



Dangerous Play (Hillview University Titans #1)

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Category: Sport

Description: Asking your ex-boyfriend's rival to fake date you should have been easy.

But things get complicated when real sparks start flying in totally fake scenarios.

Ivy

When my soccer captain ex dumped me for my younger sister my whole life shattered. What better way to get back at him than dating his rival? Okay... fake dating him.

But the problem with Maximilan Aarons was that he wasn't at all what I expected him to be. As I got to know him during our romantic dates and he showed me what a real boyfriend should look like, I broke my one and only rule.

I started falling for him.

Somewhere between all the dates and kisses I forgot that this was a mutually beneficial fake relationship and he had his own agenda.

One that didn't include me, just his soccer career.

Rival soccer team's captain? Check.

Cocky playboy reputation? Check.

Smile that has all the girl falling at his feet? Double check.

Totally unexpected cinnamon roll hero personality? Triple check.

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CHAPTER ONE

MAX

Running through the damp grass and dribbling the ball between my feet felt like a walk in the park instead of what it really was, advancing toward the opponent's goal without breaking contact with the ball. Every step got me closer to the goalie and the opponent's team closer to losing.

We were at the end of our extra time, seconds away from moving into penalties to decide who is going to win.

But in my mind, there was no question.

The win belonged to us.

The Titans never lost.

And we weren't going to start now.

My thighs burned from the past 99 and a half minutes I've spent running, but I pushed through the pain and ran faster.

The opposing team tried to catch up, their defenders doing their best to close in on me, but I broke away from them, and it was just me and the goalie.

His dark eyes widened, fearful, because his defensive players were nowhere near to

stop me.

I was unstoppable.

Playing the ball between my feet, I continued to advance toward the goal without a second thought.

I kicked my feet with all the remaining strength and shot the ball, all the while smirking.

Lined straight, the ball landed in the net. Score!

Loud screams and shouts erupted from all around me, and the referee blew the whistle, ending the game.

My teammates rushed at me, jumping on top of me, their weight almost bringing me down.

“You did it, man!” my best friend, Dex, shouted, as he ruffled my hair.

“We did it.” I laughed.

Soccer was a team sport and there was no point being a captain if there was no team.

“I was worried you would let us go to penalties.” Maddox smirked. “You took your sweet-ass time.”

“Yeah, I like to keep everyone on the edge of their seat.”

“That was some fine soccer out there, son,” Coach Parker praised, clamping my shoulder. I nodded as the last of adrenaline pumped through my body.

It wasn't just any win; I helped facilitate and made it happen. It was against our archnemesis, Westpoint University.

We beat them in their home. Because that was the Titan's way of winning.

Our rivalry was legendary. It'd been ongoing since San Matjo was created.

San Matjo is a little city in the middle of California and the only thing besides soccer that it's known for is the music festival. Westpoint and Hillview are the only two universities co-existing in this city and our soccer teams are going head-to-head all the time. Most Major League Soccer players come from this no-name area and gain fame.

The crowd raved at our win, which was funny, considering we were standing at Westpoint's soccer field as we wiped the floor with them.

Oh, the irony.

Cheeks aching from my grin, I slipped into my blue sweater before I lined up with my teammates and shook hands with the opponents.

Respect mattered, after all.

The Lion's' captain, Ander Sanchez, did his best to crush my hand, glaring daggers at me.

"Lose with some dignity, dude. Same way you take cock." I grinned, making him grit his teeth.

It was easy to piss Sanchez off, and I enjoyed doing it.

It was both of our first year as captains and we both wanted to prove ourselves. And while I started a winning streak, he didn't.

"Talking from experience, Maximus?" Ander barked.

My name was Maximilian, but everyone called me Max.

Well, everyone, but Sanchez.

"Move on, dickhead," his teammate called out, clearly addressing me, and I moved down the line with Dex on my heel.

"We should crash their sour losing party," he offered with a wicked grin. "It will be fun."

I high-fived the last person before I moved toward the sidelines to disappear down the long corridor into our changing room.

"My definition of fun must be different than yours."

"Come on." He wrapped his arm around my neck. I hated that he was taller than me and could treat me like I was his little brother instead of his captain. "I'll tell you one thing: fresh pussy."

"I'll tell you something else... pussy that's not interested in Titans."

"Everyone loves to fraternize with the enemy." Dex snorted as he leaned in, the smell of his sweat making my eyes itch. "Makes a good gossip."

"Sure," I muttered, still unconvinced. "Let me shower first and then we will talk."

“Just think about it.” He released me as he shouldered his way through our changing room door. He had all the girls wrapped around his little finger with his blonde hair and blue eyes. But the dude always wanted more.

“Think about what?” my best friend and fellow midfielder, Maddox, stood next to me, holding the door open for me. He, too, was taller, and it worked in our favor because he was a defensive player also. But while Dex was light, Maddox was his opposite. Composed, dark, and private. He was my best friend since freshman year. They both were, despite their personalities.

I shook my head. “Crushing a Lions’ party.”

“I’m game.” He shrugged as if I offered him a burger. “Would be fun to see their smug faces when they realize we can not only take the championship but their girls too.”

Running my fingers through my hair, I sighed. “It’s either I agree and we all go, or you all go without me agreeing and I have to get the pep talk from Coach.”

“It will be good for team spirit,” Dex shouted, waving his jersey over his head.

A laugh bubbled out of me as my teammates cheered.

“Fine, we are crashing their party.” It was my first year as captain, and I wanted to make a good impression. And I could do that by not denying my team the well-deserved fun after the first game of the season.

Maddox glanced at me, a reserved smile on his face. “It’s okay to have fun sometimes, Aarons.”

“I’m fun,” I said through clenched teeth, dropping my ass onto the bench and pulling

my shoes off. “But this season is important.”

“Every season is important,” Maddox mimicked me. “Take a breather, dude. You work way too hard; this whole captain thing is going to your head.”

“We never lost a championship,” I reminded him. “I won’t go down in history as the captain who lost our winning streak.”

“We just won a fucking game, dude.” Dex poked his head out from the shower stall. “Take a chill-pill, get laid. Tomorrow, we return to running laps and chasing ball. Tonight... let’s chase something else.”

Another round of cheers sounded, making me annoyed yet oddly relaxed.

There was nothing I could do to stop my team from their merited rest. The best I could do was try to enjoy myself and not ruin their fun.

Two hours and two double cheeseburgers later, I walked into Welly’s, the bar most frequented by Westpoint University students. I was overwhelmed by their ugly burgundy-colored merchandise. Every girl wore a Westpoint or Lions shirt, crop top or sweater.

“I need to bleach my eyes out,” Dex muttered with a grimace. “Or take it off the girls.”

Maddox chuckled. Our teammates scattered, and Dex made his way to the bar.

“I need a drink,” I announced over the blasting music. “Screw being DD, we will take an Uber.”

“Lead the way, captain.” He motioned toward the wooden bar, where a bunch of

college students shouted their orders. Wooden tables and chairs littered the bar, and I spotted the losing soccer team playing darts.

Sanchez looked like he bit into a lemon, warming his beer with both hands, as a pretty blonde chatted him up. He literally looked over her head, watched his goalie miss the board. The girl next to him giggled and reached on her tiptoes. Her shirt rode up, exposing her flat stomach and smooth skin as she wrapped her hands around Ander's neck. She was short yet attractive.

Jerk barely spared attention to his girlfriend.

If she was mine, she would have been showered in attention.

Even though she wasn't really my type, I still felt bad for her.

Ander tugged on her blonde ponytail, tilting her head back, and with a half-assed effort, kissed her neck.

"Stop staring at my sister," an annoyed yet soft voice warned me as I stopped in my tracks and stared at the scene unfolding in front of my eyes.

Blinking, I turned my attention to the source of the pissed off voice and came face-to-face with green thundering eyes, that were attached to a very attractive face. She was taller than her sister and had legs for days that were bare from the tiny shorts that barely peeked out from under her oversized Westpoint sweater. One would think girls were all about showing off, but this girl gave me the zero fucks giving vibes.

"I wasn't checking out your sister," I replied calmly. It always worked on the girls in Hillview. My gaze travelled down her body, wondering what was hidden under that ugly burgundy hoodie.

“No, but you are checking me out now.”

Busted.

This firecracker was one to look out for. But instead of retreating, I grinned. I loved a good challenge.

“Can’t decide if I like your outfit or not.” I shrugged, lifting a shoulder. “Maybe if you took your hoodie off...”

She rolled her eyes. Her blonde hair was long, disappearing behind her back and with every move of her head blonde curls bounced around her heart-shaped face.

“You are Maximilian Aarons,” she said my name in a way that I knew she wasn’t a fan.

“Do you want an autograph or a selfie?” I wiggled my brows, and her scowl deepened.

“Actually... no. But thanks for the offer.”

A chuckle escaped me, but I quickly recovered as I ran my fingers through my hair. Her green eyes followed my movement, and it seemed like her face softened up. Just a tiny bit.

“What’s your name? It’s only fair you tell me now that you know mine.”

“Ivy,” she clipped.

It fit her.

“Hey, Cap!” Dex appeared with two beers. “Here’s your much needed drink and... Oh my goodness, are you talking to a girl?”

I rolled my eyes at how my friend portrayed me. Pathetic.

Ivy’s curiosity piqued as she tilted her head and studied Dex. She was trying to make sense of the rumors she heard of me across the city and of the scene unfolding in front of her eyes.

Way to go, Dex.

“I will make myself invisible,” my friend offered, pushing the beer in my hand and leaving us. “Enjoy, Cap!”

“Now, you have my attention.” Ivy grinned at me. “I thought you are the infamous playboy of Hillview.”

“Technically, that title always belonged to Dex.” I smirked. “My best friend. Right now, I’m committed to soccer so I don’t have time for flings or any of those things. You know... I’m the captain.”

“I figured that out.” Her face lit up. “Are you celibate?”

“No,” I replied way too eagerly. “I’m not opposed to sex. I just can’t do the whole ‘you said you will call but you didn’t’ bullshit the next morning.”

“Ah, you want the easy way out,” she concluded. “The happy ending without the strings.”

I shrugged. “Does that make me sounds like a bad guy?”

“Not as bad as most guys in Westpoint. At least you are honest and upfront about it.”

“Now that we established that, you game?” I wiggled my brows suggestively.

She gave me her best poker face, a clearly unimpressed expression that would have made anyone else drop their charming act and smile. But not me.

“You can start by buying me a drink,” Ivy suggested, crossing her arms. Her hoodie smoothed over the curve of her boobs, making my throat run dry. “Even the non-decent guys buy drinks first.”

I flashed her my sweetest smile. “Where are my manners? Ivy, can I invite you for a drink?”

A chuckle escaped her, as she tried to keep a straight face. “Yes, Max, I would like a Long Island Iced Tea.”

“Coming right up.” I winked and pushed my way toward the bartender.

Ivy’s sweet and fruity scent followed me. I softly gripped her wrist and pulled her in front of me, keeping my hands on her shoulders, guiding her as we made our way through the stuffy bar.

My original plan for the night that involved sticking it to Westpoint for winning faded and my sole focus shifted to Ivy. I was curious about her, I wanted to know why she was letting her sister date a jerk, when she clearly cared about her, and also everything she knew about said jerk.

Did that make me an asshole? Probably.

Did Ivy look like she wanted to hook up with me? Not a chance.

So, it was safe to conclude, we were just keeping each other company.

“Hey.” I leaned on the bar, my hand still on Ivy’s shoulders. “A Long Island Iced Tea, please.”

The bartender, who must have been a college student, based on his messy hair and wrinkled white T-shirt, nodded and proceeded to mix her cocktail.

Tapping my watch, I paid and then motioned toward the exit. “Shall we get some fresh air?”

Ivy nodded, reaching for her drink, but I pulled it higher, out of her grasp.

“I got it, lead the way.”

She guided us through the sea of people, and I groaned, “Finally,” as I dropped on the curb of the road, next to the bar.

Chuckling, she sat beside me, crossing her legs at her ankles.

“Are you okay with sitting on the sidewalk?”

She gave me the side-eye as she lifted her drink to her lips. Before, I didn’t even notice the shimmering pink lipstick on her plump lips. “I wouldn’t have led the way, if that was the case.”

“Got it, babe.”

Ivy’s eyes fluttered closed as she sipped, her lips wrapping around the paper straw making me wonder how those lips would feel wrapped around my cock.

Maybe I should have gotten laid. My throbbing cock agreed with me.

“Good game today,” she mentioned casually.

I smiled, and this time, I didn’t even have to force it. It came naturally, like any time someone told me I played well. But contrary to all the Hillview girls screaming it at me as we exited the stadium, Ivy stated it. As if she didn’t expect anything less.

“I know.” I grinned, wanting to hear her sweet chuckle one more time.

“Can’t even pay you a compliment without you getting all cocky about it.”

“Oh, you can. I’m just surprised you watched me play. I assumed your eyes were glued to your captain.”

The sharp inhale of her breath told me I hit a nail. Her cheeks flushed and her playful smile dropped.

“You know,” she muttered, turning around and letting her golden curls cover her face.

“I was trying to piece it together. You look alike... you and your sister.”

Her shoulders slumped. Having your boyfriend dump you for your sister was not a position anyone would want to be in. Especially not when said boyfriend was a colossal asshole. Even I heard the rumors about their messy break-up during their family vacation.

“Hey... you don’t have to be embarrassed about it,” I said, reaching out to touch her shoulder. I curled my fingers into the soft cotton of her hoodie until she stiffened under my touch.

I wasn't the best with dealing with outbreaks and the last thing I wanted was to see Ivy cry.

She turned to face me, no longer teary-eyed. "I want payback."

I wanted to shake myself for not seeing it before. Perhaps, I was too busy ogling her to realize the truth of our encounter.

She. Sought. Me. Out.

And she had an agenda.

"I would say... date his best friend?" I offered, but we both know Ander didn't care about that. He would have cracked a joke about how they are sharing her, and even the thought of that pissed me off.

Ivy shook her head. "You and I both know he only really hates one person."

Hate was a strong word, but Ander couldn't separate the game from real life. I was his enemy on the field, but he was always hostile toward me outside of it as well. Ever since our freshman year when we first played against each other.

I thought he saw me as a threat, but maybe there was something more to it.

"You want me to date you?" I pried, putting her out of her misery. "I never even had a girlfriend."

"You had, freshman year... that brunette girl."

Okay, yes. Thalia was, but that was a long time ago. I was a junior now, and ever since that shit show of a relationship, I never jumped back into the dating pool. I

preferred playing in the hookup now.

“It wouldn’t come as surprise,” Ivy went on. “Plus, you don’t want to get caught up in emotions. This would be the perfect alibi for you too. It would give you a free pass.”

I stared at her. “Are you proposing I date you?”

“Fake-date ,” Ivy corrected, making me blink.

What the hell was even fake-dating?

“Babe, I think you read way too many romance books. People don’t do that in real life.”

“Yeah, they do. Even soccer players when they mess up and they need to clear their image, or whenever you want to get back at someone... or really any time.”

My ego hurt. I needed to end it and get the hell away from Ivy.

She was Ander’s ex. What was to say he didn’t set her up for this to distract me from this season. It was such a laughable idea to fake-date someone, that it could easily come from Ander. He wasn’t the brightest.

“Thanks for the offer, but no thank you.” I flashed her a smile. “I’m good with my own alibi, and I don’t have an image that needs improving or any other reasons you pointed out.”

Ivy’s shoulders slumped and she grabbed my arm, stopping me from standing. “Can you at least think about it?”

“I thought about it, and my answer is no. I’m really sorry your sister and your ex did this to you. But I have no interest in playing this game with you. I have a career to focus on.”

She nodded. “I understand... I guess, I thought you hated him as much as he hates you.”

I shrugged. “I don’t like him because I think he is a shitty human being. But I don’t hate him. I wouldn’t waste my energy on him like that. And you shouldn’t either. There are hundreds of nice guys at Westpoint, I’m sure you will be able to find yourself one who will happily fake-date you.”

“It’s not that easy.” She scoffed. “I’m his ex. No one wants to date the girl he dumped for her sister. I’m damaged goods.”

I almost laughed how dramatic she sounded over such a small thing, but I restrained myself.

“As I said, there are hundreds of students who don’t care about Ander. You just need to stop looking in his group and step outside of the soccer-obsessed bubble.”

“Have you met our school?” She raised her voice, frustration rolling off her in waves. “Everyone is soccer obsessed.”

She could find anyone, but she wanted me. Because that would guarantee his attention.

“A word of advice?” I stretched out my sore legs. “You’re better off without him. I doubt he was a Prince Charming boyfriend, and soon, your sister will realize that too. Maybe make your sister realize she is wasting her time with him.”

“She is a freshman,” Ivy muttered. “She is not going to listen to me when she has the most popular guy of Westpoint showering her with attention.”

Clearly, my idea of showering someone with attention was different than what I witnessed inside, but if girls these days wanted to be ignored, I understood why I was still single.

“Good luck with your quest, then.”

”I was so convinced you would go for it.” Ivy shook her head, disappointed.

“Another word of advice?” I offered. “If you are going after someone to get them to do something for you, next time, do your research and don’t base your decision on rumors. Play the man, not the game.”

“Thanks.”

“Good luck,” I nodded to her spilling my beer into the close by bush and without looking back I made my way to the car park. I didn’t have to throw a glance over my shoulder to see Ivy’s disappointed gaze following me, I felt the back of my neck burning from it.

I resisted the urge to turn around and give her the smallest ounce of hope of reconsidering her offer.

Because if freshman year taught me anything, it was that girls went to crazy lengths to get their way and Ivy almost got under my skin tonight.

Almost.

CHAPTER TWO

IVY

Last night was a colossal failure. Not only did Maximilian Aarons shut me down, but I had to watch Daisy's desperate attempts to get Ander's attention. It hurt watching my baby sister make the same mistakes I did. I knew how shitty the narcissistic bastard could make me feel after he lost a game. The way he would talk down to others to lift himself up, especially to his girlfriend that he believed was his property.

"Come on, sleepyhead." Kaia, my roommate, pulled the blanket off me and shook me awake. "We need to get in our run before class."

I groaned and pushed my face into the pillow. Running was my thing way before Ander, but when we started dating, he always got mad that my endurance was better or that I was running faster than him. Eventually, he sucked the fun out of running and only now over the summer, I started dipping my toes back into it. Pushing my body to its limits and understanding I couldn't expect myself to pick up where I left off after two years. My ego was bruised especially after the failed half-marathon over the summer when I thought I could just run it easy, like it once was. Time didn't stop while I was in relationship. My friends faded into the background as Ander demanded to be the main character in my life. If it wasn't for Kaia, I would have been alone.

"Not in the mood," I muttered.

"Get up!" Kaia clapped her hands together, and the loud noise of the curtains moving pierced my ears. "You made me promise I won't ever let you miss a run. Plus,

operation Maximilian Aarons is moving into phase 2.”

“Phase 1 failed.” Annoyed, I pushed myself into a sitting position. I was still wearing the oversized Westpoint hoodie but discarded my shorts. “He refused.”

“No is just another way of saying convince me .” Kaia sat beside me, already dressed in her cycling shorts, sports bra and running shoes.

I scoffed. “No, trust me. Max isn’t interested.”

“We just have to get him interested.” My roommate wiggled her brows suggestively, making me chuckle. “I heard the Hillview guys run a rout in the morning too... maybe we could bump into them this morning.”

I blinked at her.

“Did you really think I was flirting for nothing yesterday?” She snickered. “No, girl, I got your back. Now, get dressed, and wear cute outfits because phase 2 is about to go down.”

Kaia danced across my messy room, her short blonde hair flying around her face as she walked out, leaving the door open. Music was already blasting through our little apartment and I didn’t understand how she had so much energy after throwing back all those shots.

“Ivy! If you don’t want to sit across Ander on Christmas Eve and be miserable, you better start getting ready!” she shouted as I was about to doze off.

But the mental image she put into my mind did the trick. I moved to my dresser and stared at the drawer of workout clothes. My eyes settled on a matching sage green set with booty short and sports bra. Max liked my eyes, but I had to remind him they

were attached to a body that would haunt him in his dreams until he gave in.

The weather was insanely humid and hot despite the early hour, and sweat was trailing down my body by the time we made it to the beachfront. Soon, I caught sight of Max.

He was slipping out of his T-shirt, the muscles on his back and arm flexing from the movement, and he discarded it on the bench. His friends were already shirtless and all I could see was endless sea of rock-hard abs and chest. I appreciated their carefully crafted lean muscles, contrary to the bulky build of football players.

“Kaia!” one of the guys shouted, waving at us.

“Seriously, K? Derek? You couldn’t find anyone else?” I muttered only for her ears, making her laugh.

“We are only friends.”

“Is code for hooking up. It’s easier if you call it Netflix and chill.” I rolled my eyes as we jogged toward the guys.

Max’s dark eyes were on me as he stretched his arms over his head. The muscles on his stomach tightened, turning into visible squares. My mouth watered.

My eyes trailed over his chest, taking in his body before moving to his face and discovering an unimpressed scowl as we approached them. He plucked his sunglasses from the top of his messy chestnut hair and hid his eyes behind them.

“Morning, guys,” I greeted them with a sweet grin, trying not to take Max’s shielding as an offense. “Ready to sweat out last night?”

Kaia gave Dex a quick hug and he lifted her off her feet. I should have picked the biggest playboy, but who would have guessed Maximilian Aarons was going to have an epiphany of not dating exactly when I needed him? Clearly not me.

“Guys, this is Kaia,” he introduced her to everyone. “And her roommate...”

“Ivy,” I offered, and Max’s grimace deepened.

Dex glanced at his captain, as the third guy, Maddox, muttered a greeting that sounded more like a sigh.

“Hi,” Max said, through his clenched jaw, his eyes on Derek. “Can we go now?”

“Yes, captain.” His friend mocked him, resulting in Max glancing at his watch before without another word uttered to any of us, he jogged off.

Maddox followed him, while Dex shrugged, making Kaia giggle.

Frustrated with Max’s behavior and with the little exchange between my roommate and yet another Hillview player, I took off after the guys.

The pavement under my feet was soft, as with every step I took, my thick running shoes absorbed some of the impact. My thighs burned as the wind blew in my face, moving the loose strands of hair out of my face and cooling me down before my face reddened.

Max and Maddox picked a cruel rhythm as they conversed, based on the way how Max leaned his head toward his friend.

“Are you compensating for last night’s poison?” he teased Maddox with an easy grin.

Such a different expression than when he was engaging with me. Or at least the way he had become after I told him about my plan.

“Yeah.” Maddox’s deep voice travelled with the wind. “Contrary to you, I didn’t bail on the night just because I’m a pussy.”

Max threw his head back and laughed. “Nicely put. Sue me.”

“Waking you up at three in the morning was enough satisfaction.”

Max grinned and then switched to a higher gear, running faster.

I ran after them, determined to make it as close as possible to talk to Max.

“What’s the story with Sanchez’s dirty laundry?” Maddox asked, referring to me.

A frown pulled my lips from the nickname.

“Is she looking to switch teams?” Maddox went ahead with the line of questioning.

“Oh, the silent treatment, bro.” He barked out with a laugh. “Are you even interested? She is not your type.”

Max turned to throw a glance over his shoulder at his friend, but his eyes caught mine. We looked into each other’s eyes, and time stood still. Max diverted his gaze and looked at Maddox.

“She’s behind you,” he said as his strides slowed, allowing me to catch up to them, positioning between the two of them.

“Hey,” Maddox greeted me, without much enthusiasm.

I arched a brow at him, making him grin.

“Not gonna apologize... found it funny you get conveniently dumped before the start of the season when Max and Sanchez both make captain, and now you bet your eyelashes at him. It doesn't smell right.”

“What you're smelling is your own sweat from trying to keep up with Max,” I retorted.

Max barked out a surprised laugh, ducking his head to hide his grin.

“Got to agree with her, dude.” He winked.

My heart skipped a beat at that.

“Come on.” He motioned toward the endless beachfront road. “I have a feeling you want to talk to me.”

“You're a mind reader.” I offered him a soft smile.

In a couple of minutes, our breathing took the same rhythm and we ran at the same pace, our feet hitting the pavement in synch. The wind calmed and suddenly the smell of the ocean and sand dissolved and all I could smell was the pine and wood scent radiating from Max. My lungs filled with his intoxicating and masculine scent.

“What were you going to reply?” I asked, catching my breath.

“Nothing. There are conversations that are not worth my effort. Maddox's teasing was one of these moments.”

“Not worth your effort? Wow.”

“I just select carefully what I engage in to keep my mental peace. That’s why your ex could never get to me,” he said, flashing me his usual signature grin.

I nodded, trying my best not to be bothered by his words.

“I understand where Maddox is coming from,” I started saying, taking a different approach to the conversation. “How it looks, but... it’s not it.”

“Oh, I know.” He chuckled. Despite his sunglasses, I could still make out his dark eyes. “I could tell by your face when you were watching your sister with him. You can fake many things... heartbreak isn’t one of them. That’s something that takes so much away from you. And you looked heartbroken. I felt bad.”

“Not bad enough to help me out.”

Max contemplated my words. “Why me?”

“He hates you,” I replied immediately.

“You give me way too much credit. We are opponents.”

“No, all he talks about is you. Always. It’s like... he wants to be you,” I insisted, remembering the endless nights when Ander ranted about Max. “He really does hate you.”

“Not good enough, babe.”

“Just tell me your price,” I called after him when he took off once again, as we reached the sandy beach. “Max!”

He ran across the sand, as if he was running on the pavement. I watched his quad

muscles flex as he kept on moving toward the water. He only stopped when he reached the shallow, wetting the bottom of his shoes, removing the sand.

I walked across the unsteady sand and joined him, panting.

“I’m just a pawn in the game, so tell me, what’s in it for me.”

“What do you want?” I asked. “You told me you want to stay away from girls anyway. Having a girlfriend, even if fake, keeps them away.”

“What about my needs?” He wiggled his brows. “Are you going to be taking care of them or am I supposed to be cheating on you?”

If he was caught cheating on me, it would have been the same shame as my ex dating my sister. I was equally screwed unless he remained faithful and in love with me all the way. Something that was difficult to fake, and I desperately needed him for that awkward Christmas and my big twenty-first birthday celebration.

“I mean,” I sighed, stepping up next to him.

Max smirked at me. “You didn’t come that far in your planning, right?”

“To be honest, no,” I admitted, squatting and touching the water. It was still warm, as the strong wind from the past couple of days couldn’t beat the early September sunshine. “I had everything else planned, though. But... I just thought it was going to be easy to convince you, and you would want to do that.”

“I’m not really a person who holds grudges or hates anyone. Some people are not worth my energy and Ander Sanchez is one of them.” Max shrugged. “I would love to help you. But I’m not sure I can do this whole fake boyfriend thing. It’s just not who I am.”

“I understand. I guess... I’ll just have to do this on your terms.”

“We can be friends. If you ever need buffer, I can come in, but I’m not sure I can do the kissing and hugging and pretending. It would take way too much from me, and my focus needs to be on my game.”

He was letting me down in the gentlest way ever. He was being kind about it, and nice. Even offering to help. I almost felt bad for believing the rumors I heard about him.

I nodded, disappointed. “I hope you don’t think I’m...”

“Desperate?” Max offered with a sweet smile. “Anyone would be in your position. But people like Ander get the most annoyed when you ignore them... try doing that and watch him come knocking. You don’t need me there for that.”

“Yeah, easier said than done.”

“I’m sorry.” His hand found my shoulder and squeezed it. “I wish I could do more.”

“Well... you can.” I scoffed, ignoring the annoying little butterflies that surprisingly sprung up in my stomach. “You just choose not to.”

“You can see it that way. I need to do what’s best for me. But I wish you all the best, Ivy. You deserve someone who truly sees your worth.”

I felt the weight of his hand lift from my shoulder and the sand by my side dipped as he turned to walk away.

“Max?” I called after him, my eyes still trained on the waves licking the sand in front of me. “What if I give you sex? We can be hooking up... during the fake

arrangement.”

Max remained quiet for a long second, before his laughter echoed through the beach.

“Now... you are desperate. I don’t need you to pay me with sex, Ivy. If I was going to do it, I would have done it out of the goodness of my heart.”

“Guess, you don’t have a heart then.”

“You will thank me one day. I’m keeping you from making a mistake.”

“From where I’m standing, it doesn’t look like that,” I muttered bitterly.

“Best of luck, Ivy. You’ll need it.”

This time, I didn’t stop him from walking away.

Suffering through my classes was painful. The whispered rumors managed to get through every doors, even the computer science lab, where I spent most of my hours. Everyone, read Ander, thought I was crazy for double majoring in computer science and marketing. The two were polar opposites but I wanted to be employed after university hence I had to make sure my majors enhanced my chances. Marketing was just way too little in today’s competitive world where everyone was an influencer.

It was barely the start of the semester, but we had to pick up our last year’s final project and enhance it. I stared at my fundraising website I created taking running as an inspiration and collecting money for a marathon. Building something similar to Kickstarter from scratch was supposed to be impressive, but all I saw was infinite possibilities to elevate it.

Scribbling into my open notebook, I shifted in the padded office chair, pulling my

legs under me. The air turned chilly around me from the aircon blasting. I enjoyed being tucked away from the world, especially after my yet another failed attempt to convince Max. People noticed me talking to him twice already and whispers were starting up from all sides.

Weirdly, despite this not being my plan, I should have been excited that people took notice as it might have made it easier to try my luck with Max again. But people at Westpoint were cruel. They called me a traitor, a whore, and some went even as far to call me a cheater, when it was Ander who cheated on me with my sister.

“Why were you seen with Maximilian Aarons?” Daisy’s voice came from the distance, and I removed my AirPods, before I turned to her. She stood at the door of the lab. She was dressed in wide-legged high-waisted light blue jeans that hugged her waist like a glove, with a tiny pink bralette, and a full face of makeup. Compared to her, my blue and white striped midi dress with a cropped jean jacket made me look like her mother. “And not once, twice.”

“Excuse me?” I asked her with an arched brow. “Since when is it any of your business what I do?”

“Well, you can’t just go around talking to the enemy, Ivy!” Her voice hitched, turning high-pitched, and I knew the words she repeated to me didn’t belong to her. They were coming from Ander.

It was cruel how life made me realize the abuse and terror I was in by watching my sister repeat the same mistakes.

“You can tell your boyfriend he has nothing to worry about.”

I pressed the word your , making her flinch.

“It’s me. I was genuinely worried about you. I don’t want you to get your heart broken or worse... people are already hard on you.”

If she was so worried about my reputation, she wouldn’t have fucked my boyfriend on our family vacation. I knew it was all Ander, but I couldn’t help but blame her too. Hookups required two people, after all.

“Thanks for your concern, but I’m fine.”

“You aren’t. People say you are pregnant with Aarons’s child,” she repeated one of the stupid rumors that started up from me wearing my dress this morning. Clearly, I would be pregnant and showing from talking to him yesterday. I started to understand why Max ignored rumors and didn’t engage.

“They are also saying since I lost out on one captain, I am looking to replace him with another,” I mocked.

“You know, it’s not your fault. You just weren’t good enough for him.”

There it was. The overused word from Ander that he always reminded me of.

You are not hot enough.

You are not smart enough.

There was always something I wasn’t enough for him.

Every time I did something, his voice reminded me of it in the back of my head. It taunted me, holding me back.

Somewhere in the past two years, I forgot my worth.

“I’m just worried about you,” Daisy went on. “I don’t want you to make a mistake and make things more complicated for you.”

“How would you know how it is for me?” I tilted my head, letting my messy bun tilt on top of my head. “You weren’t here last year. You have no idea about anything. All you know is what Ander filled your head with.”

My sister flinched, as if my words caused her pain, but I couldn’t find it in me to care. I was deeply hurt by her actions over the summer and how she handled everything between us. She didn’t act like a sister, and I knew she wanted to show everyone she was a big girl and show for herself that she got the most popular guy on campus, but at what cost? She was willing to pay a high price just for bragging rights, and that made me sick.

“Thank you for your piece of advice, sis. But you can tell Ander, there is nothing he should be worried about. Kaia likes Dex and I was merely there for buffer,” I dismissed her with a tight smile.

The lie left my lips without having to force it out. And suddenly, I wasn’t talking to my sister anymore, I saw myself last year replying to a controlling boyfriend’s requests.

I hated the girl I was with him and how he turned me into a shell of myself.

Yet, I never walked away, and that was my fault.

“Okay, great.” Daisy nodded.

“But a piece of advice for you...” I stopped her as she started turning on her heels, eager to get away. “Don’t believe everything a guy tells you. It’s a lesson I had to learn on my own skin.”

“How’s that working out for you?” she muttered over her shoulder, not even looking me in the eye. “There’s a party on Friday at the soccer player’s house. You should come. Just to show you are supporting the right team.”

Even though he wasn’t there physically, he was still running the show in the background.

“I’ll be there.”

Daisy offered a small, fake smile and quickly slipped out the door, phone in her hand.

She was far more gone than I thought and somehow realizing that I needed to watch myself around my own sister, made me feel like I lost her all over again.

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CHAPTER THREE

MAX

My head was full of Ivy and her pleading. No matter how hard I tried to focus on my psychology class, I didn't hear a word. This type of behavior was exactly why I didn't need a girl in my life.

It was a distraction.

Swinging my backpack on, I hurried out of the theater-styled classroom where hundreds of students sweated. Being an athlete, my main goal was to go pro, but once I retired or if life didn't want me to end up going pro, I needed a plan B. Sport psychology was my plan B.

As I walked through the busy marble floor corridors, various students nodded at me or mumbled a greeting. I had no clue who most of them were, but I politely acknowledged them, before burying my face into my phone.

I pulled a baseball cap out from my backpack and pushed it on top of my head, covering my eyes. In movies, it worked as a disguise, but in reality, it ruined my hair.

"Max!" a voice shouted my name, making me stop as I was strolling across the street in between buildings. I turned to look behind me, the smell of sunshine and grass filling my nose. Fall was not something that happened in California, which was why playing outside all year round was possible.

My eyes landed on Thalia Henderson, trying to catch up with me. Leaning against the bench, I took in her cropped sweater and jeans mini skirt. Her chestnut hair was bouncing in happy curls around her face, and her makeup was on point. Compared to her, I must have looked like homeless in my faded jeans and Titans sweater.

“I was trying to grab your attention all this time,” she scolded me with a smile.

“Now you got it.” I flashed her my half smile, pushing my hands in my pockets.

Thalia’s eyes fell to my hands, and she moved in closer, expecting a hug.

“What’s up?” I asked, maintaining the distance between us.

“I just wanted to congratulate you on the win.” She batted her long eyelashes. I still remembered the taste of her lips, how I could taste a full mix of berries on those lush lips.

I hated berries ever since we broke up, and I even refused to put them in my smoothie. I was that petty.

“Thank you, but it was only a friendly game, and we all know the Lions are no match for us.”

“You lost against them last year,” Thalia mentioned it, reminding me of the only time we lost against them. Maddox and Dex were both out of the game because of a red card, and I was on a verge of an injury pushing myself to play both in NCAA Division I games and USA National Team. The only downside of wanting to do both was that I didn’t get paid, just had my costs covered.

“Yeah, that was a tough one.” I shrugged, my hands fisting in my pocket. “Anyway... if that’s all...”

“I just wanted to see if you wanted to catch up?”

Thalia was toxic, possessive and crazy. I didn’t know that freshman year, but since our breakup, I did. She wanted to rekindle our relationship, and I tried to balance the line of remaining polite, but not encouraging her.

“I’m a little bit busy with practice and stuff, but maybe over the weekend I can find some time,” I muttered, and even I could hear my voice growing uncertain. “Why don’t I text you?”

“You never texted me the last time you promised.”

“Must have slipped my mind, sorry.”

“You know... my dad...”

“Hey, Cap!” Maddox hugged my neck from behind. “Hey, Thalia.”

“Hi,” she mumbled, not sparing him a look. “We were in a middle of a conversation.”

“Sorry, this is urgent.” He winked at her and stepped backward while holding me in a lock.

“I wasn’t finished,” she shouted after us.

I wanted to turn away and say something comforting, but Maddox held me strong.

“Don’t even fucking think about it,” he muttered, his smile dropping and his strides becoming longer and quicker. “You should never be alone with her.”

“I can’t just ignore her. But I should have handled it better.”

“Yeah, I heard her start using her dad as an excuse,” Maddox bit through clenched teeth. “If you want a career in soccer, create some distance.”

I groaned, shaking his arm off me. “Thanks for the save.”

“Any time, bro. But let’s not make a habit of this. Stick to avoiding her and I don’t know... maybe take up that chick on her offer? Fake girlfriend or not... that would stop Thalia’s attack.”

I sighed, not wanting to think of Ivy at the moment.

“You should have never fucked her.” Maddox shook his head, reminding me of my drunken mistake freshman year, as he cut across the courtyard.

“In my defense... he was not the National Team’s coach back then.” I sighed as I kicked the door of the athletic building open.

I needed to be on the team to put myself in front of the eyes of the world. And I knew that pissing off Thalia could easily cost me that position.

Coming off from a win always meant that practice was more brutal. I warmed up the team as we went through the strategy, making sure every player on the field knew where they needed to be at any point of the game.

“Great work,” Coach Parker called to me as the team moved in unison, holding their position as we played against each other. “I think we need to make sure Derek is positioned always to have an opening.”

Dex was our forward and he loved being the center of attention and scoring all the goals. He fit into that role well, while Maddox and I worked the ball all the way from the middle up to him. The three of us made the game what it was.

“That’s what we are working on,” I explained, pointing at the defenders who were posing as the opposing team.

“He moves too much into the goal line,” Coach Parker explained, as we approached the rest of the players. “Stallman, don’t go too in, if you get the goal pass you might end up being offside losing the goal.”

Dex nodded, looking around him to see where he was positioned, before taking two steps toward the middle of the field. “Got it.”

“Last year, there were a lot of offsides. We can’t make the same mistake this year,” Coach went on.

“And a lot of over the goal shots,” Marco, our forward, muttered.

Dex groaned quietly, hating when Marco criticized him, but it was true. We made many mistakes last season and we needed to correct them. This year, there was no room for error.

Coach Parker went on, grilling Dex and the defenders, and I zoned out, my mind still spinning around Thalia and the potential of a World Cup waiting for me. I couldn’t mess it up with her or upset her when there was a FIFA World Cup taking place next year. And with Sky McCarthy retiring, there was a midfielder spot open for me. Coach McCarthy was my favorite. As assistant coach, he always gave me good advices.

“Aarons, you and Linden also need to take more chances.” Coach turned toward me, dragging me out of my daydreaming. “Whenever you take a risk and score, it turns out to be good for us, but you always wait till the last minute. You need to step up more.”

Could I have taken more risks? Definitely. Both on and off the field.

Maybe dating Ivy would be good for me. Maybe a fake girlfriend would get Thalia off my back, keep my potential World Cup position, and help me focus on my soccer.

“Dude, you are not here.” Maddox elbowed me in the ribs, as Coach blew his whistle, dismissing us. “What’s gotten into you?”

“I need to sort out the Thalia problem.” I lowered my voice, as our teammates scattered from around us, rushing to the changing rooms. “I need her to back off.”

“Are you taking Poison Ivy up on her offer?” Dex bumped into me from the other side, joining in on our conversation.

“Maybe that would be helpful... just until they announce the teams... it will also give her enough time with the Ander business... and you know...”

Dex clapped me on the back. “That’s the spirit, I would tap it.”

“This isn’t about sex,” I groaned, shaking his hand off me. “This is about getting Thalia to back off and helping Ivy with Ander. It’s a two in one... think of it as business.”

“Sex is business... it’s the best currency to trade in,” Dex went on.

I glanced at Maddox. “Do you think it’s crazy?”

“I think you should focus on your benefit of it as you don’t know how genuine this girl is... she might be tricking you. But she can’t trick you if you have your own gains from this arrangement.”

“Exactly,” Dex agreed as if he wasn’t unhelpful moments before. “Plus, I heard she’s been getting a lot of shit for being seen with you. Maybe you can go play knight in shining armor and save her from the cruelty of the internet.”

“I’m no knight in shining armor.”

Laughing, they exchanged an amused look. “Yeah, you are.”

“You are the hero in every girl’s fairytale, dude.”

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks for the not so useful advice.”

“Where are you going?” Dex called after me, as I jogged across the field.

“To play the hero.”

After a quick shower and a change of my outfit, I jumped into my Range Rover and made my way toward the Westpoint campus. It was Friday afternoon and students were done with their classes. They mingled in the courtyards, lying on the blankets and chatting as I passed. Several curious glances were thrown my way, but I kept my sunglasses fixed in front of my eyes and walked with determination even if I had no idea where Ivy was. I didn’t know what major she was to even start walking to any direction. I didn’t know anything about her.

Maybe I needed a better plan.

“Max?” A hand landed on my shoulders.

Twisting around, I pasted a casual, sweet smile on my face. “Hi...” Surprise washed over me, and my smile wavered. “Kaia, right?”

“Impressive.” Her short blonde hair framed her face. She was wearing a skintight ribbed dress, the caramel color blending in with her skin.

I blinked, unsure where to look as it almost felt like she was naked, so I settled on her eyes.

“Do you know where Ivy is?” I asked, hoping my voice didn’t shake from the uncertainty that gripped my throat.

This was the most impulsive thing I’ve done since hooking up with Thalia.

“Oh...” Kaia blinked. “I think she is on Mill Hill Road. Where the soccer players live.”

It was one of the busiest college streets where most athletes rented and lived together. Whenever the team was sharing a place to live, it always boosted the teamwork. Usually, freshman had to stay on campus but anyone on the team from sophomore onwards had the option to live in the soccer house.

A sour taste filled my mouth, and I immediately thought I got played.

“They are having a party tonight, and I think she went there to hang out with Daisy... her sister,” Kaia explained, as she took in my sad puppy face probably.

“I wanted to talk to her, but it can wait.” I shrugged it off, annoyed at myself for even considering it.

“I’m going there... if you want to give me a ride?” Kaia asked. “I won’t tell Dex.”

Dex wouldn’t care even if I was fucking her, but it was cute of her to try.

“I can give you a ride,” I agreed. “But I won’t go inside.”

Her smile grew wider. “You came all the way here just to go back?”

“Technically, it was a ten-minute drive. It wasn’t some grand gesture.”

“Depends on who you ask.” She winked. “Let’s go. The sooner you drop me off, the sooner you can pretend this never happened.”

It almost felt like Ander was the leader of some weird cult and not the soccer team. People were staring and pointing and even taking sneaky photos, and it was ridiculous.

No wonder Ivy felt pressured. Westpoint was clearly more intense than our school.

I opened the door for Kaia, before I rounded the car and dropped next to her.

“Your school is intense.”

“Soccer is a religion here,” she answered with a shrug. “Ivy got the worst of it.”

“Are you here to take her up on her offer?” she pushed on. “Please say yes!”

I chuckled and shook my head. “I was... but then... I don’t know anymore.”

“Talk to me and I’ll convince you.”

“No offense, but I’d rather talk to Ivy.” I offered her a curt smile as I drove toward the Westpoint athletic street. “This is between her and me, and I want her to be the one I talk to first. But I’m sure she will fill you in on all the juicy details.”

As I passed some of the houses, their sizes and designs were all the same, plain and simple, but the various flags showcased who lived in them. Some had team flags; the others had fraternity chapter flags. I slowed my speed, until it came to a stop in front of a white house with a flag of a lion with a soccer ball.

“You look like you’re about to change your mind.” Kaia grabbed my arm that rested on top of the steering wheel.

“Just contemplating my life choices,” I half-joked.

She smiled. “Let’s go in, pretty boy.”

CHAPTER FOUR

IVY

Coming here was a mistake.

Memories flooded my mind as I walked through the house where I spent most part of my last two years. The music was already blasting and the walls around me bounced with the deep bass. The guys scattered around the house, some playing video games in the living room, others disappearing in the media room under false pretenses, while I walked from room to room, trying to keep my anxiety at bay. No one has spared me a glance since I entered. No one even talked to me. They acted as if I was invisible, and I preferred that over being called a traitor or any other names.

My fingers tightened around my red Solo cup, water swirling around from my never-ending walk.

Nothing changed in the house. It was still the same layout, the same furniture, the same bare, pictureless walls that got painted over the summer, covering up the scratches and dents.

“You came.”

Two words.

One impassive tone that made the skin crawl.

Thousands of feelings that came crashing back.

My heart lurched, but it wasn't happiness that made it beat faster; it was fear that urged my body to move into fight or flight mode.

Instead, I turned away from the empty canvas of the wall and faced the dark brown eyes boring holes in the back of my head.

"I did," I replied, hoping my voice didn't come out as shaky as it felt. "Let's get this over with..."

"What exactly do you want to get over with?" Ander tilted his head.

"You wanted to talk," I pointed out stupidly. That was the whole reason I came. I didn't buy Daisy's stupid 'you need to be on our team' speech.

His smile grew into the predatorial one, and my stomach shrank.

I shouldn't have come.

"Let's go up to my room."

Swallowing hard, I willed my head to nod and turned to start walking up, painfully aware that he was right behind me. His signature earthy smell infiltrated my nose, reminding me of the nights we spent with our bodies intertwined.

Once upon a time, his scent was my favorite.

But then I woke up from this fairytale straight into this nightmare.

Daisy stood at the top of the wooden staircase. I ignored all the awards and team

pictures displayed and watched my sister's frown as she combed through her messy curls. Her dress hitched up her thighs, barely hitting under her butt as she swiftly moved her hands over the hem of it, pulling it lower. The scowl on her face told me she was just as unimpressed as I was by the whole situation.

"Maybe we should talk outside," I offered, stopping mid-step, and his body almost bumped into me.

"Scared to be alone with me?" he mocked me, instead of insulting me. "Don't worry, I don't want anything like that from you. Your sister is way better in bed."

I caught myself in the last second before rolling my eyes, as my sister's expression turned proud instead of horrified. Guess, a compliment was a compliment, no matter if it was only stated to bring someone else down. Ander was a master of backhanded compliments, but she needed to relish in this crumble of appreciation that he threw at her because soon it will come to an end.

"That's okay," I answered, keeping my voice flat. "Let's go outside."

"If you want me to stare at your ass, all you had to do was ask," Ander muttered, making my frustration grow with every second.

He was walking behind me all this time, there was no need for him to make comments like that. Especially since I dressed in a simple A-line summer dress that hit mid-thighs. I dressed cute, while my baby sister dressed slutty. There was a time I dressed like that for him. But now I only dressed for myself, in whatever I felt comfortable.

Guilt swirled in the base of my stomach, but I kept reminding myself that this was Daisy's decision and she didn't want my opinion.

I turned on my heels and started to take a step down and walk outside.

A hand wrapped around my bare skin, squeezing my arm tight.

“No.”

One single word brought back thousands of memories. The hair on the nape of my neck rose and a slow shiver ran through my spine.

It made every fiber in my body scream with worry.

I came this far to talk to him and clear the air out, maybe even accomplish being left alone and not bullied. But going into his bedroom and being alone with him wasn't part of the deal.

“No,” I repeated his words back to him. His nails dug into me deeper and left half-mooned marks on my upper arm.

Hissing, I tried pulling away.

“Let go,” I ordered him, my voice sounding far less assertive as I wanted it to. “Please,” I added quietly, the plea barely a whisper on my lips.

The cruel smile I knew well broke across his face, and with a shove, he let go of my arm. “I told you. You want to talk. We do it in my room. But I can see all you want to do is cause a scene. What do you think you will accomplish with that, little traitor? You want everyone to think that I'm capable of hurting you? You want to ruin my image?” A low laughter shook his voice. “That won't work. Not everyone is as easily fooled as your new boyfriend.”

“This has nothing to do with Max,” I muttered quietly, wanting his name out of the

conversation. “This is about us...”

Ander chortled, catching the attention of other students at the bottom of the stairs. I noticed someone turned the music lower, allowing our voices to provide the ultimate entertainment.

“Did you hear that, babe?” He glanced at my sister, whose face morphed into a disgusted smirk. “She wants to talk about her and I... like there is any chance I would replace what I have with you for her.”

Even Daisy smirked.

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” I replied, steadying my voice, although my eyes burned.

I was naïve to think Ander was going to be a sensible human being and talk to me.

This school was Ander’s playground and all the clowns danced for him.

He ran the show.

But I was done attending the play.

“I’m sorry,” I said, apologizing because that was what he expected. “I misjudged you for someone who could have a conversation. I will be leaving.”

“I mean if you want to talk, talk,” Ander called after me once I descended.

“I have nothing else to say.”

“You seemed to have awfully lot to say just now. Did Aarons not fuck you well

enough? Are you here to get a repeat of what you lost when you tried to replace me with a Titan?"

I shook my head, disgusted.

Did everyone forget he was the one who dumped me?

I hated how it hurt me, and I hated it even more that I was giving him the one thing he wanted.

My attention.

My tears.

My hurt.

"Forget I said anything," I turned to whisper, making him laugh.

"That won't be too hard, as you never said anything even remotely worth listening to." His smile grew as a teardrop rolled down my cheeks.

Laughter echoed all around me as Daisy stepped next to Ander and wrapped her arms around his waist, and he pulled her close to his chest, lips brushing her forehead.

"Don't worry, babe. Your sister is not worth my time."

Another round of snickers started up as I willed my feet to move fast and walk out the door.

I was painfully aware of all the eyes burning holes into me like gigantic reflectors on the stage, illuminating my misery and feasting on it.

“What the hell is happening here?”

Suddenly, I couldn't hear anything, just the way my flats clicked on the marble floor. A dark-haired guy stood at the entrance. The light illuminated him as if he was a fiction of my imagination, a guardian angel coming to save me.

“Ivy?” he called my name as my eyes met his.

It took couple of seconds for his brown eyes to darken as anger washed over his face.

“Max...” I breathed his name in a relieved sigh.

“Look at that,” Ander's voice echoed from the stairs. “The knight in shining armor showed up. You are a bit late, buddy.”

“I'm not your buddy,” Max gritted through clenched teeth. He extended his arm and pulled me to his chest, pushing my embarrassed tearstained face into his black T-shirt and hiding it from everyone around.

It was too little, too late, but I appreciated his delicious pine scent filling my nose as I breathed, trying to calm my racing heart.

His hand rested on my back, and in slow circular movements, he comforted me as he spoke. His chest vibrated with every word he spat toward my ex, but I was too preoccupied counting my inhales and exhales to pay attention.

I didn't want to hear it.

I didn't want to know it.

All I wanted to do was disappear.

But being in Max's strong and safe arms was the closest I ever felt to that safe haven I craved.

And I never wanted to leave it again.

MAX

Pissed off was understatement. My body trembled with bottled anger as I listened to that jerk talk. I always knew Ander was bad news. If I could avoid him, I did, and our only interaction was on a soccer field. But what he did to Ivy was the lowest of the lows. Humiliating Ivy and turning her sister against her was too much for me.

I used to believe he had a shred of human decency in him.

But Sanchez was beyond saving.

I needed to get Ivy as far from him as possible.

She shook in my arms as the breeze surrounded us. She clung to me, her pink manicured nails digging into the fabric of my shirt, not wanting to let go.

"It's going to be fine," I muttered into her hair to comfort her.

I came here to talk to her, to even offer my help, get a mutually beneficial arrangement going. I make it to the World Cup and she gets to stick it to her ex.

But after seeing the scene I walked in on, I desperately wanted to help her. I wanted to be what she needed me to be.

Her knight in shining armor.

The one everyone saw when I marched into the house and wrapped her in my arms protectively.

No one stood up for her.

No one was there for her.

Not even her best friend who stood by my side, silent, when we walked in on the scene.

Just me.

She needed me. Just like she said it to me. But I didn't believe her until I saw it.

Guilty, I helped her into the passenger seat of my car.

I should have taken her word, but I didn't trust her.

I was used to making the right decision in the right time. Being rational and a good decision maker.

As I sat into the driver's seat, I thought back to the ride over to the house.

Did her friend have time to fabricate the scene? Did she text someone we were coming?

But the sheer shock on Kaia's face was way too real to be fake. Yet, she didn't step in either.

A small sob dragged me out of my thoughts. Ivy wiped the tears away with the sleeve of her dress.

“Here,” I muttered, leaning against her, her jasmine scent catching my nose as I opened the glove compartment and took a tissue box out.

“Thanks,” she said, her voice barely a whisper against my ear before I pulled away. “Really... thank you for...” She trailed off, and I was thankful she didn’t finish that sentence.

“There’s no need to thank me... anyone would have done what I did,” I replied, despite witnessing the opposite. All of them were snakes.

Ivy let out a little snort. “You can say what you think.”

“I’m too upset for that,” I shut down the idea immediately. My hands gripped the steering wheel with such force that I was surprised it didn’t break off.

I never thought of myself as a nice guy. Not since the whole Thalia mess blew up in my face and I had to triple check every word leaving my mouth and guard myself from anything that could cause me harm. I was direct and curt with girls setting strict boundaries.

But I never thought I would become someone’s hero.

Yet, the way she looked up at me, sparkle lighting up her sad tear-filled eyes, I knew I walked into this one deep.

“What were you doing there?” Ivy asked.

I sighed. “I was going to talk to you... about your proposal... but I guess I’m a bit too late.”

“I mean.” She shrugged, turning to face the window. “We could still say we are

friends. Pass it off as accident.”

I knew damn well small towns and rival colleges did one thing best. Gossip.

There was no way I was making it back to my house before my team found out where I was. The shitshow that waited for me only made my pounding headache worse.

“We could set some ground rules, yes. If we are going to do this whole fake dating thing.”

Ivy bit into her lower lip, and a faint smile tugged on her lip. “Thank you. Gosh, I would have jumped in joy if you said this yesterday. Now... I feel awful for dragging you into this.”

“I have my reasons why I need it,” I said slowly. “But I want to have this conversation in my room with my full attention on you. Two more minutes and we are there.”

She nodded, sinking into the seat.

“Ivy.” I glanced at her. “I’m taking you to the Titans’ home.”

“I know. Can’t be worse than the Lion’s den we just left.”

Maybe not for her, but I just brought trouble to our doorsteps.

CHAPTER FIVE

MAX

“Kissing only in public,” Ivy said. I parked a street away from my house, not wanting to throw her to the wolves before we even knew how to handle the situation. We sat in my car, the indoor space feeling a bit suffocating and her jasmine scent tickling my nose with every little move she made. “Just when it’s needed, otherwise we can rely on PDA. You good at that?”

“The best.” I flashed her a cocky smile. “Trust me, my hands will be all over your body, baby.”

Ivy mimicked a gag, and I laughed. “Yeah... I think I became immune to that kind of talk.”

“No worries, I’ll be fully respectful.” I winked, before I propped my foot up on the car door pocket. “That leads me to my point, not that you do that, but what’s mine is mine. No flirting and no cheating. You have an agenda with someone, fill me in. I can be a jealous boyfriend.”

“That I heard.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. I was an obsessed little puppy when it came to Thalia, and I took my jealousy to a whole other level. But she quickly matched my psycho level, and everyone forgot my possessiveness. Or so I thought.

Love was supposed to make you feel calm, levelheaded and safe. Not possessed and obsessed.

And I was done with the toxic love.

“Just for my image,” I explained. “Don’t want to be dragged into any drama with you cheating and people messing with my game because of that. Let’s keep it mutually respective.”

“Are you a business major? You sound like you are conducting a business arrangement.”

“I’m not, actually. I study psychology... and you can wipe the shock off your face.”

“Why?”

I shrugged. “I was always curious about happiness. How it works, what makes people happy and how our brain decided we are happy. I wanted to learn more.”

“And did you find it?” She tilted her head, some messy strays of hair falling over her face.

I resisted the urge to tug on them, fisting my hand. “Still searching.”

“You know... we need to know some stuff about each other, if we are going to sell this,” she mentioned, as if I didn’t know. But I sure as hell wasn’t going to be the one opening up first.

I nodded. “But we can stick to the hooked up, started dating and still getting to know each other timeline. What’s important is that we entered into a relationship after one hookup and we are already exclusive. That’s a rushed timeline, so we need to find an

excuse. I don't date and you... just came out of a relationship. People will immediately think it's a fluke."

Ivy crossed her arms. "Maybe we can say we texted over the summer? Met while surfing?"

I almost choked on air. "Surfing? I don't surf. I know I look like an all-American dream, but I'm from Arizona. I hike most of the times."

She grimaced. "I do kite-boarding... I could teach you."

"Not a chance. I want to play professional soccer and not kill myself chasing uncontrollable waves."

"Do you like video games?" she tried another angle. "I study computer science, hence people assume I'm a nerd because girls shouldn't know how to code. Minecraft is my favorite videogame."

"I play FIFA on my Switch when I travel. That's about it."

Ivy exhaled. "We must have any interest that overlap... like... what do you like to do in your free time?"

"Free time?" I asked jokingly, glancing out the window. My life has always revolved around soccer ever since I decided I wanted to go pro. It was my whole personality, there wasn't really much else. "Play soccer? Watch soccer? Work out? Run?"

"Running is good!" She looked at me with a newfound spark. My chest felt a strange tug looking at her expression, but I brushed it off and focused on her words. "I run too... or used to. Okay, so maybe we met on a running trail."

“In California?” I asked back with a raised brow. “I still spent most of my summer in Arizona. One of the only times I was running there during the summer was when I did the Santa Monica half marathon.”

“You ran it?”

I nodded, shrugging. “The guys dared me to sign up when I was complaining that I needed to work toward something to keep me motivated over summer break. It wasn’t too bad, I ran it in an hour and a half.”

“That was beginning of July... that gives us enough time to say we met there and hung out from there onwards.”

“You were there?” It was my turn to sound shocked.

Ivy nodded. “Yeah... it was a huge fail. I haven’t run or trained since dating Ander. After we broke up, I wanted to just pick up where I left off, but it wasn’t that easy. Let’s just say it was a humbling experience.”

I thought about it for a second, but there were so many people, it was impossible for me to remember her. “Why did you stop running if you enjoyed it?”

Ivy turned to look out the window, her shoulders tensed.

I nudged her gently, keeping my voice light and calm. “What happened with the deep stuff?”

She scoffed, still not turning toward me. “Ander got jealous and told me to stop running as I was a better runner than him. I was so stupid, I wanted to please him. So, I took up kite-boarding actively, and while I love it, it’s not really the same. Running... helps me work through things, it relaxes me. For kite-boarding, I need to

be fully present. I can't get out of my head and just let my body take me. If I do that, I end in the mouth of the wave."

I watched her sad eyes reflect in the window and I wasn't sure what the appropriate response was to such a heavy confession. I always knew Ander was a dick, but with every new thing Ivy shared, he was burrowing himself deeper and deeper in my eyes.

"Ivy..." I started, not even sure what I wanted to say, when my stomach rumbled loudly, interrupting my non-existing sentence.

She glanced my way over her shoulder, and I gave her my sweet boyish smile. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

A small chuckle escaped her, and a faint smile played on her pink lips. Warmth spread in my chest from being able to bring her back from her bad memory.

"Me too," she whispered.

I nodded, and dropping my foot from the door pocket, I started the car. As the engine roared up, I turned to her and extended my hand. "I think we should shake hands. To seal the deal."

"We met in July on the half marathon, texted through the summer and now are exclusive. No kissing in private and full display of PDA," Ivy recited as she wrapped her small fingers around my hand, and we shook on it.

"Happy to do business with you."

"You still haven't told me your reasons," she said as she dropped my hand, and I replaced her warmth with my sticky steering wheel.

“There are still many things we haven’t discussed,” I diverted, knowing full well I was going to have to get into the full Thalia story, but not wanting to ruin the mood. “But let’s start with food.”

“Food sounds good.” She nodded, her eyes glued to the road. “I think I should know more about you and your soccer... like when did you start playing? What’s your goal... things like everyone knows. That’s more important than your favorite color.”

“Green,” I replied without thinking. “Like the freshly cut grass. That’s also my favorite smell.”

She smiled. “Mine is yellow... like goldish yellow. And my favorite smell is... the smell of sea. Like the salty air. Or freshly baked cookies, could bottle that up... but they only make seawater scented candles, not cookie ones.”

I grinned, reminding myself to look for a freshly baked cookie candle for her. It would make a cool gift.

“Am I supposed to bring you flowers and gifts and shower you with attention?” I asked uncertainly. I did the whole balloons, roses, gifts and dinner dates with Thalia, and it was stressful finding the right thing she wanted. Whenever I messed up, she was a bitch to me.

“Gosh no. That’s okay... not even Ander did those things. I don’t need that. Just the public display is enough.”

My chest felt a weird tightness from her words. She deserved to be showered with flowers and gifts.

“Guess your love language is act of service and words of affirmation,” I muttered to myself.

“What’s that?”

“Sorry... just came out. Not trying to analyze you. But sometimes I can’t help it.”

“What’s your love language?” she asked. “And what are love languages?”

“Words of affirmation, gifts, quality time, act of service, and physical touch. Like everyone has a different way of expressing and interpreting love. For example, if I express love with quality time, but you interpret love with gifts, we would have a problem in our relationship because you would think I don’t love you. That’s why many relationships get literally lost in translation.”

Ivy was silent for a moment. “I do appreciate compliments, but as for act of service...” Her gaze travelled to my face and I felt it scorching my skin. “I don’t know. Nobody has done anything nice for me really... just you.”

The bar was set pretty low for me to be an amazing fake boyfriend. It should have excited me; I was going to play at the World Cup and win best fake boyfriend of the year award with minimal effort.

Yet, the thought of someone being dismissive over her angered me. I didn’t understand how could someone not like her. I could see myself being friends with her.

“Noted,” I croaked out, my voice hoarse.

“What are yours?” she asked, curiosity coloring her voice. “Let me try and guess.”

I chuckled. “Give it a shot.”

“Hmmm... you sounded very dismissive over gifts and you don’t look like words of

affirmation would mean so much to you, otherwise your ego would be already inflated.”

I tried not to laugh at her assessment. “My ego is doing just fine.”

“Exactly. Probably quality time. Since you are always so busy with soccer, you making time for someone is already a big thing, instead of you watching soccer in your free time.”

“Great way to make me sound like a soccer-obsessed jock.”

“Bet you were a jock in high school,” she muttered. “You are now.”

“Actually, no.” Ivy side-eyed me. “I’m not that tall, so I was teased a lot over being short. I actually sucked at soccer and everyone told me I couldn’t make it. Joke’s on them now.”

“Thank you for telling me.” She rested her hand on my upper arm and gave it a gentle squeeze.

I didn’t want to point out that this was all online and if she ever read an interview or a summary of me, she would have known. They called me Potter as I was this skinny little kid that no one believed in at first, but with time, I changed everyone’s perception of me. It was my ability to control the ball that everyone found magical.

I flashed her a small smile. “You’re welcome. But if you want to know more of my soccer, just Google me.”

Ivy made a face. “That sounded like something Ander would say.”

“I’m not that good talking about myself.” I shrugged. “Especially not compliments.

So, if you want to make up your mind and have your own opinion on my soccer, check it out online.”

She was silent for a long moment, head bent over the phone as I drove us toward my home.

“How come you play for the national teams when you are playing in NCAA?” she asked suddenly.

“Easy, I don’t get paid.”

“Ander is not playing for them,” she said. “Are you better than him?”

“No. Sanchez is not playing for them as he doesn’t want to do it for free. But I do it for the experience and exposure. And it’s not mine to decide who is better. There are more qualified people out there to do so, like the National Team Coaches and all the soccer agents. What I think is irrelevant and subjective.”

Ivy hummed as if my words got her thinking. “You’re not competing with him.”

“The only person I’m competing with is myself. That’s all that matters and what I need to focus on. I don’t need to compete with someone who is in the same place as I am. Sure, we might be picked for the same position, but we are both better suited for different type and style of teams with the pros.”

“Wow... you sound like you have this all figured out,” she remarked.

I laughed. “I don’t, but I told you already... Sanchez means nothing to me. The rivalry between our universities is fun and keeps the players engaged, but we’ve been having the upper hand for years.”

Ivy nodded as I slowed down, and a lane of white houses lined up on either sides of the car. She shifted next to me.

I wanted to reach over and comfort her, but I wasn't sure about our rules with touching in private, so I refrained.

Instead, I said, "You got it right. Quality time and physical touch are my love languages."

Maybe that's why every time she reached out, I felt a jolt of electricity run through me, and that was why I wanted to touch her so badly.

She flashed me a small smile, but it vanished as I stopped the car and turned to look at her. Her teeth sunk into her lower lip and she eyed the simple three-story white house with the Titan's flag hanging from the balcony.

"Will you tell your teammates the truth?"

I contemplated my reply as my eyes fell on my home where my team had gathered. "Just Derek and Maddox, the rest of them won't need to know."

Dex and Maddox already knew, as well as Kaia. That was enough. I just needed to believe they trusted my judgement to not hold this against me. I could only hope this won't be the reason my team loses faith in me as a leader.

Ivy nodded. "Hold my hand?" she asked quietly.

I reached out, brushing her loose strands of hair out of her face. "We agreed... full PDA package."

Her smile that I grew to crave made an appearance, and pride swelled in my chest at

being the reason for it.

I winked and rounded the car, before opening the passenger door and offering her my hand. “Ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” She carefully placed her hand in mine, her cold fingers wrapping around me like a life vest, and warmth spread through me from our touch.

I tugged her to my side as we walked toward the house. “Game on,” I muttered into her ear as we made our way to the front door.

The shiver passing through her body was written off to the chilly wind, but I couldn’t help but notice her cheeks turning pink.

I hid my smile as a spark of happiness swelled in my chest. But I didn’t have time to analyze why I was feeling happy by her cheeks changing color or why I even cared that I affected her. I shouldn’t. Ivy’s been through a rough breakup with a narcissistic bastard who probably left her with a long list of issues that I haven’t even started uncovering. I knew how emotional damage looked like, and this girl showed all the symptoms. Yet, my silly little heart decided to care.

The door swung open, and my best friend’s grim face welcomed me.

“What the hell did you do?”

CHAPTER SIX

IVY

I was going viral. Actually, we were.

It wasn't enough that I humiliated myself in front of all my friends, but someone recorded it and posted it online, turning the entire thing into mockery. Making me seem like a pathetic girl in love who wanted her ex back so desperately that she would even ruin her sister's relationship.

I stared at the tiny screen in Derek's hand where my teary face was all blown up and zoomed in.

Gosh, I was an ugly crier.

Of course, the video had no sound. It only showed what Westpoint students wanted the world to know. Me crying at the bottom of the stairs and Ander standing between me and my sister. No one recorded his cruel words. No one took a snapshot of his sadistic smile.

As usual, he was the victim and I was to blame.

It was the same when he cheated on me with my sister. Everyone felt bad for him when he was the one committing adultery.

It wasn't fair.

He was a narcissistic bastard with victim mentality. He was toxic, and while I got out, it didn't feel like I was ever going to get fully rid of him.

Max's pine scent hit my nose as he moved closer to me, and his arm snaked around my shoulders, gently pulling me to him. It was a kind and comforting gesture.

"Just breathe," he murmured in my ear and pushed away his friend's extended hand when he saw his own face on the video.

"Take a deep breath, Ivy," he said again as I struggled to breathe, his fingers pressing into my shoulder with just enough force to distract me from my spiraling thoughts. Instead, I focused on the way his fingers drummed gently on my shoulder, one at a time, lifting and pressing back. I savored a small swirl in the base of my stomach when his thumb caressed my exposed skin peeking out from my dress and he drew small, calming circles. I relished the weight of his dropped arm, the safety belt of his protectiveness. And his warm breath tickling my neck as he leaned in closer.

"You're doing great, Ivy," he praised me.

I suddenly became painfully aware how a tiny praise made me feel. Breathing was supposed to come easy, yet I struggled with the most basic human function.

I was pathetic, not someone who should be praised for being able to keep herself alive.

Ander's voice echoed in my head, his cruel words bouncing in my mind and reminding me of all the things he called me.

Stupid.

Pathetic.

Bitch.

“Ivy.” Max’s voice sounded somewhere far away, and I blinked, focusing on the reality in front of me. Questioning gazes burned my skin. Dex and Maddox stared like they haven’t seen me before.

“Come inside,” Maddox suggested, moving his tall frame out of the way and allowed us space to step in.

Max kept his arm around me as he guided me inside, his voice a muffled sound compared to the shouting coming from the living room. I glanced toward the voices arguing and strange gunshot coming from the open space living room.

“Ignore them, they are playing Fortnite or Call of Duty or whatever that is,” Max explained casually.

I groaned, “They don’t even look the same.”

Max’s lips tugged upward as he suppressed a grin. At least this got me out of my weird trance. “You shoot each other in both games. Same thing.”

“Yes, but the essence is different.”

“Potato, potahto.” He shrugged with a grin.

“Before you guys dive any deeper into that fascinating subject,” Maddox cut me off before I even opened my mouth, “we need an explanation.”

Max nodded, now looking like he was carrying the weight of the world as he squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. “We are dating. Fake dating. It’s official now. You both thought it was a stellar idea hours ago... so... here we fucking go.”

He didn't come across as cheerful as I imagined him based on the excuse he gave me that he had his reasons. But he probably didn't expect this little problem to come up with my humiliation being plastered all over the internet.

Derek rolled his eyes. "Don't take us for a fool... but what's going on with..." He pointed at me.

"What do you mean?" I narrowed my eyes.

Guess, he wasn't going to pretend I was far from that girl he met on the run. I was far from that charming, smiling thing that batted her eyelashes on Max wanting him to agree. I had a drive back then.

But a few hours in Ander's presence dragged me down into the dangerous slopes of my black hole. A hole where he intended to keep me and never let me go. I could feel his claws digging into me deeper and keeping me where he wanted me to be.

I swallowed hard. "Ander is a dick," I replied.

Derek snickered. "Tell us something we don't know."

It was supposed to be a joke, a rhetorical request. But my chest tightened.

Max shook his head and his thumb resumed drawing circles on my heated flesh. "One step at a time. I'm assuming we need to make this official."

"Damage control is your first step," Maddox agreed. "Maybe post a photo of the two of you."

"Okay, we can take one."

“In different clothes though,” Derek cut in. “Maybe change into something you wore first day at school.”

“I don’t remember what I wore.” Max snorted, glancing at me. “Do you?”

“I might like video games, but I’m a girl. I do remember the red top and straight jeans.”

“Great, we can go grab your stuff later and take some pictures. But first... food?”

“We just ordered,” Dex offered, “burgers and fries.”

I must have made a face as Max groaned. “Are you vegan?”

“I sense judgement in your tone.” I chuckled before shaking my head. “I don’t eat red meat. But chicken and turkey, yes...”

“I can add chicken nuggets or wings to the order.” Derek pulled his phone out. “Which one?”

“Nuggets.”

“By the way, nothing wrong with vegans but makes going out to dinner a pain,” Max chimed in.

“Like most dietary requirements.” I shrugged.

“True... but with chicken, we can work it out,” he said with a wink, and my stomach did a surprised backflip from his wink. “Now... let me introduce you to the rest of the team. If you are ready.”

My racing heart and galloping thoughts had settled in the last couple of minutes, allowing me to take in the foyer of the Titan's house, looking around at the marble staircase and the minimalistic decorated jacket rack and dump table. It wasn't messy, but it wasn't organized either. Rather it was lived in, homey.

I should have been trembling. I was walking into our enemy's house, full of players who watched me cheer for an opposite team.

Yet there was not one ounce of fear in my body. Anticipation and strange excitement buzzed through my body, and I found myself looking forward to meeting the team. The team I only heard negative things about, yet I knew, deep down in my heart, that not everything that Ander told me was true.

Max was the living example of that.

And if Max, who was the worst person in Ander's eyes, was the total opposite, his team couldn't be bad at all either.

The next hour was spent with devouring delicious chicken nuggets with lots of ketchup and fries, washing it down with diet Coke. My emotional support food wrapped a little blanket around me and supplied me with instant happiness. But it wasn't just the food that wrapped around me. Max's hands never left my body. His touch was gentle and caring, keeping it on my lower back as he guided me through the house, introducing me to his teammates, and once we sat, he kept it on my thighs. Occasionally, he would tuck back my hair, or lean closer whenever he was saying something in a low, rumbling voice. None of his touch was intrusive or possessive, yet I could never forget he was next to me. Not even when I'd gotten introduced to all the guys on the soccer team, unable to recall all their names and positions. I was satisfied just by being able to have a conversation with them. It wasn't hard. After our fake story time, there were no questions about my ex, or the viral video of me being humiliated. None. Instead, we chatted about video games. Maverick showed me their

impressive collection of PS5, Wii and Nintendo Switch. Different guys had different preferences, but they were all equally shocked when I said I never played the one with sports. I wasn't even faking the surprise on my face when Max stood up, his hands leaving my thigh for the first time since we sat down, and he pulled out a box from under the TV, showing off his impressive collection of Nintendo Switch accessories. From a wheel to tennis rackets, golf, and hockey sticks, there was everything. Even a strap-on for playing soccer.

"You're joking." I let out a stunned snort, and walking over to him, I picked up the black mesh strap-on. "Of course, you have the soccer one."

A shy smile tugged on his lips. "I told you... I'm all soccer."

For a moment, my heart skipped a beat, expecting him to use the word 'babe' that all the guys always used with their girlfriends, but his word of endearment was a pause.

"You need to ask him how many things he has broken due to using that shit," Derek chimed in.

Max's smile developed into a grin. "Yeah, I stopped counting. But I'm an Arizona kid. In the first year, I had no idea what to do with... rain. Like am I supposed to go out, everything is slippery and muddy. And it does get cold as well..."

"Seriously?" I couldn't hold in my laughter, and I glanced back toward the oak dining table situated in the other end of the room and surveyed his teammates' faces. They were all grinning and nodding. "Oh my gosh, you are serious!"

"He used to think he was made of sugar," Liam cooed, grinning at his captain.

"I am made of sugar." Max flipped him off. "Contrary to you assholes."

“Is that why you are so against surfing?” I wiggled my brows, turning toward my fake boyfriend. “Afraid of some water?”

“Nah, he is just a pussy,” Micah offered me an explanation.

This time, I didn’t look back, instead I watched Max roll his eyes with a shrug and didn’t even react to his words. It felt like the guy’s comment wasn’t even worth his time. It was strange seeing the dynamics between the guys. Ander didn’t let anyone breathe a wrong word about him, while with the Titans, it had that family bickering feeling. The teasing and joking, yet I could tell they were ready to jump down my throat if I hurt him. I felt their eyes trail every movement between us like I was a prey. But mostly, they watched the way Max behaved around me, noted every small touch. He was putting on the show for them, to show them this was serious as I was the first girl he ever brought into the house.

Those were some big shoes to fill.

“So... does she know about Thalia?” Nico said, and I blinked in surprise.

“Was that your girlfriend from freshman year?” I asked, my eyes still remaining on Max. His posture changed, his hands disappeared in his pockets, and it seemed like the distance between us grew. Did he take a step back?

“I was just getting there, thanks,” he muttered to Nico in a dark tone, while I heard a low chuckle from the table.

“You better get that story out in time...” Someone shut him up before he could finish the sentence, yet it still felt like a punch to the gut.

I knew Max had his reasons for wanting to fake date me, but I didn’t realize it was a girl.

“Why don’t I show you the rest of the house?” Max offered, tilting his head toward the door.

The guys behind me snickered. “And your room, Captain.”

All it took was one dark look from Max to get them to shut up, and I was impressed. He didn’t exercise any of his captain privileges to be a dick; he only used his leadership skills when they were making me uncomfortable.

“Sounds good.” I nodded and offered him my hand.

Max threaded his fingers through mine, before we walked back toward the foyer to take on the staircase.

“Nico, make sure you clean up,” Max said over his shoulder. “You seemed like you had some extra energy to burn off.”

I grinned at that.

I wasn’t surprised that Max’s room was on the second floor. I turned my head away, allowing him privacy to enter his room’s code.

I felt his eyes on me, as I surveyed the corridor with rooms. “Most of the times sophomores are doubled up in rooms as well as some juniors who are not starters. Seniors have their own room. As I’m the captain, I should have gotten the biggest one, but I stayed in my last year’s room. I really don’t spend enough time in here for it to matter,” he explained as he pushed the door open and stepped aside.

My gaze roamed over a very minimalistic room. In the middle, a king-sized bed stood, with a grey comforter on it and some decorative throw pillows, one of them shaped as a soccer ball. Two white bedside tables on either side of the bed took space.

A big window overlooked the back of the house, under which a desk was positioned with piles of books. I remembered him dropping his backpack in the foyer when we entered, but either Derek or Maddox must have brought it up as it was sitting on his office chair.

“En suite to the left and the right door leads to the closet. I use the dresser for most of my clothes,” he pointed at said furniture piece which I missed as a TV was positioned on top of it. “I have some space in the closet, if you ever want or need to leave clothes here.”

I nodded, sobering up. “Right...”

“If you prefer the dresser, I can empty out a drawer or two,” Max offered, his dark eyes scanning my face. “What’s wrong?”

“Am I supposed to leave clothes here?” I asked, sounding stupid. We were supposed to be dating. Of course I was meant to sleep over and have clothes here. There was no way he was going to come to Westpoint.

“I have a little apartment too with Kaia,” I muttered at last.

Max nodded. “I can come stay there too... but...”

“You have early morning practice,” I finished his sentence.

“Do you have a car?”

“Of course.”

“If not, I can drive you after my practice...”

“How are we supposed to keep this up?”

Max ran his fingers through his messy hair. “If I don’t have a morning practice, we can run together, otherwise if you sleep over, I can drop you off afterwards, and we pick certain afternoons other than weekends when we have designated date nights. On weekends, I can go with you to a party of your choice, unless I have an away game.”

My nerves settled a bit. “This is good...” I muttered. “What about your home games?”

A grimace passed on Max’s face. “I’m not going to force you to come.”

Hurt prickled in my chest. “I’m your girlfriend. Shouldn’t I be wearing your jersey?”

“Yes.” His throat bobbed as he swallowed. His dark eyes turned darker as he was imagining something in his head. “You should... if you want.”

“It would be weird if I didn’t go.” I shrugged. “I’m under no obligation to watch Westpoint games. But I’m sure I can convince Kaia to come with me and I’ll get a jersey or an apparel.”

Max shook his head. “I’ll give you mine.”

Those words shouldn’t have made my stomach backflip, but they did. A shiver ran across my body and I smiled at him. “I would really like that.”

“Also, we need to talk about pet names,” Max went on to his next order of business. “I hate ‘babe’ and ‘baby’. I only use it when I’m being sarcastic, and only call me that if you want to piss me off.”

I liked those, but I nodded since Ander also used them, so it was nice exploring something new. “What do... people... exes... call you?”

“Max?” he offered, making me laugh.

“That’s not a pet name, darling.” He grimaced. “Love?”

“Well... unless either of us is British.”

A laugh exploded out of me, and a satisfied grin played on his lips.

“Okay, so I use pet names for you and you just call me Max,” he concluded.

“Not a chance.”

“Then, let’s put a pause on pet names, until one of us comes up with a fitting one for the other,” he offered as a last resort.

“Fine,” I agreed with a smile. “Do you have to approve it?”

“Would be nice, otherwise, I might choke on whatever I’m drinking or eating if you spring it on me out of the blue, and you won’t have a boyfriend.”

“So dramatic.” Max was funny and easy going. It was hard not to like him.

“What can I say...”

There was a small silence between us. Max used the time to unpack his school bag and dump his sweaty clothes in the laundry basket, while I sat on his comfortable bed and examined the pictures displayed on the bedside table. One of them was the team picture from last year’s final. I recognized most of the guys from downstairs and it

was great seeing Max hold the trophy. Another one was with him and the National team during one of the games—Copa America. The last one caught my attention. It was Max and an older male, wearing the Titan’s jacket and putting his arms around Max. I knew he was familiar but I couldn’t place him.

“That’s Sky McCarthy,” Max offered when I took the picture in my hand, examining his proud smile and sparkly eyes. He looked at him with admiration and love. “He is one of the best midfielders in history in the entire world. He is our assistant coach.”

I gaped at him. “Really?”

“Why do you think we are so good?” Max grinned. “Jokes aside, Coach Parker knows him and couple of years ago he wanted to get into coaching, but didn’t want to make a huge fuss about it, so he invited him, and I guess he just fell in love with our team. He’s not here most of the times, but when he is here...”

“Is he a tough coach?” I asked, placing the picture back and leaning on my elbows to look up at Max, who was standing dangerously close to me. I could feel the heat radiating from him.

“Tough but good and fair. Very skilled. He basically made me into the player I am today. He plays where I play, he can help me, and all the other midfielders the most. In soccer, it’s not enough to have good strikers, you need to have good midfielders to move the ball up and generate game.”

I nodded along as he launched into his little soccer speech.

But my mind kept wondering to the comments thrown at me downstairs about his ex and the big story behind why he actually wanted to fake date me. I knew it wasn’t out of the goodness of his heart as he stated back on the beach. This was way too much of a complication for him when he had his eyes set on one thing only.

Soccer.

“Max?” His name left my lips in a little sigh and his dark eyes connected with mine. Minutes that seemed like hours passed as chemistry sizzled between us. I couldn’t remember the last time I had sex, but it had to be almost three months ago. Max swallowed hard and licked his lips, as if he could read my thoughts. I didn’t trust myself to not reach out for him and do something stupid like kiss him. We should strictly keep that for public appearances. Instead, I cleared my throat, and in a raspy voice, I said, “You owe me a story...”

CHAPTER SEVEN

MAX

I took a seat next to her, wondering what she might think of me. This reality was far from what she heard of me being a playboy heartbreaker. I hung out with people who deserved that title more than me, and other than the occasional hookups, I was not interested in girls. Not since I burned myself so fiercely that I still bore that scar. The past still haunted me. Which wasn't a surprise, as I was entering in a fake dating with a random girl who just exited an emotionally abusive relationship. It couldn't have been more complicated.

And on top of all that, she was hot as hell with burning desire in her gaze that in normal circumstances would have pinned to the bed and kissed senseless by me.

Yet, instead of devouring her pouting lips, I was about to open up about a thing no one other than my closest friends knew.

"I dated this girl, Thalia, freshman year," I started with a deep breath. "She was fun and we were both fresh out of high school and thought it was a great idea to jump into a relationship. I was playing for the national team since sixteen, and there was really no space for anything else in my life. Thalia got that, her dad was a soccer coach for Miami FC and she knew the game was important to me. But then... as the honeymoon phase ended, and sex became second priority, she became annoyed and bitchy, wanting my attention when I clearly couldn't prioritize her. Don't get me wrong, I'm fully aware she deserved a guy who could dedicate himself to her and give her the time and energy she deserved, and I told her this. But she... didn't want

to let me break up with her. Sounds stupid, but we would get into these massive fights, everyone on my dorm floor would hear it, and then the next day, she acted like nothing happened. I said I wanted to break up over hundred times but she kept showing up at my practice, inside the locker room, and even break into my dorm room. She was obsessed yet I kept putting off having another conversation. Coach was riding me hard why I was distracted and asked me into constant meetings to see what else he could do.” A shiver ran through me at the memories. I hated the feeling of not being able to do anything. “I should have been a bigger jerk or I don’t even know what was the appropriate way to do it, but after Christmas when she showed up at my family’s house and introduced herself to my parents telling them how much in love we are, I told her this needed to stop. I was freaked out over her attitude. She passed every single existing line. So, Dex and Maddox came with me when I told her we were done. She cried, made a huge show over it as we were in public and called me horrible names. But I didn’t really care, I just wanted to be rid of her. Boy... was I wrong by thinking I was done with her.” A low laugh escaped me. “She started spreading lies of me cheating on her, me being a jerk, everything basically you heard about me and what people assume to this day. But I kept my head down and just focused on soccer. The season was upon us and I was expecting a call from the National Team for the summer tournaments. Surprisingly, the call didn’t come from the coach, but from Thalia. She cut me off one day as I was walking from one class to the other. She informed me that her father got the national team coaching position and that if I wanted her to support me playing for the team, I should keep being with her. Obviously, I laughed in her face and didn’t believe a word. But then I got home and saw the news. I called my agent and asked him if I was going to be called to the National Team, he said most likely and I left it as it was. I wasn’t going to be bullied into a fake dating scenario. Eventually, I got the call and all was happy, until Thalia told her daddy I broke her heart and I was benched for all the fucking games. We lost and I told coach that his daughter deserves someone with his full focus on her and not me. He told me I cheated on her. I said I didn’t, but he needed some time to cool down. Now we are okay... but with the World Cup coming up, the best midfielders retiring, I have a good shot of playing an important tournament. And Thalia found me

today, reminding me of what she can do to sabotage that chance.”

I dared to steal a glance at Ivy’s face, watching her brows high on her forehead, grimace painting her face.

“Long story short, I need a girlfriend for Thalia to back the fuck off. I can’t be stringing her along, cheating or whatever she wants to tell her daddy I’m doing to her, if I’m publicly in a happy relationship.”

“Wow,” Ivy muttered, slowly shaking her hair. “I don’t usually call girls crazy, but this one definitely qualifies. But I still feel like I should add there is two sides to every story and maybe in hers, you are the villain.”

“I’m sure Ander has a sob story with you as well that makes him look like the victim.” I scoffed. “I just need your help the way you need mine. I honestly can’t deal with her anymore. She is toxic and she will ruin my career in the ground.”

Anger and hurt flashed on Ivy’s face before she nodded. “Duly noted.”

“Not wanting to sound like a dick, but you asked for a story, and I really don’t want the feminist bullshit. Some girls are just bad and there is nothing deeper to look for in them.”

Ivy nodded. “I know, but I wouldn’t want people calling me crazy without giving me a chance to explain. But you handled it pretty well,” she offered consolation, but I just lifted a shoulder.

If she wanted a full story, she could go to Thalia and get it, but I knew that I wasn’t what she said I was. I wished I was a heartless dick like she painted me to be; I even tried to act the part. But that just wasn’t me. Things would have been easier if I was and I wouldn’t be here talking to Ivy and trying to get her to see my point.

“No need to sugarcoat it, I messed up big time. Should have been more assertive.”

“That might not be your type.” She chuckled, making me grin.

“I can be on the field, but my mom taught me to treat woman with respect. That respect bit me in the ass. So, after Thalia, I only ever had one-night stands and only after I informed the girl that I had no intentions of having anything more. I was rude, but I needed to get laid every once in a while, and bunch of them volunteered.”

Ivy laughed. “You are such a guy.”

“I thought you just called me a pussy.”

“I didn’t say pussy.” She giggled; the sound playing with some invisible strings in my chest. “I said you are not the assertive alpha type.”

“Is that your type?” I wiggled my brows. “I can put you against the wall, babe, and fuck you senseless.”

She tried to keep a straight face but ended up erupting into a laughter. “You’re so cute.”

“Cute? I’ve been called worse.”

“Like... pussy?”

I shook my head in disbelief but didn’t really care she was teasing me. It was great to see a glimpse of the girl I met in the bar. Her laughter warmed my chest and her smile was contagious. No wonder she caught my eye in the bar. Too bad Ander was hellbent on killing every ounce of happiness in her and leaving her in pieces.

I tucked her wayward hair behind her ears. “I know, you think there is probably a correlation between Thalia and you, and you will go back to your apartment thinking of every single scenario where you might have acted crazy , but trust me, you two are nothing alike. In your story, no matter who is telling it, you are the victim, and you shouldn’t let him have the power to tell you otherwise.”

She sank her teeth into her lower lips. “How would you know? You don’t even know me.”

“I’m a pretty good judge of character.”

“Really?”

“Well... post-Thalia,” I offered.

“I need to see that for myself before I place my trust in you.”

I clung onto my chest and laid on my bed. “You wounded me.”

“You’ll live.” She patted my knee. “Thank you.”

“For what?” I wiggled my brows, folding my arms behind my back.

“For... all of it.”

“It’s mutually beneficial, Blossom.”

Ivy leaned next to me, her face in line with mine. “That’s the best you came up with?”

In everyone’s mind Ivy’s where these long dark green plant with pointed leaves. Not

many people knew that they actually blossomed in autumn having small green flowers. It wasn't anything spectacular, but they were blossoming. Just like the girl in front of me will once she was fully healed.

"I can always stick to babe and be basic about it."

Ivy shook her head, confusion still wrinkling her forehead. "I think I can grow to like it. It's... different. Not your usual pet name."

"I'm not your usual boyfriend." I winked and earned myself another of her sweet laughs. I needed to bottle up that sound and play it on repeat from what it did to my chest. It was ridiculous how stupidly happy it made me to hear her laugh. I would have done anything to keep her laughing.

Well... almost anything.

An hour later, we were all dressed in clothes from our first day, me in jeans and a black T-shirt paired with my white converses, while Ivy wore her red top that hugged her breasts, but left her stomach exposed and paired it with low-rising straight jeans.

"So, what do we do?" I asked. We stood in the backyard of our soccer house.

Dex motioned for us to stand closer to each other. "Just pose for a golden hour pic."

"What does that even mean?" I muttered, and Ivy chuckled next to me.

"Don't you ever take Instagram pictures or TikToks?" she enquired, tilting her head to the side. Our arms brushed as we took another step closer to each other, and I stared into her green eyes.

I grimaced. "Do I look like I do that? I'm offended. And what are you, a wannabe

influencer by night and computer science nerd by day?”

“Have you not met people with depth?” she fired back with a grin. “You know... the thing called personality... you could try it. And no, Maximilian, soccer is not a personality.”

“You sound just like my mother.”

“Your mom seems like a smart woman.”

“Certainly.” I pushed my hand into my pocket and placed the other one around her shoulders in a casual posture, trying to make my moves seem smooth. I’ve done this countless times—throw my arm around girls—but Ivy was different.

“You’re like an iceberg.” She poked me in the side, leaning into my chest. “Can’t you relax?”

“This is awkward,” I muttered, my lips brushing the top of her blonde hair. I hated posing for photos, especially when I saw Dex take endless pictures of the two of us. I assumed none of them were good enough, as he was frowning at his phone.

“Don’t you model for sports brands?” she asked.

“In case you haven’t guessed based on my unnatural modelling abilities. No.”

“Imagine you are,” she said. “Imagine it’s Nike, your favorite, and they want you to pose with a super famous female soccer player for their new campaign.”

I must have looked as a deer caught in headlights, as my friends barked out a laughter. Ivy chuckled.

“Forget it.” She shook her head as she rested it for a second on my chest. Her green eyes blinked up at me. “Forget it all. Just imagine it’s you and me, like in the car.” Her voice lowered to almost a whisper so the others wouldn’t hear us, and I dropped my head, touching my forehead to hers to hear her words. “You told me you were good at PDA,” she muttered, her voice raspy and her breath tickling my lips. “You prided yourself on it. So, show me.”

“Well... if we had an audience other than my friends,” I started, licking my lips, “I wouldn’t keep my hands around your shoulders, instead, I would slowly run them down your back and over your ass and keep them there.” Challenge lit up in her green eyes from my words, and I moved my arm from her shoulder, slowly running it down her back. My hand stopped above her butt, fingers lightly caressing her exposed skin. I watched her eyes darken, before her teeth sank into her lower lip. A half smile tugged at the corner of my lips, and I couldn’t help my cockiness, as I smoothed my palm over her firm backside, giving it a squeeze. “I would do that... to make sure everyone knew you belonged to me. And if you kept biting your lips the way you do—” My fingers curled into her ass, but she didn’t release her lower lip.

“What would you do?” she asked, challenging me, baiting me.

This was all for show, but despite my morals and principles, I was still a guy. My cock twitched as I cupped her face. She leaned into my touch, as my thumb caressed her cheek, before I hooked it over her lower lip and pulled it free from her teeth.

A surprised hiss escaped me when her teeth sank into my thumb. Her bite wasn’t strong, but it sent a jolt of electricity through my body and right into my aching cock.

Ivy’s eyes twinkled with satisfaction as need burned through me like a wildfire.

When was the last time I got laid? I couldn’t recall.

My jeans grew tight, and I swallowed hard.

“Got it,” Dex interrupted, and Ivy released my finger.

“Let me see.” She giggled, stepping away from me. Cold air hit me straight to the core where her body’s heat was flushed against me, and I came as close as I could to the much needed cold shower.

I followed her as she bounced over to Dex and they both flipped through the pictures, unaware of my tortured expression.

“You okay?” Maddox asked, appearing next to me.

“Fine,” I grunted, shaking my head and running my fingers through it. “Shit...”

“Don’t play with fire, Captain.” My friend smirked glancing at Ivy. “But I feel like you already got burned.”

I followed his gaze and watched in awe how unaffected Ivy was by me and my presence. How she laughed with Dex and pointed at the screen and potentially at a picture of us. She was back to her flirty self, the one I met on that very first night and it was dangerous. I much more preferred her when she was sad and broken. She was far less dangerous.

“I guess, this is how she wants to play,” I muttered, pushing my hands in my pockets and fisting them to regain control over my wild thoughts. “She has no idea what she started.”

“Max, come.” Ivy smiled and ushered me toward her. “You will love this one...”

I doubted I would love any of the photos. In general, I despised photos of myself, but

for some reason, the happiness in Ivy's voice and her small giggle compelled me to move closer.

But before I reached her, I still heard my best friend snort. "You are in such a deep shit, bro."

I knew that, and with every step I took toward Ivy, I walked into even deeper shit.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IVY

Two months with him.

It was the perfect caption for the short video and intimate looking pictures I posted from our heated moment in the backyard. Technically, its been two months since the half marathon in July hence our anniversary and I wanted to stick to that story. I didn't expect to fuel the name calling, but after the post and Daisy's public tantrum walking on campus was painful.

Especially with Ander's watchful eyes following me wherever I went. He didn't dare approach me, but it didn't stop him from further straining my relationship with Daisy.

But all of it faded away when I looked at the photo of Max and I that I used as a screensaver, just to annoy everyone who came close enough to me to see it. It was one of the twenty Derek took, and the intensity of our stares made desire pool in my stomach. We had scorching chemistry. But I was curious to see how it would feel to kiss him.

My body ached just by thinking of him.

I shouldn't think about him in a sexual way or even in a remotely romantic way. It was strictly business. Nothing less, nothing more.

Yet, my body didn't get the memo.

My phone pinged with an incoming message from Max with a blue heart emoji, and I glanced at it as I twirled in my chair, enjoying the dim light of the computer science lab. Data Mining was one of my new classes and it was looking to be a tough one, but I welcomed the challenge.

Max

What are you doing?

My afternoon practice is cut short as we have a game this Friday.

In the past days, we had exchanged couple of texts and went on a coffee and a lunch date during school hours, but I hadn't slept over nor were we seen kissing. Max did however send flowers to my apartment making Kaia swoon over them and I even posted them on my socials. Tonight, was our first official date night, the one we planned to have every Thursday. Nerves knotted my stomach, and I quickly snatched my phone, opening his message.

Just finishing up my data mining homework.

Max

Data mining? I can't even find a mining emoji.

That's because you never use emojis.

Max

Now my most recent one is a green heart... thanks to what I needed to put next to your name.

I remembered the tantrum he threw when I told him I had to be called 'Ivy' in his phone with an emoji. He ended up naming me Blossom and added a green heart, despite my suggestion to use the pink one. Baby steps. He was a psycho who had everyone saved under their full name, and only Dex and Maddox had their nicknames, along with his parents.

You'll survive. What's the plan for today?

Max

It's a date. It's supposed to be a surprise. Wear something comfortable and come whenever you are done. I'll be at home.

Giving my flowery dress and white Vans a once-over, I decided I'm dressed comfortably enough. I never would have dared wearing anything like this with Ander; he always encouraged very short shorts, skirts or dresses and crop tops.

I snapped a quick picture for Kaia and asked her opinion about my outfit.

K

No. No. No. Are you a granny? What is that knitted sweater? Absolutely not. Wear jeans and crop top.

I wore that on our coffee and lunch date. Literally that's all I've been wearing around him.

K

At least ditch the sweater. I'm sure he will warm you up if you get cold.

Two hours later, I walked into the home of the Titans.

“Hello, rival team’s ex,” Nico greeted me. I remembered his green eyes and the malice in them from the last time. “Long time, no see.”

“Nico.” I offered him a smile. I dated a bully for two years; I could surely handle one more. “Good to see you.”

“Feeling’s not mutual.” He grinned lazily, leaning against the staircase, his arms crossed. “What brings you here?”

“I came to see my boyfriend,” I said, the word boyfriend feeling strange on my lips. “Have you seen him?”

“Upstairs.” He nodded toward the next floor, his gaze lingering on me, challenging me to go past him.

I squared my shoulders, but before I could move, Max appeared on the top.

“Blossom.” He looked at me with his sweetest smile. “I was just about to get you. I thought you needed eight minutes.”

“No traffic.” I smiled at him, and I hoped I didn’t let on how creepy I found Nico.

“Great.” He strolled down the stairs, throwing a passing glance at Nico.

My eyes drank him in, and I couldn’t tear my gaze from him. He wore his signature jeans, with a simple white T-shirt and white Converse, but the way his eyes sparked with mischief sucked me in. “Hey, you,” he greeted me again as we stood toe to toe. I was painfully aware of his presence and the way he towered over. He brushed his nose against mine and planted a small kiss in the corner of my mouth, barely brushing

my lips.

I lost the ability to speak as his pine scent filled my nose.

Max grinned like he knew exactly the effect he had on me. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me closer.

“I want to show you something in my room,” he muttered, but the way Nico stood motionless on the stairs told me he was eavesdropping.

My hands fisted around his shirt, and I buried my face deep into his neck, finding the source of his divine smell.

“Very smooth.” I chuckled.

“Come on.” He tugged on my hand and took me upstairs. We passed the passive aggressive looking Nico.

“What do you want to show me?” I teased him as he guided me to his room, and we quickly slipped inside.

“I have a gift for you.”

I gaped and looked around. “Do you want to do it outside in front of others?”

Max shook his head. “It’s nothing crazy, don’t worry. It’s something that you will need and I promised you.”

He dragged out a jersey from his bag. Max 8 . My throat closed up, and I swallowed slowly.

“Since you said you wanted to attend the game on Friday,” he explained, handing me the jersey. “I think this color will suite you better anyway than the burgundy.”

“This is yours?”

“Yes... no.” Max shrugged. “I asked for an extra for you. I have never worn it.”

Disappointed, I forced a nod. Of course. He wasn’t going to give me his own shirt, the one that smelled like him. This was all a fa?ade, after all.

“I also got you a hoodie,” he said and pulled out a blue hoodie and a white one as well. One had the team’s name Titan’s printed on it while the other had their logo. “So you can switch around.”

I smiled. The sour taste of disappointment turned my stomach. Both hoodies were untouched.

“They are my size, so they should be oversize.”

“Thank you.”

He studied my face and pushed his hands in his pockets. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, of course. I really appreciate you got them for me... let me know how much I owe you...” I trailed off.

“Blossom, it’s a gift.”

“Thank you.”

“Leave them here.” Max motioned. “We can pick it up after our date.”

“What is the plan?”

“Surprise, but I hope you will love it... I’m actually excited for it.”

Arching a brow at him, I left the stuff on the bed and followed him outside. Our hands interwind automatically as we stepped on the corridor and made our way downstairs. “Now I’m intrigued. A date that you actually look forward to? Suspicious... are we going to play soccer or watch soccer?”

Max laughed, throwing his head back. “My goal today is to prove it to you I’m more than just my soccer.”

“Good luck. You literally told me you don’t have a hobby.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” he said as we crossed the driveway toward his Range Rover. “I think running is a hobby, and look at the bright side, we both share a hobby. We must be a match made in heaven.”

I couldn’t help but smile, not when he was talking such non-sense in such a sweet way. He stopped by the passenger side and opened the door for me, helping me up the step to his car. Carefully, I climbed in, and Max waited until I settled in before closing the door.

It was strange, having the door opened for me, when there was no one to witness his move. But then I remembered that he told me his mother taught him to be respectful with women and this was him being his usual self. This wasn’t him trying to impress me.

After buckling in, he handed me his phone. “You can pick the music, but I swear to God if you put on Taylor Swift, you are banned for life. Don’t gamble away my blind trust.”

“That’s a tough job.” I opened his Spotify and my eyes caught his neatly organized playlists. Running, Gym, Pre-Game, Post-Game, Travel, Party and Other. “Wow, you’re a playlist guy.”

“Why is everyone surprised? Everyone uses my phone for music and I have to have them split in categories. Most people dump them in the favorites. Like how am I supposed to find my music in one long list?”

“Makes sense... but... do you ever shuffle your playlist?” I teased him.

Max threw me a dark glance. “All the time actually. Otherwise, I would know the order. I like to live on the edge.”

“Very dangerous.” I laughed and settled on his Travel playlist. Surprisingly, I was met with an array of upbeat R&B and Pop music. “How long is the drive?”

“One hour if we don’t hit traffic,” he said, lifting his left leg to causally rest on the door pocket as he drove. “And no... still not telling you where we are going.”

“You’re unbelievable.”

“Yep.” Max popped the ‘p’. “This is our time to get to know each other. So, tell me, did you research me as you promised you would?”

He teased me about the message I sent him wanting to know more about his soccer past.

“You didn’t change too much,” I replied, thinking of his cute round face and curly hair. “What happened with your curls?”

“Outgrew them.”

I pulled my legs under me, making myself comfortable for the journey. “You looked cuter with them, more innocent, but based on what you told me about yourself you are still quite innocent and sweet,” I teased.

“I prefer the term nice or gentleman.”

“You are like a golden retriever.”

“I’m not blonde.” He laughed. “Please don’t tell me you’re a romance reader and you know all these terms.”

“Nope, I prefer movies. I guess, you would qualify more for a cinnamon roll hero.”

“I think we need to have a conversation about your data mining class. It seems fascinating.”

I leaned my head against the headrest and watched his profile—his sharp jawline and impossibly long lashes that fanned his chocolate eyes. “Data mining is fun, because it’s actually about analyzing a large batch of data and finding patterns from them and making predictions.”

Max blinked. “That sounds like us analyzing the other team’s footage and trying to predict what their strategy will be and how to best prepare to beat them.”

My jaw almost hit the floor at how quickly he got it and translated it down for himself to understand. There was no denying he was smart. “Something like that but with data.”

“Data can be anything,” he argued. “Depending on what you analyze.”

“Damn.” I grinned. “I wasn’t used to guys having a brain.”

“You mean, guys using their original brain?” He winked.

Heat flushed my cheeks, and I quickly shook my head. “How was your week?”

“Not too bad,” he admitted and proceeded to give me a short rundown on all the things he had done in school, his classes and practice. We were still borderline of being friends yet strangers, trying to talk about regular things with enough detail.

Max drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and bobbed his head to the rhythm. My heart did a little happy dance in my chest, watching him relax that way in my presence and being fully himself. I didn’t think twice before I lifted the phone and captured him in a short video.

“Give me your hand.” His sudden voice almost caused me to drop the phone, but I obeyed and watched as he took my hand in his and instead of lacing our fingers or kissing it, he placed it on his thigh. Slowly pulling his hand away, he left mine pressed to his leg, muscles flexing under my fingers, and he laid his own on top of mine. It was always the guy who placed a hand on the girl’s leg and everyone always took pictures like that. But this was new, different. Yet, it felt like us , albeit fake. “Now, you can take a video.”

I was annoyed at how easily my body reacted to his. It wasn’t an intimate position yet the way I could imagine his manhood being close to me, all I had to do was extend my fingers and I could graze him made me flush.

I was never sex crazy, but my body had its own mind when it came to Maximilian Aarons. I just had to keep reminding it that it was all my idea. I got us into this mess, and I had to be the one keeping the boundaries intact.

For both of our sakes.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I squeaked as I looked around the huge arcade. A gaming arcade.

“Thought you might need to let out some steam. Plus, I heard you learn a lot about people when you see them lose.”

“You think you will beat me? Not a chance, bro.”

“Ouch.” Max laughed. “I’m not your bro, Blossom.”

That stupid nickname did something funny to my heart every time he said it.

“Let’s set some ground rules... we alternate picking games, and whoever wins the most games in total pays for dinner.”

“Thought this was a date... you should be paying dinner if this is a date.”

“I thought you never lose.” Max arched his brow. “If that’s true, I’m paying dinner anyway.”

I grimaced, but I couldn’t stay angry at him for long, because this was the sweetest fake date idea ever. I loved going to the arcade, which Ander knew about during freshman year, but him being a soccer sensation, going to places like this was below him. He called this childish and stupid.

“Ladies first.” He motioned to the big space in front of us. There were various video game machines lined up against the wall, couple sports ones mixed in between. A big pool table and air hockey took up the space at the front, and in the back, I saw some car racing, motorcycles and other interactive games. “There’s bowling, dodgem and other stuff on the level below as well.”

“We are starting with a classic.” I grabbed his hand and bounced toward the back.

“You’re joking...”

“Nope. Dance battle to warm up.”

Max groaned. “Fine... I can still win.”

“You think way too highly of yourself,” I cooed as we cut through the crowd of teenagers and some fleeing college students our age to get to the dance battle machine.

Max supplied the coins for us to start the game, and leaning against the machine, he patiently waited as I picked a song.

“So, you like dancing, surfing, running and you are a total nerd,” he summarized my main hobbies with a smirk.

“I’m full of surprises.”

“And most likely shit... no one can be good at that many things.”

I shrugged. “It’s way better than putting yourself in a box and being just a soccer player.”

He contemplated my words, but his response was interrupted as I decided on a song. Bruno Mars’s “That’s What I Like” started, and I raised my brows. “Ready?”

Max stepped on his box and focused his attention on the screen.

The arrows started lighting up. Soon enough, I realized by trying to pick an

impossibly hard and quick song I wasn't familiar with was backfiring on me only. Max whistled through the song next to me and moved with such fluidity and ease like he'd been doing this his whole life.

Panting, I struggled keeping up or hitting the arrow with the right amount of force for it to register. By the time the song ended, I was sweating, and we ended up having similar points, but Max collected more of them.

"I think... I just wiped the floor with you, Blossom." He grinned, throwing an arm around my shoulders.

His condescending tone made me grimace, as he pointed at the Air Hockey. "Ready to get smashed?"

"You know... you are supposed to let me win... if this is a date," I muttered as he steered me toward the next game.

Max laughed, and the sound sent shivers down my spine.

He whispered in my ears in a raspy voice, "We are fake dating, Blossom. I don't need to let you win." He straightened and grinned. "Plus, letting you win would be an insult to you. And I respect you."

I shook my head as a part of me wished I have had met Max sooner and fell for him instead of Ander.

We tied in the end, and Max paid for our dinner of burgers, fries, chicken wings and milkshake. I haven't had this much fun in a while and I enjoyed spending time with him far from the craziness of our universities and getting to know a different side of him. Despite Max claiming he was only good at soccer, he was pretty good at all the games.

“One more picture,” I muttered, staring at the selfie he took of us, but I didn’t like how my hair looked.

Max made a silly face and leaned in again.

“Ugh, I look horrible,” I complained as he snapped another one. “It’s my face.”

He pulled me to his chest, and my face met his neck. His pine scent filled my nose and my body immediately relaxed. His lips brushed my forehead, and I didn’t even notice he was taking pictures of us as I explored the scent of his soap and cologne. “Do you approve of this?”

“That’s cute.”

“Hurray!” Max exhaled, his arm still holding me in place. “I’ll post it this time.”

“Look at you, becoming a social media guru,” I teased him as I watched him enter the app, upload the picture and caption it a simple: Date night. “Emoji,” I reminded him before he hit post. “And tag me.”

“Okay, Instagram police,” he teased me. “By the way, I loved the pictures you took of our practice,” he went on, showing me the photo he posted yesterday of him shirtless, one foot resting on the ball. I went to watch their practice and he looked so hot in the setting sun I couldn’t resist snapping some pics of him to post. “My agent is getting his hopes up that he can finally get me sponsorships and force me into posting stuff.”

“You’re welcome.” I grinned. “If you get sponsorships, I promise to help you post. You know... put the marketing side of my degree to use.”

He rolled his eyes. “But honestly, thanks. You revived my account and finally

everyone stopped giving me shit.”

I was glad to help out since this was meant to be a mutually beneficial arrangement.

“Don’t be too generous with your thanks yet,” I muttered. “It’s my mom’s birthday in two weeks. After your game. Will you... come home with me?”

“It was part of the deal.” He nodded, his sweet smile lighting up his face. “Of course, I’ll go. Are you nervous?”

“A bit,” I admitted. “Haven’t talked to Daisy since she found out about us and I have no idea where we stand. I mean, I know our relationship is nonexistent at this point, but still... she is still my sister. I love her, but at the same time, I want to protect her from Ander. It’s just hard to do it.”

“They always say that the road to hell was paved with good intentions... I guess she needs to learn this on her own.” Max shrugged. “It must be hard watching her make the same mistakes you did, but think about it... would you have believed anyone two years ago if they told you the truth about Ander?”

I contemplated his words and shook my head. “No... I wouldn’t have. He has this way... to make you believe whatever he wants.”

“I figured. You just need to let it play out, and you can be there in the shadows watching over her. But you can’t always protect the people you love from making mistakes. All you can do is be there for them afterwards.”

Pushing away my milkshake, I turned to face him. “Do you think I’m making a mistake?”

“I told you the first day I think this is crazy. But hey, you sold me on it, and for my

own selfish reasons, the answer is no. But I do understand your reasons as well. I just think... this is more of a revenge relationship I a saving Daisy one.”

He was reading me like an open book.

“Hey, revenge is a dish best served hot.” I laughed at his saying.

“Just because I don’t believe in revenge doesn’t mean your reasons and your feelings are not valid, Blossom. They are, and the only thing that matters is for you to be able to deal with the situation. I’m here for you.”

I was dancing on the fine line of falling for him as he was being the perfect dreamy boyfriend even without trying to be. His actions spoke louder than his words. Yet, when he acknowledged my feelings and didn’t discredit them, it did something to my heart. It mended the broken parts.

Perhaps, I was more broken than I thought if a couple of nice words and simple acknowledgment of my feelings made me emotional.

Ander did pull a number on me, and I was only scrapping the surface of all the damage he did.

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CHAPTER NINE

MAX

“Aarons, take the shot!” Coach shouted, pissed off.

A frustrated groan left me as I watched my perfect pass make it to Derek’s waiting foot and he missed the goal by mere inches, allowing the ball to fly into the stands. I should have taken the shot, but all my life, I was a team player and never someone who took unnecessary risks.

Halftime’s whistle sounded, and wiping the sweat off my face, I moved toward the changing room.

“I’m sorry, man.” Dex jogged up next to me and gave me his sad puppy eyes. “Not sure how I missed it.”

“Me neither,” I muttered. Being pissed at him wasn’t going to win us the game. Hidden Hills was playing much better than we anticipated and their defense was air tight. It took me almost the full halftime to get the ball away from them and give it to Dex. He gambled away an easy shot.

Or rather, I made a mistake not taking the shot myself.

But I was a team player and if I could, I always passed the ball to the person who was meant to score.

I didn't look up at the stands, I didn't want to know if Ivy made it since her last text suggested she was running late. I didn't even understand why I cared if she was there or not. She was my fake girlfriend, it shouldn't have mattered. I was used to not having anyone watch my games, but the idea of Ivy being in the stands for me was exciting. Not that I would ever admit it to myself.

Guess losing with her watching would suck double time.

"Okay, guys," I said, my voice strong and confident despite my inner feelings conflicted. "We still have another forty-five minutes to turn this around. We are switching to 3-5-2 formation. Hudson, Liam, you will be able to assess the situation and see if you need to defend or attack. Maddox, Andrew, and I will have the opportunity to dominate any midfield battle and move the ball. Maverick, you need to step into our midfield battle while having enough defensive cover, and Dex and Marco, you better link up and not stay isolated."

"We haven't really practiced this," Marco muttered, concern shining in his green eyes.

I nodded. This formation required heavy coaching, otherwise if our midfield is breached, we were fucked, and defending a wider position was tough too.

"Why don't you switch with Oliver?" I glanced at my other teammate who was an attacking midfielder but could be used as a forward. "He can help you at the front. Can you guys do that?"

Oliver nodded, and after exchanging a look with Marco, he nodded as well.

"Great." I clapped, eager to get back on the field and destroy the other team. "Coach?"

“The idea is the right one... let’s see if you can all keep your positions and do your god damned job,” Coach Parker muttered, and I was expecting slightly more encouraging words, but I would take whatever at this point. At least he wasn’t shouting.

“Titans on three,” I called them around and placed my hand in the middle. They all piled their hands on top of mine as we formed a tight circle. “One... two... TITANS!”

The team jogged back to the stadium as I bumped my fist with Maddox and the two of us followed.

“We’ve got this,” he muttered, his eyes on Coach Parker in front of us. “We never lost in a home game and we never will.”

I doubted his words, but I forced myself to act confident. If I made the wrong call and messed up even more, I was going to go down in history as the worst captain of the Titans.

No pressure really.

Letting out a small exhale, I took my position opposite Maddox. Contrary to before, now we had two people between us, which meant our position was quite wide, making it challenging to defender.

I watched the opponents trying to shadow us, find whoever they were stuck on, but the new positioning threw them off a bit, which gave us the edge to snatch up the ball, moving it between the five of us in the midfield.

My eyes were glued to the ball, not leaving it for a nanosecond in order to not miss out on anything. The next forty-five minutes were make or break. There was no room

for error from our side.

We made pass after pass, moving the ball as a unified team while time ticked away like the most annoying countdown.

The Titans had higher possession percentage of the ball, but when it mattered the most, we lost it.

And that's how the score suddenly jumped to 1-0 to Hidden Hills. No matter how much I pushed my body, I couldn't catch up to the ball as they easily moved past our defense, snatched the ball, and moved it all the way up to the goal line and scored.

I let out a frustrated groan, my fingers threading through my hair and I pulled on it.

"Max," Maddox muttered, elbowing me. "Focus."

He was right, I wasn't focused. Not since the back of my mind was occupied with a certain blonde who drove me crazy. I wanted to know if she was wearing my jersey, but I didn't want to see the disappointment in her eyes.

Losing wasn't how I wanted to start off her experience in watching me play.

Not that I should have cared about it, she wasn't mine, not for real. Yet, the throbbing ache in my dick reminded me how good it felt being close to her and wondered how it would feel kissing her senseless or diving into her.

With another muffled groan, I twisted my upper body, catching a glimpse of Ivy on the stands. Her blonde hair was braided in two long braids and my jersey that should have hidden her slim and sexy body was tied around her waist, exposing a teasing line of tanned skin above her jeans.

I swallowed hard as my eyes connected with her emerald ones.

She slowly pulled her beautiful pink full lips into a smile and silent words passed between us.

Words of encouragement.

Words of hope.

Words of good luck.

I needed them all, because I was losing all hope in myself that I could get this done.

I let out a long breath, and without even a smile, I turned back toward the field.

“Let’s go,” I muttered to Maddox and jogged back into position.

There was still fifteen minutes left of the game and I had to prove it to everyone the Titans were winners and not losers. Never losers. Not under my captainship.

I moved through the motion with newfound energy. Moved past the opponent players with ease as I snatched the ball up from the enemy midfielder.

Playing the ball between my feet, I moved toward their goals and focused on the clear path in front of me.

This time, I didn’t look for Derek.

This time, I didn’t slow down looking for anyone else on our team.

This time, I relied and believed in myself.

I picked my target and sent the ball flying quicker than anyone could anticipate it.

The ball flew in one straight line, landing in the left corner, missing the goalie's hand by mere inches.

Suddenly, my teammates collided with me and jumped on top of me, their happy shouts echoing in my ear.

It wasn't a win, but at least we didn't lose.

A tie was better than losing.

Hell, anything was better than losing.

Yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that I should have taken the first chance I got to score. Then we would be winners.

"Hey, Captain." Ivy knocked on my bedroom door and walked in before I could reply. "Why the sour face? You played well."

Her green eyes glimmered with concern as she took me in, while I drank in her outfit and had to swallow hard when I noticed that she wasn't wearing jeans. She was wearing jean shorts that molded onto her hips and ass like a second skin. She was wearing a jersey with my name on it.

The sight of her in my jersey, my name and my number made the ache in my chest deepen, but I quickly reminded myself it wasn't mine. Just like she wasn't mine.

"Did I take the post too far?" she asked, concern lacing her words as she lifted her phone.

I shook my head again. Her post of the team jumping on me and hugging me, and the picture of me shooting the goal shot were amazing. Her sweet caption praising my talent was heartwarming.

But nothing eased the disappointment brewing in my chest.

I let the team down. My team. The one I was responsible of.

“Max?” Ivy asked, stepping closer.

“Sorry,” I groaned. “I wasn’t in the mood to party.”

“You guys tied, it was a great game,” she tried again, her voice thinner than before.
“You played well.”

I looked up at her, and whatever she saw in my tortured gaze made her close the distance between us.

“You’re too hard on yourself,” she whispered, her hand landing on my shoulder.

The weight of her hand got me curving my shoulders inwards, and I let my head hang again.

“You don’t get it,” I muttered. “I should have shot the first goal instead of giving it to Derek. I made a bad decision and it cost us the win.”

“Titans lose as a team and win as a team,” she reminded me, and I let out a tortuous laugh.

“Yeah, that doesn’t mean I can’t give myself feedback.”

“You are beating yourself up,” she said, her voice suddenly harder. “Everyone makes mistakes, it’s what makes us human. You made the best decision you could with the limited information you’ve got on the field. You placed your trust in your teammate. It doesn’t make you a bad leader, Max. Not even a failure. It makes you a team player.”

I let out a shaky breath, emotions running high in me since the game. I was a perfectionist, and I held myself to an impossible standard.

Today, I messed up.

“I’m just... hard on myself,” I muttered the lamest excuse. “Sorry... you probably want to party. Let me get my shit together, and I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Ivy sat beside me on the bed. “If you don’t want to party, we can stay here. Watch a movie. You don’t seem in the mood to talk.”

A shake of my head was the only response I gave her before I picked up the remote control and handed it to her. “You pick.”

I moved all the way up on my bed, propping the pillows up for both of us and leaned against it. I was still wearing my faded blue jeans and a Titan’s hoodie that I threw on after showering earlier.

Ivy followed my initiative and positioned herself next to me, her gaze fixed on the TV.

My eyes took a lazy route, watching her long legs extend on my bed as she wrapped her arm around her exposed midriff. Tiny goosebumps dotted her skin, and I immediately slipped out of my hoodie and offered it to her.

“You seem cold, take it.”

Ivy’s hand paused for a split second as she reached for it.

“I’m boiling up,” I said, which was true. Being this close to her, plus the anger simmering in me did help me run hot. “You look like you need it.”

“Thank you,” she said, but I had a feeling there was so much more she wanted to say. “I picked a comedy,” she told me as she slipped into my hoodie, her face buried into the soft material for a second before her head popped up, her braids intact. My hoodie covered her up and she even pulled her legs, slipping them under it.

The sight of her wearing my clothes eased some of the tension in my chest and flooded me with warmth.

I wondered if I sweated in it or if it still smelled like my soap and perfume. I wondered if she liked the smell.

From that moment, I forgot about the game, and Ivy occupied my thoughts.

CHAPTER TEN

IVY

My knee bounced nervously as we drove toward my home. It was my mother's birthday weekend and both Daisy and I promised we would come to celebrate. San Diego was just little over two hours from San Matjo.

Max offered to drive and I was grateful for that, considering it was going to be the first time I was facing my parents post break-up when Ander was clearly dating my sister. It was going to be a shit show.

At least I didn't need to struggle through the looks of pity as I had a hot and smart boyfriend of my own.

"Fair warning, my parents love Ander," I muttered as I stared at the passing cars. "They are obsessed with him and he can do no wrong in their eyes. They didn't even care about the whole sister switch. They said at least he remained in the family."

"Great, can't wait to meet them."

The smell of flowers was overpowering, as Max convinced me that buying a gift of expensive jewelry for my mother was not enough, and he stopped to get her flowers and a bottle of whiskey for my dad. I had no clue how he remembered when I mentioned it in passing, but he got the flower and the drink right.

His attention to detail was superb.

“Why don’t you play a bit?” Max pulled out his Nintendo Switch from the middle console and handed it to me.

I immediately turned it on, feeling grateful he brought it even though I wasn’t sure when he thought he would have time to play. “How do you even play FIFA?”

“It’s more the strategy part of it, selling and buying players, making the best team,” he explained as the screen loaded. The rest of his explanation was lost on me as the home screen showed another game next to his beloved FIFA.

Minecraft.

“You...” I stared at him, tears burning my eyes. He clearly told me he never played.

“I think it’s installed and loaded,” he said, not even acknowledging my wave of emotions. “I wanted you to have your comfort game with you in case the weekend got too much.”

“Gosh,” I sniffled as a tear rolled down my cheek. I was ridiculous. One small act of kindness was making me all emotional. “Thank you... it’s really thoughtful. Incredibly. Really.”

“It’s okay. I’m happy if it makes you happy.”

And that was why Maximilian Aarons was the best boyfriend ever.

Best fake boyfriend ever.

The rest of the trip I spent my time playing Minecraft listening to some country music I have never heard in my life but apparently Max loved it. It was weird to see this new side of him and to explore who he really was outside of his soccer playing

persona.

I barely noticed that we arrived into San Diego, as we turned onto the street where I grew up and I recognized the palm trees and the houses.

“You can park on the driveway,” I offered as he pulled to stop in front of our picture-perfect white house with white picket fence. Ander’s Mercedes was already parked next to my Dad’s BMW, and Max carefully reversed back to park his car in front of theirs.

“They got here early,” I muttered, my knuckles turning white as I held onto the Switch. Anxiety rolled off me in waves, and I started to sweat. I wished I could sink into the cold ocean water instead of going through this family weekend.

“It’s going to be okay.” He reached over and squeezed my hand. “I’ll be with you every step of the way, don’t worry!”

I forced a smile and nodded, trying to look confident, but I was terrified.

“I’ll even go surfing with you,” he offered, his lips curling into a sexy smirk. “I know you want to see me in a wetsuit.”

A chuckle escaped me, and just thinking of his hard abs and lean body wrapped in a wetsuit got me hot. There was no denying Max was hot as hell and my body noticed it too. But he was making a sexual joke in private that never happened before.

“Ivy!” The entrance door swung open, almost hitting the wall of the house as Daisy marched out. She was wearing a yellow sundress that would have washed her out if it wasn’t for the fake tan she wore. Her long blonde hair was braided to the side and her grin wide as she approached Max’s car. “Wow, what a shitty car.”

Max let out a low laughter and pulled away. "Sanchez is rubbing off on your sister and not in a good way."

"Tell me about it." I sighed and reached for the handle. "Guess, there's no more hiding."

"We don't need to hide. Just remember, there's no shame in upgrading from that." He nodded toward the door where Ander stepped out in his faded jeans and Lion's T-shirt. His hair was messy.

With a nod, I watched Max exit the car and rounding it, he opened the door for me.

"Daisy." I nodded at her with a smile and she threw her arms around me, squeezing me into a tight hug.

"I missed you!" I cringed internally, like she wasn't the one siding with her boyfriend and humiliating me during the past weeks, but I ignored it. "Mom's going to be so happy you came. She was worried you might feel bad coming to celebrate with us."

I felt Max's hand around my waist as his fingers danced over my lower back and he protectively pulled me to his side.

"I'm Max, by the way, but I guess introductions aren't necessary." He looked at Daisy once I nestled against him.

"Nice to officially meet you." She batted her fake eyelashes at him. I was taken aback by her change in appearance mostly because before she never showed any interest in fake tan and fake eyelashes.

Ander approached, his arm reaching around Daisy's shoulders and pulling him into her. "Aarons."

“Sanchez.” Max nodded to him, his tone cold, but offering his hand to him. Ander reluctantly shook it.

“What brings you all the way here?” Ander asked like he was oblivious to the fact that it was my mom’s birthday and attendance was mandatory.

“Good food. Pretty girls. Curiosity.” Max shrugged with a grin, and I almost chuckled. His usually sweet personality was taking a passenger seat and I didn’t recognize his underlying alpha side as it took over the driver’s seat.

Ander scoffed, and Daisy immediately ran her hand over his chest. “You should come inside, we were just starting with lunch. Weren’t sure how long you were going to take.”

I rolled my eyes as she turned away, and Max brushed his lips over my forehead before reaching for the gifts in the back seat.

I was annoyed he only showed sign of affection once they turned away, but I caught a glimpse of Ander looking back and catching the moment which seemed way more intimate this way.

“Mom, Dad, Ivy and Max are here!” Daisy informed the whole neighborhood as she bounced into the house, Ander on her toes.

“Mr. and Mrs. Ridge,” Max greeted my parents with his beautiful smile. If I was worried how my parents were going to react to him, I shouldn’t have been. My mother’s face immediately softened as she took him in, her face showing an appreciative glimmer as she gave him a once-over and found him hot enough to replace Ander. They were both built similarly, with similar dark hair and dark eyes. But while Ander’s personality was manipulation, there was something warm that radiated from Max.

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” my mom said, stepping up to him and giving him a hug. “Call my Irene.”

“Sure, Irene, thank you! These are for you.” Max handed her the flowers with a grin. “Happy birthday.”

“Ah, beautiful,” she cooed. “Daisies and lilies, my two favorite flowers.”

I ignored that Ivy’s weren’t her favorites when she named her first daughter after them. Max laced his left hand with mine, giving it a small squeeze.

“Thank you for having me, sir.” He stepped up to my dad, still holding my hand and handed him the whiskey.

My dad’s eyes lit up slightly seeing the brand he liked and the impressive age of twenty on the whiskey. “Welcome to our home.”

“I’m here too,” I muttered, giving a small wave before my mom hugged me.

“Aw, you found such a handsome boy. I was worried about you,” she muttered into my ear, and I almost gagged. Not the words I wanted to hear, but also exactly what I expected, hence the whole fake boyfriend.

Max threw me a glance that told me he heard her, and I exhaled as I hugged my mom back.

“Yeah, he is perfect.”

“I’m glad you and Daisy sorted it all out and the four of you get along,” she went on. “Ander told me you all went to a party together.”

I didn't correct her.

"Lunch is ready, let's get started. You might be able to catch some waves before dinner," she said, making me smile. "Are you a surfer, Maximilian?"

Max grinned and his eyes locked with mine. "No, but I can't wait for Blossom to teach me."

"You play for the Titans, right? You won the cup the past four years in a row," my dad said, since he was a great soccer fan, too.

"Yes, sir," Max replied dutifully. "It's my first year as a captain and I hope to guide my team to victory again."

Ander snorted, clearly annoyed by not getting any attention.

"And you also played for the National Team," my father went on, clearly doing his homework on Max.

"Yes, I do. I hope to play again this year."

"You are coached by Sky McCarthy?"

I let out a frustrated groan with all his questions, but Max only bobbed his head again.

"He is the best midfielder and I can only hope to be half as good as him."

Ander snorted again, catching Max's attention.

"Heard your season is going well." Max turned to my ex.

“Yeah,” Ander said it in a disgusted way. “Better than you guys. I heard you choked the first half time and didn’t take your shot. Must suck having your mind somewhere else.” The smile he flashed him was pure malice and it made me wonder how did I ever love him.

Max shrugged, but I knew it was still eating him up. My hand found his thighs under the table, and I gave him a gentle squeeze. “I take every opportunity to learn,” he muttered. “And distractions happen, especially when your girl is watching you play. Guess, it went to my head.”

The words felt false as they left him. It wasn’t him, but he played the role I needed him and Ander was seeing exactly what I wanted him to see. A distracted, lovesick player.

Nausea hit me stronger this time and my appetite vanished as I stared at the steak and mashed potatoes.

Ander snickered at Max’s confession, and conversation moved from me back to Daisy and Ander who both enjoyed the spotlight.

Max leaned back and laid his arm across my chair, leaning in to kiss my cheek softly. I turned to face him, our noses brushing. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing you need to be sorry about,” he muttered, his lips brushing mine as he spoke. Electricity sizzled down my spine at the contact, and I desperately wanted to kiss him deeper and devour his soft lips. The side of his lip kicked up and the sexy smirk was driving me crazy.

Someone cleared their throat and our attention snapped back to the table. “Are we bothering?” my mom asked with a soft chuckle. “You love birds will be soon alone to devour each other. But if you are done... cake is coming.”

“I’m ready for dessert,” Max said, his gaze holding mine, and we both knew he wasn’t talking about cake.

Butterflies awoke and flapped their damned wings in my stomach. This was a dangerous game we were playing, but not one I wanted to stop.

Especially when he was looking at me like there was nothing and no one else in this world who mattered more than me.

“Yeah, cake sounds good,” I muttered, wetting my lips with the tip of my tongue and grinned when Max’s eyes darkened. There was always chemistry between us, but this was the first time we really used it to drive a point home and everyone at the table believed we were ready to rip each other’s clothes off. “Do you need help cleaning up?” I asked my mother, my eyes still on my fake boyfriend. “I can help.”

My mom chuckled. “Yes, otherwise you might burn up from the intensity of your boyfriend’s stare. He is ready to...”

“I’ll help.” Max stood, pushing the chair back and slipping back into his gentleman role. “You stay put, Blossom.” He kissed the top of my head, and his lips brushed my ears, where he whispered, “I’m sure you are soaking wet for me, and I wouldn’t want anyone to see the stain on your dress.”

Daisy gasped, clearly hearing him, but thankfully my parents were far out of earshot.

“Asshole,” I muttered, making him laugh.

Ander followed to help, of course, because he couldn’t not go if Max was helping and I stayed burning up in my seat.

It might have all been a joke for him, but I was needy for him. I’ve been horny and

needy since our first date. And with every little thing he did for me, I was falling for him deeper.

My body wanted him, and my heart was ready to take the plunge and follow.

“You found a nice guy,” my dad told me from across the table, and I gazed at him in surprise. He never commented on any of our decisions, but clearly, he wanted to make a comment on this one. “He seems like he knows what he wants and he is focused. And he cares about you.”

“Ander cares about me too,” Daisy chimed in, her face flushed and frustrated. “Why would you not say that?”

Dad exchanged a sad look with me. Ander might have fooled my mom with his charm, but my dad wasn’t as forgiving on the whole sister switch.

“Yes, I’m sure he does, my love,” he muttered to my sister in a condescending way. “Like he cared about your sister before he cheated on her with you.”

Daisy gasped. “That was rude, Dad! We fell in love, it’s not his fault it happened, and we were both terribly sorry. Right, Ivy? We made up.” She glared at me, her eyeballs almost falling out.

I nodded. “Sure, I don’t mind... I moved on.”

“As you should.” Dad nodded. “That boy has a future.”

“You are saying it like Ander...” Daisy jumped in again.

Dad let out a sigh. “I’m having a conversation with your sister.”

“By trashing my boyfriend,” she whined.

“Just stating facts.” He shrugged, unbothered by the crocodile tears pooling in her eyes.

“You make it sound like Max is better than Ander.”

“There is no such thing as better,” I soothed her concerns in a bored tone as my dad let out a low sigh and exited the dining room. “Simply, your boyfriend is not someone suited for me. Max is suited for me.”

“He is way too nice. I’m sure he is boring as hell in sex.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Actually, I can’t complain. And that is one thing where we can easily compare guys. And let me tell you this... Max is much better than Ander when it comes to sex. Ander does that thing with his finger, but Max knows how to use his tongue way better.”

Daisy gaped. It was totally worth it for seeing my sister’s face. I felt bad for hurting her, but at the same time, I wanted to put her in her place and make her realize her fairytale was built on lies.

“Who’s ready for the cake?” My mom returned with the huge pink two-tier cake with three sparklers.

Max hugged me from behind, his head resting on my shoulders. “Glad to know my tongue made such a good impression on you.”

I let out a low laugh. “I’m just using my imagination.”

“Love the endorsement.” He chuckled, making shivers dance on my spine. “Would

love to prove it too, but we have rules.”

Fuck the rules, I wanted to say, but thankfully, the celebration interrupted me from making the biggest mistake of my life and acknowledging that his teasing might have been real and not fake.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MAX

I was going crazy. I stood in the late afternoon setting sun in my drenched wetsuit and stared at the ocean.

Yep, totally crazy.

I'd spent the majority of the time trying to balance on the board but ended up falling into the water more than I could stand on it. Sitting was okay, I mastered sitting. Ivy laughed and dropped onto her own board floating in the shallow water.

"It's easy," she told me as she unzipped her wetsuit. Her baby blue bikini cupped her breasts perfectly and I couldn't take my eyes off her. I loved her in workout clothes, but the wetsuit was a whole different category. There was nothing left to my imagination. I could see every curve and every dip of her body.

"You are doing well." She laughed, making me roll my eyes.

My hair was sticky and wet as it stuck to my face and I'd swallowed too much water already. My muscles ached, and I wrecked my knee at least four times both on the board and into some rock in the ocean.

It was safe to say I wasn't a water guy.

"This is horrible," I complained, laying on the sand after I dragged my board to shore

and watching the sunset. The ghost of the waves still made my body feel like it was rocking on the water as Ivy laid next to me, her head nestled into my shoulder.

“For the first time, you did wonderful.”

“No need to fluff me.”

Ander and Daisy were having drinks in the beach bar, and I felt their eyes constantly on us.

I covered her body with mine, laying on top of her. I nudged her legs open with my knee and I didn't care about the sand and water dripping from me as I rubbed myself against her. Ivy sucked in a surprised breath and her eyes widened. She could probably feel my erection, but with all the wet clothing between us, she couldn't fully guess what it was. Or she wouldn't dare consider what it might be.

“Are they looking?” she asked, and I nodded. I had no clue if they really were or not, but it was easier to do what I wanted if she thought we had audience. “Maybe you should kiss me.”

I was dying to taste her on my tongue. And kiss her like I wanted to all this time. Like she deserved to be kissed.

“I had the same idea.” I flashed her a satisfied smirk, and brushing my nose over hers, I watched as her eyes fluttered close and she took a sharp inhale. Our breath mixed as I leaned over her and caught her lips with mine. She tasted like chocolate and coffee. Ivy moaned as she opened up for me, my tongue seeking entrance to explore every inch of her. I was met by her tongue, and they collided in a sensual dance as my hand moved to her hips, digging my fingers into her flesh as my hips rocked into her center.

Another soft gasp escaped her as she wrapped her legs around me and pulled me closer. If there were no clothes between us, I could easily slide inside her and fuck her.

That thought made me want her more. Her scent intoxicated me as our tongues collided and danced a dangerous tango.

I ran my tongue over her swollen lips, before capturing her lower lip between my teeth and sucking on it.

I would have done anything to coax those sweet sounds from her once again. I wanted to remember them forever.

I would have been dry humping her, if we weren't already drenched from the ocean. Yet I was sure if somehow I managed to get my hand into her wetsuit, I would find her bikini bottoms soaked for a different reason.

She blinked at me as her breathing quickened and her breasts rose and fell. I kept my hand on her hips because otherwise, I would undo her bikini and suck on her perky nipples that kept straining against her bikini top.

"Are they still watching?" she asked, her voice raspy as her fingers played with my wet hair.

I almost asked 'who?' when I remembered why I was there in the first place and why we were kissing. I snuck a glance at their table, but it was empty.

For a second, I considered telling her they were still staring and enjoying our show, but my brain recovered enough from my horniness to remind me it was a bad idea to allow myself to get way too involved with her.

“No, they are gone,” I replied, rolling off her.

“Guess they enjoyed the show,” she said. “You kiss well.”

“Oh, are we having a feedback session?” I teased her with an easy grin and folded my arms behind my head. “Hit me.”

“No feedback, you are the perfect fake boyfriend actually,” she said shyly. “You are caring, nice and sweet. Your attention to details is scary. You are a true gentleman. Yet you kiss like...”

“Don’t leave me hanging now. My ego needs the stroking. I’ve been spending time with Sanchez, listening to all his digs. I need to recover.”

Ivy brushed a wet strand of my hair back. “You kiss like you never wanted it to end. It felt like a second and a lifetime all at the same time. It was all-consuming and so good.”

It was because I meant it, but of course I couldn’t say it out loud.

Instead, I just grinned. “Thank you for the feedback. I’m glad to know you can confirm my tongue skills are superb.”

“Oh my gosh.” Ivy’s cheeks turned pink and she laughed, her voice echoing in the almost empty beach. “I had to say something.”

“Maybe one day... you will know for certain I’m better,” I said quietly, not even sure if she heard me. “Especially with my tongue between your legs.”

When I glanced over, she was catching the last bit of the sunset. The wind was returning and seawater filled my nose.

I couldn't tell if the redness on her face was from the sun playing tricks or embarrassment from my words.

"Did you get your dose of the water?" I asked, nodding toward the ocean, instead of teasing her about her previous comments.

Ivy looked at me, her profile illuminating the little remaining light and painting her red. "You do remember everything, don't you?" I shrugged in response. "I'm ready to go, if you want. Ander never tried surfing with me... I mean you're not a natural, but it means a lot you at least pretended to want to try."

"I wanted to try it," I said. "I finally found something I suck at. Very humbling."

Her laughter did something to me since the first time I heard it, and every single time, it was the same.

"That's why I like you... you are so real."

"Unless when I'm pretending to fake date you," I reminded her.

A sour expression took over her face. It felt like she was almost dreading the whole fake part of our arrangement as much as I did. "Yeah, true."

"But it was easy to not fake how much fun I was having this afternoon. You would be a great teacher, but I just suck at it. So let's agree to never surf again."

"You could do paddle surfing," she pointed out. "You are great at sitting on the board."

"I'll be in the water with you all summer as long as I don't have to do all the crazy stuff and break my neck."

“Live a little.” She nudged me with her shoulder, and I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her between my legs to hug her.

We sat like that, intertwined in each other. The only noise around us was the soothing music from the bar and the waves crashing into the beach.

“You don’t have to do that,” Ivy muttered as she leaned against my chest, her head resting on my shoulder and her fingers tracing the nape of my neck. “No one is watching.”

“I know,” I said into her hair, not caring about the cold shiver that ran through my body from all the wet clothes. “I want to do it.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

IVY

Max was unexpected in every single aspect.

He was kind and caring.

He was hard working and dedicated to his team.

He was a total gentleman who made my blood boil with desire.

I was going mad because no matter how many times I slipped my hand between my legs and touched myself imagining it was his fingers teasing me and made myself orgasm, it was never enough. That sizzling chemistry between us kept cracking.

Did he feel the same way, though?

I slept in his hoodie and imagined he was by my side.

And I wasn't.

I rubbed my eyes and blinked at the guy sleeping on the other side of the bed. Max discarded his T-shirt sometime during the night complaining about the heat in the room. I wore his hoodie and shorts to sleep, but the body heat coming from him kept me hot.

Admiring his tanned and toned chest, I wished I could run a hand over his sculpted muscles. He wasn't bulky at all, and I wondered how it would feel to touch him.

"You're staring," Max mumbled, his face pushed into the pillow, messy hair falling over. "Gosh, your room feels like hell. No wonder Ander enjoyed being here."

Despite the mention of my ex, I chuckled, and Max glanced at me.

"Good morning, Blossom."

"Morning," I offered him a half-sleepy smile. This was our first time in my childhood home. But this wasn't the first time we shared a bed. We kept a pillow between us to divide the bed equally and avoid any touching. It was Max's idea.

Max kicked the thin sheet off him and stood. "I'm desperate for coffee. What do you want for breakfast?"

I watched his upper body stretch and his muscles tighten, when something else caught my eye. His boxers were strained.

I cleared my throat, my eyes focused on the beast he was taming in his boxers, as he swiftly adjusted himself. Images of us tangled up on the beach yesterday flashed in my mind and I could finally confirm what I felt was indeed real.

"Morning wood, don't worry about it," he muttered, embarrassment in his voice, and when I glanced up, I saw his cheeks flush. "I'm gonna go to the bathroom. You make coffee?"

I nodded, the throbbing between my legs intensifying. "Yep. Sounds good."

Max threw an uncertain look my way. "Don't worry about it. I would never do

anything to make you feel uncomfortable. I wouldn't..."

"I trust you," I blurted out to stop his gentlemanly speech, when all I wanted from him was to fuck me hard.

I was a slut.

He was here to help me with Ander and my insecurities, and all I could think about was getting laid.

It wasn't fair and I had to keep my shit together.

"Thank you, but I haven't earned your trust yet."

I wanted to scream at him to stop being so fucking perfect and saying the right thing all the time, but I remained silent.

The sizzling electricity was humming between us as our eyes connected and the world fell apart. Gone was the soft crickets from the birds, gone was Daisy's rummaging through her room next door. Everything faded in the background as we held each other's eyes.

"I-I'll get the coffee going," I offered, returning to the safest topic. "You take care of yourself..."

"I'll just shower, I wouldn't..." He looked horrified by the idea of masturbating in my shower.

"Whatever you want," I shrugged, jumping off the bed and heading toward the main door. "I will be outside. See you in the living room... and don't forget your T-shirt."

Max grimaced and headed to the bathroom.

Guilt knotted my stomach as I listened to the shower turning on and I walked back to the bed, laying on my back. My heart throbbed in my chest as I listened to the noises of the bathroom. Faint rustling with clothes. Heavy footsteps. Creaking of the shower door.

Anticipation built inside me as I reached my hand under my sleeping shorts and my fingers found my clit with ease. Circling it, I pressed my finger over my clit, gasping with pleasure.

A muffled grunt came from the shower as a response to my silent moan, and I could see it all in front of me—Max leaning against the shower wall, palming his long and thick cock, and jerking off as the cold water beat down his sweaty and hot body.

I slipped two fingers inside and started pumping to the rhythm of the falling water and small groans. My desire coated my fingers, and it was embarrassing how wet I was just imagining him jerking off.

My climax came unexpectedly, and I quickly pushed my face into the nearby pillow as my body shook with its release. All my tensed muscles suddenly relaxed and my legs shook more than they did after my failed attempt of a half marathon.

I barely noticed the sound of the water stopping as I caught my breath and removed my hands from my panties.

“You’re still here?” Max’s voice filled the room, scaring me.

Water dripped from his hair and slid down his toned tanned chest as he was wearing his boxers again. Gosh, it was unfair how hot he looked.

He arched a brow as I ogled his body.

“Yeah,” I muttered slowly. “Sorry, just saw a story from Daisy and I was having a mental breakdown,” I came up with the stupidest excuse to explain my messy looks and why my face was buried in my pillow. Hopefully, he wasn’t going to ask to see it.

“Oh,” he acknowledged my struggles with a shrug, as he pulled out a white T-shirt and jeans from his duffle. “I’m starving. Shall we grab breakfast in that brunch place you rave about?”

“Yes! You’ll love it.” How endearing it is to finally have someone who listens to everything.

He flashed me a sweet smile as he got dressed. “I’ll wait in the living room,” he offered, zipping up his bag.

I nodded as he closed the door behind him and I buried my face back into the pillow, muffling a frustrated scream.

Why did I feel so guilty over masturbating? It just felt wrong. He was the sweetest person I’d ever met. Caring and kind. And it was wrong.

Yet, the little devil on my shoulder reminded me he was masturbating as well.

“Fuck this,” I muttered as I turned back to stare at Max, who sat across me with an amused smile.

I wanted to be half as unbothered with life as he was. But I couldn’t contain my frustration as I watched Daisy and Ander walk into the same coffee shop where we were. She only knew about this place because I showed it to her and Ander rarely

wanted to come here with me when we visited. Something about brunch being stupid was his usual excuse. Yet, here he was, holding my sister's hand and smiling at her. I was sure it wasn't a coincidence.

Nausea hit my stomach, and I grimaced.

"They're heading our way," Max warned me as he grabbed my hand over the top of the table.

"Fancy seeing you guys here!" Daisy squeaked and threw her arms around me. All this hugging was still new to me. "I thought you might be having a much longer lay-in in the morning before the drive back. But I guess great minds think alike and we all wanted the same brunch."

I caught a glimpse of Max's annoyed face before her blonde hair obstructed my view. They were both still in the room when we went downstairs and my parents had some SPA appointment so we decided to have brunch before the drive back.

"Hey, Aarons," Ander greeted my fake boyfriend somewhere in the background and I couldn't resist peeking up to see Max standing up to shake Ander's hand. Talk about behind the bigger person.

"Sanchez."

Ander scoffed, and I haven't realized previously how often he's done it.

Daisy let go of me, moving next to her boyfriend. "We should all sit together. I haven't had the chance to grill Max about his intentions with my sister," she told us both.

The grin Max flashed her was not the comforting sweet one he used on me. It was

feral with underlying tension in it.

“I’d love nothing more,” he sweet-talked, but no one caught the slight sarcasm.

My sister batted her eyelashes at him, testing the ground. She was wearing a very familiar white puffy sleeved dress and high heels.

“Is that my dress?” I accused her with a gasp. “I’ve been looking for it everywhere...”

“You left it at my place,” Ander replied calmly as they took a seat opposite of me and Max slid into the booth next to me. His arm rested behind me and his fingers brushed my exposed skin.

I felt underdressed, without makeup and wearing jean shorts and a tank top. It was supposed to be a casual brunch, yet it was turning into circus.

“I tried it on and loved it,” Daisy shrugged. “It looks good on me, right?”

I swallowed hard on the bitter words that were ready to fly out my mouth and instead nodded.

“Your blue dress is much prettier,” Max muttered in my ear, but made sure everyone heard it.

Daisy’s cheeks flushed, and I felt bad that I was bringing her down. Yet, Max didn’t make a negative comment at my sister. He was making an objective observation on the dress.

“Yeah, I love that one.” I nodded, smiling at him. His palm rested on my shoulder and his fingers teased my skin, drawing small circles. “But it does look great on you.

You can keep it, Daisy.”

Ander’s face mirrored pure disgust at our exchange, but thankfully, the waitress arrived to take our order.

Ander ordered pancakes with maple syrup and bacon; an acai bowl for Daisy. I ordered an avocado toast and milkshake, while Max picked the salmon and egg toast with a side of fries for us to share.

“Isn’t that too much food?” Ander asked, glancing at me after I put in my order.

My chest tightened as anxiety raced through my veins and panic gripped my throat. “No... it’s...” I started to defend myself, but Max gripped my shoulder tighter, stopping me from talking.

“You’re right, we should share a pancake stack,” he interrupted and waved at the waitress. “Chocolate and hazelnut to match your milkshake?” His dark eyes held my gaze and a calming wave washed over me as he drew me in.

“Sounds perfect,” I said, my voice barely a whisper.

Ander scoffed. “You’ll need to do a lot of cardio.”

“You know what they say, sex is the best cardio,” Max retorted with a deadly sweet smile. “And we can go for a run as well.”

Daisy looked from Max to Ander and finally to me before she glanced back at Ander. Concern swam in her hooded gaze as she shifted next to him.

I placed my hand on Max’s thighs and gripped it. We shouldn’t be pushing Ander, not when Daisy looked that uncomfortable. Guilt knotted my stomach, and catching

Max's eyes, I gave him a subtle shake of my head.

Food arrived, and we silently dug into our meals. Daisy devouring her acai bowl, as Max and I shared some sweet smiles and looks.

He stole my milkshake, wrapped his lips around my used straw and groaned with pleasure, before he dipped a fry in it and gave it to me to try it.

"I would have never tried that combination," I confessed as he fed me two more fries. "It actually tastes good."

"Were you questioning my taste?" He grinned, pleased with himself that he managed to pull me out of my head and put me at ease with my ex and sister across us.

"Gross." Daisy grimaced, pushing her bowl away from herself. "I would never eat that."

"You're missing out." I shrugged as I cut a piece of my avocado toast and offered it to Max.

He bit down on my fork and smiled. "I'll have to get that next time."

The words next time made my stomach flutter.

"I'll pay," Ander said as they cleared the plates. "My treat, Aarons."

Max chuckled, pulling me closed to his side. "Already got the bill, but appreciate it. We should get going, it was great to spend time with you two. We should do this again soon."

"Definitely," Ander clipped as we stood.

Max offered me his hand, helping me up, and we remained with our fingers interlaced as I waved bye to Daisy and made our exit.

Max's shoulders relaxed when we stepped outside into the sun and let out a long breath.

"I ate so freaking much," he muttered as he opened my car door.

"That's your conclusion?"

"Yep. Let's do something fun when we get back, we both need a distraction."

Nodding, I slumped against the window and stared back at the coffee shop watching Ander and Daisy. I couldn't shake the bad feeling wrapping its arms around me as I watched them. It felt like I have already seen that movie and I knew way too well how it ended.

MAX

"How did you beat me again?" Dex groaned, throwing the controller on the table. The glass on the tabletop rattled from the force, and Ivy grinned.

"I'm just better than you."

I wrapped my arm around her, giving her a small kiss on her cheeks. "Good job, Blossom."

She beamed, her cheeks where my lips touched her turning a shade of pink.

After the suffocating brunch, I decided to bring her back to our place and indulge her in some video games. I got beaten by both of them, which was why after the first

round, I decided to just watch Ivy beat Dex over and over. It was great seeing him not thrive against someone. His ego needed that. Plus, pride filled my chest at how good Ivy was at these games.

That was my girl.

But it wasn't.

Not really.

Maddox, Andrew, and Oliver gathered in the living room, talking but watching the Mario Kart competition unfolding.

"One more," Dex said the same thing he was repeating the past couple of rounds.

Ivy laughed, and her carefree laughter wrapped around me like a warm hug. She needed this.

Glancing at my way, she silently asked for my permission, making me feel uncomfortable. "You can play as many rounds as you want," I muttered, ignoring the fact that I needed to do homework and maybe even hit the gym after all the breakfast I consumed to make a point with Ander.

But I knew I made the right call when she picked up her little wheel of a controller and hit start.

"Let me show you how it's done, Derek."

Ivy winked at me. My chest felt tight despite the heartwarming scene unfolding in front of me. I should have been happy my girlfriend was getting on with my best friend. However, she was not my girlfriend. Yet the way Ander looked at her today

made my blood boil. I got angry, and I wanted to show him how he should have treated her right.

I've never felt anger like that. It consumed me, and I was usually a very calm person, who kept all his emotions in check. I never lost my cool. Not on the field and not off the field. And especially not over a chick I was fake dating.

But I couldn't deny that with every day spent with Ivy, she was slowly getting under my skin. Somehow, she got me, and that was a first.

We were both using each other, yet, it felt different.

I couldn't explain what I was feeling. Not quite yet, but it wasn't what I knew I was supposed to feel.

My phone vibrated and I stared at the name. Not who I wanted to talk to, but I knew I needed to get this conversation out of the way.

"I need to take this," I informed no one in particular, and planting a small kiss on Ivy's hand, I answered the call. "Hey, Coach McCarthy."

"Max, you're a hard player to track down." His voice sounded cheerful yet sincere.

"Sorry about that. Didn't mean to ditch your calls but school got busy and my weekend was packed," I omitted the truth, and he hummed.

"I know, I didn't have the university experience but I'm sure school didn't really get in your way that much." He was smiling based on how his words seemed prolonged. "Rumor has it you found yourself a girlfriend."

I swallowed hard. "Thought you are above rumors."

“I like to entertain them every once in a while,” Sky said. “So, is it true.”

“Yes... kind of,” I muttered. It was embarrassing mentioning a girlfriend to my coach. Especially since it was all fake. “I mean... I know everyone is freaking out because of Thalia,” I addressed the reason behind his question. “But Ivy is different.”

“I’m sure she is, if you decided to jump into it,” he replied after a short pause. “I just wanted to make sure you are keeping your head in the game. And to talk about that wanna-be goal pass you made.”

I exhaled loudly. “Yeah, that was a bad judgment call.”

“We, midfielders, go through this. Learning to draw the line between scoring and passing it on. You learn by making mistakes, and next time, you will recognize the right decision sooner. I know you are unhappy with your decision, but I know in the long run, it leads you to make better decisions. You grow as a player from making mistakes. No one is perfect.”

Some of the weight from my chest lifted from his words, and I felt more at ease than at the start of the conversation. I needed to hear him say it. It wasn’t enough Coach Parker said it, or my teammates, or Ivy. I needed to hear it from Coach McCarthy.

“Thanks,” I muttered, swallowing the big lump in my throat. “I was upset over it.”

“Don’t be... you got an even score, you still lead in points. It’s fine.” He punctuated the last two words with such force I almost cracked a smile. “That being said, have you heard from the National Team?”

“Nope. Not yet. Have you heard anything?”

“Me neither. But I’ll keep my ears open.”

“Thank you.” I sighed. “Are you coming down any time soon?”

“I’ll be with you guys on Friday,” he said, cheerfully. “We need to work on mashing that midfield a bit more, plus I’m bringing my son on a university tour.”

“Shit, Eric’s going to be a freshman next year.” I grinned.

“Don’t even remind me.” He laughed. “I’ll need you to keep an eye on him.”

“You got it,” I said, knowing that we were both fully aware I was the most mature out of all the players on the team. No matter their age.

“I’ll see you next week, so until then, stay out of trouble.”

“I always do.”

Currently, trouble was sitting in my living room, hanging out with my team. I wasn’t sure if it was going to blow up in our faces or not.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MAX

The next couple of weeks passed in a blur of morning practices, classes, afternoon practices and workout sessions, occasional dinner dates, run dates and sleepovers. Plus, many soccer games on the weekends. Ivy always asked for my outfit pictures of travelling sweat set or fancy suite. Her comments made me laugh and I enjoyed our little text exchanges which I even read back when I was alone. Especially the cute and flirty ones.

With pumpkin season upon us, we made sure to drink plenty of Pumpkin Spiced Latte that I slowly grew to like and attend fall-themed activities on the campus to really rub it in everyone's nose that we were dating. I didn't mind her company, I actually enjoyed spending time with Ivy despite the constant attention and the need of taking pictures of every tiny thing we did. It was all for show, and I knew it, but the way her eyes lit up when I got her flowers felt real. So, no matter how fake our dates were, I always got her flowers. That thing was real between us.

"I need the chocolate chips," Ivy called out, waking me from my daydream as I stared at the pretty fall colored bouquet I got her. It was one of those rare occasions when we spent time in her flat. Kaia was out with some friends, and it was time for me to try the famous cookies Ivy raved about.

"Here you go," I handed her the bag, glancing at the cookie dough.

"Don't even try," she grabbed my reached out finger that I wanted to dip in the

dough. “It’s not ready yet.”

“I wanted to taste test it,” I gave her my sweet puppy eyes, but she shook her head.

Leaning against the counter, I watched her tight jeans mold onto her perfect ass that got rounder and lifted from all the running we did. There was something familiar about the way we spent time in a kitchen. It almost felt like playing house.

“Do you need some muscle?” I interrupted her as she mixed the dough.

“No,” she shut me down with a grin. “You need to sit back and enjoy the process. Stop trying to help.”

I couldn’t help it, I wanted to help. I wanted to be close to her, feel her flowery scent wrap around me and feel her body heat.

Crossing my arms I watched her make small balls and lay them out on the baking paper, before I stepped in to open the pre-heated oven.

A grateful smile played on Ivy’s lips as she bent down to put the cookies on the rail.

“And now we wait.”

“This is when the magic happens?” I wiggled my brows, making her giggle.

“Something like that, I hope you will like them.” The way her voice shook with slight self-consciousness squeezed my chest.

There was no way I was ever telling her if I didn’t like her cookies.

“I trust you, Blossom,” I smiled at her, and before I could catch myself, I wrapped my

arms around her middle and pulled her to my chest.

Her grip around the mixing bowl tightened, and I watched her profile light up as she dug her finger into the remaining dough, before offering it to me.

Without hesitation, I captured her dough soaked fingers and licked off the delicious mix of sugar and chocolate. A moan escaped me, and suddenly I was transported back in time to our first fake photoshoot when she bit my finger.

I made sure my tongue ran along her whole finger, cleaning off the sweet heaven.

“Gosh, this is amazing,” I moaned into her ear.

Heat colored her cheeks as she asked, “Do you want more?”

“Always,” I muttered and with hooded gaze, I watched her dug into the remainders again and bring it to my lips.

I licked her fingers, while my eyes fixated on the small cookie dough stuck to her cheek.

Without further thinking I spun her around and sitting her on top of the counter, I kissed her cheek, clearing off the sweet mess. “You had some on your cheeks.”

“Oh,” she chuckled and her eyes grew wider when I took the bowl from her.

“May I?” I asked politely, before dipping my fingers in it, and spooned a big amount into my mouth. I couldn’t help but moan as the sugary sweetness melted in my mouth. Plus, I was dying to tease her. “This is amazing, Blossom.”

“I want to try some,” she said, tucking a loose piece of hair behind her ear, and she

blinked up at me with pleading green eyes. A shy smile tugged at her lips and suddenly the room temperature doubled.

With two fingers, I spooned the dough and reached it out to her, allowing her lips to wrap around my fingers and she sucked on them.

My cock strained behind my zipper as her tongue licked off the dough and it took all my restraint to keep my face straight.

A small moan fell from her lips. "It does taste divine." Mischievous lit up her eyes and her smile turned into a wide grin. "Don't you want more?"

I narrowed my eyes at her, as all my blood pooled south of my body and thinking clear has become a big challenge.

"I do," I said slowly, as I picked up some dough and without a second thought smudged it all over her face and neck.

Ivy squealed from my sudden food attack, but before she could run away, I planted my hands on either side of her and leaned in. Our noses brushed and electricity sizzled between us just like that day on the beach. We've been at this many times, always dancing at the thin line between fake dating and real passion. I felt it every single time I was with her, and fighting it became increasingly hard.

"Guess, I'll just have to clean you up," I muttered, my voice sounding deeper and raspier than before.

Ivy's chest rose and fell in a rapid motion as she nodded. "You better..."

With a cocky grin, I leaned in licking her neck in one swift motion, aching to taste her skin under my lips. She tasted divine, especially as her flowery scent mixed with

the chocolate chip cookies.

She sucked in a deep breath and held it in as my mouth moved over her jaw, kissing and licking her cheeks, forehead and nose. Every single inch of her head but her lips. Never her lips. I wasn't going to cross that line in private unless she begged me for it.

Her hand gripped the front of my t-shirt and she pulled me closer to her, until I was standing against her, and Ivy's legs came around my waist.

Our noses touched and I took a breather. "I think you're clean."

Ivy shook her head, and smudging some dough over my lips, she kissed me. It wasn't a slow and passionate one like the one we shared on the beach. It was rushed, full of teeth and in between giggles. It almost felt natural.

My body relaxed into hers, allowing my hips to push into her soft center and get as close to her as we could, as the cookie dough melted in my mouth together with her greedy tongue.

"Oh my gosh what a mess!" Kaia laughed.

Her voice felt like a cold shower, and I quickly stepped back, over the mixing bowl that somehow ended up on the floor, the dough spilled around us.

"You guys need to get a room." She snickered, phone in her hand as she took some pictures of us and the mess around us.

"The cookies!" Ivy came to her senses first, jumping off the countertop and quickly heading to the oven, as I stood there frozen.

Kaia's laugh followed her into the room as I looked back at Ivy. "Did you hear her

come?" I asked casually, as my drumming heart and aching cock settled slowly.

"Yeah," she nodded quickly not meeting my eyes. I heard her footsteps. "Sorry... I didn't mean to ambush you like that, but I wanted her to see us do what any couple would do in private."

"She knows this is fake," I reminded her quietly.

Ivy nodded as she carefully placed the cookies on a pink plate. "She could have brought someone with her."

Of course. There was always an excuse for us to make out. But never the right one. And suddenly I was annoyed that it bothered me. It shouldn't have had.

"Try it," she stood in front of me with the plate.

I carefully picked up a cookie, observing the hard surface before biting into it. The moment my teeth sank into it I realized how soft it was. Melting in my mouth and the taste I have tried before was the perfect balance between sweet and bitter dark chocolate.

"Fuck," I muttered more to myself. "This is the best thing I've ever tried."

The only missing ingredient was her taste.

IVY

My heart pounded like I was getting a heart attack every time I thought of our baking session. There was no way I was able to look at cookies the same way after it. Max completely ruined them for me.

That passionate yet sloppy kiss kept playing on repeat as I watched the highlights of the Titans win on their most recent away game.

Max in a suite was quickly becoming my favorite sight and I always melted a little when I saw a picture of him in his outfit.

Or when his name popped up on my display.

With a silly little smile I accepted his call. I watched his messy just showered hair come up and a wide grin on his face, as he was dressed in his Titans sweat set that they used for travelling.

“Congrats!” I cheered as loudly as I dared with Kaia already asleep.

“We won!” he punched in the air as Dex came up from behind him and whistled.

I let out a short laugh. “You where amazing.”

More guys whistled in the background making Max roll his eyes. “I need to get out of here. I can’t hear you from the zoo.”

“Ivy I love you so much!” someone shouted in the background clearly trying to imitate Max’s voice.

The three little special words left a sour taste in my mouth, but I forced a laugh.

“I don’t sound like that, asshole,” Max flipped off his teammate before exiting the locker room. “Sorry about that. It was call your girlfriend time and they were riding my ass.”

“It’s okay,” I said, disappointment squeezing my chest. “I love talking to you.”

“You’re wearing my jersey,” he squinted at the screen with a grin.

“I was watching the game while I was building the website I was working on,” I confessed. “I wanted to support you.”

“Thank you,” his sweet smile made my insides melt. “And thank you for the cookies. The guys loved it on the bus. Dex wanted to know if you can make weed cookies.”

I chuckled as I laid down on my bed and propped him up on the phone. “Can’t say I tried but I can.”

“No need, he’s chill enough without them.” Max stretched out as he took a seat on the still empty bus. “I hate sleeping on the bus.”

“How long is the drive back?” I asked looking at the clock. It was almost midnight.

“Should be there in three hours, and I much rather sleep in my own bed then wake up early to drive back,” he forced a grin but I was his eyes growing heavy as the adrenalin left his body.

“You played very well,” I complimented him. “I saw your two goal assists. They were amazing.”

“Thanks, Blossom,” he whispered leaning his head against the window. His eyes trailed the outside of the stadium looking for his team.

“Don’t forget to post the pictures I sent you,” I reminded him of the official photos I grabbed from online. “And did you think about the sponsorship offers you got?”

Max made a tortured face. “I will post them, boss.”

“What about my second question.”

“You sound like my agent,” he groaned, his face all scrunched up and upset. “I’m not a fan of either sports brands. Like I don’t wear them on my own. I don’t want to do that just for the sake of doing.”

I remembered Ander posting five different brands just to get the money and free clothes. He didn’t care about his own personal preferences. As long as he was making money he was happy.

This was just one of the many different values Max possessed that I loved him for.

“You literally only wear Under Armour, while your whole Titans’ kit is Nike.”

Max made a show of lifting his shoulders, and the white tick on his sweatshirt mocked me.

“You know you can reach out to them...” I started with my marketing speech, but he shook his head.

“Not this again. I’m fine, I have more sports clothes than I need.”

That was also true, but it still made me grin.

“Still want to come for a run tomorrow?” I changed the topic. “I ran my best 5k time today, so be prepared to get your ass kicked.”

His carefree smile returned and he chuckled. “You got it in 25 minutes? I’m proud of you.”

I grinned widely from his praises. “So tomorrow?”

“I’ll run another 5k with you, we can try and do it again or even quicker.”

“Aren’t your legs dead?” I asked, suddenly feeling guilty. He just ran for 90 minutes and was coming off from a mini injury were he didn’t even take a game off.

“Your speed is my recreational speed,” he teased me lightly, but I saw him grin. The way he panted when we ran together was telling me he was lying. He started to struggle to keep up with me and that gave me immense amount of pleasure.

Clearly, I was sadistic.

“Funny,” I grimaced.

Max ruffled his hair and yawned. “I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon than for our 5k.”

“Sounds good,” I smiled and pulled the blanket over me.

“Don’t you need to change?” he asked, eyeing the jersey I slept in.

I shook my head. “I’m a supportive girlfriend. I sleep in your jersey too.”

His face had a weird expression that I didn’t try to decipher as I mentally kicked myself for saying that.

“Appreciate it,” he let out a low chuckle. “It looks good on you.”

“I know you probably see many girls wear it.” I shrugged, because it was true. Whenever I attended a home game, many girls wore his jersey. Anyone could buy it.

“Yeah, but you’re the only one who counts... plus you’re wearing mine,” he stressed the last word like it meant something, when in reality he went and got me one from

the shop like all those other girls did. I was no different then them. “Plus, you look the hottest in it.”

A round of whistles sounded and Max rolled his eyes. “The zoo has boarded the bus.”

I laughed quietly. “I will let you get some sleep.”

“Thank you,” he smiled lightly. “Have a good night, Blossom.”

“Good night,” I muttered as I closed my eyes before I saw him hang up the phone.

I laid in bed, wrapped in his jersey, phone to my chest and just breathed as my body ached for him. It was annoying how needy I was for him. I’ve never felt that way with Ander. Sex with him wasn’t remotely good. The only reason why I still liked sex was because of all the night I spent with my own vibrator exploring my favorite spots and learning what I liked. But in general, I never really understood the hype around it. I never got the wanting to rip each other’s clothes off.

Not until Max.

Our chemistry was out of this world. Every small touch felt like sizzling electivity burning through me. Every kiss resulted in thousands of butterflies coming alive. And every hug transported me to the safest spot in Earth. His arms were my safe haven. It didn’t matter how long we’ve known each other, or that most things between us where for show. When he hugged me, there was no place I would rather be.

And that was dangerous.

I wasn’t supposed to falling for him. I was supposed to get revenge on Ander.

Yet, the more time has passed, the less I thought of my ex and the more I fantasized

about his rival.

MAX

Couple of weeks later Halloween was coming up and I had no excuse for not preparing a couple's costume and going to a party with Ivy. I didn't want to do it, I hated costume parties, but with a fake girlfriend, it came with the territory. She agreed to attend a party with me on Friday that Thalia and her friends were going to in one of the frat houses, and I agreed to accompany Ivy to the enemy's soccer house for a Halloween extravaganza, but only after confirming Dex and Maddox could attend too.

It was a strangely warm autumn afternoon and Ivy spread out on the blanket next to me, her hair spread like a halo around her and soaking up the last rays of sunshine.

"What do you think about Barbie and Ken?" She flipped to her stomach and pushed her phone in front of my nose.

I glanced up from the textbook I was reading doing my best to prepare for the quickly upcoming midterms.

"I'm not blonde." I shut down the idea after a single glance at the neon colored outfits. "Keep looking."

"You trash all my ideas." She pouted, making me grin.

"You have many qualities, Blossom, but Halloween costumes are not one of them."

"What about Princess Peach and Mario?"

I grunted. "Seriously?"

“I give up.” She threw her phone on the grass. “What did you dress up as last year?”

I grimaced, thinking about it. I was sure I wore jeans and maybe a jersey from Miami Inter or something similarly creative. “A professional soccer player?”

“That’s who you are.”

“Technically no, as I don’t get paid.” I grinned, and Ivy groaned.

“Can we please do something cute?” she asked. “I’m open to any couple’s idea.”

“Okay, what would you dress up as if you went alone?” I asked, leaning over her and trapping her between my arms.

Her cheeks flushed, but she replied, without missing a beat, “Tinkerbell. I wanted to do that since last year, but Ander considered it stupid.”

What a shitty asshole, but I forced my face to remain neutral and calm. Tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear, I nodded. “I will be your Peter Pan.”

She bit into her bottom lip to keep herself from smiling.

“Nope, not wearing a stupid thing on my head.” I muttered as I pushed my nose to hers, our breathing becoming one. “But I can wear green cargo pants and a green shirt. Will that cut it for you, Blossom?”

Ivy nodded and breathlessly said, “Yes.”

My throat tightened, and I wished we were in a completely different scenario when our lips were about to touch and she gave me her consent.

“Great.”

“But we have two costumes,” she muttered, her lips grazing mine as she spoke.

The air shifted between us, and despite the chilly air, I was burning up. My erection strained against my zipper and no matter how many times I came in the last couple of days, one graze from her was sending me over the edge.

“Don’t play with fire,” I warned her, unsure if I meant it about costume or the situation.

Ivy laced her hands behind my neck, her fingers digging into my loose hair at the nape of my neck. “You haven’t kissed me properly in ages, so forgive me to wanting to make sure you won’t choke when you have to perform under pressure. There is no way you wouldn’t kiss your girlfriend all night long.”

I ignored the ache in my pants and chest from her words and resisted reminding her of the passionate moment we spent in her apartment. Which was also totally fake.

“I thought you only wanted me to kiss you with an audience present,” I muttered over her lips.

Her lips parted as my breath tickled them.

“We have an audience,” she whispered, her voice falling as her eyes dropped to my lips.

“Be careful what you wish for, Blossom, because you might get addicted,” I warned her in a low voice before I captured her lips with mine.

A groan escaped her as I devoured her lips. With a sigh, she opened up, her tongue

poking out and wetting my lips before I allowed her entrance, deepening our kiss. Our tongues explored and tasted each other. She tasted like the best mixture of chocolate, apples and coffee, thanks to her fruit salad and mocha she had during our picnic. Her taste was intoxicating, the best I'd ever felt, and I had kissed my fair share of girls. But kissing Ivy felt different.

Whistles and claps sounded from the background, making us break apart.

Ivy gazed at me dreamily.

"Did I pass the test?" I asked, keeping my voice as casual as I could, despite desire still clogging my throat.

Ivy nodded, too stunned to speak, before she cleared her throat. "Not bad."

A low laugh escaped me as I pulled her into a sitting position. Our chests were still flat against each other, and I felt her thundering heartbeat against my own, matching her crazed pace. It looked like I wasn't the only one affected by the kiss. "I'm way better than not bad, Blossom."

Her cheeks turned pink, and she smiled. "You are very skilled. You almost made me feel like that kiss was real. Again."

My brain slowly caught up to what I just did. When I kissed her, I forgot it was for show. I gave that kiss my all. Again.

And it was anything but fake.

At least for me.

I swallowed hard, putting some distance between us as I reached for my lemonade.

I needed to get my head back into the game and remind myself why I was doing this.

But most importantly, I needed to remind myself this was fake. No matter what my body was telling me.

It was pure hormonal reaction. I would have felt the same way no matter who I kissed.

It was normal.

The more excuses I listed, the less convinced it got.

There was no way I was going to fall for my rival's ex.

No way at all.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IVY

Max was acting weird. He dressed up in his green cargo pants and green T-shirt, which both complimented his skin tone well, his dark eyes sparkling, and hair messy as I liked it. He looked a lot like Peter Pan, which everyone mentioned to him.

Compared to previous years, where I got ready with Kaia in our apartment, getting ready with a house full of guys was more entertaining as I expected. They all seemed to accept me and wanted to involve me in every single detail that made my heart melt.

“Come, Poison Ivy, drink this.” Derek motioned me over, his hair styled back and shirt fully unbuttoned, leaving his abs on display.

“I’m telling you for the tenth time, I’m Tinkerbell.” I grinned, not even getting offended anymore by his teasing. I took the yellow shot from him. People at Westpoint started calling me Poison Ivy after the break up, and I was annoyed that Hillview soccer started picking up on it too. They didn’t realize how annoying it was. “What’s this?”

“Dude, the wings.” Liam patted Derek on the back and pointed at my delicate wings.

Usually, I would have felt self-conscious wearing glittery thighs and basically a bodysuit only, but none of them made me feel uncomfortable in my skin.

“Couple’s costumes,” Dex said, earning a dark look from Max, who was sitting on the sofa focused on his FIFA game against Maddox. He was dressed in his outfit and he even went as far as getting green Vans to match the look.

“What’s this?” I asked again, swirling my drink curiously.

“Limoncello,” Max replied, his eyes on me, as he missed a shot. “It’s good for digestion and you said you still feel the lunch swim around your stomach.”

My heart melted a bit from his caring and I took the shot without further questions. It actually tasted good.

“Plus, it’s alcohol,” Dex added, taking the glass from me. “That’s always good for digestion.”

I exchanged a look with Max, who ducked his head with a grin before returning to the game. He never usually played when I came over, but since I showed up to get ready, he made a point of putting distance between us. Distance was the last thing I wanted.

Ever since that kiss in the park, when his lips devoured mine in a way no one has ever kissed me, I wanted more.

I shouldn’t have wanted more, but I was tired of fighting my body’s attraction to him. He was hot, and I wanted to fuck him. Despite all the complications.

Approaching him, I nudged his legs with mine, and he automatically opened them, allowing me to step between his legs and sit on his thigh.

Readjusting the controller, he hugged me around it and his breath tickled my neck.

“You’re losing,” I observed the score.

“Yeah.” He sighed as Maddox scored a goal. “I’m distracted.” His eyes ate me up.

I had to remind myself it was fake and he didn’t mean it, but the way my stomach clenched from his touch and the way warmth spread through my body from his gaze contradicted the facts.

There was no faking the pained look on his face and the primal desire between us. There was real, tangible tension in the air surrounding us and slowly suffocating us.

Max shifted behind me, adjusting his hold on me as his wooden scent wrapped around me like a security blanket.

“Are you ready to go?” he muttered into my ear, his husky, sensual voice contrasting his rapid movements on the joystick.

A shiver worked its way up my spine, and I played it off as chills.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“No,” I muttered, turning to look at his profile, admiring his cheekbones and dark eyes that were still staring at the screen. I loved video games too, but I craved his attention. I needed his gaze at me, not at the game. “I’m ready, whenever you are.”

Max exited the game with another missed shot, and Maddox snickered. His fingers brushed my waist and he squeezed me slightly before nudging me up.

“Let’s go.”

We laced our fingers, and with Derek and Maddox, we made our way to the Uber XL awaiting us.

The party was as big as I remembered. The Phi Kappa Psi frat house was always throwing the best parties, and I knew several other students travelled to come to this Halloween special because they always went crazy. I felt like walking into a house of horror rather than a fraternity. All lights were dimmed, spiderweb hung from every direction and smoke enclosed us as we made our way to the drinks bar set up in the living room.

“Dude, this place is freaky,” Derek muttered from my left. He was dressed up as Ken, in his light washed denim jeans, and denim vest that he left unbuttoned. No wonder he drank a lot during pre-game at their place to keep himself warm.

Max shot him a look and tugged me closer. Not that I was complaining. I wished he put his arm around me, but in my heels, I was taller than him and he couldn’t pull me to his side in that way.

We followed the booming music, stepping around objects and people who appeared out of the blue and it was a surreal experience. It felt like we were sneaking in.

“What are you drinking?” Derek shouted through the crowd as we stepped into the living room where the wall lights painted the walls red and black. It was positively creepy. Every year, this house became scarier.

“Gin and tonic,” Max muttered from my side. “Blossom?”

“Yeah, I’ll take the same, but with pink gin.”

Derek grinned. “Wasn’t planning to bring you a non-pink drink.”

“I’ll go help him,” Maddox offered, leaving us by the wall.

“Do you see your friend?” Max asked politely, looking around.

I shook my head and fished out the phone from my bag. “She said she is here.” I glanced at the message and back at Max. “Shall we do a round?”

“Let’s go.” Max grabbed my hand again and we walked the edge of the living room, searching for Kaia.

“Think I found her.” Max stopped me, and I bumped into his chest as he pulled me back into him. His hands rested on my hips and his lips met my ears. “By the bar, next to Dex.”

I gasped, looking at the Gladiator outfit. I’m not sure what I was expecting, but I didn’t think she would dress in a piece of ripped brown cloth as a skirt and bandeau stud top and lace up shoes. “She looks hot.”

“You are the prettiest,” Max whispered, reminding me why he was the best fake boyfriend.

“Thanks,” I said, not particularly happy about the warmth spreading through my body at the compliment. It wasn’t like he meant it. Everyone else was dressed sexy as hell and there I was in my little Tinkerbell costume.

Max grabbed my hips and spun me to face me. Despite the height difference, he towered over me suddenly. “You look sexy as hell, and if we weren’t here to make our exes jealous, I would have already ripped off the little bodysuit off you and explore every inch hidden under it.”

“What?”

Max shrugged as his hand moved up my body all the way to my neck where he cupped the back of my neck and pulled me to him. He kissed me like that day in the park, like I was the air and he was suffocating. Like he couldn’t get enough of my

taste. He devoured my mouth, with every stroke of his tongue, I was getting dizzy. My head spun as our tongues collided, and I opened wide for him, inviting him to explore every inch of me. Or at least of what I could give him right now. My body pressed into his and I was met with hardness straining against his cargo pants. He wasn't lying when he said he wanted to fuck me and weird satisfaction filled me thinking I did that to him. I pushed into him again, and in response, Max groaned into my mouth.

Fuck Ander and fuck Daisy.

I wanted to get lost in Maximilian Aarons.

"There you are." The voice was like a cold shower. I sighed as I stepped away from Max and glanced up at my sister. "I was worried you won't come, but here you are with... him."

"He," I said pointing at Max, "has a name, and he is my boyfriend."

"Yeah." Daisy shrugged, her pupils wide from all the alcohol she had already consumed. She wore a pink bikini with a little pink tulle skirt around her waist. "I'm a flamingo," she muttered when she caught my roaming gaze. "See, flamingo earrings." She pointed at her ears as she arranged her perfectly curled hair. "No one gets it. Ander told me I look stupid."

"You do look like a flamingo," Max said kindly. There was no trace of the heightened emotions that passed between us, nor any anger by my sister's dismissal.

"Thank you." She looked at him in passing before her pleading sad eyes found mine again. There was sorrow and fear mixed in her gaze. "Come with me, please. I need your help. Ander is mad at me now and I want to get him a drink he likes so he gets less mad. You know what will do the trick. You've been there before."

I bit my tongue as I knew if he was mad there was no way alcohol will help him. It was only going to make things worse.

“Or we could play beer pong, and you guys could let him win,” Daisy offered, panic shaking her voice as she glanced at Max for help.

My heart clenched in my chest from seeing her so worked up over a stupid guy. Someone who didn’t deserve half of her attention, yet there she was, still trying to make it right and please him.

It felt like looking in a mirror. That was exactly how I looked all those years and there was no one to help me.

But I could help Daisy.

“One game.” I pleaded with Max.

His resigned shrug was enough to tell me he was going to help, even if it meant losing a beer pong against Ander. It wasn’t the losing that was going to suck, it was everything that would come with it.

Max’s face told me everything I needed to know in the next few minutes. He was livid, and I grew to know him enough that his fake smile left an acidic feeling in my mouth.

With every shout and celebratory victory falling from Ander’s lips as he threw the ball into our cups, Max was losing his patience.

“I’m so good,” Ander shouted as he puffed his chest.

Daisy beamed and wrapped her arms around his neck for a deep kiss. Gone was the

fear and the sorrow from her eyes.

I wanted to vomit.

“I seriously can’t keep messing up just to please him,” Max muttered, as he watched my ex. “He is so fucking obnoxious, I want to punch him.”

I agreed with him. Apparently, Ander’s ego was so fragile he couldn’t handle if things weren’t his way. I remembered the many different options on how I was dragging him out of these moods. Winning was the easier one, but it wasn’t always simple finding someone who was willing to lose against him.

“Suck it, Aarons!” Ander flipped Max off as he blew on the ball, bouncing in front of the table. “You have no chance of a comeback.”

Max’s eyes lit up at the challenge, and I held my breath in worry and anticipation.

“Can I throw?” I cut in as he lifted his hand to fling the ball.

Max stared at me, and I saw the anger brewing in his dark eyes. I’ve never seen him that pissed off, despite the slow and fake smile on his lips. He was still putting up a show, but inside, he was going to flip out any second.

But I knew Max wouldn’t cause a real drama out of a stupid game. He was just tired from the comments and the whole self-inflating importance Ander was giving himself.

We had a small crowd around us, everyone watching the showdown.

“Of course, Blossom.” He handed me the ball with a quick smirk and pulled me to himself from behind. “I can help you throw,” he muttered into my ears as he walked

us to the table. “Or just throw it far... the sooner this is over, the sooner I get you all to myself and we can leave this party.”

Everyone heard his words, and embarrassment crept into my cheeks as he nuzzled my neck and dropped sloppy kisses.

I pinched his arm and tried to turn in his embrace to warn him against aggregating Ander.

“Don’t worry, Aarons, you are not missing out on much. She is not worth missing out a party on.” Ander snickered with a grin.

Max’s arms grew stronger around me, and despite his ragged breathing, his words came out calm. “Oh, I’m sorry, bro. I didn’t realize you were that bad you couldn’t teach a girl how to fuck. Can’t say I have the same problem. Let me know if you need some pointers in, you know... improving your skills.”

A groan tore from Ander’s lips as I threw the ball, missing the table by a long shot.

“Hah,” my ex celebrated immediately and didn’t even offer Daisy a shot as he easily placed his own ball in our last standing beer cup. “Losers!”

Max swiped the drink before me and chugged it, before throwing the cup into the nearest trash bag.

Ander stepped around the table and met us. “You two make a great couple... two losers.”

“Real original.” Max patted his chest in a condescending way. “Enjoy your night, Sanchez.”

“Oh, I will.” He grinned, pulling Daisy and kissing her in an aggressive and sloppy way.

Max ducked his head, clearly unable to watch as he tugged on my hand and laced our fingers. “Let’s get the fuck away from here.”

I nodded, leaving behind my sister and my ex. At least I helped with Ander’s mood a bit, and he wasn’t going to be rude to her. Or not as rude as he could get when he was moody. A little weight lifted from my chest, but as I watched Max’s tensed jaw, guilt consumed me.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, not even sure which part I was apologizing for.

Max turned to me, ready to say something, but his gaze dropped behind me and he swore. “Fuck this night.”

“Hi, Max.”

A girl wearing a red swimsuit and a whistle around her neck stood in front of me.

Max pulled me to him, his arm wrapping around my waist as I took in the deep V cut of the swimsuit, putting her breasts on display. That must have been Thalia.

“Hi Thalia, this is my girlfriend, Ivy,” he introduced us immediately, and I put on a sweet smile as I extended my hand. It was my turn to dazzle her and convince her we were an item.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, batting my eyelashes at her. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Funny.” Thalia cocked her head. “I haven’t heard a single thing about you.”

Max exhaled heavily, and I could tell Ander already wore down his patience.

“Well, now you do.” I shrugged, still smiling.

“So, how do you two know each other?” Thalia pointed between the two of us.
“Casual hookup? Trying to score yet another soccer captain? Indulge me.”

Gosh, I already hated her entitled bitchy voice.

“Common interest in running brought us together,” Max replied curtly as his fingers drummed on my hips, teasing my exposed skin.

Electricity rushed through me from his sudden touch. My breath hitched, and desire built deep in my core.

Their conversation faded in the background as Max gently moved his fingers down my leg, drawing sensual circles, before dragging them back up. His fingertips grazed my aching center as he continued his torturing pattern.

I should have been part of the conversation, help him with deflecting Thalia, keep convincing her that we were together and our relationship was serious.

Instead, there I was, almost coming apart from a simple touch of his. But his fingers played me like a violin, without missing a beat as he held the conversation.

My head rolled back and landed on his chest, my pleading eyes finding his.

A cruel yet satisfied smile tugged on his lips as his hand froze on my abdomen, his fingers inches away from my aching spot.

“Anyway, I think Ivy is ready to go,” he said as I felt his hardness digging into me

from behind. The need to touch him and torture him the way he did with me consumed me, but Max kept me in place, not allowing me to move. “Tell your dad I say hi, and that my team is waiting for his call.”

Thalia scuffed. “Seriously?” she asked without any self-preservation. “You are leaving with... her.”

“Yes, my girlfriend,” Max repeated the word with a cocky grin. “I’ll see you around.”

“I will tell my dad,” she stopped us from turning away and both of us glanced at her. My eyes were wide with curiosity, while anger shook Max’s body.

Gone was the seventh cloud where I floated minutes ago.

“Tell him what?” Max challenged her.

“That you...” Thalia started, but I cut her off. Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe just the annoyance over the fact that I desperately needed to come and every time Max and I got close to having a real moment outside of this whole fake circus, someone interrupted us and cut the mood.

“You can tell your daddy he is in a happy relationship and I have no desire of ever letting him be single again. How does that sound?”

Thalia took a surprised step back. “You don’t have to be a bitch just because I’m his ex. Girls should lift girls up and not trust lying, manipulative sociopaths.”

I almost laughed in her face. I dated a lying, manipulative sociopath before and it wasn’t Max. “I think you were describing yourself, not him.”

She gasped. It was damn time someone put her back in her place.

“Oh, and one last thing before you run to Daddy... stay away from my boyfriend.”

“Or what?” she challenged me. “What can you possibly do? I’m the one who holds his future.”

“But I can hack into all your personal devices within minutes and ruin your whole life by displaying all the shit you have done and said. Doubt your daddy would like that. So, as long as you stay away from him, I won’t use my skills on you. How does that sound?”

Thalia glanced behind me, catching Max’s eyes, like he was going to step in and defend her. She was delusional.

“You are crazy.” She shook her head, staring at me.

“Good, that means I will do it.” I grinned at her.

She stared at us for a long moment, before turning on her heels and leaving without any further comment.

“Can you really do that?” Max asked, stepping behind me once again.

Turning to face him, I arched a brow. “The words you are searching is thank you.”

“Oh, Blossom, I think you owe me a thank you as well for the painful beer pong match. Do you know how hard it was to miss on purpose?”

A laugh bubbled out of me as I watched his teasing half smile light up his face.

“Can we please get the hell away from here?”

“Yes, please,” he groaned, grabbing my hand again and lacing our fingers. “Look at the bright side.”

“What is the bright side?” I chuckled as we made our way through the house.

“We don’t have to do another couple’s costume. I think this party traumatized me enough to not go to the one tomorrow.”

Under normal circumstances, I would have pouted. I loved Halloween, but I agreed with him.

“We can have a movie night,” I offered innocently.

“Yes.” Max grinned. “I think it’s my turn to pick a movie, you can pick the snacks.”

I leaned on his shoulder and he wrapped his arms around me. It might have started out fake, but this genuine friendship we’ve built the past months was anything but fake. I loved him as a friend. And even as more, if my crazy hormones were anything to go by. My body was obsessed with him, and my mind and heart followed along.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MAX

The morning run pushed me to my limits as sweat trailed down my back. Despite the chilly November morning, I was sweating like a pig which might have something to do with all the beer I consumed over the weekend. I fully blamed Ander for it, but it was my own selfless act that got me in this shit.

“Fuck me,” I muttered, resting my hands on my knees as I looked up at Ivy.

She grinned at me, like we hadn’t just run six miles. She was wearing a cute skirt and a long-sleeved shirt that fully molded on her body, and yeah... my three-day hangover wasn’t the only reason I was falling behind her in pace. Plus, she was crazy fast. Her endurance was impressive. No wonder Ander’s ego couldn’t take it.

“I would love to,” she teased me with a grin as she caught her breath and blew a loose piece of hair from her eyes. “You are being such a gentleman.”

“I’m going to die.”

“You’re being dramatic.”

“I’ll show you dramatic.” I bent down to throw her over my shoulder and sprinted toward the ocean. The sand made my steps unsteady, but I continued with determination until the sea licked my shoes.

Ivy squealed over my shoulder. “Do not drop me in! Maximilian! Don’t you dare!”

Smirking, I walked deeper into the ocean, the cold water freezing my burning and aching legs. “Maybe you should ask nicely.”

“Fuck off, I hate you! If you do it, I will never talk to you.”

“You and I are stuck together, Blossom.”

Ivy screamed, and her voice echoed off the emptiness around us. We were alone. I submerged both of us.

The cold water helped me gain more control over my aroused body. It was becoming increasingly hard to deny I didn’t find Ivy sexy and that my body wasn’t attracted to her. I was supposed to help her get over her ex who completely shattered her confidence and belief in man, yet there I was, lusting after her like a horny teenager.

But the mixed signals she threw my way were just too confusing. One moment she looked like a sad little kitten being hurt by her sister or ex, and the next she was a seductive little minx wanting to climb me like a tree.

I wanted to be anything but a gentleman to her and it took controlling every fiber of my body to not do something that would jeopardize my career.

Because if Ivy and I were to hook up, that would eventually lead to a real break up, which would leave me at Thalia’s mercy. No, thank you.

And it was much better getting blue balls from the ice-cold water than to admit it was because of the lack of sex.

“I will murder you!” Ivy screamed when we both emerged from the water, and I

shook my hair out. “You are dead!”

“Wet is definitely a sexy look on you.” I laughed as I took in her slick down hair, her destroyed ponytail and mad eyes.

But my next giggle got stuck in my throat as she stood, water dripping down her body. Her white shirt soaked through and completely see-through, allowing me a sneak peek into her hot pink sports bra and her hard nipples.

Fuck me.

No amount of cold water could distract me from the sight in front of me.

I swallowed hard. “Bad idea... I don’t want you to get cold. Why don’t we go?”

“Always the perfect gentleman,” she teased as her beautiful lips pulled into a knowing half smile. “You started this, Aarons, now you better finish it.”

“It was a joke.” I shrugged, untying the soaking wet sweater I had tied around my waist. “Do you want it?”

“That will not help me.” Ivy rolled her eyes. “It would only help you.”

I cleared my throat, my eyes falling to her full lips that turned a shade lighter from the cold water. “But I don’t want you to get cold.”

“Body heat helps with that,” she suggested, her voice innocent, as I watched her teeth graze her lower lip, wishing it was my own teeth and mouth on her. “What do you say?”

She didn’t wait for my reply as she pulled the soaking shirt over her head.

I let out a ragged breath and ate up the sight of her. She was gorgeous. Her breasts perfectly full, narrow waist and long lean legs, thanks to all the running. No matter her personality, I would have wanted this girl just by looking at her. But knowing what was under this beautiful shell made me want her even more. I loved who she was as a person. Funny, caring and a great friend.

Fuck, I was in big trouble.

“Cat bit your tongue?” she teased, stepping closer to me. “It’s not like you haven’t kissed me before.”

“We’re alone...”

“So what?” she challenged me, taking another step closer. “We’re both adults, Max. Adults who clearly have needs and find each other attractive. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Maybe she was ready for a rebound to forget Ander, but for me, this hookup would mean something different.

But if she needed a rebound, I’d much rather she chose me than anyone else.

“Is that all you want?” I asked, titling my head. “Just sex?”

“If it’s on the table... yes. We are stuck together, because of this arrangement... we better make the most of it. It’s not like any of us can go and hook up with anyone else. And... I... I have never slept with anyone else other than Ander. He was... my first. I kind of want to forget it... move on.”

The truth of her words hit me to the core and something in me snapped. She deserved the world, someone to worship her and love her the way I knew I could.

Unable to wait much longer, I closed the distance between us and kissed her with all the pent-up passion that was suffocating me these past few days. I kissed her like I was drowning and she was my only source of oxygen. Because I wasn't good with words, and I had no idea how to tell her everything that I wanted to.

My hands moved down her neck, gripping her shoulder tight, before lowering the straps of her sports bra and freeing her tight nipples. God, the sight of them... Based on Ivy's expression, they might be aching even. I brushed the hard tip and pinched it.

A moan tore from her, pleasure making her arch.

"Max," she panted as my other hand massaged her breast while my fingers played with her other breast. Rolling and pinching the hard bud, forcing out the tortured noises from Ivy. "You're going to make me come just by touching my nipples."

Cold be damned, that was the plan. I dropped my head and sucked her nipple.

"Oh my God!" she squealed, holding onto my messy, wet locks. "Keep going... please... don't stop."

My mouth moved to the other one, while my hand landed on her ass, and I squeezed it tight.

Ivy was so responsive to my touch, arching her back, thrusting her hips forward, silently urging me to touch her. The wet material of her leggings made it difficult to put my hand inside it, but answering her wishes, I traced the outline of her pussy with my hand, drawing small circles over her most sensitive spot.

Panting and gasping for air, some ragged words left her mouth, but I couldn't decipher what exactly she wanted.

More, for sure.

I kept my thumb pressing over her nipple while my other two fingers thrust over her opening. I couldn't dip them into her wetness, as the clothes stopped me.

"Are you going to come for me?" I asked with my mouth around her nipples, my teeth gently scraping the sensitive skin.

"Yes. Just don't stop."

"There's no stopping me, Blossom." I switched between her tits and stroked them in perfect sync.

Her breathing turned more and more ragged with every thrust and her moans became frequent with each lick of my tongue, until there was nothing left of her but a panting, wet mess.

"Max..."

"That's it, Blossom, let it go."

"Oh my—" she screamed as her body jerked when her climax hit her. I kept on sucking and thrusting all the way until she settled, and her head dropped against my head, her fingers grazing my neck.

"You good?" I asked from her breasts, watching the nipples wear a lovely pink color from my work. It was my own personal artwork.

"Never better." She chuckled, while I pulled the straps of her sports bra higher and hid her breast. "I don't... I'm not..."

“It’s okay, Blossom.”

“I can... if you want... suck you off... or jerk you off... or...” she offered, the conversation suddenly turning uncomfortable. Even the air around us shifted as her desire settled.

“I’m good,” I croaked. “I just wanted to help.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I almost cringed at my words, and suddenly, I was happy I didn’t take the full plunge and dived into it without thinking. It would have only ended up with one of us hurt.

And as we walked back from the beach, both soaking wet, only one of us was still blue. My blue balls had nothing to do with the cold but everything to do with the sexy blonde who was my fake girlfriend.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IVY

I couldn't get Max out of my head.

My cheeks burned every time I thought about someone seeing us, but I kept convincing myself maybe if anyone saw it or recorded it, we could play it off as we did it as a show as opposed to what really happened. We crossed the boundary and I wasn't sure there was even any going back from it.

We went back to his place, took a shower, and he dropped me off in my apartment like the perfect gentleman. As usual, he messaged me good night and in the morning sent a text asking about my day. Nothing out of the ordinary, yet I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off with him.

Ever since our last picnic, he was acting strange.

"Earth to Ivy!" Kaia shook me with a little more force than needed. "Where were your thoughts?"

I shook my head. "What were you saying about Halloween?"

"Tristan and I are dating," she announced. "I was telling you about our hot and steamy sex at the party, but you totally zoned out."

"Wait, what?" I stared at her. Tristan Edwins was the most obnoxious, annoying idiot

after Ander. I knew Kaia was crushing after him since Ander and I were together, but they never happened before. “How?”

“I don’t know. What matters is that he finally decided we were meant to be, and it was totally worth the wait.”

“He called you ugly,” I reminded her of the time we double dated. “And boring.”

“Ander did the same to you.” Kaia rolled her eyes. “That doesn’t make him a bad person.”

“You’re comparing him to Ander, my ex. The one who cheated on me with my sister among other things,” I said, my voice a bit more on edge than I would have liked.

“Chill, Poison Ivy, he only cheated on you because you didn’t give him enough sex,” she pushed it under the rug like it didn’t matter.

“Don’t call me like that. I told you I don’t like that nickname. You know damn well why they made it up.”

“Sorry.” She reached out to hug me, and I patted her back carefully. My defenses were suddenly up and I was confused and hurt with my best friend’s behavior. “You know how long I wanted to date Tristan...”

“I do.”

“All I want from you is a little... understanding. You know how he is, how their crew is. I just want to... fit in for now.”

I nodded, but I couldn’t shake the feeling of wondering what was it that made him change his mind and what Kaia had to give up to win him.

And somewhere deep down I hoped it wasn't our friendship.

As I watched the Titans practice, some drills they ran with Max shouting, my attention shifted from my laptop to the guys. It felt so natural sitting there and watching them. Never for one second did I feel like I didn't belong there. They welcomed me with open arms.

Max stopped close by to grab a sip of water and waved at me. Both Dex and Maddox followed along.

"Sorry for crashing," I apologized after declining his invite, but then changing my mind. "I needed some space."

"Take all the space you need," he said, pointing around the empty stadium, and before I knew it, he stepped over the small gate and taking the steps by two made it up to me. "Everything okay?"

"It will be." I nodded, sadness still clutching my chest from my earlier conversation with Kaia. We hadn't talked since she told me she was dating Tristan, but I'd seen her around campus with my sister and the rest of the soccer crew. "Did Derek and Kaia ever hook up?"

"Yeah, first day at the bar, when we met. Why? Did something happen?"

"She is now dating Ander's best friend, and she's been wanting to date him for a long time. It just feels... weird. She was adamant I go for you, this whole thing was actually her idea. I thought she wanted to help, but these last few days I've been thinking. What did I really accomplish by fake-dating you?"

Max remained silent as he watched me, his eyes narrowed.

“I mean you’re a great friend and I love hanging out with you and your friends. I wish I attended Hillview instead of Westpoint. But this whole thing started with me wanting revenge, which is... stupid. I would never get back with Ander. Not in a million years.”

“Is it possible you are only now seeing his true colors?” Max asked. “And that up until couple of days ago, if he wanted to get back with you, you would have gone for it?”

I wanted to say no, but the words got stuck in me. “Maybe?”

“When we first talked, you were heartbroken and angry. You didn’t stop to evaluate his problematic behavior, the things he said to you and how he treated you. I can see how he behaves with Daisy. I could see the sheer terror in your eyes when Daisy told you he is moody to the point that I had to go and lose a stupid beer pong game.”

“I said I was sorry over it.”

“That’s the problem. You’re sorry because you think I’m upset for the loss. I couldn’t give two flying shits that he is going around telling everyone he beat me in beer pong. I’m not defined by his words. But you are. I watched you the past few months being shocked with my behavior, you tease me of being a gentleman. I’m not, trust me, I’m not further from it, and if we ever get to that point, you will see it. But I have manners and I respect you. That’s the key difference. I was trying to show you what a normal relationship would look like if it wasn’t fake. Because you deserve someone who will open the door for you, surprise you with flowers, take you on dates and respect you. Someone who does that not out of obligation but because they want to see your eyes light up.”

Emotions clogged my throat as I listened to his words.

“But you need to believe that you deserve it.”

I nodded slowly as his words sank in.

“The truth was always in front of you, it just took you longer to realize it. Ander was and continues to be what we in call a real piece of shit .”

That got me to croak out a choked laugh and Max grinned.

“Now, if you want to break up with me, because you finally realized... I might be heartbroken over it,” he teased with a smile. My heart jumped in my chest and the idea of breaking up with him still sounded too real, painful and not something I wanted to do.

“Can we keep dating?” I asked carefully. “Just until Christmas. We can break up before my birthday in January.”

“That’s a shitty time to break up, it would make me look like an asshole. Why don’t we stick with it until March? I should have a secure spot on the National Team by then and anyway my focus will shift.”

“You know Christmas means my parents, you, me and Daisy. And Daisy means... “

“Sanchez. I’m a big boy. I can handle Christmas with him after we kick them out of the Championship this weekend.”

“Excited?” I wiggled my brows. “I’m sure you will win.”

“Aarons, if you are done charming your girlfriend, get your ass to the field!” Coach shouted from below, the Titans already gathered around him.

“I’m not really done.” Max flashed me a grin.

“It wasn’t a request, Arons!”

I chuckled, ducking my head, as Max threw a panicked look over his shoulder at me and quickly ran down the stairs. Once he was back on the field, I lifted my laptop screen back up and stared at my little research project called Thalia, because I wanted to make sure Max doesn’t miss out on his well-deserved National Team invitation.

He deserved it more than anything. I watched him prioritize gym over sleep even when I was with him. I experienced all the extra effort he put in outside of trainings and my heart broke a little with every day he kept on waiting anxiously by his phone, checking in with his team and coaches to see when the announcement will come.

“I don’t need to remind you that if you loose on Saturday the season ends for us and the Lions, will move into finals. There is no room for errors. We are playing home, on our own pitch, you all better bring your A games. No distraction. It has been a strong season so far, but one game can change everything.”

Their Coach lacked talent for motivational speeches and looking at the faces of the team every one of them felt it too. My eyes landed on Max, his messy hair falling over his eyes as stood there with his arms crossed, biceps flexing.

“Do not miss!” Coach went on, clearly not reading the room and Dex rolled his eyes. “And take all the necessary risks, but not too much.”

Max shook his head and pushed his fingers through the messy strands.

“We’ve never lost a Championship, let’s not start this year.”

A few guys snickered as Coach clapped and walked away.

“Dismissed.”

“Worst motivational speech ever,” Maddox muttered. “That guy needs some training.”

I let out a short laugh before burying my face back into the laptop. Thalia was plain boring. Liked every post Max posted, commented on everything. She wanted to be noticed and become an influencer but she was trying too hard. Honestly, I didn’t get how her dad didn’t see it. But I guess parental love and all.

“What are you doing here?” A girl appeared next to me. Her hair was braided into one long braid, and she was wearing an oversized sweater dress with knee-high boots. Her freckled, heart-shaped face was morphed into a concerned grimace. “Aren’t you a Lion? Are you stealing our strategy?”

I furrowed my brows and closed my laptop. “I’m Max’s girlfriend.”

“You’re dating Sanchez’s ex?” she screamed and turned toward the team who were gathering their stuff to leave.

Max rolled his eyes and swiftly joined us on the stands.

“Nice to see you too, Sunshine.”

“Sunshine? Really, Max?” She sighed but gave him a hug. “Bet you missed me.”

“We missed your big mouth,” Derek said, climbing the stairs.

“Funny you say that.” The girl laughed, and her eyes flashed to Maddox arriving last before returned to me. “Is anyone going to fill me in?”

“Fill you in on what?” I muttered, suddenly annoyed.

Max sighed. “Blossom, this is Nova. Coach Parker’s one and only daughter.”

“She’s a true nightmare,” Derek added as he wrapped his arm around her.

“More like a hurricane,” Maddox corrected with a smirk.

Nova chuckled. “Yeah, still doesn’t explain why she is here.”

“Can you be nice?” Max stared at her. “She is on our team.”

“We like her,” Derek said with a grin, and Maddox nodded.

“I leave for a couple of months and this is what you do.” She shook her head with a dramatic sigh before bursting into a laugh. “Sorry, I’m messing with you. I’m Nova, a drama major.”

“Of course you are.” I chuckled dryly. “I’m Ivy, a computer science and marketing major.”

“Great. I was in Canada recording a TV show over the past few months. We just wrapped so that’s why I’m so out of the loop with all the gossip.”

“It’s not like we weren’t updating you in the group chat,” Derek muttered. “You wound me.”

“Took you all but three minutes to brag about the TV show,” Maddox remarked, staring at his watch. “That must be a new record.”

Nova grimaced. “We should grab dinner.”

“You guys totally should,” Max agreed, hugging me to himself. I scrunched my nose from the smell radiating from him but didn’t pull away. “Blossom and I have plans.”

“Sex doesn’t count as plans,” Nova objected, her pleading green eyes turning to me. “I would love to get to know you.”

“You were hostile,” Maddox reminded her. “Max is protective. They’ll get over it.”

“I was just being me.” She looked like a little sad puppy with her lip turned down and I could see why she landed a TV show. She had on point facial expressions. “Please?”

I glanced at Max and he was already shaking his head. “Ugh, you will regret it, Blossom. Trust me.”

An hour and a half later, we were all in one of the best Italian restaurants in town ordering our weight in garlic bread, bruschetta and pizza. Nova was chatting happily with another girl who was someone’s girlfriend and suddenly this whole new world opened up to me.

The girlfriends of the team.

Besides Nova, there was Brooklyn who was Liam’s high school sweetheart and they made the cutest couple. Brooklyn’s friend Paige was seeing Alfie, the funniest and most genuine goalie I had ever met. And then there was Rosalie who was Aaron’s little sister, a freshman currently, but seemed to be good friends with the girls.

They were all sweet and welcoming me into their little group of supporting soccer girls.

Max’s hand squeezed my knee as I laughed at a story Brooklyn was telling us about

Liam and the paintball game they had over the weekend. Liam was showing off his bruises on his arm allowing his friends to tease him about it.

“Are you having fun or regretting it?” Max asked, leaning close to me. His pine scented cologne hit my nose and I inhaled it deeply. I loved how he smelled after showering.

“Loving it,” I replied honestly. “They are all so nice.”

“Wait until you get to know them better.”

“Max,” Nova called his name from the other side of the table. “How does it feel introducing her to us? You now made it official.”

“It was official,” he replied curtly with a small grin. “Just because I didn’t subject her to the pain of talking to you doesn’t mean we weren’t real.”

“You did always come up with excuses,” Paige reminded him, but I hadn’t recalled any invite being extended to me for any dinner or hang out with girls. We only ever hung out with the guys.

Both Derek and Maddox shot their friend a look that told me this was a serious boundary of not introducing the fake girlfriend to the girls, and I understood where he was coming from. We weren’t supposed to last. This was only temporary and while the guys weren’t going to get attached to me emotionally, some of these girls might if we hung out and became friends.

“I like her more than Thalia.” Nova snickered. “She was a total bitch. Super controlling, selfish and manipulative. Not much has changed... other than Max learned how to pick a girlfriend.”

“Very funny.” Max fake-laughed but I saw his eyes light up with happiness being surrounded by his closest friends.

“Don’t worry.” Rosalie leaned into me. “Nova is always super hyper. I’ve seen her only twice and am still not used to it. But they keep telling me she will grow on me. Still waiting for that to happen.”

I chuckled. “I’m not even sure what’s the big story behind all this,” I motioned around the table.

“Nova and Brooklyn were instant besties the moment they met at the first soccer game freshman year. Paige was Brooklyn’s roommate who was dragged along. Guess Nova being the Coach’s daughter and Brooklyn being with Liam just created their own little group. I only know bits and pieces of what I picked up since August, so I’m happy to have someone equally new next to me.”

“Thanks,” I offered a grin, but the pang in my chest kept reminding me of Daisy. Even their smiles were similar. Or at least my sister’s pre-Ander personality as I called it. “Anything else I should be aware?”

Rosalie pretended to think. “No, not really. I’m not familiar with anything. I know some of the other guys join sometimes, like last time Nico came and he is a totally douchebag, but I think it started as a thing for girls to bond.”

“Yes.” Brooklyn leaned over Liam to join in our conversation. “We are like the committee that gets to decide if girlfriends are worth it.”

Paige added with a laugh. “We might be scary.”

She was anything but scary with her strawberry blonde hair and baby blue eyes. She looked like a real-life doll especially with the Southern accent.

“Doubt it,” I shrugged. “Maybe the guys are just bad at getting girls.”

They all chuckled.

“True.” Nova lifted her coke glass to me and drank. “If you have any single girlfriends, you can bring them. We can purge the Lion out of them and turn them into Titans.”

I almost offered to bring Kaia, but then I remembered she was dating Tristan and she was full on Lioness.

“You could bring the cutie.” Derek wiggled his brows. “Would give her another round.”

“She’s actually dating Tristan.” I winced as the words came out.

Derek’s face went blank, and it was Max who touched my back in a soothing gesture. “The co-captain? The defender?”

“Edwins.”

Someone let out a low whistle. “He’s an ass.”

“When did this happen?” Derek asked, confused. “She was literally booty calling me four days ago.”

“Around Halloween,” I guessed with a shrug. “What do you mean she was booty calling you?”

“What would I mean?” He rolled his eyes, picking up his phone to read out loud. “Hey, Dex! Wanna come over for Netflix and Chill? Wink face, eggplant emoji,

water drops emoji.”

That didn’t sound like Kaia, but at the same time it sounded like her.

“She is madly in love with Tristan, she would never risk losing him.”

Glancing at my own phone, I checked when the last message exchange was between us and since Halloween, the only real conversation we had were about groceries and bills.

“She sounds like a lost cause.” Nova’s voice snapped me back to reality as Max’s hand moved in a slow circling motion on my back. “You need new friends, and lucky for you, we’re here.”

I managed to force out a smile, but the words to thank her burned in the back of my throat as tears clouded my vision. It didn’t hit me until that exact moment how awfully alone I really was. Losing all my friendship I’d built over the past two years and being stuck in a fake relationship.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MAX

Semi-finals were always nerve wracking especially against the Lions. Not because I was scared of them, but because they played dirty. Between the whole Ander and Ivy thing as well as the Dex and Kaia, it was all a ticking time bomb.

Ivy was clearly upset over her friend's choice of partner. Dex went and hooked up with her on that booty call, but I didn't want to tell Ivy and further annoy her. She had a lot on her mind.

"You are judging," she muttered, laying on my bed. It was the night before the semis and the only distraction present were Ivy and some sci-fi movie she picked that I couldn't care less about. I watched her blonde hair spill across my grey pillow, and she looked calm. She always looked calm and at peace when we were together. "Excited for Thanksgiving? Heard your mom gave you an earful."

I winced. Apparently, I couldn't exit the room fast enough for Ivy to not witness how upset my mom was that her only son is not only spending Thanksgiving with a girl they never met but is also potentially not going to spend Christmas with them.

"They will be here tomorrow, and they will come for the final as well," I said with a shrug. "They will meet you. We are all having breakfast tomorrow morning and problem solved."

"You're very calm about it," Ivy observed, pausing the movie and moving to sit by

my side at the edge of the bed. Her fingers entangled in my hair, and she gently tugged it, making me look at her. “What is it?”

“Scouts are going to be there tomorrow. They are basically still auditioning me.”

“But why?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

I did everything well, hadn’t messed up other than that one goal pass, I was a team player, a motivator, I busted my ass to prove myself on and off the field. I even let Ivy force me to post all the soccer content on my Instagram and help me grow my online presence. My agents were over the moon with me, brand deals were coming my way from everywhere, yet it still wasn’t enough to land a spot on the National Team.

“I just don’t get it... I did everything.” I took a deep breath as my voice shook and I pushed my fingers through my messy hair.

Ivy caught my hand with hers, and moving it out of my hair, she placed it in her lap, her hand giving mine a reassuring squeeze. “You’ll dazzle them tomorrow. I know.”

I cracked a weak smile. It wasn’t like me to break down like this, it was completely out of character, but I just had enough. I was an asset, and with Sky retiring, there was no one better to fill his shoes.

“Sorry, I’m not in the greatest mood today,” I muttered, taking a deep breath. “If you want to go home.”

“And watch Tristan and Kaia?” Ivy groaned, reminding me she was simply hiding. “Plus, we have breakfast with your parents tomorrow morning.”

Kill me. I was planning to introduce her after the game and not before. I had enough shit going on without needing to put them through a fake parents meet.

“You are doing it again.” Ivy tugged my hand and straddled me out of the blue. “You are lost in thoughts beating yourself up.”

“How do you know?”

All I could think about was the way she rubbed herself over my still aching dick right then. I haven’t had sex in what felt like years, and the fact that my body developed its own mind when it came to Ivy wasn’t helping.

Embarrassing.

“Why don’t you let me take your mind off things? I never got to thank you for what you did at the beach.”

I’d been craving the taste of her pussy since that day. I wanted to rip her clothes off and feast on her, wondering if she tasted just as sweet as I imagined. The sounds of her coming apart in my arms still played on repeat every time I jerked off. But it wasn’t enough.

I wanted her.

“I don’t think we should cross that line,” I said, my voice raspier than I anticipated.

Ivy chuckled and brushed her nose over mine. “You’ve already crossed it. I’m just returning the favor. It’s only fair... and then... if we feel like crossing more lines, we have the whole night.”

She chose the worst possible moment to test my restraint because I didn’t have any.

“Blossom,” I croaked out, my lips brushing over hers. “I don’t have it in me to stop myself today. I won’t be a gentleman.”

“You don’t have to. I want you to let loose finally,” she whispered, peppering small kisses around my lips.

Grabbing the back of her neck, I pulled her all the way until my mouth crashed over hers and I kissed her with a feral need. There was no audience, no excuse this time. This was all us. And it felt divine. My head spun as she opened for me and I kissed her deeper, fully devouring her. Every little moan, every panting sigh was swallowed by me as I explored every inch of her mouth.

With my other arm around her waist, I flipped her onto the bed and rocked my hardness against the softest parts of her.

A whimper tore from her lips as I moved down her neck, hinting kisses along the way, nipping at her sensitive skin and licking my way down, exploring her favorite spots.

Her hands pushed into my hair, holding onto it, as she panted from the anticipation, and I grinned against her flushed skin.

I pushed my T-shirt up over her body, stopping only after I had exposed her lace panties, toned stomach, and braless breasts. God, I missed them.

“Take this off,” I muttered, tugging at it. Despite loving seeing her in my clothes, they were in the way right now.

Ivy pulled it over her head and discarded it on the floor. My eyes roamed over her perfect body, and I wasn’t sure where to start. I wanted to lick and kiss and taste every inch of her. But equally, I wanted to be balls deep in her, making her scream

my name.

The primal possessiveness that washed over me when I was with her wasn't healthy. But I couldn't find it in me to care.

Not right now.

"There are so many things I want to do to you."

"You will have time to do all of them," she said, leaning up on her elbow, her hooded eyes finding mine. "I want you to take what you need tonight. Don't think about me or..."

"Blossom, if you think I won't make sure you're screaming my name until your voice is gone tonight, you really don't know me."

Heat flushed her cheeks. "It's not that easy to make me come. I usually have trouble."

"I didn't see you having any trouble when you fell apart on the beach," I said, arching a brow and making her grin. "I stand by what I said. There's no such thing as bad sex, only bad partners. Guess I just need to show you how easy it is to actually make you scream."

With that, I reached over to rub my thumb over her soaked panties.

"You are making my job way too easy." I pulled her panties down her legs, kissing my way back up before my fingers found her clit, massaging it in slow, teasing circles.

A loud gasp escaped her as I soaked up the sight of her wet and aching pussy. I've dreamed about this moment for so long. The desire to taste her on my tongue and be

inside her battled within me as I worked her clit.

My fingers spread her folds and the sigh of her pink glistening pussy pushed me over the edge. Grabbing her butt with both hands, I pulled her closer to me and, with one long lick, buried my face in her.

I sucked on her hard little bud before plunging my tongue inside her, fucking her with it like it was my cock. Her taste and scent surrounded me, and her cum tasted just as sweet as the lingering jasmine smell that I'd grown accustomed to. I feasted on her as if it was my last meal, never wanting to let go.

"I need more," she moaned shamelessly, forgetting we were far from alone in the house. "Please."

Without removing my mouth, I pushed my thumb to her clit, giving her more.

Ivy shook in my arms, her legs trembling from the desire and release building inside her.

"I want you." Her request was almost lost in her moans, especially as it was quieter, and fear lingered behind her words.

"The first time I fuck you, Blossom, will not be in rush," I muttered against her pussy as my thumb worked restlessly. "Now be a good girl and come, so I can fuck you like you deserve."

My words must have done the trick because I watched her eyes close, pure pleasure washing over her face before I lowered my head back to her wetness. After a few strokes with my tongue, I felt her sweet cum release and I kept licking every drop of it until she was nothing more than a panting mess under me.

Satisfied, I wiped my mouth and glanced up at her.

“Did I... scream?” she asked me, horrified, wide-eyed.

“I think the words you are looking for is thank you.” I grinned as my body covered her and I kissed her. “Do you feel how good you taste?”

She offered a sheepish smile, and I could tell she was outside of her comfort zone. Talking about sex was one thing, but clearly, she wasn’t far as comfortable with the doing part as she let on.

“Are you okay?” I asked, pushing her hair back from her face and gently kissing her temple.

“Yes,” she muttered, and I hated to see the uncertainty in her eyes.

“Talk to me?” I asked as my hand roamed down her neck and rested on her breast. I pinched her hard nipple and grinned. “Or you don’t need to catch your breath?” I flashed her my sweet half smile, and I felt some of the tension release from her body. “I can do this all night.”

“I thought you said you aren’t a gentleman.”

“I’m doing my best to remain one,” I chuckled, because I knew if she got wind of half of the things I wanted to do to her, she would be running out screaming. And I meant what I said. She deserved to be worshipped and made to feel good, not just fucked and then forgotten.

She shook her head. “This is about you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I said, my mouth hovering over her nipple, before I

captured it with my lips. “It’s about us.”

“Just show me how much you want me,” she pleaded.

Pushing my hips into her aching center, I rubbed my hardness over her softest part. “This is all you, Blossom.”

Ivy reached up, her tentative fingers touching my chest and exploring the hard muscles of my back and abs, caressing me with her slender hand. “Your body... you look amazing.”

It was a shallow compliment, but I worked my ass off to have the body I had, so I wasn’t going to complain. Instead, I grinned.

“If you wanted to see me naked, all you had to do was ask.”

“I want to.” She bit into her lower lips and glanced at my boxers, the only clothing piece left between us. “Take them off.”

A cocky smile tugged my lips, and I obeyed her, kicking off my boxers and letting them fall to the ground. Her eyes widened as she took in my length, and instead of fear, desire flooded them.

Good, she wanted it as much as I did.

Reaching to my bedside table, I opened a fresh box of condoms and taking one out, I rolled it on me.

“Did you run out?” she teased me as I threw the packaging on the floor.

“I didn’t have any, since I wasn’t having sex,” I muttered as I aligned my body with

hers and my hardness with her entrance. “But a guy can hope, so I got a box... just in case you changed your mind about your rules.”

“I did change my mind,” she said, kissing me. “I want you and I think... part of me wanted you since the first moment I saw you in that bar.”

It was all the confirmation I needed to rock my hips and slowly enter her. I gave her time to adjust, watching her face carefully, before starting with my slow thrusts. She fit me like a glove, all tight around me and after the first couple of seconds I was already seeing stars.

Maybe I should have hooked up to make sure I lasted longer than five seconds.

“Faster,” she asked, her nails digging into my back and pulling my closer.

Bracing my arms at her sides, my thrusts became quicker and shorter, and my climax crested incredibly fast.

“Tell me you’re close, because I’m not lasting long,” I murmured into her neck as I sucked on one of her sensitive spots that I stumbled upon during my earlier explorations.

“I’m there with you,” she muttered, her eyes shut tight.

“Look at me,” I said, my fingers caressing her face and my weight blanketing her.

Ivy’s hooded eyes locked with mine and it was enough to almost tip me over the edge. Those raw emotions were my undoing.

“Come for me, Blossom, give in to it,” I muttered slowly as my thrusts picked up an even quicker pace. Her moans mixed with my grunts, and I listened to all the sounds

leaving her mouth, the way she clenched me inside her, and I knew her release was imminent.

And in the same moment that she screamed my name, I finally found my own release too.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

IVY

“How was your drive from Arizona?” I asked, taking a big sip of my coffee and washed off the lingering taste of Max’s cum. It was safe to say that our passionate night resumed with an equally entertaining morning, where he made me scream his name in the shower. Definitely less mortifying when the house is full of guys.

“It passed by very quick,” Max’s mom, Rachel, replied with a sweet smile. She was a beautiful woman and I could tell Max got more of his features from her. Especially the dark hair and eyes. And his height. His father was much taller, fit, and still handsome with his silver hair. I certainly wouldn’t have any complaint if Max aged like his father.

“We make the drive every year for semi-finals and finals. We love watching him play.”

Max looked at his mom with eyes full of love, while his dad grunted.

I don’t think his father liked me very much, he had a judgmental look on his face every time our eyes met. Or maybe he was just protective over his son who was destined for greatness and he didn’t want me to bring him down.

“Aw, that’s so sweet,” I smiled. “You must be very proud of him.”

“We are.” She nodded, her eyes glistening with emotion.

Max squeezed my knee under the table, and he flashed me an appreciative smile.

“Are you ready to impress the National Team scouts?” his father asked, all business.

“Of course,” Max nodded. Despite his stress, he played it very cool, but I learned to read him these past months. The way his knee bounced under the table, or the impatient tap of his fingers gave him away. To the outside world, he was cool and collected. But deep down, he was trembling with the fear that he might not be good enough.

I pushed down the desire to reach over and wrap him in my arms like I could protect him from all the negativity he was feeling.

“Coach McCarthy thinks I have a good shot,” Max went on with the speech I heard him give his teammates too when they asked about the National Team. “The process takes longer as they are scouting for the World Cup. It’s not just the America Cup. It’s a whole different level and they need to make the right decision.”

“And you think you are the right fit.”

Max nodded. His fingers wrapped around my hand, and he squeezed it tight, releasing some of his stress.

I kept my smile on, allowing him to lean on me as I assessed their family dynamics.

“Of course, you are.” His mom nodded, while his dad grunted.

“So, what is your plan?” his father continued with his line of questioning.

I resisted the urge to sigh, because he seemed like an asshole.

Max arched a brow. “What do you mean?”

“You guys are dating, so it must be serious if you decided to spend two holidays together. I wanted to know what was the plan when you move on to the World Cup.”

“Nothing.” Max shrugged. “It’s just for the summer. I’ll be back for senior year. It’s not a big deal, Dad, I’ve done it hundred times.”

“But your focus...”

“No,” Max cut him off, and the collected, kind person he always was disappeared. “My focus is on my career; having a girlfriend doesn’t change that.”

“I support him in everything he does,” I chimed in. Max squeezed my hand in response.

“Of course, you do.”

“What’s his problem?” I whispered to Max as his dad asked for more coffee.

He rolled his eyes. “We don’t get along well. He thinks I made a mistake in breaking up with Thalia. He thinks that she would have helped me secure a spot in the soccer world. He doesn’t get it...”

I nodded.

His dad didn’t get that Max wanted to do this on his own. He wanted the accomplishment to be a testament to his talent. He wanted to be appreciated for who he was, not for who he was dating or sleeping with.

Yet, here I was, making him be defined by dating me. Fake dating me. Or real dating?

We didn't exactly put a label on things yet; there hadn't been a good moment to discuss where last night and this morning had left us. But I hoped we could move from fake to real.

I wasn't even sure what I was hoping for. But I knew I wanted to keep seeing Max, be in his presence, and kiss him and hug him any time. For real this time.

I could just hope he felt the same and it wasn't just bodily release for him.

Gently cupping his face, I turned his head away from the food and planted a soft kiss on his lips.

"What was that for?" he asked, his sweet half smile returning.

My heart did a little happy dance in my chest, and I shrugged. "I just wanted to do it. And I wanted to see you smile."

"All you have to do is ask, Blossom," he said, kissing my forehead.

I almost melted into his arms because I loved his small gestures.

"Ready to show up your ex?" he muttered in my ear, smothering a laughter. "You'll be wearing my jersey tonight."

Last night, he gave me his jersey. The second one he wasn't planning to wear. It smelled like laundry detergent, but he put his perfume all over it for me, and it was like having him wrapped around me. I couldn't wait to wear it.

"Tonight, for the finals and during the World Cup. Always," I whispered back before our lips connected in a brief kiss.

It didn't hit me what I said, until Max pulled away with a wide grin and focused his attention back on his avocado toast.

Did I just confess I wanted to be with him forever?

I grew obsessed with wearing jeans and Max's jersey. It was simple, yet I felt sexier in it than in any short dress. His lingering smell wrapped around me, and it felt like I was in his embrace. Kaia messaged me asking if we are going to watch the game together, but the moment I saw her wearing Tristan's red jersey and sitting with Daisy, I decided to take Rosalie up on her DM and watch it with the other girls.

"Finally," Nova shouted, waving me toward her. She was sitting in the first row, the best seat right behind the Titans' benches, together with Brooklyn and Paige.

Rosie and I exchanged a look and slowly descended the stairs. All Titan's fans stared at us like we were walking a runway on the fashion show and not going to watch a soccer semi-final.

"Everyone knows Nova is the coach's daughter," Rosalie explained as she tucked her brother's jersey tighter into her jeans.

"Whose jersey is she wearing?" I asked, but I didn't see the back as she was facing us.

"No clue. I haven't watched a game with her yet."

"You almost missed the beginning," Nova informed me as I gave all the girls a quick hug. From the corner of my eyes, I saw Max's parents on the block next to us with other parents. "I was a bit concerned you might show up in the wrong jersey."

I shook my head, and taking a Coke from Brooklyn, I sat next to Nova. "I was

tempted, but didn't feel like pissing Max off. He needs to focus and not worry what I'm wearing."

The girls chuckled.

"How does it feel? Sitting with the enemy?" Paige asked, pointing to the opposite end of the pitch where the Lions warmed up and a sea of burgundy jerseys flooded the stands.

I sighed, but I didn't feel the pang of sadness I was expecting. Instead, I felt content.

"Weird... it feels like I'm right where I belong," I replied, taking a sip from my drink. "Can't explain it."

My eyes found Max as he was warming up with Maddox and Derek with their black and blue warm-up set. He looked handsome with his windswept hair and focused expression. Despite that, his eyes shone with love for the game. That was real passion.

"You belong with us." Brooke lifted her cup. "I'm glad you joined us. Our little club is growing."

I chuckled.

Nova caught my eye and turned her back.

"Out of all the guys, I was not expecting to see Maddox's name on your back." I almost choked on my Coke.

"He demanded I wear it. I don't usually respond to demands but he seemed upset and I didn't want to aggravate him further." She shrugged. "But I usually wear Dex's or

Max's; it doesn't matter. It only matters to them. They keep a tally, and I'm trying to make it equal."

"Was there ever anything between Max and you?" I asked, unable to control my curiosity.

Nova laughed and shook her head. "I'm the coach's daughter. Off-limits to all the guys on the team. Plus, I would never date a soccer player. They are pretty self-centered and I love being the center of attention so our personalities would crash."

"Max isn't like that."

"Max is a people pleaser." Brooklyn snorted. "He is the nicest guy of them all, a true gem. But that guy is going to explode one day from all the shit he swallows with a smile. I have no clue how he does it."

I contemplated her words and maybe to the outside world, Max seemed like a people pleaser, but I got to see his other layers and a glimpse of what he was hiding behind all that sweetheart personality.

"Maybe you just don't know him."

She nodded. "That's true, you know him better than I do," she said, exchanging a look with Nova. "I was expecting you to jump at my throat for calling Maximilian a people pleaser."

Nova chuckled. "He has his girlfriend to protect him now; no need for me to get upset. But don't call him that."

I found myself grinning, until she turned to look at me.

“Ivy, if you hurt him, I will hunt you down and make you regret it.”

“You let Thalia walk.” I gave her a knowing look. “Definitely not taking your threat seriously.”

The girls laughed but something like sadness flashed on Nova’s face.

“Trust me, if I could, I would make Thalia pay for what she did. But... can’t put my dad in a tight spot. Or Max. So had to find an alternative way to deal with my anger.”

“Which is arguing with Maddox?” I asked.

Brooklyn and Paige howled, and I grinned wider.

“Oh my god, is there anything going on?” I moved closer to her, prompting her to share her secret.

Nova shoved me. “You have the memory of a goldfish. I just told you I’m off-limits.

I hummed while Brooke and Paige gave me a meaningful look. There was something brewing, and I was curious to find out what.

It didn’t even cross my mind in that moment that I might not be around to witness it if we end our arrangement as per the original deadline.

The only thing I kept thinking about was how good it felt to have girlfriends who laughed with each other, shared gossips, and seemed genuinely nice.

“Earth to Ivy.” Rose poked me, making me squeal. “Lover boy is waving at you.”

“What?” I blinked, remembering where I was. Glancing down at the pitch, I saw

Max, Liam, Maddox and Derek all waving at us as they were getting out of their warm-up clothes.

I waved back with a sweet smile and my heart melted a bit. Ander never acknowledged me during a game, but then again, I've learned over these past few months that what we had wasn't even classified as love.

"Good luck!" I mouthed, and he nodded, running his fingers through his hair.

Then, he turned and jogged to the pitch. I watched him slip on his game face as he, Maddox, Oliver and Andrew positioned in their lines.

He tried explaining me their strategy, the lineup of three lines with different number of people, but I was way too distracted by his naked chest to remember anything. He didn't expect me to understand, he just needed to vent and I was happy to listen to him talk about soccer any time. His enthusiasm and passion rubbed off on me and he almost got me invested in soccer.

Almost.

"Where is this asshole scout sitting?" I asked Nova, glancing around the stadium.

"Behind us," she whispered. "Six rows up. He is wearing an ugly green baseball hat. Trying to disguise himself. I think that's why Max and the guys wanted to make sure he saw you wearing Max's jersey and waving at him."

Oh . Embarrassment heated my cheeks and I couldn't believe I almost convinced myself we were no longer playing this game, when in reality, this was the grand finale.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MAX

The match was supposed to be tough, and we were all prepared for it. We practiced day in day out. We watched clips, knowing what to expect. We knew the opponents and their plays like it was our own team.

But fuck it, they played dirty.

Yellow cards and red cards kept flying and even I had trouble keeping a straight face and a cool facade. As captain, I needed to keep everyone levelled, but I wanted to punch the referee who was blind to most of the shits Ander and his team pulled. We rotated players, getting suspensions for the first time in our lives and being careful not to catch two yellow cards for the same player.

“He literally grabbed him,” I shouted at the referee after Liam got grabbed by his shirt and pushed away with force. This wasn’t American football; this wasn’t supposed to happen. “Just look at the recording!”

“No, it wasn’t a fault,” the referee replied. “If you say one more thing to me, you will get a yellow card.”

Ander snickered as Maddox and Dex lined up behind me, ready to jump into a fight if needed. Edwins was behind Sanchez, waiting for the fight to break out.

But I couldn’t lose myself, not with the National Team coach watching and waiting

for me to slip up.

“Whatever,” I muttered, turning away.

“That’s okay, Aarons. There is no shame in being a loser or dating one.”

I took a deep breath and forced my body to keep walking.

“I would be more concerned about your girlfriend, Edwins,” Dex jumped in, removing the attention from me. “You know she booty-called me couple of weeks ago when she was supposed to be yours?”

“I fucked her,” he added with a cocky grin. “She came all over my dick screaming my name. So, I guess you guys need to ask yourself why all your girls prefer us over you. I mean... it’s a no-brainer really.”

I rolled my eyes and gave him a slight shake of my head. “Come on, let’s resume the game.”

“You’re dead,” Edwins growled.

Dex grinned.

“Let’s change to defense,” I muttered to my friends. “You will need some people around you. Aaron, Hudson, Maverick?” I called on our best defenses and pointed toward their position signaling the change in formation.

I didn’t have time to consult with Coach Parker, but after the exchange that went down and the 0-0 score, we needed to make sure Dex was in position to score and that position was safe.

“Any of us has the opening to shoot on the goal, go for it. We need to score.”

Both Maddox and Oliver nodded, and the game resumed in more intense and faster pace. The Lions were growing impatient and aggressive, especially with their previous offenses going unnoticed by the referee.

My heart rate peaked as I pushed myself past my limits. We were closing in on their goalpost, pushing them back inch by inch and within minutes we were all in position that if we got the ball we could potentially shoot.

The defenders passed the ball between them, giving it to Oliver who moved it to Maddox and it finally landed at me. The Lions’ defenders were circling me. I had seconds to break away from them, but no matter what trick I pulled with the ball, there was always someone around me. I pivoted over and over until I found a small break in their line and passed the ball smoothly to Dex, waiting to shoot on the goal.

He caught the ball with his left foot and immediately lifted his right one to shoot.

I watched the defenders move toward him.

I closed in on them, positioning in case he wanted to pass it back until he got freed up.

Ander stepped up behind, lifting his foot to kick the ball from Derek’s possession, but he was way too far from the ball and I didn’t get why was he trying to get it when he couldn’t.

I felt like I watched the playback on slow motion on how Ander lifted his foot and kicked the back of Derek’s knee with full force. I saw as his knee buckled and heard his painful shout echo in the stadium as he collapsed.

Everyone froze for a split second, rooted in place, not believing what they saw, before rushing over to Derek.

Ander lifted his hands as the referee approached, saying he didn't do anything.

But I saw it with my own eyes, and I knew what he did.

"What the fuck was that?" I stepped up to him, pushing him backward.

"Max," Maddox warned, pulling me back. "Not worth it. Not now."

"He fucking kicked him," I shouted.

"I know," Maddox said. Dex's grunts and struggles made me see red even more. "But it's not your job to make him pay for it. Not here, not like that."

"Why don't you listen to your friend." Ander snickered.

The referee and the medical team arrived, and I approached them.

"This was unacceptable," I started when the referee lifted a yellow card. "Thank you!"

"That's for you," he told me calmly. "I warned you."

"You're joking." I blinked at him in shock. "He was the one who kicked my teammate's knee out! All I'm trying to do is explain you..."

The referee dug in his pack and picked up another yellow card. A fucking yellow card.

“You are fucking kidding me.” I shook my head, furious.

“One more word, Aarons, and I’m suspending you from the rest of the game.”

“Let’s take a time out,” Maddox told me, grabbing my shoulder, and Liam appeared on my other side guiding me off the pitch.

“Like what the fuck are they thinking?”

“Cool down, son,” Coach Parker said to me.

“When in the history has saying ‘cool down’ to a pissed off kid helped?” Coach McCarthy asked. “Come with me.”

I was too mad to argue, so I followed him to the changing rooms where I dropped onto the wooden bench and tried taking several deep breaths. My entire body trembled with anger.

Sky dug his fingers into my shoulder, forcing me to look up at him. “When I was your age, I felt the same anger raging through me. I was a little piece of shit,” he started, and I doubted he was ever as hot-headed as I was. “Granted, I didn’t witness what you just did, but also, I was playing professionally, being paid millions.”

I swallowed hard as I met his sincere expression. He was more of a father to me than my own.

“I used to have to play against my biological father, who was a piece of shit. I was always angry and had rage attacks to deal with the emotions until I realized I was just sabotaging myself by letting him have any influence on my mood and game. Soccer is not just a physical game, it’s also mental. Your opponent will say and do anything to get you to shift your focus. Especially Sanchez and the history the two of you

share. Whatever you feel is valid, Max. You're allowed to be angry, to want to punch him for what he did for your teammate and for whatever happened with his ex. All you need to do is take a deep breath and never lose focus of the ball. You're angry and you want payback. Then win. Getting a reputation of a hotheaded unreliable player will not land you in the Cup final and it will sure as hell not help you get on the National Team. I need you to re-focus your feelings into the game. Make soccer the place where you can get rid of them."

My face must not have inspired the confidence he hoped for as Coach McCarthy sighed. "What do you do to clear your head?"

"Run."

"Then run after that ball until all your anger subdues. Run as fast as you can and win this game. That's all you need to do. Don't engage, don't talk. Just run."

With a deep breath, I nodded. I knew Dex would want us to win, to show them up. "We are down a striker."

I dropped my face in my hands and kept on breathing, but the anger shaking my body didn't subdue.

"Max, we need to go back, time's up. The choice is yours."

I breathed in for the count of six and exhaled for the same amount. I could do this. I could go out there and ignore everything Ander said and did. All his word vomit over Ivy, my teammates. I could pretend he didn't exist.

"I already have a yellow card," I muttered as we approached the corridor leading out to the pitch. It was my first ever yellow card.

“Yeah. It sucks when referees pick on you, but nothing we can do about it. Make sure to not provoke another one or they will force you to sit out the final.”

He didn't say if we make it. He said when.

I nodded and cracked my knuckles, and taking one last deep breath, I stood at the sidelines. I could turn around take a look at my parents, Ivy, my friends, but I wanted to be in the zone.

My team surrounded me and Maddox patted my shoulder.

“Ready to win this?”

I had my whole team counting on me.

“Listen up, guys,” I started, my voice a bit rusty. “We need to regroup and win this thing for Dex. We need to show the Lions no matter what we do, we can't be broken. No matter how dirty they fight, we will always come out on top. Sebastian, it's your chance to step up, big shoes to fill, but you've trained with us so you can do it. We are going to wipe the floor with them and send them packing. No one disrespects us like that in our home and walks away.” The guys cheered. “But we are going to do it fair and square. We are the Titans and we always come out on top.”

“Titans on three,” Liam shouted, and we placed our hands on top of each other's, the bodies of my teammates surrounding me and our hearts all beat to the one determined rhythm.

“One.”

“Two.”

“TITANS!”

This was our home, and they didn’t get to walk away in one piece after what they did.

I felt Coach McCarthy step up next to me and patted my shoulder. “You’ve got this, son.”

“You never told me what happened with you and your biological father.”

“I’ll tell you when you get your team into the finals.”

“No pressure.” I chuckled, shaking out my heavy limbs.

“All the pressure is on you, Max. But you can handle it.”

Man, I was fucking wrong.

During this game, I relied more on swearing than on my stamina. There were only twenty minutes left of the last half but we were giving it our blood, sweat and tears. It was clear that our moral was down and everyone was slightly concerned about their own well-being.

Ander’s shit talking didn’t really help in the back. I tried to cut him out but every single time he said Ivy’s name, I had to swallow my urge to react. I bet he said her name more times during this game than during their relationship and that was a lot to assume. Obviously, he only cared because she chose me.

While I was lost in thoughts, the ball passed in front of my nose and the Lions made their way toward our goalpost. Lunging after their midfielder who was positioning to make the pass to Ander, I quickly intercepted him, and with my old foot magic trick, I got the ball away from him before he could blink.

I signaled to my team and we made our way back to the opponent's part of the field. Their goalkeeper jogged back, assessing the situation and moving best to block any potential shot. The field in front of me lay empty, everyone was behind me trying to catch up and the Lions were quickly shifting from their comfortable attacking position back to defending. It took them several minutes, which gave me all the advantage I needed.

I waited for their defender closest to me to catch up as I held on to my sprint.

As soon as their defender approached my line of vision, I looked at the goal ahead of me. We just passed the half line and approached the third. The crowd's anticipation told me everyone else was catching up and soon enough I would be surrounded by all the Lions.

I saw Maddox to the side, shaking off his own defender while Oliver was nowhere to be seen. There was no sight of Sebastian or any of our frontline.

There was only me and the goalie and the incredible distance between us.

Fuck it, I had to take the chance. It was now or never.

I kicked the ball, allowing me distance to position myself for the long kick. It was going to be the longest goal kick I had to do with the wind howling and the distance between me and the goal. I had to be precise as one small mistake could make the ball fly in a completely different direction.

My breathing slowed as I took a calming breath, picking a spot where I wanted the ball to land, and with my next exhale, I kicked it with everything inside me.

I stopped dead, watching the ball fly in a beautiful curve over the field, descending around the goal line, and with an impressive downward arc, it landed in the far-right

corner of the goal. The goalie stood there, not knowing what happened as the ball bounced and entangled itself in the net.

I did it.

“There’s no way,” someone muttered behind me, but the whistle of the referee told otherwise.

The crowd screamed and my team crashed into me with all the force of their running.

It was only 1-0, but it gave us the hope we needed to push through the last minutes of the game.

I gave us the hope.

“You fucking did it, man!” Maddox shouted in my ear as he hugged me tight.

I believed in myself and in my team, took the risk, and I did it.

I got us into the finals.

CHAPTER TWENTY

IVY

“How is he?” I asked, biting my lower lip as I glanced at the hospital door.

Max looked up from his hands where he rested his face before I walked into the waiting room.

“Just got rolled into surgery,” he muttered, and flashed me an appreciative smile as I handed him coffee. He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me onto his lap. “ACL surgery is tough... recovery time is long. He will be lucky if he can play next year when the season starts again in August.”

I shuddered, the image of Ander kicking his knee out still flashing in front of my eyes. I still couldn’t believe he’s done it and gotten away with it.

All the players were dressed in their sweats not even bothering with a shower. I only pulled Max’s hoodie over my head and stopped to get him and the others some coffee, with Rosalie.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” His fingers dug into my hip and he held me to himself like I was his anchor.

“Talk to me,” I asked into his hair as I kissed him gently.

“It was... intense.” Max took a long, shuddering breath. “Trying to ignore everything leaving Ander’s mouth and not reacting, while all I wanted to do was beat the shit out of him. And I can’t shake the feeling that... we’ve won, but at what cost. This is more than just a game... it was personal on so many levels.”

“Why did he attack Derek like that? I thought he would go for you.”

He nodded, his eyes swimming with uncertainty as he looked at me. “Remember when you said Kaia is dating Edwins?”

It was my turn to nod.

“We were having this conversation and Dex was quite surprised since he hooked up with her around the same time. So, when Ander was coming at me, Dex protected you and me by spilling what he and Kaia did. Edwins got pissed off and Ander had his reason to take our striker out.”

I could barely breath. It was one thing for Kaia to date a douche, but to cheat on him after pining for him was reckless and stupid.

“Wow. I didn’t know.”

“I didn’t want to tell you... you were preoccupied with what it meant for your friendship that she blindly ignored everything that has happened with you. But I can’t help but wonder...” Max took another deep breath. “Especially after you mentioned it during our practice. Did by any chance... Kaia gave you the idea to date me?”

I was utterly silent as the wheels of my mind worked double time.

She did suggest I date Max, and she did push me to date him even when he said no. But she was being a good friend and she knew Ander was going to die if it happened.

She was looking out for me.

Wasn't she?

I glanced Max with uncertainty.

"Yes, it was her idea..."

Max let out a breath and chuckled to himself. "I think we both got played, Blossom."

"But I..." I swallowed. "I don't think I was faking it. Not the last moments, not for a long time."

Pain and sorrow radiated from his eyes as he let everything I told him sink in. How his best qualities were used against him to weaponize them and make him crumble. Everyone who didn't just hear the rumors knew he was the good guy who cared. Kaia brought him to the party.

We might have been played, but our acting was over. And maybe that's what everyone wanted. For us to fall in love, so they could create the best weapon against him.

Someone he loved.

And the pain in his eyes told me he did.

"I think I need to be here for my friends and team now," he said, his voice raspy and full of pain. "This is not the time and place for us to have this discussion. I have way too many things in my mind and I need some... space."

I nodded. He needed to think everything through before he decided to lay his heart

out for me.

“I know you think you’ve been played, but I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.”

“I know, Blossom.”

I dropped my forehead against his. “I really... like you.”

A ghost of a smile appeared on his lips before he kissed me. It was the gentlest, softest and slowest kiss we’d ever shared. He took his time kissing me, not urging me to open up, not pushing his tongue, just tasting my lips and savoring the minutes of our intimacy.

It was a kiss that felt more like a goodbye than a first kiss.

“I’ll go. But please... call me.”

Max nodded, his eyes closed. We always knew this was going to come to an end, but no matter how prepared I was for that moment, a tiny sliver of hope was always there in the back of my head telling me that maybe, just maybe this didn’t need to end.

That our story couldn’t come to an end before it even had a chance to begin.

I resisted the urge to cry, keeping my tears at bay as I walked out of the hospital and left the Titans alone to wallow in their sorrow.

I couldn’t cry, not when I had to face Kaia and get some answers for myself.

I took the stairs two at a time to our apartment. The place that I called home since moving out of our freshman dorm.

“You’re the worst friend ever!” Kaia shouted, catching me off guard. I didn’t even notice her sitting on the sofa and sniffing. Her eyes were puffy.

“Excuse me?” I asked, shocked by her accusation. “Want to try that again?”

“Dex told Tristan I hooked up with him!”

“What do I have to do with that? Derek told Tristan... the person you fucked when you had a guy you pined after for years. Who does that?”

“I didn’t think he would tell him!” she shouted, jumping up from the sofa. “Who does that?”

“They were trash talking me, like they’ve been all season. Derek was trying to protect me and Max,” I explained as I got mad at myself for even taking the time to break it down for her instead of confronting her.

“Who cares?” She rolled her eyes. “You chose to date Max to get back at Ander.”

“Does he know? Or Tristan?” I asked as calmly as I could. “Did you tell them?”

Kaia opened her mouth, ready for the word vomit to take over, but I saw guilt flood her eyes, and I cut her off before she could start.

“Be honest, just once. Did you or did you not tell them?”

“I didn’t tell them.”

I sighed, but then she said, “I didn’t have to tell them as it was Ander’s idea from the beginning.”

My ears rang as her words sank.

“What do you mean?” I whispered. “You and I came up with the idea together...”

I remembered the night we got drunk on cheap wine after my breakup and plotted ways to get revenge on Ander and teach him a lesson. Kaia said I should date someone he hates. Max was the easiest choice because he was more talented and successful and it killed him.

Kaia shrugged. “I really wanted to be with Tristan. During the summer, we flirted and hooked up once. He said if I wanted to be with him, I would have to convince you to date Maximilian Aarons. I thought it was innocent, you wanted revenge and they wanted you with Max. I don’t know if they expected you to fall for him and be heartbroken, or they wanted him to fall for you and lose focus. Honestly, I didn’t care. I didn’t think you would fall in love with each other and he would...”

“Did you see what they did to Derek? Did you realize Max was up for National Team and got a yellow card for protecting his friend? You might as well cost him his career. And then we didn’t even tackle the emotional damage that this all cost me. I fell in love with him.”

“But that’s a good thing. He loves you too, he deserves you and I see how he treats you. You finally have that.”

“I don’t think you understand what you did,” I snapped. “You played me. Me! Your best friend.”

“Don’t be mad at me... I did something else.”

“Honestly, I doubt you could have caused any more damage.” I laughed dryly before I realized I spoke way too soon.

My phone vibrated with an incoming message, and I glanced at the photo sent by Max. I assumed it was a picture of Derek or the team or some kind of update.

Instead, when I opened the photo on WhatsApp, it was a screenshot of my conversation with Kaia—the messages where I told her Max agreed to fake date me to get rid of the National Team’s manipulative bitch of a daughter and to help him get on the team if she couldn’t spread lies about him.

Reading my own words, which I had typed in the heat of the moment, mortified me months later. I should have never said such things in writing; I should have known better. It was easy to hack and read conversations, and it was even easier if your best friend screenshotted them and sent them.

“Tell me they hacked you and you didn’t just...” I looked up at her, but the way she bit her lower lip to stop herself from allowing the tears to spill from her eyes was enough confirmation. “I can’t believe you. How could you... after everything.”

“Tristan said I had to earn his forgiveness.”

“Huh, you deserve each other.” I was at a loss for words. How could my best friend, the only friend I ever had, pull this shit on me?

“Ivy, come on... you would have done it if Ander asked you.”

I was halfway out the door when her words stopped me in my tracks. I had to hand it to her—yes, I would have done whatever Ander asked of me. Blindly, without questions. But I was no longer that girl. I was no longer lost, self-conscious, and scared. Max showed me what real love was, how a guy should treat a girl, and what my expectations should be. I rediscovered myself and learned so much in these past few months, all because of Max. And while I walked away a better person from this arrangement, Max’s life was left in pieces. All because of me.

“Yes, I would have. But I’m not her anymore.”

“Ivy...” Kaia’s pleading voice echoed as I exited into the hallway. I left her, our friendship and the old Ivy behind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MAX

I was going down in history as the worst captain of Hillview University. If there was an award for that, I'd win it hands down.

Rubbing my throbbing temple, I looked up at Coach Parker, Coach McCarthy, my parents and my manager, who were all very concerned and condescending over the news blowing up. We were gathered in the small meeting room of the sports center and they'd been hammering me with annoying attention and ideas for the better part of the morning. I couldn't wait to get out of there and join my team on the field for our afternoon practice.

It was safe to say the National Team never called me, despite my stats and achievements as a soccer player. I think trashing Thalia, even if it didn't come directly from me, was something the Coach was never going to get over. And it was all my fault.

I used those exact words, even if she typed them.

Everything I had planned carefully and built over the past couple of months came crumbling down.

I knew this was a dangerous play.

"Disappointed doesn't begin to cover how we feel," my dad informed, as if I cared

about his opinion.

I glanced at Coach McCarthy with a pleading look, wanting to be out of this room as soon as possible as they discussed what damage control could be done and what were the possibilities moving forward.

A public apology and acknowledgment were already posted and pinned to all my social media accounts.

All images of Ivy and I were archived and wiped from my socials.

I had not talked to her since she left the hospital and I sent her the screenshot. I left her messages on read.

My manager had accepted a few charity-related projects for me to show I cared, which felt forced and stupid, but I didn't dare voice my opinion.

And of course, everyone expected me to perform in the finals and win the cup despite all of this. Winning it was key to show I was still the same person no matter the little slip-up.

I opened my mouth to defend myself, to explain how I really liked Ivy and it was becoming serious, but I closed it and decided against it, just like I did the past five times. My heart and my mind were at war, and I knew I had been played. My emotions, my caring was a weakness to the team and on the field. I was a liability because I cared and was kind.

Guess the whole issue with Thalia hadn't taught me anything. All those lessons just flew past me.

Granted, I would never forget this shitshow that went down. Not when it cost me my

friend's season and my future career.

"Max?" Sky squatted. "I think this meeting has ended."

At some point as I was lost in thoughts, everyone had left the room. "Thank God," I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck.

"Hey, one slip-up is not the end of the world," he tried calming me as my knee bounced. "At your age, I did bigger shit."

"Yeah, difference is you had a contract locked in and you were the Golden Boy," I reminded him. I was nothing but a college kid with a big dream. A college kid with a reputation that no soccer club would want to touch.

"There are worst people than you. In the grand scheme of things... all you did was try and help a friend. It backfired, but you had good intentions. Was it ethical and the right way? That is debatable."

Dex's recovery was going to take nine months, he was lucky. We had no striker for the finals either.

"Wallowing in self-pity is not a good image," Sky continued.

"I beat myself up when I make a wrong pass... how do you think I feel?" I asked. No one knew me better than Coach McCarthy. Even Coach Parker and I didn't have the same close relationship as I had with my mentor.

"Angry," Sky said. "You're angry because you did the right thing by everyone in your book. And you are now in deep shit. But at the same time, I watched you all morning, you wanted to go ahead and defend that girl. You're not willing to drag her through mud."

“I know people manipulated this situation.” I cracked my knuckles and stretched my stiff back. “But she... she was a mess. Sanchez destroyed her, and I felt bad. I might have even felt more than just bad for her. It wasn’t all pity. It was real to me and for her. It wasn’t fake. It just sucks because it could have been so much more... it could have developed into something permanent and meaningful. It had the potential. We meshed well and it felt like it was meant to be. Now because it didn’t start out as everyone thought it did... I can’t even talk to her. It’s not like by me keeping distance I will get a spot on the National Team. What’s done is done.”

Sky contemplated my words. “If that’s how you feel, why did you agree to remove her from your social media?”

Good point.

“I was pissed off, angry for being manipulated, but I honestly don’t think it was her. She is a victim as much as me. Even more because whilst I do have my very sour looking and asshole of a team,” I smiled softly as I said that, “she’s alone. She has no one else left. Her best friend sold her out, her sister is dating her douche of an ex and everyone else on campus acts like Ander Sanchez is a God. She only ever had me during this whole semester. And now she doesn’t even have me.”

He stared at me, and I blinked.

“Does any of this makes sense or am I going crazy?”

“I think you have feelings for this girl.”

“I’ve gotten that far, thanks,” I muttered sarcastically.

“You feel too much, too soon. And now the trust is broken and you are not sure what to do about it, how to proceed and what to believe.”

“What do you suggest?”

Sky laughed and stood. “If I could make that decision for you, it wouldn’t be called a life decision. It’s up to you to decide, Max.”

“Yeah, but...”

“There is no right or wrong. You can either follow your heart and give it a go or you can follow your mind and focus on your career do the steps we drew up, hope for another National Team invitation next year and a contract.”

“I always wanted to play a World Cup,” I muttered. “But I guess there is always a next time, in four years’ time.”

Sky nodded. “There is nothing for you to feel guilty about. You fucked up first time in your life, people will get over it. Coach Henderson will get over it, I’m sure he is aware his daughter is way too much. It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that you move on.”

“It’s just tough. I’m worried about making another mistake. It feels like all year I’ve been making the wrong decisions.”

“Our decisions lead us to a certain path. One or two wrong decisions don’t mean your destination will change or that your path is wrong. You might just simply be choosing a harder path to take. There’s no one to say what’s right or wrong. Not as long as you follow your heart... or brain. Get out now.”

I stood and nodded. “Thanks for the advice.”

“But I thought you didn’t get any advice out of my rumbling,” Coach mocked me with a grin and I smiled back.

I needed to take the risk and follow my heart. It might have been the most dangerous of plays to pick, but I had nothing else to lose.

And there was something empowering about not having the pressure to be perfect and do the right thing.

“I just wanted to apologize,” I said to my team as I stood in the middle of their circle. There had been some off-handed comments, and with Dex out, only Maddox and Liam were in my corner. People like Nico were out for blood, saying I destroyed the team and wanted me replaced.

“We already heard it,” Alfie muttered with a shrug. “We’re all over it. Let’s just focus on winning.”

“He should still be punished,” Nico jumped in as I expected.

“I can punch you. Would that be good enough punishment for the stupidity leaving your month?” Maddox groaned.

“I understand you guys are still pissed off about the whole fake dating, but what’s done is done, and I really want us to focus on winning the finals. We are a team, and we need to work together now more than ever. I cost us a player with the fake dating, but there’s nothing I can do to bring Dex back. What we can do is win the cup for him and show him that we don’t give up.”

As far as motivational speeches go, I was almost as bad as Coach Parker. Maybe because I didn’t believe my own words either.

“Why put us in this position?” Maverick asked.

I took a deep breath, locking my hands behind my neck. I had to open up and be

honest with my team. They deserved to know. This game was built on trust and I broke their trust. So, all I could do was be honest.

“I’m in love with Ivy Ridge and it wasn’t fake to me. At least not all of it. Not toward the end.”

Gosh, it felt like a huge weight had been offloaded from my shoulders. It was good to say it out loud to my friends.

Liam cleared his throat. “No offense, Cap, but we knew that. It was pretty obvious. We never thought it was fake. Not from your side. We know you.”

“We just don’t get how you fell for her act,” Hudson, our defender, chimed in.

I groaned. “It wasn’t an act. She was played too. Because let’s face it. Everyone knew I was gonna fall because I’m a softie.” The team nodded in agreement. “Great, but she was coming off a huge breakup. She was broken.”

“I’m missing the point,” Marco, another one of our forwards, muttered. “Why fake date?”

“Well, I wasn’t planning on falling in love,” I confessed in case it wasn’t clear to them. “It was supposed to keep Thalia at bay, land me a spot at the National Team and piss off Ander.”

“At least you achieved one thing from that list.” Liam chuckled, ruffling his blonde hair. “You pissed off Ander really bad.”

“Technically... he was the one who told Edwins to convince Kaia to convince Ivy to fake date me. For me to lose focus.”

“That backfired on him.” Maddox grinned. “You didn’t lose focus by being in love. You actually held on pretty well despite all the shit he threw. You didn’t let it affect your game and the team.”

“Until Dex ran his mouth,” Aaron added. “That’s what got him a target on his back.”

“And fucking that chick who was dating Edwins,” Alfie added.

I nodded, agreeing with the thought process. “Yes, but Dex only said what he did to protect Ivy because he knew what she meant for me, so it all comes back to me.”

“This is a whole bunch of what-ifs and he said she said,” Liam said, rolling his eyes. “You didn’t cost us a player, it was Ander and the Lions who took that player from us. You kept it together the best you could.”

I could have kept it together without that yellow card and losing my shit, but I nodded. I appreciated his way of thinking and it seemed like most of the team did too. They were all nodding along, and besides people like Nico, the majority was happy with the reasoning. Thankfully, the shitshow that broke out after people found out it was all a play in order for me to land a spot on the National Team was only a big deal to the National Team and me. That had no implications on my team whatsoever and I was grateful for that. Especially when they still wanted me to lead them in the next game. They still believed in me and wanted me as captain and that warmed my heart.

Or at least the pieces that were left of it.

“We showed up the Lions in the end, because even without a striker we came out on top,” I went on and the guys cheered. “And now we need to keep pushing and prove to everyone who was doubting us that we are Titans, we may bend, but we can’t be broken.”

Cheers erupted around me, and I found myself in a middle of the group hug. My closest friends patting me on the back and Maddox grinned at me.

“Now, all you have to do is get the girl.”

“Yeah, that ship has sailed... I...” I started with my excuses, but then I stopped and laughed. “Fuck it, I have nothing else to lose. I can do whatever I want.”

“Operation Poison Ivy.” Aaron grinned, getting my head in a neck lock.

“Come on.” I pushed him off me and let out a relieved laugh. “You know her name is Blossom.”

Liam’s wide grin seemed to be contagious around the team as the guys nodded. “Operation Blossom is on.”

“We can do that... after the finals. First, we need to win the cup for Dex.”

I wanted nothing more than to drive over the Westpoint pick her up and kiss her until I ran out of breath. Maybe even longer.

But I had a duty to fulfill as team captain, and I already let everyone down. I wanted to make one good and sound decision this year by putting the team first. It wasn’t going to land me on the National Team. But it was going to help me with my own guilt. Because if we lost the finals after I got Ivy back, I would have never forgiven myself.

And I wasn’t going to enter a relationship just to doom it with my own guilt and self-depreciation. We both deserved more.

Even if that meant staying apart for a while longer.

I could just hope I wasn't too late when I got around to finding her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

IVY

People didn't get any creative with insulting nicknames over time.

“Whore.”

“Traitor.”

“Bitch.”

All of those echoed through the hallways as I passed through them, trying hard to prepare for my finals and work through the chaos.

I decided to stay at school instead of going home for Thanksgiving. I didn't want to see Daisy and Ander, and the campus was finally empty, allowing me to enjoy my solo dorm room where I moved back after the fallout with Kaia.

It wasn't ideal, and it felt like a huge step backward but it was necessary in order for me to take back control over my life.

I was doing my best to maintain my positive outlook on life and to prepare for my finals. The Soccer Cup Final was still a week away, taking place early December and I was anxious about how the team would perform.

My heart ached when I saw Max archived all our posts. I understood his pain and hurt

and I didn't expect him to reach out. Not after that text from my phone went viral and even made it to ESPN. I was embarrassed I put him in this position.

Yet, I couldn't stop missing him.

I couldn't stop thinking of him and wishing that we got more time together.

I missed him inside me; no matter how many times I touched myself, it never felt the same. Not without him. Never when it wasn't him.

While Ander ruined my image of sex and made me believe it's nothing special, Max fully destroyed sex for me. Nothing felt as good as when he was inside me, when he touched me, when he made me come.

I'd been chasing that feeling on my own and I always fell short.

And worst of all, I had to look for alternative running trails to make sure I didn't run into him or his team during my runs. But it gave me time and focus to train for a full marathon that I impulsively signed up for in the summer and incorporate longer runs into my daily life to keep my schedule packed. Running for two hours a day really limited the free time I had.

Plus, I excelled in my classes, which wasn't a bad thing.

There were a whole bunch of positives to my new life, but I couldn't help but focus on those little negative things.

Like missing Maximilian Aarons.

Wrapped up in a black sweater under my wind jacket, I warmed my hands on a takeaway cup I picked up from a coffee truck on my walk back from my long run.

The warmth of the drink felt good on both my insides and on my freezing hands as I took a deep breath of the chilly December weather.

“You’re impossible to find!” Someone grabbed my shoulder and I turned, plucking my earbuds out.

“Came to deliver your threat?” I asked Nova, the familiarity of her face making me ache for those days when we watched the game together and I thought we might become friends.

“No.” Nova grimaced and shook her long dark hair. “I came to check in on a friend.”

The way she said friend made my eyes tear up.

“I guessed you could use one,” she offered a soft smile. “Now, I know I’m not choice number one, which deeply wounds me, but Rosie is on Derek duty, which she’s been enjoying quite a lot. If you buy me a coffee, I can catch you up on all the gossip.”

I almost cracked a smile hearing her upbeat, melodic voice and I turned toward the coffee truck. “What’s your drink? All black like your soul?”

“I don’t actually drink coffee. I’ll take a hot chocolate with lots of cream on top.”

“How are you so hyper without coffee?”

“Can you imagine if I drank it?” she asked, her smile contagious. “Everyone always gets surprised, but I don’t like anything that gets me addicted. Other than sex. Sex is healthy.”

“Really?” I arched a brow. “How so?”

“Did you know that it eases cramps when you’re on your period? Regulates your mood. Helps you fall asleep,” she listed the reasons until it was our turn. Then she flashed her beautiful smile at the guy and ordered her hot chocolate with extra cream. The way she said extra cream got the poor teenager blushing and he even gave her the drink for free. “I just saved you money,” she informed me as she bounced away from the coffee truck and I couldn’t help but laugh.

I wanted to be Nova just for a day. Her brain was full of rainbows and butterflies.

“So, how are you doing?” she asked, sipping on her drink. “For real, not the bullshit excuse.”

She was the first person who asked me that, other than my father who gave me a quick call after Thanksgiving when potentially Daisy broke the news that Max and I were never really an item.

I shrugged. “Heartbroken, which is ridiculous.”

“Your feelings are valid,” Nova encouraged me to keep going. “You’ve been through a lot as well.”

“I feel guilty and sad,” I continued, staring at the close by park. The one Max and I spent countless afternoons at, kissing, discussing school and life. It felt like a lifetime ago. Yet, the memories didn’t fade.

Instead, the places that used to remind me of Ander, the thing that would trigger me into relieving some bad memories, they turned positive. It felt like all the thorns that I gained from my previous relationship helped bloom the roses I saw now. All I saw was happiness and love.

And it hurt more than remembering all the bad things.

“I feel hurt. I confessed it to him. And he just... let me go.” Tears choked me and my words came out quieter than anticipated. “I’m fucking hurt and broken, Nova. I have no one in my life I can turn to. I don’t blame him. Fuck, I understand him. I ruined his career. I ruined Derek’s chance of winning the final with his team. All I brought was pain in his life. I really am Poison Ivy. I feel so guilty and lost and angry and sad. But above all... I’m just heartbroken for how it all ended. I thought I knew what heartbreak was when Ander cheated on me with Daisy, but this feels hundred times worst. This pain feels like someone reached out into my chest and carved my heart out. Like they ripped it out from me, but I didn’t die. I’m just slowly bleeding out one day at a time, waiting for the end that never seems to arrive. It’s just constant agony and pain. Everywhere I look, everywhere I go, I see him, feel him. There is no getting away from him. I see him in the flowers that grow despite the cold weather. I see him every time I catch a glance of the ocean. I see him when I walk past the park and when I drink my coffee. There is not a single thing in my life that doesn’t remind me of him. I gave him my all heart and soul during these short months. And now I’m left here all empty.”

It was word vomit that ended with me bawling my eyes out and sniffing. I just broke down from the honesty that rippled through me. From all the emotions I didn’t address. From everything I tried to hold in as I focused on moving on.

But I couldn’t move on. Not without stopping and acknowledging everything that happened.

She wrapped her arm around me and asked, “Do you need a tissue?”

I snorted. “Yeah.”

I blew my nose and dried my eyes, taking deep breaths.

“I feel so stupid, but at the same time... I would do the exact same thing again. Just to

meet Max, to get to know this side of him and have a chance to fall in love with him again. He might have ruined every guy that comes after him, but it was worth it. Does that make me a horrible person?"

"It makes you a human. You're in love with him. It's hard not to love Max."

"It's impossible not to fall for him." I sighed deeply. "He is perfect. And the saddest thing is he doesn't realize it at all. He is born like that. He doesn't even try to be perfect. So unfair."

Nova chuckled and nodded. "True. He is incredible."

"How is he?"

Nova remained quiet while we walked in silence. We stopped by the lake, watching the swam swim toward us.

"He's getting by," she replied finally. After all, she was his friend, she was always going to choose Max's side. But it seemed somewhere along the way, Nova decided I was worth choosing too. "It's tough for him and his people pleasing personality as Brooklyn would say. He lost everything he's worked for and he still doesn't see where he went wrong. He doesn't see the learning, only the one where he shouldn't have entered into this deal with you. And for some reason, that's unacceptable for him. So, he keeps on going back and forth figuring out to come to any kind of conclusion to be able to move on. And then we didn't touch on the fact that assholes like Nico gave him crap and obviously he is heartbroken as he needs to wait another four years for the next World Cup."

I wanted to agree, but the guilt wrapping around me didn't allow me to utter a word. I didn't know what to say or how to react, but it sucked to know Max wasn't doing any better than I was.

“Also, on top of everything, I think he loves you,” she added as a side note.

My heart skipped a beat, and I glared at her.

“Listen, I would be the first one to write you off, and I had my suspicions from the moment I saw you watch their practice. But I pride myself on being a good judge of character and you, my friend, are a good person. You both got played. So, I’m not holding anything against you.”

“Thank you?”

Nova laughed. “I’m sure Max will come around, just give him some space to lick his wounds and grieve his career.”

“Those are pretty big things,” I muttered. “I’m not sure he can just get over it. Soccer is his whole personality.”

“True,” Nova agreed. “But Max is learning there is more to life than soccer. Look how well he did diversifying himself with you. I even caught him play Minecraft.”

I remembered how casually he pushed his Switch under my nose and how surprised I was to find my favorite comfort game on it just because he thought I needed something to occupy my mind.

He was so freaking perfect.

And I never deserved him.

“He was really average at most other things,” I remarked, making Nova laugh.

“I wouldn’t say this, if it wasn’t something I know no one would mind... but... I think

you should come to the finals.”

I sucked in a deep breath and held it in as Nova spoke.

“It’s an away game, the guys need all the support. Dex is coming with us as well because he wants to watch it, and I’m sure Max would love to see you cheer him on.”

I was skeptical about that last part.

“Max and I... we are really done. He is not returning my calls or texts. I’m sure he doesn’t want to see me there. If anything... I’ll be a huge distraction. He did his best to distance himself from me and I need to respect that.”

It was the hardest speech I had to go through. Even harder than confessing my feelings. Because what I just told Nova was my new reality. One I needed to start living in and accepting. There was no need for me to hold on to hope.

“Just... give it a thought?” she asked, her voice quieter than usual. “You have my socials so just drop me a message if you change your mind.”

“Thank you, but I won’t.”

She nodded. “I will get going then... I would say don’t be a stranger, but I feel like us bumping into each other coincidentally will be tough. I would still love to see you... sometime.”

“I would like that.”

“Just because you don’t date a Titan doesn’t mean you are not a Titan anymore,” she muttered as she squeezed my shoulder. “You are a Titan forever. No matter what. And Titan’s don’t break.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MAX

The cheer of the crowd carried me away as I ran across the field in the hot weather. I had no clue who decided that Nevada, the middle of the desert, was a great idea for a soccer cup final, but here we were, sweating our butts off in December.

I was naive to pack a long-sleeved jersey because I was debating changing my soaked short-sleeved one just past halftime. I panted as Ridoc U's team, which had never made it to the final before, gave us a run for our money.

"Their defense is top-notch," Maddox muttered, jogging closer to me, and I nodded, assessing the opponent's formation.

Sweat trickled down my forehead and neck, and I needed to come up with the best strategy for us to break through their defensive formation. We always kept our 4-3-3 formation with a strong attack and defense balance and rarely had to change it up, but with Dex gone, we had to rely on other players in the midfield to get the game moving. Our new formation of 3-4-3 was working well in the first half. But now, with the opponent not attacking, we had a good chance of changing it further.

I called a timeout, and gathering the team, I glanced at both coaches. "Let's do 3-5-2," I announced, removing one more defender and strengthening the midfield more. "We've already done this once; we can do it again. I know we haven't practiced, but everyone knows their job. Micah, you're in, replacing Nico. Sorry, bud, this isn't personal." And it really wasn't, but he was the weakest in our defensive line, and both

Hudson and Aaron were needed. Our other defender, Maverick, was already benched, so Nico got a great chance at least playing. “Let’s move the ball in the midfield, and if you have the shot, take it. Seb, position well in case you’re needed. Midfielders, do not lose the ball, do not let the midfield break up. Show them why we are better, and let’s fucking score.”

The guys cheered, minus Nico, who looked pissed off as hell, but I couldn’t find it in me to care.

“We need defenders who can play midfield too,” Coach Parker said to an annoyed Nico, who shrugged and walked off like the childish asshole he was. “You made the right decision, Aarons.”

I wasn’t doubting my decision, not even close, but it was good to get feedback. I didn’t second-guess myself or worry about what people might think of me. At that moment, my only thought was winning, and I was willing to make whatever decision was necessary to achieve that.

With a nod, I glanced at the team. “Everyone good with their position and assignment?” I asked, looking at every single one of them.

They all nodded as I held their gaze, and I let out a satisfied grin. “Let’s go, then!” Liam clamped me on the back as we jogged to the pitch, and he flashed me a wide grin.

“What?” I asked, not daring to look at the stands. I knew Ivy might have been there watching me, as Nova told me she talked to her. But I hadn’t even dared glance toward my parents or friends, not wanting to lose my newfound cool calmness and confidence.

“You’re really growing into this captain role, captain.”

“That’s the point, isn’t it?” I asked with a grin and focused on the ball that was being played between two of our players. “Or am I supposed to keep sucking at it?”

“It just felt like...” Liam shrugged as he caught the ball, and we both made our way toward the opponent’s goal.

I didn’t look for Derek, as he wasn’t there. I didn’t seek out Sebastian. I saw Maddox from my peripheral vision move in, and Liam passed the ball to him, moving it toward the goal.

I picked up my pace, and running faster felt easier thanks to all the running I did with Ivy. I was less tired, stronger, and I even enjoyed it.

Positioning behind one defender, I made sure I wasn’t offside as I signaled to my teammate to make the goal-pass.

Maddox moved around his own defender and kicked the ball in a nice, curved line straight to my feet.

I pivoted in place, and as soon as the ball touched the grass, I kicked it toward the goal. I didn’t need to pull any tricks, and I didn’t stop to overthink or second-guess.

The worst thing that could happen was I’d miss, and we’d try again.

But there was nothing worse than not taking the chance.

And as I watched the ball land in the net, I felt the heaviness settle onto me, my chest aching.

We basically won at that point; there was no way their defensive strategy was going to score unless we fucked up the last ten minutes.

The whole team celebrated as they all jumped on me, doing our usual celebration after the goal. But my head was already somewhere else, onto the next task.

And as I turned toward the bleachers, scanning the crowd, looking for the familiar blue jerseys, I passed my cheering parents and stopped at the girls standing up and screaming. I watched their happy faces and their silly little dances. I saw Rosie screaming her lungs out, Nova hugging Brooklyn, and Paige standing on her seat trying to talk to Alfie. They were all there, cheering us on and supporting. All but one.

That one empty seat cut me deeper than anything else as that uncomfortable weight suffocated me.

“You did it,” Maddox shouted. “We basically won!”

I cracked a soft smile, but it wasn’t close to what I was supposed to feel.

“I was going to say... it felt like you stopped pleasing everyone and used a different strategy,” Liam finished his sentence as he approached me, and the game resumed, all of us settling into comfortably passing the ball between us just to kill time as the opponents ran between us.

“Yeah, maybe I just stopped giving a fuck about what everyone thinks,” I muttered as I kicked the ball away when the defender approached.

Liam scoffed, and we watched as Oliver caught the ball and passed it to Maddox. It was a fun little game to play, but for the first time in my life, I wanted the game to be over.

I was expecting a more exciting or tougher final. Yeah, breaking through their defense was not easy, but it wasn’t impossible. The game against the Lions was way

more challenging.

Maddox jogged over to me, playing the ball between his feet with some cool foot movement before he passed it on.

I took a deep breath and played the opponent a bit, moving the ball at impossible lightning speed, doing my favorite tricks, and confusing him before I laughed and moved the ball to Micah.

That was why I loved soccer—the adrenaline rush I got when I moved the ball like that. There was nothing better than it.

“Ivy isn’t here,” I muttered to Maddox as I walked over to him. I should have probably run, pretended like this game was still ongoing when we all resigned and believed in our win. “I just looked up.”

Maddox swore under his breath and stopped next to me. “Listen, I know you are upset over it, but you practically ghosted her. And while Nova went to talk to her, I doubt she felt welcomed to come. But after the game, I can help you write a message and—”

My eyes caught movement behind Maddox, and I narrowed my eyes at Coach Parker. I didn’t even realize both of us had stopped to chat, and Coach seemed pissed off about it.

“What?” I shrugged, staring at him, just as Maddox grabbed my shoulder and turned me toward the game.

Micah lost the ball, and the opposing team was running away with it toward our goal.

“Fuck,” I swore as we both broke into a sprint to catch up with the other players.

Liam and Andrew were closing in on the guy with the ball, while Aaron and Hudson did their best to position and block. But by changing the strategy, we only had two defenders, and our whole strategy was built on the midfield not letting go of the ball possession. Micah clearly fucked up, which happened because he wasn't as used to playing as we were. He was never a starter.

It happened because I stopped to discuss my non-existent love life with Maddox. Both of us were more focused on what to do with Ivy than on the finals.

"Max to the right," Maddox shouted ahead, his voice reaching me as I rounded the other players to the right. I was surprisingly damn fast, and while my thoughts about Ivy might have doomed us, she helped me improve tremendously.

I was in line with the guy who was about to reach our goal line and score. And with no defense there to stop it, it was up to me to somehow take the ball.

The distance between us was getting smaller as my thighs burned from the incredible speed I pulled from my reserves, but I was still far from catching up and kicking the ball from him. There were not that many options—just one that I had never pulled off.

I tried it once and almost ended up in the hospital with an injury, but it was now or never.

I almost won the finals for the team, but if I lost it because I lost focus—the one thing Ander wanted for me to do—I was never going to forgive myself.

With a deep breath, I pumped my legs as fast as I could and pushed off the ground, landing headfirst on the grass right next to the ball and sliding it away from the opponent.

His foot connected with my abdomen as he tripped over my body, not having enough time to register me lying there, and he rolled over me.

The whistle sounded as I lay in the grass and groaned, looking up at the red card held by the referee.

I was expecting a yellow one, but hey, at least I did my best.

Liam and Oliver bent over me and offered me their hands. “That was sick, dude.”

“How the fuck did you run so fast?”

“Not fast enough,” I muttered, twisting my neck from side to side.

“You could have broken your neck,” Maddox said, blowing out a long breath as he caught up to us.

I shrugged and grinned. “Guess I went out with a bang.”

They all laughed, and I saluted them. “Try not to lose the ball again... I can’t leave you guys alone for a second without adult supervision.”

“We’ll try our best, Captain.”

I walked off the field, my entire body aching from the impact I took, and I tried to hide my grin as I passed the very pissed-off referee, opponent, and Coach Parker.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Coach Parker shouted at me, and I winced despite my shit-eating grin.

“You always told us to use our heads, Coach. I did just that.”

I caught a glimpse of Coach McCarthy turning away to hide his laugh as Coach Parker shook his head.

“Get off the field.”

“Yes, Coach,” I saluted him as I walked off the field, laughing to myself.

I was totally going down as the worst Captain of the year, but I didn’t really care. All that mattered was that I really did try my best and made impulse decisions without overthinking too much. And it felt fucking liberating doing that.

“Did you just repost all your photos with Ivy?” Nova screamed as I exited the changing room to meet up with the girls and our fans and hopefully get some dinner.

“Congrats on the big win, Max, your goal was so impressive, and your slide tackle was the best I have seen. You are truly an asset to this team, and we are so lucky to have you as captain,” I corrected Nova with a grin. “That’s what you meant to say, right?”

“No.” She grimaced, not even giving me a hug—just crossing her arms and staring at me. Maddox’s jersey was way too big on her tiny body and looked even more ridiculous as she put a coat over it.

“Yes, I did,” I replied to her question, confirming what I did during the last minutes of the game instead of watching my team win.

“Why?” she asked, her face a mix of confusion and surprise. “Like, why now?”

“Something Maddox said on the field got me thinking—”

“You mean when you guys were supposed to be playing soccer instead of asking for

dating advice,” Nova interrupted me.

“Not exactly how it happened.” I narrowed my eyes at her, still grinning. “But it did end in a kind of advice until we were rudely interrupted by... you know... the game.”

“What the fuck did you do to Maximilian Aarons?” She stared at me like I had gone completely crazy.

And maybe I had.

I didn’t consider that possibility, but it was a real possibility.

“I think he’s been replaced with a clone.” Liam appeared behind me, his arms around Brooklyn already. They’d been dating since freshman year of high school, and they still acted so madly in love it was disgustingly sweet.

“Definitely,” Maddox agreed, his mouth curving into a grin as he carried the trophy. “You forgot it in the changing room because you were too busy staring at your phone.”

“Keep giving me shit.” I shook my head, unbothered. “I don’t care.”

“You unarchived all but the one where your hair looked bad,” Alfie jumped on the let’s-make-fun-of-Max train, and I grimaced.

I had great friends. Truly.

“I did post a photo of all of us with the trophy,” I muttered in my defense. “I even tagged you all as collaborators or whatever that shit is.”

“Look at you, buddy, all grown up knowing how to use social media. I’m so proud of

you,” Liam cooed, making me want to punch him.

Instead, I rolled my eyes.

“Fuck off.”

“You only posted that so people would go to your profile and see all the Ivy pictures,” Dex said, leaning on his crutches. His grin was wide as he joined us, and we made sure he was included in the trophy team picture. After all, we owed him this win too.

“If you’re all done with whatever this is.” I motioned around our little circle. “I’m starving.”

“I like this new Maximilian,” Maddox observed. “You are cooler.”

“Less of a softie,” Alfie nodded.

“Maybe even a bit of a dick,” Dex added.

I sighed as I looked over all of them. “Can we get pizza or burgers?”

Everyone laughed at me, and I couldn’t even be bothered anymore. The pressure in my chest didn’t ease, and I honestly didn’t care about anything anymore. Winning felt great, but without Ivy there to share it with, it felt bittersweet.

I glanced at my phone; she had probably received thousands of notifications of me tagging her again in all the old pictures, and she could hopefully understand that was step number one for me to start winning her back.

But no message awaited me.

Frustrated, I opened up our text message chain and typed:

Sorry for the spam, but it was way overdue to unarchive our pics. I hope you don't mind.

"Smooth, but no," Nova muttered from behind me and took the phone from my hand, reading the message to everyone.

All my friends snickered.

"Missed you at the game today and wink emoji," Dex offered.

"That sounds like I'm booty calling."

"And her screaming your name sounded like you already bumped uglies, so don't act all innocent and holier than thou." Maddox rolled his eyes.

I almost gasped, but then I remembered I did make her come as loud as possible the day before the semi-finals, and there was not one ounce of regret within me for doing it.

"Fair point," I nodded, glancing at my phone. "So, shall I write, 'I'm sorry you missed the game'?"

"No, write, 'I missed you at the game,'" Dex repeated himself. "Do you want me to type it?"

"You have crutches," I scrunched my nose, looking at him.

Rosie slid the phone from my hand and threw it at Derek. "We will deal with this opening. You clearly suck at it. I hope you are better at flirting in real life."

Was I? Probably not.

My face must have given me away as everyone laughed again.

I seriously needed to reconsider my choice of friends.

“Hey, Max!” someone called my name from the shadows, and I turned to glance at Eric McCarthy rushing toward me, his friend-shadow Zoya behind him. I never asked him what their relationship was, but clearly, I sucked at this whole romance thing, so it was better I didn’t meddle in other people’s business. “Great game! Congrats, guys!”

“Thanks, Eric.” The guys grinned at Coach McCarthy’s son, and I stepped to meet him.

“What’s up?”

“How’s your head?” Eric laughed, and I shrugged. “Seriously, that was insane. I don’t get why you got a red card when there was no intent to injure.”

“I think this referee was pissed off at me since the semi-finals and was looking for an excuse to send me off.” I lifted a shoulder as I pocketed my hands.

“Can I see the trophy?” he asked, glancing at Maddox behind me.

“Sure, go ahead,” I waved him off and stared at the shadow appearing behind him and turning into someone I had never seen live in my whole life. I felt a little starstruck as a legend stood in front of me. “Holy shit...” I whispered, staring at Aiden Hitchings. An American prodigy who played for the better part of his life for FC Barcelona and made the American National Team the best in history. His blonde hair still looked as messy as in all his team shots, and he was still as fit as if he came off

the field just yesterday. He also happened to be married to Coach McCarthy's mother, which kind of made him his stepdad.

"I'm Aiden Hitchings," he introduced himself as he extended his hand to me.

"I know who you are." I gaped at him like an idiot before grabbing his hand and shaking it. "Sorry, I'm Maximilian Aarons."

"I know who you are too." He flashed me a half smile, and I almost fainted. He knew my name? "Sky won't shut up about you, and I have to hand it to him—you have some sick footwork when you actually focus."

"Yeah... thank you." I ran my fingers through my hair and gave a shy smile. Was he actually complimenting me? "I don't usually get distracted, but I got a bit caught up in some stupid shit. It was the first and only time, sincerely. I usually take this very seriously."

Aiden hummed, looking over me. "I sure hope you do. It was great to see you play live finally. You've got good technique, and I'm impressed with your speed as well."

I grinned at him like an idiot. Sure, sounded like he was complimenting me.

"You run for fun, I presume?"

"Yes, sir." I nodded with a stupid grin. "My girlfriend loves long runs, and we run together."

As soon as the words left me, I realized I forgot to use the past tense, and it was too late to take them back.

Shit.

“You have a girlfriend?” Aiden arched his brow, and I shook my head.

“Ex-girlfriend, actually. The whole fake dating fiasco that ESPN loved reporting?” I sighed as I dug myself into a deeper hole.

A ghost of a smile hinted at Aiden’s lips. “I presume that was the pressing matter you and your teammate were discussing in the middle of the game?”

I blew out a long breath and chuckled. “Yeah... not my finest moment, but I looked up, and she wasn’t there, and I don’t know why I was expecting her to be there. Well, clearly because I love her... but you know... I should probably shut up.”

Aiden let out a low laugh. “Oh, to be young and in love.”

“Yeah, not so great,” I shook my head.

“Come on, Grandpa, have you seen the size of this?” Eric shouted, and I almost choked on air.

Did he say Grandpa? I sure as hell heard that.

Looking back, Maddox and Dex both looked equally horrified as we all glanced back at the soccer legend in front of us.

“Listen, it was really great to meet you,” he said, nodding to me, unfazed by the Grandpa part. “I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

“Thank you for coming,” I nodded back with a wide grin. “It was amazing to meet you in person.”

Aiden clamped my shoulder as he passed me and stood next to Eric to take a look at

the trophy before congratulating my very starstruck team.

“Gosh, he is hot,” Rosie gaped after him. “Blonde hair, incredibly blue eyes... I don’t care how old he is, I love him.”

“I literally look the same,” Dex commented, his voice offended. “You don’t say that about me!”

I laughed at his disappointed puppy face, but my happiness was short-lived as he threw my phone back at me.

“Asshole,” I muttered as I caught it at the last minute before it hit the pavement and swiped, checking my messaging thread with Ivy.

Missed you at the game today, Blossom. I wished you were there.

“The words you are searching for are ‘thank you,’” Dex corrected me with a grin. “Now, wait for the magic to happen.”

I stared at the chat for several minutes, where there were no dots, nothing appearing at all, before I pocketed the device and rejoined the conversation.

“Since we’re not driving back today, I vote we get drunk,” I announced to my friends.

The season was over. My National Team career was over. I could be just Max until next August and not worry about soccer and my image anymore.

“Look at this—Max is learning to let go of things he can’t control,” Nova jumped on my back as I headed toward the parking lot and our cars.

“Letting go? Not yet. Rather drinking them away as step one.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

IVY

Finals, Christmas, and New Year's came and passed in a blur of me forcing myself not to reply to Max and ignoring everything that was happening.

I ignored the message he sent.

I ignored all the notifications that reminded me he had unhidden all our photo history.

I ignored ESPN playing on repeat how he and Maddox stopped in the middle of the field after he saw I wasn't there, only to call him "the flash" for running at lightning speed and saving the goal.

I ignored the flowers he sent me at the end of the semester.

I ignored the flowers I received on Christmas morning from him.

I even went as far as ignoring Nova and Rosie and their attempts to involve me in any pre-Christmas activity in the town, which meant, for the first time in my life, I missed the Christmas market. I had it on my list to form meaningful relationships with others from my major, and it was a surprise to find out they actually didn't care about Ander or the soccer team. They were a completely separate entity from the sports-team-obsessed students, and it was refreshing to talk with like-minded people.

"We will see you at lunch?" Avery turned around in her seat as I got up from mine.

She was one of my new friends, and I genuinely enjoyed her company. It felt like a fresh start. She wasn't part of the gossip mill, and while she didn't live under a rock, she certainly didn't concern herself too much with all the drama from last semester.

I nodded as I waved her goodbye. Picking up my laptop, I headed out of the classroom and quickened my steps to make it into the opposite building on time.

I spent a lot of time thinking up job opportunities for the future with my double degree in marketing and computer science. The world was my oyster, and I saw firsthand how the small changes I implemented in Max's account had immediate rewards. He signed with Under Armour, and I saw his pictures over the break.

Gone was the guy who was way too shy and uncomfortable to pose for a golden-hour sunset picture with me. He looked like a born model in their new collection of clothes, playing around with the soccer ball, feeling completely at home in front of the camera.

I was glad his reputation was recovering after everything that went down last semester. But his talent spoke for itself. It didn't matter what he said about a coach's daughter when his footwork was top-notch, and his dedication was unmatched. He was born to be a soccer sensation, and he was working toward that goal every day.

A notification buzzed on my phone, and glancing down, I saw a campus alert pop up regarding a class cancellation due to the sickness of our professor. But I forgot to even care about my sudden free time as I looked up, and my eyes locked with dark, chocolate-colored ones.

Everything else faded into the background—the chatter around me, all the other students. Nothing else mattered, just Maximilian Aarons standing right in front of me, wearing his black Titan's hoodie with his name on it, his arms crossed as he leaned against the handrail of the stairs.

I gaped at him in utter shock because it was one thing for him to send me flowers and message me, but it was a completely different thing to show up at my campus after everything my school had put him through.

Yet, he was there.

“You’re a hard one to track down, Blossom,” he said as a greeting, and his lips pulled into his signature smirk I loved so much.

My heart skipped a beat, and those damned traitorous butterflies started flapping in my stomach, reminding me how it felt to love him. Not that I ever had a chance of forgetting.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, my voice coming out all wrong. I didn’t want to sound so shaken and raspy.

Max dragged his eyes over my jeans and cropped sweater combination before meeting my eyes again. His windswept, messy hair made him look more innocent than he really was. Because the way his tongue darted out to lick his lower lip, I knew what he was thinking.

“Isn’t that obvious?” He shrugged, ignoring the people around us who were pointing at him and taking pictures. “Clearly, flowers weren’t working toward my apology. Which is weird because I remember you loved flowers. Unless that was fake too.”

I shook my head, not wanting him to think for a second that anything in the past was fake between us. “No, it wasn’t.”

“Good, because I’m not sure you’ll be able to enter your dorm room from all the roses I left you.”

Warmth crept up my face. “What?”

“There are roses in your dorm—dozens,” he explained slowly with a grin as he reached an arm toward me. “Come here.”

I took the steps one at a time, in the slowest pace ever, as my heart hammered against my ribcage. My eyes locked with his, and I didn’t dare look away, in case this was all a dream and he was just a fragment of my imagination.

But it couldn’t have been, as he looked too perfect standing there casually, like we hadn’t spent the last month apart and ignoring each other.

“Come here, Blossom,” he asked, extending both of his hands toward me.

“You really shouldn’t be here,” I muttered as my fingertips brushed his, and his pine scent surrounded me all at once.

Max wrapped his fingers around my hand and pulled me to himself. “I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be. And I should have been here sooner.”

Students brushed behind my back, and whispers penetrated our little bubble. “You shouldn’t be here. What are people going to say? You are...”

“Let them say whatever they want, I don’t care.” He pulled me until my chest was flushed against his, his arms sliding around my waist. He flashed me the softest yet realest smile I’d ever seen on his face. “I missed you, Blossom. Every single day since the semi-finals. I’m sorry for not being here sooner, for not being more persistent and trying to get your attention. And most of all, I’m sorry for acting like none of it meant anything and thinking that if I removed the pictures, I could remove all the impacts you have made on my life. Because I can’t, and I don’t want to pretend like I can or want to anymore.”

Tears burned my eyes, and I felt like I was dropped into an alternate universe. One where the guy I was fake dating, whose career almost crumbled because of me, still wanted me despite all that.

“I don’t understand,” I whispered stupidly as I blinked up at him. He seemed different than before, yet he was exactly the same. I couldn’t decide what had changed about him, but something did.

Maybe it was the way he held himself with endless confidence, or the smile that sat on his lips, or the way he hugged me to himself, all protective.

“What about the National Team? All the... mess?” I asked, thinking the reason we broke up was the leaked messages and that everyone expected him to fall in love with me and mess up his game. Which almost happened as well. He was a prophecy coming to life, and yet, despite all that, he chose me.

Max shrugged. “The season is over; we won the final, despite the fact that you not showing up messed with my head bad.” He flashed me a cocky side grin. “And that’s all. I re-evaluated my life and realized... I won’t always please everyone. I’m talented and an asset to any team who wants me. My worth as a player or human being is not decided by a coach who doesn’t see who his daughter really is and puts his daughter above the team. I know when and how to make sacrifices for the team. But I’m not willing to make them right now. I proved myself time and time again. I know I’m a good fit; there’s nothing else I can do. I won’t sit and beat myself up over his decision when I know that in my heart, I did everything to prove my worth. So, I decided to follow my heart, take a leap of faith, and do something out of character for once that will benefit me. Not the team or my career, just me.”

My heart fluttered in my chest as he spoke, and every word melted away the walls I tried to put around myself. He was penetrating all my defenses, and I had no desire to reject him. Not when he poured his heart out and laid all his cards in front of me. He

was honest and offered me a fresh start—a new beginning for the two of us, despite everything.

“I know we can’t forget everything that happened, and I don’t want to. You made me a better person. You changed me during these past few months, and I have no intention of forgetting that. I want to continue from where we left off the morning of the semi-finals and pretend like everything in between didn’t happen. If you want it too.”

I let out a low chuckle and pushed my head into his neck. “I would love that, but equally, I want nothing more than a fresh start for us. To wipe out everything and start over on that day in the bar or even pretend we really met at a marathon. But we both agree on one thing... I want you. And I’m tired of pretending I don’t want you.”

The side of Max’s lip tipped up into a sexy smirk. “Good to know we agree on the main thing.”

I laughed and tipped my head up, looking up at him and brushing my lips over his. Max captured my lips with his in a deep, passionate kiss. There was no tentativeness in the way his hand came up to cup my face or in the way his tongue teased mine, leaving me wanting more.

A small moan escaped me as I fully flushed against him, my arms around his neck pulling him as close as I could while we kissed.

Max’s fingers dug into my face as he held me to him with a deep kiss before pulling away and flashing me a grin. “I don’t want to cut the mood, but... can we go somewhere more private to finish this?”

I laughed and nodded. “I would offer my dorm, but apparently, some idiot left me roses there.”

“Come home with me,” he said, pushing his forehead to mine, his pleading puppy eyes boring into mine. The way he said “home” made me melt even more.

“Sounds perfect,” I whispered, my voice once again hoarse from all the emotions.

Max held my hand all the way as we walked across the Westpoint campus and throughout the drive back to Hillview University’s soccer house. There was something oddly calming and familiar in the way we walked hand in hand through the door.

Max wrapped his arms around me and kissed my neck as we entered. “Welcome home, Blossom,” he muttered into my flushed skin, and I blinked up at the big blue banner hanging in the foyer that read: Welcome Back.

I let out a laugh and turned in his arms. “Were you that sure I was going to come back with you?”

“Was I that easy?” Max touched the tip of his nose to mine and grinned. “That was for Dex, when he got back from the hospital, but the guys wanted to keep it on in case we decided to get back together.”

That settled some of the annoyance that started brewing in me. I didn’t want to be easy or manipulable anymore. That wasn’t the new Ivy I tried to be.

“I think we both learned a lot about ourselves since our arrangement,” I told him as he kissed my neck. “We have both grown, and we’re not the same people we were.”

“Completely agree,” Max nodded. “I would love nothing more than to get to know the new Ivy. We could have a Disney date—I think you promised that over Christmas. Or we could go on a hike; I found this new trail not that long ago and saved it for us.”

It was hard to remain serious and level-headed when Max was that sweet and attentive. I wanted nothing more than to lock ourselves in his room and remind myself why I fell for him so easily, besides his amazing personality.

“Can we go up? Before we run into anyone?” I looked around, self-conscious.

Max claimed my lips again, kissing me long and slow, like he had all the time in the world. “Everyone is in the gym. Strength training.”

“Are you missing out on it for me?” I gaped at him, and he laughed.

“I couldn’t wait a moment longer to approach you. It took all my self-restraint to give you enough space over the holidays to process everything that’s happened and not push you into anything.”

I nodded, appreciating his honesty.

“Now, I know I might seem too forward,” he muttered, and a blush painted his cheeks, “but I’m dying to be inside you. That being said, I completely understand if you want to take it slow and not have sex. We can still have fun, or we can just kiss. I really don’t mind what we do... as long as it’s with you.”

I was becoming a puddle of emotions from all his sweet words. Someone needed to teach the art of talking to women like Maximilian Aarons, because he had a magical way of wrapping every word with a little bow and making sure it drove me crazy.

But what I most appreciated about him was that his actions matched his words. They weren’t just pretty words; they weren’t empty promises. I knew with conviction that he meant every single one of them. And I knew that if I told him I wanted to take it easy, he was going to offer to play video games, watch a movie, or go on a hike. He was going to do whatever I felt comfortable with, because I came first.

I only ever came in second when it was about soccer. Otherwise, there was no competition.

And that wasn't something I was used to—being first or being important—but Max taught me that feeling, and I was slowly getting addicted to it. It was intoxicating.

“I want all of you,” I muttered over his lips. “You know I was tired of you being a gentleman anyway.”

Max let out a low laugh, and grabbing the back of my neck, his lips crashed against mine. It felt like something had finally snapped in him, and he didn't hold himself back anymore. Like he was finally ready to give me his all. Our kiss was sloppy, deep, and passionate. Teeth met teeth, and tongues danced with tongues. His hands roamed my body in strong, confident strides as they reached under my sweater, cupping my breasts over the thin top I wore underneath.

I moaned into his mouth and arched into his touch as his fingers brushed my peaking nipples.

“You really need to get undressed... now,” Max growled over my lips as he pulled away.

I immediately missed his lips on mine, but his greedy hands pulled the sweater over my head and threw it on the floor as he dropped the straps of my top and let my breasts spill out. I knew it was a good idea not to wear a bra, and as soon as his lips connected with my nipple, I appreciated my laziness even more.

A loud gasp escaped me as my back hit the wall, and I used that as support to arch into his mouth more.

His hands unbuttoned my jeans, and he pulled them down while his tongue moved in

slow, teasing circles over my nipples.

“Step out,” he ordered as he kept on pushing my jeans and panties.

His teeth grazed my nipple, making me moan.

“Blossom,” he growled my name over my breasts as he lowered to his knees, and lifting my legs one by one, he helped me step out. He reached up, pulling my top all the way down, leaving me fully naked and bare for him.

Sitting back on his heels, he looked me over like he was staring at his favorite all-you-can-eat buffet. His eyes shone with love and admiration. Yet under all that appreciation, there was something dark and primal lighting up his chocolate-colored eyes.

I gave him a shy smile, and I wanted to ask him what he was doing as he cocked his head to the side and grinned to himself. But before I managed to get a word out, his hand reached between my legs, spreading them, and his lips met my wet folds.

I never told him that the last time he ate me out was the first time anyone had done that for me. Ander never put his mouth on me down there; he didn't enjoy it. But the way Max feasted on my pussy was sexy as hell.

My fingers threaded through his hair, and I let out all the moans I wanted from the way his tongue fucked me. It was divine, how he knew exactly how to fuck me like it was his dick.

Climax contracted my stomach muscles, and my legs started shaking as his thrusts became quicker.

“I need more.” I whined, pulling onto his hair. “Please... Max!”

Two of his fingers plunged into me, hitting all the sensitive spots as his tongue teased my clit.

“Are you going to be a good girl and come for me, Blossom?”

“Yeah,” I moaned, thankful we were alone in the house. “Just don’t stop.”

“I have no intentions of stopping,” he muttered somewhere through the haze of my brain.

I felt my orgasm shake my body as his teeth scraped my sensitive clit, and I fell apart against the wall, my voice echoing through the house.

Embarrassment should have dragged me from my lust-filled daze, but there was no shame in me. It was one of the best orgasms of my life.

When I blinked my eyes open, I found myself slumped against the wall, Max kneeling in front of me and licking his fingers.

That was the sexiest sight I had ever seen. The way his tongue darted out, and he licked the remaining cum off his lips sparked desire up in me again.

Reaching out, I caught his hand with mine, and he offered me his fingers to suck on. Slowly opening my mouth, he placed two of his fingers inside, and I sucked on them. I wrapped my tongue around them like it was his cock, reminding him of the way I sucked him off in the shower before the semi-finals.

One glance at his darkening eyes was enough to tell me he was rock hard under his jeans.

“You’re way too overdressed,” I muttered, my voice raspy from all the moaning and

screaming.

Max pulled his fingers out of my mouth, and in one smooth movement, he stood.

If I thought watching him kneel in front of me was sexy, I had never seen him set his jaw with an unreadable expression as he pulled his hoodie off, showing off his sculpted abs. Then, he unbuttoned his jeans and kicked them off too. It was the most sensual experience watching him undress himself as he held my gaze the whole time.

I took a long, ragged breath in as my eyes dropped to his manhood, and I licked my lips.

“You want it?” he asked, stepping closer to me.

Kneeling up, I reached for him, but he shook his head. “Open up.”

I gave him a tentative look as I did as instructed and opened my mouth as wide as I could.

He fisted himself and guided his dick to my mouth, pushing it slowly inside. “Now suck it.”

I’d never seen him as much in command as in that moment, and suddenly, all I could think about were the gossips I heard about him before I actually met him. This was part of his personality that never got to come alive—the primal, animalistic side of him that he kept hidden and only used when he hooked up.

But the way his fingers caressed my hair and face, there was nothing controlling or demanding in his touch. On the contrary, it was all caring and kind. Opposite of the dirty words and the storm brewing in his eyes. Yet it told me it was more than just a hookup.

Max pulled out of my mouth, and reaching down, he helped me up. His fingers laced with mine, and leaning me against the wall, he kissed me deep and leaning me against the wall, he kissed me deep and sensual once again.

“I don’t think I’ll make it back to the room,” he muttered in my ear as he kissed the sensitive spot behind it.

“We have the whole house to ourselves,” I chuckled.

Max grinned at me, and squeezing my butt, his hands ran down the back of my thighs. He wrapped his arms behind my knees, lifting me up.

My legs moved to hug him and crossed at his back.

“Are you on the pill?” he asked as his hardness teased my slick folds. All it took was one slight rock of his hips, and he was going to be inside of me.

“No.” I watched panic wash over his face before I quickly added, “I’m on the shot.”

“You’re the devil,” he muttered, rocking his hips into me and sliding inside me with one swift movement.

A loud gasp escaped me as I adjusted to his size.

“Try not to forget your next shot so we don’t turn this story into yet another cliché romcom plot twist,” Max said into my neck.

My fingers dug into his hair, and I pulled his lips to mine. “Then don’t try to leave a hickey. We’re not in high school.”

He flashed me the sexiest of his grins and instead kissed my lips with the same desire

and need as the first time on campus. Our breathing mixed as his hands squeezed my butt, his thrusts picking up a faster pace, my back slamming against the wall to allow him even more momentum.

Yet, through all the thrusts and pace changes, his lips never once left mine. He kissed me breathlessly and sloppily until the only thing I could think about was his name.

“Max,” I cried out as my climax shook my body yet again. My muscles were not used to this kind of exercise, and the way all of them contracted and shook was ridiculous. “I’m going to come.”

“Come for me, Blossom,” he muttered into my ear, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Max,” I called out his name, my fingers digging into his hair and back as the last of the shakes finally released my body. A cry erupted from me as my body found its release and finally settled into sweet oblivion.

“I love you, Blossom,” I heard Max mutter somewhere in the darkness. I wasn’t even sure if I really heard him say it or if I imagined it as exhaustion claimed me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MAX

“Wake up!”

A loud bang shook me awake as I blinked my eyes open and stared down at the peacefully sleeping Ivy by my side. Her blonde hair was spread across my chest, and gone were the pillow barricades we used before when sharing a bed. All our limbs were entangled under the duvet, and I didn’t know where she started and where I ended.

We had become one.

“Go away!” I shouted at whoever was in front of my door.

Last night was a blissful haze of many orgasms, takeout, and even more orgasms. None of the guys had even seen Ivy as I ushered her to my bedroom and kept her locked away all night long. I wanted to have her all to myself.

“Max, open up!” The door shook from the bangs.

“What the hell?” I shouted, standing up as Ivy stirred awake. “I’m not alone, and you just woke Ivy up!”

“Trust me... you will want to see this.” Maddox banged the door one more time before I unlocked it and ripped it open.

“What?” I asked, staring him down in only my boxers. Thank God, I put those on to go downstairs for water in the middle of the night.

Ivy pulled the duvet over her head and muttered something incoherent.

“I tend to agree with her.”

“Move.” Maddox told me, entering my room with Liam and Dex on his heels.

“Are you guys serious? Ivy isn’t even dressed!”

They ignored me as they took a seat at my desk chair and armchair, and Derek leaned on his crutches.

“What is this about?” I demanded to know, pissed off by the interruption. This wasn’t how I planned to wake up next to Ivy.

“Hi, Ivy!” Dex greeted the duvet bundle with a wide grin. At least he acknowledged her.

I rolled my eyes and handed her a random T-shirt I had on my armchair and her discarded panties so she could get dressed under it.

Within minutes, she emerged, kicking the duvet off the bed and sitting cross-legged on it. Her hair was a mess, sticking up on all sides, but I couldn’t help but smile at the sight of her.

“Have you checked your phone?” Liam asked. I glanced at the nightstand.

“I forgot to charge it overnight; I was busy,” I muttered, plugging it into the charger.

“Will you please tell me what’s going on? I feel like someone has died or something

crazy happened.”

“Here I thought this was an intervention to not date me for real,” Ivy added with a grin.

The guys chuckled. “No, we fully support you taking on the real girlfriend role. He needs it.”

“He’s been super whiny without you, so we’re glad to see you back,” Dex nodded.

“He is standing right here!” I folded my arms in front of my chest. “What should I have seen on my phone?”

Maddox stood and handed me his phone, where several ESPN headlines flashed:

Coach Henderson has been retired from coaching the US National Soccer Team.

Coach Henderson has been replaced by legend Aiden Hitchings as head coach for the US National Soccer Team.

NCAA College Soccer Superstar, Maximilian Aarons, ends Coach Henderson’s career as head coach.

Scandal: US National Soccer Team Coach picks daughter over country.

My jaw dropped to the floor as I stared at the headlines. Clicking on the first article, I scanned the text on how the US Soccer Federation had received some screenshots where Thalia was begging her dad not to pick me for the National Team out of spite for what Ivy said about her. What’s worse, Coach Henderson did reply with something along the lines of “no problem.” Which would have been fine if they had another midfielder with similar stats, build, physicality, and talent as me. But I was in

the top four midfielders in the country according to all stats, and him not even considering me was already causing a lot of backlash. Now these screenshots really buried him.

“This is crazy... How did they even get these screenshots?” I asked, turning the screen to Ivy so she could understand what was going on. Then it hit me.

Her lips pulled into a small smile, and she crossed her arms defensively in front of herself. “Well... Merry Christmas?”

“You’re joking,” I gaped at her.

Ivy shrugged. “I was looking for something good on Thalia way before the whole mess, and this was just the perfect thing. And to be fair, I warned her what would happen if she didn’t leave you alone.”

“This is amazing,” Dex laughed. “Nice job, Poison Ivy.”

“Don’t call her that,” I warned him without taking my eyes off Ivy. “Gosh, you are truly amazing,” I muttered, appreciation lacing my words.

Ivy blushed. “It was nothing. They took forever to conduct the investigation, so I had to leak it to ESPN too, to light some fire under them. And it seems like Henderson couldn’t deny the legitimacy of them.”

I was truly mind-blown by her cunningness and immensely impressed by her bravery.

“Wow, I really don’t know what to say... Thank you doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

Ivy tucked her hair behind her ears and smiled. “You’re welcome. You deserve it.”

“I mean, this doesn’t mean I’ll get the call or anything similar, but I guess it can mean I’m back in the running,” I said, trying to keep the excitement limited in my voice.

“Well...” Liam cleared his throat. “About that... Have you checked your phone finally?”

With a sigh, I reached over to the nightstand, turning my phone back on. Within seconds, it was buzzing with messages. First, our Titan’s group chat was blowing up, everyone sharing the article. I had missed calls from my parents, my agent, Coach McCarthy, and an unknown number.

My stomach knotted as I swiped through all the notifications before staring at the newest incoming message from Coach McCarthy.

Coach McCarthy

Call me as soon as you see this.

Blinking up at my friends and Ivy, I gaped. “Oh my gosh.”

My hand was shaking as I called him immediately. Ivy jumped up, coming right next to me and wrapping her arms around me while Liam threw a pen to get my attention.

“Put him on speaker!”

Pushing the speaker sign, we listened in silence for the ringing tone before the call connected.

“Max?” The voice on the other end definitely did not belong to my coach, Sky McCarthy; instead, it was Aiden Hitchings.

Ivy put her hand over mine and helped me hold the phone as my entire body shook. “This is Max Aarons...”

“Max, this is Aiden Hitchings,” he introduced himself, as if I didn’t know it. “You probably remember we met briefly after the finals.” I nodded, before realizing he couldn’t see it.

“Yes, I remember,” I muttered, sounding like a total idiot.

“Right.” Aiden chuckled. “You have probably heard the news that I took over as head coach for the US National Team for the season, and following the superb season you had with the Titans, I wanted to give you a call and personally extend an invite to the US National Team this season.”

I stared at my friends in utter shock before my eyes slid to a very grinning Ivy.

We spent the whole week celebrating with takeout, sex, and various parties. Everyone on the team was over the moon with the news of Henderson being replaced and me making the National Team. I kept telling everyone that it wasn’t final—that I might still end up on the bench for the World Cup—but in everyone else’s mind, it was a done deal.

Ivy was happy, but I caught her eyes flashing with concern from time to time, especially as her birthday neared. I planned this whole surprise party for her together with Rosalie and Nova to make sure she felt loved and celebrated. I also told her I was happy to go visit her family over the weekend so she could celebrate with them too.

I hadn’t asked about Daisy and Ander, but I didn’t even want to; they didn’t matter to me. As long as Ivy was happy, I didn’t mind what the plan was for her birthday.

I was still waiting for the final schedule of when the Training Camp would take place and which pre-games I was required to play. There were always at least two or three friendly matches before the World Cup to make sure team chemistry was there and all the players knew what they were doing.

“You are awfully quiet today,” I told Ivy as we reached the viewpoint of the hike I found for us weeks ago when we weren’t even together. As soon as I saw this trail pop up on my TikTok, I saved it, knowing she would love it, and I didn’t want to be here with anyone else.

“I’m just tired,” she muttered, sadness lingering in her eyes as I wrapped my arms around her from behind and kissed the top of her head. “School is crazy busy, and I don’t know. Just everything seems to be happening very fast.”

I remained quiet for a long second as I watched the ocean appear on the horizon over all the trees we passed.

“Do you think we are too fast too?” I asked her, not wanting to beat around the bush. “I know you said you wanted a fresh start, but it’s not like we can pretend we don’t know each other...”

She nodded as her body leaned into me more. Her body language was the complete opposite of her mood and words. “I just wish... we had a do-over at things.”

I didn’t want a do-over, especially not after telling her I loved her and her not saying it back. It was clear I was in love with her, but I wasn’t sure she was there yet or if she was ready to accept it.

“Did you get your schedule?” she asked instead of waiting for my reply. “For the camp and the games?”

“No,” I shook my head. My arms tightened around her as she scoffed.

“I saw the U.S. is playing Spain in a friendly game on my birthday weekend.”

I dropped my head into her neck and kissed her favorite spot, but she pulled away.

“Why didn’t you say something?” She turned in my arms, her eyes full of hurt. “I would understand. I know soccer comes first, and it’s just a stupid birthday. But I wanted you to tell me.”

“Because I was trying to get out of it,” I confessed. “I called Hitchings, asking if I could play any other game, any other time, no matter what. But because it’s a weekend game, both the school and the team think I need to play it. Plus, it’s Spain, and he wants a strong team. I was on the phone with him this morning too, trying to move it, begging him to come up with a solution. I don’t want to miss your birthday. I want to be there for you.”

Ivy hummed. “It’s not about my birthday...”

“What is it then? I’m sorry this is a mess right now and I can’t offer you anything more stable. I can’t offer you a do-over now. This is all I can offer you. My time, as much as I have of it, and my attention whenever I can spare it.”

“But soccer comes first.” There was resignation in her voice. “I know soccer comes first. I didn’t expect to come first. I guess it just hurts now that I realize it.”

I ran my hand through my messy hair and sighed. “You know you matter. You are important to me. Hell... I...”

“Please don’t say it again,” she whispered, tears pooling in her eyes. “I’ve already been here. I’ve already done this with Ander.”

“This is different.” I took her shoulders in my hands and looked deep into her eyes. “I want to do everything to make this work, and I want to give you everything. I’m not saying it will be easy, but we can make it work. I will be coming back between games and training camps. I still study here; it’s just for this semester. Don’t let four months of hardship take away what could be a very long future.”

Tears spilled from her eyes. “I know. I’m trying to be positive, but I can’t go through this again, Max. I can’t just be waiting around for your attention. I want to be with you, truly, but I will always come second, and right now, if you choose to focus on your career, I should focus on my life. I can’t keep living with the Titans and attending Westpoint where I don’t have any friends.”

“Just transfer to Hillview,” I offered. “We have the same programs. You can even transfer all your credits.”

“I picked Westpoint because they have the best computer science program,” she reminded me. “And I’m going to see it through. But if you choose soccer, it’s only fair you let me choose myself too, and we can meet up after the World Cup, next semester. Give each other time to grow and work on what we want. And if in September we both feel the same and want to resume this relationship from where we are right now, we can. But don’t... put me through this uncertainty of a waiting game.”

“You said you would cheer me on no matter where...” I reminded her of her words before the semi-finals as I wiped her tears. “Was that fake?”

Ivy let out a strained laugh. “No, Max. Nothing was fake for me. But you keep asking me all the time what was fake and what wasn’t, and that’s why I told you we need a do-over. Like this, we are both so caught up in what happened when it was supposed to be fake and all this uncertainty. It’s really not healthy. And to answer you, I will always support you. No matter what or where. I can be next to you as your friend, but

I can't put myself through the back and forth. It might make me selfish to choose myself when I spent so much time and energy helping you believe in yourself, but I need to do this for myself. For once in my life, I need to be selfish and put myself first, because it's clear no one else is willing to put me first."

I couldn't argue with her. Not when she made such valid points. We were at one of the most beautiful sceneries I had seen in a very long time, and my heart was breaking.

I had never experienced heartbreak before. But the way my chest ached and felt like something was breaking inside me was real. The pain radiated through my whole body, and my throat burned from all the emotions.

All I could do was nod because I couldn't put her first. Not when I had my dream, one I had worked for years to achieve, right in front of me. I would have never forgiven myself for that. No matter how much I wanted to put her first and show her how much she really mattered, I had to realize she was right, and maybe we needed this distance.

"I never intended for this to end this way," I muttered. "When I approached you at the beginning of the year."

Ivy nodded, dabbing at her tears. "I know, but it did. It's none of our faults, it's just bad timing. But maybe if the timing is better next time..."

"Yeah... next time," I echoed her words, and I just hoped this wasn't one of those right person, wrong time situations. Because I couldn't lose her forever.

Not when she was walking away with all the pieces of my heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

IVY

Heartbreak sucked.

But going through heartbreak twice in a short time and over the same guy was plain cruel.

I cried through my birthday no matter how I tried to convince all my friends that those were happy tears.

And yes, I was a hypocrite for calling the Titan girls my friends, but they really were. This time around, I didn't push them away. I allowed them to be by my side every step of the way, and we went through the ups and downs of my breakup together.

It was different than with Ander because there was no anger in me. There was no one to blame but the circumstances.

I knew it was the right decision, even if deep down inside me I wished Max would have turned around and said I was his number one and soccer didn't matter.

But he worked his whole life for this World Cup; I couldn't just expect him to throw it away for what? A girl he was fake dating for four months and real dating for less than a month? It was ridiculous.

We both knew it was the right call, but it still hurt like hell.

Especially when I opened the small package Max sent me for my birthday a couple of weeks later, when I thought I was strong enough to handle whatever was inside. But my poor heart crumbled even more when I unwrapped the small candle that read

Ivy's freshly baked cookies. Opening the lid, I took a deep breath, inhaling the mix of scents that transported me back to the one and only time I made cookies for Max. The light, lingering scent of cinnamon, the hotness of the oven hinted in the background, and the overpowering smell of sugar cookies and melted chocolate were unmistakable.

And the note tucked inside read

I searched high and low for the perfect scent, but it didn't exist. So, I made one for you. I hope this is what you had in mind.

The fact that he remembered something we discussed in passing on our very first day of dating when we were setting ground rules was equal amounts heart-breaking as it was heartwarming.

And I couldn't handle lighting or even thinking about that stupid candle without crying.

"I need some distraction." I dragged myself out of my thoughts and glanced at Nova, who was decorating some cupcakes with very little talent. We were in her apartment that she shared with Brooklyn, and it was amazing. I shouldn't have been surprised considering her dad was the soccer team's coach, but I was jealous of all the natural light coming in and the open concept of the kitchen and living room.

"You can help with the icing," she offered, pointing at the various colors.

"What is this for again?" I asked with a low chuckle as I picked up the pink one.

“Ask Rosie. She’s organizing something for Derek because he finally lost the crutches,” she said, her brows wiggling. “I low-key think she has a thing for him.”

Rosie gasped in the background. “That’s not true. I’m being a good friend. I did the same organization for Ivy’s birthday!”

I hummed as I decorated cupcakes with pink. “Why pink?”

“Oh, that’s the color I had left over from your birthday.” Nova shrugged. “Doubt Dex cares.”

Rosie and I let out a low laugh, but my heart immediately started beating quicker, and I glanced around. “Is Max coming?”

“Just moved into Training Camp,” Nova informed me. “He left this morning. He’s going to be gone for the next three weeks, and then they have one more friendly game before they announce the final roster in May.”

I hummed, thinking he will be gone almost all March and then he will return to finish this semester before the World Cup.

“How’s your marathon training?” Rosie changed the topic, and I flashed her a thankful smile.

“It’s good. I started with the strengthening program Liam recommended for the core and some calf exercises, and they’ve been a game changer. I feel so much more powerful when running now, and I’m improving my speed. Like on the days I have short runs, I need to run quite fast miles, and it’s getting better.”

“You look incredible,” Brooklyn remarked from the sofa where she was chilling. My body was indeed changing, becoming leaner with even longer limbs, and the Titans

helped me with a meal plan too, to make sure I fueled appropriately. They've been a great support, like my little friend group, if I ignored the fact that I only knew them because of Max. "Liam will be happy his PT expertise can finally be put to good use because I hate working out."

"Unless it's sex," Nova added, but immediately shot an apologetic look toward me.

"Trust me," I sighed. "I'd much rather do sex as cross-cardio than cycling."

"You can always do that," Rosie offered. "One-night stands and rebounds are a thing."

"You should listen to the freshman," Brooklyn pointed at Rosie with a grin. "They know best."

I let out a surprised laugh and shook my head. "I'm not too good at this whole sex-without-attachments thing. I get attached. You know... I couldn't even fake date a guy without attachments."

"This is good," Nova grinned at me. "You are making self-deprecating jokes. You are getting better."

My laughter bubbled out of me in full force, and I had to cover my mouth. The girls all exchanged a look, and they seemed pleased that they managed to make me laugh. It was definitely a first, but as I doubled over to let out all of the laughter stuck in my lungs, I felt like the ache in my chest eased a bit.

Even if it was momentary.

February slowly turned into March, and as April started blooming, I began finding my footing and my place in life again. I settled into a somewhat working routine that

didn't only consist of stalking Max and everything he was doing; instead, I focused on perfecting my skills, looking up potential summer jobs, and exploring start-ups. I wanted to do something with video games as those were my passion, but I also enjoyed marketing, so I was searching for a fusion.

The Titan girls became my core group, and despite Max not being present, I was still invited to all the outings. I watched Max's TikToks on repeat that he only posted whenever there was a sponsor. He was growing comfortable in his skin and really ready to sell himself as a professional who knew how to capitalize not just on his soccer skills but brand himself.

Other than them, I made a point of spending time with Avery and trying to build a friendship with her and her friends, but it wasn't that easy. We just didn't mesh outside of school talk well, and it filled me with great sadness every time we hung out. I desperately wanted to fit into Westpoint, but I found myself at Hillview every chance I got. It was time for me to face the fact that maybe I should make the transfer or just accept the fact that I liked the people at Hillview more. There was no shame in that.

I was getting ready to go out to a party the soccer team was having and potentially see Max for the first time since our official breakup. I picked out a short green satin mini dress that complimented my eyes, and Nova said I looked very "fuckable" in it. If I had to see Max, I wanted to give him something to think about when he leaves the next time.

Picking up my phone and ID, I noticed a missed call and a text message light it up. Swiping, I saw that Max was the source of both notifications.

His message was short, yet a thousand emotions awoke in me from reading it.

Max

Can I come over?

I hovered over his message, thinking to reply that I was heading to the party or to allow him to come over so we could have the privacy to talk and hear whatever he had to say.

But a knock interrupted my thinking, and I found myself smiling.

I didn't think why he needed permission when he knew where I was staying, and if he wanted to see me, he would just come.

I opened the door wide, without thinking, and paired it with a similarly wide smile. "Welcome back!"

"Thank you?" Ander arched his brow as he stared at me.

My hand dropped from the door, and I crossed my arms. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk to you, if you are free for a second. I can tell you are going out."

My eyes narrowed at him as I studied his sad-looking face and the way he blinked up at me. He was a master manipulator, I knew that, but he did look sad. Or was it my imagination playing with me?

"Can I come in?" He pointed at my room. "Unless you are waiting for someone else."

My gaze dropped to my phone, remembering I hadn't texted Max back, and I shook my head. "Not expecting anyone... come in."

I cursed myself the moment he dropped down onto the empty bed opposite mine and blinked up at me with his brown puppy eyes. His eyes were the same shade as Max's,

but they lacked depth and honesty.

“What is it?” I rushed him to say what he needed so I could get going. It was a bad idea inviting him in.

“I noticed you’ve been running again. Running looks good on you.”

I cringed at his words and leaned against the wall next to the closed door. The more distance I kept, the better.

“Thanks.” I grimaced. “Is that all?”

“Do you have to be so hostile?” he asked, his eyes narrowing. “This isn’t easy for me.”

I wanted to laugh in his face, but instead, I sighed. “You haven’t seen me hostile yet.”

Ander groaned and shook his head. “Listen, I wanted to apologize for how things went down between you and me last year. It wasn’t cool what I did, and I deeply regret it. You deserved so much better, and I’ve been chasing what you and I had with Daisy. But it’s just not the same... I still want you. You are still the one for me.”

My jaw hit the floor in surprise from the words leaving his mouth. Not because of the emotional impact they had on me. Not because if he’d said these words before December last year I would have gone back to him immediately. But the sheer audacity to come to my dorm and talk trash about my sister and try to get back with me was incredible.

“Wow.”

“I know this is a lot, and you might feel guilty doing this to Daisy, but trust me, she is

okay with it. She understands that her and I just didn't fit well," Ander went on, not realizing my disgust.

"Do you hear yourself?" I asked him with a small shake of my head. "Do you register the words leaving your mouth?"

"I do." He nodded, standing up. "I love you, babe. Why don't you give me another chance? I know I messed up, but I can fix it, and we can go back to how things were before. Just you and me."

"That's never going to happen," I told him calmly. "You didn't just mess up; you cheated on me with my sister on our family vacation. That was a decision. You never respected me, and you always belittled and embarrassed me."

Ander opened his mouth to say something, but I cut him off.

"You manipulated me. You were emotionally abusive, gaslighting me whenever you were not in the mood to deal with me. You are toxic, and I never want anything to do with you."

"I changed," Ander said, stepping closer to me. His hand reached out to me like he wanted to touch me, but I hit it away.

"Don't touch me!" I warned him. "I need you to leave."

"Don't be such a bitch, Ivy," he groaned, his voice dropping. "You gave yourself to Aarons, and now you think you are holier than ever?"

I hit his hand away and stepped back. "Get out of my room!"

The door flew open, coming to my rescue. "Ivy?"

I hoped it was Max deciding to show up, but instead, a wide-eyed Daisy stood in the door. Her eyes were cried out and red, and she stared at her ex.

“What’s going on here?” she asked, disappointment and sadness lacing her tone.

“Ander is just leaving,” I told her, despite Ander not looking like he was about to leave. “It doesn’t matter, let’s go.” I stepped around the door and wrapped my arm around Daisy’s shoulder. “Let’s go.”

After one last look at Ander, I hurried out of the room, guiding Daisy as far from him as possible. Despite my heels, I matched her long strides as we hurried toward the exit. Anywhere was better than my dorm room, stuck with Ander. The audacity of him.

“Are you okay?” I turned toward Daisy, looking at her tear-soaked face as she nodded. She looked pale and sad but didn’t seem harmed in any way.

“He broke up with me,” she sniffled, trying to blink her tears away. “I did everything he wanted... always, and he just broke up with me. He told me you were much better in everything than me, that I was stupid, and that he wanted you. I really thought you would have gotten back together with him...”

“I would never do that,” I assured her as we paused close to the parking, and I gave her a tight hug. “You are better off without him.”

Daisy nodded. “I realize that... I didn’t like being with him. He was very moody.”

That was one way of putting it, but I didn’t want to spring everything on her at once. I wanted her to come to her own conclusions when she was ready.

“Ivy?” The voice I’d been craving to hear finally wrapped around me like a safety

blanket, and I looked up to see Max leaning against his Range Rover. He was wearing his usual jeans with a button-down shirt, and he looked hot in his outfit. I've seen him in a suit before, but business casual was also a great look on him. "Are you okay? What happened?"

He rushed to meet us on the sidewalk, trying to make out Daisy's crying face and assess my expression.

"Max, hi," I let out a relieved smile. "We are fine... just Ander and Daisy broke up. She is a bit upset."

Max arched a brow, which meant he heard Daisy thinking I would get back with Ander, which meant Ander also approached me, but I only shook my head, not wanting to get into it.

"Do I need to go beat him up?" he asked, a soft smile on his lips, and Daisy let out a little chuckle.

"Please."

I shook my head again. "Don't waste your time with him. But we could use a ride to the party... Daisy is joining too."

"The more, the merrier," Max nodded, and guiding us to his car, he opened the back door and waited until both of us settled in before rounding his car and getting in on the driver's side.

Daisy stared at me with wide eyes, and I just smiled. "Max is a gentleman," I explained, and she made a little "O" with her mouth.

"Any music requests?" Max asked as he buckled his seatbelt.

“Taylor Swift?” Daisy asked quietly.

I wanted to tell her no, but without a single complaint, Max obeyed and played a Spotify mix of her songs. “Not sure what’s Taylor’s Version, what isn’t, so hopefully I’m giving the royalties to the right person right now.”

Daisy chuckled as she leaned her head on my shoulder. “This is perfect, thank you.”

I caught his eyes in the rearview mirror, and he offered a small smile that I returned. Ever since I laid eyes on him in the parking lot, my heartbeat had returned to its usual steady pace, and my life felt more complete than moments before. It wasn’t just the safety I felt next to him. It was the way he looked at me and how he took care of me while giving me space.

I loved him for all those things.

“Ivy?” Daisy’s small voice interrupted my thoughts. I brushed her hair out of her face and glanced down at her. “I’m sorry for falling for Ander. I should have never slept with him. But I saw the love you two had, or I thought you had, and I wanted the same for myself. I’m so sorry I hurt you, and I was horrible to you this whole year. I should have never listened to him; he said disgusting things about you, and I believed them all. You’re my sister... I should have been on your side. Instead, I was against you, and I’m sorry.” I felt her tears soak my bare shoulders, and I held her tighter.

“It wasn’t your fault. He is very good at making you feel special and making you believe things. It’s not your fault at all... I’m not mad at you. I love you.”

“I don’t deserve you,” she muttered as she cried.

I kissed the top of her head and said the words Max said to me. “You deserve someone who will show you how special you are. I’m your sister, and I will always

love you no matter what. And you will also find a guy who will love you like that and treat you the way you deserve to be treated. Until then, don't settle for less."

I saw his soft smile bloom in the rearview mirror as I glanced up, and my heart fluttered.

I found that guy already.

I just needed to figure out how to keep him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

MAX

I was fuming over the whole Ander thing once I gathered all the pieces of information. Apparently, he broke up with Daisy and wanted to get back with Ivy, but she told him off.

This was Nova's rundown, but I trusted she conveyed the message.

I felt guilty for not going up to her dorm and approaching her instead of waiting like an idiot for her reply if I could talk to her. But at the same time, I was proud of her for finally getting a chance to tell Ander off and reconnecting with Daisy.

It felt good watching them bond during the night and Daisy liked the other Titan girls as well which was a bonus.

With me being gone for so long, I spent the party catching up on the latest gossip, before catching up on all the schoolwork in the upcoming weeks.

It was impossible to get her alone and drag her through an emotional turmoil of giving her my national team jersey that I got her. So, it remained hidden in my luggage waiting for the right time.

Which seemed to be my motto this year. Me waiting for the right time to do the things. I wasn't people pleasing anymore, but I was just waiting around.

I could have probably created my own moment and just make things happen, but part of me wanted it to happen organically, naturally, as they were supposed to.

But when it came to Ivy and me, nothing was like it was supposed to.

And especially not matches.

There was one last match that fell on the day of her marathon that I had marked in my calendar since January. I wanted to be there to support her and cheer her on, but that was the last friendly game before the team announcements and I should be there to show my talent one more time and secure a starting position.

I really put my best foot forward in the training camp and the last friendly game. Despite missing Ivy's birthday, I was 100% present on the field and focused on the game. I cut out everything else and proved to myself that I could do it. I could be in the game even when my heart was hurting.

But I also realized I didn't want to live like that. I didn't want to grow tired of the sacrifice and start hating the game I dedicated my life to. I had to find balance for my sanity.

So there I was, sitting in front of Coach Hitchings as he stared me down.

"You're telling me you're not playing?" he asked point-blank after I gave him my speech.

I nodded, a knot in my throat. "I can't. I'm sorry. I played against Spain when I couldn't. This is really inconvenient for me."

His eyes narrowed. "Your coaches and professors cleared you."

“I never said it was inconvenient for my schoolwork.” I shrugged, a signature smile on my face. “I’m on top of it; I’ve passed all my midterms.”

“Don’t beat around the bush, Aarons. Just give it to me straight.”

I took a deep, shaky breath. “I missed the birthday of the girl I love to play against Spain. I did that because I knew I had to. Soccer is my life. I love the game, and I would do anything for the win. But... she came from a rough previous relationship where she was never first, and with soccer, I can’t put her first. I put her second, chose to come play here, and be here instead of pursuing her. Now... I don’t think she’ll just take me back and we can get back to where we left things off, but I have a chance to prove to her that I can put her first, that she can place her faith in me. And I want to take it. Unfortunately, this chance collides with our friendly game against Germany. But I think I’ve proved myself enough during the camp and the previous friendly, as well as through all my soccer career so far, that I’m a player who can hold his own and that you can rely on.”

“This happens to be the same girl you had an important discussion about during the Soccer Cup final?” Aiden arched a curious brow, and I ducked my head in shame.

“Yeah. Same girl.”

Coach Hitchings let out a long sigh. “So, if I tell you, you will not make the World Cup squad if you don’t play the friendly game?”

I bit into my lower lip, my heart hammering in my chest. I thought I could convince him that he would let me off the hook and still make a decision.

“You are one of the top midfielders we have. I would be crazy not to put you on the team,” Coach went on, noticing my inner turmoil. “But this season you’ve shown your head is your biggest asset and your worst enemy. I need a player who has his

head clear and focused on the game during the World Cup. Can you promise me that if I let you go, you'll be 100% focused?"

Tilting my head, I wanted to nod, but I couldn't predict Ivy's reaction—what she was going to say or how she would respond. All I knew was that I had this chance, and I needed to take it, whatever the outcome.

"No, I can't, because I don't know what will happen. But I can promise you that no matter the outcome, if you put me on that field during any of the World Cup games, I will be present and pull through, just like I did against Spain and during the camp. I was fucking hurting every single day of that camp, dying of heartache, and it didn't impact my game. When it matters, I am there. That's the player I am, and that won't change. The decision is up to you."

IVY

The loud noise and buzzing of runners fueled me with so much energy and happiness that I didn't even care about the little wind we were experiencing. It was a beautiful April day, and I couldn't be happier or prouder that I was about to run my first marathon.

Did I wish it was under different circumstances? Yes.

But the support of my sister, parents, and my girls meant a lot to me. They all scattered all over on the other side of the corridor, and even Liam, Derek, and Maddox came to cheer me on and keep the girls company during the almost five-hour-long event.

My goal was to run it in four and a half hours, hopefully, and with all the training I was confident I could do it. But anything under four hours and forty-five minutes was acceptable for my first time.

I fixed my cute black running skort that Nova got me and checked that my running vest was properly secured, filled with my soft water bottles with electrolytes and some recovery gel and gummies. It was a game changer having male athletes with me through this journey because their supplement knowledge was incredible. I had never tried as many different gels and proteins in my life as I did during the preparation.

It was kind of bittersweet that this journey was ending, but I was ready for some new challenges after I proved to myself that I could do this and anything I set my mind to.

All it took was my self-discipline.

Glancing at the sidelines, I watched as Daisy laughed at something Rosie said, and my heart warmed from seeing the two of them get along so well. All the girls and even the Titan guys welcomed Daisy into the group with open arms. They were just as welcoming and kind to her as they were with me, despite none of us having any Titan connections anymore.

My heart sank a bit as I looked around for Max. My brain knew he wasn't there, as the US National Team was playing Germany in a friendly game. I was planning to listen to the broadcast while running because then it felt like we were running together. It was a silly little thing, but it gave me peace and tricked me into believing Max was by my side when in reality, we were running two very different courses.

Letting out a long sigh, I went through the warm-up exercises I always did and tried to force my brain to focus on the run ahead of me. I closed my eyes during my static stretches, allowing myself to feel the wind on my face, the rocky pavement under my foot, and the endless chatter and noise from the other runners getting ready to take their spots in line.

"Please, all marathon runners, get in line; the race is starting in 10 minutes," the announcement boomed, snapping my eyes open as I quickly stretched out my calves

and headed for the queue.

For some reason, I didn't remember the half-marathon being as busy back in July last year, but maybe I was in a different headspace back then.

I found a spot where there was enough space for me to start, but it wasn't too far back, so I didn't have to overtake that many people in case I ran quicker.

Fixing my braid and making sure it was tucked in tight, I picked up my phone and started the broadcast. The commentator was always the same funny guy, and I loved his bickering with his colleague. Plus, they were always saying positive things about Max, which I loved.

"What a nice sunny morning here at FedEx Field," the guy started.

"Indeed, love seeing our National Team warming up in their blue home colors and assessing the field."

"The team must be shaken quite a bit by their last-minute change in lineup, where NCAA superstar Maximilian Aarons is missing."

"The game they play has Aarons as a centerpiece together with another midfielder, so it will be interesting to see who will fill his shoes."

"Especially since Aarons is replacing Sky McCarthy this season, taking over his iconic number 16, which is far from Aarons' number 8 in NCAA, but having the 16 in the National Team was a big deal."

"Let's hope he gets to keep the number 16 for the World Cup if he makes the final roster."

My heart hammered harder in my chest, and my smartwatch was going crazy with calculating it. My eyes darted around like I expected Max to just appear out of thin air. There must have been a reasonable explanation as to why he wasn't playing for the National Team.

Yet, my poor little fragile heart jumped to the most stupid conclusion ever.

That he probably came to cheer me on.

I shook my head as the five-minute notice sounded and jogged in place, getting my thoughts and heart rate under control. I needed to calm down and not think about Max right now. I had to focus on the run and my breathing.

My back slammed into something behind me, and I quickly jumped to the side, pulling my earplugs out.

"I'm so sorry!" I apologized when I saw I bumped into a guy, but my words disappeared as I stared into familiar chocolate-colored eyes, a lopsided boyish grin, and the messy hair I loved touching.

"No worries at all." He grinned at me, fixing his black workout t-shirt as he stepped next to me. "I'm Max, by the way. Max Aarons."

What was he doing? Why was he here? Why was he introducing himself?

Max extended his hand toward me, waiting for me to take it and shake it.

"I didn't catch your name?" He tilted his head to the side, his grin growing wider as he took in the shock on my face.

"Ivy," I replied, wrapping my fingers around his hand.

Tears spilled from my eyes as realization washed over me, and I barely whispered my name.

“Such a beautiful name for such a beautiful girl,” he said, pulling me closer to him. “But I think Blossom is more fitting for you.”

I was full-on sobbing into his chest as he wrapped his arms around me.

“What are you doing here? What about the National Team? The World Cup? Max...” I asked all my questions at once.

Max kissed the top of my head and shrugged like it was no big deal at all.

“You said you wanted a do-over. There’s only one marathon in California every year that you would sign up for. If I missed the chance to reintroduce myself in the scenario we wanted our relationship to start with, I would have to wait another year when I wasn’t even sure you would still want to run a marathon. I couldn’t risk missing this window of opportunity and giving us the chance to start over fresh.”

“What about the World Cup and the National Team? Are they...?”

“They’re going to be fine. There’s a World Cup every four years; I have plenty of chances to play there if they decide not to take me. But I don’t have a chance to start over with you again. It was now or never, and between playing at the World Cup or being with you... I pick you. A hundred times.”

Emotions ran high in me—from the pre-run adrenaline to seeing Max, through all the things he just sprung on me. I was sobbing, crying, and laughing all at the same time as he hugged me to himself, his calming pine scent surrounding me.

“I can’t believe you’re here! I want to kiss you,” I mumbled into his chest, and I felt

his laugh vibrate through me.

“I’m not sure you’re supposed to kiss strangers you just met, but maybe after we spend four and a half hours together running and getting to know each other... maybe then we can kiss.”

I looked up. “You will seriously run the marathon with me?”

“I would do anything for you, Blossom. Haven’t you figured that out by now?”

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MAX

Playing for the National Team during the World Cup was a completely different feeling. Watching everyone and their mother cheer on our country and fly out to wherever the games took place was incredible. Maybe I was just lucky that after having it held in Qatar in previous years, now it was Mexico, Canada, and the US, so the fans didn't need to fly that far. But still, the support and the atmosphere were intoxicating. Especially knowing my family and friends were all there cheering me on, together with Ivy. Knowing the girl I loved was up in the VIP box with my family and closest friends, wearing my jersey with my name on it, made it way more special than any game before.

Our team was strong, but we had no chances against the World Cup Champions, Spain, despite the friendly game. We all knew it was probably the last time the US was going to play, and my summer break was about to start.

It was bittersweet, walking into a game knowing we would lose, but after the 8-0 Spain vs. Greece game three days ago, we needed a miracle.

Considering their team was made up of players from FC Barcelona, Real Madrid, and Atletico, it was no surprise. Hell, even Coach Hinchings and Coach McCarthy had played with those players before. They were in a completely different league.

As for me, it felt like I was playing against myself. Their midfielders were like me—energetic, with sick footwork and passion. The only difference was they were seventeen. It was mind-blowing.

“Soak this in.” Coach Hitchings patted me on the back as halftime was ending, and I put my water bottle down. “Learn from them. Who knows, maybe one day you’ll play with those guys.”

I offered him a soft smile. “I don’t want to play in Europe. I know, shocker—sue me.”

He let out a laugh. “I wasn’t planning to play for FC Barcelona either. Sky was an LA Galaxy kid too. But once you taste the game in Europe, how different it is—the level, the spirits... it’s addictive.”

“I know.” I nodded as I listened to the crowd. “Hell, I can feel it just by playing against them, but I want to make a difference in American soccer. I mean, never say never, but... I think I want to stay here.”

Coach nodded and clamped me on the shoulder. “Well... based on how this looks, our World Cup run is coming to an end. And... you’ve already made American soccer better... we have never made it to the semi-finals since...”

“1930.” I grinned at him, knowing our soccer history. It was great that we got this far, and I could have made up thousands of motivational speeches about not coming this far to only come this far, but the 3-0 on the scoreboard didn’t look great.

“Exactly.” Aiden nodded. “I gave you a shot, and you exceeded my expectations. Everyone on this team has proved themselves, and I couldn’t be happier with all your performances. But you really stood out. Giving several goal passes—I just wish you’d scored a goal. I think that would have really made this experience unforgettable for you.”

I nodded, as I agreed, but I also knew our strikers were top-notch. There was no need for me to score; they could handle it, and it worked. But I would have liked to have at least one goal to my name—especially against Spain.

“We still have forty-five minutes.” I grinned, walking out to the pitch. “I better make the most of it, and who knows... maybe I’ll surprise us all with a goal.”

“I seem to recall you always knew how to leave with a bang.” Coach smirked. “Try and do that again for us.”

I let out a laugh, and with a quick salute, I jogged out to the field. Glancing up to the viewing box, I immediately found Ivy leaning against the railing and waving at me.

I waved back and sent her some kisses, loving how she looked in my blue jersey—three sizes too big on her, and as usual, she tied it around her waist.

With a wink, I pointed at the goal, then back at her, telling her I would score for her.

She laughed and made a heart shape with her hands.

I grinned as my national teammates clapped me on the back, and our captain said something about the strategy. But my eyes still focused on my girl as she turned toward my parents, my mom giving her a hug, before I looked at Nova, Dex, and Maddox—all three of them laughing, wearing my name on their backs.

How did I get so lucky to have all of them in my life?

IVY

I never got tired of watching Max play, especially when he was playing the best I’d ever seen him. His dedication and passion were visible, and he really stood out to me during the entire game.

“Isn’t that a conflict of interest for you?” I turned toward the girl on my right, Natalie Hitchings. She was Coach Hitching’s daughter, sitting there with her boyfriend, Gabriel, and her mother, Hazel. She played for FC Barcelona’s Women’s Team and

had lived in Spain for most of her life.

“Not really,” she replied, not taking her eyes off the game, while her boyfriend did glance in my direction. “I’m American. Just because I was born in Barcelona, lived there for eighteen years, and now I live there again...”

“You’re totally Spanish,” Gabriel muttered with a grin. “She’s Spanish, and she’s low-key rooting them on.”

“Not low-key at all,” Natalie laughed. “Gosh, Perez is so good.”

“That’s the guy who plays for FC Barcelona,” Maddox informed me, pointing at number eleven.

“Got it. I feel like Natalie knows everyone.”

“I do,” she grinned. “On both teams. It’s really stressful. I mean... the US has no chance anymore. Unless your superstar boyfriend wants to score four more goals. Which would be impressive, but highly unlikely. I’d give him 54% chances at a goal if he gets past their defense.”

I almost let my jaw drop from her assessment as I watched the red and blue players run on the field. Clearly, I needed to polish my soccer knowledge.

Exchanging a look with Natalie’s boyfriend, I leaned against Nova. “I really hope he manages to score.”

“He will.” Nova squeezed my hand. “How are you feeling about the whole Ander issue?”

Maddox and Dex both glanced at me as I took a deep breath, painfully aware of Max’s parents looking at me too. Daisy transferred to Hillview for the rest of her

college career and told the school board at Westpoint everything Ander did to her and me. She had more courage than me in speaking up and making her voice heard. And I was proud of her. The therapy she was going to was paying off. As for Ander, his soccer scholarship was revoked, and he was removed from the team after I had to give a statement to the school too.

“He got what he deserved.” I shrugged. “I kind of feel bad, but Max said I only feel bad because I’m a decent human being.”

“Which is code for you shouldn’t give a shit,” Maddox muttered.

“It’s not like he ever cared,” Derek agreed. “If it was the opposite, he would have bragged about kicking you out.”

I nodded, but part of me still felt guilty over him losing soccer. I knew it meant a lot to him, but after what he did to Derek, he was living on borrowed time.

“It feels good knowing I won’t have to see him again next year,” I admitted with a smile.

“You can always transfer.” Nova hugged me. “I would love that.”

“Doesn’t make a difference for you,” I reminded her, as we were in different majors.

She just lifted a shoulder when Derek leaned over. “What about Kaia? Did you girls make up?”

I grimaced. “Kaia called me briefly, apologizing and telling me she broke things off with Tristan, but us being friends again is something we both need to work on, and I promised her that come next school year, we will do our best to leave all the negativity of the previous year behind. But I’m not going to blindly trust her.”

Derek nodded, a pensive expression on his face. “Seems fair.”

I offered him a soft smile, and we both watched the field, catching the way Max’s eyes narrowed at the ball and how his footwork caught it.

It was easier to follow soccer when Max had the ball, and I was looking at the exact same thing. Just the ball rolling in front of Max and his Nike shoes as they ran across the field.

“Holy shit.” Dex took a deep breath and almost pushed me over as he leaned against the railing.

“How the hell did he do that?” Natalie followed, both of them staring.

Glancing around the field, I noticed Max was surrounded by all red players, breaking through their defense.

“He can’t hesitate,” Maddox said, slamming his fist on the rail in front of us.

Nova and I both jumped up, and we watched with bated breath as Max pivoted with the ball, breaking away from the Spanish players.

“He needs to score,” Derek said, pointing at the opening only people with soccer knowledge saw. All I saw was a sea of players and an impossible positioning.

Max must have come to the same conclusion, as he did some fancy trick with the ball, pretending to shoot it away, but in the last moment, he caught it with the top of his foot and let the ball fly in the opposite direction.

The entire stadium sucked in a deep breath, waiting for the pass between the goalie’s extended arms and into the net.

I've never screamed so loud in my life as when I saw Max's serious, focused face light up, the pressure lifting off him as he pumped his fist in the air and celebrated the goal. It was his first goal during the World Cup and the last one for a while, but watching his new teammates congratulate him and seeing Coach Hitchings' proud face light up, I knew he was exactly where he was supposed to be, and it was all worth it.

All the late-night phone calls, the early morning practices, the endless text messages we exchanged, and the fact that I hadn't seen him properly since May had put a strain on our relationship.

Around me, everyone screamed and celebrated. The way the stadium roared with noise felt like the US had just made it into the finals when, in reality, they lost. But they went out with a bang.

My eyes remained glued to Max, and within seconds, he turned to look at me too, a wide grin on his face as he blinked up against the bright sunlight.

"I love you," he mouthed without shame, not caring that people would make a meme of him for saying that.

But through all the practices, media tours, and games, I knew that I always came first to him. He made time to call me, text me, and send me flowers. And what was most important, he showed up for me when it mattered.

Soccer was his career and his first love, but I was his future.

The End