Coach Cleo?”

Cleo looked down at their feet on the pitcher’s mound, rubbing their cleats into the sand. “If your pitching form is that rough, your batting is definitely worse. And we can’t have you relying on a pinch hitter to get back into the league.”

It was a fair point. As much as I’d been a star, I had a lot left to prove. I needed to bring as much value as possible to my team to have any hopes of coming back.

Stepping up to home plate, I squared my feet with the white, irregular pentagon. It was smudged with dirt and skid marks from the rec league playing over the weekend.

“Some animal didn’t even bother to clean up the plate.” I shook my head.

Cleo scoffed. “You’re so fucking spoiled.” As they got into position on the mound, Cleo tried not to smile at my complaint. We used to play together in my backyard, using old pieces of gutters as bases. This was a fair-cry from “out of order”.

Glad I could make them smile, I tried to calm my own as I lifted the bat to my ear.

“Lift your elbow,” Cleo called from across the field.

Doing as I was told, I pulled my elbow higher, a light pull shooting to my shoulder. I winced at the feeling. Even if I knew I wasn’t about to get hurt, my brain was convinced that the same pop hit heard on the field two years ago would happen again.

It was a mental fight to get that voice to quiet.

Trying to steady my breathing, I took in a deep breath through my nose as Cleo wound up the neon yellow softball. It came hurtling toward me as it left their hand. I kept my eye on it as it got closer, trusting my eye to start my swing at the right time.

Pivoting on my back foot, my arms stretched out as my back extended. I heard the metalclink as it made a light contact with the spinning leather. Instead of flying toward Cleo and into the outfield, the ball spun out over my head and landed in the grass behind home plate.

“Fuck.” I groaned.

Cleo shook their head. “Again.”

We kept on like that for a while. Cleo wasn’t ready to let me off the field until I was hitting the vast majority of the balls.

When we finally came off the field, we both changed our shoes in the dugout. After a

moment, Cleo shrugged. “I could tell that you were trying to be more present. Your form was much better.”

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“Thanks.” I smiled as I peeked over at them. Bent over, I untied my cleats. “So, how is the planning for the future coming?”

“Fine.” Cleo swallowed hard, avoiding the question as much as possible. Flustered, they finished taking off their cleats and slipped on their sneakers. “I’ve had this idea for a while and haven’t gotten around to writing anything.”

My jaw dropped as I sat up. “You still write?”

Shaking their head, Cleo groaned. “Didn’t you just hear me say I haven’t written?”

“But like... you still want to?” I watched them closely, knowing they were likely to play it all down. But in reality, Cleo had always been a skilled writer. Back in high school, they would write in an old notebook in the dugout.

“Kind of. I mean the bookstore leaves me with a lot of time just sitting around.” Cleo stood from the rusty old bench and packed up their bag.

Clapping my hands together, I looked up at them. “This is perfect. I want to take you somewhere.”

Wrinkling their forehead, Cleo shook their head. “How can that be true?”

“Well, you’ve been helping me. So, let me help you.” I knew my eyes had lit up far more than I meant them to. But I couldn’t stop myself from getting excited when Cleo was around.



Cleo bit their lip. “When?”

For a moment, I racked my brain for the details. I saw the poster over a month ago but even then, I pictured the two of us there. And now, I needed to make it happen. Pulling out my phone, I checked the date.

“Tonight. I’ll pick you up at 5.” A smile took over my cheeks as I grabbed my packed bag off the bench.

“Seriously?” I could see Cleo’s own smile playing on their lips. “What if I had plans?”

I didn’t mean to let the laugh escape my lungs but when it did, I raised my hands in surrender. “Then you don’t anymore. This is more important.” Not waiting to hear any resistance, I walked out of the dugout and left them in my dust.

Besides, I didn’t have time to waste. I needed to get ready for my date with my ex.

A few hours later, I was dressed and showered. I had texted Dan and Meredith to let them know I’d be out for dinner and headed out of the house just before 5 pm. Before I walked out, I checked my reflection in the full-length mirror by the front door.

The black trousers were tight on my newly muscular thighs. But the matching black belt and button-down look slick. I hoped it would draw at least a little bit of Cleo’s attention. After all, it was their work that got me to look like this again.

I took off to my car, skipping the last two steps of the porch stairs and basically throwing myself into the car. I’d kept my hair down, letting the long locks flow down my shoulders and back.

Starting up the car, I started the short drive over to Cleo’s place. I tried not to get too

in my head as I drove, not wanting to let my nerves get the best of me before I even saw them.

Instead, I blasted the radio until I pulled up outside of Cleo's Shelf. Hopping out of the car, I smoothed out my shirt.

God, I hope this turns out okay.

Walking up to the apartment door, I pressed the buzzer and waited. No answer. I wasn't sure how long I should wait before ringing the bell again. I turned to look down the street, luckily no one was around to see my shame. The sun was just starting to sink in the sky, it would be setting just as we hit the river.

Behind me, the rattle of the old metal door drew my attention.

"Sorry, I was already heading out when you buzzed." Cleo stopped in their tracks as they saw me.

Turning around, my jaw dropped. They looked amazing in a flowing sundress in the perfect autumn orange. "Wow."

Cleo rolled their eyes. "Stop."

But I couldn't. Maybe this wasn't supposed to be a date, but I hadn't seen them dress up like this since we were in our early twenties. Seeing them like this blew my mind.

"Where are you taking me?" Narrowing their eyes, Cleo glared at me.

I offered them my hand as we walked to the car, but they crossed their arms instead. Jogging across the sidewalk, I grabbed the handle of my Mercedes Benz and pulled the door open for her. "After you."

“Thanks.” Cleo slid into the car, tucking their dress under their legs.

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With a nod, I gently closed the door. Hopefully, they'd unwind a little once we hit the road.

I walked in front of the car and took a deep breath before hopping into the driver's seat.

Once the door was shut, Cleo looked over at me. "Seriously, where are we going?"

Putting the car in drive and zipping down Main Street, I smirked. "To the city."

Cleo smacked my arm. "What the fuck?"

23

CLEO

My jaw dropped. "What do you mean the city? That's so far away."

"I promise it's worth it." Cat's charming smile took over her entire face as she turned onto the highway on-ramp.

Shaking my head, I couldn't believe I'd let myself get in the car with my ex. Cat hadn't necessarily earned that trust back. But something about the way she looked at me, was enough for me to ignore every red flag.

Unsure how to handle this surprise, I turned toward the window and watched the scenario change. Cat's phone played a collection of songs, anything from older

alternative rock to current pop.

As I watched the scenario shift from the rural woods of New Winford to the suburbs of the lower Hudson Valley, my mind reopened all of the memories of driving with Cat over the years.

When she first got her license, she took me for a long drive into the mountains to sit in the open trunk and watch the sunset over the valley. But now, I watched the sun sink under the ridgeline as we drove south.

Before I knew it, the suburbs transformed into large apartment complexes and the George Washington Bridge.

Cat navigated the traffic like a pro, one, veiny hand on the wheel as she danced to the music. The orange glow of the sun made her look even more beautiful. As much as I wanted to pretend like she wasn't just as stunning as I remembered, it was undeniable.

We flew down FDR Drive on the East side of Manhattan until Cat pulled off into the East Village.

"Almost there." Cat smiled as she turned down East 3rd Street. Clicking her tongue, Cat pumped her fist. "That's lucky."

A parking spot opened right in front of a shop called Book Club. Cat swooped in and parallel parked in one try. A part of me wasn't surprised, the world seemed to move around Cat Collins like it was expecting her.

Before I could move toward my door, Cat was flying around the car to open my door. Checking for traffic, Cat pulled open the passenger door and gestured for me to stand up. "We're here."

Pulling myself out of the low car and onto the curb, I looked up at the painted signage over the entrance. “What is this?”

“You’ll have to see.” Cat held out her arm one more time, hoping this time the parking luck might just follow her. But until I saw what she had in store, I wasn’t quite ready to give in. I’d already caved and kissed her. She still had plenty to make up for.

Taking the hint, Cat crossed the sidewalk and pulled open the door to Book Club for me. I walked past her and inside the store.

My jaw dropped at what awaited me. A dimly lit bookstore was packed wall to wall with shelves. To the right of the entrance, a wood bar that stretched half the store displayed a selection of wines and coffees.

In the back, rows and rows of chairs were lined up in front of a small microphone stand.

Behind me, Cat moved toward the bar and placed an order.

I walked up to a woman browsing the shelves, holding a copy of Fingersmith in her hands. “Sorry, what event is happening tonight?”

Smiling back at me, the woman looked up from the book. “Oh, the poet Liv Butler is doing a reading from her latest release.”

My forehead wrinkled. There was no way it was a coincidence. “Thanks,” I said as I turned around.

Before I could say anything, Cat handed me a glass of red wine. “You still like Cab, right?” In her other hand, a bottle of non-alcoholic beer glistened.

“Yeah.” I took the glass, barely able to process what was happening. Cat guided me to the back of the store, holding out her hand. Grabbing it, I swallowed hard. Her grip was firm, like she was afraid to lose me in the nonexistent crowd.

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By the time we were taking seats, in the middle row near the edge of the seats, I finally found myself. “How did you know?”

Cat turned to look at me, her deep green eyes holding my gaze. “How could I forget your favorite poet?” Scanning the bar and the bookshelves, Cat nodded. “I came here once or twice over the years. But when I saw they were hosting Liv Butler, I thought of you immediately.”

“Really?” I swallowed. Even all these years later, Cat Collins remembered the woman whose work inspired me since I was a teenager. It felt impossible. And yet, Cat had made it happen.

“Oh, and this is for you.” Cat passed a pristine copy of Butler’s book, *To Die in the Dark*. “There’s a signing at the end.”

Shaking my head, my shoulders dropped. The same desire that drew me to kiss her was creeping back to me now. And her incredibly form-fitting outfit wasn’t helping. The rolled sleeves of her button-down made her forearms look incredibly toned.

Words hadn’t yet formed in my mind when the lights flashed gently and the rest of the crowd settled in their seats. As the other patrons settled, most of them held a glass of wine in their hand.

I took a sip of my wine, knowing I would need it to get through the rest of the night. As I rested the glass on my knee, a woman in plain clothes and a fitted blazer walked up to the mic stand with a gentle wave.



The room erupted in delicate applause, softened by the hundreds of books surrounding us.

Adjusting the microphone, Liz Butler nodded her appreciation. “Thank you all for coming. Here’s a poem called, “In Dishonor of My Dying Mother”.” With a deep breath, Butler began the reading.

With each bar of intricate poetry, my walls started to fall. The seating was tight, so I let myself shift toward Cat. I allowed my leg to press against her trousered thigh. Even through the thick fabric, I felt an electricity shoot through me.

It can’t possibly still feel like this.

But it did, as the poem went on, my comfort only grew. Cat’s body wash mixed with her light sweat and sent an inviting scent into my nose.

When the poem finished, the room clapped gently. “I’ll read one more if that’s okay with you all.”

The audience gave a collective nod as Liz read on. From my periphery, I could feel Cat watching me. It felt like she was absorbing my every reaction, wanting to know how it felt to hear the words.

But after a moment, she turned back to the reading. She wanted to absorb it herself too, so we could discuss it in the car on the way home. Suddenly, a flash of long car rides talking about our English summer reading came back to me. We used to fight about whether *The Great Gatsby* was actually a queer love story. Of course, we were fighting the same point so it was more of an impassioned discussion than a debate.

Looking over at her, I watched her eyes follow Liz’s mouth and the way her hands gesticulated as she spoke. As the final poem drew to a close, Cat’s eyes grew murky.

Tears welled in her eyes just as the final line was read, “And so I am the leaves in the tree.”

Her hand, which had drifted toward my exposed knee, lifted from its spot to clap. Its sudden absence sent a cold jolt to the spot she’d warmed.

As Liz took her place at the signing table, the crowd slowly stood and got into a neat line. These were not the kind of fans who needed to be held off by security.

“What did you think?” Cat leaned down and whispered in my ear.

I sipped my wine. “I have so many thoughts. Probably too many for this line.”

With a smirk, Cat nudged my arm. “Car debrief?”

The line moved fairly quickly and Liz Butler was shockingly nice. She held out my autographed copy and smiled. “Thank you for coming.”

Cat looked at me. “They’re a huge fan. In high school, they used to say you would be the reason they became a writer.”

“Is that right?” Liz beamed up at me. “Well, did you? Become a writer, that is?”

I nervously tucked a blonde strand of wavy hair behind my ear. “Not quite. But I have an idea.”

Turning to Cat, Liz pursed her lips. “Lock her in a room until she writes something, anything.”

With a wink, Cat nodded. “Yes ma’am.” Her subtle country twang came out at the word.

We said our goodbyes and browsed the store for a moment. Every few feet, a new book cover would catch my eye and compel me to pull the novel from the shelf. I did my best to stock new releases but Cleo's Shelf ran mostly on local donations to stock its plentiful shelves.

"God, I dream of being able to stock the store like this," I confessed as we approached the exit, setting my wine glass on the bar and mouthing a thank you to the bartender.

Cat held open the door for me again, a rush of cool fall air smacking into us. "Well, I bet if you wrote something you could use the advance to get some new stock."

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“I doubt it’d be big enough...” I started before I felt her warm hand on my wrist.

“Cleo.” When I turned to look behind me, Cat smirked. “No more practice until you write something.”

Before I could refuse her proposal, a bright white flash stunned me. Dozens more followed behind it, the entire sidewalk lit up by the camera flashes. My face scrunched with confusion. “What the fuck?”

“Shit.” Cat groaned as she put a protective arm over me and hustled me toward the car. In one, unified motion, she threw open the door as I slid inside. As she slammed it behind me, I took a deep breath. The noise of the cameras quieted through the windshield.

But I could hear a muffled paparazzi yelling questions. “Cat, are you coming back next season? Who’s the lucky lady? Give us a smile!”

Without answering, Cat slipped into the driver’s seat and tried to catch her breath. “Let’s get out of here.”

As soon as I nodded, Cat whipped the car out of the parking spot and headed down the block. Once we were sure the paparazzi weren’t following us, Cat pulled off to the side and searched for a nearby spot.

“Sorry about that.” She looked up from her phone. “I didn’t want our night to end like that.”

Our eyes met, the glow of the phone screen lighting each of our faces. I shrugged. “Then let’s not let it end like that.”

Cat’s chest rose and fell rapidly. Her gaze fell to my lips before coming back to my eyes. When I nodded, Cat crossed over the center console and placed her strong hand on my neck, pulling me in. She pressed her lips against mine, gently at first. But with each passing second, a fire grew in both of us.

I let my tongue slip into her mouth, tasting the bitter beer with each kiss. My hand found her leg, resting on it as we pressed into each other. After a moment, a honk from beside us pulled us apart.

“Shit.” Cat waved an apology to the car and pulled out of the spot. “Pizza?”

24

CAT

I took Cleo to my favorite pizza place, standing outside while we ate and talked about the reading.

And now as we pulled off the highway and drove through New Winford, we were still discussing.

“I just think it’s amazing how she can make something so gruesome seem so beautiful.” Cleo stared out the window as they waxed poetic about the reading. It brought a smile to my face, to hear how much they enjoyed it.

As we pulled onto Main Street, Cleo groaned. “Oh, park in the back. The cops are dicks about parking violations.”

Nodding, I turned into the tiny lot and parked next to their Corolla. I put the car in park and turned off the engine. “Let me walk you in.”

This time, Cleo beat me to opening their door and stepped out of the car. They jostled the sun dress in the chilly wind, a light shiver running over them.

As we walked around to the front of the building, I sighed. “I just like listening to people read. I feel like I could just sit there and listen all night, ya know?”

With each step, our bodies swayed closer together. Maybe it was just exhaustion, or maybe it was the magnetic pull I felt to them, but I couldn’t seem to walk straight. And from the looks of it, neither could they.

“I do.” Cleo bit their lip as we rounded the corner to the front of their building.

The bookstore’s lights were out, but upstairs a single lamp lit up the windows.

Pointing upstairs, Cleo giggled. “This is me.”

“Very funny.” I nudged their arm.

A silence passed over us as we looked into each other’s eyes. My mind flashed back to the kiss in my car, the way their lips felt so warm and familiar. I could’ve stayed in that moment for the rest of my life.

Cleo sighed. “Thank you. Really. I don’t think I’ve ever been on a date like that.”

“A date?” I tried –unsuccessfully – to stop the blush from rising to my cheeks.

Taking in some of the October air, Cleo shrugged. “I don’t know what else you’d call it.”

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It was still odd, to realize Cleo had been on other dates. In the last five years, they'd been with other people, saw what else was out there, and still hadn't found what they were looking for. Maybe it was fucked-up, but I was so thrilled they hadn't.

I buried my hands in my pockets, not trusting them to be loose. "You're welcome, thanks for trusting me." Looking up at the apartment, I clicked my tongue. "Well, I guess this is goodnight."

As I turned to leave, Cleo grabbed my wrist and turned me to face them. "I actually have a book upstairs that I want to show you."

My cheeks lifted with a goofy smile, I knew it wasn't my sexiest smile but I doubted Cleo minded. "I'd love to see it."

Pulling my hand out of my pocket, Cleo laced their fingers in mine and led me to the metal door which they unlocked and pushed open. Inside, was a small, tiled vestibule that led to a steep staircase.

Despite Cleo's being the only unit in the building, they still left their upstairs door closed. And when they led me up the steps to the landing outside of their door, I realized they also kept it locked.

Laughing, I watched them move. "You know this is one of the safest towns in the country, right?"

"Maybe it's so safe because we all lock our doors." Cleo quipped as the latch on the door flipped.

As they pressed it open, I leaned over their shoulder and whispered. “You know just as well as I do that no one around here locks shit.” It was a running joke between us as teens, to see how many houses we could get into just by turning the knob. It was always followed by profuse apologies and claims that we thought this was one of our friends’s houses.

But now, as Cleo pushed open the door, I wished I could just walk in. The warmth of their decor was unavoidable. Warm tones filled the space, along with dozens of house plants and shelf after shelf of packed bookcases.

“Wow.” I looked around the whole place as I stepped inside.

Closing the door behind me, Cleo shrugged. “You like it?”

All I could do was nod. “It’s great. It’s very Cleo.” I smiled as I looked at the prints, a combination of sketched nudes and illustrated cats.

From the corner of the room, a tabby cat meowed from the top perch of his cat tree.

“Oh, that’s Finn. He’s my bestie.” Cleo winked as they summoned Finn with some tongue-clicking.

I chuckled. “He looks like a good best friend.” Allowing me to give him some pets, Finn rubbed against me after greeting his owner.

Eventually, he got bored of us and headed back to his bed. Cleo turned to me, “Do you need a coffee or anything?”

“No, but I do want to see that book.” I grinned at them. We both knew it was a ploy but I knew it was too hard for either of us to admit that we wanted to be in the same bed again. Our breakup hadn’t been pleasant.



So instead, Cleo came up with an intricate lie to get me up to their apartment.

“Right, it’s this way.” Cleo nodded as they led me down a short hallway toward their bedroom. The room opened up to tall ceilings and what I could only assume were bright, large windows in the daytime.

Looking around the room, I didn’t see any bookshelves. “Did you invent invisible shelves in the last five years?” I teased them as they bit their lip.

“Maybe.” They stepped closer to me, closing the distance between us. Even though we’d kissed twice in one week, I still felt like touching them was risky. I knew a rejection could be right around the corner.

Maybe this was all an elaborate ruse to embarrass an ex.

But looking into their blue eyes, I knew it wasn’t. Cleo wouldn’t have risked their own heart for me, for this, if they didn’t think there was a chance it could actually work. We were both too fragile for those kinds of games.

Cleo put a hand on my hip. “Is that okay?” When I nodded, they wrapped their arms around me and pulled me into a tight hug.

Sighing, I let my arms drape over their shoulders as I squeezed them closer. I felt my skin warming the cold spots on their arms, where the cold air had chilled.

As I held them, I breathed in their scent. It was something like dried flowers and old books. I wasn’t sure I’d ever felt anything more comforting than that. We stood pressed together like that for a long minute before Cleo eventually lifted their head from my chest and looked up at me.

Still keeping them close, I dipped my head lower to kiss them. But it turned from a

gentle test to a passionate kiss in a matter of seconds. In the privacy of Cleo's bedroom, we finally found the familiarity that had been there. Our lips and tongues were quick to find a new rhythm.

I bent my knees, placing my hands on the back of their thighs. Getting the signal, Cleo jumped into my arms, wrapping their strong legs around my waist.

“Fuck.” Cleo moaned as their center settled near mine before pressing their soft lips against mine again. This time, our tongues grew more reckless – desperate to get closer.

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Holding their back, I brought them to the edge of the bed where I gently set them on the mattress. There, Cleo looked up at me with disbelief. “Are we really doing this?”

Lowering my face to theirs, I let my hands rest against the bed. “I think so.”

“Me too.” Cleo smiled as they wrapped their hands around the nape of my neck and pulled me into the bed. Their dress was already riding up their legs, exposing the supple skin of their inner thighs.

My eyes weren’t sure where to land, all of them too enticing to look away.

But as we kissed, I let my hands explore for me. Under their clothes, I felt the soft curves I’d known for a decade. A moan escaped their lips as they felt my fingers.

Opening their eyes, they met my gaze as their hands reached to my chest where they slowly unbuttoned the topmost clasps of my dress shirt. I watched their face as they saw my body, my hair draping down and framing our faces as I hovered over them.

“God, look at you.” Cleo gasped as they brushed the shirt off my shoulder and off my arms.

Sitting upright, I let them watch on as I straddled their lap. Goosebumps rose from my skin under their gaze, familiar and thrilling all at once. I reached around my back and unclasped the lace black bra. As it fell off my body, Cleo’s chest stuttered.

“Is it what you expected?” I swallowed, nervous that they’d be disappointed.

Instead, Cleo sat up and kissed up my chest toward my neck. “I thought I knew you then. But this, this is the Cat I dreamed about every night for the last five years.”

My heart stopped for a moment as all the excitement rushed between my legs. I wasn’t sure how Cleo could be so stunning. While they kissed along my body, their hands cupped my back and held me close.

Rolling my head back, I moaned up to the ceiling. “You feel so good.”

Cleo smiled up at me before lying back, shifting their weight, and pulling the skirt of their dress out from under their ass. “Help me get this off.”

With a nod, I reached my hands down to the fabric and gently pulled it over their head. I was careful to hold the collar away from their face, not wanting them to get caught. Once it was off, I tossed it to the floor and looked down at them.

“Wow.” My eyes widened as I looked at the matching, floral bra and panty. The bra lifted Cleo’s breasts, making them impossible to miss while the panties came up high above their hips. I wasn’t even sure where to look as my center pulsed with anticipation.

Cleo bit their lip as I looked at them, nerves taking over. “What do you think?”

“You’re more stunning than I remember.” I managed before sinking my lips into their neck. When they moaned their approval, I allowed my teeth to slip into the skin.

“Fuck.” Cleo grunted at the feeling of my bite. “Touch me, please.”

Nodding, I brought my hand down their chest toward their stomach where I lightly traced the outline of their stomach. My fingers found the edge of the floral fabric and traveled over their mound toward the slit between their legs. Over the panties, I made

wide circles with the tips of my fingers as I felt for their hardened clit.

A pleased groan escaped their throat when I found the pebble. I smiled up at them as I applied targeted pressure, my own clit beginning to throb.

Their body started to rock against my hand, helping me massage the perfect spot. But after a moment, Cleo grew frustrated by the fabric between our bodies. “I want this shit off.”

“Done.” I laughed as I hopped off of their lap and gripped the fabric with my fingers. Lifting their hips, Cleo used their hand to push the panties over their plump ass. As I pulled, the cotton stuck to their wet slit. “You’re excited already.”

With a nod, Cleo shrugged. “I’ve thought about this.”

I giggled as I pulled the panties down their legs. “Since I got back?”

Sitting up, Cleo’s hand moved to the black belt on my trousers. “No.”

My forehead wrinkled as I watched them release the metal prong holding the belt and my trousers in place. Smiling, Cleo licked their lips. “For the last five years.”

Just knowing they had wanted me all of those years was enough to send a jolt of electricity to my already pulsing center. I felt the pleasure soaking my panties as I shifted my weight.

Cleo wrapped their arms around my waist and pulled my exposed stomach closer. Kissing it, they used their long fingers to unclasp my pants and unzip them. The belt clattered with each movement. Looking down at the line of my black panties, Cleo licked their lips. “Can I take these off?”

Nervous, I looked at their gentle face and nodded. “Please.”

Cleo swallowed the lump in their throat before sliding the trousers and my black bikini-cut underwear down my legs. The fabric and the heavy belt smacked against the floor, but Cleo was undeterred. Instead, their hands moved down to cup my bare ass. Their grip was gentle but familiar, a warm spot forming on my body from their touch.

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“Cleo...” I moaned as my head rolled back.

“Yes, Catherine?” They looked up at me, their mouth lingering around the trimmed hair near my slit.

My eyes closed as I felt their warm breath linger near my clit. Like a gentle lullaby, Cleo whispered, “I really missed you.”

I felt like someone was sitting on my chest as the words left their lips. Sinking my fingers into their blonde, wavy bob, I smiled. “I missed you too.”

Cleo licked their lips as they brought their face closer to my pulsing clit. Their hands kept gripping my ass, pulling me closer. They took one more look up at my face before burying their face between my legs. Starting with gentle kisses, Cleo slowly let their tongue peek out from between their lips.

With each flick, their tongue pushed back my hood and grazed my sensitive bead.

Swallowing hard, my legs began to tremble. I felt myself grow more and more slick with each passing second, afraid the pleasure was going to start dripping down my leg.

When Cleo sunk their tongue fully into my folds, cleaning up my excitement like they could read my mind, a primal grunt rumbled from their mouth into my folds.

They let their mouth explore me, reminding themselves of how I felt and tasted. Looking down at their face, I watched as they took me in. My grip on their hair grew

tighter as they increased the pressure on my clit.

It wasn't long before I wanted more of them. Using the fistful of hair, I gently pulled their head away from my slit. "Cle, lie back."

Nodding, Cleo licked my pleasure off of their lips as they rested their back against the plush mattress. Once they were comfortable, I pulled their floral panties out from under their ass and peeled them off of their legs. As soon as the fabric moved, a waft of sweet pleasure hit my nose.

My pulsing clit ached to touch them. Dropping the underwear to the floor, I lowered myself on top of Cleo. I looked into their blue eyes as I brought my thigh between their legs, feeling the slick excitement against my bare skin.

I couldn't bring myself to look away from them, instead, I kept my eyes open and watched as I thrust my thigh into them.

Staring back into mine, Cleo whimpered. "Cat, please."

"Please what?" I lowered my head to Cleo's ear.

Their breathing grew ragged as excitement took over their body. "Touch me like we never stopped."

Lifting my face to theirs, I nodded. "Okay, baby." It was exactly what I wanted too, to be close to them the way we had been all those years ago; like no time had passed between us at all.

Not needing more instructions, I leaned onto my elbow and brought my hand down to their slick center. Quickly, I found their clit and massaged between their folds. Using my thigh, I pressed my hand into their hard bead.



“Yes,” Cleo whispered as their head pressed into the mattress.

Not wanting to deny them what they’d asked for, I let my fingers explore down the slick folds. I groaned as my fingers slid along their center, letting my head fall to their shoulders. They brought a hand up to my scalp and brushed the long brown hair from my face, burying their hand in my scalp.

Finding their entrance, I let my finger tease it. I opened my eyes to peek into theirs as they gasped for air. With a grin, I let a finger sink into their center. A moan left my lips as I felt how slick they were for me.

“Oh, Cleo.” My face scrunched up as I sunk my finger another knuckle deep.

Rocking along my hand, Cleo held me close. “That’s not how you used to.”

With a cheeky grin, I let out a deep rumble of a chuckle. “Is that right?”

When they nodded back to me, I pulled my finger out a little and added another finger. I hadn’t expected them to be so eager to receive me. But as I slid back inside their soaked entrance, Cleo grunted. “That’s better.”

Finding our rhythm, I gently massaged their G-spot. With each caress of my fingers, Cleo’s body rocked against mine harder. They held my head close to their chest as I fucked them. After a minute, Cleo brought their other hand to my center.

“Fuck.” I grunted as I felt their hand sink between my folds to massage my pulsing clit. The shudder their touch sent through my body was enough to press my fingers even deeper inside Cleo.

Looking into each other's eyes, we started to breathe in sync. Our bodies intertwined, unsure where Cleo started and I ended. But I felt every single caress of their fingers

on my excited clit.

Our bodies grew warm as they pressed together, a light sweat dampening our skin as we thrust into each other.

“Cat, make me come.” Cleo whimpered as their hips started to rock harder against my hand. The folded knuckles of my other fingers pressed into their clit as they trembled against me.

Nodding, I smiled. “Only if you make me.”

Cleo rolled their eyes but nodded, knowing I was kidding. But nonetheless, they applied targeted pressure to my sensitive, throbbing clit. As they did, I felt my body start to quake. Between the slick excitement between their legs and their fingers on my own slit, my body was ready to be sent over the edge.

I felt Cleo’s hot breath against my shoulder as they grew closer to their peak. Our moans grew louder, unconcerned with neighbors or roommates for the first time we’d ever been together.

“God, I missed you,” I confessed as my body took over, my movements beginning to stutter as Cleo’s pressure grew.

Under my hand, I felt Cleo shudder against me. Their neck strained as their moans grew to screams of pleasure. “Don’t leave me again, Cat.”

Following orders, I pressed deeper inside them as I felt the muscles inside them tighten around my fingers. “I’m not going anywhere.” The sensation made my jaw drop as my body lost control. I screamed into their chest as the waves of pleasure vibrated my body.

Tightening their grip, Cleo followed close behind me. But they pulled my face toward theirs, our eyes meeting as we both reached our peaks.

“Shit.” I managed as my body tensed and froze. After a few seconds, my muscles released and collapsed onto Cleo’s body.

Catching our breath, both of us removed our hands.

Unable to hold myself up any longer, I rolled onto my back.

Laying next to Cleo, I looked over at them as my chest heaved. “Are you okay?”

With a nod, Cleo moved onto their side to look at me. “More than. Are you?” They were barely able to keep their eyes open as they asked.

“More than.” I smiled back at them. “Can I hold you?”

Cleo smirked back at me and rolled to their other side. “You just want to touch my ass.”

Shrugging, I slipped my arm under their neck and wrapped the other around their stomach. “Would that be so bad?”

“Nope.” Playing into it, they rubbed their ass against my core.

I tried to calm the pulse of pleasure that wanted more of them. Instead, I tightened my grip on their body and pulled them closer. I took in every breath of them that my lungs could hold. A part of me was nervous they’d say now, that this magic would pass and they would remember why we never worked. But until that happened, I wanted to be as close to Cleo Fontaine as they’d allow me to be.

25

CLEO

Waking up next to my ex wasn’t on my bingo card. But when my eyes peeled open and saw Cat’s gentle, sleeping face, it all made sense. Laying on her back, I rested my

head against her chest all night.

My nerves wouldn't let me fall asleep as the morning sun streamed into my bedroom, a slight orange hue to the light as it passed through the changing leaves.

Delicately, I lifted my head off of the warm skin and peeled myself out of the bed. Our clothes were strewn across the floor from the night before. I grabbed mine and tossed them into the hamper before grabbing a fresh pair of panties from the drawer.

Looking over the selection, I was tempted to pick a simple pair of boxers – hoping it would stop me from caving to Cat's temptation again. But I knew it was naive. So instead, I took out a g-string and pulled it up my legs and over my ass.

Despite the morning being chilly, my apartment was too warm to wear any pants. So I settled for a loose t-shirt that just barely covered my ass.

Before I left the bedroom, I stopped in the doorway and watched Cat sleep for a moment. Taking it in, I realized it was as if I'd accepted that I'd never see again. But I was wrong. Here she was, small breaths leaving her lungs as she slept.

I still remembered the last morning we spent together before I broke everything off. Standing at the threshold, I tried to take her in the same way. I tried to memorize every little hair on her head, every sound of her sleeping form.

Just in case.

Shaking the thought, I walked to the living room where Finn was already on the counter begging for food.

I started a pot of coffee before getting out the can of cat food and dishing it for my sweet tabby. "Good boy," I gave him a few pets before setting the wide bowl on the

ground.

With coffee in hand, I headed to my desk. If I knew anything about Catherine Collins, it was that she didn't make threats lightly. So I didn't have much of a choice but to start writing... something... anything.

## Page 43

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:39 pm*

I threw open my laptop to a few texts from Bri.

Where did she take you?

How did it go?

Did she murder you?

K, checked your location and your home. Gonna assume your phone died or something. But text me in the morning.

They spanned nearly six hours.Oops.Bringing my fingers to the keyboard, I wrote out a brief response.

I'm alive, just a late night. Lots to talk about later. But wondering if the league would be down for Cat to come play in a game or two?

I sent the text without much more thought. At some point, Cat needed to get back on a field with real players. And the women in the rec league had a variety of experiences. Some of them had even gone pro like Cat.

Checking the clock, I knew it was unlikely that I'd hear from Bri for a few hours. I opened a new document on my laptop and stared at the blank page.

Groaning, I sighed. This was silly. I hadn't plotted a single word. Hell, all I really had was a vague idea. What good was that?

If I don't write, Cat won't practice. Then she'll be stuck here. A part of my brain didn't hate that idea, not after the night we'd had. But I knew she was still here on a mission: get back to the pro league.

One night with me was not going to change that. And I needed to make sure I was being honest about that. Otherwise, my heart might get ripped through the shredder...again.

I hovered my fingers over the keyboard, waiting for the words to come to my mind. After a deep breath, my skin met the plastic of my keys. Like a starting gun fired, I typed like a mad person.

Interrupting my first paragraph, my phone buzzed. It was a text from Bri:

YES. I need to grill her. Saturday? Also... what happened last night?! Need a debrief.

A blush rose in my cheeks at the thought of explaining what happened between Cat and me. But before I could get too in my head about it, the floorboards creaked near the kitchen.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt." Cat smiled, her eyes heavy with sleep. Walking closer, she wrapped her arms around my neck. Her eyes widened when she saw my laptop. "You actually took me seriously?"

I shrugged. "For now. You didn't say how much I had to write."

Rolling her eyes, Cat kissed my cheek. "I won't bother you." She walked away toward the kitchen and found herself some coffee.

Trying not to get distracted by her gorgeous body in the slightly buttoned dress shirt from the night before, I turned back to my laptop. This was dangerous. Cat already



had my heart back in her palm and I had no idea what she planned to do with it this time.

26

CAT

Cleo and I managed to slip in one more practice before the weekend. We were both so distracted trying not to touch each other that we didn't get much work in. By the time I was rolling out of bed on Saturday morning, I still hadn't been able to stop thinking about Cleo.

The house was quiet, everyone trying to sleep in. But I had a game to get to. Cleo managed to get me a spot on their rec league team so I could practice in an actual game instead of a personalized training session.

I slipped on my white softball pants, mid-calf socks, and a shirt as close to Cleo's team jersey in color as possible.

Tucking in the shirt, I checked myself in the mirror as I put a black baseball cap on.

I left the room and grabbed a to-go cup of coffee from the kitchen, lit up by the bright morning light.

"Good luck today." Meredith startled me from the living room, where she watched the quiet street from the bay window.

Gasping, I clutched my chest. "Jesus, you scared me. Thanks." Crossing the house, I looked out of the window with her. "What are you doing?"

Meredith shrugged. "I just like being awake before everyone else."

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“I don’t blame you, calm before the storm and all that.” With a sigh, I grabbed my equipment bag from the entryway. My metal bat poked out of the top. It was heavy with shoulder tape, two gloves, and my cleats. I was prepared to have the worst game of my life.

As I reached for the doorknob, Meredith waved for me to stop. “Catherine.”

“Yes?” I looked at her.

“Be careful.”

“I’m going to take it easy, can’t risk another injury.” I winked.

Shrugging, Meredith looked at me the way only a mother could. “But with your heart too, okay? We want you to be okay beyond all of that.”

Something in my chest tightened. But I nodded. “Yes ma’am. I’ll see you later.”

Pulling open the front door, I made my way to the Mercedes parked at the front of the driveway. She made a good point. The last time Cleo broke my heart, it started a downward spiral I was still recovering from.

I had to tread carefully.

I was one of the first people to arrive at the field for our recreational game. But it gave me time to warm up and lace up my cleats. Once Cleo arrived, they started introducing me to all the other players.

It wasn't long before Bri was rolling up to the dugout. She dapped me up and patted my back. "I haven't seen you in like a decade."

"No kidding." I rubbed the back of my neck, knowing I wouldn't have answers to any of the questions she might lob my way. My life was largely directionless right now and that wasn't super comforting to someone trying to protect their best friend from heartbreak.

"So, Cat..." Bri started.

But she was quickly interrupted by the umpire blowing the whistle for the game to start.

Cleo nodded toward the field. "You're starting in the outfield."

"Works for me." I got my ass moving, trying to avoid an interrogation. Walking out onto the field with a team of women I'd just met was a new feeling. But I introduced myself to as many of them as possible.

By the time I was taking my position in right field, I had met most of the women in my vicinity.

Even from the outfield, I could see Cleo behind home plate in their catcher's outfit. The bulky equipment shouldn't have been sexy, but with Cleo inside, they looked hot.

The first inning moved slowly, the other time still finding their footing at bat.

By the time we switched to batting, our team was feeling good. While we sat in the dugout, Bri leaned over to me. "Cat, when are you heading back to the big leagues?"

“We’ll see how this fall goes. I’m hoping to make spring training next season.” I nodded, watching Cleo’s reaction from my periphery.

Shrugging, Bri laughed. “You’ve got some work to do if that’s your plan.”

I tried not to roll my eyes, knowing how important Bri was to Cleo. But she was being a dick. Ultimately, I couldn’t blame her. She’d seen us together since high school, she knew every dirty detail of our breakup and probably hoped Cleo wouldn’t bother with a loser like me again.

“Collings, on deck.” The coach hollered down from the dugout’s field entrance.

With a nod, I stood from the bench and leaned over to Bri. “Still further than you went, Shaw.”

“Cheap shot.” Bri rolled her eyes as she faked a huff.

Grabbing my bat, I headed to the small patch of sand just outside the dugout. The chainlink between the field and the dugout allowed Cleo to keep an eye on my practice form from the bench.

As I took a swing at the air, gentle on my shoulder to prepare it for the intense motion, I tried to breathe.

“Elbow up, it won’t hurt you,” Cleo called.

“Right.” I nodded as the current batter’s ball soared through the air.

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From the bench, Bri crossed her arms. “Maybe your star player can help us get some more donations.”

“Stop.” Cleo rolled their eyes and smacked Bri’s arm. “We’ll be fine without that.”

As soon as I took another swing, trying to push the conversation from my mind, I heard the referee call the play. “Out!”

It’s time. I sighed as I shook out the stiffness in my shoulders.

“You’ve got it. Just remember, it’s practice.” Cleo offered a slight smile, hoping it would calm my nerves.

Licking my lips, I threw on the batting helmet and walked toward the plate. I pulled my batting gloves from my pocket and slipped them on my hands. The velcro band snapped into place as I walked up to the plate.

The umpire had cleaned off home plate before I walked up.

I squared my feet with the white rubber and twisted the bat in my hand before getting into position. Letting out a deep breath, I looked at the pitcher as I lifted the bat to my ear.

All of the noise around me quieted as I lifted my elbow up, leveling it with my shoulder. Cleo was right: it wasn’t going to hurt. My brain needed to understand that. Shaking my head, I convinced myself that it was okay.

Eye on the ball. I watched the neon yellow and pink softball in the pitcher's hand.

Winding up, the pitcher stepped forward and launched the ball out of her hand.

As it hurtled toward me, I stepped back from the plate.

"Strike!" The umpire hollered.

From the dugout, my team clapped. Over their hands, Cleo's voice rang out. "That's okay. Now you know what it looks like. Next one's yours."

It was a vote of confidence. And one I kind of believed.

So I shook out my arm, ready for the next ball as I lifted my bat back into position. Trying to stay in the moment, I watched every movement of the pitcher and let myself feel the light fall wind on my neck.

This time, when the ball left her hand, I felt it move in slow motion as I locked in on it.

At just the right moment, I let my arms take over and swung at the neon shape flying toward me. My heel turned as the bat swung across the bat.

A familiar clink told me I'd made contact. Slightly stunned as I watched the ball fly into the outfield, I didn't move.

"Go! Go, Cat!" Cleo yelled from the dugout. They stood up from their seat and wrapped their fingers around the chain link fence as they cheered.

Right.

I took off, letting the sand kick up under my cleats. Pumping my arms, I kept my eye on first base and refused to let myself consider how close the ball was. At full speed, I felt my foot press into the fluffy, white base.

“Safe!” The umpire called as the sound of a glove catching the leather ball resounded across the field.

Pumping my fist, I smiled as I caught my breath.

“Yes!” Cleo cheered from the dugout.

Looking over at them, I shook my head. I’d done it, I’d broken the seal. For the first time in two years, making it back to the pros felt possible. But my heart dropped as I considered what that really meant. What if I have to break Cleo’s heart again?

27

CLEO

“You killed it on that last play. A double was not on my bingo card.” Cat shook her head as she closed my apartment door behind us.

I couldn’t stop the blush from rising in my cheeks. A part of me hoped that Cat would think it was just a slight sunburn.

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Setting my bag down by the door, I shrugged. “Yeah, but I couldn’t have done it without your catch in the outfield.”

She shrugged, a proud smile peeking onto her face. “Happy to be of service.” Clearing her throat, Cat tapped her fingers against her arm. “So, what did Bri mean about needing donations?”

“Oh, nothing. We always need donations. Every season could be our last.” I waved off her concern. It was genuinely a yearly issue for our league. But every year, we found a solution. Sensing that Cat didn’t buy it, I raised my eyebrows. “Seriously, don’t try to solve this one.”

Now that we were alone, I let my hand touch her forearm. A light layer of dust and dirt made her skin rough. I leaned in for a kiss, pressing my lips against her face. The smell of sweat filled my nose.

“We have to shower. We’re both filthy.” I joked as I pulled away.

Nodding, Cat laughed. “Together or separate?”

Without responding, I grabbed her hand and guided her toward the bathroom. I turned on the hot water, letting it heat up while we stood on the white subway tile. “Do you want to shower alone?”

Cat shook her head. “God no. I spent all day keeping my hands off of you. I want to be covered in you.” The low rumble that came from her chest made my center pulse. Watching her out on the field was hot enough, but to have her alone now was a



fantasy come true.

Not wanting to wait any longer, I lifted up my jersey with both arms and tossed it on the floor. Cat's eyes darted down to my sports bra, cupping my breasts.

"Fuck." Cat groaned, following suit and tossing her teal shirt to the ground. Then she reached for the waistband on my polyester pants. The pristine white had turned to a sandy beige from the game, dirt smudges all over them.

"Thank god for bleach." I teased as she unclasped them.

Chuckling, Cat brought me closer and planted a kiss on my neck. She wrapped her hand around my back to my ass, pushing the fabric off of the cheeks. Taking a handful of it, Cat moaned as she looked over my shoulder. The gray boxers were damp from sweat but she seemed undeterred from her mission.

Slipping those off too, Cat got on her knees and pulled the clothes off of my body. The room began to fill with steam as the shower water finally got hot enough to go inside.

Cat let her lips kiss my hips, lightly grazing the skin where my stomach met the bones.

An embarrassing whimper escaped my lips as she kissed me. I was still stunned that I was back to fucking my ex, to letting Cat have this kind of effect on me. But I would be lying if I said it didn't feel right.

Pulling away from her, I stepped toward the shower and ripped off my bra. My exposed back to her, I winked at Cat. "I'm cold." And then I got into the water.

I groaned as the hot water met my skin. Losing control of my neck, my head dangled

as the water dripped down my neck. The drain swirled with dirt and sand as warm water massaged my sore muscles.

I saw her feet first, saddling up behind me. Her hands gripped my hips as she pressed her core into my ass.

“God that feels good.” She sighed as the warm water washed over.

“Me or the water?” Looking over my shoulder, I raised an eyebrow.

Cat licked her lips, hungry for me. “Both.”

Before she could get too carried away, I passed her the body soap. I wasn’t about to get a UTI because I didn’t wash this shit off my body before I got railed by my ex.

Cat took soap in her hand and lathered it in her palms. But instead of rubbing it into her own body, she brought her hands to mine. Starting on my arms, Cat massaged the soap into my skin. She was thorough as she brought her hands up my arms and onto my shoulders. Pressing her fingers into my sore traps, Cat watched the soap cover my body.

My head fell back at the massage. “Thank you.” I moaned.

She washed my entire figure like that, spreading soap across my back and hips. Then she brought her hands around my front and cupped my breasts in her warm hands. Suds fell down my body with each movement.

Bending down, Cat spread my legs and lathered soap on my thighs and calves. By the time she was done, my entire body was begging for her. I could feel my center grow slick with anticipation.

Her touch was gentle but assured like she'd thought about how she'd wash me for years. And maybe she had.

When she finished, I returned the favor.

With a soapy hand, I washed Cat's body. I took my time on her shoulder, letting my fingers massage the injured spot.

Cat's eyes closed as the pleasure took over. "Fuck, I needed that."

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When I finished letting my hands explore her body, I moved our bodies back into the stream of water. The clean water washed the dirt off our bodies, mixing as it swirled down the drain.

“Better?” Cat asked as she turned to face me, kissing me softly as our wet lips met.

“Much.” Nodding, I let my tongue slip into her mouth.

After a few kisses, I grabbed Cat’s wrist and brought it to my center. My clit had been throbbing for the last ten minutes. And now, I wasn’t sure I could wait any longer to feel her again.

Cat’s eyes rolled back as she felt my slick slit. It was obvious what was water and what was my excitement. “Jesus, Cleo. You’re fucking soaked.”

“We are taking a shower.” I laughed as I wrapped my arms around her neck.

Pressing her fingers into my clit, Cat shook her head. “You’re an asshole.”

I couldn’t stop myself from moaning as she pushed back the hood covering my head. As she touched me, Cat got down on her knees. The stream of water passed over her head as she brought her mouth to my center.

“I’ve wanted to taste you again for years. There hasn’t been a single meal that compares to you.” Cat looked up at me as she licked my folds. Taking my pleasure into her mouth, Cat groaned.

I shuddered against her, the warm water mixing with her strong tongue. My hand was buried in her long, brown hair, tugging on it as she drank me in. Moving from my clit, Catherine's tongue spread my slit and found my entrance.

I tilted my hips forward for her, trying to give her easier access as I pressed my palm against the steamy shower tiles.

"Fuck." Cat whimpered into my entrance as she teased it with her tongue.

The sound of her excitement made my chest tighten. I wanted to please her but when I looked down at her ass, I saw her hips rocking against her hand as she touched me.

Laughing, I tightened my grip on her hair. "You couldn't stop yourself?"

She shook her head, letting her mouth rub against my clit as she moaned into me. Intensifying her pressure, Cat's tongue thrust inside of me as she gripped my ass. Between her legs, she massaged her center.

With each stroke of her tongue, I grew closer and closer to my peak. Watching Cat touch herself in front of me made my entire body warm with excitement.

Cat pushed her tongue deeper, tasting all of me as her nose pressed into my clit.

"Shit." I moaned as the pleasure took over my body. My hand slipped against the tiles as my legs began to tremble.

Following my lead, Cat started to shake. But she was diligent in her pressure against my folds.

Unable to slow myself, I seized up as my climax took over me. I gripped Cat's hair, not aware of how tight my grip was. As my fist clenched around the wet locks, Cat's

hold on my ass intensified, stabilizing me as I came.

Cat squeezed her thighs together as she joined my cacophony of moans. More primal, she spoke her excitement into my folds. Once my body finished shuddering against her, Cat pulled her mouth away and rested her forehead against my thigh as she reached her peak.

“That’s it.” I eased my hold on her hair as she released.

When her trembling stopped, I opened my palms to help her stand.

“Thank you.” Cat was barely able to speak as she got to her feet. Upright, Cat used the shower water to wipe her mouth clean.

I pulled her in for a kiss, tasting myself on her lips. “Should we finish showering?”

With a nod, Cat reached for the shampoo.

But as she did, I wrapped my arms around her stomach. A part of me would have spent a thousand dollars on my water bill just to stay there with her forever.

I kissed her shoulder before letting her go. It wouldn’t be long before we finished her training and she’d be on her way. I need to be ready to say goodbye.

28

CAT

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Biting my lip, I tried to ignore the teenagers roaming the store and laughing at every other book. It had been days since Bri let the league's funding problem slip and I hadn't been able to get it off my mind.

Coming up with ways to help the rec league from shutting down was a lot harder than I thought. Of course, I could just donate the missing sum myself. But I knew Cleo would never let that happen.

From my spot on the old leather chair in the corner, I watched Cleo at the register. They kept an eye on the teens too, but knew that this was just part of their journey to adulthood.

When they caught my eye, I smiled.

"What?" They furrowed their brow suspiciously.

I shrugged. "Just thinking." It wasn't a lie. I was just thinking about something they didn't need to know about.

But my eye caught on the bulletin board behind Cleo's head. Dozens of posters filled the small cork surface.

Have they ever bothered to advertise the league?

I rubbed my forehead. It wouldn't be difficult to make some on my laptop and post them around town. Surely, a few of LAWSON's rich friends would want to support a local sports league full of queer women.

Before I could finish the thought, Cleo tried to follow my gaze. “Seriously, what are you looking at?”

“The board.” I shrugged, hoping they wouldn’t ask more.

“What about it?” They pushed.

It was silly of me to think they would suddenly be a less curious person.

Before I could even answer, Cleo shook their head. “Will you drop it please?”

I shrugged. “I’m sorry. I just feel like this has to have an easy fix.”

Resting their head on their palms, Cleo glared at me. “Why do you have to solve it? We always find the funding. It’s a small league.”

“Because I appreciate what they’re doing for me. And I appreciate you. I want that space to keep existing for you.” I clenched my jaw, knowing that Cleo was going to tell me to drop it again.

With a sigh, Cleo nodded. “I get all of that but...”

A young woman approached the counter and held out a book.

Turning to their customer service, Cleo smiled. “Hey, find what you were looking for?”

“Yeah, I’ve been looking for this for months.”

“Well, we’re glad you found it here. Thanks for stopping by.” Cleo completed the purchase and waved as the woman left the store.



When the bell chimed at the front, signaling her exit, Cleo turned back to me. “Look, we like how small the league is. It’s easy going and the championship is mostly a joke. None of us want to bring too much money into it.”

Nodding, I sighed. They were right. Money made everything more complicated. Suddenly, the rec league wouldn’t just be a bunch of people coming together and playing softball. It would be about corporate sponsors and winning.

“Okay. If that’s what you want.” I relented.

Looking around the now-empty store, Cleo came around the counter and sat on my lap. They planted a kiss on my lips. “Thank you.”

29

CLEO

The clatter of falling bowling pins echoed off the polished wood floors as I raised my arms. “Yes!”

The monitor overhead announced my strike with a cheerful song and a strange animation. Walking back toward my mom, I pumped my fist. “I told you this would be the winner for me.”

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“You were right.” She chuckled as I walked back to the bench. Resuming our conversation, my mom eyed me. “Why would it be so bad to let New Winford residents know about the game? The donation could be suggested and no sponsorship would be necessary.”

Crossing my arms, I shrugged. “I don’t know. It just feels like my problem to solve. I’m not sure I want Cat to be involved in so much.”

My mom sighed. “Because a part of you worries she won’t stick around?”

“Maybe.” She wasn’t wrong. It was something I hadn’t let myself consider. Shaking the thought, I looked up at the scoreboard to avoid her eyes. “But I’m also capable of handling it and the league always figures it out.”

Mom stood up for her turn. “Wasn’t your homework to worry more about the future?” Winking, she grabbed her bowling ball from the return. Without much prep, she brought the ball to her chest and started her throw. She rolled the ball right down the center of the lane.

Watching it closer, we both leaned forward to watch. As the pins fell, Mom groaned. “Boo!”

The monitor over my head displayed a 9/10. She’d have to hit a solo pin.

When she came back to the ball return, she bit the inside of her cheek. “Do you trust her with your heart?”

“Oof. I don't know if I should answer that.” I confessed. In all honesty, Cat and I hadn't discussed the future much. Both of us were too afraid to touch the thing that tore us apart to begin with. But I knew we'd have to eventually.

The league's playoffs were rapidly approaching and once they finished, it would be far too cold to keep training here. Cat would likely go back to the city and I'd go back to the store and my barely-begun book.

We'd go back to our corners, letting the other go again. But that time, it would really be the last time.

“You don't have to. But if even a part of you does trust her, maybe you should let her help you.” After she raised her hands in surrender, she grabbed her bowling ball and used her same form to roll the ball down the alley.

Nailing it, she hit the pin on the head and jumped with joy. “Ha!”

“Nice one, Mom.” I clapped for her as I looked around the alley. It was fairly crowded, full of families taking their kids out for a Saturday evening and teenagers looking for something to do.

Mom sat down next to me and sighed. Silence passed over us for a moment before she shrugged. “You know, Dad really loved Catherine. He loved the way she treated you.”

Scoffing, I shook my head. “That was before she went pro. Then she was far too busy for me.”

“Is that fair?” The words came out of her mouth before she could stop them. “Sorry, sweetie. I just know the shop was a lot for you to take on then and you couldn't go see her as much.”

My face flushed but I couldn't tell if it was embarrassment or anger. Mom wasn't entirely wrong. Cat was on the road a lot and while running the shop, I could barely ever leave New Winford. And Catherine's life was changing too, spending more and more time out at bars and hanging around fans.

It was hard not to be paranoid, even if Cat never did anything wrong.

"No, I get it." I waved off her concern. "It was more complicated than I made it out to be. It was a lot."

Even then, a part of me felt like not much had changed. Sure, Cat took me on a thoughtful date – no – the most thoughtful date I'd ever been on. But one date did not a new future make.

I still ran the shop alone, Cat was going to go back to work. And then we'd be in the same position. I'd be alone in this small town, bowling every weekend with my mom and crashing Bri's romantic weekends with her girlfriend.

My throat tightened. Unless it wouldn't be the same.

"Come on, you can do better than that!" I hollered from behind my catcher's face guard as I threw the hulking softball back to Cat. I was glad to have my catcher's gear on as a cold wind blew through the open field.

Shaking her head as her leather glove closed around the ball, Cat scoffed. "You're so rude."

I rested my glove on my hip as I stood. "If you can throw this faster than 50 miles per hour, I'll eat you out for an hour."

Gawking at me, Cat's face flushed. "You're sick in the head. We don't even have a

speedometer” She tossed the ball between her gloved hand and her bare palm. But I knew it was a good motivator, her face lighting up. Moving back to the mound, Cat shook her head as she got into position.

“I’ll know it when I feel it.” I winked.

Even from behind home plate, I could see her starting to center herself. She took in a deep breath, holding it in her lungs before letting it out through her mouth.

Nodding to me, I squatted down into position and held up my glove. I’d seen that look in her eyes before, she was hungry for a win. Her eyes were on the prize. Digging my heels into the sand, I prepared for a fast pitch.

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Once I was squatted, Cat started her wind-up. Her form was nearly perfect; the ball made a perfect windmill as it passed over Cat's shoulder and was swiftly brought down. When it released from her grip, a fastball came hurtling toward me.

It moved so fast that my eyes wanted to close to protect themselves. But I forced them to stay open, bringing my right hand up to reinforce the glove as the pitch made contact with the leather covering my hand.

A bright stinging radiated from the center of my gloved palm. I stood up, shaking it out as I did. "Much better."

Cat beamed with pride as they crossed the distance between us. Pulling off my glove, Cat kissed my palm and eyes it closer. A red spot grew at its center. "Did I hurt you?"

"Eh, hazards of the job." I looked up at her, my throat tightening under her emerald gaze. "You're very pretty."

Blushing, Cat stuttered. "You're... really pretty too."

Watching her eyes, I smiled. "That was a really strong pitch."

"I hate this glove." She sighed. "I wish I could find my old one."

I couldn't stop myself from laughing. "Isn't that thing like two decades old?" All these years later, I could still picture the peeling leather of that brown glove.

With an assured nod, Cat pulled back. "Yeah, but it's easier on my hand and I can

actually move it.”

We walked toward the dugout, happy with our practice for the day. As we did, Cat licked her lips. “So, how’s the writing?”

“Don’t ask me that.” I buried my face in my glove, the smell of old leather wafting into my nose. It had been a few days since I worked on what was becoming an interesting idea. But I kept getting stuck.

“Come on, just tell me something.”

Reluctantly, I confessed. “It’s slow. I keep feeling like it’s a waste of time.” Not looking up, I packed my bag and changed my shoes.

Cat scoffed. “Well, that’s definitely not true. Worst case scenario, you wrote something cool for yourself. Best case, you write an award-winning bestseller. Either way, I’ll buy it.”

I shook my head, hiding my embarrassment. But it was sweet, and I knew it was entirely truthful. Once our stuff was packed, we made our way to the parking lot. Standing between our cars, Cat laced her fingers with mine. “You know, if it sells, you wouldn’t have to worry so much about closing the shop here and there. You could go... say... to a professional softball game anywhere in the country.”

Nudging her shoulder, I raised my eyebrows. “The truth comes out.”

“I joke.” Cat kissed my cheek. “Can I come over and make you dinner this week?”

“Please.” I pressed my lips to hers. It was risky kissing in the open like this. It wouldn’t be long before the paparazzi caught on to our early morning practices. But for now, it felt safe.

Cat watched me get into my car, leaning against the hood of her black Mercedes. As I pulled out of the parking lot, watching her wave goodbye, I felt my heart pounding. The extra money wouldn't hurt. And maybe it could solve our problem; maybe Cat leaving town wouldn't be the end.

30

CAT

Rummaging through the attic was a far bigger pain in my ass than I expected it to be. Daniel had left dozens of unlabeled bins up here. And now that I needed to find my old glove, his non-existent organizational system was becoming a thorn in my side.

“Where the fuck is this thing?” I muttered to myself as I moved yet another box to the side. I was waist-deep in opened containers when I heard the attic stairs creaking under the weight of someone's foot.

Knowing it was my brother, I shook my head. “Dude, you have to do something about this. It's a mess up here.”

Laughing, Dan appeared on the landing while ducking his head under the rafters. “Aren't you unemployed?”

“Rude.” I narrowed my eyes at him as I tossed the box I'd been digging into the side.

Dan waded through the sea of boxes – objectively made far messier by my scavenging. Wrinkling his forehead, he sighed. “What could you possibly be looking for?”

My shoulders dropped at the question, pausing long enough to look around. I must have seemed like a madwoman. It was close to dinner time and I was in my brother's



attic muttering to myself while hunting for an item that was packed away at least a decade ago.

“My old glove. I know mom would have kept it.” I rubbed my forehead, trying to picture in my head where she would have hidden it.

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Finally understanding, Daniel pursed his lips. “Allow me.” Reaching behind my head, he pulled out a black bin with a yellow lid. The top, which wasn’t visible to me, was labeled: “Cat the Bat”.

“Bingo.” Dan slammed the heavy, plastic container down on the wide wood planks. “Why do you want that nasty old thing? The leather is peeling off of it. It leaves black soot on your hands.”

It did sound a little ridiculous. I’d used dozens of gloves since college, most of them sent to me for free from whatever company wanted my picture taken with their product. In a lot of ways, it was perfect. But now that I was trying to get back into the game, I felt like I needed something more familiar. Cleo’s presence had helped a lot in that department. With the rec leagues championships growing closer, I needed another lift.

With a sigh, I popped open the lid of the container. “I just feel like this new glove is too stiff.”

“Did you try Dad’s trick?” Dan smirked.

“Sitting on it for a day did not help.” I laughed as I looked through the treasure trove of items. It was like a history lesson in Cat Collins. There were dozens of trophies from soccer to softball, and math to chorus.

I unfolded a couple of loose papers.

“Oh, I love those.” Dan leaned against the post at the center of the attic as I searched.

Inside were crude drawings of our family alongside sunflowers and rainbows.

Shaking my head, I looked at Dan. “You kept all of this?”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “Of course I did. Mom seemed to think you’d want it, so I trusted her guidance.”

I felt my eyes swelling up. After they’d moved, Dan took on the responsibility of being the family’s keeper. No one trusted Florida’s hurricane season to keep our belongings safe. So instead, Dan volunteered the attic.

I shouldn’t be so hard on his organizational skills.

“What’s all of this about, really?” His forehead wrinkled.

Looking up at him, I stammered. “I... think I’m just trying to see how much of my old life I can get back. And how much of it will stick around.” After I said it, the glove’s faded brown appeared before me.

Daniel nodded. “So it’s about Cleo?”

“Pretty much,” I confessed. “I don’t know if anything will be different this time. But I really feel like they might be the only person I can be with.”

Taking in a deep breath, my brother shrugged. “I felt that way about Meredith. Do you want to know the secret?” Instead of answering, I just nodded. “You can make it different.”

It was an answer I’d been avoiding. But to really make that happen, it would take both of us. A commitment that we’d not let distance tear us apart again. And even if I was ready, I couldn’t do it without them.

“Thanks.” I closed up the bin and put everything back in its apparently correct place.

Dan clapped my back. “Cleo was always my number one draft pick for you.”

And I couldn’t lie, they were always mine too.

Daniel’s advice echoed in my ear as I threw onions into the skillet. A loud sizzle emanated from the pan as I stirred the contents.

Over my shoulder, I watched Cleo typing at their desk. They looked so cute when they were concentrating.

I’d made this particular dish enough times to go on autopilot, not needing to pay too much attention to get the job done. Cleo played some music over their speaker while they worked and I danced along.

But just as dinner was finishing on the stove, my phone started ringing from my pocket.

Cleo, not hearing it, kept the music on and faced their computer.

When I checked the screen, it displayed Tommy’s name. Sliding right on the call, I brought the phone to my ear. “Hey, what’s up?”

“You sound chipper. How’s it going over in small-town USA?” She cleared her throat as she clicked her pen.

Nodding, I looked around the apartment. “Pretty good.”

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Tommy continued. “Good. So some paparazzi caught some of your practice the other day. It looks like your cover is blown.”

Not wanting to alert Cleo to a potential problem, I played it cool. “Got it, what do they have?”

“Nothing crazy. Just you and the ex practicing your pitch. But you can’t tell who’s in the catcher’s mask. Of course, there’s always going to be speculation.” Tommy was always willing to point out the worst case.

“Right.” I swallowed hard. The clock was ticking on this little oasis we’d built together.

Tommy sighed. “But, good news, some sponsors saw the pics and they like how you’re looking. We have some interest in new ad campaigns.”

Pursing my lips, I stirred the orange curry I’d made. “Well, that’s good. Thanks for the report.

“There’s one more thing,” Tommy cleared her throat. “The team wants to send a representative to the championships if your team makes it, that is.”

“Huh.” My forehead wrinkled as Tommy went quiet. “I’ll get back to you on dates for that.”

Tommy clicked her tongue. “Got it. I’m guessing they’re in the room, but we should discuss all of this more later. Talk soon?”

I pulled the phone away from my ear. “Yeah, thanks.” Hanging up the phone, I shoved it in my pocket. I couldn’t be sure how much Cleo had heard. From the looks of it, not much as they continued to type away on their computer.

As I plated the food, I tried to recenter myself. The pictures leaking was great news for my career but I wasn’t sure how that would play out for whatever was happening with Cleo. I had no idea if Cleo was interested in getting back together in a real way or if this was just some fun for both of us while I was stuck in New Winford anyway.

Filling up two plates, I swallowed hard. I needed to talk to them at some point. Can’t I just run from it?

31

CLEO

“Dinner’s ready.” Cat interrupted me with the announcement.

Snapping out of my haze, I closed my computer and plastered on a smile. From the looks of it, Cat thought I hadn’t heard a word of the conversation she’d had with her agent in my kitchen.

“Thanks.” I smiled as I walked over to the steaming plates of food, planting a kiss on her cheek. We made our way to my small mid-century modern dining table and sat down.

Digging into the food, we both went a little silent as the delicious mango chicken curry hit our tongues.

Through a pleased groan, I shook my head. “Wow, that’s delicious.”

Cat grinned at me, eager for the praise. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Did I hear you on the phone?” I prodded, poking my food around and trying to act cool.

Nodding, Cat pouted as she ate. “Yeah, everything’s good. But you should know a couple pictures of our practice leaked. Nothing explicit and you’re disguised by the gear, so it should be fine.”

Clearing my throat, I took another bite. “Right, that’s good.” A part of me wondered what she meant. We hadn’t discussed how I felt about a public relationship so Cat couldn’t be sure that I would have minded if I was recognizable. But maybe she preferred it this way for now.

“Did Tommy have anything else to report?” I had to play it cool and hope that Cat would tell me what I needed to know.

“Some sponsors like my form and want me to consider new deals.” Cat tried not to smile, the nervousness of returning to the field hitting her.

Trying to intercept her gaze, I raised an eyebrow. “That’s good, right?” Of course, I knew that it meant Cat would have to leave New Winford, at least for a while. She’d have to go back to the city for photoshoots and interviews.

Cat shrugged. “Yeah, I think so.” With a shrug, she turned back to her food. But I could tell there was something she was leaving out. Grabbing another bite, I decided to trust her. She’d bring it up when she was ready, and until then, she was sitting around the table having made dinner for me.

It was the only way to get through the next couple of weeks, one meal at a time.

Sunlight streamed through the trees as we drove north.

“I’m so excited.” Cat’s fingers drummed against the steering wheel as we got closer to the apple orchard. She asked me to take her apple picking since she hadn’t been in more years than either of us could count.



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Looking over at her, I smiled. “Me too.” She was cute – even if she was hiding something from me.

A loud ring came from the car’s speakers. The display on the dashboard read “Call from: Tommy.”

“I can get this later.” Cat swallowed as her finger floated toward the decline button.

“No, no. Take it now, then it’s not hanging over your head.” Waving off her concern, I shrugged.

Not having a way out, Cat clicked “accept”. “Hey, Tom. You’re on speaker, and Cleo’s in the car.”

Tommy laughed. “Cool. Hey, Cleo. Nice to sorta meet you.”

“You too.” I crossed my arms and smiled like she could see me. Peeking over at Cat, her knuckles were turning white as her grip on the wheel tightened. What is she so nervous about?

Not holding off, Tommy pressed on with business. “I’m sending you a couple contracts. Give them a read when you have a second. There’s dates and such for photo shoots and media appearances written in there so just make sure those work for you.”

“Easy enough.” Cat shrugged, stretching out her arm to the hang-up button. “Okay, cool...”

Squeezing in before Cat could hang up, Tommy cleared her throat. “And do you have the dates for the Championship? The team really wants to see you play.”

Cat stammered, looking for the words while avoiding my gaze.

“First weekend in November, likely on Sunday,” I interjected, clenching my jaw as I spoke.

“Thanks, Cleo. We’ll talk soon, Catherine.” Tommy hung up the phone, our awkwardness palpable.

Just as the call ended, the car was rolling into the gravel parking lot of a crowded orchard. I wasn’t entirely sure why Cat had hidden that from me but I knew now wasn’t the time to bring it up. Odds were that she didn’t bring it up because she knew it would mean leaving town. And what was becoming clear to me was that Cat had no intention of seeing this through.

I should’ve known that it was just some hometown fun.

Shaking my head, I popped open my door and was hit in the face with obnoxiously fresh air.

Cat hesitated in the driver’s seat for a second before climbing out and walking over to me. She offered an awkward smile, testing the waters.

“Ready?” I plastered a smile on my face.

“Yep.” Cat nodded, not trying their luck.

I had no idea how long we could go without mentioning all of this but maybe it was for the best to pretend like our time together was hurtling to a close.

## CAT

Roaming through the orchard, Cat walked in stride with me while they held the small bag of apples. They'd insisted on carrying it to avoid hurting my shoulder.

Somehow, we'd been walking around the farm for thirty minutes and still had managed not to talk about Tommy's call. My heart was still racing. Cleo's silence meant one of two things: either they really didn't mind that I would be going back to the league soon; or they were fucking fuming and had no desire to blow up on me in public.

If I knew them at all, they were more inclined to the latter.

"We should've demanded that dude rent us a pole. These trees are completely stripped." Cleo shook their head as they looked up at the pristine, ripe apples hiding at the tops of each tree.

Fallen apples littered the ground, making the walk quite precarious.

"Maybe there's more in the back?" I offered, watching them scan each and every branch as we moved toward the end of the row. With a chuckle, I shrugged. "I could put you on my shoulders and you could grab the taller ones."

Cleo's head whipped around as they scowled at me. "With your shoulder?"

Rolling my eyes, I licked my lips. "I have to get stronger, don't I? Besides, it'll mostly work my legs."

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Cleo bit their lip as they looked up at the juicy fruit tempting them. Groaning, they conceded. “Fine, pop me up. I know my legs are too weak to hold your muscly ass.”

With a laugh, I knelt on a clean patch of grass. Patting my shoulders, I signaled for Cleo to hop up there. Straddling my neck, Cleo draped their legs over my shoulders and placed a hand on my head for balance.

Once they were settled, I grabbed their shins and pressed up. Standing upright, I carefully walked us closer to the tree. “It’s all you.”

Giggling, Cleo stretched out their arm to the tree and pulled off a ripe apple. They popped it into the bag and reached for more.

I looked up at them, hunting for the perfect fuji apple, and felt my chest tighten. We'd have to talk about the phone call eventually. But I feared that they'd run like they did the last time we were together. A part of me hoped this was different, that we could fix it now.

“Alright, I’m good. Bring me back to earth, Houston.” Cleo teased as I slowly bent my knees. Once their feet had made contact with the ground, they removed their legs from my shoulders and planted a kiss on my cheek. “Thank you.”

“Any time.” I turned around to look at their blue eyes, shimmering in the last fall sun. Most of the trees were starting to lose their leaves at this point and the fall was quickly growing cold.

They offered me a hand up, which I took gladly as we kept walking. “Oh!” Cleo’s

face lit up. “Can we get apple cider donuts?”

Laughing, I nodded and put my arm around their shoulder. “Of course we can.” We walked on, enjoying each other’s embrace. Something in the air told me we both feared this would be one of our last moments together like this. We’d managed to avoid reality as we fell back in love with each other.

But now, the real world was banging at my door. And I needed to decide what exactly I wanted for my life. I shook the feeling, letting the sun warm my chilly face. There was no point thinking about it right now. Instead, I just kept putting one foot in front of the other.

We wandered back to the massive white tent where long tables filled with families stretched out across a wood-chipped clearing. Spotting a table, Cleo jogged ahead and claimed it.

I sat across from them and popped open the bag of donuts we’d grabbed on our way to the seating area. Passing one to them, I smiled. “We should buy some for your mom. She likes these right?”

“Yeah, they’re her favorite.” Cleo nodded as they took a bite, the sugar on the outside crumbling onto the table. A blush grew on their cheeks as I mentioned it.

Maybe it was a bad idea to mention family again when we weren’t sure what was next for us. The more I talked like this, the more confusing our conversation would be. But looking across the table, all I wanted was to make it complicated.

They pointed behind me. “Look at that kid absolutely downing a donut while his parents are distracted.”

Turning around, I laughed at the kid. He kept sticking his hand in the bag of sweets

and pulling out whole donuts. His parents were too busy chatting with each other to notice. But I had a feeling when they realized just how many the kid had taken, that they would have a good laugh and head home.

“What a cutie.” I giggled.

Looking around, I watched the other tables as they enjoyed their food. There was so much joy here. And I feared I’d never feel it if I kept hiding from Cleo.

33

CLEO

After we finished our food, I walked Cat over to the farm stand and bought another bag of donuts for my mom. The orchard was getting really crowded by the time we trekked back to Cat’s car.

Happy to avoid the crowds, we piled into the car and headed home. I was more exhausted from all the walking and the beaming sun than I’d realized. The gentle rocking of the car could’ve put me to sleep if my mind hadn’t been racing.

But as much as I enjoyed our apple-picking date, I knew I had to bring up the phone call at some point. We’d been forced out of our delusional vacation and forced to reckon with everything we’d avoided talking about.

I used the car ride to try and formulate my thoughts and by the time Cat was pulling the Mercedes into my parking lot, I felt like I had a pretty good grip on where I stood.

Grabbing the bag of apples from the car, I headed for my front door with Cat trailing just a few feet behind me. I tried not to think about how cute she looked in her loose flannel and torn jeans.

With each step, both of our moods grew heavier. The tension of our looming conversation started to weigh down on us.

Once I'd gotten us upstairs, we set our stuff down.

Cat leaned against the peninsula that separated the kitchen from the living room. Taking my position by the couch, I sighed. "So. Your team is coming to the championships?"

Biting her lip, Cat nodded. "If we make it and the league is cool with it. I'm sorry I didn't mention it earlier."

"I get it. It's fine." I looked back at her, her brown hair draping over her shoulders. A golden light came in through the living room windows. "What does that mean?"

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With a sigh, Cat shrugged. “I don’t know.”

I scoffed. “So you’ve known about this for a few days at least, and you haven’t figured out how you feel about it?”

“Kind of.” From across the room, I could see her jaw tighten. “It’s kind of a decision we both have to make, no?”

“That feels like a cop-out.” I crossed my arms. I knew it was a combative move, but I couldn’t stop myself. Everything in my body told me to protect myself. This was charted territory and the map didn’t look too good.

Cat shook her head. “How could that be true?” After waiting for me to answer her, Cat continued, “I was willing to work on this. You were the one who walked away last time.”

Groaning, I rolled my eyes. “That is such an oversimplification and you know it.”

“How?” She quipped.

“Because you didn’t make any time to visit me. You were on the road all the time and you never answered my texts or calls. You had an ego the size of fucking Mars.” Shaking my head, I met her green eyes. “You quit on me and waited for me to do your dirty work.”

Cat bit her lip, her face turning to a scowl. “Bullshit. You refused to come on the road. My career was taking off and you were jealous that I didn’t get roped back into



New Winford's orbit."

My jaw dropped. "God forbid I helped my mom with the store after my dad..."

Raising a hand, Cat shook her head. "Pause. That's not what I'm saying."

"Do you want to clarify?" Asshole was how I wanted to end that sentence. But I decided to ignore the twenty-five-year-old, hurt Cleo begging me to blow this up.

"I'm saying, there were options to hire help and to take time off, that you didn't take. I know that taking the store was always going to be your priority and I respect that." She met my eyes, not backing down from this fight.

There was a pause, silence settling over my apartment. Once again, I was thankful that I didn't have neighbors.

Shaking her head, Cat looked at her feet. "But I told you what I needed to feel invested in coming back here. And you refused to meet me halfway."

"So why didn't you end it yourself?" I swallowed hard. It was a question I'd asked myself for years as I tried to figure out where we went wrong. But if we had any hope of doing things differently this time, I needed to know.

Cat lifted her chin, meeting my gaze again. "Because you were always my person and I didn't want to quit on you. I wasn't ready to walk away."

Before I could think about it for too long, I clenched my jaw. "And this time you are going to walk away?"

"Did I say that?" Cat stood up straight, taking her weight off of the counter behind her back, and walked closer.

“Tommy seems to think so.” I crossed my arms. The last thing I wanted to do was give up my control, but I felt myself desperate to melt in Cat’s green eyes.

Laughing, Cat shook her head. “What if I did want this? What if I was willing to put in the effort to try again, to prove to you that I was never going to leave you? Then what?”

She was saying everything I’d been dreaming of hearing. Can I trust that it’s real?

“I don’t know.” Biting my lip, I looked down at my feet. “I don’t know if I would ever believe you.”

Letting out a sigh, Cat nodded. “Do you want some space?” She’d lowered her voice, trying to be as gentle as possible

“I just need to go for a walk. Is that okay?”

“Of course it is. Do you want me to stay until you get back?” I heard Cat swallow hard, nervous that this would be the last time she saw me. And I couldn’t say I blamed her. I hadn’t been the most committed person since she’d come back to New Winford.

But I nodded. “You can stay. I’ll just be right back.”

Heading for the door, I reached my hand out to hers and gave it a squeeze. I didn’t want to leave her feeling like I was completely out, because I really wasn’t. Grabbing a green, bomber jacket from the front door, I slid my keys into my pocket and walked out.

When I pushed open the metal downstairs door, a cold gust smacked my face. The fall was making itself known now, no longer hesitant to cool the world off. I started

my walk down Main Street, tucking my hands in the jacket's pockets.

As I walked, my mind swirled with possibilities. There was a world in which I couldn't believe a word out of Catherine's mouth. But I knew that would be indulging my most pessimistic impulse.

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I walked past the Chinese food place, its open sign still blinking this late into the evening. Cat and I went on our first date there. A picture of us giddily holding hands as we walked inside came to mind. The warmth of her palm on mine was as fresh to my mind as the food inside.

We didn't have much money, just whatever we'd made at our summer jobs. But Cat never let me pay. Not for the first few months anyway.

Shaking the thought, I kept moving. The brisk air made my cheeks tingle as I moved.

There was another world, where I tried to believe Cat and give this another chance just to have her go back on everything she'd promised. But maybe it would be a pleasant few months before the facade broke.

And even still, maybe I needed to learn this lesson one more time.

Then I passed the florist's shop, the windows dark and the lights inside off. I'd bought Cat a bouquet there for our first Valentine's Day together. But she came inside at the same time and I had to hide behind the shelves of tacky decor while trying not to overhear what she picked for me.

I could still see her gawking at me when I told her the story a few months later, surprised that I could manage to be so sneaky. She told that story to everyone we met.

By the time I reached the intersection of Main Street and Pine Road, my heart rate had settled.

Fucking Cat Collins. Leave it to her to reinfect my mind with endless memories of our time together in this small town. She was right, everywhere I looked I saw her. I'd never be able to escape her, even if I did manage to push her away.

Blowing the air out of my mouth, I nodded as I turned on my heels and walked back to my apartment.

I wasn't sure if it was the cold or my pull to Cat that made my feet move so fast as I made my way down Main Street. By the time my building was in view, I was sprinting down the block, my feet pounding against the cement sidewalks.

Throwing open the downstairs door, I ran up the steps, taking two at a time.

When I unlocked my door and pushed inside, I didn't see Cat in my living room. The kitchen was clean and most of the lights were off. Finn was stationed in his cat tree by the window, likely watching me on my walk.

Please tell me I didn't scare her off. My heart was racing again, my lungs hot from running. I threw off my shoes and jacket before moving down the short hallway.

Laying in my bed, Cat looked up at the ceiling.

"Hi." I swallowed as I crossed the room and threw myself in the bed. Too embarrassed to look at her, I put my back to her and put my body in an S-shape.

From behind me, Cat pressed her body against mine and wrapped her arm around my front. Brushing my blonde hair off of my face, Cat brought her lips close to my ear and whispered, "I'm not going anywhere, Cleo. I lost you once, I'm not losing you again."

I felt a weight lift off of my shoulders as my body sunk into her embrace. Her body

warmed me from the chill of the mid-fall cold. Maybe we could make this work.

34

CAT

A few days after our fight, Cleo and I had mostly gone back to normal. But I could tell that they were waiting for another shoe to drop. And I was hoping that this phone call might help.

The phone rang a few times before I heard their voice. “Hi, everything okay?”

“Yeah, are you busy?” I asked while sitting in my Mercedes.

Cleo took a moment to think. After a second, I could hear some rustling through their end. “Not really. I can close up early.”

Biting my lip, I closed my eyes. “Are you sure?”

“Just tell me where to meet you.” Cleo giggled as they moved through the store.

“Done.” I pulled my phone from my ear and sent them a text with just an address. “See you soon.” I hung up the phone after they said goodbye, anxiously tapping my fingers against the leather steering wheel.

I wasn’t sure how they would react to the news but I needed to find something concrete to convince them that I was going to be spending significant time in New Winford.

It only took them a few minutes to walk the ten blocks from Cleo’s Shelf to the unremarkable house in town. Once I saw them, I hopped out of my car and waved.

Their face was wrinkled with confusion as they tried to catch up.

“Did you bring me here to kill me?” They teased.

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Rolling my eyes, I kissed them. “No, I just wanted to show you something.”

We walked up to the front door together, taking the few wood steps up to a landing. Pulling a pair of keys from my pocket, I unlocked the door. And held it open for Cleo. They reluctantly stepped inside, looking around the empty unit. I could tell they were searching for something, a hidden mystery.

“What do you think?” I licked my lips as I followed behind them. It was a cute house, the only unit in the building which left some privacy. The kitchen had been remodeled, with sparkling new appliances and fresh paint on every wall.

“I mean, it’s a nice place but I don’t see why we’re here.” Cleo turned around to look at me. As soon as they saw my face, their jaw dropped. “Did you buy this fucking house?”

Scoffing, I shook my head. “God, no.” After a brief pause, I let a small smile creep onto my face. “But I did rent it.”

“What?” Cleo gawked. “Are you serious? Why? What about your place in the city?”

I waved off their concern. “I’m going to sublet it in the off-season and let the rent pay the mortgage. But this way, I won’t have to crash at my brother’s place anymore.”

Stunned, Cleo wandered around the living room more. “Did you do this for me?”

I hesitated. “It was a factor. But not the only reason. I like being here, it’s quiet and it’s easy to stay on track here when I’m not playing. And I wanted you to see that I



have every intention of sticking around.”

Besides, it was a nice place. It was right in town which kept me within a few minutes of Daniel, Meredith, and the kids but also let me have some life in town. Cleo being right down the road was certainly a bonus.

“You know you don’t have to do this, right? We can make it work without you living here.” Cleo’s chest rose and fell quickly, their nerves ramping up.

“I know. But I want to.” I crossed the distance between us and wrapped my arms around their waist. Looking into their eyes, I smiled before pressing my lips into theirs. Like the first time, electricity lit up my body at their touch.

Their hands drifted down my back, hovering just above my ass. Our kisses grew more intense, our tongues beginning to press into each other’s mouths.

Moving me toward the counter, Cleo held me close. Their grip was tight and sent a whimper through my throat. Before I knew it, I was being pressed against the edge of the marble countertop.

Cleo gripped my thighs and lifted me onto the ledge. “I really want you.”

“Then take me.” I groaned between kisses as Cleo used their body to spread my legs. My center was already glowing slick at their touch.

Not needing more direction, Cleo’s hands moved from my ass to the button of my jeans. They swiftly undid them, without breaking our lips apart. Hungry for me, they pushed my chest back. My palms pressed flat against the cold stone of the counter.

Tugging on the denim, Cleo started to pull them over my ass as I lifted myself up just a few inches. I moaned as the fabric slipped over my legs.

“Fuck, you’re hot.” My head rolled back as Cleo bent down to slide the jeans onto the floor.

“I won’t wait any longer.” Cleo shook their head, letting their fingers touch the pink, mesh thong covering my folds. As soon as they felt my warmth through the fabric, their head dropped to my shoulder. “Oh my god, you’re already soaked.”

I knew it was true, feeling my pleasure covering the panties.

Pushing the mesh to the side, Cleo pressed their fingers into my folds and moved them in wide, gentle circles. My clit throbbed at their touch, soft moans leaving my lips as my head rolled back.

Athud sounded as my skull met the wood of the cabinets. “Fuck.”

“Are you okay?” Cleo looked up, not stopping their fingers from pushing back my hood.

Nodding, I moaned. “Yes, fuck me.”

Smirking up at me, Cleo licked their lips and let their fingers slide down my slit toward my entrance. Their eyes rolled back as they met my excitement. As they watched my face, they massaged two fingers inside of me. I felt my channel stretch for them, allowing their knuckles to rub my G-spot.

“Right there,” I begged as my hips started to rock along their hand. My body had anticipated their touch for hours, the thought of having this place to ourselves sending waves of excitement through me.

Cleo let a low rumble of a laugh escape their lungs as they watched me grind against their body. My thighs trembled as they tried to stay open. Luckily, Cleo’s body kept

them from closing. With each thrust, Cleo massaged my perfect spot and brought me closer and closer to my peak.

A part of me wanted to hold off, wanting to make this last forever. But they were far too gorgeous and I was far too excited to have any control over when I fell over that cliff.

Leaning my head against the cabinet, I let my body take over. Goosebumps rose on my skin as they kept pace, slipping in another finger.

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“Fuck.” I grunted as the extra girth forced my eyes closed. There was nothing I loved more than taking all of them.

It wasn’t long until I felt my body tensing, a wave of pleasure rising as a scream left my chest. I tried to keep my hips moving. But when Cleo noticed me struggling to maintain the rhythm, they used their free hand to guide my hips on their hands.

The feeling of their strong hand on my waist was enough to send me over the edge.

Groaning, my legs pressed together as I started to shudder. My body caved in on itself, hunching over Cleo and digging into their broad back.

“Good, just like that.” They whispered into my ear, a light chuckle escaping their lungs.

“Shit.” I felt my entire body release against them. With a final shake, the tension in my muscles eased as did my grip on Cleo’s body.

As I caught my breath, I kissed their shoulder.

Cleo, with a cheeky smile on their lips, looked around the apartment. “You did sign the lease, right?”

Lightly smacking their arm, I rolled my eyes. “Of course I did, you creep.”

Pulling back, I licked my lips. “But there’s one more thing I want in my new apartment.”

CLEO

Suspicious, I raised an eyebrow. “What else could you possibly want?”

Cat pushed me back, closing her legs and hopping off the countertop. Instead of putting her jeans back on, still in a puddle on the floor, Cat grabbed my hand to the center of the living room and pulled me down to the floor.

She laid on her back and winked at me.

Before I got on top of her, I let my loose linen pants fall to the floor. I didn’t bother leaving my bikini-cut panties on, sending them to the hardwood too.

“You can read my mind,” Cat smirked as she watched me move.

Lowering myself onto her center, still warm from my touch, I felt her hips thrust into me. “Fuck.” I moaned as I settled onto my knees.

It was moments like this that our history became so clear, even now we knew exactly what the other wanted. I knew exactly how to please her. Placing her hands on my waist, Cat gently bounced me along with the gentle pulses of their hips.

I felt the air between us shrink and expand with each thrust, the feeling making my clit throb as if her hands were massaging the hard bead. The hair around her center tickled my slit as I rubbed against it, letting my slit rub along hers.

“Oh god.” Cat’s eyes closed as she rested her head on the bare floor.

Rocking my hips, I felt my pleasure begin to drip down and mix with hers. The

feelings made me whimper as I put my hand up in my hair. Lifting my shirt over my shoulders, I peeled off my shirt and threw it across the room.

Without a bra in her way, Cat reached her hands up and grabbed the rounded flesh. She put the hardened nipple between her fingers and pinched them lightly. A wave of pleasure shot down from my breasts to my clit.

“You’re so fucking hot.” I groaned as the rhythm between us picked up. Cat’s thrusts grew stronger, letting me bounce on her center even more.

Having already gotten myself worked up by touching her, I wasn’t going to last long. I looked down at her green eyes and moaned. I knew I’d never seen anyone as beautiful as she was, especially covered in sweat.

Grunting from the exertion, Cat asked, “Do you want my fingers?”

I shook my head. “I just want you to fuck me like this.” Each time my hips landed on her center, I rocked them against the solid bone of her pelvis. With each rub, my clit grew harder and more sensitive.

Soon, I pinned my hips down and put all of my energy into pressing against her thrusts. Even without her inside me, I felt like I could feel the pressure building in my channel.

My legs trembled as I peaked, letting myself lose all control. A scream ripped through my throat as I gave myself to Cat entirely.

“Yes, god, yes.” Cat panted as she pressed into me harder, chasing down my clit with her center.

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Seizing, my body tensed against her before releasing. As soon as the moment passed, I fell to her. My palms slammed into the wood behind Cat's head as I planted a kiss on her full lips.

Catching my breath, I looked down at her with a grin I couldn't contain. "Living this close to you is going to be incredibly dangerous for my productivity."

After Cat and I got dressed and chatted about how she planned to lay out the new place, we went our separate ways. Despite how much I loved spending time with her, she was too distracting to get anything done.

And I'd finally hit a good pace with my writing. Instead of getting hung up on plotting, I was letting the story unfold before me. Of course it would need more drafts but I was just happy to be back at my keyboard.

I lifted my hands from the laptop to check my phone. It was a message from Bri:

Made the playoff schedule. Trying to put your professional ass team up against the strongest teams to make it as fair as possible.

Looking at the brackets, it made a lot of sense. Most of the more casual teams were set to face off early on to see who was a rising star. From there, they would start working through the more serious groups.

Our team had agreed that we'd only let Cat pitch one inning per game until the Championships. After all, the whole point was to have fun.

And from what Cat said, the fundraising scheme was going well. They'd put up posters around town and a bunch of people had come into the bookstore and told me they'd come watch the game.

Mom seemed to have been right, letting Cat in was helpful. And every day she kept proving just how important to my life she was.

My eyes widened at the dates on Bri's brackets. No way the playoffs are next weekend.

But they were. The league stacked all of the playoff games on one weekend to not stretch the season too late into the fall. We never knew when the first snow would come each year but it was better to not risk it.

A loud buzz sounded from downstairs. Standing from my desk, I crossed my apartment to the intercom. "Hello?"

"Delivery." A voice sounded from the other side.

My face lit up as I realized what it was. Rushing downstairs, I grabbed the package from the driver. "Thank you!"

He nodded as he disappeared back to his truck. Turning on my heels, I took the heavy box back upstairs and slammed my front door.

Giddy, I grabbed a pair of scissors from the kitchen and sliced at the clear tape. Under a layer of packing paper, dozens of multi-colored shirts were neatly stacked inside. Reaching for my phone, I typed out a text back to Bri:

Perfect, thanks. Good timing.



I attached the photo of the opened box and hit send, awhoosh sounding from my computer.

It was all getting so real. And my nerves were growing at the thought of Cat's big performance. Soon enough, we would know whether she still had a professional career or if she was really done.

But I had faith. I'd never seen a player improve the way she had.

And if I had grown to believe in her, who wouldn't?

36

CAT

The bookstore was growing busier by the day as the days got colder. Taking a break from my training, I offered to help Cleo restock the shelves. With a stack of used mystery novels in my hand, I wandered down each aisle and slowly slotted the books into place.

"Remember the Dewey Decimal System!" Cleo hollered from the register.

Rolling my eyes, I nodded. "I got it on lock, I swear." I wasn't entirely sure I was true. But I knew if I was wrong, no customer would notice.

Once my stack had depleted, all of the recent donations filed away into their new homes, I wandered around to the register and smiled at Cleo.

They narrowed their eyes at me suspiciously. Worried about my shoulder, they were watching my every movement going into Championship weekend. We were less than a week away, our team having crushed the playoffs easily.

“You okay?” Their forehead wrinkled.

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Performatively making a wide circle with my arm to test it out, I nodded. “Feels strong.” But I leaned on the wood counter and winked. “You weren’t so worried about the shoulder when I was carrying you to bed last night.”

Cleo took the book in their hand and smacked my bicep lightly. “Lower your voice.” A deep blush took over their cheeks as they tucked a blonde strand of hair behind their ear.

Before I could reply, I felt a tap on my shoulder. “Cat Collins?” An excited voice came from behind me.

Whipping around, I smiled at the nervous fan. “Hi, how are you?”

“I’m just a huge fan, I just wanted to say hi. I’m driving down from Sugarties on Saturday for the Championships.” The woman rocked on her heels.

Clicking my tongue, I nodded. “Thanks for the support. We really appreciate it.” I looked over at Cleo who didn’t seem to know how to react. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“Donna.” The woman stretched out her hand to shake mine. “It’s really an honor, I’ve watched you for years.”

I waved my hand. “That’s really sweet of you. Do you play?”

With a humble shrug, Donna looked down at her feet. “I used to.”

Excited, I turned to Cleo. “Well, this is perfect. This is Cleo, they are super involved in the rec league’s organization. I bet you have a team near you.” As I turned to Cleo, I wrapped my arm around their waist. We hadn’t talked about any labels just yet, but I could sense their concern.

The fan interactions were always odd for them, unsure how possessive of me they needed to be.

“Oh, perfect!” Donna shook Cleo’s hand. “Could I have some sort of contact information for you?”

“Of course.” Pulling out a post-it note from under the counter, Cleo wrote down their number and handed it back to Donna.

Sighing, Donna put the note in her pocket. “It was great to meet you both, thanks again!” She walked out of the store, the bell above the door announcing her departure.

Once she was gone, I turned my attention back to Cleo and stepped closer to them. “A little jealous, are we?”

Rolling their eyes, Cleo licked their lips. “You’re a hot commodity, Catherine. But you did a good job.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” I winked as I pulled them into me, planting a kiss on their lips. All I wanted to do was make them feel reassured, and remind them that I would be here no matter what.

But as I pulled away, I caught a glimpse of the calendar behind Cleo’s head. We were just a few days away from the Championships. And despite it being a rec league game, it could be the most decisive game I’d ever played.

And whatever happened would affect mine and Cleo's lives forever. My stomach turned at the thought.

I hope I've done enough to prepare.

37

CAT

Walking across the damp grass together, Cleo and I made our way to the field. The Championships were the next day and this would be our last practice for the season.

It was odd to see just how different we were now compared to just a couple of months ago. But as we walked into the dugout, our sneakers crunching the sand under our feet, the reality of the time we'd spent together really set in.

"What the hell?" Cleo gawked as they turned toward the field.

A smile snuck onto my face as I followed their gaze. The field had been freshly made over, new sand had been laid around the diamond. New, bright white bases drew our eyes to each corner of the field.

Cleo whipped their head around to look at me. "Did you do this?"

With a shrug, I sat down on the bench to put on my cleats. "Maybe."

"That's insane." Cleo shook their head as they slipped on their cleats. I'd never seen them move so quickly for anything except getting on base.

Once their shoes were on, Cleo ran out of the dugout, using the metal pole at the end of the chain link fence to slingshot themselves onto the field. "How did you get this

done without me noticing?”

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Chuckling, I followed behind Cleo. But I leaned against the fence post and watched them jog around the field. “I just reached out to the town and asked how much it would cost.”

“You paid for it yourself?” Cleo gawked at me as they came to a halt near the pitcher’s mound. All of the new sand had been tamped down just right after being put in place.

“Yeah, but I had the town do the work so it’d all be done to their codes.” I crossed my arms, nervous that Cleo would hate it. They had been so reluctant to take my help at all over the last few months. “I just knew that the league would never have the money to actually fix the fields. So I thought I’d give y’all a leg up.”

Cleo still couldn’t believe their eyes as they crossed the field to meet me at the fence.

Watching them get closer to me, I swallowed hard. “Besides, this way, New Winford has the best field so everyone will want to play here.”

Once they were close enough, Cleo threw their arms over my neck and whispered. “How sexy, less drive time.”

“I think so.” I winked as I pulled their waist closer to me, letting our lips meet. “We should get practicing.” Luckily, it was a Friday which meant the paparazzi who had finally caught on to our early Monday morning sessions had no idea we’d be out here.

After a moment, we separated and grabbed our equipment from the dugout. Cleo put on all of their catcher’s gear including the black pad that covered their entire torso.

When we'd first started training, my throws weren't strong enough to warrant wearing the entire set. But now, I was nearing my old professional speeds.

We walked out onto the field, both of us taking our places. Stepping onto the brand-new pitcher's mound made my chest tight. It felt like a pro field, the closest I'd been to one since my injury.

I put my old, worn glove on my hand. A far better fit, the glove was much easier for me to use. I knew I'd have to get a new one eventually if I had any hope of preserving whatever was left of this one. But for now, the familiarity – just like having Cleo catch – was more valuable.

Starting with a few warm-up throws, I felt my muscles loosen with each throw. I'd made a point to go back to the gym and strengthen my body. It was a luxury to spend all of my days trying to get back to my peak physical shape. And standing on the mound today, I felt like I had succeeded.

With every throw, I felt my abs supporting every movement, my thighs holding my knees in the correct spot.

"Ready?" Cleo nodded as they prepared to crouch down.

"Yes, ma'am." I smiled as I took my position on the strip of new rubber.

Squatting, Cleo settled into themselves and held up their glove for my throw.

I took in a deep breath, settling my lungs as I tried to stay in this moment. It was easy for my mind to think about the next day, to try and predict how the Championships would go and what would happen after I proved my skills again.

But that wasn't why I was here. Instead, I watched Cleo's glove and turned my body



forward, holding the leather close to my chest. I felt the stitches of the softball in my right hand, letting my calloused fingers remember the ball's weight.

Starting my wind up, I lifted my arm overhead while stepping forward. As the ball and my arm dropped down my side to my hip, I released the ball. Following through, I dragged my right leg behind me to finish the throw.

I watched the ball fling toward Cleo, who kept their glove just below their chin.

Clap. The ball met their glove as a cloud of dust rose from the leather.

In one fluid motion, Cleo grabbed the ball from inside the glove and stood before throwing it back to me. "You can do it faster."

"It was my first pitch." I rolled my eyes as I lifted my glove to catch the incoming neon ball.

"When did you start making so many excuses?" Cleo winked under the metal face guard.

Scoffing at them, I got back into position. I knew I could always count on Cleo to bring the sass. It's why I'd asked them to help me to begin with, a little bullying went a long way.

Each throw grew faster than the last as we kept practicing. It wasn't until I was consistently throwing faster than sixty miles per hour that Cleo allowed me to stop. The idea of throwing something that fast at a recreational league's Championships made me laugh.

"You're going to have to turn it way down at the game." Cleo shook their head as they changed out of the catcher's gear.

“No kidding,” I teased. “But we can go all out for warm-ups and between innings.”

Stepping closer to me, Cleo sighed. “Plus, all they’re really looking for is progress. They want to know you’re doing better and back to your old self. Even if your pitch is a little off, you’re still the best in the pros.”

Clicking my tongue, I met their blue eyes. “Aw, you really think so?”

Cleo rolled their eyes before putting their palm on my neck and tugging me closer. “I know so. And this is the only time I’ll say it.”

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I closed the gap between us and kissed them again. Their lips were soft, a light, salty sweat lingering just above their mouth. Wrapping my arms around them, I felt my heart begin to race. We'd spent far too much time in each other's beds to be this excited still.

But I felt like I'd unlocked a passion that had been buried for the last five years and I wasn't about to cage it again.

Just as Cleo's breath grew ragged with anticipation, they pulled away. "We still have to work on your batting before we do... this." Their eyes wandered up and down my body.

Of course they were right, but I hated admitting it. "Fine."

With a wink, Cleo took their glove out to the pitcher's mound. I watched their ass sway with each step, wanting to run out there and throw them down on the grass. But instead, I grabbed my bat from the dugout and headed for home plate.

After tomorrow, there would be plenty of time for that. But for now, I was on a mission, and I was running out of time.

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CLEO

I wokeup to the sun blaring in my eyes and an empty bed. Agreeing that being together the night before the most important game of Cat's life was a bad idea, she

had stayed at her brother's house.

Reaching for my nightstand, I clicked "stop" on my alarm and rolled out of bed. I had a few hours before I needed to head to the field but I got dressed anyway. I slipped on the slick new jersey with the number 26 on the back and a pair of freshly dry-cleaned softball pants. Slipping on the striped mid-calf socks, I put my feet in my slides before heading out to my living room.

Finn moaned up at me from the floor, begging for his breakfast. Grabbing a can of wet food, I filled his bowl and set it on the ground while my coffee brewed.

Once I'd poured myself a steaming cup, I headed over to my desk. As much as I hated to admit it, it had been so helpful to have a motivation to write. Knowing that the extra money – if I managed to sell the book – could help me run the shop or take some time off made for a good reason to get to work.

If Cat wasn't going to slip into old habits, neither would I. We both deserved better and I was prepared to put in more effort to see her life outside of New Winford.

I popped open my computer and put on some music. Taking a deep breath, I let my fingers lower to the keyboard. The story had taken its own shape, one I never could have imagined.

I tried to push away any thoughts that invaded my mind.

But as I took a sip of coffee, I looked around my empty apartment. I'd gotten used to seeing Cat most mornings. A part of me was still afraid of what this looked like when she went back for spring training.

Can I go back to being alone? Of course I knew I could but I hated the thought. I'd already spent so many years waking up in an empty bed, dreaming of Catherine.

I set my mug back down and tried to write just a little more. I needed to leave for the game soon and I knew I wouldn't get much done for the next couple of days.

So I turned off my logical brain, letting the words flow from my fingers and trusting my instincts.

Another alarm blared twenty minutes later, reminding me to get out of the house.

Closing the computer, I put my coffee cup in the sink and gave Finn a few pets. "Be a good boy and wish me luck."

A gentle purr came from his little chest as he nuzzled his face into mine.

Having packed my equipment bag the night before, I walked over to the front door and threw on my sneakers. I tossed the bag over my shoulder and held my keys. I locked both doors as I left my building and headed to the back parking lot.

It was shockingly cold out, the late October air refusing to warm with the sun. Rubbing my arms, I opened my car door, turned it on, and blasted the heat.

It was almost 10 am, the game would start in a little over an hour. But I was meeting the other recreational league organizers to set up the donation station and make sure the field was in good shape before everyone arrived.

I drove my Corolla down the road toward the small park. The parking lot closest to the field wasn't as empty as I'd expected. From the looks of it, the neighboring soccer field was finishing up a little league game.

When I got out of my car, my bag over my shoulder, I waved at the few women on the softball field.

“Did you know about this?” Carol, a woman in an orange jersey, gestured to the field.

Nodding, I tried not to blush. “Yeah, it’s a gift from Cat. She just appreciates us helping her and wanted us to have a nice field.”

Carol raised her eyebrows. “Well, you’re a lucky person then. I bet she spoils you plenty.”

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I nudged Carol's arm and ignored her. "So, should we get started?"

With that, the three other players and I got to work. We set up a small folding table near the Backstop, draping a cheap tablecloth over the plastic top. Carol pulled out a small box with a slit in the top for cash donations. I could tell Bri had made the piece with some spare wood in her shop.

Once the table was in place, our players started to arrive for warmups. Blue and orange jerseys speckled the renewed field. Some of the women had brought their family to watch the Championship game.

Grabbing my bag from the bleachers, I brought it into the dugout and started to greet my teammates.

"Ready to kick some ass, Cleo?" A booming voice came from the entrance of the dugout while I tied my shoes.

Smirking, I looked up to Bri's goofy grin. Behind her, I saw Sarah and her kids settling into the small bleachers.

Once my laces were tied, I stood from the bench and hugged Bri. "Only if you are."

Snapping my fingers, I looked around the dugout and raised my voice. "Hey, y'all. Just a reminder, Cat is only going to pitch in a few innings. So don't think we'll just sail through this Championship, cool?"

The team gave a collective nod as they headed out to the field to play some warm-up

catch.

“I still think we’ll sail through.” Her raspy voice sent a shiver down my spine, leaning against the dugout wall. And when I turned to meet her green eyes, Cat smiled at me. “Hey, gorgeous.”

I shook my head as a blush took over my face. “Hi.”

She crossed the distance and placed a gentle kiss on my cheek as she set her bag down on the bench. Her teal jersey tucked into her pants, Cat bent over and pulled out her cleats.

“I’m going to start warming up with Bri if you’re going to be a minute.”

“Please,” Cat nodded as she started to change her shoes.

As I walked out of the dugout, I called over my shoulder, “Don’t forget, you’re handing the first pitch and inning.”

Swallowing hard, Cat let the air escape her lungs. “Yep.”

I wanted to give her some space, a little room to find her center. So, with my glove in hand, I walked out onto the grass and threw a softball to Bri. “You brought your girlfriend already? Y’all might as well be married.”

Rolling her eyes, Bri lifted her glove to catch the throw. “You’re a punk.”

As we warmed up, the stands started to fill up. I saw my mom’s figure pull out a folding chair and put it on the grass near the chain link fence, wanting to be close to the action. My heart warmed at the support.



But as I parsed through the growing crowd, I searched for Cat's team representative. What if they don't show?

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CAT

There was only so long that I could hide in the dugout. And when the ref blew his whistle, I knew my time was up.

Swallowing hard, I pulled my old, peeling glove from my bag and gave it a smack. "You better come through for me," I whispered as I slipped it under my armpit.

Our team – nicknamed the Teal Steel for the purposes of this Championship – took the field, each player finding their position. I tried to keep my head down as I approached the pitcher's mound, a light clap coming from the stands.

The umpire wiped off the long rubber strip at the top of the sand pile. When I got closer, I held out my hand to shake hers. She wore a navy blue uniform and a matching cap, smiling as she shook my hand. "Good game today. Protect that arm, alright? We don't like injuries here."

"Of course, ump. Thanks for being here, it means a lot to the league." I nodded, placing my other hand over our shake.

Once the umpire walked toward home plate, I felt a warm palm on my formerly-injured shoulder. "You ready?" Their gentle voice calmed my nerves.

Letting out a sigh, I shrugged. "Not quite, but I've gotta rip the bandage off at some point."

“That’s true.” Cleo nodded and looked into my eyes, their endless blues a sea I could’ve been lost in for decades. “Just remember, it’s you and me out there. The rest of it doesn’t matter.”

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They were right. I'd have to do everything I could to stay centered. If I managed that, the rest would follow. "Let's get it done."

"Atta girl." Cleo winked as they headed toward home plate.

I scuffed my cleats in the sand, getting some traction on them as everyone took their place. Trying to calm the blood pounding in my ear, I closed my eyes and ducked my head. I hoped the bill of my cap would cover my face as I took a moment to breathe.

"Batter up!" The umpire called.

Listening closer, I let myself take in the day. The sun warmed my skin as a cool breeze blew over me, my long hair lightly tickling the back of my neck. From the stands, I could hear kids playing, adult chatter, and the sound of cars in the parking lot crunching gravel under their tires.

Opening my eyes, I looked up to the plate where a woman in an orange jersey measured herself up to the plate. Her bat twirled in her hand as she got into position.

Already squatted down, Cleo was covered in their gear. But even from the forty-three-foot distance, I could see their eyes shining at me. I nodded, this is what we'd work for all season.

Before I got into position, I scanned the stands behind them. Just past the backstop, a crowd of locals settled into the bleachers. My heart stopped when my eyes stopped on a familiar face. Sitting toward the edge of the small set of metal bleachers was my old co-captain. She wore sunglasses and a black cap to hide her face.

But I recognized her immediately.

Shaking the feeling, I knew the best thing I could do was stay light. So my eyes kept moving, this time landing on my brother and his family. As Meredith tried to wrangle the kids, Daniel waved at me and pumped his fists.

It made me chuckle as I rolled my shoulders back.

No more stalling. Go time.

Nodding to the umpire, Cleo, and the batter, everyone quieted.

The batter lifted her metal bat and kept her eye on the neon softball in my hand.

Cleo settled onto their heels, holding up their glove for my pitch.

Nice and easy.

I held my peeling glove and the ball to my chest and took in a big breath. With my bare hand, I gripped the softball and began my windup with. Arching my arm backward over my head and allowing it to swiftly fall down to my hip while taking a large step forward, I released my grip right as my hand was parallel with my body.

My right leg dragged behind me as the ball hurtled toward home plate.

The batter swung wildly at the pitch, more concerned with getting hit by the speeding ball than actually making contact with it. Cleo's glove closed around the ball, a loudsmack coming from the leather.

"Strike!" The umpire hollered.

Throwing the ball back to me, Cleo hooted. “That’s it, Collins.”

I smiled as I caught the ball and got back into position.

My chest warmed with a strange feeling. Trying not to get caught up in myself, I pitched the ball again. I kept my form as close as possible.

This time, the metal batclinkedagainst the hurting ball and sent it flying into the outfield. From home plate, the batter took off toward first base. But our outfielders were already underneath the ball, ready to catch it.

Once the ball clapped into their gloves, the umpire clenched her fist near her head. “Out!”

The stands clapped as the next batter made their way onto the field.

Cleo took the time to stretch their legs and point at me. “Let’s fucking go, baby!”

I couldn’t stop myself from laughing as I shook my head. The warm feeling came back to my lungs. It was something I hadn’t felt in years. Cleo had done something miraculous: they had brought back my love of the game.

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CLEO

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The game was moving smoothly by the fifth inning. Despite Cat pitching every couple of innings, the Orange Dangers were doing a great job. The score fluctuated every inning and the crowd was amped up.

When our team went up to bat at the top of the sixth inning, I would take a peek at the donation box. Lots of people were stepping up and placing money in the wood slot.

By the time we were heading back to the field, Cat was beaming. Not because we were destroying the other team, but because we were having a great time. Cat had run their new glove over the Dangers's dugout when she realized one of their players left theirs at home.

And now, as I put my metal face mask back on, I watched as Cat jogged out to the pitcher's mound. Her ass looked amazing in the tight white pants, slightly stained by the sand. In the fourth inning, she slid into third base in an attempt to steal a base. The play left a mark on more than just her ego.

I shook out my legs as I neared home plate. "You doing okay out here, ump?"

Nodding, the umpire smirked. "You're all a joy to watch. If you ever need a volunteer to umpire, give me a call."

"You're too kind." None of us would ever take her up on the offer but it was sweet nonetheless.

Once Cat settled on the mound, the umpire called out the next batter and I squatted behind the plate. I wiped the sweat off my right palm onto my pants. Flexing the

glove open and closed, I watched Cat's motions closely.

As she smiled down the line at me, I felt the air leave my lungs.

The reality of the game smacked me in the chest. What were the odds that I'd ever end up out here with her like this? I certainly wouldn't have guessed it would be possible even three months ago. But here we were, just like we'd done since middle school, ready to start another inning.

I'd spent a lot of time the last few weeks trying to think about the future more. But this was a moment that deserved my presence. So I took in a crisp breath as the stands quieted and smiled.

I nodded to Cat.

As she wound up the pitch, I watched her every movement; the way her arm made a wide arch around her body; the way her strong legs pressed forward; the grunt that came from her mouth as she made the motion. It was magnificent, a professional at work.

And before I knew it, the bat was clinking against the ball and a flash of orange took off toward first base. The ball soared into the outfield, splitting the difference between the center fielder and the left fielder. Both of them raced to get under the ball, but it fell to the ground instead.

The batter took off toward second as the shortstop held their glove open for the throw from the outfield. By the time our center fielder, Vanessa, was hurling the ball to the infield, the batter was careening toward third.

"Go, go, go!" The Dangers's coach yelled from the patch of sand next to the base.

But before they could make it, the shortstop caught the throw and tapped the orange-jerseyed player.

“Out!” The umpire clenched her fist.

The field reset as the excitement of the dynamic play eased.

“Great work!” I called out to the field.

Squatting back down, another player waltzed out to the field. I checked in with Cat, noticing her shaking out her arm. She was playing too hard, the strain of a more serious game starting to show.

But as the batter squared up to the rubber, irregular pentagon, Cat put her game face back on. The new batter stepped up to the base, a helmet obscuring most of her face. I’d seen her play before and knew she was a bit of a powerhouse. Hopefully, Cat had noticed the same thing.

As Cat got into position, readying the ball at her chest, I lifted my glove just below my face.

Starting the pitch, Cat stepped forward and windmilled the ball out of her hand. I kept my eye on it but it disappeared at the sound of a discordant dink. Just as I was looking up, a neon orb came slamming down into my helmet.

“Shit,” I grunted as I fell over. Lifting my mask, I felt around my face. My nose wasn’t moving. That’s a good sign.

Before I could finish assessing the damage, I could hear Cat’s feet running from the pitcher’s mound, her cleats digging into the dirt, and then the sand.



She basically slid into a kneel, looking at my face. “Cle, you okay?” Her chest was heaving when I looked down and met her green eyes.

Nodding, I blinked quickly. “I think so, just stunned.”

The batter leaned down, placing a hand on my shoulder. “I’m so sorry, do you want some ice?”

I considered it for a moment, but before I answered, I turned to look at Cat’s concerned face. “How do I look?”

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A nervous smile crept onto her cheeks. “Stunning as ever.” My heart fluttered. Even in the middle of her most important game, she stopped the world to check on me. At that moment, I’d never felt sillier. I couldn’t believe I’d ever doubted she would show up for me.

If she thought I looked unharmed, I was going to trust it. Looking up at the batter, I smiled. “No need to worry, shit happens.”

Standing up, I nodded to the umpire. “I’m good, let’s do it.” I flicked the metal guard back over my face and waved to the crowd who clapped for me.

The umpire returned to her place behind me. “Let’s play ball!”

With a wink, Cat made her way back to the pitcher’s mound. She put her game face on. After all, we had a Championship to win.

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CAT

Our team huddled in the dugout at the top of the seventh inning.

Bri clapped her hands together and leaned into the group. “Alright, fuckers. We’re tied in the last inning. No one gets on base, understood?”

“Shouldn’t we let Collins pitch if that’s the strategy?” Marla pursed her lips.

Shaking them off, I put a hand on my shoulder. “This is your guys' game to win. My shoulder is sore and I did what I needed to.”

Cleo nodded. “Exactly. We were winners before Cat got here. We can do this.”

Throwing her hand in the center of the huddle, Bri smirked. “Let’s get this shit.”

The entire team tossed in a hand. I tossed mine in too. On the count of three, the team bounced their hands off each other and toward the roof of the dugout. “Teal Steal!”

With that, everyone ran out onto the field. Cleo stayed in their catcher’s gear, having completely recovered from the foulball earlier in the game. I ran to right field, ready to catch whatever came my way.

But as I took my place in the outfield, there was a muffled quality to the whole space. It almost felt like the first day I’d come to the field when I’d sat in those very bleachers and watched the love of my life pretend not to see me.

And now, as I stood in the freshly mowed grass, I listened to the distant sounds of the game. The Steals’s main pitcher was back at the mound, giving the batter hell already. With each swing of the bat, the sound of the softball in the metal felt like a distant dream.

I tried to pay close attention, ready to spring into action at every hit. It wasn’t long before a ball came hurtling to my position. I hustled to get under it but was a little too slow, my hustle this late in the game waning. But when I reached it and scooped it into my glove, I launched the ball to second base where the shortstop was already waiting – glove open – for my throw.

“Out!” The umpire’s distant call managed to reach my ears.

There was a cheer from the stands.

Watching the game move on, a part of me thought that I could do this forever. Spending my days out here, with no stakes, and a gorgeous person waiting for me after wasn't so bad. I feared I wouldn't be able to go back, that walking away from New Winford – even just for a season – would be too hard.

I'd gotten used to dinner at Daniel's house and spending weekends with Lily and Jacob.

I felt my chest tighten as another pitch left the mound.

Watching it soar through the air, I shook my head. But I fucking love this game. I bite my cheek. When it really came down to it, I didn't have much of a choice. I wasn't done playing the field.

Besides, I knew New Winford – and its incredible bookseller – wasn't going anywhere.

42

CLEO

“Out!” The umpire called, ending the top of the seventh inning.

The Teal Steals ran into the dugout, excitement bubbling. We'd managed to hold off our opponents from scoring a single point, meaning we were still tied. With one at-bat left, all we needed was a single player to cross home plate to win it all.

Marla read out the batting order and our first batter got out onto the field, swinging her bat as we waited for the Dangers to start the inning.

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I sat on the bench next to Cat, my leg shaking with nerves.

“I thought it was just for fun.” Cat winked as she put a reassuring hand on my leg.

“Well, it is... but winning is the most fun.” Wiggling my eyebrows, I nudged her shoulders as I watched our batter step up to home base.

Everyone in the dugout leaned forward as the ball went into play. Our eyes were peeled on the action, unable to look away. But that didn’t stop anyone from chatting.

Bri, standing on deck, looked at Cat. “I hear you rented a place in town. Tired of being a leech on your brother?”

“Pretty much. I thought I might need more of a base here.” Cat put her arm on the back of the bench, not quite touching me but letting me know she was there.

Nodding, Bri walked out onto the field as the umpire called an out. “That’s what I like to hear.”

I leaned over to Cat. “Don’t let her bother you. She was in a love triangle with Sarah and a billionaire like two months ago.”

But before she could answer, Bri stepped up to the plate and the dugout went quiet. It was a nail-biter but on the first pitch, Bri managed to hit a ball into deep left field and get to first base before the softball was back in the pitcher’s hand.

Our next batter went out onto the field, ready to go. I nudged Cat to get up, she was

next up. Grabbing her bat, Cat started breathing heavily, nervous about her last performance. There was a chance she would be the difference between us winning and losing.

She swung her bat slowly a few times, testing out her shoulder after a long game. Before she could get too much practice in, the umpire called another out.

“Shit,” I muttered. Two strikes. One more and we’d have to go into an extra inning.

Shaking her head, Cat put on the bulky batting helmet and headed out to the field.

My body wouldn’t allow me to stay seated, instead, I stood from the creaky bench and laced my fingers into the chain link fence. I watched as Cat pulled on her leather batting gloves, tightening the velcro around her wrists.

My leg shook as she stepped up to the plate. Looking down at her feet, she squared them with the plate, letting the bat sway in her hands as she settled into position.

The pitcher straightened her cap, knowing how important this play was.

Cat was watching this time, ready to evaluate the pitch before taking a swing. So when the first ball came hurtling toward her, she kept her bat in place.

“Strike!” The umpire hollered.

Good work.

Cat stepped back from the plate while the pitcher reset, her forehead wrinkled with tension. When she got back into place, a light scowl covered her face. I spotted her low elbow but just as I was about to call it out, she met my eyes through the fence.

Without a word, she smiled and lifted it before turning back to the pitcher.

Not wanting to give Cat more time to consider what she'd throw, the pitcher started her windup, the neon yellow ball flying toward home. This time, Cat was ready. She swung just as the ball reached home.

Crack. The bat resounded as the ball zipped past the pitcher's right and to the shortstop. Without hesitating, Cat took off for first. Her hands pumped vigorously like she was being chased by a horde of zombies. She kicked up dust with each pound of her feet.

The umpire's arm stretched out her entire wingspan as Cat ran past first base, her foot thumping against the rubber. "Safe!"

"Yes!" I cheered from behind the fence, watching as Cat doubled over to catch her breath.

"Cleo, on deck." Marla nodded to me, ending my celebration a little early.

Our next batter stepped up to the plate, nervous about the weight of the game being on her shoulders. But she took a deep breath and stepped up.

I grabbed a bat from the edge of the concrete wall of the dugout and took a few practice swings while watching the bases. Bri was on second and Cat was on first. All we needed was for one of them to push it home.

If we can just drive the ball far enough out, one of them can make two bases.

With a gentle dink, the batter tipped the ball to the space between the pitcher's mound and the catcher. Taking advantage of the pair's hesitation, Annie took off to first and so did Bri and Cat.

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By the time the pitcher and catcher got themselves in order, the bases were loaded – a teal shirt at every corner of the diamond.

“All you, Cleo.” Marla smacked my back as I headed out onto the field, throwing the sweaty batter’s helmet on my head.

Sighing, I laughed as I walked to home plate. I was never much of a batter, long ago I was a bit better than Cat but that wasn’t saying much. But I knew all I had to do was get it as far out as possible. I just needed to give Bri a chance to make it home without getting out myself.

I nodded to the umpire as I stepped up to the pentagon, dusty from all the gameplay.

Lifting my arms and the bat into place, I took a deep breath. It’s just a game. Behind the pitcher’s head, Cat watched me closely. A smile played at her cheeks, eager to watch one more play on the field with me.

As the pitcher wound up, I prepared for a fastball. But this time, I wanted to surprise her. I wasn’t going to wait to learn her pitch, I’d already figured her out.

So when the ball left her palm and soared toward me, I pulled my arms back and took a swing. I felt the ball lift off the metal bat before I heard the louding of the leather being forced out into the field.

Tossing the bat to the sidelines, I took off. The crowd roared, standing to their feet as the ball kept growing farther and farther into the outfield. Watching it, my pace slowed as my jaw dropped. No fucking way.



Bri, Cat, and Annie moved toward their next base, all eyes on the sky as the neon yellow ball started to sink down. The left fielder sprinted toward the back fence, making a desperate attempt to catch the ball and keep the game tied up. But as the ball crashed to the ground just past the chain link, their hopes were dashed.

Bri and Cat cheered as they jogged around the bases. Like a performance, Bri danced on home plate as she passed over it. Cat rounded third base, shaking her head as she watched me move to first.

She crossed home too, with the crowd erupting behind the backstop.

Knowing I'd locked in the game, I laughed and kept jogging. I rounded second base and lifted my arms, taking in every chant and cheer from the watching crowd. As I made the rounds, the Dangers stuck out their hands for me to high-five.

By the time I was turning from third base to home, the entire Teal Steal had come out onto the field. At the front of them, Cat hooted and hollered with arms. I grinned from ear to ear as I joined my team at home plate. As soon as my foot hit the hard rubber, the team swarmed me and wrapped me in their arms.

"Cle-o! Cle-o! Cle-o!" They screamed.

As the group separated into smaller groups, Cat held my arms and shook her head. "Cleo Fontaine, you are a wonder." There, in front of everyone, Cat's hands met my neck as she pulled me in for a kiss. Our lips pressed together, as the field lit up with excitement.

Once I managed to pull myself away from Cleo, our team lined up across from the Orange Dangers. Walking toward each other, we started the parade of high fives and “good games”.

It might have been my favorite part of the game, a tradition to end the game as a good sport no matter the loss.

Cleo headed the line and filed in not far behind them, happy to let them shine. By the time the formality had finished, each team started to head off the field toward their friends and families.

But some people were waiting for me that I was a little anxious to speak to. I wrapped my arm around Cleo as we walked back to the dugout. “Sorry, I hope it’s okay that I just announced our relationship to like... the entire town.”

As we walked over to the bench, Cleo raised an eyebrow. “Oh, so it’s a relationship now?”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re such a little shit.”

From behind them, I could see my former co-captain and the press crowding the exit. Sighing, I looked at Cleo. “Just give me a second to deal with them?”

“Take your time, I’m packing up.” Cleo waved me off as they started changing into sneakers.

Swallowing hard, I stepped out of the dugout and into the afternoon light. A few sports journalists waited there. But before any of them could get to me, my co-captain, Katie, stepped forward. She brought me in for a quick hug, smacking my back. “Good to see you out there, dude.”

I nodded. “Thanks for coming.”

“So look,” Katie lowered her voice. “I’m going to tell them you’re ready to come back and they’ll be in touch. Cool?”

She dapped me up, saying congrats again.

But before she left, I lifted my hand to stop her. “Katie, just tell them I won’t be back before spring training. If they want to do any press, they’re going to have to come here.”

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Laughing, Katie turned away. “They’ll do whatever you want, captain.”

As soon as she was out of earshot, the press swarmed around me. “How does it feel to be back on the field?”

“Did your shoulder hold up alright?”

“Do you have plans to go back to your life in the city?”

“Are there any stars here that deserve a shot?”

“What’s next for you?”

It was hard to parse through the cacophony. But there were a few I knew I had an answer to. “It feels great, this was a real homecoming and I needed it more than I could have expected. Shoulder is great, I’m glad it held up.”

Shaking my head, I looked back at the dugout. Cleo leaned against the chain link fence, smiling as they watched me.

“What’s next?” I scoffed, a laugh coming out of my lungs. “I’m going to rest my shoulder over the winter and reconnect with the incredible family and friends I have here. I have a lot of time to make up for.”

Not breaking away from Cleo’s face, the press kept trying to get their questions in. But with two bags over their shoulders, Cleo squeezed through them and handed me mine. “Ready?”

Nodding, I turned back to the journalists. “That’s all for now, guys. Thanks for coming.” I leaned down to Cleo. “How’d we do on donations?”

“Surpassed by a long shot.” Cleo smirked, excited to fill the league’s coffers for next season.

As we walked side by side, I let my hand drop to my side and grab theirs.

Blushing, Cleo smiled up at me. “How much time do we have?”

“As long as we want.”