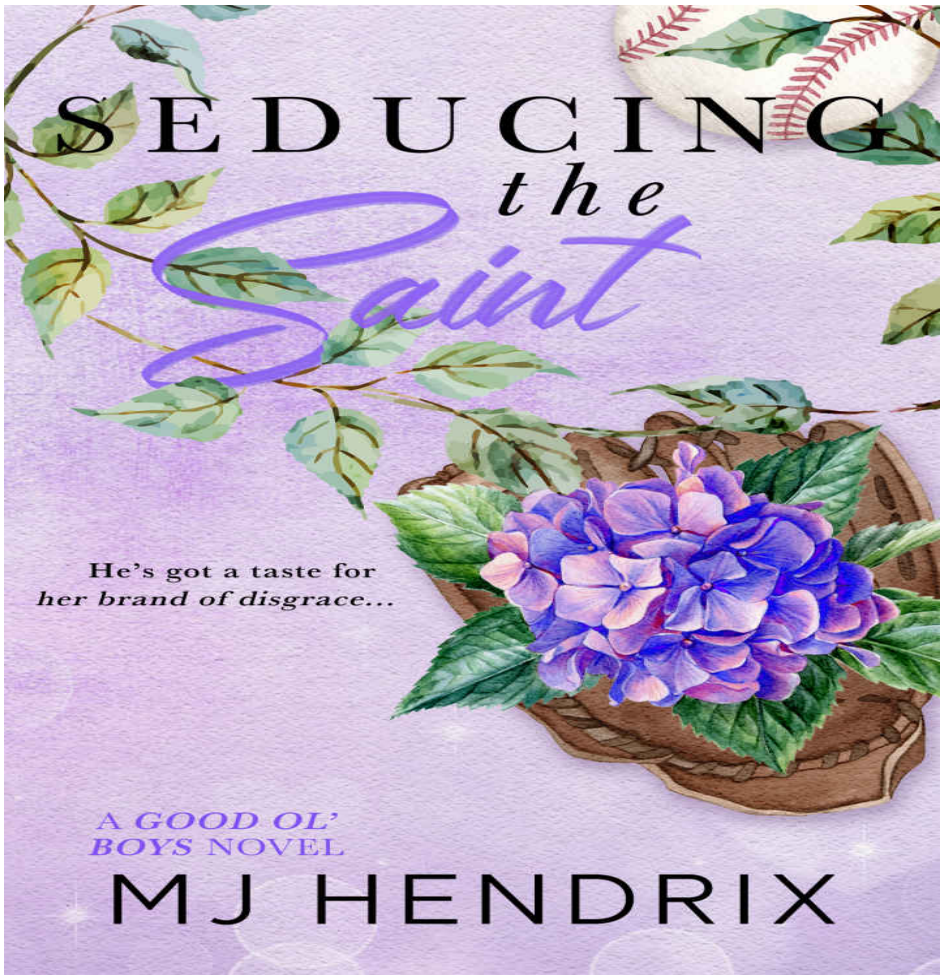
SEDUCING *the* Saint

He's got a taste for
her brand of disgrace...

A *GOOD OL' BOYS* NOVEL

MJ HENDRIX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seducing the saint

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS COLLEGE SPORTS ROMANCE

GOOD OL' BOYS

BOOK 3

MJ HENDRIX

MJ HENDRIX PUBLISHING LTD CO.

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about this book

I hate Silas Saint.

But we weren't always enemies … not even close.

Now, he's a star D1 college baseball pitcher, bound for the major leagues.

We were best friends growing up, but I ran like hell after the scandal—ghosted him, actually.

I guess his taste has changed from trailer park to two-faced blonde sorority girls.

I was perfectly fine with ignoring his existence before I was offered a job I couldn't refuse. If I want my school paid for, I'm stuck working for the head baseball coach.

Which means I'm forced to watch Silas sweat through batting practice and strike out every opponent he's up against. If he'd stop glaring at me from across the cafeteria, maybe I would stop flirting with everyone on the team except for him.

I can't say why I hate him—it's a big, dirty secret. A secret Silas CANNOT find out.

A scandal.

The best word to describe my life up to this point is *scandalous.*

And the scandal part started with a Saint.

good ol' boys series

Falling for Temptation
Seeing Double
Seducing the Saint

To the girls who have always had to love on defense.

saint *[seynt]*
noun
certain persons of exceptional holiness of life.
a person of great holiness, virtue, or benevolence.

scandal *[skan-dl]*
noun
damage to reputation; public disgrace.
defamatory talk; malicious gossip.
a person whose conduct brings disgrace or offense.

playlist

Listen on Spotify.

Something in the Orange by Zach Bryan
Locksmith by Sadie Jean
Whole Damn Town by Turnpike Troubadours
You All Over Me by Taylor Swift, featuring Maren Morris
I'd Hate Me Too by Christina Sikora
She Got the Best of Me by Luke Combs
Remember That Night? by Sara Kays
You Should Probably Leave by Chris Stapleton
This Is Me Trying by Taylor Swift
Giving You Up (Acoustic) by Kameron Marlowe
Liquor Store on Mars by Kelsy Karter & the Heroines
Love Me Anyway by P!nk, featuring Chris Stapleton
Older by Sasha Alex Sloan
Anyone by Justin Bieber
Wildcard by Miley Cyrus

ONE

silas

WHEN A GIRL DANCES on a table at a college party filled with fraternity brothers and over half the D1 baseball team, I assume three things about her.

Number one: she's addicted to attention; most likely thrives off of it.

Number two: she's drunk, high, or both.

Number three: she's not my type.

I'm not necessarily looking for female companionship right now, but if I met the right girl, I wouldn't be opposed to a relationship. Between my classes and being a pitcher for the Ole Tex University baseball team, my schedule is jam-packed. If someone were to grab my attention, she'd have to be pretty special.

"Saint, you want a beer?" my friend Cole Whitlock, the catcher for the team, shouts at me over the shitty rap music and the laughter of drunk sorority girls and bat bunnies.

"Yeah, something dark," I reply.

I don't drink often, but it's Saturday night, and practice isn't until Monday afternoon. I need to relax for once and give the old college experience a real try.

"Damn, who is that?" Cole approaches me with two cans of Coors Light, handing me one.

They must not have anything darker than this piss.

I don't know who he's talking about. I also don't care. Cole can't keep it in his pants. Hell, most of the team can't. I'm the only virgin that I know of, but none of my teammates know that little detail about their starting pitcher. I was raised in a small, tight-knit community that valued purity.

My father is the pastor of the quaint white church we attended anytime the doors were opened growing up. Above all, purity is his number one sermon topic. Purity of the mind, the body, and the intentions for everything we do.

I lift the beer up to my lips for another sip, knowing it would bring a reprimand down on my head if he knew.

"I love when we get new transfers every semester. It's like a wave of fresh meat to look forward to that you haven't somehow pissed off by not liking their Instagram pictures or for texting their friends."

I take another gulp of the carbonated drink. "Maybe you should try not talking to more than one girl at once."

Cole isn't paying any attention to me. I follow his line of sight as the group of our freshman players start to chant near the back of the fraternity house.

"Take it off! Take it off! Take it off!" Their drinks are raised in the air as they cheer on the girl dancing on the beer pong table.

When I first got here, there was a cluster of women up there together, but now, the only one left is a brunette with long, wavy hair in a purple miniskirt and with a white bandana tied around her chest as a shirt. Her face is covered by her hair, and I can tell from twenty feet away that she's got the body of a dancer. I try to recall the cheer team girls who aren't blonde, but I come up blank.

For a moment, I'm just as mesmerized by her as the rest of the crowd is. She's round in all the right places and slim in her waist and limbs. I can't determine her exact height, but she's on the shorter side. I'm six-three. The girls I usually like are always pocket-sized.

The way she moves is captivating, like not a soul watching matters. Hundreds of eyes are enjoying the view, but she doesn't miss a beat. Her arms are stretched up above her for a moment before she reaches back down to toy with the hem of her white bandana shirt, face turned down toward her thigh-high black boots.

"Someone get that girl a pole!" Cole yells in the girl's direction.

She whips her head up, hair flipping out of her face as she turns to look at us.

"Holy shit." Recognition flashes through the deepest part of my memory.

Scarlett.

We make eye contact. Her body freezes for a moment before a breathtaking smile cuts across her flawless face. She hops off of the table. One of the guys approaches her, but she ignores him. Each of her steps causes my heart rate to hammer louder in my ears. She's always had that runway walk, hips swaying.

She is *the* beauty standard in my mind. Every girl I come into contact with is subconsciously measured up to Scarlett. None of their lips are quite as full. Their eyes are never as captivating. Hers are pale gray, like a storm rolling in during the middle of the day.

Some girls have pretty blonde hair or fiery red, but it just never has the same luster and appeal that Scar's rich brown has. I want to run my fingers through it while I drift off to sleep. I chalk it up to the fact that she was the prettiest girl I knew growing up, and young boys who are kept away from most of society only have so much to go off of when puberty hits and testosterone levels soar.

You're pathetic. Stop it. Every guy wants that. Also, you hate her. Because she's a terrible person.

She hates you even more.

My childhood crush is now right in front of me, reminding me of our height difference. I'm over a foot taller than her five-two frame. The last time I saw her, I was only six foot. The extra three inches I've grown since then have me towering over her even more.

"Someone's growth is still stunted." The words pour out of my mouth involuntarily.

Just as I expected, her stormy eyes grow darker. She pops a hip out, crossing her arms over her ample chest. She has to tilt her chin up to look me in the eye.

"Someone still can't help but notice every little thing about me." A smirk touches her full pink lips.

That familiar little burst of repulsion seeps over me.

Yes, I do still hate her. It's normal to feel attraction toward a walking, talking scandal.

I widen my stance and give her my best shit-eating grin. "That's what happens when you insist on being the center of attention everywhere you go."

She tilts her head to the side. "Can't help that I'm popular."

I fight the urge to let my eyes roam over her very *grown-up* body. Her clothes are as skintight as ever. I can still hear my mother's voice disapproving of the formfitting outfits Scarlett and her mother used to wear to church. It was impossible not to stare at her back then, but I've been on a college campus, pretty girls roaming everywhere, for a year and a half. My self-control is much stronger now.

But, damn, do I wanna study how well she's filled out since I saw her last. She was only fourteen, and I know from my brief glimpse of her up on the table that even though she's still short, she's all woman now.

A voice speaks from my left. "You two know each other?"

I forgot Cole was standing right beside me. Scarlett's eyes stare into mine for another split second before she rotates her gaze to Cole's. Then, she curves her lips up at him, her smile the perfect balance of flirtation and seduction. She reaches a hand out, but instead of shaking the one he stretches toward her, she grabs his beer can. She tilts it back, gulping the half-full can down in one swig.

"Ah, it looks like your drink is empty, and so is mine. Go fetch."

Cole gapes at her before smiling and walking toward the kitchen. "Anything for you, beautiful."

I shake my head. "Still bossing people around like they're your little slaves. Have you ever considered simply saying please?"

"Please … stop talking to me like we're still friends."

I bark a laugh. "You and I were *never* friends."

I take another drink before letting myself look down at her. We both know it's a lie.

Her smile is gone. She blinks at me slowly before turning her body slightly away. She reaches a hand up to flip her hair over to the side. I catch a whiff of her coconut shampoo, the familiar scent jerking me back to the first time I realized how deep my obsession with her hair was. I was twelve years old, and I wrote an entire research paper about the health benefits of coconut oil.

My mom asked me, "Why coconuts?" and I had to lie and say that it was because I liked the beach so much.

It's completely normal to still feel this way. Her hair could be on the cover of a magazine.

"What are you doing here?" I don't intend to sound irritated, but I'm mad at myself for letting her have this effect on me when we haven't seen

each other in almost five years.

The last time I heard from her—four years ago—she made her opinion of me abundantly clear.

She must be visiting my roommate, Dan, or another friend at Ole Tex University. We all grew up together, and she and Dan were good friends. At one point, he even liked her when we were kids.

She and Dan had better not still have a thing.

I resist the urge to dig my phone out of my pocket and text him about it right now. She spins around, perfect grin back in its place.

"I go here now. You got a problem with that, Saint?" She arches a dark brow, studying my reaction.

The muscles in my abdomen contract like I took a punch to the stomach.

How am I going to avoid her now?

TWO

scarlett

TO NO SURPRISE, Silas doesn't outwardly react to my news. I had my suspicions that he might be playing ball here, but I wasn't sure until we made eye contact across the room. He always wanted to play college baseball, and the Mustangs were his top choice.

I finally agreed to transfer to Ole Tex for the spring semester a few weeks ago. The decision was technically made by my mother's newest husband, who offered to pay for my schooling if I attend the college of his favorite D1 baseball team. Apparently, the coach here is one of his old college buddies and teammates.

"Don't sweat it, PK. I'm sure we'll barely see each other." I pat his arm in a way I hope he perceives as sarcastic comfort. I didn't expect his bicep to feel like the log of a tree.

Holy shit, he got big.

The boy I grew up with, who I threw dirt clods at every time I caught him staring at me, is now a star college athlete, and he has the muscles that go with the title.

Don't think about what he looks like underneath his long-sleeved Mustangs baseball Dri-Fit shirt …

Too late. Now, I'm picturing it. The shoulders that belonged to the slim teenage boy I grew up with have filled out deliciously. Silas was always the hot one back home, and it appears nothing has changed. He's so tall now, towering above me in a way that makes me feel petite.

Around his neck, he has a silver chain with a tiny cross at the end of it, which I've never seen before. He's wearing a white baseball cap, but his wavy dirty-blonde hair and pale-green eyes haven't changed at all. His jawline is sharper now, and he no longer looks innocent. A flood of

memories rushed through me when I saw him from across the room, but now, as I stand next to him, it's like my pubescent sexual awakening is happening all over again.

He was the first boy I remember wanting to kiss.

But that was before. Now, I'd rather fuck with his friend to get a reaction out of him.

Speak of the devil …

The one who could have potentially spiked my drink returns with two beers.

"Name?"

He grins like they always do when they spy a challenge. Some men love to be treated like shit.

"Cole, catcher."

"Catcher Cole?" I take the beer, glad to see it's not opened yet.

"Ha-ha. You can call me whatever you want, babe." He winks at me, clearly letting his eyes roam over my body without trying to hide it.

Ew.

"Well, you can't call me whatever you want. Scarlett."

Cole looks from me to Silas. "So, how do y'all know each other?"

I smirk, still looking at Cole. "PK's obsession with me dates back to the Stone Age. Gave him his first boner, actually."

Silas doesn't miss a beat. "I think it's cute how you keep a mental record of my boners."

Cole furrows his brow. "What does PK stand for?"

"Preacher's Kid," Silas and I say in unison.

I look up at him, my first crush, experiencing a tiny moment of déjà vu. It was a cold night in the small town of Bonnet Valley, Texas, where we grew up, and we were talking to an out-of-towner who asked why I called Silas PK.

"Because he's the preacher's kid, and he acts like he's better than everyone."

PK gaped at me, only fourteen but towering above me already. "I don't act like that. You act like what people think doesn't matter at all."

I shrugged. "It doesn't. What they think doesn't matter one bit."

The newcomer back then reacted the same way that Cole does now. “Wow, you two have a complicated … thing going on.”

Silas speaks at the same time as me again. “No.”

“Absolutely not.” I throw my head back and laugh. “I mean, he wishes, but no. We’re what you would call enemies.”

I watch his Adam’s apple bob in his neck as Silas chugs the rest of his beer before crushing the can in his big hand.

“Nah, we’re not enemies. We’re not anything.”

My neck heats as his broad shoulders turn around, and he walks away from me, leaving me to deal with his friend. I should have been the one to exit the scene first. Now, he’ll feel like he’s the one on top in our fucked-up dynamic.

Not anything, my ass. How dare he pretend like our history was nothing just to sound cool in front of his teammate.

Two can play this game.

I turn back to Cole, consciously lowering my heart rate and putting on the invisible mask I wear around most people. “Now that we’re *finally* alone, why don’t you tell me how pretty you think I am?”

He grins like I expected, reaching out to touch my upper arm with his fingertips. I force myself not to flinch at the unwelcome contact. Instead, I smile.

“You know you’re hot as fuck. Has a day ever gone by that you weren’t told that?”

I shake my head slowly before sipping the nasty beer. I have no desire to continue the conversation with him, but considering Silas could be in the room still, I decide to stick it out.

“It never gets old. How am I supposed to meet new people if you keep me over here in this corner, all to yourself?”

He smiles, tightening his hand around my arm. “Well, you’re all mine right now. Why would I want to share you?”

My skin crawls at his words, but again, I force a smile. “Better not get used to that feeling. It won’t last.”

He laughs, stepping closer to me. I can smell his faint body odor mixed with too much cologne.

“Why? You don’t want to date a baseball player?”

Not you.

"Been there, done that. I don't want to date anyone."

He licks his lips while staring at mine. My blood cools, and I take a small step back from him.

"I get that. We're hot, young college students. It's all about having fun in the moment." He looks around before leaning close to my ear. "I'm friends with the guys who live here. You wanna go upstairs, where it's quieter, so we can get to know each other better?"

Hell no.

I push him away from me. "I'm good. I'm going to find my friend."

He doesn't have to know I haven't made any friends here yet. I only ended up at this party because I was walking to my dorm room and a group of pledges invited me.

"Meet a nice girl. Make a friend. Always have a female ally at a party." My mother's words echo in my mind.

She's finally doing better in life. At least, she's been sober for five years. She had already quit drinking and trying to turn her life around when they met, but most of her new leaf is all thanks to Dave, my stepdad. I don't hate Dave. He's great for her. But it's slightly annoying that she waited to stop partying and sleeping around until I was entering high school. My chaotic childhood was the epitome of instability. She's always loved me, but emotionally, she was rarely there. We moved from one boyfriend's house to the next. I don't even remember having my own room most of the time, just a place on a strange, new sofa.

I spot a girl with curly caramel hair hanging out in the corner. She's by herself, but she doesn't look lonely. She's reading a book, looking down at the pages and ignoring everyone.

I walk up to her, plopping down on the dingy love seat. "Whatcha reading?"

She looks up at me, dark eyes taking me in quickly before she half smiles. "It's a mafia romance."

She tilts the book up to show me the cover with a nice, glossy man chest.

I smile back at her, immediately knowing we could be friends. "I got most of my sex education from those books, all dusty on the library bookshelf. I always picked the ones that were the most worn, figuring they were the most explicit. I was right."

She cackles. “My mother never uttered a word about the deed, but whenever we went to the library, I would sneak one and read it with a bigger book covering it up.”

I laugh at her response. I try not to get my hopes too high that this could be a real friendship. It’s hard for me to get along with some people. Too many girls struggle with envy.

“Hey, uh … you should give me your number so we can get lunch one day. My name is Lucy.” She stretches her hand out, holding her phone.

I take it, entering my number and texting myself from it. “I’m Scarlett. Do you live on campus?”

Lucy nods. “Yeah, in the dorms. My dad is a professor. You?”

“Yeah, I’m in Boomer Hall.”

She nods. “I’m right next to it in Fitz. Are you a freshman?”

I nod. “Yes, I transferred this semester. My stepdad has a hard-on for the baseball team.”

Lucy rolls her eyes. “Don’t they all? It’s the entire identity of half the dads. I’ve always loved that mine is more on the academia side.”

The little familiar sting of jealousy pinches me. I’ve never known my biological father. My mom told me that he was a loser who abandoned us. She dropped out of high school before her baby belly was showing. She gave birth to me at sixteen.

I plaster a smile on my face. “Yeah, that’s cool. My stepdad got me a job on campus. I think I’ll be working with the team some of the time, but hopefully not much.”

Lucy looks over at the group who was chanting at me while I danced on the table. “Oh, yeah? What’s the job?”

I shrug. “Don’t know. Dave is old college besties with the coach, so he said it has something to do with athletics, but I never got a description or anything. I start on Monday.”

Lucy stands up. “We should ditch this party and go get some ice cream. You down?”

I join her, smiling as she loops her arm through mine. “Sure.”

I just made a friend.

THREE

silas

MY MONDAY AFTERNOON political science class is giving me a headache. There are very few things worse than trying to focus on something that's extremely boring when someone very *not* boring is occupying your thoughts.

Scarlett Cohen, for instance, is much more thought-captivating than the difference between a monarchy and a democracy. Scarlett's hair alone is a more captivating thought than anything Professor McCutchen will ever teach from the front of this classroom. I shake my head, trying to force my attention back to the topic at hand.

"I go here now."

The smirk on her red lipstick-stained lips is burned into my brain.

Is she happy she's going here now because I'm here? Does she want to mess with me, maybe ruin my life a little bit?

I shift in my seat, pressing my elbows into the desk. There are few people in the world I despise more than Scarlett Cohen. Last time we communicated, she told me to fuck off and never speak to her again.

And I haven't.

The last time we spoke, before the party last weekend, was when I was sixteen. She completely shattered my heart. At that time, we hadn't seen each other in person in a year, but we had communicated through letters, email, and the occasional late-night phone call after I was finally able to buy myself a phone. My parents never allowed me to have a cell phone, so I had to hide the cheap flip phone from the gas station in the back of my T-shirt drawer. To this day, they don't know about it.

They say you never forget your first heartbreak. I was hoping I'd never have to see the source of mine in the flesh again. It's typical of Scar to show

up in my realm, on my campus, right when the best season of my career is looming on the horizon.

I cannot lose focus.

"That's why we are blessed to live in a democracy and not a monarchy." Professor McCutchen's voice booms across the classroom.

I sit up straighter, gritting my teeth as I press too hard on the keys of my laptop. I do my best to focus on taking notes for the next ten minutes until my phone vibrates in my pocket.

I pull it out to see a text from one of my best friends since childhood, Dan.

Did you know Scarlett Cohen is going to Ole Tex now?

I shove the device down into my backpack.

Right when I was focusing on the damn lecture …

Are Dan and Scarlett going to hang out now?

While we were growing up, he had a little crush on her for a while. They were each other's first kiss. I try not to think about that for too long.

Inadvertently, my thoughts drift back to seeing her for the first time in almost five years two days ago. I can't stop reminiscing about her facial expressions, specifically the way she peered up at me with her stormy-gray eyes, slightly larger than usual and the only part of her that had an ounce of innocence to them. The rest of her was pure sin.

And she knows it.

I extract my phone from my backpack, tapping out a quick reply to Dan.

Yeah, I heard. Have you talked to her?

My leg bounces impatiently for three minutes, which feels more like thirty, before the screen lights up with a response.

Yes. I saw her in the cafeteria. Mamacita sure grew up, didn't she? I guess she's 19 now.

The temperature of my blood rises instantly. Her birthday is January fourth, so she turned nineteen right before the semester started.

Remain calm. He's your friend. He's a very, very good friend.

Just when I think I won't slam my fist down on the desk, another text comes in.

I invited her over to our apartment for a drink tonight.

"The bathroom is disgusting. You're just going to invite a girl over and not clean it first?" I'm pulling Lysol wipes out of a plastic container to disinfect the sink.

Dan is leaning up against it, styling his hair like it's any other Monday night. "What's with you, Saint? It's Scarlett. We grew up with her. It's like having my cousin over."

My brows come together as I study him in the mirror.

He continues to mess with his hair for a few seconds before looking up at me with a pinch in his forehead. "What?"

He doesn't like her?

I want to ask what his intentions are, but that would sound ridiculous. Also, I don't give a shit.

I don't want to have to see her around here all the damn time.

Play it cool. As far as Scarlett is concerned, you're apathetic and indifferent. If he finds out you hate her, he'll want to know why.

I shrug. "Nothing, just think it's … awkward to have a chick over without cleaning up first."

He's motionless beside me as I continue to wipe down the sink, which is sprinkled with the little beard hairs from Dan trimming his face. His bathroom connects to the main area for guests to use.

I finally look back up. "What?"

He smirks, shaking his head. "Nothing, Saint. You hanging out?"

I decide that I might as well clean the whole damn bathroom while I'm at it, moving over to the toilet. "Yeah, I guess. Might have one beer. Got practice."

Dan slaps me on the shoulder with the universal bro language that says, *Sure, buddy, if you say so.*

A knock sounds on the door of the two-bedroom apartment he and I share. Dan moves to open the door. My chest thumps like the sound of his footsteps. I quickly finish cleaning up the bathroom, washing my hands before scooping up the soiled towels on my way to the laundry closet.

“A man who does laundry? The women of Ole Tex must be powerless to resist him.” An alluring female voice speaks from the kitchen, right beside the front entryway.

I look up slowly, never quite prepared for the sight of her.

“Sup, Scar.” My cheeks heat. “I-I mean, Scarlett.”

Four years ago, I swore to never use that term in regard to her again.

She blinks at me, tilting her heart-shaped face slightly to the right. Her dark hair is pulled back in a high ponytail. She’s in an oversize black hoodie that says, *Girls just wanna have FUNdamental human rights*. I can’t tell if she has shorts on, but I’m assuming she does and they’re just tiny.

She turns to Dan. “So, good ol’ farmer Dan is a drinker now?”

I continue walking toward the laundry closet down the hall. My chest is tight as I hear them catching up and the beer cans popping open.

I need to protect Dan. He’s a little gullible when it comes to women, and he has no idea of the torment she’s capable of causing.

“I swear, last time I saw you was that day you told my mom that you might be having a baby with a famous country singer, and she forbade us from ever talking to you again. Adam was worried about you, but I wanted to know the story of how you’d snuck into the VIP part of the stage,” Dan says.

Scarlett laughs as I throw the towels into the washer.

“My mom said we were leaving and never coming back, so I decided to go out with a bang. I was still a virgin, actually.”

Keyword: was.

I feel nauseated out of nowhere. I look around for a container to vomit into as my stomach churns.

Dan chuckles. “I figured. So, how did high school go for you? I’m so glad you transferred! You were always a hell of a—”

They must walk out of the kitchen because their voices drift off. I dump detergent into the machine without measuring it, slam the lid down, and push Start. Walking back into the main area, I see that they’ve moved to sit on the sofa. I grab a beer from the fridge before joining them.

“Yes, Danny, I’m happy to be here too. Stepdaddy is footing the bill, so I’m making the best of it.” She turns to face me as I sit on the armchair across from the sofa.

My jaw is tense, and I force myself to relax it as she focuses those eyes on me. The room feels stiff and a little overheated.

“Have you heard what a big deal Saint is on campus?” Dan says with a genuine smile. “Gotta say, it sure is fun living with the guy every sorority girl wants to suck off.”

I scoff. “Not true.” I take a swig of my beer. “They wanna suck you off too.”

Scarlett crisscrosses her legs, and I see now that she’s wearing white spandex shorts. “Saint belongs with a stuck-up sorority girl.”

Dan snickers. My skin prickles with irritation.

“It’s just like you to say something so sweet right in front of my face.” My voice drips with sarcasm as I take another sip of my drink.

Just as I expected, she smiles that wide, devilish grin that makes the front of my sweats feel tighter.

If you get hard from her smiling at you after you said something mean, you’re a fucking loser.

“I only speak the truth. With that perfect platinum hair, little plaid skirt, and daddy’s plastic card, they have the whole fake good-girl vibe down. Popular, perfect grades, team players, et cetera. What more could Daddy and Mommy Saint want for their little PK?” She says it all in a casual, relaxed tone, like she’s describing the weather this weekend.

Dan coughs into his fist. “That’s a bit of an exaggeration. They’re not all good girls, and most of them have shitty grades, it seems like.”

Scarlett barks out a laugh. “That’s my point. It’s a charade, but they play the part well enough for *the Saint Slugger*.”

I sit up straighter, sick of them talking about me like I’m not sitting six feet away from them in our tiny living room.

“I don’t know why y’all think that’s the kind of girl I wanna be with. I’ve never dated a sorority girl.”

Dan throws his hands up. “Whoa, I never said sorority girls were your type, but while we’re on the subject, I know you were talking to Adeline Sage for a while last semester. She’s, like, the president of one of them—Alpha Chi maybe?” He shrugs like it doesn’t really matter because they’re all the same to us.

My eyes shoot up to see Scarlett’s darken for a split second.

Interesting ...

“But, yeah, we talked for a bit. I like blondes.” I recline back against the chair, carefully counting to five before looking at her again.

She's on her phone, ignoring me. The screen casts a blue light on her face, and I take a moment to study her pouty, rose-colored lips. It's unbelievable how one square inch of a person could occupy so many of my thoughts for the entire day.

"I always thought you liked brunettes." My roommate kicks his feet up onto the rickety, old coffee table. His eyes are also on his phone. "Hey, Scarlett, what's your Snapchat?"

"Why would you think that?" I ask him.

Scarlett takes his phone to add herself instead of saying it out loud.

Does she not want me to have it?

I smile at the thought. *Probably not.*

Dan looks up at me with his brow raised while Scarlett has his phone. He points at her, like I'm supposed to know what he's trying to communicate with a look and point.

"Well, you always liked brunettes … before."

Her eyes are on me again as she returns Dan's phone to him. Her face is neutral, but I know her well enough to know she wants to hear my response.

"Well, people grow up, don't they?" I stand up and walk back to my room, shutting the door behind me a little harder than necessary.

I can get through this. I just need to avoid being around her. She's too pretty for her own good.

FOUR

scarlett

IT'S my first day at my new job. I don't know what to expect of my duties, only that it's something for the athletic department. My best guess is that I'll be in some back office, entering random data or submitting grades for scholarships. My mother firmly scolded me on the phone for about an hour last night after I got home from Dan and Silas's apartment.

"If you screw this up in true Scarlett fashion, I don't know if Dave will be able to bail you out. This job is a blessing, *honey. I want you to have a better life than I did. Do you want to go through what your mother did for all those years?"*

She's incessantly putting her past on my shoulders as this ominous warning to "be good."

The door to the office I was told to wait in opens with a creak.

"Miss Cohen? I'm Coach Simmers. Nice to meet you, young lady." The man is huge, barrel chested, and red skinned, like he bakes in the sun for hours on end.

He extends his right hand, removing his sunglasses with his left. I stand and take his callous hand in mine, shaking it.

A practiced smile forms on my lips. "Yes, sir. My name is Scarlett. Glad to meet you too."

He takes me in briefly. I'm wearing black skinny jeans and a button-down white shirt, which almost feels like a straitjacket. I think the seams would rip open if I raised my arms too high. My hair is in loose waves around my shoulders.

"You sure aren't who I would choose for an equipment manager." He scratches his head. His brow furrows, and he exhales. "I guess I promised Dave, though, didn't I? Listen, honey, this team is all guys, and the

coaching staff this year is too. You'll be the only female around." He smiles warmly.

Equipment manager?

I'm not sure exactly what he's getting at, but I know I need this job for Dave to keep paying for my school. I grin up at the coach. "Oh, I'm a tomboy through and through. You can stick a baseball cap on me if you want to."

He tosses his head back in a laugh. "No need for that unless you wanna protect your face from the sun. We'll be outside a lot for games and practices. You familiar with the duties?"

I blink at him, slowly shaking my head. "I am not. I was just told to report here to you, sir. I'll be working outside?"

Surely, he doesn't mean baseball games and practices …

He takes a seat behind his desk, motioning for me to as well, so I do. He removes his baseball cap to reveal a sweaty, bald head that's every bit as red as his face.

"Yep. I'm the head baseball coach, and you will be my equipment manager. You gotta help me whip these boys into shape before the season starts in February. You pick up baseballs, load the pitching machine, get extra water when we need it, come to the out-of-town games—basically, you're my right-hand gal."

I get to work around the sweaty baseball players all day? Oh, hell yes.

A vision of Silas Saint's face darkening when he learns about my unavoidable proximity brings a surge of pleasure and nerves through my belly. The opportunity to mess up his perfect little baseball star life is right before me, on a silver platter no less.

Coach smiles again, and I like the way his skin crinkles around his eyes. He looks at me in a way men rarely ever do … fatherly.

I shift in the leather chair. "Well, I'm down for whatever you need, Coach. Put me to work."

He smiles, standing up and coming around the desk. I stand next to him, barely reaching the top of his abdomen. He must be over six-five.

"Well, you will need to wear something more fitting for the job. That white shirt will get dirt all over it. Lemme see if I can find you an old practice jersey lying around somewhere."

He motions for me to follow him out of the office and into the hallway. The walls are lined with photographs, some in black-and-white ink, from

the teams who played for Ole Tex years ago.

"Are you in any of these?" I ask.

Coach doesn't answer right away, and I wonder if he heard me. Maybe he has hearing loss. I'm about to ask again when he stops in his tracks, turning to a photograph.

"This here is a much younger and slimmer Baron Simmers, starting pitcher from '88 through '92. That ugly mug kneeling right beside me is Dave Harlen." He points to two college-aged boys with big smiles, dressed in white uniforms.

"Wow, Dave has hair."

Coach Simmers barks out a boisterous laugh. "He sure did. Hey, that reminds me of something we need to talk about."

He turns to me, and his face suddenly turns somber, smile gone. "If any of these boys, and I mean, any of them—hell, I don't give a shit if they're my starting lineup—ever lays a hand on you or even goes so far as to make you feel uncomfortable with unwelcome advances"—his blue eyes are lasered into mine, and I can tell he means every word—"you come to me immediately. Because they'll be off my team in the next second. Don't you ever let that shit slide. You hear me? I mean it. I don't tolerate that kind of behavior."

I don't know how to respond, and I'm afraid that my voice will crack with emotion if I speak, so I simply nod. Actual tears are gathering behind my eyes, and the words *daddy issues* float through my brain. I've never experienced a man's genuine protection and concern for my well-being like this.

He relaxes a bit, forming a half smile. "Okay, good. Anyone gives you a lick of shit, I wanna know about it ASAP. Now, let's get you that jersey."

I'm relieved when he leads me back to a room with a plaque on the door that says *Baseball Equipment*. My unwelcome emotions are shoved back to the dark corner of my heart, where I like to keep them.

"You'll get a badge with a lanyard pretty soon. That way, if anyone sees you back here, they'll know you're meant to be here." He grabs a faded royal-blue-and-white jersey off of a hanger. "Here, this one is an extra small."

I reach for it, taking it from his hand. It's still going to be huge on me, but it's definitely better than the button-down.

“You can just keep that one. I’ll get you a couple more Mustangs T-shirts to wear too. Make sure you wear athletic shoes too. It’s chilly today, so you can wear that jacket if you need to. You might get sweaty sometimes, though.”

I’ve been holding my old puffer coat since I took it off in the office. Late January in Texas is hit or miss with the cold, and today is mid-fifties with sunshine.

He leads me out of the equipment room. “The ladies’ restroom is right around the corner. You can meet me out on the field when you’re done. It’s through that door right there.” He gestures to the metal door at the end of the hall before heading toward it.

I turn and walk around the corner to the restroom. After changing into the jersey, I tie my hair up into a high ponytail. My skin has always been too pale, making the bags under my eyes more obvious. Insomnia is something I’ve dealt with since my days of sleeping on a lumpy sofa in a strange man’s house every few months. Sometimes, they had nice dogs; other times, they had mean ones. Sometimes, it was unbearably loud from the city streets. Other times, it was eerily quiet out in the country, the only noise a coyote’s cry.

I shake the memories of the origin of my sleeping troubles away before applying a layer of tinted ChapStick. I head out the door toward the field, throwing the horrific white shirt in the trash.

I’ve never liked wearing white anyway.

FIVE

silas

THE GUYS ARE all in a great mood, and it's starting to rub off on me. It's preseason practice, arguably the best part of the year. It's all anticipation, sweat, and more importantly, no injuries or losses.

I'm feeling damn good today. My throwing arm is aching just the right amount. My muscles are loose, and my mind is focused on one thing—pitching like a D1 baller. I don't see other players as my primary competition. Old me is the one I'm trying to beat. Silas Saint from last season isn't shit compared to the competitor I'll be this year.

I'm throwing to Cole, who's squatting behind home plate right now. His glove is my target. My eyes don't stray from the leather as I go through the windup. One step back, touch the ball to the glove, legs together, focus my mind and eyes on the target, pull back, raise my knee, let her go.

It's as natural to me as breathing. I've been throwing baseballs since I could walk. My father only values two things in life—the good book and baseball. He would've been a ball player all through the major leagues if he hadn't been called to the pulpit. He focused all his love for the game into coaching me from a young age, and I've always loved it.

"Huddle up, boys! Pitcher's mound." Coach's voice breaks into my concentration.

A bead of sweat drips down between my eyes. I wipe it away with my forearm. I'm already on the mound.

"Damn," Trey says. He's our second baseman.

I look over at him, but he's looking up. My eyes follow his line of sight until they land on … Scarlett. My chest immediately tightens.

What the hell is she doing, standing next to Coach Simmers?

“Boys, we have a new member. As some of you know, our last equipment manager broke his ankle over the Christmas break holiday. Greg did an excellent job, but I had no choice but to replace him. Please welcome Scarlett Cohen.” He pauses for a brief moment as the assistant coaches acknowledge Scarlett and give her their names.

Nothing irritates me more than how good she looks in absolutely anything. She just throws an oversize jersey on with tight black pants, hair up in a ponytail, and we can hardly look away. I glance around at the other guys. I know it’s not just me feeling this magnetic pull.

She’s dangerous. Stay far away.

Cole’s eyes are dark and calculating. He smirks at me before looking back over at Scarlett. A heavy lead ball settles in my stomach.

“Saint!” Coach’s deep voice jerks me back to reality.

I look up at his constant red face. “Yes, sir?”

“Where you at today? Pitchers are in the outfield with me.”

“Yes, sir,” I reply.

He directs the rest of the team on where they’re going to be while they work on their specialty positions before we all join back up for batting and outfield work. I can feel Scarlett’s eyes on me, but I refuse to look at her. I won’t give her the satisfaction of my gaze on her. She can have all their attention, but not mine.

“Scarlett, you’re with me today, hon. Let’s get these pitchers working,” Coach Simmers says.

I turn and walk straight to the outfield.

This is practice. Practice is where you become the best. You can’t let anything distract you.

Or anyone.

I force myself back into the mental zone where the white ball, blood-red seams, and the leather glove are all that exist to me. When I reach the back of the field, where we usually work, I turn and face the other pitchers. There are eight of us—four starters and four relief guys. We play four games a week, but with the muscle exhaustion of a game, each guy can only pitch once in seven days.

Our new equipment manager is blurred out in the corner of my vision. If I’m going to throw strikes, she has to stay that way.

I’m able to eliminate distractions, and I aim for Cole’s glove with accuracy. Every time he throws back to me, he glances over at Coach

Simmers and Scarlett with a smirk.

I start shortening the time between pitches so he doesn't have more than a few seconds to look away from me. My irritation grows each time I see his eyes move in her direction.

If she's going to be a distraction for everyone, this isn't going to work.

Sweat drips down the center of my lower back as I throw another fastball.

"Saint! Give yourself a minute to breathe between them, or you'll keep lobbing the ball," Assistant Coach Jones instructs me.

I know he's right, so I close my eyes to ignore my catcher's leering gaze.

It's you and the batter. Nothing else is relevant. No one else is relevant.

After three more pitches directly into his glove, my shoulder starts to cramp.

"Take five." Coach Simmers appears next to me out of nowhere. "How's the arm feeling?"

He's perceptive. Even with so many guys on the team, he seems to be in tune with all of us at once. Or maybe it's just me.

"Feeling a little tight." I rotate my shoulder in a circle, exhaling a breath.

"Let's do some easy tosses at a quarter speed."

I do as he told me, focusing on my form and each step it takes to windup. After five throws, he tells me to increase to half speed. My shoulder is loosening up again, and the cramp has eased.

"Now, let's go to seventy-five percent. This is the hardest for you because you'll want to go all out. Give me three strikes."

He's right; I hate holding back. Control is something the pitcher must always have. Through taunting fans, opposing team members talking shit, and the various distractions from being in the center of the stadium, surrounded by thousands of people with every eye on you, maintaining control and focus is absolutely vital.

I hit the mark all three times.

Cole now has all the baseballs. He moves to toss them back until Coach holds up a hand.

"Saint, I want you to go into the trainer and ice the shoulder before batting practice. Show Scarlett where the training room is while you're at it."

I was so focused on the pitches that I didn't realize she was standing behind me, next to Coach Simmers.

"You'll meet the team's head trainer back there. Let him know you're our new equipment manager. He'll show you a few things, like where the ice packs are, for in the future." He turns from addressing Scarlett to move to another group of players.

She crosses her arms, looking up at me with a smirk.

"Lead the way, *Saint*."

I don't give her the satisfaction of a response or eye contact. My mind is spinning with possibilities of how she ended up as the equipment manager for the team.

Is Coach insane?

She's a walking scandal, a distraction that none of us need going into the season. As we walk side by side into the field house, I can feel the eyes of the team following us. Or I should say, following her.

My skin begins to prickle with irritation. I do my best to ignore the whirling sensation of exasperation, but after we step into the air-conditioned building—out of everyone's view—I lose my cool.

"What the hell are you doing?" I plant my feet, turning to look down at her.

I crowd her up against the wall, careful not to touch her. My sweaty practice uniform is sticking to my skin.

Without a moment of hesitation, she bows up to me, feet apart, arms crossed. "I beg your pardon?"

Her facial expression is neutral, except for her right eyebrow being slightly raised.

"When did you become the equipment manager for the baseball team?" I take a step forward, eyes narrowed at her.

This is my realm. She already invaded my college campus, flirts with my friends, and hangs out with my roommate. The last place I want to see Scarlett Cohen is on *my* baseball field.

"Since Dave got the job for me." She inspects her nail beds, seemingly oblivious to why this would be a problem for me.

"Who is Dave?"

She exhales a breath. "The newest model. Any further questions?"

My pulse quickens slightly. Scarlett's history of stepdads and her mother's long line of boyfriends are something I'm familiar with. When we

were … whatever we were … she told me about the constant moving, the ever-changing homes, and rarely having her own room to sleep in. At one point, I was so frustrated with what her mother was doing to her that I tried to convince Scarlett to run away with me. I told her we could go anywhere. I told her I would keep her safe and make sure she wouldn't have to sleep on a random stranger's couch ever again.

That was before. She's not your concern anymore. She's wreaking havoc on your entire life right now.

I clench my jaw. "What does the newest model have to do with you working for Coach Simmers? Get a new job. Quit this one. You don't belong here. It's not the right place for you, Scar—"

Her face changes immediately, brows pinching together as her smile drops. "Your opinion is irrelevant. Your preference for my whereabouts is irrelevant. I need this job to keep my tuition paid. So, *screw* you."

SIX

scarlett

I STOMP AHEAD OF HIM, my blood reaching its boiling point.

How dare he act like I don't have a right to be here! Always so high and mighty. I'm not even good enough to get him a stupid ice pack!

"Turn right." He speaks from behind me.

I pivot to the right. My chin juts out as I strut ahead of him. If he wants to play dirty and tell me I don't belong, he's going to regret it. Silas Saint has taken enough from me.

We walk into the training room to see a man sitting at a desk with a blue collared shirt on. He glances up at us.

"Can I help you?" he asks.

"Need to ice the shoulder. This is the new equipment manager." Silas tells him.

The man stands up, smiling at me as he extends a hand. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Leo."

He's good-looking with curly, dark hair and nice white teeth. He's average height, and judging from his broad shoulders and a trim waist, he clearly works out.

I give him my sweetest smile, trying to determine if it would be in my best interest to flirt with him or play it innocent and sweet.

"It's nice to meet you too! I'm Scarlett. I'm excited to learn the ropes around here and be as helpful as I can."

His grin widens. "I'd be happy to show you around."

Silas has stepped into the next room, and Leo follows him into it. The first one had a desk and an office chair, which Leo was sitting at, along with some lounge chairs. This next room is bigger, holding four massage tables, lounge chairs and sofas scattered around, four bathtubs, and a large freezer.

There are shelves filled with medical supplies lining the walls. Both rooms have high ceilings and are painted white.

Silas is rummaging through the freezer. He pulls out an ice pack, walks over to a sofa, and collapses onto it.

Leo points to the freezer. “This is obviously where the ice packs are held. Over on that shelf are some basic bandages, kinesiology tape, that sort of thing.”

I look over to see where he’s pointing, noticing the shelves are well organized with an array of supplies.

Silas’s white practice jersey is sticking to his abs. I’d never admit it out loud, but he has aged like a fine wine. Sixteen-year-old Silas was hot, but this tall and muscled grown-up version is a whole other realm of sexy.

You can look, but you will not touch.

Silas has the pack on his shoulder, but he looks like holding it there feels awkward. Not in a million years would I help him, but I guess it’s Leo’s job. He walks over and grabs a little sling to put the ice in and wraps it around his shoulder.

I roll my eyes involuntarily.

Men, so helpless.

Leo turns to smile at me. “For the upper body, we do ice packs, but when the guys come in after practice, I can show you how to run the ice baths for them.”

I can feel Silas’s eyes on me. His little speech in the hall is still fresh in my mind. I walk over to the shelves to inspect them.

“So, Leo, you like working with the baseball team? I’ve heard a few of them can be difficult.” I turn to see his reaction.

Leo smiles as he walks over to me. “I love it, actually. There’re some pretty good guys on the team. What made you want to be the equipment manager?”

He leans up against the shelf next to me, crossing his arms over his chest. For a moment, I let my eyes inspect his built arms intentionally—so that he realizes I’m doing it.

“I just love sports so much.”

A loud bark of a laugh comes from the direction of the sofa. Leo looks over at Silas with a question in his gaze before turning back to me.

“Oh, yeah? What’s your favorite sport?”

I rack my brain for one that I could pretend to know something about. “Hockey is my all-time favorite. The guys are just … tougher than other athletes.”

Leo chuckles. “Oh, yeah, you’d have to be tough to play hockey. Although any contact sport requires a different skill set than ones without physical contact. But sometimes, the injuries sustained during the athlete’s college and pro career affect them for the rest of their lives.”

I want to look over to see if Silas is watching us, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of my attention.

Pretend he doesn’t exist.

I shrug. “Well, the no-contact athletes probably don’t have what it takes for the more intense ones, like football or rugby.”

“Quite a strong opinion for a girl who’s never played a real sport.”

I knew he was listening.

I turn my head to look over at *the* Saint Slugger. “I played kickball growing up, actually.”

He levels his gaze on me. His pale-green eyes have always been able to see straight through to my soul. “Are we calling those games we played on a dirt field with a bouncy ball a sport now?”

I fold my arms over my chest, smiling at Leo before turning back to Silas. “Either way, I also trained in a kickboxing gym during high school.”

Silas doesn’t show emotions on his face—most of the time—and today is no exception.

We stare boldly at each other for a few tense seconds, inadvertently engaging in a spontaneous competition of who will be intimidated enough to look away first. We either don’t look at each other or we stare. There is no in-between.

Under his gaze, the air feels warmer. My skin seems to be its own separate entity when his eyes are on me, like I can feel each hair follicle growing just a tiny bit. I’ve lost all sense of time.

Have we been doing this for seconds or hours?

Finally, Leo breaks the silence by clearing his throat. Silas and I both jolt, looking away together. My eyes go to Leo, but I don’t see which way Silas turned. I’m about to break into a sweat.

“I guess I should get back! Coach Simmers might be looking for me.” I smile at Leo as I walk past him toward the door, reaching out for his hand.

He returns my smile, but his is a little dimmer than it was the first few times. He shakes my hand. “It was nice to meet you, Scarlett. I’ll see you again soon, I’m sure.”

All I can manage is a nod as I flee the room like a damn coward.

SEVEN AND A HALF YEARS EARLIER

"I'm not a pussy. You can't boss me around just because you're taller than me." I spit into the dirt just to nail my point home that this is my turf.

Silas Saint's eyes are on me from above. I can feel them like I feel the sun beating down on me in the Texas heat. I'm going to turn twelve this year. He already is, so I know that's a part of why he thinks he can take over the team as captain, even though I called it first.

"Why can't you act more like a good girl?"

My head jerks up, and I meet his gaze above me. "What the hell are you asking me something like that for? I don't have to be a *good girl* for you. This is a kickball game, not Sunday School. I'll say it again because it seems like you've got a hearing problem. I'm not a pussy. I'm the captain. You're in the outfield."

I step around him and onto the pitcher's mound, raising the worn ball up as I prepare to roll it on the ground for the other team to kick.

"I'm the best pitcher, Scar. Quit being so stubborn all the time. We're losing the game because your pitches always drift to the right."

I close my eyes to focus. "You can either go back to the outfield or quit. If you don't wanna be a team player, then be a quitter."

I continue to ignore him as I step back and prepare for my pitch. His footsteps echo in my ear as he walks back out to the field to his proper position.

I roll the ball to home plate, gritting my teeth as it drifts to the right. The kicker goes for it anyway, probably realizing it's not going to get any better than that.

After three more failed attempts at pitching straight, I exhale a breath of frustration before spinning on my heel to walk out to Silas in the outfield. He doesn't say anything when I reach him. I dig the toe of my shoe into the dirt for a few seconds before squinting up at him.

"Can you pitch the rest of the game?" It physically pains me to say it, but I don't want to lose.

He reaches out for the ball. I hand it over to him.

"Let's practice later … after the game?"

My belly does a strange twist.

Alone time with Silas.
“You got a deal, Saint.”

SEVEN

silas

PRESENT DAY

AFTER-PRACTICE MEETINGS usually take place in the training room while we soak in ice baths and doctor up any muscles that need to be massaged to prevent cramps from the strenuous workouts we do.

I walk into the room last to hear the guys joking around and having a good time. The topics range from how much we're going to dominate the season to what girl was in whose bed last Saturday night.

The locker room talk is extremely foul. It was something I had to adjust to quickly because the way these men talk about women is not at all how my friends from home and I did.

I came to Ole Tex from a remote small town called Bonnet Valley, Texas. All my friends were homeschooled, like me, and we went to church at least twice a week. Even our most perverted discussion about girls and their bodies was nothing even close to how the baseball players discuss them.

More like degrade them.

It used to make my stomach churn. I still don't like it or participate, but I've mostly learned to tune it out and think about other things.

Until I hear the name Scarlett.

"I cannot wait to see that ass spinning on my lap. I thank the good Lord for making such fine girls to walk around and be distracting as hell."

An outfielder named Ryan is the one talking about her like she's a piece of meat. My internal temperature rises. I sit in a chair, leaning back against it before I level him with a disapproving glare.

"What's your problem, Saint?" He looks at me with slightly wide eyes, like he has no clue what could have upset me.

I'm about to give him an earful about the basics of respecting women because they're human beings too, but Coach Simmers walks into the room and starts speaking.

"All right, we have a few things to discuss before you go frolicking off into the night." Coach Simmers silences all conversations going on with his deep, booming voice. "As I announced earlier, our team has a new member. Scarlett Cohen transferred to Ole Tex this semester. The equipment

manager is a vital role, so I expect you to treat her with respect." He levels his gaze on the faces of several players.

"I've decided to establish some ground rules pertaining to our new equipment manager. There will not be—under any circumstances—any romantic relationships between her and anyone who wants to remain a player on this team."

The room is so quiet that I can hear the ticking of the clock on the wall. Apparently, Cole and Ryan were not the only ones planning to approach Scarlett. I feel an odd sense of relief settling over me as my muscles relax, coupled with the strong desire to ignore the reasons why this new rule gives me such an intense sense of calm.

"We've never had a female equipment manager, so we never felt the need to establish this rule in the past."

No one can deny that Scarlett draws attention unlike any woman I've come into contact with … ever. My muscles tense up again as I realize that's not a unique experience for me alone.

No, it's good that it's not unique to you. She means nothing. She's just insanely appealing to your base male instincts. It's the same for any man with clear eyesight.

It's her first day on the job, and Coach Simmers is already bringing up the issue of staying away from Scarlett with the entire team. He has no doubt heard the vile conversations about her going around the room.

"Just to be crystal clear, this means if there is any reason for me to believe that any of you have entered into a romantic relationship with the equipment manager, you will be suspended from the team indefinitely. Y'all have a good night."

I had no idea how privileged I was to practice last year without the distractions I'm dealing with now. This year was supposed to be my best one yet, but so far, I'm underperforming.

It's not just Scarlett—I learned to blur her out in my vision and tell myself she wasn't there on the first day.

What I can't seem to ignore are the reactions she draws from the rest of the team.

Even though I refuse to look in her direction, I know she's wearing red lipstick today from the comment Sean made about her "sinful red lips."

I also know—against my will—that she's in skintight jeans from the multiple comments on how great they make the shape of her backside look. I wish the words could permanently be washed from my brain.

"If I miss a fly, it'll be because I can't stop staring at that denim dump truck."

"Oh, what I wouldn't give to be those jeans. Lord have mercy."

I'm about three seconds away from turning to see for myself what all the fuss is about. Then, I remember her words from the party when she first appeared on campus. *"Someone still can't help but notice every little thing about me."*

I grit my teeth, winding up a pitch before throwing it as hard as I can into Cole's glove. He yelps.

"Ouch! Damn, warn me next time you decide to bring the heat up to ten." He stands up, shaking his hand out.

"You good?" One of the assistant coaches goes up to Cole to see if he's okay.

I have no idea why he's acting so dramatic. I didn't throw it any harder than usual. I do some stretching while I wait for Cole to squat back down into position again, but instead, he tosses his catcher's mitt to Assistant Coach Jones and walks off toward the training room.

"Saint, I'm going to catch for a minute while Cole ices his hand." He squats down.

I must have hit Cole's glove in a weird place. I wind up, throwing the ball as hard as I can once more. Coach Jones winces, but he throws it back and nods at me.

Again and again, I throw it as hard and as fast as my arm can.

Baseball has always been a vital part of my life, but today, the ball feels like an extension of my right arm. Something has shifted. In between pitches, my eye catches Coach Simmers's face across the field. He's watching me, arms crossed over his chest. Scarlett is a blur next to him.

Once my shoulder starts to ache, I slow down the pitches to half speed.

"You threw hard today." Coach Jones walks up to me after my cooldown.

He's looking at me with a question in his gaze, eyes narrowed.

"Yes, sir." I rotate my throwing arm in a circle, ready to feel the ice on it.

"We should clock you tomorrow, see how fast they're going."

I nod. Last year, they were capping at ninety-two miles an hour, which is fast for a freshman on a D1 team. I definitely feel stronger now, so I'm hoping they've picked up speed.

We're still in preseason practice, which means no games yet. The guys have been talking about a party going on at one of the fraternity houses, but I'm only half listening.

"Saint, you coming tonight?" Ryan asks me.

I shrug as I take off my glove while walking toward the field house. "I don't know. Maybe."

Parties aren't really my scene, but sometimes, I go out of boredom. I'd rather have a relaxing night in with a few close friends. Maybe I'll invite my roommate.

Dan has always been a close friend. There used to be a group of four of us who were always together—Dan's brother, Adam, and another friend we grew up with, Levi. But now, Levi and Adam are both married. Their wives—Kenna and Harley, respectively—were roommates and close friends, so the four of them tend to hang out with Levi and Kenna's baby boy, LJ.

We're always invited when they do things, but the couple group isn't much into the frat parties. We occasionally grab dinner during the off-season, but when baseball is going on, I barely have time to get my homework done. My dad insists I focus on only playing baseball, so he deposits money into my bank account for necessities.

"Hey, Scarlett, you should come to the party tonight. The entire team's invited."

I hear a feminine voice from behind me. "Oh, am I on the team now?"

Ryan turns beside me to walk backward. He has a ridiculous, stupid grin on his face. "Yeah, baby, you're the MVP."

"I must be the only MVP in history to never score a point."

He winks at her. "You're the motivation we all need to show up and play hard."

She laughs as he turns back around, his stupid grin growing wider.

I clench my fists, trying to remind myself that we need him to have a working arm to win games.

Do we really, though?
“I guess in that case, I’ll be there,” Scarlett says.

EIGHT

scarlett

MY DRESS ISN'T anything to write home about—unless you're a man and you like female skin. It's a cheap, long-sleeved black body-con style with diamond cutouts on the sides of the hips and over the stomach. It almost looks like someone took scissors to it and went to town, but I like the effortless sexy vibe it has. My hair is massive and curly tonight. I used a tiny little curling iron to give it a full, messy look, almost like a dark lion's mane. I toss it over my shoulder as we approach the party.

"Damn, mama. What's it like being God's favorite?" Lucy is in skinny jeans and a black crop top.

She's only ever worn black since I've known her. I can't tell if she likes me or not because she really doesn't smile all that much around me. But I invited her, and she's here, so that's something.

I texted her an invite so I wouldn't be a lone wolf at this party. Also because I desperately want to know what it's like to maintain a friendship. My mom had us moving around so much when I was growing up that I've never felt that deep, long-standing connection with any of my friends in the past. There simply wasn't time.

"You are insanely gorgeous. I don't wanna hear it. What's it like never having to use fake tanner? That's the life I want."

I'm naturally as pale as a bank of snow, but Lucy has a God-given dark hue that I would kill for.

She shakes her head. "Not as nice as it must be to have those pale sky-gray eyes that torture the soul of any man who dares to look into them."

I burst out laughing as we strut into the fraternity house. I'm thankful for the warm air inside because my dress really isn't enough coverage for a cold early-February night.

“I’m going to get us some drinks.” Lucy floats off toward the drink area.

My eyes sweep the area to assess for the group we might want to migrate toward. I’m beyond grateful to have a friend with me, and I’m tempted to just huddle in the corner with her. My energy is depleted. I barely even made it out tonight. The only reason I came was because Ryan had asked, and I’m hoping to at least make a few friends with the guys on the team so they don’t all start to hate me like Silas does.

I had a weird moment today that made me sad because I don’t have a relationship with my best friend anymore. I used to be sad about it a lot more, but it’s been a long time since I’ve felt anything but hate toward him.

It happened in the school cafeteria. I went up to the dessert table. Right smack dab in the center of it was a pan of dirt cake. The sight of it took me back to this one memory I’d thought was buried deep in my mind.

Instead of turning away to shove the memory back where it belonged, I served myself a piece, took an enormous bite, and sure enough, the taste made the memory fully resurface, like it’d just happened yesterday.

Silas and I were at Dan and Adam’s house. Their parents were always having the youth group from church over for gatherings. This particular one was to make a bunch of desserts for the church picnic on Mother’s Day. Silas and I were in the peak of our *flirtatious but still only friends* phase.

We made two dirt cakes together, but instead of using the proper ingredients on the second one, we snuck outside and put actual dirt as the bottom layer. We told our friend group—Dan, Adam, and Levi—that we had made an extra one simply for them to enjoy that day and laughed our asses off as they all ate it without a clue that there was dirt on the bottom layer.

And now, he hates my guts, so that memory has to go back in the vault where it belongs.

“Here you go. Typical Coors Light kind of night, but I found us straws too. Makes the beer drinking slightly more sophisticated.” Lucy’s voice jerks me back to the present.

I accept the cold can and straw, open it, insert the straw, and take a sip. “Thanks. Any preference on where we park our fine asses?”

She shrugs. “You wanted to chill with the team, right?”

I look over at the swarm of baseball players. They haven’t drunk enough to be in their wild, unhinged state. The tall, muscular one with

green eyes and a strong distaste for me glances over at me and Lucy. He's dressed in distressed jeans and a fitted, long-sleeved forest-green shirt. He's wearing a white baseball cap backward. The dirty-blonde waves are longer than he used to wear them.

I pop a hip out, level him with a glare, and wink.

Interpret that, Saint.

His eyes don't leave mine. Apparently, we're engaged in a staring contest. He's not smiling. The expression on his face is neutral, maybe even a little judgmental.

Preacher's kid to the bone. Better than everyone.

My skin-baring Saran Wrap dress would never pass the strict approval of Silas Saint.

Fuck you and your approval.

Without breaking eye contact, I lift my beer to my lips and sip from the straw. Anytime I want to screw with a man's head, I always do something involving my lips.

It works like a charm. His eyes dart down for a split second to focus on the movement. When his gaze meets mine again, he looks pissed.

I smirk, looking away in victory.

Lucy's dark eyes are studying me. "Uh, what was that?"

My heart does a little pitter-patter inside my chest. It's not that I'm afraid of people finding out that Silas and I have a past, but there's also a strange desire inside me to keep it hidden, like it's our dirty little secret.

That's concerning, to say the least.

The logical part of my brain breaks through into the chaos sometimes. I shove it right back down where it belongs.

I form a practiced smile. "What do you mean?"

She looks over at Silas, then back at me. I blink innocently, taking another sip of my drink.

"Hmm. When you're ready to tell me, I'm all ears." She runs a hand through her caramel curls, separating a few clumpy strands.

This friendship gets better and better. I adore people who respect boundaries and allow me the space and time I need to open up. It's never been easy for me, and when someone pushes for vulnerability, I clam up even more.

As if the universe is listening to my thoughts, my phone pings with a text. I open it to see that it's from my mother.

Hey, sweetie. Don't forget about therapy on Monday. Be safe. I love you. —Mom

What is it with old people signing texts like I don't have her contact saved?

My stomach immediately cramps with nerves. I *hate* therapy. My mother is forcing it on me. She and my stepdad made it a nonnegotiable part of the deal that I go to therapy this entire semester if they are going to pay for my college tuition.

I quite literally looked into student loans when they told me that. I honestly don't know if it's possible for me to go and talk to a complete stranger about my feelings for an hour *every single week*.

They can't make me speak. I'll sit in silence.

I text her back before shoving my phone in my pocket.

How is Lettie?

I miss my little sister a lot more than I thought I would.

"You're in another world tonight. Let's go talk to some people." Lucy grabs my hand and leads me toward the group of baseball players.

My muscles tense as we approach. I'm feeling uncommonly vulnerable tonight. My memory from lunch about growing up with Silas, combined with my mom's text about therapy, has me in a funk. My usual snark and unwavering confidence are fragile, like my skin is paper thin and they can all see straight through me. Anyone who knows me well would be able to see the uncertainty and vulnerability on my face.

I feel the urge to bolt. The chances of me exposing myself is too high for me to interact with strangers right now. All I really know about the guys on the team is that they all want to sleep with me.

Unoriginal asses.

"Scarlett, how do you like being on the Mustangs baseball team?" Ryan, the outfielder who invited me, approaches me with a sweet smile.

I smile back. "It's fun. I love Coach Simmers."

He nods. "Yeah, he's a great guy, isn't he? We all love him. He's sort of a mentor to me, you know? My dad is an alcoholic, so seeing a man who's responsible and sober is …" He trails off, shaking his head as he takes a sip of beer.

My heart squeezes. I know exactly how it feels to have an unstable parent. My mother is in a wonderful place in life now, but it certainly hasn't always been that way. I don't remember meeting my dad.

"Yeah, I can totally see that. I don't have a dad in my life, so being around a man who shows up is a breath of fresh air."

Ryan reaches out to touch my arm reassuringly. I look up at him, taking into account his facial features for the first time.

He's actually kind of cute.

He has dark-brown hair and matching eyes. He's one of those guys blessed with thick lashes. He's not super tall, maybe five-ten, but I'm short, so average-height men are usually who I'm attracted to.

Not always, though ...

I refuse to allow thoughts of the very tall Silas Saint to ruin my flirting with a cute guy.

"Well, stick with the team, and you'll find that there are a lot of good men out there who do show up. Do you need another drink? I'm getting one for myself."

My can is only half empty, but I nod. He smiles before walking toward the kitchen.

I turn back to face everyone, and my eyes are bombarded with a busty bleach-blonde bimbo who has snaked her way into our group. Her tits are spilling out of a tight red dress that matches her bright lipstick. Her gold stiletto heels add about six inches to her height.

And she's whispering in Silas's ear. The hair on the back of my neck stands up as her red claws brush across the front of his stomach, presumably feeling the muscles underneath his forest-green shirt.

Silas is leaning his head down so that he can hear whatever she's saying. My body is locked up. I can practically feel my heart pumping blood inside my rib cage.

Lucy leans closer to me. "Damn, I'm glad we're friends. I would not want to be on your bad side—ever."

I can't even register what's going on around me.

"I like blondes." Silas's words from the night I went to visit Dan in their apartment rings in my ears.

Is this knockoff Barbie really his type?

He's not yours, so who cares? You literally hate him.

MINE.

The ridiculously irrational possessive word screeches through my mind.

Okay. He's not mine, but that doesn't mean I want him to be anyone else's.

I've always been irrational. Screw it. I'm finally accepting who I really am. I can't wait to tell my therapist about this new layer of my personality on Monday to make it official.

I need to look away. I want to look away, but there's a magnetic pull keeping my eyes on the spectacle that no one else in the room seems to be interested in. Silas is wearing a white ball cap backward, which makes him annoyingly hot. He's easily the most attractive man on the team. The baseball players are obviously the hottest guys on campus.

That makes him the sexiest man at this school, a god among mortals.

You're pathetic.

The blonde girl must say something funny because he breaks out in a grin, perfect white teeth flashing.

"Here you go, Scarlett." Ryan startles me when he appears on my left, holding up a beer.

"Oh, thanks." I take it without looking at him, my eyes glued to the girl's red talons still holding on to Silas's abs.

Without warning, his head pops up. He makes direct eye contact with me. His expression is neutral until his eyes flick to Ryan standing next to me, turning his gaze a shade darker.

That's your cue.

I slip my hair over my shoulder, turning to face Ryan with a seductive smile. "Thank you. You're a sweetheart."

Ryan is only a pawn in this game, but Silas started it and left me with no choice. I can't let him win.

"You really are the most beautiful girl at this school. Do you like it here?"

The blonde hair in the corner of my eye is stealing my focus.

"I like it okay, I guess." A giggle from the corner to my right makes me grit my teeth. "Some of the people are less than ideal."

Ryan scrunches his eyebrows, looking around the room for a minute. "Like who?"

I wave a hand. "Never mind. Hey, you're hot."

I lean into him, resting my arm across his shoulders and pressing my chest into his side.

I gaze up at him, batting my eyelashes slowly. His breathing grows deeper as he looks down at me. His arm snakes around my waist, tugging me closer.

My body freezes immediately, regret shooting through me.

"You're hot too. You wanna go upstairs for a little bit?" He leans in closer to me, eyes dropping down to my lips.

I pull back a fraction of an inch. "I want to stay out here with everyone else."

He doesn't say anything, just blinks and dips his head closer to mine. I pull back again.

"Yeah, I get that. If you change your mind, let me know."

I nod, taking another step back from him. For a moment, I think he isn't going to let go of me. After a few awkward seconds, he finally releases me. My eyes drift over to see what the blonde girl and Silas are up to.

My stomach drops.

They're gone.

NINE

silas

MY SKIN IS HOT, and her fingers are ice cold on my forearm.

The blonde has led me down to the basement of the house. I asked her what her name was twice, but I couldn't hear her answer over the music. It's not that I don't think she's pretty—she's gorgeous—but it's hard for me to focus on any woman with Scarlett in the background, whispering in Ryan's ear.

"You're so hot. I've been waiting for you to talk to me all night." She giggles, pulling me down the last step.

I peer around the room as my eyes adjust to the dim lighting. There are a few dingy sofas, a worn ping-pong table, and several plastic tables with red SOLO cups on them. Surprisingly, we're alone.

"The basement will fill up with people before long. It's still early." She walks over to the smaller sofa in the corner, draping herself across it.

Why do I feel sad that she's just offering herself up to me like this?

I don't know if I can be with a girl that I don't even know. The guys on my team do it all the time, like it's nothing.

You should be jumping at this chance. Do you want to be a virgin forever?

I walk over to the sofa, sitting down beside her and curling my arm around her shoulders. She leans into me immediately.

"So … are you in a sorority?" I have to at least get to know her a little bit first.

"Yes! I'm in Alpha Chi. Adeline Sage is my big sister. She is literally so amazing."

I sit up, removing my arm from her shoulders.

This is why the sorority girl thing bugs me. They all know each other.

Adeline and I never dated, but she was interested in me. We messed around a lot. I never took it all the way to home plate with her. I liked her, but I wanted to stay focused on baseball. We're still cool, but now, I don't know if this girl is going to be running back to tell her that I'm into her. The last thing I need is drama going into the season.

She leans toward me a little, her red lips curving up into a smile. "You don't have to worry about Adeline. She told me I could go for it if I wanted to. Girl code is strong in our sisterhood."

My muscles won't relax at all, but I lean back against the sofa to appear indifferent. My exterior is completely calm. It's a facade I've always been good at creating.

She leans closer so that her cleavage is against my arm. She reaches a hand to rest on top of my thigh. "You know, there's a rumor about you."

I don't know what to do with my arm, so I reach around to rest my hand on her lower back. She takes this as an invitation, crawling all the way into my lap. I'm motionless as she straddles me, her dress riding dangerously high up. My body is starting to respond to the close proximity of a beautiful girl who clearly wants to fool around with me.

She leans forward to whisper in my ear, "Don't you want to know what the rumor is?"

I'm frozen, unsure of where to put my hands or how to proceed from here. My body is reacting to her as the front of my jeans gets tighter.

"What rumor?" My voice is gruff and low.

"I don't know who started it, honestly, but Adeline confirmed that you're … a good time." She starts to nibble on my ear.

My heart rate increases as her fingers begin to comb through the hair at the back of my neck.

"Don't you want to kiss me?"

Do I?

The only girl I've ever wanted to kiss is upstairs.

And she's flirting with your teammate.

I reach my hand up to curl it around her neck and pull her down to me. She's eager, giggling as our lips join together.

I close my eyes. I hate myself for it, but in my head, she's not blonde. She's not a random sorority girl whose name I don't know. In my head, she's the girl I grew up with, the one with beautiful, dark hair, who smells like fresh coconuts.

With one hand curled around her neck, I reach the other down to gently pinch her waist. The kiss deepens, and she moans. My Scarlett fantasy is shattered.

Suddenly, she tastes sour to me.

Before I can push her away, I hear someone staggering down the stairs to the basement.

"Do you like beer pong? We should get a tournament going." Ryan's voice is getting closer.

I push the girl back gently, but she doesn't want to budge.

"Where's the light switch?" Ryan's voice sounds closer.

Sweat beads on my lower back. My already-tense muscles tighten more. I break the kiss, having to turn my head completely to the side to get her lips off of mine. She takes it as an invitation to make out with my neck.

The light flicks on, illuminating the dark basement and putting a spotlight on us.

"Oh, ha. Sorry to interrupt," Ryan says, still descending the stairs. "Wanted to get a game of pong going."

The blonde finally removes her lips from my skin once I physically lift her off of my lap and toss her onto the couch cushion beside me. She's light, but my arms are sore from pitching all day.

She giggles beside me, adjusting her dress. "Well, at least I know you can throw me around. For later."

She latches on to my arm, and it takes everything in me not to jerk it out of her grasp. The claws on her fingertips dig into my skin.

I glance up to see who all came down the stairs.

There's no reason for a heavy mass to settle in my stomach at the sight of Scarlett. Nothing justifies the way my arm feels like it's on fire with the other girl's nails digging into it.

Scarlett is standing halfway down the staircase. Her body is motionless. She almost looks frozen in time, like a statue in a museum.

Guilt washes over me at the expression on her face, the way her eyes look oversize and … wounded. Her hand is gripping the railing tightly, and her gaze is glued to my face.

"You guys wanna play us?" Ryan is like a bull in a china shop, completely oblivious to the tension in the room.

He's setting up the pyramid of red SOLO cups on one of the tables.

“Sure! I’m really good.” The girl with the death grip on my forearm finally releases it, bouncing up off the sofa and practically skipping toward the beer pong setup.

Scarlett’s eyes haven’t left mine, but her mouth forms a hard line. It takes everything in me, but I have to find the strength to appear unaffected, like I wanted to make out with a random girl in the basement. Like this is just my life and what I do at frat parties.

She can’t know I was pretending it was her the entire time.

One thing about Scarlett is that she knows me better than anyone. If I’m not careful, she’ll see it on my face. She’ll read it in my eyes.

Without breaking eye contact, I visibly adjust the front of my jeans before standing up. I casually strut toward the beer pong table, joining the girl on her side of the table. She’s organizing the cups into the pyramid.

I don’t want to touch her again, but because I have the undivided attention of an audience of one, I wrap my arm around her waist and rest my hand on the top of her hip.

“Let’s play, baby,” I say into her ear, but loud enough to carry across the room.

It does something to Scarlett because she immediately snaps out of it, her trance broken.

She saunters down the stairs, joining Ryan on the other side of the table. Her features have completely relaxed, appearing almost bored with her eyelids lowered.

She grabs Ryan’s beer and begins pouring it into the cups.

“Thanks, gorgeous. Hey, Amy, there’s more beer in that mini fridge behind you.”

The blonde girl, whose name is apparently Amy, turns around to get us a beer for our cups.

Ryan starts bouncing the ping-pong ball on the table as he grins at me.

“It’s gonna be a good night, Saint. It’s not every day we get to play this game with two gorgeous ladies beside us, huh?”

Ryan is one of those guys who talks like he has respect for women … when said women are present. As soon as we’re alone in the locker room or on the field, his mouth is just as dirty and disrespectful as the rest of them.

I have a very specific distaste for men like him. At least Cole doesn’t pretend to be something he’s not.

Not that either of them is an acceptable choice.

I want to kick his ass at this game for no particular reason, except that it will feel good.

"It already is a good night." I grin at him.

TEN

scarlett

SOMETHING DARK HAS POSSESSED ME. I feel the jealous rage of a woman scorned rising inside me like the tide at midnight. The destruction of whatever lies in my path is imminent.

She did nothing wrong. Amy is just a girl who likes a guy who also happens to really not like you at all. You literally kissed his best friend as a kid just to make him jealous.

The positive self-talk I learned from my school counselor during junior high isn't doing much for me.

"Nice shot, handsome." My voice is dripping with honey, sultry and sweet.

I lean up to kiss Ryan on the cheek, my hand gripping his bicep.

"You trying to get me in trouble with Coach, huh?" He chuckles before leaning close to my ear to whisper, "We got time for that later, cupcake."

I literally couldn't care less if he gets kicked off the team as long as I can use him to make Silas Saint aware of just how *unaffected* I am by his sucking face with a blonde sorority bimbo.

"On fire!" Amy squeals from across the table, practically jumping into Silas's arms after she gets her second ball in a row in a cup.

Silas chuckles, setting her back upright, cupping her small waist.

If human beings could realistically breathe fire, now would be the time you'd see coals glowing under my skin. My entire body is tingling with pent-up rage.

Remember what happened. Remember why y'all didn't work out. He's the enemy. He'll always be the enemy.

Without warning, I feel tears gathering behind my eyes, threatening to spill out over my cheeks. The memories from us growing up together,

becoming friends, sharing secrets, all those letters …

It rushes over me like cold water. I suck in a harsh inhale. All eyes in the room on me. Silas and I make eye contact, his gaze immediately growing hard.

He just really does not give a fuck about me anymore.

I have to escape. This room is suffocating me. These people … they're not my friends. Ryan wants in my pants. Saint wants me to disappear. Amy doesn't register that I'm even present.

I spin on my heels, marching toward the stairs.

"Hey, where are you going?" Ryan calls after me.

I ignore him, blocking out every sound. It's an old, familiar trick I'm very good at. Block out all the noise. What I can't hear can't hurt me.

SIX YEARS EARLIER

My thirteenth birthday is today.

Once upon a time, becoming a teenager felt like *the* milestone that mattered. Now that the day is here, I wish it had never come.

"We're moving again? Mom, no … please. I like it here. I like Bonnet Valley. Please, Mom."

My begging screeches mean nothing to her. She's frantically packing up a suitcase, throwing in her clothes and mine without even folding them.

"I finally have some friends. I feel like I … sort of fit in. The kids here are nice. Even school isn't so bad. Mom, are you listening to me?"

She either can't hear me or she simply doesn't care. Either way, I will not go with her. I don't care if I have to sleep inside the playground slide. I'm *not* moving again.

Silas will help me. Silas will understand why I don't want to go.

I turn away from my mother, who seems to be in some kind of trance, and run out the front door, my worn tennis shoes pounding on the dirt road outside of our trailer house.

My arms pump up and down as I aim for the nicer part of town. It's only two and a half miles to the Saints' house on Becker Street. I've never run the entire way without stopping before, but there's a first time for everything. I've been pushing myself hard in track lately. I can make it.

My lungs are begging for air. It's a cold January day, and my jeans are a pair of too-tight hand-me-downs I've had since last year.

I'm close—so close—when I finally pull to a stop, panting and struggling for breath. My heart is pounding as their house comes into view. It's an older Tudor-style home with yellowing brick and rounded archways.

Silas is outside in the front yard with his baseball glove. My stomach muscles tighten at the sight of him, so tall and good-looking. He's wearing a baseball cap and a heather-gray hoodie.

"Silas." I say his name, not quite loud enough for him to hear.

My footsteps must reach his ears because he turns to look at me. A smile breaks across his face, erupting a flight of butterflies in my belly.

He's happy to see me.

He jogs toward me. I stop in the street in front of his neighbor's house, feeling timid now that I'm here.

What am I going to say?

"Hey, Scar."

I blink up at him, unable to hold back my smile. "Hi."

I'm still trying to catch my breath.

He tosses his baseball up in the air, catching it with his glove. "What are you doing here?"

He squints at me in the midday sun. It's a Monday afternoon. He's probably done with homeschooling, and his mom is at the grocery store. My mom picked me up early from school today to tell me to help her pack so we could move.

I brush my toe over the dead grass on the shoulder of the road, trying to fabricate something to say that doesn't sound pathetic or desperate.

"I, uh …"

His fingers reach up under my chin to tilt my head up to face him. His smile has faded away.

"What's wrong?"

My eyes water, a teardrop trailing down my cheek. I try to hide it, tilting my head down. His concern is unnerving, catching me off guard and bringing unwelcome emotion up inside me.

"I just wanted to see what—"

Strong hands come around to grip my shoulders. My body immediately relaxes into his touch.

"Scarlett, talk to me. What happened?"

My lips are trembling, but I force back the resistance to throw myself at him and sob.

"She wants to … she wants us to move. We're moving."

His grip on my shoulders tightens. I cross my arms over my chest, and he pulls me closer.

The words spill out after that. "I don't want to go, Silas. I don't wanna leave. I told her that. She doesn't care. She doesn't care what I want. All she cares about is her life. It's like … it's like I don't matter."

I'm blubbering now.

He's pulled me all the way to his chest now into an embrace. We've never touched like this. This is our first really close hug, and I'm not even enjoying it.

Minutes fly by as I quietly sob into his lower chest. He's always been taller than me. It's comforting, the overarching feeling of safety. Like he's got me, no matter what. He can defeat my demons simply with his size and proximity.

"I'm going to fix it, Scar," he whispers in my ear.

I'm fatigued and ready to fall into bed and sleep for two days straight. Crying takes it out of me. I pull back, peering up at him with red-rimmed eyes.

"What can we do?"

We. Like we're a team.

Even after I kissed Dan behind the church to get a reaction out of him, he still wants to be on my side.

He doesn't correct me. His hand cups my face tenderly, light-green eyes boring into mine. "Trust me, Scar."

He pulls back, grabbing my hand and pulling me behind him. We walk up to his front porch, and he sits me down on the front step.

"Wait here. I'll be right back."

He bounds up the steps, slamming the screen door behind him.

I pick at my cuticles while I wait for him. I don't know what his plan is, but I trust Silas. He's my best friend.

Hopefully, he'll be more than that one day.

The door opens behind me, heavy steps stomping on the old porch.

"Well, hello there, Scarlett. How are you today?"

I turn back, my eyes having finally dried up.

Silas's dad, Pastor Saint, is standing there with a kind smile on his face. Silas is beside him, his glove and ball back inside the house.

Pastor Saint comes to sit beside me, resting his forearms on his knee. He's dressed in plain khaki pants and a worn short-sleeved button-down. I don't know what it is about preachers, but they always look like they're about to give a sermon.

"What seems to be the trouble, Miss Cohen?"

I don't really want to talk to Silas's dad about this, but when I look up at my best friend, he gives me a slight nod of encouragement.

I place my hands on my knees, blowing out a slow exhale before I begin.

"My mom says we're moving. I know it has to be something about her boyfriend. He was giving her money to … pay rent. I think she caught him

cheating with Sandra. She lives in the trailer next door, and she's a whore."

Pastor Saint's eyes widen slightly.

I quickly tack on, "So I've heard. I don't really know. Anyway … we can't afford to stay here now. I begged her to stay." My eyes water again. "But she doesn't care. She won't take Tony back after what he did with Sandra."

I use the sleeve of my shirt to dry my eyes, trying to hold in the sniffles. A warm hand cups my shoulder, pulling me into a hug.

Silas is sitting beside me, attempting to comfort me. "It's gonna be okay, Scar. We're gonna help your mom."

"That's right; we are. You did the right thing, coming here. I want you to know that. Don't you worry about a thing," Pastor Saint says.

I look up at him. His eyes are the same green as his son's. They're comforting. They make me feel safe—both of them do.

I lean farther into Silas's hug, my heart rate decreasing. My limbs have finally stopped trembling.

I'm safe. They've got me. They're going to help. We won't have to move. I won't have to leave Silas.

ELEVEN

silas

PRESENT DAY

I'M LEAVING my world history class on Wednesday when Cole slides up next to me, Ryan right behind him. I'm not at all in the mood to talk to Ryan.

"Hey, Saint, you feeling good about our first game this Friday?" Cole has a shit-eating grin on his face as he claps his hand over my shoulder.

I nod. "Feeling damn good, Whitlock."

My Mustangs baseball Dri-Fit pullover has gotten a little tight around my shoulders. I bulked up a lot over the winter months.

"We're headed for lunch in the cafeteria. You coming?" Cole removes his hand from my shoulder to pull out his phone and text someone as we walk.

"Sure, I'm starving." I adjust the strap of my backpack, tugging it higher as we stroll across campus.

It's a cold day at Ole Tex University in Greencity, Texas. The ground is icy in some places. I saw a few people slip on it early this morning when I got up for coffee before my first class.

I'm an early riser like my father. He taught me from a young age that a man should be the first one awake in the house and the last one to go to sleep.

We make our way through the double doors of the cafeteria. We deposit our backpacks on an empty table before joining the growing line of students holding red plastic trays.

The food here is decent. It's nothing compared to my mom's cooking, but it cures the issue of hunger.

Cole and Ryan are in line in front of me. I'm the tallest of our trio. Their conversation isn't something I'm paying attention to until I hear the name Scarlett.

"She's as hot as sin, man. Do you think Coach Simmers meant what he said about kicking someone off the team for starting something with her?"

Cole shrugs. "I don't know. He looked serious when he said it. What makes you so sure she'll go for you?"

Ryan places his tray down to be served by the cafeteria worker behind the glass. She scoops a large helping of beef stew into his bowl.

“We played beer pong the other night, and she was flirting with me the entire time. I really thought she’d go upstairs with me, but she got sick and left early.”

My fist clenches the plastic tray in my hand. Cole steps up to set his tray down to be served.

“I don’t buy that. She’s into me. Same thing happened between us at the Sigma Phi party at the beginning of the semester.” Cole smiles flirtatiously at the lunch lady, like he does to all women of any age, size, or shape.

He and Ryan continue to bicker about which of them Scarlett is actually into. I wish I could shove both their heads together and shut them up.

We shuffle through the line, our trays heavily laden with stew, rolls, corn dogs, and banana pudding once we return to the table.

“Well, Whitlock, I guess we’ll just have to see who the best man is by the end of May. She’ll be with us all season, coming to every out-of-town game. Can’t get caught by Coach.”

Ryan is an outfielder—a really good one, probably our best. I try to remind myself how he will be helping us win games, if only I can resist bending his fingers back so far that he needs a cast.

“Speak of the devil’s mistress,” Cole mumbles, winking at both of us as he nods toward the entrance of the cafeteria.

I know who it is before turning around.

I can feel her before I see her. Her laughter floats through the room, distinguishable among the crowd of students.

She finally wanders into my line of sight. She’s wearing a pink puffer coat and shimmery black leggings with fuzzy boots on. Her hair is in a high ponytail, a few dark tendrils loose around her face. Minimal makeup is on her face, but she looks as gorgeous as ever.

She’s smiling at another girl who looks familiar as they both remove their coats and drop their book bags on the table a few feet away from ours. She’s wearing a formfitting, cropped blue sweater underneath her coat.

I look away before she has a chance to see me, chewing my food quicker so I can get out of here. The last four years were a state of pure bliss, not being around her, hyper-focused on her position in every room.

Now, I’m a slave to her location, always waiting to see if she’s going to show up where I am, wondering what she’ll be wearing, who she will grace with her attention.

Hating someone so much is exhausting. It would be easier to just not care.

"Cohen! You coming to the first game this weekend?" Cole turns around in his seat across from me to talk to Scarlett.

"Considering it's what I get paid to do, yes." Her voice is low and bored.

"How do you like the new gig?" Ryan joins in on their conversation.

I can practically smell the smoke blowing out of Cole's ears. He turns back around, squinting his eyes at Ryan sitting next to me.

"It's great, except for the company it forces me to keep," Scarlett drawls.

Her friend snorts at the dig. They must be the only two girls on this entire campus who would actively make fun of some of the baseball players. Most of them treat us like gods, which I've quickly realized gets annoying.

My head has been lowered since the girls sat down, eyes on my tray of food. The last time I saw her was at the frat party over a week ago, when she and Ryan caught me making out with Amy sitting on my lap.

The expression on her face in that moment is burned into my brain for eternity.

"I, for one, am glad to have you around. Too much testosterone on the bus makes me antsy when we go out of town." Cole seems to think sucking up to Scarlett is the move to win the little challenge he and Ryan have going on.

"Damn straight. I bet you get your own hotel room too. If you get lonely … you know I'm just a phone call away."

What a couple of desperate morons.

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind when I'm sleeping in a big, cozy bed all to myself," she muses.

My eyes finally drift up to look at her table. Scarlett and her friend are seemingly unaffected by the attempt at flirtatious banter Cole and Ryan are so intent on starting.

Several seconds tick by before she turns to meet my gaze. The gray pools are storming in her very Scarlett kind of way—attempting to torture me from across the room without a word.

She bats her long, dark lashes at me while a tiny smirk forms over her lips. I don't know what she's smiling about. Her expression is devious, like

she knows something I don't.

Remaining calm is one of my strengths. That's part of what makes me a great pitcher. I can shut out the noise from the crowd, the taunts from the other team, even the pressure to get a strike when there are two outs and bases are loaded.

But right now, I'm feeling rattled by a five-two spitfire who's doing nothing at all, except smiling at me.

I'm getting more pissed off about it by the second, my blood pumping loudly in my ears. I'm about to ask her what her deal is when a hand brushes against my shoulder, pulling me out of the spell I was under.

"Hi, handsome." Amy's voice is right in my ear. Her warm breath is on my neck.

Scarlett's smile drops, eyes going dark.

I can't look away from her, but my mouth slowly curves upward.

"I texted you," Amy whispers as she leans farther down to plant a kiss on my cheek.

It wasn't my plan, but I guess her interest in me is working out in my favor once again.

Amy did text me, but I've been completely ignoring her. I'd honestly forgotten she existed until I got the message last night.

"How did you get my number?" My eyes are still glued to Scarlett's, needing to see her reaction to this exchange as it plays out.

Amy plops down beside me, uninvited. "Adeline gave it to me. I figured you just forgot to ask me for mine."

If there's one thing I've never understood about women, it's the way they make assumptions about motives purely based on what they want to believe. If I had wanted her number, I definitely would have asked for it.

I need to have an upfront conversation with Amy about not being interested in dating her. The hints I've given her seem to be going right over her head.

Here in the cafeteria, in front of everyone, is not the place to do it. I'm not a dick. I wouldn't embarrass her like that.

There's a moment of awkward silence as she stares at my profile, waiting for me to say something.

"Okay," is all I can manage to reply.

I probably sound like a douchebag, but I genuinely don't know how to reply to that without being mean or lying to her and leading her to believe

that I did want her number.

"Wow, you baseball players are something else." She huffs as she rises to her feet and storms off.

Scarlett breaks our stare long enough to follow Amy's retreating form for a few seconds. By the time she looks back at me, my line of sight has been obscured by my roommate.

"Who was that?" Dan sits directly in front of me, still blocking my view of Scarlett.

"A bat bunny who desperately wants Saint to slam her," Cole says.

"Slam her? Is that the baseball douche version of bang?" Dan laughs.

"Sure is," Ryan says. "And I'll be slamming our equipment manager before the end of the season."

"You wanna bet?" Cole leans back, arms folded over his big chest.

All the baseball players are built. We spend half of our practice time lifting weights up until the season starts. I've put on over twenty pounds of muscle in the last four months alone.

It's a good thing too, because I'm about three seconds away from using it against my teammate—violently.

"Whitlock, I'd love to bet you that I will score before you."

My fists are clenched tightly under the table.

"All right, I bet you that I will hit a *grand slam* with her before you do. In fact, I bet you I'll do it before anyone on the team does."

My usual calm demeanor has vanished, replaced by someone with a Hulk-like anger issue. It takes all my hard-earned self-control to resist throat-punching him to shut his big mouth.

Ryan barks out a laugh, stretching his hand across the table toward Cole. They shake on it, and my stomach churns.

"Deal."

She's right behind them, sitting at the next table.

How can they talk about her like this when she's right there?

Dan's eyes are on mine, and I can see he's clearly disappointed I haven't defended Scarlett to my teammates.

What is there to say?

If I speak up, they'll all know we have a history. They'll know I used to be in love with her.

My chest is rising and falling quickly. My skin is hot as the rage inside me only seems to be growing when I remember the last letter Scarlett sent

me, the one where she told me how she really felt.

Cole leans forward over the table, his voice lowered. “From the minute I saw that ass shaking up on a table, I knew I’d be the first one to bag that whore.”

My body moves without my permission. My right arm rises—the one I throw baseballs with at ninety-two miles an hour—and connects with Cole’s throat. My fist crushes his esophagus, knocking the wind out of him.

He stumbles back out of his chair, falling onto the cafeteria floor.

I can’t hear anything besides my rushing blood for a few seconds. I stand up so I can see him.

Cole’s eyes are wide as he reaches his hand up to grip his throat, gasping for air. He’s lucky the table is between us, or I would’ve followed him down there and done it again.

“Shut. The fuck up,” I grit out. “Or I’ll make sure you never speak again.”

TWELVE

scarlett

THE CAFETERIA IS a roaring mass of students clamoring to get closer to the fight. My heart is pounding, my mouth gaping open as I watch it unfold in disbelief.

Goody Two-shoes Silas Saint just started a fight …

"What happened?" Lucy was facing me and didn't see it.

Cole landed right behind her after getting punched in the throat by Silas. My bottom lip is trembling as I recount it to her.

"Everyone was talking like nothing was wrong, and then suddenly, Silas just throat-punched Cole."

"Holy shit. I thought they were friends."

Silas is standing up, glaring at Cole on the floor. His face is contorted in anger like I've never seen it before.

People are pressing in all around with phones out, recording.

Silas's mouth moves, saying something to Cole that I can't hear over the excited chatter among the spectators. I want to scream at them all to shut up so I can hear.

Fights in general always draw a crowd, but a brawl between two of the top players on our school's D1 baseball team is an event no one wants to miss.

My hand is clapped over my chest, and I'm literally on the edge of my seat, waiting to see what will happen next. I've known Silas since we were kids, but I've never seen this side of him.

Cole must not be interested in getting a black eye on top of a bruised throat because he stays down on the floor for another few seconds. Silas grabs his backpack, slings it over his shoulder, and spins around to walk away.

The crowd parts to let his big frame through, whispers traveling through like wildfire.

"Damn it, I was hoping for some defense strikes," a random skinny kid whines as the people dissipate back to their tables.

Cole finally stands up, one hand still wrapped around his throat. Ryan hops out of his chair, looking at his teammate with an awestruck expression.

"What the hell was that about?" is all I hear Ryan say before they grab their backpacks and walk out of the cafeteria, choosing to use the doors on the opposite side that Silas went through.

Dan turns around in his chair to look at me, a smirk on his lips.

"What happened?" I question him.

He stands up, bringing his food tray and backpack over to the table with me and Lucy. She's sitting directly across from me, so he sets his stuff beside her and takes a seat.

"That was insane. I've known Saint my entire life, and he's never hurt a fruit fly." Dan is chuckling as he casually takes another bite of his beef stew.

My mouth is agape. "Um, hello? Story, please? What were they talking about?"

What on earth is he laughing about?

Dan looks up at me, chewing his food as he continues to snicker, shaking his head. His eyes are sparkling with a secret.

"Daniel, are you seriously not going to tell us what happened?" I stare at his smug face, incredulous.

He takes a long swig of his sweet tea before finally answering me. "It was some argument they had over a bet. Ryan and Cole were just mouthing off, and Silas got sick of it."

Lucy tosses her caramel curls over her shoulder. "What was the bet about?"

Dan turns to face her, leaning forward. "I don't think we've met. Hi, I'm Daniel, but my friends call me Dan."

He extends a hand to Lucy, who reaches out to shake it. "I'm Lucy, or Lu. How do you and Scarlett know each other?"

I want to grill Dan further about the bet, but I have a feeling it won't get me anywhere. Maybe he'll be more open to talk about it once we're alone.

"We grew up together. Danny was my first kiss." I pick at the food on my tray, my mind still scrambling to come up with why Silas would throat-

punch Cole.

Dan laughs. “You were my first kiss too. We snuck behind the church and swapped saliva.”

I smile, shaking my head at the memory. “I thought you were going to tattle.”

He grabs his chest with faux shock. “Me? You know I was never a snitch. Secrets are always safe with me.”

Lucy scrunches up her nose. “Sounds better than my first kiss. I was the unfortunate victim of a Seven Minutes in Heaven game with my *first* cousin.”

Dan bursts out laughing. “No way. That’s so gross.”

Lu shakes her head. “Seriously, I thought I was a lesbian afterward because I hated it so much. Turns out, I’m straight. I’m just not into incest.”

“Oh shit, that’ll do it to you. My first boyfriend is dating a guy now. I genuinely think he was with me to try and prove to himself that he did like girls. Honestly, it made me a little insecure because he never wanted to mess around with me.”

Dan squints at me. “Yeah, I’d say that’s a pretty sure sign you shouldn’t be with someone. If they don’t wanna jump your bones twenty-four-seven, it’s not meant to be.”

My mind wanders back over the guys I’ve dated in the past. Most of them didn’t want to do anything *except* have sex.

“I want someone I can be friends with too. The best of both worlds—sex with someone you genuinely like as a person.” I look up at Dan and Lucy.

Both of them are staring at me. I feel overexposed for a moment, folding my arms over my chest.

I’ve said too much.

Lucy sighs. “I get that. My boyfriend is great, but honestly, sometimes, I wonder if he’d like me at all without my boobs being attached to my chest.”

Dan looks at her incredulously. “That’s not normal. You should never feel that way about your significant other. If he can’t sit up all night talking to you like he would a friend, without sex, you deserve better.”

Lucy shrugs. “I just don’t know if that exists. I mean, if it does, it’s not common. Guys kind of have trouble seeing past the physical stuff.”

“Well, I’ve seen it. My brother, Adam, and Harley have it. So does my buddy Levi and his girl, Kenna. But I know they all waited for the sex part

until they were already pretty much in love. They got that foundation built up before taking it to the bedroom. Maybe that's the difference."

"I didn't know Levi and Adam were both wifed up! I'm so behind on everyone. We need to have a get-together." I haven't seen the other guys I grew up with since I moved to Greencity.

Dan smiles. "Yeah, we should. They still take some classes, but they're all obsessed with each other and doing couple things all the time. Plus, Levi has a kid now."

My mouth drops open. "Levi is a *father*? I need a full story time."

Dan nods. "You should hear it from him and Kenna. It's funny when they tell it because you need to hear both sides to really get it."

Lucy turns her dark-brown eyes to Dan. "So, all these people are friends and lovers, but they waited till they were in love to get frisky? Is that your plan? Are you single? How do you wait so long when you have physical needs? Most guys act like they'll die without it."

I knew we'd be great friends when I met this chick.

Dan chokes on a bite of chocolate chip cookie, coughing for a solid thirty seconds before washing it down with his tea. His eyes are watering when he finally finds his voice again.

"Um, well…you gotta have self-control, is my best guess."

I lean forward, placing my elbows on the table. "What do you mean, you guess? Do you practice what you preach, Danny?"

Dan's cheeks are tinged just a little pink. "Never been an issue for me."

My and Lucy's eyes both widen. We turn to stare at each other before looking back at Dan.

"What are you saying—exactly?" I choose my words carefully, truly not knowing what he's hinting at.

Unless things changed drastically after I left Bonnet Valley as a teenager, there was nothing frisky happening between any of the youths in that town. Dan's been at Ole Tex for a year and a half now, so I can't imagine he hasn't found himself drunk at a sorority party during that time, fumbling through that awkward first time. He's a tall, charming, good-looking Southern gentleman.

Honestly, the fact that he's still single is hard for me to believe.

He grins at us. "What, you've never met a twenty-one-year-old male virgin before?"

Now it's Lu's turn to choke on her food. She nearly inhales a slice of apple, coughing until Dan starts to pat her on the back.

"There, there. The initial shock of a handsome devil like me being untouched is completely normal. You'll get used to it."

I laugh out loud, gripping my belly. "You haven't changed a bit, and I love it."

My mind can't help but wander to Dan's best friend and roommate.

Is Saint still a saint too?

If this man is still a virgin, the women of Ole Tex University are seriously being deprived.

Rippling back muscles have flooded my vision. I didn't know that many muscle groups were located in the back and shoulders. I should've paid more attention in anatomy class.

Silas Saint is standing shirtless in front of his locker, his gloriously tanned back the distraction I never knew I needed in this life. He's reaching up to the top shelf of his locker for his baseball cap, his thick shoulder muscles flexing with the movement.

All he has on is a muddy pair of baseball pants and a thin silver chain around his neck, and God sure didn't slack on the day this man was formed. I can't even fathom how much weight he can squat with rounded glutes like those. He's a real-life human work of art.

He pulls the hat down over his head backward, and I nearly fall over. I feel like I'm watching a porno with the way my body is heating and my thighs are clenching together.

Just because you hate him doesn't mean you can't ... enjoy the sight of him. Maybe the feel of him too ...

Once upon a time, in a very descriptive letter, he told me everything he wanted me to feel with him. I still have it tucked away in a safe place, all crumpled up and barely legible anymore from being folded and unfolded a thousand times with damp fingertips.

Maybe I should pull it out and reread it with this new visual in mind ...

“Cohen! You gonna get me that equipment list sometime this semester?” Coach Simmers shouts at me from his office right around the corner.

I’m suddenly aware of the drool practically dripping out of my mouth as I jerk toward the office, my long ponytail whipping around my head. In my peripheral vision, I see Silas turning to look at me, but I ignore him.

Good luck getting that erotic visual out of your head.

The clipboard in my hand has all the information Coach needs, so I set it down on his desk, exhaling.

“Here it is. Everything we need for the weekend games is listed and accounted for.”

Coach Simmers glances at the list briefly before looking up at me. “We’ll load it up tonight since we leave for Oklahoma City at four in the morning. You gotta make sure it all gets loaded, but the guys will do the lifting. You think you can manage?”

I nod. “Yes, sir.”

I’m excited for the chance to prove myself capable to Coach Simmers. There’s something about him that causes all the guys to want to impress him, and I feel it too. He’s fatherly to all of us, which I’ve honestly never experienced.

It’s unusual for me to respond to an adult authority like this, but I want to excel at this job. I want to stay at OTU. My stepdad will keep paying my tuition if I can keep my job and continue to go to therapy.

For the first time in my life since Bonnet Valley, I feel like I belong where I’m at.

I had my first therapy session on Monday, and it wasn’t so bad. Dr. Marcy Trainor didn’t push me at all to share anything personal. We talked about my class schedule, the new job, and whether or not I’d made any friends since moving here. If we stay on the surface, I’ll have no trouble seeing her every two weeks for the rest of the semester to keep stepdaddy’s checks rolling in.

Coach Simmers smiles warmly at me. “You’ve been a great addition to the team. You need anything at the out-of-town game, make sure you let me or one of the coaches know. You’ll have your own hotel room since you’re the only woman coming along. Last year, we had a female trainer, so there were two of y’all. Sorry you gotta be by yourself.”

I shrug. “I’m good by myself. I’ll bring homework.”

Coach nods. He looks down at the clipboard and scans the equipment list. His brow is furrowed with concern. He exhales a deep sigh.

I squeeze the armrest of the chair. “Is, uh, is it all there? Did I miss something?”

He looks up, waving me off. “No, no, it’s not the list. You did good. I’m nervous about the game. Oklahoma is good, best in the division. With the players fighting each other this week, I’m not sure how we’ll fare.”

“Saint and Whitlock, you mean?” I lean forward.

Coach nods, his face grim. Silas is our top-performing pitcher. Cole is the best catcher. They’re supposed to be a dynamic duo, our winning combo.

“Guys are so good at putting stuff behind them. I bet it’s water under the bridge by now.” I smile reassuringly.

Coach laughs. “Is that so? Well, let’s hope.”

THIRTEEN

silas

THE BUS RIDE FROM GREENCITY, Texas to Garland, Oklahoma is six hours.

I get in the zone before games. Nothing can crack my focus.

I'll listen to my pregame playlist once we get closer. It's all classic pianos and violins, Mozart-style. My noise-canceling headphones will keep out the chatter around me from the guys.

The first half of the trip, I'll either talk to whoever sits in my row or listen to an audiobook and attempt to ignore the sight of the long, dark-brown hair sitting in the front row.

My dad texted me last night that he was in Garland already with my mom, and they're both excited to see me play tonight. I'm living out both of our dreams right now.

I've also been texting Adeline for the past few days. I don't know if it will go anywhere, but she reached out to me about Amy being young and naive. She apologized for giving her my number, not realizing how obsessed she was with me.

I told her it was fine, and we've been texting ever since. My phone vibrates with a text from Adeline.

Jenson Williams is our third baseman. He's predicted to be a top pick for the majors once he graduates. He's a junior, and he'll most likely be team captain next year.

He collapses into the seat next to mine. “How’s it going, Saint?”

Jenson is a big guy and a strong leader.

“Good, man. Ready for this.”

He reaches into his bag to pull out a book to read. The title reads *Philosophy and Common Sense.*

“Light reading to pass the time?” I joke.

He smiles. “Yeah, nothing too serious. Hey, I heard you clocked Cole Whitlock.”

My smile falls. I’ve been getting shit from the guys for throat-punching Cole for days now. Ryan’s been spreading it through the team and all of campus. Apparently, I need to watch my back.

“You heard right.”

He chuckles. “Yeah? You hitting him really didn’t shock me. Man asks for it on the daily. What I didn’t expect was the reason.”

My fists clench. “What reason is that?”

Jenson studies me for a second before answering, “Word going around is that it had to do with our new equipment manager.”

My blood stops pumping through my veins, my head starting to spin.

He continues, “I can’t say she’s not nice to look at. I just wouldn’t have pinged her for your type. I thought you were seeing that chick from Alpha Chi—Adeline something.”

Word sure gets around at this school.

I shake my head. “Adeline is a nice girl, but I’m focused on the game.”

He nods. “I’d personally never date a sorority girl. They’re all about drama and parties. Not my thing.”

I can’t say that Adeline really seems like a party girl, not like Scarlett does. I don’t know what’s up with my head, losing interest in a sweet girl who really likes me because I can’t shake a complete hot mess who hates me out of my mind. If I never spoke to Adeline again, I don’t think I’d think twice about it.

“So … are you and Cohen a thing then?”

“No. Hell no. Cole’s just starting shit.”

He has to know I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize my place on the team.

He studies my face for a minute, but he doesn’t push it.

“My focus is on throwing strikes and knocking them out of the park. Women are a distraction I don’t need.”

Jenson nods. If anyone on this team understands that, it's him. I've never seen him at a frat party. As far as I know, he hasn't dated anyone since attending Ole Tex, even in the off-season.

The players with potential to go to the major leagues are only a handful of us, but we know how rare that opportunity is.

I'm not about to throw away my future for a pretty face.

Warm-up is nearly over, and my shoulder feels good tonight. The sun is setting behind the bleachers as the stadium fills up with fans from Garland and a few Texans.

My focus hasn't wavered since we left campus. Cole and I haven't spoken since I hit him at lunch two days ago. Yesterday's practice was a light day for me since I'm pitching tonight. I spent it in the gym, lifting weights, and in the batting cages.

I'm standing in the dugout, stretching my shoulder over the bat, when Coach Simmers walks up to me.

"Whitlock, come here."

Cole jogs up next to me, making eye contact with me, but not smiling.

Coach claps his big hands on both of our shoulders. "Now, listen. Y'all are my dynamic duo. You're up against Oklahoma for a reason. They're the team to beat. They've got a batting lineup that'll make you shit your pants. Saint, your arm has to last me all night. Throw 'em how you know you can. Whitlock, you're his eyes on the field. Keep him informed. If you both do your jobs, we can hold 'em back and take a win."

"Yes, sir." I turn to look at Cole.

He nods at Coach before turning to find his place on the bench.

Everyone is in uniform. Tonight, we're wearing white pants with royal-blue jerseys that have gray numbers and the Mustangs baseball mascot, which is a Mustang horse in motion, bucking. Number twenty-six has been mine since I was old enough for T-ball.

Coach addressed the entire team in the locker room. The Oklahoma Bulls has a pitcher who's known for striking out other teams in record time. We have a strong batting lineup, but every team has weaknesses.

I tug my cap lower down on my forehead, taking long, deep breaths as the umpires enter onto the field.

Coach Simmers has lined up three base hitters, then me. Time and time again, I've been knocking balls out of our practice field since preseason practice started.

Something about this year has changed for me. My arm is throwing at ninety-five miles an hour, according to Coach Jones's radar gun. That's the top speed of any college baseball pitcher in the world right now.

When it comes to batting, my speed and strength coincide with my knowledge of pitching. When I was a kid, my dad taught me to analyze the pitcher as he winds up, to anticipate where the ball will fly before it ever leaves his hand. If I can hit it at the exact right spot, it'll fly out of the park every time.

My eyes are focused on the rival team's pitcher as he steps up to the pitcher's mound, getting ready to throw the ball across home plate. I take note of his stance, the seconds he takes before releasing the ball, and the angle it takes from the ground down to home plate.

He's left-handed.

Left-handed pitchers are notorious for throwing off batters. Most baseball players grew up batting right-handed pitches. It's not actually any harder to hit a left-handed pitch, but the windup looks different and can throw off the batter's focus. It's a mind game.

Lucky for me, I can bat both directions. Left- or right-handed, it doesn't matter. My dad insisted on making me do both when I started playing, and I've never stopped. It's a rare and useful ability.

"You batting left tonight?" Cole appears at my side.

"Yeah."

He's silent for a moment as we observe our opponents taking their positions. My skin tingles with anticipation. I'm antsy, ready to play.

"You're stronger than ever. They won't know what hit them."

He walks back over to the bench. I think, in his own way, that was Cole's way of saying that we're good—at least for the game. The tension in my shoulders eases up slightly.

Our first batter steps up to the plate. He's good, always gets at least a piece of the ball to get on base. He makes it to first with a grounder, just in time.

The second batter goes out—Ryan. My eyes are on the pitcher, studying his form. He's in the center of the stadium, thousands of eyes on him. I know exactly how that position feels. Not letting the pressure get to him is half the battle.

He nearly strikes Ryan out, who keeps swinging too soon.

He's faking him out.

The best pitchers learn their batters, just like the best batters learn the pitchers. He's seen that Ryan goes too soon, and he's playing with him.

Finally, Ryan gets a chunk out of it, barely making it to first.

Jenson struts out to the plate next, practicing his swing. He's a strong batter. There's a good chance he'll knock it into the crowd. His swing is perfect on the first pitch, clinking with the bat loud and clear.

The ball soars far, so far that it nearly hits the fence in the back. The left fielder chases it, picking it up out of the grass and throwing it infield to third base, trying to catch our first guy.

He slides in, barely making it safe.

Bases are loaded.

I pick up my bat, feeling the rubber grip under my gloves. I'm about to step out onto the field when the door leading into the dugout from the locker room swings open and Scarlett rushes out.

She's in the usual equipment manager uniform for the games, but it's my first time seeing it on her.

Holy shit.

It's a formfitting, long-sleeved top in royal blue, a similar style to our jerseys. The front script in gray says *Mustangs.* The pants are skintight and solid black. She's wearing white tennis shoes, and her long, rich brown hair is in waves, tied up into a ponytail, pulled through a matching blue baseball cap.

I've never seen her in any kind of baseball-esque attire. She makes it look like it should be a female-dominated sport and men have been stealing the spotlight for way too long.

Imagine going to a game, and she's the one squatting out on the field.

You have to focus on this game. Right fucking now.

She hands Coach Simmers a clipboard, turning halfway back around to go back through the door. Our eyes meet for a split second. Hers drop down to the bat, and she must realize I'm up next. She pauses, tilting her body back toward the field. Her lips part, seemingly in anticipation.

This entire exchange happens in a matter of moments, but when I briefly pause near the exit, Coach takes it as me needing something. I drag my eyes from Scarlett's as he starts speaking.

"You got this one, Saint. Take it left. They're all set up. Don't let him fake you out." He claps me on the shoulder.

I jog up to home plate. My eyes meet the pitcher's for a brief moment before I take my stance, batting left. He gives a sly half smile.

My eyes don't stray from his left arm through the windup, the pullback, the release.

The ball nearly hits me, getting dangerously close to my right leg. I look up at him, judging whether or not it was on purpose.

He's not smiling this time.

As a pitcher, I know how rare it is for someone at this level to throw so far on the inside unintentionally. Some guys use it as a method to throw the batter off. They know who the favored ones are, based on the lineup.

"Focus, Saint!" Simmers shouts from the dugout.

I look over toward him one more time, just to see the pale-gray eyes next to him staring at me.

I tap the bat on the ground before getting back into my stance, eyes on the pitcher. He winds up, pulls back, and whirls the baseball dead center across home.

My bat clinks against it just in time, sending it soaring over his head, dead center through the field and out of the park.

FOURTEEN

scarlett

WATCHING Silas play college-level baseball is unreal.

He's not just good; he's incredible. He was the best player on the field tonight, without question—from the first time he touched home plate and hit a grand slam until he struck out three of the first five batters for Oklahoma. He dominated the field.

The opposing team couldn't even hit the scoreboard until the third inning. They couldn't get a guy around the bases to home.

I had to go from the dugout to the locker room for different reasons throughout the game, so I missed some of the plays.

Any chance I got, my eyes were on Silas's tight ass in those white baseball pants. After he slid into second base and got covered in red dirt, the temperature in the dugout rose by ten degrees.

For the first time in my life, I'm starting to understand the thrill of sporting events. If I'd known for the last nineteen years that this was what these men looked like up close, I'd have been a faithful fan.

And now, I have a front-row seat for this entire season …

Honestly, my resolve to hate him had better get stronger if I'm going to resist this kind of temptation. This stadium is crawling with hot baseball players in uniform, and he looks better than them all.

I absolutely *loathe* him for it.

Sure, I see them all almost daily on campus, but these guys—all dressed up, sweaty and covered in red dirt, hyper-focused on competing—are *literally* the sexiest things I've ever witnessed.

We're back in the locker room after winning our first game against the team assumed to be the best in our division. Spirits are high. The guys are excitedly talking, smiles on all their faces.

Coach gave a little speech already, praising the hard work put in on the field.

I'm busy taking account of all the equipment we used, lining up everything from extra bats to the catcher's pads.

"Hey, girl, you sure were a nice addition out there." Cole slides up next to me, handing me the last piece of his sweaty catcher's equipment.

I smile. "That game was amazing. Great job."

Coach Jones shouts at all the guys. "Let's grab showers. We've got to get to the hotel and sleep so we can dominate tomorrow's game."

Cole walks past me toward the shower stalls. I'm still wiping down the equipment with sanitizer when Silas walks right by me in the same direction.

He's shirtless, wearing only the pants he had on for the game, his cross necklace, and his cleats. His sandy-blonde hair is sticky and matted to his head.

"Good game," I blurt out of nowhere.

He turns his head to look at me, unsmiling. He flexes his jaw.

"I didn't even realize until now that I might be a baseball fan," I stammer.

In his baseball-god level presence, I'm a blubbering mess, a puddle on the floor, now pooling with dirt and sweat.

He leans up against the locker. I have to tilt my head up to look at him. He's over a foot taller than me.

He folds his arms over his muscled chest. "Glad I could be a part of your conversion."

My hands are clammy as I watch him strut to the steam-filled shower room. I'm shaking, completely unwell with how strongly I've been affected by watching him play.

Whatever is happening to me right now, I've got to get it under control.

I need to remember what happened to make me lose these feelings the first time around, converting them to something dark and unredeemable.

I've finished my job and assembled and cleaned all of the equipment right around when the guys get out of the shower. They all seem to forget there's a female in the space because some of them drop their towels right in front of me. I get an eyeful of Ryan's pale white ass before deciding I'd rather wait on the bus.

They're still laughing and talking, seemingly oblivious to me.

With my hand covering my eyes, I start making my way out of the locker room. I collide with someone's bare chest—someone big.

I look up, an apology on my lips. "Sorry, trying to get out of here."

Jenson, the third baseman, smiles down at me. "This is no place for a lady."

He's still damp from the shower. I feel a slight ping of disappointment that it's not a different bare chest in front of my face, but I give him a half smile before walking around him and out into the hallway.

My steps take me out into the night and toward the bus in the parking lot, where there is a small crowd of people waiting to greet the players. Most of them look like parents and grandparents.

There's a group of girls my age, all wearing leggings or tight jeans and jerseys that have been cut off to show their stomachs. I wonder for a moment if they're from my school and maybe they're dating the players, but I don't recognize any of them. They give me a side-eye before turning their eyes to look behind me, no doubt hoping to get the attention of the team.

I roll my eyes before climbing up into the charter bus and finding a seat in the row behind the coaches.

My eyes drift out toward the people waiting, illuminated by the fluorescent light poles.

My heart starts thumping louder in my chest when I see Silas's family. His dad is standing tall and proud, his mother tiny and cute beside him. Silas is the spitting image of his father. They look so much alike that it's eerie. His grandparents are standing beside them. His grandfather is just another twenty-five-year-older version of his dad.

I watch the team amble out of the building. They meet up with their families, hugging and taking photos.

I'm frozen in place when I see Silas, a wide grin on his face as they tell him how amazing he played, his father clapping him on the shoulder. They take a family photo, his mother's face full of pride.

Silas has always had a great relationship with his family—something I'm incredibly envious of. It's not that I don't love my mom, but the person she is today isn't the woman who raised me. I'm glad Lettie has the mother I always wanted, but it's been hard for me to just let go of everything that happened while I was growing up.

Maybe opening up in therapy and processing some of this childhood trauma wouldn't be so bad.

I turn away from the exchange, my head resting back against the leather seat. My breath is coming in short puffs. I try to get myself under control, the swirl of emotions inside me raging. My eyes drift closed, a lonely tear sliding down my cheek.

They're probably going to be at all the games, so you'd better get used to seeing it.

I'm cleansing my face in my hotel room. It's amazing to get my own room, and I'm secretly glad there are no female trainers for the team this year.

It's late, but for some reason, I don't feel tired at all. The game tonight was so exciting, and I'm anxious to see how the guys play tomorrow and Sunday.

College baseball schedules are rigorous. They play three games on the weekends and one during the week. Four games a week is way too much exhaustion for pitchers, so they each only pitch for one game, sitting out the rest, except for batting. Silas will be a relief pitcher for one more game this week, but for the next two days, he'll be in the dugout … with me and the coaches.

My phone pings with an incoming text from Cole.

Hot tub?

I stare at the screen, chewing my lip as I debate on my response.

Who's going?

A hot tub soak sounds heavenly, but if it's just Cole down there, I'm out. I'm not into him, and being alone with a guy in that situation is asking to either be taken advantage of or for rumors to start. I can't risk losing my job.

Me, Scott, and Trent.

I don't know Trent and Scott well, but they've never given me any reason to feel uncomfortable. I type out a quick reply before digging through my suitcase for the bathing suit I packed, just for this potential event happening.

Okay, see you down there.

My swimsuit is a neon-yellow triangle bikini with high-waisted bottoms. I wear a size 32D in bras, so my boobs always spill out a little bit in swimwear. It's just my luck of the draw.

I pull denim shorts over it and an oversize pale-pink T-shirt that I usually sleep in because it's worn out and cozy. I turn my ponytail into a massive messy bun on top of my head so that my hair doesn't get wet. After grabbing a towel and my room key, I head out the door.

The elevator is at the other end of the hall. When I get there, the doors are closing.

"Oh, wait!" I screech.

A muscular, tanned forearm reaches out through the opening to stop the automatic doors from shutting.

"Thanks." I look up at the other occupant to see Silas, shirtless—*again*—wearing only swim shorts.

Ugh, fuck me.

His face is neutral as he leans back against the back wall of the elevator, eyes straight ahead. I step inside, letting the doors close.

We don't speak as the elevator descends from the fifth floor down to the ground level. I see his fists are clenched in my peripheral vision. The tension could be severed with a samurai blade.

I try not to envision his stance on the pitcher's mound, eyes lasered in on the nervous batter. My mind recalls his every movement as he leveled up to hit the ball out of the park, which he ended up doing a total of three times tonight.

Why is it so hot to watch a man excel at something he loves?

My stomach is clenched tight, my lower back starting to sweat. This proximity to him, coupled with being completely alone, is playing games with my head.

His muscles must be sore.

The elevator finally comes to a stop, and the doors open with a ding. He waits for me to exit, so I go ahead of him. The sign for the hot tub and pool

area is right outside the elevator with an arrow indicating it's to the left. I turn to follow it through a glass door leading outside into the late-February air. It's cold, probably close to freezing temperatures.

I expect to see the other team members already relaxed in the steaming hot tub, but it's completely empty. My steps falter. It's close to eleven p.m., so the entire pool area is technically closed, according to the hours posted.

Do I really want to be alone with Silas? Surely, the others will get here soon.

I'm freezing my toes off, so without wasting time, I start to strip down. I toss my towel on a nearby plastic chair before peeling my shirt off over my head, then wiggling out of my denim shorts. I hear a faint inhale of breath behind me. A smirk ghosts across my lips as I continue to strip down to my bathing suit.

I pivot to face the man who followed me out here, the one whose heart I shattered years ago.

He's turned around, facing the wall. I don't wait to see if he's going to join me—it's too damn cold for that. I'm already shivering as I step down into the hot water. My frigid toes tingle and burn for a few seconds before adjusting to the heat.

My body immediately relaxes as I lean back against the side of the tub. I close my eyes, letting out an involuntary, breathy moan.

I hear another sound from Silas, something that sounds like he's forcing air out of his lungs.

Is he okay?

"Are you, uh, doing all right over there?"

I tilt around to see what's happening with our star player, who is still awkwardly facing the wall. His head is lowered down, looking at the ground. The lower right side of his back is starting to form a bruise, where I remember him getting hit with a ball during the game.

"It feels much better in here." I pause, debating my next words but deciding I want to see his reaction to them. "I promise not to touch you and steal your purity, PK."

The definition in his back muscles intensifies as he flexes for a moment before slowly turning around. His pale-green eyes bore into mine as he walks up to the hot tub, deposits his towel on the ground, and steps into the water.

I notice the front of his swim trunks being shaped a little bit odd. It's nothing too out of the ordinary; it just looks like something is bulging out.

My cheeks heat when I realize what I might be seeing is Silas Saint with a half-mast boner. He held his towel in front of himself as long as he could before having to set it on the ground.

I bite my lip, holding back a smirk. The conversation with Dan at the cafeteria table floods back into my mind.

Is Silas still a virgin? I have to know.

He settles into the heated water directly across from me, leaning his head back against the edge and closing his eyes.

My eyes travel over to the door leading into the pool area.

Where are the other guys?

It seems strange to me that they aren't down here. I left my phone up in the room on the charger because it was about to die, so I can't text Cole.

Silas lifts his head up, eyes opening to stare at me. His gaze is intense, like he's trying to see right through me, down to my soul.

I stare right back at him. The water is still, the top of my breasts exposed in the cold air. His muscled chest resembles something I've seen before on the cover of an old romance book, gloriously wet and shimmery in the dim light from the light pole over the pool area.

I wet my lips, and his eyes flutter down to watch the movement. Part of me feels like we're suspended in another world, like this isn't our reality. We're hundreds of miles away from home. No one knows we're out here when we should be up in our beds, asleep.

He won't stop looking at my mouth, and his expression is … hungry. He licks his lips.

Who would know if we maybe didn't act like we hated each other for … a few minutes?

"Should I turn on the bubbles?" I ask, my voice a little hoarse.

He doesn't speak, simply nodding.

I stand up, climb the steps to get out, and walk over to a little red button near the posted list of rules. It has to be turned like an oven timer. I twist it all the way to a hundred eighty minutes, and immediately, the jets come to life, sputtering the hot water around Silas.

I hustle back over to the hot tub, my nipples hardening as the cold air gets to them.

Silas the Saint *definitely* notices, and his eyes visibly darken with something that looks a whole lot like lust.

I clench my legs together, sinking down into the water.

Is it so wrong that I want my ex-best friend to touch me?

FIFTEEN

silas

MY CURRENT PROXIMITY to Scarlett Cohen is something I've imagined many times before, but I never thought it would become my reality. The lower half of my body is reacting to the sight of the hard peaks of her breasts in a tiny yellow bikini in a way that I will be taking to my grave—just like the mental image.

I've grown to expect her to call me PK, but I haven't used her nickname in years. For a while, I felt like if I didn't, she would miss it.

I doubt she's even noticed, but I want to see if I can get a reaction using it now.

"How'd you like the game, Scar?"

Her body stills, the corner of her mouth tilting up. "Would've been better if y'all had played shirts versus skins."

I'm not sure if she's trying to flirt with me or if she's just being Scarlett. Watching her entertain every male within a ten-mile radius is a special kind of torture.

"We play that way during practice sometimes."

Her eyes are focused on mine. "I know. I get to watch practice."

She pushes off from the edge, floating closer to me. My body tenses up, and I brace myself on the bench with my hands. Every fiber of my being is in tune with her movement right now. My inhales get faster as she inches closer.

This hot tub isn't big. It might seat up to eight people if they're okay with touching the other occupants.

She reaches my side, choosing to settle in inches away from me on the same bench. Her elbow rests on the outside edge as she faces me. Her chest

is half out of the water, and I'm having trouble keeping my eyes trained on her face.

"I still don't like you, but I have a question." Her husky voice is barely above a whisper.

I don't trust my voice not to crack, so I simply bob my head. My body tilts toward her, as I'm eager to hear what she's going to ask me about.

"Why did you punch Cole?"

My body stills. My mom told me once that women don't ask questions they don't already know the answers to.

Does she know? Did Cole tell her?

I can't risk the possibility that she does know and then catches me lying about it, but I would rather cut off my pitching arm than tell her it was about her.

I shift my body to face her more fully.

"Whatever you heard, I'm sure it was just a rumor." I try to keep my voice casual, even though my pulse is racing.

She tilts her face up. "Who said I heard anything?" Her breath spreads warmth over the base of my neck, level with her mouth.

"The rumor mill is relentless, but most of it's bullshit. I would think you know that by now."

She edges closer to me until her knee is on my thigh. I'm frozen in place, shocked that she's voluntarily touching my body after being very vocal about how much she dislikes me.

"Any chance I can persuade you to fess up and put all those rumors to rest?" Her voice is sultry and seductive.

"Why so interested?"

I need to take some control over this situation because right now I feel like I'm just another unfortunate victim at the whim of Scarlett's desire to play.

I reach forward under the water, gripping the top of her mid-thigh with my hand and squeezing gently. Her eyes widen at the pressure.

My hand feels like it's on fire. Her skin is smooth in my grip while mine is callous from lifting weights and hours of batting practice.

She's not one to back down—ever. She moves her tantalizing body closer to me, pressing her chest up against my shoulder. The warmth of her soft breasts touching my cold skin sends sparks through my shoulders and chest. I can feel the points of her nipples.

“I guess I’m just curious about what could have possibly driven a saint to such a violent outburst.” Her eyes dip down to my mouth as she bites her bottom lip.

My heart is thundering inside my chest. I don’t know if any piece of her is being genuine with me right now or if it’s all an act.

Part of me wonders if I’m having a very lucid dream right now because it wouldn’t be the first time my subconscious created a scenario like this with the first girl who ever sent my head straight into the gutter.

“I thought you and Whitlock were *buddies*. I’m surprised he hasn’t told you,” I say.

We’re at a standstill. If we draw our bodies any closer to each other, she’ll be sitting in my lap, and there’s no way she wouldn’t feel my physical reaction to her.

In typical Scarlett fashion, she does exactly what I never expected her to do. She pushes against my hold on her, stretching her leg over me and settling into my lap. Her ass presses down into my thighs. I know she can immediately feel that I’m hard.

Scarlett is straddling me.

“Maybe he did,” she whispers into my ear, hot air coating my freezing skin.

My excitement for her is now right where it needs to be. The only barrier between us is my swim trunks and her bikini bottoms.

I would have the good sense to feel embarrassed if all my nerve endings weren’t screaming with lust. My hands reach back to grip her hips, fingers pressing into her ass.

I want to keep her here forever.

With our height difference, her current position brings her face equal to mine. Her mouth is inches away from me, the tips of her breasts pressing into my chest.

“You excited to see me, PK?”

She’s taunting me, but her heavy breathing gives her away. She’s just as excited to be here as I am to have her here. We spent years desiring each other with no fulfillment.

Almost a decade of yearning is all coming to a point at this moment.

As much as I know she hates me now, it’s clear that she still *desires* me —physically at least.

That’s not enough. That will never be enough.

I want to silence my inner dialogue, ignore the voice of reason … even if just for tonight. I want inside her more than I've wanted anything. I literally *crave* to feel her. I've lain awake at night, wondering what she feels like.

This could be your only chance, the last shot you have at being with her. She'll probably wake up tomorrow, hating you again.

My hand releases her hip, sliding over to the front of her swimsuit bottoms.

She's motionless, lips parted slightly as she gazes at me.

My fingers slip underneath the fabric, my knuckles grazing over her skin. I'm so close, closer to this part of a woman than I've ever been before.

Without breaking eye contact, my fingers inch lower. I feel the slit of her lips. The tip of my index finger sweeps over it, and she hisses in a sharp breath. My eyes go round at her reaction when I realize that it feels good for her there.

I pause for half a second to give her a chance to stop me, to pull away, to say no.

Instead, she silently begs me with her eyes to continue.

My finger grazes over the same place again, feeling a little knob underneath her skin. Scarlett lets out a soft moan that sounds like her pleading for me to keep going.

This time, I take two fingers to the same place and squeeze the knob between them. She lets out a soft cry, followed by a word.

"More …"

My erection is as hard as stone, still pressing into her. I pull her swimsuit bottoms over to the side to get better access to her. My fingers keep sliding over her in the same place, again and again. I watch her face, absorbing every reaction to my movements. Her eyes close, and I feel like I'm floating on a cloud of ecstasy, getting to see her react to me pleasuring her.

I've never experienced this before, never touched a woman like this. It's only a couple of minutes before I feel her legs start to squeeze me closer and she lets out a soft cry.

Her face is the most beautiful sight to me—always—and her expression of pleasure is addictive to absorb.

She finally comes back to earth, panting for breath and gaping at me. Without a word, she reaches down, and I feel a burst of anxiety in my

stomach, thinking she might be angry about what just happened.

Instead of grabbing my hand, she reaches for my waistband. My eyes stay connected to hers as I lift up my hips, and she uses both hands to slide them down to the top of my thighs.

My hardness is out in the water now, sticking straight up without the barrier of fabric to keep it down.

If she sits back down now …

I'm unable to move as her hand reaches down to grip the base of me. Nothing has ever felt so good in my entire life on this planet.

She guides me to the space below, where I was just touching her. My highly sensitive tip brushes against her wet opening.

She pauses, her eyes searching mine.

We both know what this means. We're risking it all by doing this, taking a leap into a space we've never dared enter before—for good reason.

She's made it very clear how she feels about me—that she would rather die alone than be with me. This can't be anything more than physical.

I literally cannot fathom going back now that we're here. I shift my hips up slightly, entering her by barely half an inch.

She takes it as an invitation, sitting her body farther down and covering me with herself.

I thought the best feeling in the world was her hand on me, but I was completely wrong. This is by far the most incredible thing I've ever experienced.

"Scar …" I gasp, my hands moving up to push back the triangles of her bikini top so I can see her breasts.

They spill out with her beautiful pink nipples that I need to taste. They're supple and perfect—another figment of my imagination that's proving to be ten times better in real life.

I'm about to lean down and suck on one when she unexpectedly lifts off of me. It feels incredible for one second—until she's gone.

"Condom!" she pants.

She steps back, eyes wide as she stares at my face, tits still out and screaming for my attention.

"Scar, what—" I try to stand up before I remember I'm practically naked.

I reach down to pull up my swim trunks, but she bolts. She's out of the hot tub and wrapped in her towel before I can stop her.

“Scarlett! What’s wrong?” I step out of the water into the freezing night, my hardness still causing my shorts to tent in the front.

She ignores me, running for the door into the hotel and using her key to open it, glancing back with a frantic expression and wide eyes before fleeing inside.

SIXTEEN

scarlett

FOUR AND A HALF YEARS EARLIER

MAMA IS CRYING SOFTLY into her pillow. I don't know if she knows I'm still awake, but I roll over and place my hand on her arm. She sniffles, trying to control herself.

"It's going to be okay. We've made it through hard times before." As usual, I take on the role of the comforter, the calm one.

She inhales a long breath, moving toward the nightstand to get a tissue.

"I just don't know how we will make it now. With a baby here, how will we both work?"

I reach my hand across her to pull her into an embrace.

"Mama, you will find something to do while I keep her at home. I can work the night shift. You'll see once she's here."

As much as I love my mom, she can be such a panicker. It's like every setback in life is a crisis or the end of the world to her.

"One day, we'll be in a better place. One day, we're going to be living in a decent house with real heating and air-conditioning. One day, we won't be struggling to keep the lights on."

We've had this conversation over and over at this point.

One day, one day, one day … but never today.

She's a broken record that's only gotten more pronounced since we moved away from Bonnet Valley and have struggled to keep jobs that make enough to keep us afloat.

"I promise, Mama. Things are going to get better."

"I hope so."

She goes on, and I roll to my back, realizing I might not get any sleep tonight, meaning I could fail my history exam tomorrow morning.

"It's like he just doesn't have to pay for this mistake. Remember that. Remember that women are the ones who take the fall and accept all the responsibility. Men just run, like cowards."

"I know, Mama."

I've heard it all, again and again.

I love her, but I don't want to end up like her.

PRESENT DAY

The rest of the weekend games passed by quickly.

Cole sent me a text while I was in the hot tub with Silas, saying that he and the other guys were caught by a coach trying to leave their hotel room.

At one point, Silas tried to talk to me in the locker room, but Coach Jones walked in. Another time, he asked me if we could take a moment to step outside during the pregame warm-up, but I denied him again.

Danny texted me, asking me what happened and if he could give Silas my number or Snapchat. I simply replied with *NO* and didn't say anything else.

Silas made another attempt by knocking on my hotel room door Saturday night. I watched him through the peephole with my heart in my throat until he finally went away.

The bus ride back to Ole Tex has felt like six months instead of six hours, and when we finally pull up to the college campus with its old-fashioned orange brick buildings, I sigh in relief.

"All right, boys, rest up tonight, and I'll see you in the weight room at lunch on Monday." Coach Simmers exits the bus after dismissing the team.

I exit after the other coaches, moving toward the storage area under the bus to take a bag of equipment inside.

The players help with loading and unloading during the game weekend, but a lot of them scatter once we get back on Sunday night.

Coach Jones and Coach Simmers, along with the other assistant coaches, all grab a couple of bags of equipment and take them inside.

It's about an hour later before everything is accounted for and stored away.

"Great job this weekend, Cohen. Good to have you with us." Simmers smiles at me before waving his good-bye.

I smile back, turning to walk to my dorm as the evening begins to darken.

I'm halfway home when my phone rings. I swipe right to answer it.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hey, sweetie! How was your first big game weekend? We're so sorry we couldn't make it. Lettie is feeling much better."

My little sister came down with the stomach bug on Friday, so my mom and stepdad couldn't make it to the games. Dave is obsessed with Mustangs baseball, so I expect them to be going to most of them.

"It's no big deal, Mom. I worked the entire time. I'm glad Lettie is feeling better. I miss her so much."

"Oh, I'm sure you do, honey. She misses you too. I really can't wait till we're there next weekend. Make sure you pick out a good restaurant we can all dine at on Saturday for lunch."

It's surreal, talking to this version of my mom after all the years I grew up and she was a broken, hot mess. Now, she's married to a crusty old millionaire who treats her like a princess. It's the first time I've ever witnessed her not stressed out and actually happy. Even though he's twenty-five years older than her, they truly seem to care about each other.

And Lettie calls him Dad, so there's that.

I smile into the phone as I walk up the steps to my dorm.

"I love you guys. I'm excited too."

"See you soon!"

The line goes dead. I swipe my key card and enter the building, my tote bag weighing heavy on my right shoulder.

My phone rings again right as I walk up to my door, which is thankfully on the first floor. Dan's name pops up on the screen.

"Hey, Danny."

"Hey, Scarlett. How was your weekend with the team?"

I insert my key, opening the door and walking inside before collapsing on my bed. I have only met my roommate once because she's literally never here. I wish I knew a little more about her, but she must have a boyfriend or somewhere she stays every night because she treats our room like a storage locker and nothing more.

It's kind of nice.

"My weekend was … good. It was good."

I'm dying to let loose to someone about what happened in the hot tub. I need to see Lucy. I'm not sure I can trust Dan not to tell Silas what I say.

"Yeah? That's great. Do you, uh … wanna hang out tonight?"

I scrunch my brows in confusion. "Uh, I just got back, and I need to shower. I'm honestly exhausted."

"I figured you were. I was thinking I could bring over some pizza, and we could just catch up. Keep it low-key."

I sigh. “That actually sounds really nice. I want a deep dish, whatever toppings.”

“You got it. See you soon.”

He ends the call, and I stare at my muted white ceiling for another ten minutes before rallying myself up for a shower. I smell like a bus and baseball boys—and not in a good way.

Once the water does what it does best and washes away some of my stress and the dirt from the field in my hair, I pull on an oversize sweatshirt and my striped pink pajama shorts. If I let my hair dry overnight, it has a natural wave. I run a wide-toothed comb through it with some curl cream and leave-in conditioner.

I’m just finishing up my skin care routine when I hear a knock on the door. I go to unlock it, seeing Dan standing there with a pizza box. He’s dressed in a black hoodie and gray sweatpants.

“It’s so funny to see you always styling your hair up like Stefan Salvatore.” I move back from the doorway, falling back into my bed.

He laughs. “I love that show, so I’m taking that as a compliment.”

He sets the box down on the bed before going over to the small kitchenette and grabbing a roll of paper towels.

“Sometimes I miss dorm room life.”

I open up the box to see a pepperoni-and-ham deep-dish pizza with olives and jalapeños. “What do you miss?”

My mouth waters as I pull a slice apart and the melted cheese stretches with it.

“I guess the sense of community, always someone to chill with and watch a movie, play games, go to a party. Now that I’m off campus, I feel like I miss out on all that.”

He hands me a paper towel, which I set the slice on so I don’t get grease on my bed. Dan grabs his own piece, taking a massive bite.

“Thanks for dinner. I get invited to all kinds of parties. I’ll let you know next time.”

He leans the body pillow up against the wall near the foot of my bed. It’s fuzzy white fur and super cozy. Dave is a pretty cool stepdad because he insisted on furnishing my dorm with all brand-new stuff. My mom excitedly took me shopping for new bedding, a desk chair, and all the little things that make a dorm feel homier. We went with neutral tones and different textures to give it a warm and welcoming feeling.

It was her first time to ever be able to do anything like that for me, and she cried in the checkout line.

Dan takes another big bite before clearing his throat. “So, I talked to Silas.”

My mind jumps back to the present moment.

“And?” I try to act nonchalant by taking a bite of pizza.

He looks directly at me, concern in his eyes. “And he’s confused as hell.”

I finish chewing my bite before answering, “Nothing has changed between us. It was a mistake, nothing more.”

I avoid making eye contact with him so he can’t see the lie on my face.

“You’re something else, Scarlett. I get that you like playing with a douchey guy’s feelings for fun, but why are you screwing with his head like this? Are you really that unsympathetic?”

My eyes jerk back up to his. “Are you serious? What kind of an unfair accusation is that?”

My body temperature rises with anger as I stare at Dan’s face. He holds up his hands.

“Is it really that far-fetched?” He looks at me like he’s not going to take any of my shit right now.

I lean my head back against my soft cotton pillow, eyes on the ceiling. “I wasn’t screwing with him. I also don’t appreciate you ambushing me with Trojan horse pizza.”

Dan scoffs. “Is that what you think this is? Trojan horse pizza?”

I sit up straight. “Yes. I also think you’re fucked up for taking his side and coming over here to butter me up with greasy cheese and pepperonis. Some friend you are.”

He leans forward to grab another slice. “Then explain it to me. If you want me to take your side, I’m going to need to hear your version of what happened.”

I grab another slice after him, calories be damned.

“What did Silas tell you?”

He finishes chewing his pizza before answering. “He called me Friday night around midnight. I was awake, finishing a research paper. He was frantic, not at all himself. He said y’all hooked up in the hot tub, but he didn’t give me any details besides you taking off. He asked me for your

number. I tried to calm him down and tell him that he should wait until morning to talk to you when he wasn't so panicky."

My heart is pounding as I listen to Dan recount how Silas reacted to what happened between us. It sounds like he totally freaked when I bolted. Guilt washes over me.

What do you have to feel guilty for? He tried to fuck you without a condom.

"The next day, he texted me, asking for your number again. That's when I asked you if I could give it to him, but you told me no. Really put me in a hard position there—thanks for that. He didn't say much else to me when I told him you said no. Now, I think he's partially mad at me, and all I did was get trapped in the middle."

He shifts on the bed, leaning toward me. "Scarlett, I don't have a clue what's happened between y'all. I'm completely in the dark here. I do think it's fucked that you won't even talk to him, but I can't judge. I just wish you'd tell me why so I could understand."

My skin is hot as I stare at Dan, absorbing everything he told me. He waits patiently for me to respond, leaning back against the pillow and watching me with kind eyes.

"I don't … I don't know what else to say. It's in the letters. I told him in the letters how I really felt, and nothing has changed. I made a mistake that night in the hot tub. I never meant to lead him on, but my momentary lapse in judgment led to us having sex and—"

Dan's mouth drops open as he interrupts me. "You guys had sex?"

I sit back, chewing on my lip. "I thought he told you we hooked up?"

He gapes at me. "He didn't give me any details."

His blue eyes are as round as saucers.

"Why do you think I freaked out? We didn't use protection. I'm not interested in becoming a single mom."

Dan shakes his head. "You need to talk to him about it. That's all I'm going to say."

I sent the letters because I couldn't look him in the eye when I said it then, and I don't think I can now.

SEVENTEEN

silas

ALL I CAN FOCUS on is baseball practice. I daydream about it during all my morning classes, not even taking notes.

Monday lunch is weightlifting. I set a personal record for bench presses and squats.

In the afternoon, when we get out on the field, I throw the ball ninety-four miles an hour. My pitch doesn't get anywhere near a strike. One ball is so far off target that Cole doesn't even catch it. After I give it ten attempts, Coach Jones waves me in to meet him halfway to home plate.

I jog up to him, sweat pouring down my brow in the cool air.

"What's eating you, Saint? You're throwing like shit. Fast, but fast shit is still just shit."

I pant, trying to catch my breath.

"Just an off day," I grunt.

"Well, get *on*, or we're just wasting time. Take it down to seventy-five percent and give me something worth a damn to an umpire."

I turn around, ambling back up to the mound in the center of the field.

My eyelids drift closed as I try to clear my head. I exhale a deep breath from my lungs.

The game is what matters. The game is what you're here for. The game is what gets you places.

The game is all that matters.

A switch flips inside me. My eyes laser in on the catcher's mitt. I wind up, hurling the ball through the air, dead center on the target. It was slower, but at least it got to the right place.

"Good. Much better. Do it again," Jones shouts.

I do it five more times before my shoulder cramps up.

“Ice it. You don’t need to wear yourself out now that you’re hitting the target.”

I nod, jogging inside to the trainers room.

I barely slept the last three nights, tossing and turning with the memories of Scarlett on Friday night swirling through my mind. I’ve got to get her out of my head, or I won’t be able to pitch for shit on Friday.

I’ve gone over the evening a hundred times, trying to make sense of what caused her to panic and bolt.

She said *condom*. I’m assuming she wanted me to wear one, but I’m not sure why she was so panicked that I didn’t. It’d never even crossed my mind, but I’d be happy to. It wasn’t exactly something I had planned on happening, or I definitely would have been prepared.

Now that she’s been ignoring me and refusing to talk to me, I’m more confused than I ever have been. I don’t need some confession of love or undying commitment from her.

I need her to say something to me. I need to understand how she went from despising me with all her being to letting me finger her and put myself inside her.

Was it just lust?

She could have that with anyone—literally almost any man on the team or campus would eagerly line up to fulfill her desires.

My head is swirling with these thoughts, which is not helpful for the whole *focus on baseball* mantra I was repeating earlier. I push open the doors into the training room to see that she’s right there, kneeling on the floor as she’s unpacking new ice packs from a box and stacking them inside the freezer. Her back is turned, so she doesn’t see me.

I don’t really take time to think about it before stalking up to her, kneeling down on the floor next to her, and getting right up in her face.

“It’s time we had a little talk.”

She startles, jumping up in surprise. “You scared the hell out of me!”

Her stormy-gray eyes are wide as she turns to face me.

I don’t apologize, leveling her with a glare instead.

She rolls her eyes, turning away to continue her task. She always looks beautiful, but there are dark circles under her eyes. I wonder if she’s been losing sleep, like I have. Her hair is up in a loose, messy bun. She’s wearing just a touch of makeup. Her oversize black hoodie looks like it might have belonged to a guy at some point, which fills me with unwarranted jealousy.

“You’re acting an awful lot like a clingy high schooler—you know that?”

I gape at her. “So, you regularly go around hooking up with guys in hot tubs and never speaking to them again? Good to know.”

My tone is icy and cruel, but my patience has run thin.

She clenches her jaw, turning to face me again. “So what if I do? Most of them take the hint and leave me alone afterward. Your insistence on *talking* is a massive turnoff.”

Somewhere down inside her is the girl I used to know, the girl I grew up with in little old Bonnet Valley, Texas.

I wish I knew what happened to that girl.

“Are you really that mad at me for not using a condom? I had no idea that was going to happen. You act like you hate me, and the next thing I know, you’re coming onto me?”

I search her eyes for some kind of clue as to what’s wrong with her, but she’s as closed off to me as ever.

She licks her lips, eyes suddenly dipping down to look at my mouth. In that moment, I realize I never got the chance to kiss her.

She seems to realize it too.

“I told you how I felt about you in that letter four years ago.” Her eyes rise up to meet mine. “Nothing has changed. You need to forget what happened in the hot tub. It was a momentary lapse in judgment on my part, but trust me, it won’t happen again.”

She stands up, shoving the freezer closed before fleeing out of the room, taking my heart with her.

Later that night, I’m listening to classical music in my bedroom, trying not to think about Scarlett and only managing to think about her.

The day I received the letter from her is one of my core memories. It was also the day my dad announced that he *might* let me play college baseball if I could make a team and behave until I graduated high school.

Scarlett’s letter destroyed me, but I drowned all my emotions into baseball. I was sixteen years old and already being scouted by college

teams.

My eyes are on the ceiling as I reminisce. There's nothing like reliving life's greatest heartbreak to motivate myself into forgetting her, moving on, or whatever the fuck I'm supposed to be doing right now.

I sit up, throwing my legs over the side of the bed and moving toward my dresser. I dig through the drawer full of T-shirts until I find the little wooden cigar box. When I lift the lid, I see the crumpled envelopes. There's only four of them because Scarlett only wrote me four letters.

When she and her mom moved away from Bonnet Valley, I wasn't allowed to have a cell phone. It wasn't because I'd gotten in trouble; my parents were just strict and old-fashioned.

When I received Scarlett's first letter by mail, I wrote her back that same day. She had told me how much she missed me, how much she hated her new school, and that her mom had already found a new boyfriend only two weeks after they moved.

After I sent her the third letter, she wrote me back, saying they had moved in with her mom's boyfriend. She said he looked at her like grown men shouldn't look at fourteen-year-olds and that he creeped her out.

That day, I went out and bought a phone—probably the first big act of rebellion against my parents, not counting writing her the letters. They never liked me being close to Scarlett beyond helping her and her mom out. Once they caught on that I actually liked her, they were no longer supportive.

I open up the last letter she sent me—letter number four. It came almost a year after letter number one. There was a big gap in the writing because once I had the phone, we were able to call and text each other.

The words are practically burned inside my memory from reading it so many times.

Silas,

It's not going to make any sense to you why I'm doing this, but I don't have a choice. You're not what I want. You're not who I want. You can never be who I want.

I can't stand to look at you. I know you said on the phone last night that you want to come see me, but I hope I never see your face again.

Don't try to send me any more letters. We're moving. I'm changing my phone number. By the time you get this letter, it'll be different, so don't call.

I hate you. I hate you more than I have ever hated anyone. My life is better without you in it. My life is better off without you constantly calling and texting me all the damn time.

I'm cutting you off.

We're not friends anymore. We're nothing.

—Scarlett

The first time I read the letter was the most devastating day of my life. It felt like someone had reached into my chest and ripped my heart out.

I remember it like it was yesterday. It was late afternoon, a cold day in March. My baseball game had gone amazing that morning, and I'd pitched well enough to impress the scouts who had come to watch.

When I saw the letter, I was confused. I hadn't talked to Scarlett all day, but I was planning to call her that night. We had texted briefly for a few days, but she'd been short with me and hardly responding.

Between baseball and my parents not knowing about the phone, our contact was limited and mostly only possible at night. Some nights, she worked a late shift at a diner, which drew in the worst crowd. I worried about her constantly.

My biggest regret, to this day, is never telling her that I loved her. She was always hard to love, even when we were little, but I didn't care.

I wonder if she knew.

As much as she's hurt me, I want her to know that she's worthy of being loved.

I got the letter and didn't hear from her for three years. Three years of wondering and praying with no explanation at all.

My love morphed into longing.

Longing became sorrow.

Sorrow became resentment.

Resentment became anger.

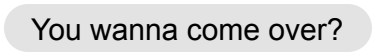
Anger became hate.

I crumple up the paper, clenching my fist tightly around it.

I know she hates me. What I don't get is why.

"Hate me all you want, Scar, but I bet I hate you more."

I pull out my phone and type out a text.



I wait patiently for three minutes before the little typing dots appear next to Adeline's name.

I roll out of bed and throw on a hoodie and my shoes before walking out the door. I don't know what I'll do when I get there. I just know I can't sit here anymore tonight. I need a distraction.

My truck is parked close. I climb inside, insert the key, and the engine roars to life. The two-mile drive takes a couple of minutes. I relish in the cold air on my skin as I cruise with the windows down.

I have to get Scar out of my head. I have to think about someone else.

I park near the pin-dropped location Adeline shared with me. I walk up to the entrance, texting her that I'm here. After less than a minute, she pushes open the door.

She smiles up at me. Her face is sweet, blonde hair spilling around her shoulders.

“Hey.”

“Hi,” I say, walking through the door.

“My roommate just got home, but my car’s in the shop, so I can’t drive anywhere until it’s done tomorrow. Are you cool with just watching a movie?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

It’s probably best if I don’t make out with her and picture someone else the entire time, like I did with her sorority sister.

Her room is on the first floor. Apparently, her door is unlocked because she twists the knob and walks through. I follow her over to her twin bed, which is unmade and covered in clothes.

“Sorry it’s a mess.”

I look around for a roommate, but we’re alone. Adeline shoves the clothes to the side so we have somewhere to sit.

“It’s a disaster because I’m never here. My parents insisted I would hate the sorority house, so they got me this dorm too. I pretty much use it as an extra closet.”

I sit down on the space she cleared, leaning back against the wall. We both look up as the door to the bathroom opens with a creak.

I inhale a sharp breath as I make eye contact with a pair of stormy-gray eyes.

How on earth is this possible?

Scarlett’s jaw clenches as she looks from me to Adeline, then back to me.

“Hey, we’re just gonna watch a movie,” Adeline says.

Scarlett looks back to her, slowly nodding. She walks to her bed, sitting up against her pillows and sticking headphones in her ears.

After a few seconds of silence, Adeline leans over to whisper, “She’s really quiet. I’ve only met her once.”

I nod, my entire body refusing to move. Scarlett is on her phone, ignoring us both.

So much for spending a night not thinking about her.

Adeline pulls up a movie to watch, but my eyes can’t focus on the screen. She reaches over, looping her arm through mine. Scarlett suddenly sits up straight, grabbing her blanket before rolling over on her side and facing the wall.

She hates you. She's made that as clear as day. You're not doing anything wrong.

Even though I try to convince myself of it, my stomach feels like it's full of bleach, burning the inside of me.

EIGHTEEN

scarlett

MY TREK from my biology class to my dorm on Thursday afternoon is interrupted by a phone call. *Life-Giver* flashes on the screen. I swipe to answer it, holding it up to my ear.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hi, sissy." Lettie's cute four-year-old voice draws forth a smile onto my face.

"Lettie! Hi, baby girl. How's my sweet little pumpkin pie?" I sit down on a bench along the path toward the science building.

"I had peanuts and jelly sammich."

"You had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich? Oh, wow, that sounds like the yummiest lunch ever."

"Mommy said I see you tomorrow, sissy?"

"Yes, baby girl, I will see you tomorrow and give you a big, giant hug and a sloppy kiss on the cheek." I smile, my eyes watering as I suddenly realize how much I miss my little sister.

I practically raised her for the first three and a half years of her life, up until my mom remarried and I was able to go to college. My income, coupled with hers, was the only thing that kept our family afloat. We took turns watching Charlotte—Lettie—while the other went to work.

"Here's Mommy. Luh you."

"Love you too, baby."

I wipe away the moisture from my eyes, hoping no one walking by can see me crying.

My mom's voice comes over the phone. "Hey, honey. How's your week been? We're so excited to come see you at the games. Dave got us a suite at the Hilton right by the school, so you're welcome to stay with us."

“Um, maybe. We’ll see. The game Friday will go late, so you might want to take Lettie back before it’s over.”

“Oh, that’s true. Well, Saturday, we want to go to brunch! Did you find us a spot yet?”

“Yeah, there’re some places close to campus with pancakes that Lettie will like.”

“Wonderful! Okay, I’ll let you go. I’ll text you when we’re on our way.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too!”

She hangs up the phone. Sometimes, I think my mom must be on Prozac. She’s been in a good mood for eight months straight.

Maybe that’s what marrying a rich man who actually loves you is like.

Maybe I need to be on Prozac. My week has been hell. Ever since Silas randomly showed up to my dorm to cuddle with my blonde roommate, who does in fact exist, I’ve been in a pissy mood. I haven’t slept much either. Reminding myself that he’s single and he can date or canoodle with whoever he wants doesn’t help.

I can’t watch it again. I can’t sit there on the verge of tears in my own room. I have no reason to cry about it. I called the housing department for the university, but they said there are zero dorms available for me to move into.

“Hey, you okay?”

My thoughts are interrupted by a familiar voice. I look up to see Lucy standing over me, her caramel curls looking almost copper in the sunlight.

“Hi, Lu. Yeah, I’m good. Just talked to my little sister. I miss her.”

She sits down next to me, wrapping her tanned arm around my shoulders. Physical touch is not my favorite form of affection. My body is rigid underneath her arm.

“I’m sorry. I bet that’s hard, being away from her. How old is she?”

“She’s four. I helped raise her until my mom married my stepdad and didn’t need me anymore. Obviously, I was glad to have the freedom, but still …”

She removes her arm, probably realizing it’s not delivering the comfort she was intending.

“Well, do you wanna get out of here and do something? You work all the weekends now, so it’s basically our only chance.”

It's a sunny February day in Texas. The temperature has warmed enough for us to get away with wearing hoodies and leggings to class. I look down at my grungy outfit.

"Should we change first?"

She nods. "Of course. You're single, and you never know when we'll run into an available lad."

I throw my head back with a laugh. Lucy is funny without even trying.

"Okay, deal. I guess I really need some fun in my life. I've been a workaholic."

She pulls me to a standing position, and we start strolling toward the dorms. Students are milling around us to and from class.

"You really have been. I know we haven't been friends for too long, but I've been feeling a tad neglected."

I link my arm through hers. "Aw, I'm sorry! You're right. I've honestly never had time to form deep friendships because I've worked almost full-time since I was fifteen. When I wasn't working, I would babysit my sister."

"I understand. You seem like a hard nut to crack, but I love a challenge."

"Where should we go?"

"Um, there's this place in town that's probably meant for kids, but it has bowling, mini golf, arcade games, and delicious, greasy nachos."

We get to my dorm building first, and I swipe my key card to open the door.

"That sounds fun. Do you wanna come in and help me pick an outfit?"

She nods. "Brett, my boyfriend, took me there on our first date. It's usually not busy during the week. It's cute too, because the owner remodeled it to look like it's brand-new, but in the 1950s."

We make our way to my dorm. I insert the key and unlock it, letting Lucy follow me inside.

"Oh, wow. Your room is so aesthetically pleasing," she remarks, rubbing her hand across the fuzzy cream-colored blanket on my bed.

"Thanks. You'd never know it from how I dress when I go out, but I like my living space to be all soft, calming neutrals."

She looks to the other side of the dorm, where my roommate's bare bed has a pile of clothes on it and nothing more. She hasn't been back since the night she and Silas watched a movie.

Is she staying at his place?

The thought makes my hands shake.

"You don't have a roommate?"

I drop my backpack onto the desk. "I do, actually."

Lucy waits for me to elaborate. I take a deep breath.

"She's dating a baseball player, apparently. Blonde, stuck-up, two-faced … you know the type."

Lucy sits on my bed, nodding.

I don't actually know her at all, but the description seems to fit.

My phone buzzes inside my pocket. I look at the screen to see a text from Dan.

How are you feeling today?

It's honestly a shame I didn't have a childhood crush on Dan instead of his friend. If we'd ever felt anything more than platonic feelings for each other, we'd possibly be dating right now.

I'm just dandy. What about you, Danny?

I toss my phone on the bed before walking into my closet. My hair is in long, natural waves today that actually look decent for the minimal effort I made this morning.

"So, none of the baseball boys have caught your fancy?" Lucy says.

I strip down out of my leggings. Then I pull a pair of ripped, high-waisted black jeans from their hanger and tug them on while I debate how to answer that question.

"Um, well … about that."

I hear Lucy grunt.

"Uh, I need the full story ASAP."

I find a cropped white V-neck with long sleeves and ribbed fabric that I pull over my head. A sliver of my stomach is showing. I decide white platform sneakers will complement the outfit. I emerge, dressed and ready, dabbing my lips with gloss.

"I, uh, hooked up with one last weekend."

Who apparently gets around more than I realized.

Her eyes widen, mouth dropping open. "Who?"

I find my crossbody purse, sticking my wallet, lip gloss, and keys inside. I put a pair of chunky pink sunglasses on before turning to inspect

my outfit in the full-length mirror on the door.

"You look gorgeous. I've never seen someone go from drab pajamas for class to hot as fuck in under three minutes."

I smile, opening the door to leave.

"I, uh, don't really wanna say who. Nothing is going to come of it, trust me. I told him I'm not interested in dating him or repeating … what we did."

She nods in understanding. "You don't have to share anything you're not comfortable with. Do you think he wants a relationship?"

Her dorm building is right next to mine, so we get to the steps and walk across the path. She uses her card to swipe open the magnetic lock.

"I don't really know what he wants, but he kept trying to talk it out, which is pointless to me. I don't feel like I should have to explain myself when it was …" I exhale, running my fingers through my hair, trying to find the words that would spell out the situation without having to go deep into the past that I can't seem to dwell on or talk about. "I just don't have anything to say to him aside from the fact that it was a onetime thing. He should move on. He has plenty of options."

We jog up the stairs to the second floor, and Lucy leads us to her door.

"Damn, you are quite the savage when it comes to relationships, aren't you?"

The arcade is exactly how Lucy described it. We're seated at a shiny red booth with turquoise plates piled high with cheesy nachos. The ambiance is classic 1950s, complete with checkered flooring and a jukebox. The arcade games look like a mix of old and new models. The bowling alley at the back only has six lanes, all of which are available. I haven't seen the mini golf course yet, but I'm somewhat of a sucker for the game.

We brought separate cars here because Lucy is going to her boyfriend's place on the other side of town afterward.

My phone rings with a FaceTime call from Dan. He's been texting me since we left the dorms, but I've been slow to respond. I hop off the booth

and scoot into Lucy's, squishing her face into the frame with mine as I answer the call.

"Say hi to Dan."

She half smiles, her mouth full.

"Hey, where are y'all?" He grins, flipping his hat around backward.

Lucy's eyes widen, and she starts choking on her food. I look at her, not sure what's happening, as I clap my hand on her back.

She reaches for her water, taking a long sip.

I look back at Dan. "Sorry, minor emergency averted. We're at Tilton's Arcade! I'm stuffing nachos down my face, and Lucy is trying and … well, choking. She likes to swallow, but she's not very good at it."

She punches me in the arm, starting to laugh as her eyes water and the chip in her throat seems to wash down.

Dan scrunches his brows in confusion, and I laugh, knowing he didn't catch the joke.

"Are you gonna come join us so I can kick your ass in bowling or what?"

He leans his head back against the cushion of his sofa. "Ah, I don't know about that. Supposed to grab dinner with my roomie when he gets home."

My smile fades. Lucy doesn't seem to notice the change in my demeanor, grabbing the phone from me.

"Bring him. We've got the place to ourselves."

Dan smiles at her before turning his eyes to me. I don't really know what to say to him. Dan and I are friends, just like he and Silas are. If I want to spend time with Dan, I'm pretty much going to be forced to be around Silas.

I take a big bite of nachos to have an excuse for not speaking.

He'd better not ruin my night by bringing Silas up here.

Dan studies me for a few seconds before replying to Lucy, "Okay, I'll ask him and see if he's up for it."

"See ya." Lucy ends the call.

I stand up to move back to my side of the booth. If I had spoken up, Lucy would've known Silas was the guy I messed around with. It's stupid and irrational, but it feels like if I don't tell anyone else about what happened, it will just go away. I've made a pact with myself to not dwell on

it anymore, and that means not talking about it with friends who I like but don't know well enough to trust yet.

I'm three seconds away from texting Dan that he'd better not come if he's bringing Silas, but I hold myself back from it.

If I do that, he'll know I'm affected by what happened. For all I know, Silas heard the entire exchange between Dan and Lucy. Surely, he doesn't want to see me either and would never show up here. He's probably with my roommate anyway.

NINETEEN

silas

MY FOCUS HAS IMPROVED DRASTICALLY this week after I had a real moment of clarity in the shower on late Monday night.

The stress I've allowed a tiny five-two woman to cause me is only wreaking havoc on my life. Her hatred for me is now fully and enthusiastically being reciprocated. I'm glad she got to see me and Adeline cuddling, even though I've barely spoken to her since.

What I've realized about Scarlett is that she likes to put on a front that nothing gets to her. She's the big, tough guy in every situation. She thrives on the shock value of her actions and then disappears in a cloud of smoke, refusing to deal with the consequences. She's been that way since we were kids.

She'd cheat in a card game of Spades, get caught, and laugh it off like none of us had any reason to be pissed.

She told Dan she was knocked up by a famous country singer before she moved away just to start a rumor and shock the community. I was so mad at her for it, even though I knew it was never true.

Her name would occasionally get brought up in our small town in the years following her mom moving them nine hours away to Santa Fe, New Mexico. In a place as small as Bonnet Valley, a girl like Scarlett wasn't easy to forget. She had the reputation of being a misfit, the stigma of shame and scandal. Her mom had let her run wild. The perception people had of her never fazed her.

She wrote me that letter, saying she hated me and never wanted to see me again, right before cutting all ties with zero explanation. I really thought that was my last straw with her … until she showed up at Ole Tex. I'd never expected to see her face again.

Then she went and *sort of* had sex with me in the hot tub and acts like it meant absolutely *nothing*. She acts like there's no point in discussing a silly little onetime mistake.

Well, congrats to her. I'm officially getting off the Scarlett ride and stepping into another line.

Dan knocks on my bedroom door right after I get out of the shower. I've got a towel wrapped around my waist.

"Come in."

He twists the knob, leaning his shoulder against the doorjamb.

"Couple of girls invited us to Tilton's Arcade."

The game tomorrow is our first one at home, and I'm pitching. But I'm also sick of my entire life revolving around baseball and Scarlett drama.

Adeline and I have hung out once since Monday. She came over this time. All we did was study and make out. She took her shirt off, but I stopped it once we got there.

After she left, I started to feel guilty about it. I can't put my finger on why. She told me she wants something casual, and she understands I can't commit to a relationship during the season because I don't have time. I've never had a girlfriend. That was one of my parents' many rules when I was growing up.

She's just a distraction at this point, and that's not fair to her.

Unless that's what she wants?

Either way, I don't know if I want to take it further with her.

"Sure. Let me get dressed."

"Cool. I'm ready when you are."

I throw on a pair of worn-out jeans, a long-sleeved pale-green henley, and a backward gray baseball cap. After slipping my nice white tennis shoes on, I join Dan in the living room.

He's smiling down at his phone, typing out a text.

"New girl?" I ask.

He glances up at me. I'm so busy during baseball season that I don't get much time with Dan.

"Uh, no, not really. Just texting Adam."

Adam is Dan's brother. We all grew up together.

"I'll drive," Dan says, standing up and grabbing his keys off the hook by the door.

We walk out to the parking lot, get into his old Ford pickup, and drive the five miles down to the arcade with the windows down. It's cool tonight, but his heater doesn't work, and it gets stuffy in the truck with the windows up.

"I swear I'm getting it fixed next winter," Dan mumbles as we pull up to the arcade.

There are hardly any cars in the parking lot. We walk up to the doors and push our way inside. I look around for whoever Dan's friends are. I see a girl with curly caramel hair and tanned skin sitting in a booth alone. She looks familiar, but I can't place how I know her.

Dan makes his way over to her, and I follow. He sits on the opposite side of the booth, not scooting over far enough to give me room. I sit next to the girl, who looks up at Dan.

"Hey, you," he says.

"Hi."

He smiles at her before introducing us. "Lu, this is my roommate."

She holds out her hand in my direction, turning to face me with brown eyes. "Lucy Blake."

I shake her hand. "Silas Saint. Good to meet you."

She inspects me with half-lidded interest. "The Saint Slugger? You're all I hear about from the guys in my computer science class."

Dan interjects, "The one and only. Leading the Mustangs to victory tomorrow night, we hope."

Lucy turns to me. "Well, good luck tomorrow. Scarlett didn't tell me Dan's roommate was a baseball player."

I freeze. My eyes jump to Dan's, but he avoids my gaze. My pulse starts racing when I hear a sultry voice to my left.

"Just in time for the check, boys." She slides into the booth next to Dan, directly across from me.

Her stormy eyes drill into mine, pouty lips shimmery and pink. She's got a tiny bit of voluptuous cleavage showing, jerking my mind back to her glistening pink skin in the hot tub that night.

Dan is fucking dead for this.

I lean back in my seat, casually draping my arm behind Lucy to rest it on the booth. Scarlett's eyes follow the movement.

Somehow, the eternal storm in her gaze grows more turbulent, like F5-level turbulent.

Dan and Lucy are talking casually about the weeks they've had, but Scar and I are engaged in our staring game. The unspoken rule is not to look away. The minutes crawl by.

"Should we go bowl?" Dan asks, finally.

Scarlett blinks before stepping out of the booth.

"Guess that's a yes," Lucy says in a monotone voice.

Dan follows her. I get out and walk behind them, followed by Lucy. My head is swirling with any plausible reason as to why my roommate would do this to me after I told him what happened with Scarlett.

I was just starting to get my focus back on baseball and putting her miserable presence out of my head so my focus could be all into the games this weekend.

She leads the group up to the counter, where a pimply teenage boy is stationed. His eyes are wide as he stares at Scarlett, nodding when she asks if we can get shoes to bowl.

Her outfit tonight shows off her petite curves, accentuating her hips and ass in black jeans. There's a tear in her jeans right at the back of her thigh, nearly showing off her butt. Two inches of her tiny waist are revealing her creamy-white skin.

I look away, pulling out my wallet to pay for my bowling shoes as I take a deep breath.

Maybe I should just leave. I could walk home. I could call Adeline.

Dan and Scarlett already have their shoes and are picking out a lane.

"This tension could suffocate a small animal. What happened between you two?" Lucy gives the teenager some dollar bills, and he hands her a worn-out pair of bowling shoes.

I stare at her, not knowing how to reply.

"We don't get along," is all I manage before we walk up to the bowling lane.

She scoffs. "Clearly."

If I had driven myself here, I'd just leave now. Since we're in Dan's truck, maybe he'll be satisfied with one game before we go.

Tell him you need to get to bed early for the game tomorrow.

I look at the time on my phone, and it's only five-thirty. I clench my jaw, willing myself to get through this without hitting my roommate or screaming at Scarlett.

Lucy is the only person here I'm not pissed off at, so I take a seat next to her on the bench to put on my bowling shoes.

Scarlett and Dan are whispering to each other on the bench across from us. I try to hear what they're saying, but I can't make it out. I shift my eyes up to observe their body language. Dan's face is serious, but Scarlett looks angry. Her mouth is in a hard line as he whispers in her ear. Her eyes flick up to my face.

I look away, not interested in engaging in anymore of her antics today. I'm going to get through this game and leave.

Scarlett hops up from the bench and goes to the shelf of bowling balls on the wall to the right. Lucy follows after her. Dan shakes his head before going to add our names to the screen on the ancient keypad.

I walk up beside him. "Thanks for the ambush, bud. Really appreciate being blindsided like that."

He keeps his eyes on the keypad as he types in L-U. "I think you two should work it out, and you're both too stubborn to talk it through like adults."

I gape at him. "I hope that's a fucking joke. I tried talking to her for a week, and I got ignored and rejected. *Sorry* if I'm not a masochist who wants to repeat the experience I had with her as a sixteen-year-old kid."

He sighs, looking up at me. "I mean, her, mostly. She's a complicated woman. You and I both know that. She has trust issues with men. Can't you just try to be patient instead of trying to irritate her further?"

He must be talking about me putting my arm around Lucy. I roll my eyes, returning to sit on the bench. The girls walk back over. Scarlett is holding a hot-pink ball. Lucy's is dark blue. Dan and I go pick out ours while they begin the game.

We were raised to always allow ladies first. Lucy is up, sending the ball soaring down the lane and landing a strike.

Dan laughs. "Holy shit. I didn't see that coming."

Lucy doesn't react. She's not a very expressive person, it appears to me, which is quite the opposite of her friend.

Scarlett goes next, sending the bubblegum-pink ball straight into the gutter. Her bottom lip sticks out as she returns to the bench. Nothing gets under my skin more than the way she always looks attractive despite her never-ending attitude problem.

I'm up next. I take my forest-green ball and step up to the lane, sending it down toward the pins and knocking them all out.

"I hate you," Scarlett mumbles under her breath as I walk back to the bench.

I pause, leaning down to reach her stunted height and whisper in her ear, "The feeling is mutual, sweetheart."

She shivers, glaring at me before averting her eyes.

Dan shrugs as he grabs his black ball. "Welcome to my life of being best friends with the guy who's annoyingly good at everything."

He bowls a spare. Lucy is up next, and it turns out, she's some kind of pro because she gets another strike effortlessly. We're all incredibly impressed at her unexpected show of skill.

My irritation grows each time Scarlett enters my peripheral vision and every time I see Dan looking happy with his little stunt of forcing us together. I try not to fantasize about punching the grin right off of his smug face.

He's trying to be a good friend. He's not an asshole … usually.

The positive self-talk doesn't help, and by the time the game ends, I'm ready to leave.

"I got a game tomorrow," I tell Dan.

He's telling Lucy a joke, who doesn't seem to smile much but is giggling at his words.

Scarlett is sitting on the other side of Lucy, arms crossed.

Dan's eyes move up to meet mine. "Uh, I'd rather stay a little longer. It's barely 6:30."

I let out an exhale, debating whether it's too far to walk or not. Campus is only about three miles from here, but our apartment is two miles farther than that. If I run five miles tonight, my legs could be sore when I'm running bases tomorrow.

Scarlett stands abruptly. "Well, I'm leaving. I'll see y'all later."

Lucy stands to give her a hug. She whispers something to her, and Scarlett nods. Dan stands and gives her a side hug.

"I'll be at the game tomorrow, so I'll probably see you then," he says.

She nods, ignoring me altogether as she walks out of the arcade.

Lucy grabs her little black handbag and slings it over her shoulder. "Well, I'm out too. My boyfriend and a bottle of wine are calling my name."

Dan hugs her too. She nods at me as she walks by.

"I guess we might as well leave now too," he says, twirling his keys around his index finger. "You can't blame me for trying."

"Oh, I can, and I do."

TWENTY

scarlett

A MILE down the road from the arcade, my car sputters, lurches forward, and squeals to a stop as the engine dies.

"No. No. NO!" I bang my hand on the steering wheel of the old clunker. "Come on, Jolene. Go a little farther for me. We're two miles from campus."

Could this day get any fucking worse?

Night is falling as the sun begins to dip down over the horizon. My frayed emotional state is beginning to unravel. Seeing Silas tonight was a complete shock. I was prepared to unwind and have a fun night with two good friends, not be forced to play a stupid bowling game with the man whose family destroyed mine.

Tears aren't something I'm accustomed to. Crying feels like weakness to me, ever since one of my mom's boyfriends threw his steel-toed boot at me for it when I was seven. She left him that night, screaming that he was a worthless piece of shit. It was the first night we ever stayed in a women's shelter, and I remember feeling overcome with guilt for crying and feeling like it was my fault we were homeless.

Every time our lives fell apart, my mom would cry herself to sleep. It has always been like the most worthless emotion to me, yet here I sit, with tears threatening to spill down my cheeks.

Headlights beam into my car from behind me. My body freezes in fear as my hand shoots out to click the lock button on the door. I'm shaking the driver's seat as I see two men exiting the pickup truck behind me.

Please, God, no ...

A big frame comes up to my driver's window, knocking on the glass.

"Scarlett?"

I exhale a huge sigh of relief, feeling like an idiot for not realizing it was Dan and Silas. I glance over to see Dan's concerned expression, a frown line on his forehead.

My fingers grasp the door handle as I pull it open and step out.

"What happened?" Dan asks.

"I don't know. It just died. I might be out of gas?" My heart is still coming back down to a normal rate.

"Can you pop the hood?" Silas asks, standing at the front of the old rust bucket.

I look over at him. "Uh …"

"I got it," Dan says, motioning for me to move out of the doorway.

I step back, folding my arms over my stomach. "It's been on E for a few days."

"A few days?" Silas asks.

I don't care for his tone. I'd rather walk than let him rescue me.

I give him a curt nod. Dan pulls something inside the car, popping the hood. Silas lifts it up.

"Do you know anything about cars?" I question him.

I'm in no position to be snooty, but I'd rather Silas just wait in the truck and Dan help me. I would rather get hit by a semitruck driving by than accept help from Silas.

"I guess I'll drive to the gas station by Ole Tex and get a few gallons in case that's the problem," Dan says.

Silas and I both stare at him, neither of us willing to open our mouths and protest.

He tries to hold in a smile. "I'll be back in, like, five minutes. Try not to verbally attack each other in the meantime."

"No promises," I grumble as Silas says in unison with me, "No guarantee."

I roll my eyes. "Hurry up, please."

Dan hops in his truck, speeding off into the dark. As soon as he's gone, I realize the truck was the only source of light we had, considering this road has no streetlights or businesses on it and my car is dead.

I've always been a little bit afraid of the dark, especially if I'm not in the safety of my home with the doors locked. I go to the front of the car, where Silas is holding his phone light over the engine.

"Didn't know the Saint Slugger was also a mechanic," I muse.

“I’m multitalented.”

“Did you do something to it?”

He turns to look at me. I can’t see his expression clearly in the dark, but I know he is not smiling.

“What do you mean?” He tilts his head in confusion.

I shrug. “You showed up at my dorm to snuggle with my roommate, and then you crashed my night. Suddenly, my car broke down. Is this another ploy to try and talk it out?”

He gapes at me. “You really are something else. You should consider joining the real world instead of gallivanting off into Scarlett land all the time.”

I scoff. “It’s just a *question.* This entire night has felt like a setup. You’ve been incapable of taking no for my answer, you intentionally try to piss me off, and—”

He slams the hood of the car down, causing me to jump in surprise.

“You know what, Scar? Fix your car yourself. I’m done. I’m done with your whole bullshit runaround about not wanting to talk about it. I’m done with you thinking you get to make all the rules in this situation, always cutting things off as soon as you decide it’s time and never giving me an explanation. I’m done being a monkey in your fucking circus.” He leans down into my face, his tone harsh and his eyes lit with anger.

I stand on my tiptoes, forcing our faces even closer, and grip the front of his shirt. “I don’t think you have a single clue as to why I don’t wanna talk about it, why I don’t wanna go there, why I cut you off with no explanation. And I never asked for your help in fixing my car!”

The headlights of Dan’s truck shine on us as he pulls up to the car.

Silas grips my wrist holding on to his shirt. “Then I guess I’ll let you figure it out on your own.”

He pulls me off of him, turns around, and stomps in the direction of campus, bypassing the truck without even acknowledging Dan.

I let out a frustrated huff, grunting in anger and rage and all the emotions I felt when I first wrote Silas the letter four years ago, wishing I could just go to him, lay on his shoulder, and cry about why I was doing it.

The door to the truck opens with a squeak. I sit back against the hood of the car, feeling the tears begin to stream down my cheeks.

“Well, hello there, pretty thing. You sure look like a damsel in distress if I ever did see one.”

My heart jumps up into my throat as I realize the man in the truck isn't Dan.

"Where'd your boyfriend run off to?" The stranger draws closer to me as I take a step back.

My voice is trapped in my throat, but internally, I scream for Silas.

You have to scream before he's too far away.

I open my mouth, but words won't form. Fear has my voice in a choke hold, keeping it captive.

"If you want me to give you a ride somewhere, I'd be happy to. Don't get to spend much time in the presence of pretty ladies anymore."

He finally gets close enough for me to see that he has a big beer belly and is missing a couple of teeth. His balding head has a slicked-back ponytail. His beady eyes remind me of an animal, like there's no soul in them.

Pure terror holds me captive until he gets close enough for me to smell the cigarette smoke and a hint of liquor on his breath, drawing up a thousand unpleasant memories.

"Silas," I whisper, drawing courage from the ability to make sound.

The stranger looks down over me, a sinister smile coming to his mouth.

"Silas!" I screech, backing away from the man.

He takes a step toward me, reaching out to grip my wrist. "He's not coming back."

"SILAS!" I scream louder, at the top of my lungs.

I pull back from his grip, but he doesn't release me.

"Don't you touch me. SILAS!"

Finally, I hear quick footsteps running closer in the dark. The man's grip doesn't loosen. He smiles like the Joker, an older backwoods version.

A big, familiar shape is suddenly upon us. Silas wastes no time in shoving himself between me and the stranger, his arm moving around his back to grip my waist protectively.

He grabs the man's wrist, who immediately lets go of me with an outcry of pain.

"We don't need your help. Leave. *Now.*" Silas's voice is cold.

I can't see what's happening with his massive six-three frame in my face. I'm doing my best to stop my body from trembling.

"Meant no harm. Just trying to help a young lady out."

I hear retreating footsteps, followed by the sound of the truck door squeaking open. I lean into Silas. His tense back muscles feel firm.

The headlights of the truck move beyond us as the man drives away, leaving us in the dark again. Silas slowly turns around without letting go of me. He reaches down to brush my hair out of my face. I suck in a breath, feeling the adrenaline still pumping through my body.

He pulls me into a tight hug—the first one he's given me since I was fourteen years old. I hold him back, reaching my arms up and around his neck. I can feel his heart thundering in his chest.

"Are you okay?" he whispers.

I nod, the floodgates of tears I've been holding back letting loose. A sob releases from my throat as another set of headlights pulls up. The door opens, significantly less squeaky than the last one.

"Hey, are y'all okay? I'm sorry it took so long. The first gas station didn't have any gas cans left. Scarlett, what happened?" Dan's voice draws closer.

Neither Silas nor I want to let go. Dan silently moves around us. I can hear the gas dumping into the tank, splashing on the empty bottom.

I finally stop crying, wiping my nose with the end of my sleeve. I see that I left a damp spot on Silas's chest as he slowly pulls back to look at me with bloodshot eyes.

"I'm so sorry," he whispers.

We're suspended in a truce right now. Neither of us can be angry or hateful. We're staring into each other's eyes, feeling a strange sense of bliss inside the bubble of what it could've been like before it all went down in flames.

I nod, letting him know I forgive him before pulling away.

TWENTY-ONE

silas

THE GAME I'm pitching on Friday is against our biggest rival, another team from Texas. It's also the first home game of the year. The coaches told the guys there's going to be at least six MLB scouts in the stands.

And my head is wrapped up in Scarlett. I can't shake the memory of her expression when I looked down at her face on the side of the road, the way her body trembled with fear, the realization of how vulnerable she could be when she wasn't putting on a front. The Scarlett I remember—who used to open up to me and trust me—is still in there somewhere.

What changed?

I'm circling my arm in a shoulder warm-up when I see her walk out onto the field. At least half the heads of the other team turn to watch her. She's drop-dead gorgeous in a jersey top, similar to what the coaches wear, royal blue with gray lettering. She's wearing fitted white pants with it and white sneakers. Her rich-brown hair is tumbling down around her shoulders in shiny, loose waves.

I watch her walk over to Coach Simmers, standing by third base, and hand him a clipboard.

He smiles at her, mouthing, "Thank you."

I can't hear them from here, as the ballpark is already beginning to fill up. Our field is massive compared to the ones I played in when I was in Select baseball. It holds almost twenty thousand fans.

"You warming up or trying to look pretty for a picture?" Cole calls to me.

I grip the baseball, wind up, and whirl it through the air at half speed.

I feel good tonight. My body is tingling with excitement for what this game might hold for me. The scouts watching could mean something big in

the future.

My eyes drift toward the coaches once more. Scarlett is standing beside them, looking tiny compared to Coach Simmers. She's observing me closely. Simmers turns to say something to Jones, and I take the opportunity to wink at her.

She blinks, pursing her lips as she shakes her head at me. She knows I'm messing with her head.

I turn back to Cole, throwing another strike at his glove.

We won the game seven to five, effectively holding back our big rival. The team is in high spirits as we filter through the locker room.

Coach Jones comes up to me, gripping my shoulder and leaning forward to talk into my ear. "Scouts wanna meet you. Follow me."

He walks up to Jenson and leans in to tell him something.

I drop the towel I was holding to use after my shower and follow Jones out the door, Jenson on my heels. Our uniforms are covered in red dirt from the field. As we make our way through the tunnel, Jones turns back to us.

"This is a pretty standard occurrence when a player stands out. Williams, you've only got one more year in college, so they'll probably talk to you about coming out to see their fields and facilities. Saint, pitchers who can bat are pretty rare, but it's unusual for them to want to speak to a sophomore so early on. Whatever they have to say, just remember not to make any commitments or promises. You'll probably both need to get agents sooner rather than later."

We push through the doors, out into the bullpen, where we usually warm up before entering the field. There are six scouts waiting to speak to us. We shake hands, and a couple of them note how well we played.

Jones was correct about them offering for Williams to go see their facilities. They're from varying states, including Michigan, Florida, Oklahoma, California, Oregon, and Texas.

The one from California turns to face me. "That was a hell of a performance. What high school did you go to?"

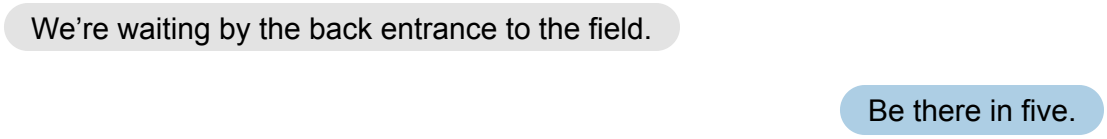
"I was homeschooled, but I played Select ball, sir."

His eyes widen. “That’s unusual. No wonder we didn’t hear about you until recently. Next year, we will want to have you come see our ballpark. You’d love the coast.”

I nod. “I’d be interested in that.”

The meet and greet concludes with Williams getting an invitation to view any of the major league facilities and meet the team, with me as a tagalong and a more serious guest next year.

We’re headed back toward the locker room to shower when I get a text from my dad.



“I’m gonna go see my family real quick before showering. See y’all in a bit.”

Jenson and Coach Jones wave to me as they enter the locker room. I continue on toward the doors that will lead me out to the back entrance. I pass through a few hallways before a door takes me out to where the crowds are. A few people stare at me, and I’m surprised they’re still hanging around so long after the game. A couple of students recognize me from class, high-fiving me and congratulating me on the win.

I finally make it to the back entrance to see my parents and grandparents waiting. To my surprise, next to them are two couples I haven’t seen since the season started.

Adam and Levi are two of my closest friends that I grew up with. They’re married now to Harley and Kenna, respectively, who are best friends.

“Hey, man! That was a great game. You’re a beast out on that field.” Adam grins, pulling me into a one-armed hug.

His wife, Harley, smiles and hugs me too with her tattoo-covered arms. She looks like a biker chick who models leather jackets on the side.

I smile back at them. Adam is Dan’s older brother, but he treats us all like brothers.

“Didn’t expect to see y’all here. Thanks for coming to the game.”

Levi steps forward, his arm still around his little strawberry-blonde wife, Kenna. He’s massive, with wide shoulders that can out-bench anyone

on the team. His glasses make him resemble a modern Clark Kent, and he's the smartest of us all.

"Didn't know if we'd make it in time. Your dad saved our seats," Kenna pipes up.

Levi and she are exact opposites. She's the token sorority girl, but with a lot of heart. He's always been the quiet nerd guy.

I hug them too. A tiny ball of emotion makes its way into my gut that all my friends came to see me play.

I turn around to hug my mom, who smiles brightly, cupping my face.

"Great game, honey! I'm so proud of you."

I kiss her on the cheek. "Thanks, Mama."

My dad shakes my hand, his cheeks round with a grin. "Talk to the scouts?"

I nod. "They want me to come see their facilities."

They all erupt in congratulations and expressions of, "Wow!"

My skin is tingling as I smile and hug my grandparents.

"Son, you looked incredible out on that field. Proud to tell people you're my grandson." My grandfather laughs, holding my petite grandmother close.

I'm about to bid them good-bye when I see Scarlett in the corner of my eye, hugging someone. I turn to see who it is, instantly recognizing her mother. She looks like a completely different person than she did four years ago.

Her hair is colored dark now, and she's wearing ankle-cropped slacks and a flowy silk top. I remember her always having yellow-bleach-blonde hair and skintight clothes because my mom hated the way she dressed.

A tall, balding man is standing next to her, his arm looped around her waist. What hair he does have left is a white-gray, making him look like her father if he wasn't holding her like a husband would.

To my surprise, there's a small child in his arms, fast asleep. She's a beautiful little girl, from what I can see at this distance. Her features look angelic.

Did Scarlett's mom have another baby? Or is she his daughter?

My parents' eyes must follow my line of sight.

My dad tugs on my arm. "We're going back to the hotel, son. We'll see you in the morning."

I turn to face him. "You know who that is, right?"

I motion toward Scarlett and her family. Adam and Levi both grin.

"Scarlett? I had no idea she'd be here. Babe, come meet one of our other childhood friends," Adam says.

The four of them start to walk over toward her.

My dad turns to glance at them. My mother's face is stone cold, jaw set. She almost always wears a smile. I'm about to ask her what's wrong, but my dad interrupts.

"We're exhausted from the drive, and it's late. See you tomorrow morning."

They all turn to walk away. I'm astonished that he won't even acknowledge Scarlett and her mother, Jackie. I know they didn't approve of her, but to straight up ignore them is beyond rude and unacceptable.

I start walking over to their group, catching up with Adam, Levi, and the girls. Before we get there, Coach Simmers appears from the direction of the locker room.

"Dave! Man, it's so good to see you." He shakes hands with the tall guy holding the little girl. "And this must be the lovely Jackie! It's great to meet you. Your daughter has been a great addition to the team." He winks at Scarlett, who smiles as she tenderly pushes back the hair from the little girl's face.

She sees our group then, eyes brightening when they land on Levi and Adam, but growing cold when she sees me.

I continue to approach. Her mom recognizes me too, eyes narrowing as I get closer. An icy wind seems to blow in out of nowhere. She loops her arm through Scarlett's, and I'm taken aback at how similar they look now that Jackie's hair is dark. They could be sisters. I always knew she had Scarlett at a young age, but this is almost eerie.

"Hey, Scarlett! Fancy seeing you here." Adam smiles at her, which she returns by stepping forward with a hug.

"Hey! I've been hanging out with Dan a lot on campus. I've heard a lot about where you guys are at now. I really want us to all get together sometime."

"Yes, definitely. I'll talk to Dan and find a good time. This is my wife, Harley. Har, meet Scar. We grew up together, all of us. And this is Levi's woman, Kenna. We all met at OTU."

Harley gives Scarlett a hug. "You were the OG bad girl of the group, weren't you? Glad to finally put a name to the face."

Kenna practically jumps with enthusiasm. “I have heard of you! Weren’t you Dan’s first kiss?”

She hugs Scarlett tightly. Kenna has never met a stranger in her life.

Scarlett’s eyes meet mine for a second before she looks back at Kenna with a grin. “Sure was. Snuck him behind the church to lay one on him. Didn’t really achieve what I was intending, but it’s a funny story now.”

Oh, really? What were you intending?

Jackie gives Levi and Adam both a hug, meeting the girls as well. Everyone is chatting in separate little groups.

Coach Simmers sees me then, smiling and holding his hand out to motion me closer. “Dave, meet Silas Saint. He spoke to some scouts tonight as a sophomore.” His voice booms with pride.

Dave turns to look at me with kind eyes, a grin on his face. He looks to be around sixty years old.

“Nice to meet you, young man. That game was riveting. It’s great to be back in the Mustangs baseball ballpark. I got the unfortunate role to play with this big lug as my pitcher. My hand will never be the same after catching those fastballs.”

We shake hands, which is awkward with his arm still being full with a small child.

“Nice to meet you. Glad you enjoyed the game.”

He turns back to Coach Simmers. “We’d better get this little muffin into bed before my arm falls off. See you tomorrow, Coach.”

They shake again before Dave and Jackie start walking toward the parking lot. Scarlett hugs the others, saying good-bye before walking back toward the locker rooms with Coach Simmers.

“Great to see you guys. Thanks so much for coming out. Let’s plan a time for dinner,” I say.

“Sure thing, man.” Adam grins, leaning in close to my ear. “Those tough girls can really be worth it if you push past the walls.”

I lean back, staring into his eyes and nodding before turning to embrace Levi.

Kenna and Harley wave before they all turn around to exit the gate.

I turn and jog to catch up with Coach and Scarlett.

“You got some more cleanup tonight?” he asks her.

She nods, continuing to ignore my presence. “Yes, sir.”

TWENTY-TWO

scarlett

I STARE at my shoes as I make my way back to the locker room, deep in thought. Seeing Levi and Adam was a great way to ease the blow of Silas finding out about Lettie. I wish I'd gotten more time to catch up with them.

Silas has no idea, but I only kissed Dan behind the church to make him jealous and hopefully spur him on to make a move on me. As usual, it backfired.

I faintly hear the door to Coach Simmers's office click shut.

Silas didn't know about my little sister's existence until tonight. He still might not know who she is, possibly thinking she is Dave's daughter and my mom's stepchild. It wasn't my choice, but it should probably stay that way.

I'm lost in thought as I walk through the empty locker room toward the equipment room. I have to organize everything and make sure it's ready for the game tomorrow. I would be finished already, but I wanted to go say hi to my mom, Dave, and Lettie. I cried when I saw her asleep in Dave's arms. I had no idea how much I'd really been missing her until I saw her sweet baby face.

"Do you want to explain to me what just happened?"

I jolt, whirling around at the unexpected voice echoing through the room. Silas is standing there with his arms crossed, still in his filthy uniform.

My lungs decompress as I release the gulp of air I just inhaled. "You scared the hell out of me."

"Why didn't you tell me you had a stepsister?" His eyes are laser-focused on my face.

I've never been good at lying to Silas. This is why I wrote him the letter in the first place. This is why I avoided a phone call and especially an in-person meeting.

I can't lie to him.

I shrug. "Is that any of your business?"

My voice is too high-pitched, and it's shaky. I turn back around, hoping he can't hear my heart pounding.

I can hear him stepping closer until he's right up behind me in the equipment room.

"You have never been good at lying to me. You try it, and for some reason, you get away with it around everyone but me." His voice is gravelly.

You will not give in to him. You can't tell him. She'll never forgive you.

I close my eyes before slowly turning around, deciding I have to do the only thing I can to distract him from asking about Lettie.

I take a step closer. He looks suspicious, his eyes shifting over me like he knows I'm up to something and doesn't trust me. I take another step in his direction, now only six inches away from him. My head tilts up to make eye contact. My hands reach up to rest on his chest, which is slowly rising and falling with his breath.

His eyes have been steadily focused on my face.

"What are you doing?" he asks, sounding a little winded.

I push up on my tiptoes while also tugging down on his neck to bring him closer to level with my face.

"This," I whisper.

My lips press onto his, which wouldn't be possible if he didn't lower his head to meet mine. His skin is soft, and our mouths form together perfectly. The scruff on his face grazes my skin as he pulls me closer, deepening our first kiss.

My childhood fantasies could not have prepared me for the reality of kissing Silas Saint. His big body engulfs mine, arms reaching all the way around my back until he's nearly lifting me off the floor. His tongue moves to part my lips, pushing into my mouth. I let him, loving that I finally get to taste him after years of unfulfilled desire.

Apparently, our bodies are not close enough for him because his arms move farther down my back until they're under my ass. He lifts me into the air like I'm weightless before pushing me back against the wall of the

equipment room. My head is now above his, my face tilted down as our lips stay locked together.

My butt must hit the light switch because it flicks off at the same moment. I barely notice it. My hands push through his hair under his baseball cap. He smells like dirt and sweat, and I'm fully obsessed with the manly scent of him.

His big hands are kneading my ass, causing wetness to pool between my legs. His tongue has been exploring my mouth, but I push it out with mine so I can nibble his lower lip with my teeth. He hisses, squeezing me closer to him with his grip on me.

I can feel his erection right between my legs, digging into me in a place that feels like heaven. I'm about three seconds away from reaching for his belt when I hear a door open, followed by heavy footsteps.

We both freeze, realizing we're not alone. His lips are still on mine, our warm breath mingling, even as we remain motionless.

"Scarlett?" Coach Simmers calls out.

I suck in a breath, realizing that he was still in his office this entire time. Silas could get kicked off of the team if he's caught indulging in a romantic tryst with me. My lips pull back from his.

I wonder if his arms are getting tired as he holds me up in the air, and then I remember him bench-pressing double my weight.

"Must've gone home," Coach mumbles, turning off the light in the locker room and shrouding us in almost-complete darkness.

His footsteps slowly move farther away before disappearing completely. We wait another minute, hearing nothing. Silas is still holding me up against the wall, both of us afraid to move and make a sound.

"I think he's gone," I whisper, trying to wiggle out of his grip.

He slowly lowers me to the floor, and I feel his erection under me all the way down, causing us both to let out a gasp.

"That was close," I whisper, peering up at him.

What did you just do?

He stares down at me for a few more seconds before finally speaking. "What was that?"

I take a step back, looking around to see what else I need to finish to avoid eye contact and get out of here.

"Um, just something I wanted to do, I guess." I reach for the bag of bats to hang it on the wall.

“What do you mean? Talk to me.” He flips on the light, illuminating the space, making it much easier for me to finish up the task.

I glance over at him, thankful he’s not asking about Lettie anymore, but unsure of how to answer his question.

He starts shaking his head, rubbing his eyes with his hand. “I can’t keep this up. You can’t keep doing shit like this to me.”

All that’s left to do is sweep out the equipment room. I grab the broom and start on the job.

“I’m very attracted to you. It’s difficult for me to understand why you get to use me physically, but I can’t do the same to you,” I say quietly.

“When have I ever used you physically?”

Okay, never.

I keep my head down, not wanting to meet his eyes. “If this is just physical, why do we need to talk about anything? You assume every time we touch, we have to have some big discussion about what it means. *Is it just for fun? Are there strings attached?* We don’t even like each other. Just let it be what it is and stop pushing me to open up.”

My dirt pile is ready to be scooped up, but I can’t find the dustpan. Silas extends his arm up to grab it off a shelf I can’t reach. Instead of handing it to me, he squats down on the floor, takes the broom, and sweeps up the debris.

He looks up into my eyes. “Okay, I won’t push you anymore. You’re right; it means nothing.”

The truth stings, but I asked for it.

He takes the dustpan and dumps it into the trash. I grab my purse off a shelf in the equipment room before following him into the deserted locker room. The janitor has entered the space to collect the dirty towels from the guys’ lockers. He ignores us as he does his job.

Silas grabs his gear. “Let me make sure you get back okay. It’s late.”

We don’t speak as we walk side by side out into the parking lot, both dwelling on what could have been, but never will be.

TWENTY-THREE

silas

THE GAME on Saturday is one I sit out when we're on the field, only batting. My arm is exhausted from last night's game. If I overwork it, I'll be useless to the team.

Scarlett and I make eye contact a couple of times, both of us lingering for a few moments before breaking it. I want to ask her if last night is stuck in her head too, but the fear of rejection holds me back.

I'm nothing more than a coward.

We lose the game by two runs. The guys are quiet as we gather in the locker room. Coach Simmers delivers a motivating speech, encouraging us all to rest easy tonight and come back strong tomorrow.

After a steaming shower, I change into light-wash jeans and a white button-down to have a late lunch with my parents. I walk out of the locker room, through the halls and public areas to find them by the back gate again. I told Dan to meet us there too, to join in for lunch.

They give me reassuring pats on the back in an attempt to console me. Dan and my dad are chatting easily, as they've known each other as long as we have. My mood is melancholy as we head to the parking lot.

"You played well, son. That's something to be proud of."

We get to my dad's Yukon, and I see Cole and his parents parked right next to us. He grins at me.

"Hey, Saint, is this the fam?"

I nod, introducing him to my parents.

"Cole is the catcher. Can't see his ugly mug under that mask."

My dad shakes his hand. "Good game, son. Can't win them all. You played well."

Cole nods. “Thank you, sir. This is my dad and stepmom, Bruce and Kay.”

Introductions are made, and the parents chat for a minute while Cole, Dan, and I stand by, awkwardly listening to them discuss how nice the facility is and where we’re having lunch.

A group walks behind us toward another vehicle.

“Hey, Jackie. It’s been forever!” Dan turns around to face the group walking past us.

Cole and I turn. My eyes land on Scarlett in a red puffer vest, a white long-sleeved shirt underneath, and shimmery black leggings with tall black boots. Her hair is still in loose curls.

Dan gives Scarlett’s mom a hug before shaking her stepdad’s hand.

“Well, you sure grew up, Daniel. What are you studying here?” Jackie smiles at him, and I’m shocked again at how young and beautiful she looks.

I don’t remember her being this way. Maybe it’s because I was just a kid, but she’s actually stunning.

“I’m studying veterinary and biomedical science. If I get a high enough GPA, I’ll apply for vet school after graduation.”

Dan has always been the smart one. He just doesn’t talk about his grades and likes to party too.

Jackie looks impressed. “Well, that’s an excellent career choice. This is my husband, Dave, and this is Lettie.”

I turn to face Dave as Dan shakes his hand. My eyes drop down to the little girl standing beside Jackie, holding her hand. Lettie is looking down at her pink shoes, clicking them together. She’s got to be around three or four years old, and she’s an exact replica of Jackie … and Scarlett. Last night, she was asleep, her face half-concealed by Dave’s coat. Now, she’s wide awake, and I can clearly see that she’s Jackie’s daughter.

Or is she?

My gaze moves up to Scarlett’s face, who is staring at me, eyes wide. She goes over to Lettie, picking her up and holding her close. Lettie lays her head down on her shoulder, clearly trusting her and knowing her well.

There’s no way …

“Silas, we need to get to the restaurant. We have a reservation.” My mother comes up behind me, tugging my arm back.

I watch Scarlett closely for another moment before my eyes land on Jackie. Her stone-cold glare is turned toward my mother. When I look down

at my mother, I see an expression I've never once known her to have. She looks cold, angry … judgmental. She's usually kind and loving. Jackie was a poor single mom in our church, who my parents once helped to avoid her getting evicted from her home.

Something happened back then, and I'm the only one still in the dark here.

My mom is still pulling back on my arm. I finally give in, turning back around to climb into the Yukon. Dan gets in next to me. We're both in the back row, our knees pushed up in the small space. I lean closer to him.

"What was that about?" I say quietly.

He turns to me, eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"You didn't see that? Who is that little girl?"

He shrugs. "I guess Jackie had a baby after they moved away. What's the big deal?"

I lean back against my seat. "Never mind."

My stomach twists as I stare out the window.

Something isn't adding up.

I reread Scarlett's letters Saturday and Sunday night, seeing if there was any hint of a baby on the way or a little girl joining her life.

There's nothing. All she talked about was how much she missed me and how much she hated New Mexico. She told me about her mom's douchebag boyfriends, looking for a job, and how much school she missed because she had to work.

She never mentioned her mother having morning sickness or going to any hospital visits. I start to feel like I'm going crazy after rereading them each for the third time, so I turn off the lights and try to force myself to sleep. I wish I still had our texts or any voice mails she'd left me back then, but I dropped my old phone in the lake last summer.

I avoid Scarlett during practice on Monday. My focus is on the game, my form, and keeping my arm strong for the games this weekend.

She does her job seamlessly, always there when Coach Simmers needs her.

Halfway through practice, I notice Ryan flirting with Scarlett, who seems to be returning it. I turn away again, clenching my jaw.

After icing my shoulder and showering, I change into jeans, a long-sleeved navy shirt, and a forest-green baseball cap.

"See you tomorrow, Coach." I wave at Coach Simmers, Coach Jones, and the assistant coaches as I walk out.

"Hey, Saint. Come here real quick." Jones waves me into Coach Simmers's office.

I walk inside and stand by the desk.

"Are you interested in touring any of the MLB facilities? If we go during the off week over spring break, we could see a game and go behind the scenes," Coach Jones asks.

Coach Simmers is leaning back in his office chair, listening. Spring break is in two weeks.

"Yeah, I'd like to go. Can my dad join us? Is Jenson going?"

Coach Jones nods. "Your old man can come for sure. Jenson wants to see the Malibu Sharks, Oklahoma City Pirates, and the Texas Angels. We'll only make it to one."

I nod. "I'm down for any of those. They were on my list too."

Simmers speaks up. "We'll make it happen and give the details this week."

"Thanks, Coach."

I turn and walk out, heading for my car. I drive the two miles to my and Dan's apartment, ready to order a pizza and binge-watch *The Office*. Tonight, my brain is turning off. No thoughts of baseball, Scarlett, or the little mini version of her I just found out existed are allowed in my head.

The homework I have due tomorrow takes me about an hour to finish. I listen to country music. I'm about to place my pizza delivery order for a large meat lovers deep dish with a side of spicy classic wings. I exit my room, walking out into the living room.

"Dan, you want any pizza?"

I look up to see my roommate sitting with Lucy and Scarlett, a bottle of wine open on the round wooden coffee table.

Lucy is dressed in darker clothes—the only thing I've ever seen her wear. Scarlett has on a deep-cut violet V-neck shirt and light-wash jeans that look painted on her skin.

Dan smiles. "I would love some pizza. Ladies?"

He looks like the typical player, constantly surrounding himself with beautiful women.

How does he do it?

I fold my arms over my chest.

Lucy shrugs. “Sure, I could eat.”

Scarlett doesn’t look at me. She simply nods. Dan reaches into his pocket to retrieve his wallet, tossing it to me.

“Use my debit card. I want supreme.”

“I’ll eat anything,” Lucy says.

Scarlett is still ignoring me. She smiles at Dan, shaking her head. She reaches for the wine, pouring herself a large glass.

Is this how we’re playing it now?

“Hey, Scar. Are you going to talk to me or keep acting like a spoiled brat?”

The room is as silent as a church on hellfire-and-brimstone Sunday. Scarlett avoids looking at my face as she lifts her wineglass to her lips, taking a deliberately slow sip.

Dan and Lucy glance from my face to hers, lips still sealed.

I’ve had enough of this bullshit.

I set Dan’s wallet on the coffee table. “Hey, Dan, can you order the pizza? I would love some hot wings and a meat lovers deep dish, extra cheese. I got something to do real quick.”

I walk around the coffee table, grabbing Scarlett’s wineglass right out of her hand.

“Hey!” she yelps, finally looking up at me, her mouth gaping open.

I hand the glass to Dan before reaching down to scoop her up off the sofa. My arms go under hers, like she’s a bag of red dirt I’m dumping on the baseball field.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

I ignore her protests as I toss her easily over my shoulder. My arm rests in the crease behind her knees. She kicks her bare feet in protest.

“Silas Peter Saint, you’d better put me down this instant!”

She tries punching the back of my legs on my hamstrings, but I can barely feel her little fists.

“It’s time we had a little chat, Scarlett Jane Cohen. You’re making it unnecessarily difficult for yourself and for me.”

I turn us around as Dan and Lucy try to hold in their snickering at the spectacle I've created.

"Hey, man, we'll go pick up the pizza to, uh, give y'all some privacy." Dan isn't even trying to hold his laughter in now.

I walk back to my bedroom door, my cargo safely on my shoulder despite a physically active, vulgar, vocalized protest. I turn the handle with my free arm. I walk through and kick the door shut before tossing her easily on my neatly made double bed.

"Now, Scarlett, I'd really like to have a conversation with you, if you could spare me a moment of your precious time." My voice drips with sarcasm.

She's fuming, her gray eyes as stormy as I've ever seen them. Her hair is wild and sexy around her shoulders.

"Oh, is that so?"

She's never looked so beautiful and so terrifying. I feel like a freak for being turned on by it, but I can feel the excitement starting to lift up below my waist.

Her chest is heaving up and down, and I can detect the excitement in her eyes.

"Well, you got me here, caveman-style. What do you want?" Her tone has a bite to it.

"I would like to talk. I don't wanna have one of those one-sided conversations we've been engaging in all semester, where I ask a bunch of questions and you avoid every single one."

I pull the chair out from my desk, turning it around to sit on it backward, facing her.

She folds her arms over her chest, pushing her breasts up. "Pick one of the blonde ones—you have a line outside. I don't want to be your girlfriend. So flattered you asked. Next."

"Who is Lettie?" My eyes are laser-focused on her face, lie detector on high.

She closes her eyes, breathing deeply. "Lettie is my sister."

"How old is she?"

She opens her eyes. "She just turned four."

I grip the backrest of the chair, flexing my forearms. "Why didn't you tell me about her?"

She looks up at the ceiling, rubbing her hands down her thighs. “I … didn’t think you would understand.”

I flex my jaw, eyes never leaving her face. “Is she … why y’all moved away?”

She nods, opening her eyes to look at me again. Tears are gathering on the lower rim of her eyes.

“Who’s her father?”

She shakes her head, tears rolling farther down her cheeks. “I can’t say.”

I stand up, moving over toward the bed to be closer to her. My heart is squeezing inside my chest in pain for all that she has suffered, all the years she’s spent holding this secret in.

Maybe she was assaulted. I don’t know the story. I know she wasn’t dating anyone back then. We were so close.

“Scarlett … it’s okay. I don’t care that you had a baby with someone else. You can tell me what happened when you’re ready. I don’t … I don’t judge you for it.”

She sniffles, lowering her eyes as she tries to get her emotions under control.

“I just wish you hadn’t pushed me away while you were going through the hardest time in your life. I wish you had let me help you through it.” I reach out to her, grabbing her arm and pulling her to my chest.

She comes easily, sobs racking through her body. “I can’t be with you, Silas. I can’t. You’re going pro. The scouts come to watch you play every single game. You have a bright future. You don’t … you don’t need this baggage. Pick the blonde one. She has it all together. She won’t hold you back.”

My hand brushes over her silky hair. I press her face into my chest as she cries. A tear slides down my face as I finally understand what happened all those years ago.

Scarlett was protecting me. She was trying to shield me from the messiness of her life, so I wouldn’t be held back from the potential glory of mine.

“I don’t want the blonde one. It’s over between us. I want you. I want mini you. You’re not baggage. Neither of you are. Not even close.”

TWENTY-FOUR

scarlett

"THEN I FELL ASLEEP, crying in his arms. When I woke up early this morning, he was holding me close, still asleep. I snuck out." I twist my hands in my lap, unable to make eye contact with my therapist after relaying my shameful behavior from last night.

I slept better than I have in years in Silas's arms.

Marcy adjusts the thick frames on her face before writing something in her notes. "So, you lied to him?"

I twist the sterling silver ring around my index finger. It's a plain band, nothing special. I stole it from a thrift store when I was fourteen.

"I didn't lie. He assumed Lettie was my baby, and I simply … didn't correct him."

"Hmm. Do you believe a lie by omission is still a lie?"

I shift my eyes back up to her face. "I guess I think it's a form of … deception."

She nods. "I think that's a fair way to put it. You don't want him to know whose daughter Lettie really is, so you avoided correcting him. You would rather him believe she is yours."

I nod, shifting in my seat and glancing at the clock. I have thirty more minutes in the hot seat.

"Is it really better for Silas to believe you had a child at fourteen years old, kept it from him, and then left her for your mother to raise while you went to college?"

Marcy isn't playing nice today.

I cross my leg over my knee. "I want him to believe whatever he needs to if it means he doesn't ask questions about Lettie and doesn't keep trying

to date me. You can disagree with that decision, but you will not change my mind about it."

Marcy writes something in her notes as I exhale. A glance at the clock reveals it's only been two minutes since the last time I checked it.

"Does your mother know the position you've put yourself in with Silas?"

I chew my lip, considering her question.

"My mother knows I rejected Silas to protect Lettie. She knows what kind of family he comes from … what they're all like."

"Does she know about your more recent feelings for him?"

I stare at Marcy. *Feelings?*

"My feelings toward Silas are physical, nothing more. He's hot—call me bothered. Why does that matter?"

Marcy tilts her head. "Do you even believe what you just said, Scarlett? There's no harm in admitting you have feelings for a man, even one you would never consider a relationship with."

I'm getting fed up with Marcy's audacity today.

"I want to jump his bones, sure. Maybe I still will. But we won't end up together. He'll marry a little blonde cheerleader and make pretty babies. Wish him all the best."

"What makes you so set against being with him?"

I lean forward. "I would never risk him finding out about Lettie. It would come out if we got that close. He can always tell when I'm lying."

Marcy scribbles in her little notebook. "What kind of man do you see yourself with, Scarlett?"

I lean back again, shrugging. "I don't know. Someone tall, hopefully. Big shoulders, athletic, knows how to laugh. Mostly just someone who can put up with my shit, I guess. Someone who won't leave."

Marcy nods. "Hmm. So, maybe an underlying reason you don't want to be with Silas is because you believe he's the type to leave. Maybe like your father did?"

Sudden emotion rises in my throat. I can't speak, so I nod.

Marcy writes something in her notes.

"Let's shift focus. Have you settled on your major yet?"

I sigh in relief at the change in topics. "Uh, not quite, but I have been thinking about something in sports management. I really love what I'm doing for the team. Obviously, I don't wanna be the bat girl forever, but the

excitement of watching the games and being close to the action has really made me think about the field on the career level. I also really like traveling. I never got to do it growing up, but my mom and my stepdad are taking me to Tahiti over spring break."

She smiles for the first time since our session began. "I'm so glad to hear that. I think your personality would be suited well for sports management. Have you thought about setting up a meeting with your advisor to discuss what it would take to get there?"

I nod. "I have. I think I'll call him this week, actually. I just thought about it this weekend, how fun it could be."

Marcy smiles. "That's an excellent idea. You're really taking your future seriously, Scarlett. I think you'll see the benefits of that choice someday."

For the rest of the session, we discuss my trust issues, balancing my class schedule with the demands of my job as the equipment manager, and the homework assignment Marcy gives me to try and meet one new person this week and introduce myself.

I exit the on-campus office, feeling worn out. Therapy hasn't been as miserable as I thought it would be. I hated it at first, but in some ways, I can see how it's helped me to talk through things with a neutral third party.

I make my way across campus, enjoying the slightly warmer weather we're finally getting in Central Texas.

Lunch being served in the cafeteria is spaghetti and meatballs. The greasy sauce looks unappealing, so I skip over it and head to the salad bar.

My plate is piled high with greens, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, ham cubes, boiled eggs, and shredded cheese as I turn around to analyze the crowd and see if there are any familiar faces. I see a few kids from my political science class, but I've never talked to them. I strongly consider calling in sick to work today so I don't have to see Silas. He still doesn't have my phone number.

My energy to meet new people is depleted. The fifteen-year-old version of me, trying to fit into a new high school in a foreign place, rushes to the surface, bringing along with it a surge of anxiety. I opt for a table alone.

I set my tray down before pouring ranch dressing over my salad. I take a bite, my mind preoccupied with my advisor meeting in an hour.

Two chairs across from me scrape across the floor as two people sit down in front of me.

“Hey, girl! Wow, that salad looks yum.”

My eyes shift upward to see Amy, the girl who made out with Silas at the fraternity party over a month ago, and Adeline, my roommate who had a movie date with Silas. I haven’t seen Amy in a month, and Adeline is still using our room as a second closet.

“Hi. It sure is,” I say.

Amy flashes her perfect white teeth in a smile. “We were just coming over to see if you wanted to come to the Alpha Chi Mardi Gras party this weekend. We’re bringing in spring break with booze and beads.”

Why would they randomly invite me to a party?

I have a hard time trusting people who are too friendly for no apparent reason. Growing up, I learned that there’s usually an ulterior motive. I briefly remember Marcy’s encouragement to work on trusting people.

“Okay, maybe. I’ll let you know.”

Adeline’s smile looks genuine. “I really have been meaning to invite you to some of our events. I know your job keeps you busy, and I’m the same with the sorority and classes. We keep missing each other at the dorm.”

Amy tosses her bleached hair over her shoulder. “I invited the entire baseball team too. Who wouldn’t wanna see all those athletic bodies wearing mostly beads, right?”

I nod, taking another bite of my salad and hoping she’ll go away. My dislike for her doesn’t really have a concrete foundation, but I’ve never been good at faking nice. Adeline is turning out to be hard to dislike. She seems like a sweet girl.

“So, which ones are, like, available? I heard you were talking to Cole Whitlock,” Amy continues.

I shrug, choosing not to confirm or deny her inquiry about Cole.

It’s none of your damn business.

She smiles, tossing her head back with a fake laugh. “Well, I also heard Silas punched Cole for it, so no one really knows which one you’re dating.”

This time, I smile at her. “That’s interesting, considering you both had a thing for Silas.”

Her laughter fades as irritation settles in her gaze. My love life is not her concern. This feels an awful lot like an interrogation, not an innocent invitation to potential friendship.

Keep fishing. I won’t bite.

Adeline speaks up. “Silas and I really were never a thing. It fizzled out quickly. He’s fair game now for … whoever.”

Amy smiles at her before turning back to me. “Well, I’m just trying to make sure I don’t step on any toes at the Mardi Gras party. If I don’t know which guys are single, it makes it kind of hard.”

I tilt my head to the side. “Why don’t you just check with the guys first before you make your move on them?”

She studies me for another moment before placing her practiced smile back on her face. “You’re really pretty—you know that? I pay good money for my lips to look like yours.”

I look down at her overinflated lips. “I never would’ve guessed.”

She smiles, thinking it was a compliment. “It’s really a shame you can’t do anything about that wardrobe. If you would just splurge on a few designer pieces, your look would really come together.”

My current outfit choice is a cheap pair of knockoff Keds, jeans I think I’ve had since my junior year of high school, and a long-sleeved Mustangs baseball shirt.

I don’t need to look at the tags on Amy’s clothes to know they’re some fancy designer who I’ve never heard of.

Mean girls, masquerading as sweet and innocent in front of guys, usually bring out the claws when they’re facing competition for male attention. It’s my least favorite brand of women. It’s the reason I have so much trouble forming and maintaining female friendships.

Girls who will do anything to impress the guy they like will also betray a friend at the drop of a hat. Or shit on someone’s lack of financial stability to afford designer clothes.

“I really prefer to dress like white trash. It’s familiar territory.”

Her eyes widen for a split second before she recovers. “That wasn’t a criticism. I love the tomboy look. I bet the boys love it too. Honestly, I wish I could pull it off. I’m just a girlie girl.” She smiles again, her plastic personality as palpable as the tension between us.

“You know, I really might come to that party. What was the dress code again? Beads?”

Let’s level the playing field, shall we?

Her eyes look a little bit like a snake as she nods. “With bikinis underneath, obviously.”

“Hmm, is the bikini optional?” I ask her absentmindedly.

I just bought a few new cute ones for my spring break trip to Tahiti that I'm dying to wear, but she doesn't need to know that. Adeline laughs, shaking her head.

Amy's expression looks more forced with each passing second. "I guess as long as the extremities are covered."

I nod, taking a massive bite of my salad.

"Sounds good," I say, talking with my mouth full of food.

Amy stands up, a look of constipation on her face. "Well, I'll see you then."

"Bye, girl." I wave my hand in the air.

She walks away, but Adeline is still sitting there.

"Amy is dating about four different guys right now, just so you know. I'm pretty sure she sees it as a challenge. How many can she balance before she falls on her face?"

I nod, reaching for my drink to take a sip. I can't help but ask her, "What happened with you and Silas?"

She smiles, shaking her head with amusement. "It's hard to keep dating a guy when he's clearly interested in someone else."

FOUR YEARS EARLIER

My mom's water breaks on the public bus.

For a second, I think she's peed herself, but when she grips my arm with Herculean strength, I know it's baby time. I hop up from the bench to step up to the bus driver.

"Can we make a detour to the hospital?" My voice is surprisingly calm.

His brown eyes widen as he glances at me. "What happened?"

"It's nothing horrible. My mom is in labor."

"Oh shit. Uh, okay. Let me radio my headquarters so they know there will be a delay." His voice is high-pitched.

"Thank you!"

I return to my seat, grabbing my mother's hand. Her face is white.

"We'll be there in no time, Mama. Are you having contractions?"

She nods, squeezing my fingers tighter. In less than ten minutes, the bus pulls up to the labor and delivery emergency entrance.

"Thank you!" I tell the driver as I grip my mom's arm and walk down the steps.

"You're welcome. Good luck."

She has a short labor, lasting less than three hours, before Charlotte Ann joins the world, screaming at the top of her lungs. Hot tears wet my cheeks as I cut the umbilical cord. The nurses wrap her tiny body in a pale-pink blanket.

My mom's face is a combination of blissfully happy and exhausted.

She reaches over to hold my hand. "Thank you, Scarlett. Thank you for being here for me. I love you." Her voice is weak.

I nod. "Of course, Mama. Where else would I be?"

The room is getting dark as the sun begins to set outside. It's early January in New Mexico. We really don't have any friends here yet, so there's no one to call and announce the birth to. My mom's parents were abusive, so I've never even met them.

"You want to hold her?" she asks me.

I reach out my arms, accepting the precious little bundle and bringing her close. I look down at her sleeping face. She's beautiful, with long lashes and rosebud lips. Her dark hair is thick and curly.

More than anything in the world, I want to tell Silas about her. I never even told him my mom was pregnant. He thinks we moved because my mom got a good job here.

I had to lie to him. He would never understand how she could have gotten pregnant again, still with no husband. If this is the kind of woman she is, what does that say about me? How would he view me, coming from a family like this?

Another bastard daughter, born in a hospital room with no man present for her to call daddy, makes it crystal clear that I would never be good enough for Silas and his family.

I don't blame him for it. It's the way he was raised.

Some people always seem to get it right. They're not constantly fucking up and ending up in situations like this. They have a mom and dad, a healthy home with the light bill paid on time. They wait for marriage to have sex, and they definitely don't end up in the hospital as a young teen, holding their mom's hand as she births a baby from an unknown man.

Other people are just walking scandals. I don't know if it follows us around or if we bring it on ourselves, but I guess in the end, it doesn't matter. This is where we are.

I hesitate to ask her for a few minutes, but I can't get it out of my mind.

"Mom … is there anyone you want me to call?" My voice is low so I don't wake up Lettie.

My mom's eyes open. They're steel gray, a shade darker than mine. All I know of my father is that his family tried to pay my mom to abort me, but she ran away instead. They were together on and off until I was two, when they broke it off permanently. I want more for Lettie. So badly, I want more.

"You've never told Silas about her, have you?"

I shake my head. "No. He doesn't know."

She nods, reaching for her cup of water to take a long sip. "I need you to promise me you never will. Can you do that?"

Never?

There's still a small, silly part of me deep down hoping my mom and I will start doing better. I was hoping one day I could go to college, get a good job, and maybe eventually be someone Silas would date.

"You know what kind of family he has. The Saints are exactly what the name suggests—better than us. Now, it's all in their heads. But they believe it. Nothing you do can change that, sweetie. You can't trust him."

I want to protest. I want to argue with her, but she just gave birth, so I'd feel like shit for it. She reaches for my hand, gripping it tightly.

"Can I trust you, baby?" Her voice is filled with desperation.

I nod, tears escaping my eyes, knowing what this means. "I don't understand why I can't still be friends with him. Nothing more … just friends."

She laughs, shaking her head. "He's headed for big places—places that he'll never take you. He might use you for a while and toss you aside, but that's all he'll ever do. You hear me?"

I look down at Lettie before nodding my understanding.

But never?

"Do you want to know who her father is?" Her voice is low.

I look back up at her. She glances over to the door to make sure it's still closed.

Is she finally going to tell me?

"You have to swear you won't tell anyone. He could still try to fight me for custody. I told him she wasn't his, but he could still come back in the future and try to force a paternity test."

My mouth drops open, as I haven't even considered that possibility until now. I bring Lettie closer to my chest as she stirs gently in her sleep.

"I promise I won't tell anyone."

I would never do anything to risk Lettie being taken from us.

"You remember that day I found out my boyfriend was cheating on me almost two years ago and you went to get us help so we wouldn't have to leave Bonnet Valley?"

I tilt my head in confusion. "Yes …"

"You asked Pastor Saint if he would help us, and he did," she continues.

My stomach starts to feel tight.

No. Please no. Anyone but him ...

Her eyes water as she looks down at her lap. "I don't want this for you, Scarlett. I don't want you to make the mistakes I've made. Silas's parents were having problems. Being the other woman wasn't in my life plan. I kept trying to put a stop to it, but he was so sweet to me. It wasn't until I found out I was pregnant that I told him he had to choose. He knows there's a baby, but whether or not he'll court-order a paternity test is something we can never risk. He might let it go, if we don't tell anyone."

My heart is completely shattered by her words.

She means Silas. I can't tell Silas.

Not only did she go and sleep with a married man—a man I once trusted when I asked him for help—but she's also ruined any possible chance I ever had at being with Silas.

We now share a sibling. Lettie is his sister as much as she is mine.

Nausea overwhelms me, and I feel like I might vomit. I stand up, handing Lettie to my mom so I don't throw up on her.

"Scarlett? Are you okay?" She brings the baby closer while her brow pinches in concern.

I ignore her, running into the bathroom as my granola bar and yogurt hospital breakfast is released into the toilet. I heave it all out, tears and snot mingling with my puke.

This is why we moved. This is why she's always bad-mouthed Silas. This is why she's insisted we can never be together.

I sob as silently as I can, holding my arms close to my stomach as I cry. I cry so hard that it physically hurts, but I welcome the pain. I cry for the silly dream I had of being with him. I cry for myself, for my shattered dreams of future happiness, now vanished with this scandal that was clearly the reason we had to leave our home.

I cry for Lettie, a baby born out of wedlock, who will never get to know her father. I cry for Silas, who will never get to meet his little sister. I cry for myself and the way I'm going to have to hurt him because I can't tell him the real reason we will never be together. I cry for how much I've already lost, and now, I'm going to lose my best friend.

I cry until there are no more tears left and my grief is replaced with bitterness, anger, and hate.

I can't hate my mother. She's all I have left. I have to direct it at someone else.

Finally, I get off the bathroom floor, walk back out into the hospital room, and pick up my pen to write one last letter to my first love.

TWENTY-FIVE

silas

"COACH SIMMERS HAS SCHEDULED my and Jenson's visit to the Malibu Sharks ballpark for the weekend right before school starts up after spring break. We'll fly out Friday morning and come back on Sunday afternoon."

My dad is ecstatic on the other line. This has always been his dream for me, and I can hear the emotion in his voice. "Silas, I'm so proud of you, son. This is going to be a great weekend. You'll have lots of options, so there's no need to commit anywhere just yet."

"I know. Coach has already reminded me of that a few different times."

I'm lounging on the sofa in my living room. The front door opens, and Dan walks in with his backpack slung over his shoulder.

"Okay, Dad, I'm gonna go. See you next weekend at the airport."

"Love you, son."

"Love you too."

I hang up the phone before moving to a sitting position. It's the week before spring break. We don't play another game until we're back from the break. Practice is batting and the weight room during lunch break, which means there's no need for Scarlett.

I haven't seen her since she snuck out on me after I forced her to talk about Lettie.

My mind has been wrestling with this new information. Scarlett is a mom. She's been a mom all this time. It's difficult for me to wrap my head around it. I wish she'd given me the chance to make my own decision about my relationship with her back then.

The bitterness that I've been holding on to is now … wavering. I have to be realistic about how my parents would have treated her if we had

stayed in contact.

I feel confident I know what they would have said.

Like mother, like daughter.

But now, she's here at college, trying to better herself so she can support her daughter. People make mistakes.

Knowing my parents, I could explain it to them from ten different angles, but they'd still only see it their way.

Dan collapses on the chair across from me, drawing my mind out of the past.

"Hey. Was that your dad?"

I nod, sitting up straight. "Yep. He's going with me to see the Malibu Sharks next weekend."

Dan grins. "That's amazing. Congrats, man. You deserve this."

"It's crazy. I can hardly believe it's really happening now that it is. Nothing is official, of course. I have two more years of college ball left."

"Well, you're already gaining notoriety here on campus. A group of sorority girls stopped me in the cafeteria today to invite me to a Mardi Gras party this weekend—if I bring you."

I bark out a laugh. "Well, that's the first time. Usually, you're the one surrounded by women."

"Oh yeah, surrounded by women … and not dating any of them."

"I feel like, if you tried, it wouldn't be difficult for you to find one who wanted more."

He shrugs. "After I took Kenna out and she friend-zoned me, I just haven't wanted to try again. I'm happy for her and Levi. Seeing them together made me realize I've never felt that desire for anyone. Not even close."

I swallow over the lump that appears in my throat. *What's worse—never feeling that way or feeling that way for someone who won't give you a chance?*

He seems to read my thoughts. "Y'all were made for each other, and I'm sick of you both acting like you weren't."

My eyes jump to meet his. "Tell her that then."

He shakes his head. "Like I haven't. She's closer to believing it than you think."

Does he know about Lettie?

He acted like he didn't when he talked to Jackie in the parking lot after the game. He could be faking it for Scarlett, but something tells me I wasn't the only one she kept in the dark about her baby being raised as her sister.

I look up at the ceiling. My life feels like it's at a crossroads. My dreams —mine and my dad's—are coming true for baseball. But at the same time, it feels like I'm losing Scarlett all over again.

She was never even mine, but just holding her for one night while she slept gave me a glimpse of what it could be like with her. I'd be lying if I said I haven't thought about our time in the hot tub, where she let me explore her body. I shift in my seat, forcing my head to think about something else.

"If we go to this Mardi Gras thing, we have to go get some beads." Dan stands up, stretching his arms overhead.

"Fine, but let's not stay long."

If I sit here all weekend, I'll just think about Scarlett. I need a distraction.

Saturday night finally rolls around. Dan convinced me to wear my swim trunks, ten beaded necklaces, and a glittery mask.

"You're missing out on the college experience. All you do is play baseball. There's a entire world of themed parties, alcohol, and women here."

"Right, as if that's not exactly what I told my parents I *wouldn't* indulge in if I came here. I seem to remember you making the same promise."

Dan shrugs. "Things change. It's a rite of passage. How am I going to tell my kids what not to do if I don't try it first and learn why it's a bad idea?"

I laugh out loud as we make our way across campus to the Alpha Chi sorority house. "I guess that's true. We're making ourselves better parents for our future kids."

Growing up in a rural, religious community and being homeschooled made for a narrow view of the world. Even though baseball was my

motivation to leave home, now that I'm here, I realize how limited my parents' mindset is.

What do they think is going to happen if I drink a little too much one night?

Shaking off my parents' expectations is easier said than done, but I've gotten much better at it over the last year and a half.

We get to the house, which is spilling over with barely dressed college students. Everyone is in costumes with colorful beads, feathers, masks, and a lot of skin.

"Oh yeah, that blonde girl Amy wanted us to find her when we got here."

I stop right on the threshold. "Ah, you go by yourself. I'm going to grab a beer."

Dan nods, disappearing into the crowd. I don't drink much at all during the season, but tonight is starting to feel like the perfect time to make an exception. We still have practice over spring break, but no games.

I find the kitchen overflowing with Alpha Chi girls, dressed in nothing more than beads and glittery body paint. They all seem to know my name, which is … weird.

"The Saint Slugger gets whatever he wants in the Alpha house. Beer or a vodka shot?" A redhead with huge boobs smiles at me, leaning close into my personal space.

A brunette presses in on the other side of me, looping her arm through mine. "How did we not know who you were until this year?"

I shrug. I don't really know how to answer that. *Where did Dan go?*

The redhead is holding out a shot in one hand and a beer in the other. I came here to drink and forget, so I take them both from her.

"Thanks. Great party. I'll see y'all around." I try to back up, but the brunette doesn't let go of my arm.

"When's the next baseball game? I painted your number on my face last time. Did you see me? I sat on the third base line."

I look down at her, not recognizing her one bit. *Is this what it's going to be like?*

I've never received so much female attention in my life. To avoid answering her strange question, I throw back the bitter shot, chasing it with the beer.

“Next game is two weeks after the break. Thanks for the support.” I smile down at her, hoping she’ll let me go.

“Saint! Look at you, lady killer.” Ryan’s voice pierces through the noise of the crowd.

I turn around, feeling relief when I see his face. He’s got a blonde on each arm. One of them gives me a death glare, and I immediately recognize Amy.

Maybe coming to this party was a bad idea.

“Let’s do a shot.” Ryan wobbles up to me, clearly already inebriated.

The redhead gladly pours a round, handing us each one and one to the girls standing around.

“To Mardi Gras!” Ryan clinks his shot glass with mine.

As the liquid burns down my throat, I feel someone’s gaze on me from the crowd in the living room.

I turn to see Scarlett’s eyes, immediately latching on to mine. Her body is strategically covered in purple beads, forming the shape of a bikini top and a miniskirt. Her hair is piled high on her head, purple and deep-jade feathers decorating it. A sparkling gold mask is painted around her eyes. She looks like an erotic Mardi Gras dream I conjured up in my mind. The curves of her slim body are begging for my hands to explore them again as she dances. She looks away from me, continuing to sway with the music.

I feel compelled to go in her direction. I move closer, the brunette sorority girl finally releasing me as I pull away.

As I start to get near her, a man with a giant red feathered headpiece steps up behind her, his hands reaching for her waist. My pulse quickens, anger rising inside me. She doesn’t step away from him.

Bodies are all over the place, but I finally squeeze through the dancing college students until I’m next to her and the guy. Her hands are raised in the air as she dances with her eyes closed.

I tap him on the shoulder. He turns around to face me, irritation in his gaze. It’s loud, so I lean closer to speak directly in his ear.

“If you’d like to wake up with your nasal bone in the right place, you should pick someone else to dance with.” My voice is deceptively calm.

His eyes widen as he takes a step back, holding up his hands. He clearly doesn’t want to dance with her that bad. Either that or my violent outburst toward Cole has gotten around the school.

Scarlett's eyes are still closed as she dances. I reach my hands down to graze my fingertips over her skin. She smiles as she tilts her head up to me.

Her eyes slowly drift open, widening when she sees me. My hands grip her waist, right below her rib cage, so she can't escape.

"Silas."

"Scarlett."

She glances around. "What are you doing?"

"Touching you." My tongue meets the roof of my mouth. "Is there something wrong with that?"

She's speechless for a moment before slowly reaching her hands up and around my neck. "How many times do I have to reject you before you accept no as my answer?"

I lean down to whisper in her ear, "I don't know. How many times are you going to kiss me to try and distract me from asking questions about your past? And while we're on the subject, now that I know the truth, why don't you quit pretending that you wrote me that letter for any reason other than to keep your secret?"

I pull back slightly, just enough so I can see the storm in her eyes. "If you can look me in the eye and tell me truthfully that you don't want this—not because you're scared I'll reject you, knowing you're a mom now, but because you just don't want me—then I'll leave you alone for good."

My heart pounds. Part of me is afraid she might actually do it, but I have to put an end to this game of tug-of-war. I've thought about it for days now. Her being a teen mom doesn't change how I feel about her or how much I want her. It wouldn't have changed my mind when I was sixteen either. I didn't get to make the choice back then, but I do now.

And I choose her.

Her body has gone still. Her arms are wrapped around my neck as she searches my gaze. She opens her mouth to speak, but someone bumps into us from the side, nearly knocking Scarlett over in her sky-high heels.

I grip her tighter, pulling her flush against me. The skin-on-skin contact brings my internal temperature up a few degrees.

"Well, aren't you two *so* adorable? You know, it must be fun to have all the baseball guys in your bed all the time. Do you make them take turns, or do they go two at a time?"

My eyes move away from Scarlett's heated expression to see Amy standing next to us. Her face is twisted with jealousy, and I can't remember

ever thinking she was pretty. She's got Ryan's arm draped over her shoulders. He blatantly roams his lustful eyes over Scarlett's body.

"We have a different definition of fun, but I'll be sure to spread the word around about what you're looking for." Scarlett grips my hand, pulling me out of the circle of people.

Adeline is standing there, blocking our way.

"What did she say?" Her expression is grim.

"She basically called Scarlett something she's not," I tell her.

Adeline and I ended on an awkward note, but I know she's a good person. She wouldn't let one of her sorority sisters treat Scarlett that way.

She nods, looking over at Scarlett. "I'm sorry. I'm going to deal with her, okay? She's not a representation of this sorority, not who we really are. Y'all have fun. Thanks for coming."

She walks over to where Amy is, leaning down to talk to her.

Scarlett tugs on my hand, and I follow her willingly. On our way through the house, she snags a bottle of 1800 Tequila off a table while the group next to it is distracted by two girls making out.

We finally push through the spectators, moving toward the stairs. We go up one level, but there's still a ton of partygoers. Scarlett takes a swig of the tequila, passing the bottle back to me before she continues up the next flight of stairs. I take a shot for courage as I follow her.

The beads are dancing around the crease of her ass, barely covering her. My mouth is watering by the time we get to the third floor. She tries two doorknobs before one finally twists open.

"I need another shot." She takes the bottle from me in the dark.

I can hear her gulp down the liquid.

My knee collides with something hard. "Ow."

She giggles, brushing her hand over my arm. "Is there a lamp by the bed?"

I reach out my hand, slowly searching for the edge of the bed. I finally reach the headboard, following it until there's a nightstand with a lamp on it. Light filters through the room. It's messy, clothes strewn about, and a bucket half full of beads is tipped over on the floor. A massive yellow sign on the wall has the Greek letters for Alpha Chi sorority on it. *Amy* is painted in pink underneath the letters.

Scarlett plops down on the unmade bed, tipping the bottle over her red lips. "You know, I've never seen you drunk. Have you ever even been

tipsy?"

I sit next to her, reaching for the bottle. She releases it, our fingers brushing. She licks her lips as I put my mouth on the bottle, letting the bitter liquid flow down my throat to poison my body.

"I have been drunk once or twice now. I don't usually drink during the season."

Strange tingles are starting to travel down my limbs, and I know the alcohol has made its way to my bloodstream. Scarlett twists a string of her beads around her finger. Underneath it, I can see now that she has a tiny purple bikini on.

"What other things have you yet to get into? Ever had a girlfriend?" She leans over to take the bottle from me.

"No girlfriend. What about you? What ended your last relationship?" I don't really want to know, but I figure learning about her past will help me know how not to fuck it up with her in the future.

"He was prick, and he played baseball," she states matter-of-factly before handing me back the bottle, her movements looking a little sluggish.

My chest tightens. "What did he do that made him a prick?"

She snorts a laugh. "Tell me your favorite sexual position, and I'll tell you one thing that made him a prick."

The reality of my lack of experience overwhelms me for a minute. She sort of already took my virginity, but she probably had no idea it was my first time, considering it lasted all of three seconds.

I take another shot to buy a little time. Obviously, even though I've never done it, I'm subjected to crude locker room talk every single day.

"Doggy."

She groans, standing up and twirling around to face me. "Adventurous. He used to fuck me while I was asleep."

TWENTY-SIX

scarlett

I EXPECTED to see a look of shock or disgust on Silas's face, but instead, he seems to be … enraged. He clenches his jaw and takes a very long drink of tequila, gulping it down like he's interested in getting his stomach pumped tomorrow morning.

I don't want to elaborate on how Rex treated me, so I try to move the conversation in another direction.

"Tell me something else about what I've missed in your life. Something really embarrassing."

He sets the bottle down on the nightstand, and I follow the vein from his wrist all the way up until it disappears into his chest.

Lord have mercy.

"I've never made a girl finish."

My eyes jump up to his face. He's studying my lips.

"What do you mean—like, during sex?"

Surely he knows I came in an embarrassingly short amount of time on his hand at the hotel.

He shakes his head, finally looking up into my eyes. "No, like, not at all."

"Do I not count or something?" I fold my arms over my beaded chest.

He slowly rises from the bed, his brows pinched together to form a line of confusion. "What do you mean?"

I smirk, realizing he must be telling the truth if he didn't know that was me having an orgasm from his fingers. "Why don't you just ask them if you're not sure? You know I came on your hand, right?"

His cheeks tinge pink, but he takes a step closer to me. I clench my thighs together as I remember how it felt when his touch was on me.

I know exactly how he was raised, and the idea of orgasms or even talking about sex can be embarrassing when it's surrounded by shame. My mother has her flaws, but at least she never tried to make me feel like my biological hormones were inherently wrong.

"Start with asking. Guys want to solve the 'mystery' of the female O instead of simply asking the woman herself what feels good. Trust me, you already have a pretty good idea."

His eyes drift down to my lips again. My breath grows shallow.

Is he waiting for an invitation?

"I wish I had a better idea." He finally takes one last step toward me, our bodies nearly flush together.

His head slowly descends until he's inches from my face.

"Don't try to stop talking to me again after this," he whispers.

I nod. I'd cut out my left kidney and give it to him right now if he'd just put his mouth on me already.

Our lips finally collide. He's sweet and sour—Silas mixed with tequila. I press up against his warm chest, wrapping my arms around his neck. I want to feel all of him, without these pesky beads in the way.

He kisses me like I'm the last living human female on this planet. His tongue explores my mouth while his fingers graze down to hold my lower back. I want them to go lower, but he's a gentleman to the core.

"Touch me where you want to feel me." My voice is husky, and I'm a little drunk.

Even with the alcohol pouring through my system, I know without a doubt that I want him.

He finally reaches farther down, hands gripping my ass to lift me up into his arms. He slowly lays me down on the bed. His body is suspended over mine, hands exploring me.

I need more, more, more. I need him everywhere.

I'm about to reduce myself to begging when he breaks the kiss. He looks down into my eyes. His lips are swollen.

"I don't have a condom."

I bite my lip, covering my face with my hands and groaning. I'm already soaking through my bikini bottoms with desire. I don't remember ever being this turned on in my entire life.

I feel him playing with the beads of my skirt. My eyes open to see what he's trying to do. His fingers twist different sides of the top, looking for

whatever is holding it together.

"I basically had to sew it on. You'll have to rip it off if you wanna …"

He doesn't need any further instructions, ripping it off with one pull. The skirt breaks off, sending beads scattering throughout the room in every direction.

"I've never done this … so tell me what feels good." His face lowers down between my legs.

He pulls my bikini bottoms to the side, exposing me to the cool air. I suck in a breath as he makes contact. Stars float above my head as his tongue explores me, wet and warm right where I desperately need it. My mouth opens involuntarily as I gasp at each tiny movement.

My nerve endings are sending sparks through every channel of my body. My limbs jerk from the sensations as I barely hold on to conscious thoughts.

Silas Saint's face is between my legs.

His callous hands move to grip my inner thighs by the knees, spreading me apart farther. He's warm, melting my nerves and lapping me up like I'm his favorite flavor of ice cream. It's only a couple of minutes before my body starts to shake and I come completely undone.

I cry out his name. "Silas."

He holds on to me until I come back down to earth, panting for breath. He lifts his head up, grinning.

"That gave me a much better idea of what to expect."

I sit up, leaning on my elbows. "How are you so good at that if you've never done it?"

He moves over me, crawling up toward my face. "You're easy for me to read, Scar."

He's finally calling me Scar again.

He lies down next to me, brushing his hand over my arm. I reach down for him, finding him hard for me.

"My turn."

He stops me, gripping my wrist. "Let's go to my apartment first. I want to hold you again in my bed when we're done."

The jump in our dynamic is startling, but I've wanted him so long that I don't want to stop and think about it. I don't want to dwell on our future … or lack thereof. I want to enjoy this night—even if whatever we might get to do is only for a little while.

“I guess we’ve tainted Amy’s bed enough for one night. Let’s go.”

I don’t waste time pushing him back against his bed after we walk into his bedroom. He goes willingly, letting my small frame dictate where he lays his larger one.

“I love our height difference. You make me feel tiny.”

“You are tiny.” He grabs my hand, pulling me down on top of him.

I need to feel all of him *right now*, but neither of us is in a state where we can drive off campus to buy condoms.

Instead, I push his chest until he’s lying flat on his back. My lips plant chaste little kisses on his torso. He’s nearly hyperventilating as I descend lower. He keeps trying to touch and hold me, but I push his hands away.

“Wait your turn,” I scold him as I finally reach down to his waistband with my lips.

His head falls back against the pillow as his hands find my hair. “Why is it so hard for you to be a good girl?”

“You’d be bored if I acted like a good girl.”

I tug the shorts down, exposing his lower half. I pepper a few more kisses around him before finally getting to the good part.

Once I make contact, he groans my name. “Scarlett …”

His fingers grip the roots of my hair, holding my head as it bobs up and down. The feeling of control I have over his pleasure is empowering as I take him to euphoric heights.

“Now you’re being a good girl,” he breathes out, fulfilling a praise kink I didn’t know I had until I heard it from Silas.

My hand is wrapped around him while I use my mouth to do the rest. It’s not long before he gets to where I need him to be, holding me tighter as his thigh muscles tense up.

He finishes in my mouth, and I swallow it down. I sit up, pulling the beaded top up over my head and tossing it on the floor before lying down next to him. I still have on the bikini bottoms, but I’m topless.

He holds me close to his chest, almost like he’s afraid of letting me go. It’s fine by me. I don’t want him to—ever.

“Was that your first time, when we were in the hot tub?” I murmur into his chest.

He brushes my hair back from my forehead before planting a soft kiss on my skin. “Yes.”

I should have known.

I press my thumb to his bottom lip, loving the chance I finally have to touch him wherever I want. I need days—no, weeks—to get my fill.

“Well, we need to redeem that shitty experience—with protection this time.”

He smiles, leaning down to kiss the tip of my nose. “We will, but I might need a few tries to get it perfect. I’m thinking … a lot of tries. If I’d known I’d ever get you into bed without having to throw you over my shoulder, I would have already bought some.”

I laugh, rubbing my hand around the back of his neck, my fingers threading through the hair at his neckline. “Is that so? I guess we’ll need a big box. I’d like to be thrown over your shoulder again.”

His eyes darken as he lowers his head to kiss me again, finally on the mouth. My heart feels like it might explode any second from happiness.

This is temporary. He still thinks Lettie is your daughter. He can’t find out the truth. You can’t keep him. The voice of doubt and reason slithers into my head.

I pull back from his lips, burying my face in his chest.

I push my knee between his muscular thighs, wanting to intertwine our bodies as much as possible.

Hot tears form behind my eyes, but I shove them back. I realize, with a sudden onset of grief, that Silas feels like home to me.

And I’ve been homesick for a long time.

TWENTY-SEVEN

silas

SCARLETT always loved chocolate chip pancakes with honey, butter, and a side of crispy bacon when we were kids. I'm pouring the batter onto the pan the next morning as the smell of freshly brewed coffee fills the air.

A splatter of bacon grease pops up, burning my stomach.

"Ouch."

"Now that's a sight that's sure to keep a woman happy." Scarlett is standing in the doorway of my bedroom.

She's wearing one of my weightlifting shirts with the sleeves cut off of it.

I should've gone to the store for condoms instead of making breakfast.

"Do you drink coffee, baby?"

A slow smile spreads across her lips. "Yes. I just like a little milk in it."

I pour her a cup of coffee. I reach into the fridge for the milk, adding it in before grabbing a spoon out of the drawer to stir it. She takes a step toward me. I meet her in the living room with the cup.

"Come sit down. Breakfast is almost ready."

I lead her over to the dining room table, pulling out her chair for her. She's about to sit when I reach down to pull her toward me by her waist, planting a kiss on her plump lips. She moans into my kiss, stirring up a slew of steamy memories from last night. I pull her tighter against me.

The door opens behind us.

"Oh shit. My bad." Dan's voice sounds shocked.

I pull back from Scarlett before looking up at him. "Morning."

Scarlett turns to him with a grin.

"Scarlett? Oh *shit."*

Scarlett crosses her arms. "Who'd you think I was?"

Dan raises his hands. I give him a death glare.

"Nobody! I'm just surprised to see you here … in the morning … with Silas. Is that his shirt?"

She sits down at the table, taking a sip of her coffee. I walk back into the kitchen so I can flip the pancakes that have probably started to burn.

"That's my new favorite shirt. What's your point?" I ask.

Scarlett turns to look at me. "You're not getting this shirt back—ever."

I flip the pancakes, which are in fact burned on one side.

"Wanna bet?"

The bacon is ready to come off, and I use a fork to lay it on the paper towel-covered plate. I pour more batter on the pan, determined to watch it closer and not let Scarlett's creamy-white thighs distract me again.

"I guess my point is that I'm happy to see it—finally. About time." Dan walks into the kitchen to pour himself some coffee.

He leans against the countertop, a big grin on his face. I flip the pancakes.

"You can't tell anyone, Danny," Scarlett says.

"Oh, secret relationship? Just like old times. My lips are sealed."

The pancakes come off with the perfect golden-brown color. I put two on a plate with bacon. I grab the butter and honey and take them over to Scarlett with a fork.

"Still your favorite?" I ask, brushing her hair back from her bare face.

She smiles up at me. "Yes. Thank you."

I sit down next to her. "So, how long do you think we have to keep us a secret? Are you worried about your mom or …"

Her big gray eyes blink up at me. "Uh … I mean because Coach Simmers made that rule."

I lean back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest. "Shit, I forgot about that. I can talk to him."

She looks down at her plate, cutting off a big piece of pancake and taking a bite. She chews slowly, eyes still on her plate.

Does she still not want to be with me? After last night?

She swallows her food, taking another sip of coffee before answering me.

"I don't think there's any rush, is there? I mean, Dan won't tell anyone. We just recently decided we don't hate each other anymore, so …"

I nod, realizing I sound insecure and desperate for trying to define the relationship way too soon. It's literally her first time to really stay over until breakfast.

"Yeah, absolutely. I get it. It's the middle of the season anyway, so maybe it would be better if we waited until it's over."

She nods, taking a bite of the bacon. "Oh my, this is delicious. I didn't know you could cook."

I lean forward to kiss her cheek, never seeming to get my fill of touching her.

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Scarlett Cohen."

Her smile turns devious, and she lowers her voice so Dan can't hear. "I know how you sound when you're coming in my mouth."

You're really dumb for making her pancakes instead of going to the store.

"I think you're the only person on this planet who knows what I sound like when that happens."

Dan clears his throat from the kitchen. "Well, as fun as this is, I'm suddenly very aware of how pathetically single I am, so—"

"What about that girl from the arcade, Scarlett's friend, who always wears black?"

"Lucy," she volunteers, rubbing her toes across the top of my foot. "She has a boyfriend."

I smile at her as we play footsie under the table. "Well, that's a bummer. Do you know anyone else we could set up with Dan?"

Dan waves his hand in the air, dismissing us. "I don't need to be set up. I was just going to say I'm going for a run so I don't have to listen to y'all whispering nasty stuff to each other. I feel like I'm related to both of you."

Scarlett bursts out laughing. "You're such a prude. Also, I don't know if you realize this, but you're the last of the four virgin men."

He gapes at her. "Damn, you're right. Bonnet Valley's finest have all fallen, and I'm the last man standing. What should I do with this honor?"

I chuckle, taking another sip of my coffee. "Get laid."

He slowly nods, considering my words. "I think I've grown attached to my virgin male status. It's pretty rare, so I've heard."

Scarlett stands up, taking her plate to the kitchen sink. "Self-acceptance is a great step in the right direction." She turns to face me. "I need to go pack my suitcase."

“Where are you going?”

She walks past me into my bedroom. “I have a spring break trip with my mom, Dave, and Lettie. We’re going to Tahiti.”

I follow her into the bedroom. “Oh, okay. Well, that should be fun.”

I feel like a lost puppy, chasing her around, like all I want is her attention. She sits down on the bed, picking at her cuticles.

“I have practice all week. This weekend, my dad and I are going to watch the Malibu Sharks play.” I sit down next to her, taking her hand in mine.

I don’t know why, but it feels like she’s pulling away from me. My heart hurts.

I just got her back.

Her hand feels limp in mine until I squeeze hers. She squeezes back gently.

“Silas, I …”

“No, don’t.” I stop her. “Whatever you’re about to say, I don’t want you to. Go on your trip. Spend time with Lettie and your mom.”

I reach my hand up to brush back her messy morning hair and tuck it behind her ear. Her eyes are downcast.

“Whatever you’re going to say, please just wait. I … I can’t lose you again so soon.” My voice is choked up and raw.

She holds my hand tightly, like she doesn’t want to let go.

“Okay,” she whispers.

I hold her close to me for almost half an hour before she finally stands up and kisses me. She doesn’t say a word as she takes a pair of my workout shorts and puts them on, followed by my old navy sweatshirt from my Select baseball team.

“Can I wear these home?”

“Of course.”

She moves toward the door.

“Scarlett.” I stand up.

She turns back around, her eyes red and watery as she looks up at me.

“Can I have your phone number?” I hold out my device, hoping she doesn’t deny my ability to contact her for the next week.

She stares at it for a moment, finally taking a step closer. She takes it, entering her info in before handing it back to me. She turns around without another word and is gone.

Practice drags by all week long. I work hard, pitching fast and accurate. I lift heavy, reaching a personal record in bench presses. During our sprints around the bases, my time is the fastest, except for one of the seniors who won state for his high school track team.

"You're like a machine, Saint," Coach Simmers says to me on Thursday afternoon after we finish a batting session where I knocked it out of the park three times.

The next morning, I ride with Coach Jones and Jenson to the airport to meet my dad. It's a two-hour drive, and we don't talk much along the way.

Scarlett put her name in my phone as Scar. I've texted her a little every day, trying not to freak her out with the jump from enemies to lovers. She's replying to me sporadically, but she told me the service in Tahiti is unreliable. I type out a response to her text.

On my way to the airport. What are you doing?

Lying on the beach and reading a book Lucy recommended.

That sounds so relaxing. What kind of book?

Mafia romance. I've never been so lazy in my life. I wanna marry rich and do this every day, lol.

I smile at the screen, happy to hear she's having a good time. She's barely mentioned Lettie to me. I can't figure out why she's still so reluctant to talk about her now that I know she's her daughter. There's something she's not telling me, and I'm not sure I want to know what it is. Maybe she's ashamed that she left Lettie to go to college, which she shouldn't be.

I wish I were there to see it. It sounds like paradise. You deserve to live like that every day.

image

Lettie and me enjoying the sunshine. See how blue the water is?

She sends a picture of her and Lettie sitting together on a balcony overlooking the ocean. They're smiling at the camera, both stunning. Scarlett has always been the beauty standard in my mind. I zoom in on the picture to see Lettie more closely. I barely got a good look at her before.

Her smile, oval face, and slightly upturned nose are all exactly like Scarlett's. What isn't like her is her eye color. Scarlett's are stormy gray, the color of the sky before a thunderstorm. Lettie's are pale green, almost the exact same shade as mine.

I stare at her face, unsure of what the tight feeling in my chest is about. I've racked my brain to try and figure out who her father could be. Scarlett was fourteen when they moved, which is so young to get pregnant. I understand why her mother raised Lettie to be her sister. At the time, I didn't know she was even talking to boys or dating anyone. A big part of me is hurt to find that out, especially remembering how much I cared about her then.

People make mistakes.

"We're here, Saint," Coach Jones tells me.

My fingers type out a quick response before I get out of the truck.

> You're both beautiful. About to get on a plane. I'll text you when we land.

I can't stress about who Lettie's father is this weekend. I'm here to think about my future, not dwell on the past, which I can't change. It doesn't really matter who he is. It doesn't affect how I feel about Scarlett or Lettie.

My dad calls me as I get out of the truck.

"Hey, where are y'all?" he asks.

"Just got here."

"Meet you by security check-in?" His voice is lit with excitement.

This weekend means a lot to him.

"Yes, sir. See you soon."

TWENTY-EIGHT

scarlett

TAHITI IS a dream come to life. We never took a vacation even close to this nice when I was a kid. Most of what we did when I was growing up was go camping or occasionally stay in a cheap motel a few blocks from Galveston, the world's worst beach.

It's strange how different my mother is with Dave. Most of the men she dated in the past were rough guys. She went through a phase of bikers. Then there was a phase with an entire gang in Los Angeles right before her boyfriend was murdered and we moved to Bonnet Valley. Thankfully, I don't remember much of it.

I've had a difficult time trusting Dave. He's twenty-five years older than my mom. When she first met him online, Lettie was six months old. I thought for sure he was a creepy old man. They would text all the time and FaceTime every night. Mom hadn't dated anyone seriously since we had left Bonnet Valley. She told me she was done with men and just wanted to focus on me and Lettie. She even started going to therapy, working on her healing and her relationship with herself.

I remember being enraged at her when I found out she was uprooting our entire family to move six hours away to the same town as her online boyfriend.

I don't know if it was luck or fate, but Dave happened to actually be a nice guy.

Mom hadn't even known he was loaded until we moved and they went on their first official date. He showed up in a normal car—some cheap Honda. After dinner, they went to his place for a drink. It turned out that he lived right on the lake in a six-thousand-square-foot mansion.

But Mom had fallen in love with him way before she knew that.

“Scarlett, Dave and I really want to talk to you about something. Can you come inside?”

I look up from my journal. Writing down my thoughts is a new thing for me—something Marcy suggested I do to process my emotions.

I follow her inside the luxurious beachfront condo we’ve been staying in all week. Tonight’s our last night before flying home.

Dave is sitting at the dining room table, doing a puppy puzzle with Lettie. He’s been in her life for three years now. *Dada* was her first word.

Mom sits down on the linen sofa, patting the spot next to her.

“Let’s go talk to Mommy and sissy for a minute, okay?” Dave scoops Lettie up and brings her into the living room.

They sit directly across from us. Mom turns to face me, grabbing for my hand.

“Honey, we want to talk to you about something we’ve decided to do.” She turns to look over at Dave.

His eyes have always been kind. “Scarlett, you’re nineteen now. You’re a grown woman. I wish I’d had the chance to know you when you were young, but I’m thankful you’ve let me join your family now. I’m thankful you’ve let me send you to college and start your adult life out on the best foot possible. I love your mother very much, and I love you and Lettie like my own daughters. I never had kids. My wife passed away before we got the chance.” He clears his throat, his eyes beginning to water. “With that being said, your mom and I have decided that I’m going to legally adopt Lettie.”

My mouth drops open. I look down at my sister, who’s smiling brightly. She’s only four. I can’t imagine she knows exactly what that means. To her, Dave is already her dad.

My heart is pounding inside my chest as I turn to look at my mom. She’s teary-eyed, holding my hand tightly.

“What do you think about that, sweetheart?”

A tear drips down my cheek. The shock of it all causes me to pause and really think about what this means.

It means Lettie will have a real dad, a legal one.

It means no one can come take her away … even a blood relative.

It means she’ll get to grow up in a two-parent home with a man who really loves her and is in her corner.

A million more thoughts run through my mind.

I see flashes of her future—Donuts with Dad at school not being an awkward, lonely morning of her sitting by her teacher because she's the only one no man showed up for. Having a dad to meet her first boyfriend at the front door and give him a stern warning about curfew; parent-teacher meetings with both Dave and my mom there.

Being escorted down the aisle one day…

All the foul memories I have from meeting my mom's new boyfriends, one after the other, and moving from couch to couch, never having a permanent space to call my own, spill through my mind.

Teardrops continue to roll down my cheeks as I watch Lettie sitting next to Dave, playing thumb war with him on the other sofa. I love her so much, and this is all I've ever wanted for her since the day she was born.

Finally, I look up at my mom as I slowly nod. "I think I'm really happy right now."

She pulls me into a tight hug as we both laugh. Lettie jumps off of the couch, running over to us to join the hug.

"I want a hug!" she squeals.

We pull back, engulfing her in our arms.

"I don't know why I'm crying so much." I sniffle, trying to get myself together.

My mom pulls back, dabbing at her eyes. "I do. It's because when we sign the papers next week, our family will be finally complete."

Dave walks over to us to wrap his girls in a hug. "Y'all are the best thing to ever walk into my life." He squeezes my shoulder.

I look up at him, blinking back the tears. "You're pretty cool too, I guess, Dave."

He laughs, taking a step back to wipe his eyes. "Let's all go celebrate with a nice family dinner."

"I really need to talk to you and Lucy. Can we all meet at your place?"

My phone is tucked between my shoulder and my ear as I unpack for my trip.

Dan's voice comes through the other line. "Sure. I was on my way to meet Lucy for dinner at the cafeteria. I'll let her know there's a change of plans. Are you okay?"

"Uh, yes, and no. Can we just meet at your apartment in, like, five minutes to talk about it?"

"Yep. See you in five."

He hangs up the phone. I change my hoodie, feeling like I smell like an airport. After slipping on my tennis shoes, I walk out of my dorm and lock it behind me.

The drive to Dan's is only two minutes. My knee bounces the entire way. I pull into the parking lot, throw the car in reverse, and speed-walk up to his second-floor apartment. He walks up behind me right when I raise my fist to knock.

"Whoa, slow down, Scar. What's going on?" He pulls out his key to unlock the door.

"Where's Lucy? I don't want to have to tell the story twice." I shift my weight to the other foot.

He finally gets the door open. "She was just leaving Brett's house when I texted her, so she'll be here in a couple of minutes. I try not to call her when she's with him because he doesn't like it."

Suddenly, I feel like a bad friend. I've never even met Brett. Every time Lucy and I talk, we go over my drama, my job, my problems.

"Is she okay? What do you mean, he doesn't like it?"

We walk into the apartment, which is always surprisingly clean for a bachelor pad.

"I don't know. She just usually ignores the call and asks me to text her. She said he has a problem with her having guy friends."

That's not a good sign.

"Well, he sounds like a dick." I go to the fridge to see if there's anything to drink.

"I have tequila and limes if you want me to make you a margarita?"

Dan's been getting more into spirits. He prefers the term *mixologist* to *bartender*.

"Yeah, sure. Make Lu one too. We need to get her to talk more about Brett. See if there's any other red flags."

Dan frowns as he pulls three glasses out of the cabinet. "What do you mean?"

I sit down on the barstool at the small island. “Dictating her friendships is a sign of an abuser. Trust me, my mom dated plenty of them, and so did I. I’ve been learning about the early signs in therapy.”

As much as I hate to admit it, Dave and my mom were right to make me start seeing Marcy. She’s opened my eyes a lot, so now I know how to avoid letting history repeat itself.

He grabs the tequila out of the freezer. “Why would she date him if he abuses her? That makes no sense.”

“Dan, please don’t ever say that again. You’re a guy—no offense. You don’t know anything about how awful some boyfriends can be. And they act nice in the beginning. It’s like a slow fade into control and abuse—so slow that you don’t realize it until you’re already in danger. Shit, now I’m worried about her.”

He’s staring at me, his eyebrows scrunched together with concern.

“What else has she told you about him?”

He opens his mouth to reply when a knock sounds on the door.

“Come in,” he yells.

Lucy walks inside, shutting the door behind her. “Oh good, alcohol. I could use a drink.”

She looks exhausted, with bags under her eyes. She’s not one to smile much, but I can tell something has her down.

I give Dan a look. He continues to make the margaritas with a poker face.

“Hey, Lu! So good to see you. How was your spring break?” I smile at her.

Lucy pulls me into a side hug. She’s wearing a black sweatshirt and leggings with minimal makeup on her face. Her caramel curls are up in a high bun on her head.

“It was good, pretty uneventful. Mostly just stayed around here and hung out with Brett and his friends. How was Tahiti?”

“It was phenomenal. It’s so beautiful. I wish I could live there forever. I’ve never seen water that color.”

Dan is squeezing limes into our drinks. “Should we go into the living room?”

Lucy and I each grab a cup, and the two of us move to the sofa. Dan takes the recliner across from us.

“Okay, Scar, you called this friend meeting. What’s up?” Dan takes a drink of his margarita.

Lucy turns to look at me, giving me her undivided attention.

She’s such a good friend. I need to do better.

“Okay, well, as you both know … Silas and I have sort of a strange dynamic.”

“Ha! Oh, sorry. I thought that was supposed to be a joke,” Dan says.

Lucy snorts. “He’s kidding. Go on.”

I roll my eyes. “Listen, I have a major problem here. There’s a lot I haven’t told y’all …”

I use the lime on the edge of my cup to stir the ice around before continuing, “I sort of told him that … I had a baby when I was fourteen.”

They both go completely silent. I look up to see wide eyes and gaping mouths.

Lucy recovers first. “Okay, what? Why on earth would you tell him that?”

Dan sits up, leaning forward. “Are you talking about that little girl who came to the game with your mom and stepdad?”

I nod, exhaling a deep breath. “I need y’all to keep this between us. I mean it—especially you, Dan.” I level him with a pointed look. “No one can know what I’m about to tell you. I don’t know how he’ll take it … I don’t know if he’ll forgive me for lying all these years. Do you promise me?”

Dan and Lucy both nod.

I close my eyes for a moment before dropping the bomb on them.

“Lettie—my little sister—is also Silas’s sister. They … have the same dad.” I look at Dan as I speak.

His face pales. Lucy gasps.

“Pastor Saint had a kid with … Jackie? Your mom?”

“Holy shit … that’s … that’s insane.” Lucy is dumbfounded.

She doesn’t even know half the history between us.

I take a long sip of my margarita before continuing, “My mom swore me to secrecy. She never told him she was pregnant, never told anyone. That’s why we moved away from Bonnet Valley. Silas and I stayed in touch until Lettie was born. After that, while we were in the hospital, my mom told me who her dad was. They’d had an affair. She … she didn’t want him to fight for custody. He had a stable family, a reliable income. She thought

for sure if they fought for custody, they'd win. She had run away. We both had."

I swallow down more tequila and lime, draining the glass. Dan and Lucy both look at each other. The emotion is rising up inside me, threatening to break loose.

"Why does he think Lettie is your daughter?"

I stand up to make another drink. "He kept asking questions about her. She looks just like me. He started to assume she was mine because that would explain why I cut off all ties and ghosted him. It seemed like the best decoy to get him off the trail of finding out the truth … at the time anyway."

They both follow me into the kitchen, having drained their glasses as well after my little story time. Dan steps up to make the drinks.

"Okay … so if that's the case, where does that leave your relationship? He must think your mom has been raising her since you were fourteen, when she was born." Lucy helps Dan by cutting up another lime.

I nod. "I know he does. He wants to get to know her. As for our relationship … I have no idea. We're at a standstill. I can't keep lying to him if we're going to move forward. We've hooked up, and we texted some this week while I was gone, but that's it. It seems like maybe he would want to date me officially, but he hasn't made any declarations of love or anything."

Dan has finished the drinks, handing me my glass back with a dumbstruck expression. "Well, can you blame him? You've done nothing but reject him and flirt with other guys for months now. He thinks you want to jump his bones but that you hate his guts."

Lucy nods in agreement with our refills as we all head back into the living room. I lower myself down on the sofa.

"Okay, fair … but then he held me while I slept all night after the Mardi Gras party. Things have shifted, clearly. How do I tell what he's thinking? How do I tell him the truth?"

Lucy speaks up. "What has changed that's made you want to potentially date him now? Are you not worried about what would happen if he and his dad find out about Lettie?"

"Oh, shit, I almost forgot. That's why I'm panicking now. My stepdad adopted her legally. They sign the papers tomorrow. They've been in the process for awhile, but they just now told me about it. My mom told me Pastor Saint's rights have been completely severed."

The realization of what's really happening between my family and Silas's family is beginning to settle over me. The weight of the past I've been carrying around with me all this time seems to be lifting from my shoulders. Tears are forming in my eyes, and I can't hold them back any longer. One slips out, trailing down my cheek.

Dan looks up at me, slowly nodding. "I still can hardly believe that. I mean, nobody's perfect, but he was supposed to be this stand-up guy. I wonder if my dad knows."

"You can't tell him, Dan. Not him, not even Adam." I sniffle, more tears spilling over now.

He nods, his voice softening. "I won't, Scarlett. I keep my promises."

Lucy moves over to sit beside me. She wraps an arm around my shoulders, pulling me closer.

She turns to Dan. "Would Silas tell his dad if he found out?"

Dan leans back, exhaling. "I don't know. He and his old man have always been close. I can't imagine what that kind of news would do to him. He's flying back from California with him right now after touring the facility of the Malibu Sharks."

My stomach twists with nerves. He's been texting me about it. He even included a picture of him and his dad standing on home plate. I wipe my tears with the back of my hand, but they keep coming down.

"I just don't know if I can do that to him. Is that selfish of me? If I tell him about Lettie, even though his dad can't fight for custody now, is it selfish to cause that drama in his family when he has so much going for him and his career, just so we can be together? I mean, who knows if it would even work?" My voice goes hoarse as I choke up more.

Lucy scoots closer to me on the sofa, pulling me in. "I don't know, Scarlett. I don't know what it would do to him if he found out. I'm so sorry you're in this mess. None of this is your fault. You need to remember that."

"Lu is right. You're not guilty of anything. For one thing, you were way too young when all that happened. You lost so much because of your mom and his dad's mistakes. What you need to think about, though, is what if Silas found out Lettie is his sister and it's not from you? Then how will he feel?"

I sit up, wiping my nose with my sleeve before I take another sip of my drink.

“I don’t know what I feel. All of it changed this weekend when they told me Dave was adopting Lettie. Suddenly, I had this renewed hope that the chance I’d lost to be with Silas was back again. We might have to wait for the baseball season to be over because of Coach Simmers’s rule, but after that …” My voice trails off.

Dan and Lu are silent for a few moments.

“I think you need to be honest with him. Silas cares about you. He always has. He deserves to make his own decision about what this means in his life. He deserves to know Lettie is his sister.” Dan’s voice is kind as he speaks.

Deep down, I know he’s right.

Lucy’s arm is still around me as she speaks up. “There’s no reason to tell him until after the season. His future has so much riding on him playing well. I think you can hold off until then.”

“I care about him so much … I’ve never been able to face it, to let it all out. It’s been this weight on my shoulders all this time and …”

The tears are pouring down now. The dam of emotions I’ve held in check all these years is finally breaking and rushing out.

TWENTY-NINE

silas

PRACTICE ON MONDAY afternoon starts off completely normal until Scarlett gets there.

As soon as she sees me, she smiles and winks. I stare for a split second in shock before grinning back at her. She's wearing my old Select baseball sweatshirt—the one she took home the other night. A burst of pride spreads through my chest.

Ryan stares at me, looking from my face back to hers in confusion. I ignore him, continuing to toss the ball to Jenson as we warm up.

Jenson and I had an incredible weekend in Malibu. The Sharks facility was state-of-the-art. It had all brand-new equipment in a massive weight room. The trainers room was like an athlete's dream spa with ice baths, hot tubs with jet massagers, and two massive saunas. They have on-site masseurs after every practice and game. The Sharks official playing field holds over forty thousand fans.

I'm dying to fill Scarlett in on the details.

After I'm done pitching, Coach Jones tells me to ice my shoulder. I make my way into the training room. Scarlett is there with Leo, our primary trainer.

"Ice pack, Saint?" he asks.

"Yeah, thanks."

I take a seat on one of the sofas so my right arm can be elevated. Scarlett is taking bandages out of a cardboard box and organizing them inside of a drawer unit. A few of the other players filter inside the training room with various different needs.

Finally, Scarlett finishes her task and comes over to sit in the armchair next to me.

“Hi,” she says.

Her eyes are bright. I smile, attempting to appear like we’re just having a casual conversation to any listening ears or curious eyes.

“Hey. How was your spring break?”

“It was really nice. I had no idea beaches like the ones in Tahiti even existed. How was yours?”

Cole glances over at us, his gaze lingering for a few seconds as he leans over to talk to Coach Jones.

“It was really nice. Went to visit the Malibu Sharks facility and saw a game.”

She nods, acting like this is new information. I grin at the cute expression she has, and she smiles back at me.

“What the hell is happening in the world?” Ryan plops down on the sofa beside us with his own ice pack-covered shoulder.

Scarlett glares at him. “Amy sure seems sweet as pie.”

“Well, at least I’m not risking my place on the team talking to her. You two sure do like to play with fire.” He chuckles, shaking his head.

Coach Simmers comes into the room, his eyes landing on me. He glances at Scarlett before walking back out again.

Shit.

Scarlett stands up. “Well, I’ve got equipment to clean.”

She walks away, a few different sets of eyes following her as she goes.

I turn to face Ryan. “What’s your problem?”

He grips his chest in faux shock. “I don’t know what you mean. I’m happy for you guys.”

“We’re not together,” I grit out.

He frowns. “Really? That’s not how it looked at the Alpha Chi party. And I hear Scarlett left with you … wearing only her bikini bottoms and missing her beaded skirt. In fact, I saw it with my own two eyes. Amy was pissed when she found the beads all over her bedroom.”

He smiles like he just found out a dirty secret about his enemy.

My pulse quickens when I realize that he’s threatening me.

Yeah, fuck that.

I lean forward, lowering my voice. “You know, if you think it’s in the best interest of the team to see me suspended for the rest of the season, be my guest and spread this rumor around. The bottom line is, you don’t know shit. Scarlett made it clear she’s not into you. If you’re so hung up on a

woman who rejected you that you'd be willing to put our winning streak on the line … I wonder how the rest of the team will react."

The shit-eating grin he was wearing fades away, replaced by a vengeful glare. "I saw what I saw. And you sound an awful lot like a whipped boyfriend right now. You wouldn't catch me simping over a bitch with a reputation like hers."

A violent urge tears through my body. I nearly throat-punch him, like I did Cole, but two of the coaches are in the room. I don't know what he means by her *reputation*, but I'm sure whatever rumors he's heard were spread around by Amy. No one besides me and Dan knows about Scarlett's past.

I inhale a deep breath to avoid getting kicked off the team or suspended for fighting another player. I stand up to save myself from making a massive career mistake over the opinion of a shitty man who truly doesn't matter.

"We won't always be surrounded by coaches, so if I were you, I'd watch my back before you say her name again." My voice has a warning tone, and Ryan has the good sense to look like he believes me.

I walk away, fists clenched, with a roar in my ears.

Scarlett has spent four nights at my and Dan's apartment since we got back from spring break … and we still haven't had sex. It's not that we don't want to—we very much do. It's been my choice not to take that final step, much to her dismay. We've been gearing up to and practicing all other types of fun activities.

I'm learning things about the female anatomy I never knew existed. Scarlett is the sexiest woman that I've ever laid eyes on, and I could take hours exploring all the aspects of her body. I've mastered pleasuring her, and she hasn't needed any help with satisfying me.

Two things have held me back from the big finale.

First off, Dan has been here. I'd rather discover all her deepest desires in complete privacy.

Secondly, I want her to be *mine* before we go there. Until we're fully committed and exclusive, it feels wrong to me. I could blame it on my purity-culture upbringing, but the reality is that I'm still not sure I fully trust her. I don't think she'd sleep with someone else, but I am concerned that she might change her mind about us again.

I loved her once before, and she completely broke my heart. We were only friends then, but she got pregnant by someone else and ghosted me. The bond of intimacy is something I want once I feel like she's finally made the choice to be with me, no looking back, no second thoughts.

We're on the bus, headed toward the out-of-town games for the weekend. I told her we need to act like we don't like each other or at least like we're indifferent because of what Ryan said. I want the world to know I love her, but if waiting another two months for it is what we have to do, I'd rather play it safe.

I guess I should tell her I love her first too.

She's sitting across from me, one row ahead on the bus. I can see her profile, but she can't see me unless she turns around. We've been on the road for an hour when I decide to send her a text.

I can still taste you.

I woke her up early this morning so I'd have time to taste her before we had to get on the bus. I didn't think it would haunt me for the entire seven-hour drive. She glances back at me with dark eyes for a moment before typing out a response. My phone buzzes in my hand.

I can still feel you.

I tilt my phone so Jenson can't read what I'm typing out.

Are you aware of how into you I am?

In the corner of my eye, I see her squirm in her seat.

No … tell me

My fingers fly across the screen. Maybe I'm oversharing a little too much, but it's hard to be around her and not spill out my inner thoughts. I've been holding it all in for years.

You are the beauty standard to me. No one even comes close to comparing to you. They don't hold a candle to your beauty. But I fell for you before I even realized that. Ever since we were kids, I've craved you in a way that was so much more than physical. Not a day has gone by that I haven't thought about you, not since I was twelve years old.

Part of me feels like a coward for sending a text message like this instead of saying it to her face. I could've told her last night or this morning, when we were lying in my bed. But whenever I try to take the conversation somewhere intimate or emotional, she clams up. Something in her struggles with letting me share those thoughts and feelings.

Before she wrote me the hate letter, we shared everything over text. We would even say *I love you* and talk about our future plans. Because we weren't able to talk on the phone much or see each other in person when we first developed these feelings, we both became more comfortable sharing them in written form instead of verbal.

After what feels like ages, I finally get a response.

I never got over you. Every guy I've dated has been a monumental disappointment because I compared them all to you. Every day since I sent that letter, I've hated myself for it. Losing your friendship, your trust, the potential of being together … it broke me, Silas.

She turns to look over at me, resting her head against the seat back. Our eyes are both filled with lust and longing. Being so close to each other but not able to touch is a small form of torture. I wink at her before looking down to text her back.

I don't know if I've told you this, but I'm not angry anymore. I could never stay mad at you. I understand why you did it.

There's so much that's happened, so much that we haven't talked about yet.

I know you have a past, Scarlett. You have nothing to worry about explaining to me. Whatever you want to share, you can do it in your own time. Just don't stop talking to me again, please.

She turns to smile at me again, but it doesn't reach her eyes. She turns back around, not texting me back for a few more hours. Once she finally

replies, she changes the subject, asking if I'm ready for the game and how my shoulder is feeling.

Once we get to the ballpark, everyone unloads and goes to their designated areas. I warm up with the guys, getting my head in game mode. My parents are in the stands, and I wave at them. My grandparents walk up, smiling as they greet each other.

I feel like I'm on top of the world when I come off the field after striking out the first three batters in the first inning. Coach Jones leans in to tell me that there are more scouts here from other major league teams and that I just impressed the hell out of them.

I pull back, grinning at him as he claps me on the shoulder.

Life is fucking good tonight.

Scarlett saw the inning, and she's smiling proudly as I move to sit on the bench in the dugout. I wish more than anything that I could give her a big, wet kiss right now, but waiting until we can be alone later will have to do.

We win the game eight to two, effectively crushing the other team.

Coach Jones pulls me aside afterward. "Ready to talk to the scouts? They asked for you and Jenson again."

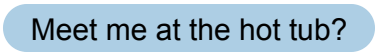
Jenson and I follow him out to the bullpen, where the scouts are waiting. It's a whole new group of them from four different teams around the nation. The conversation is essentially the same as last time. They want us to come see their facilities, offering to pay for our hotels and flights to get there.

Part of me is struggling to believe this is really happening. Everything about my life is just too good to be true.

I need to feel Scarlett in my arms. I'm desperate for the scent of her hair and the sound of her voice.

After a quick shower, I go out into the locker room to see if she's still here. Most of the guys left to go to the hotel, which is across the street from the ballpark. I got a text from my parents, saying they were going to bed but that they'd see me in the morning.

I type out a message to Scarlett.



I make my way over to the hotel. I'm sharing the room with Jake, our second baseman. He's already in bed, headphones in his ears, his eyes closed. My phone pings with a text.

I can be down there in 2 minutes.

I pull on my swim trunks quickly and grab a towel, key card, and my slide-on shoes before walking out the door. The elevator ride down four floors takes less than a minute. When the doors open and I walk out, I see Scarlett standing there, wrapped in a towel and wearing her yellow bikini.

A smile forms across my lips as I walk up and kiss her soundly on the lips. I hold her close for a few seconds, breathing in her coconut scent.

"Mmm, I've been needing that all day." I pull back from her, grabbing her hand to lead her out to the hot tub.

We follow the arrows toward the pool area, her hand grasping mine. Once we reach the glass door, there's a note written in pen, taped to the door.

POOL AREA CLOSED FOR MAINTENANCE

"That sucks." I run a hand through my hair, trying to think of a way I can spend some time with her tonight.

"You could come to my room and watch a movie for a little bit," Scarlett suggests.

I look down at her. "I wish … but, damn, if we get caught …"

"How is that more of a risk than getting caught out here?"

"True."

We start walking back to the elevator. The lobby is right around the corner. I'm considering going up to my room to change and taking her to the Waffle House beside the hotel, just so we can hang out and talk without anyone seeing us.

"Do you want to go next door?" I ask her.

She opens her mouth to answer when the elevator opens, revealing my grandfather. My heart stops. I drop Scarlett's hand, and his eyes follow the movement.

"Pops, hey. What are you doing up so late?" I try to play it cool, like I'm not up, hanging out with the very off-limits equipment manager.

He smiles warmly. "I just came down to get some coffee and read my book. I have trouble sleeping some nights, but the bedside lamp keeps your grams up."

He lifts up the book he's holding—a Civil War memoir. He walks off the elevator as Scarlett and I walk on.

"Okay, I'm going to bed, Pops. See you tomorrow?"

He smiles. "Yep. Good game tonight, Silas. Go rest that arm up."

He hobbles off toward the lobby. The doors to the elevator close on Scarlett and me.

A massive exhale escapes me. "Shit."

She leans up against the side of the elevator wall, her arms folded across her chest. Her face is pensive as she studies the panel of buttons.

"I don't think he can say anything to Coach Simmers that would get you in trouble. We're college students. They can't keep us in our rooms. We'll just say your arm was hurting and you wanted to let the hot tub jets massage it. It's not like he saw us making out. We can skip the movie tonight, just to be on the safe side."

I nod, feeling the knots of stress beginning to form in my muscles. I don't want to tell her that I'm not worried about him telling the coaches.

I'm worried he's going to tell my parents, and I know they would never approve. I've spent my entire life trying to please them, trying to be the son they could be proud of.

You're a grown man. They can't do anything, except be disappointed in you.

I tell Scarlett good night at her door, but I don't risk kissing her in the hallway, where half the team's and coaches' rooms are. I make my way back to my room, sliding in quietly so I don't wake up Jake.

They're going to hear about Scarlett from Pops. How long are you going to let them determine how you live your life?

My sleep is restless the entire night.

THIRTY

scarlett

ON SUNDAY NIGHT, we roll back into Greencity around seven p.m. I'm exhausted from the weekend, physically and emotionally. My job is draining. On the bright side, I can tell I've gained some muscle from lifting bat bags and toting around buckets filled with baseballs.

My arms are aching by the time I've finished unloading and putting away all the equipment with the coach's help. The players have all already gone home.

I wave good-bye to Coach Simmers as I walk by his office.

"Bye, Coach. See you tomorrow."

"Hey, Scarlett. Can I talk to you before you go?" His deep voice sends chills down my back.

Oh no.

Every rebellious excuse I've ever had comes rushing to the forefront of my mind.

You don't even know what he wants to say yet.

I step inside, collapsing into one of the leather chairs across from his desk. The smile lines around his eyes seem more pronounced at the end of game weekends—I think because he's in the sun the entire time.

"Long weekend? It's a big job, isn't it?"

I nod. "Yes, sir. I really enjoy it."

He leans back, his elbows resting on the arms of his chair. "Yeah? Well, good. I just wanted to check in and see how you're doing overall with school and your grades with all this extra work. It's a lot to handle. I'm somewhat responsible for you—at least, I told Dave I'd look after you."

I relax, unclenching my fist. "I think it's close to what I want to do long-term. The games all weekend, the excited crowd, the energy of it—it's

addictive."

He chuckles, nodding. "Well, that's what has us all working these crazy hours. It's a little bit unhealthy sometimes, so I try to check in on everyone involved to make sure it's not becoming too much. I'm glad to hear you're loving it. What part do you want to get into?"

I smile. "I think I'd like to be a sports agent, maybe an interviewer. I can't imagine lugging around that equipment every time, but if I could be involved in reporting or negotiating on behalf of the players, I think I'd be good at that part."

"That you would. I can see it. Well, if you talk to your advisor and get into the right classes, I'd be happy to make connections from there. I sure do know a lot of great people in the field to get you started. We could discuss an internship."

My stomach somersaults at his words. I didn't even consider Coach Simmers helping me get an internship or connections in the professional world of baseball. I smile at him.

"Wow, that would be … amazing. Thank you. I already met with my advisor and have changed up my course schedule for next year. I could graduate in two years with a communications degree, which would give me a lot of freedom to choose which field to get into."

He stands up, and I follow.

"Well, that's what I like to hear. We can keep talking about it, but it's late. You go home and get some sleep. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Good night." I walk out of his office, a smile stuck on my face.

I pull out my phone to text Silas while I walk to my car.

Just had an amazing convo with Coach Simmers. Can I come over?

My phone buzzes immediately with his response.

I'm by my truck, waiting for you.

I look up, scanning the parking lot. His truck is in the far corner, and he's standing beside it underneath one of the light poles. My duffel bag from the trip is weighing on my shoulder as I walk toward him.

He meets me halfway, taking the heavy bag.

"Hey," he says.

"Hi. Thanks for waiting for me. I guess I'm staying with you tonight."

“Yes, ma’am.”

He tosses my bag in the back of the classic white pickup, leading me around to the passenger side. He opens my door for me, and a giddy feeling erupts in my stomach. This is the first time we’ve done this. It’s my first ride in his pickup.

“Aren’t you worried about Coach Simmers seeing us?”

He glances back toward the field house, but the parking lot is empty.

“I’m just giving you a ride to the dorms.” He winks at me before slamming the door shut.

When is he going to rail me already?

I try to get control over my cavewoman desires, but it’s extremely challenging when he climbs into the truck, smelling like men’s soap, and reaches his muscled arm over to hold on to my inner thigh.

With every minute I spend with Silas when we’re in this little bubble of need and desire, it feels like a tiny clock is ticking in the back of my mind.

Once I tell him the truth, what will happen? Will it all be over?

I grab his hand, squeezing my thighs together and holding on tight.

“So, what did Coach have to say?” He spins the wheel to turn out of the parking lot.

“He asked me how I was liking the job and if I was handling it with my classes okay. I told him it’s a lot, but I’ve got it. I love traveling with the team, and I think I want to be either a sports agent or a sports reporter.”

Silas grins at me, pulling into the parking lot of his apartment complex. “You do? I didn’t know that. That’s awesome.”

“The best part is that he said he would help me get an internship and help me make connections after I graduate.” I hop out of the truck, feeling like I’m on top of the world.

Silas grabs my bag and his, carrying them both toward the stairs.

“That’s amazing, Scar. I’m glad Coach is helping you. He’s got some damn good connections.”

He sticks the key in his door, turning it to push it open. He steps back to let me go in first. Dan is lounging on the sofa with Lucy sitting right next to him.

Her eyes are red-rimmed.

“Lu? What’s wrong?” I walk up to her, sitting down next to her and pulling her into a hug.

She sniffles against my shoulder. “Oh, you know, the usual.”

I look up at Dan, raising my right eyebrow with a clear, silent question.

He mouths, *Brett, Lucy's boyfriend*.

I nod, my face growing solemn.

"What did he do?" I cup her shoulder, pulling her closer.

Silas goes into his room with our bags, shutting the door to give us some privacy.

Lucy cries softly. "It's not what; it's who."

Her curly hair is a mess, fluffy and sticking out around her pretty face. Her black mascara is running down her cheeks. I reach over to the end table, pulling a few tissues out of the box to hand them to her. She dabs her eyes before blowing her nose.

My voice is much calmer than I feel inside. I'm trying not to let the rage crawling through my veins show in my voice. "Who was it?"

"My cousin. The one I grew up with. He said he couldn't stand her. I'm an idiot."

I look up at Dan, who's shaking his head. His jaw is clenched.

"You are the furthest thing from an idiot. Your only negative trait is how many chances you gave that moron. He's a prick, a lowlife, a scum-of-the-earth douchebag. If I ever see his face, I'll kick his teeth in." Dan's anger is palpable in his voice.

My eyes widen at his outburst. I'm usually the one making violent threats. He's the sweet, funny guy.

I brush Lucy's hair back behind her ear. "He's right. We both will. I'll go right now if it will make you feel better. Dan can take him, and I'll lay her ass out on the concrete."

Lucy laughs. "Y'all are ridiculous. Amazing friends … but ridiculous. I just want to forget about him. I just need to go get my stuff, but after that, I hope I never see his stupid face."

"I'll go with you to get it," Dan promises. "You don't need to go alone."

I nod. "I'll go too, if you need me. In the meantime, we'll spend as many nights as you need trash-talking him. He just lost the best thing to ever happen to him. You can do a million times better."

She nods, looking at me with a smile. "Let's change the subject, please. I can't cry anymore. How was your weekend?"

I lean back, patting her leg. "It was really great. Silas—" I turn around to look for him. "Well, I guess he went to shower. He played phenomenal, as usual. The scouts from more teams were there to see him."

Dan lowers his voice. “Have you talked to him at all about …”

I shake my head. “No. It’s eating me alive. I just … I think it’s best to wait until the season is over. His entire career is riding on how well he can play during the season and getting them into the playoffs.”

Dan and Lucy both nod.

If I’m being honest with myself, I don’t fully have the courage to tell him yet. Seeing his parents in the stands at every game makes me feel physically ill. He’s so close to them. They’re so proud. I’ve always been jealous of happy, whole families. I used to not care if his father fell off a cliff after what he did to my mother and sister, but now … now my heart is torn.

I stand up. “You okay for a while, Lu? I can stay if you need me to.”

She waves me off, leaning back against the sofa. “No, you go. I’m going to make Dan watch *A Walk to Remember* with me.”

He chuckles. “Ugh, why is it always the sad movies with you?”

She looks over at him with her wide, dark-brown eyes. “Please?”

He shakes his head, reaching for the remote and kicking his feet up onto the coffee table.

They sure do act an awful lot like …

I lean over to kiss Lu on the cheek. “Love you. Let’s get lunch tomorrow.”

“Love you too. Okay. Good night.”

I walk up to Silas’s door, knocking twice before twisting open the handle. I push open the door to see him standing with his back to me. His shoulder muscles look tense as he slowly turns around. His phone is in his hand, pressed up against his ear like he’s on a phone call.

His skin is flushed, his jaw clenched as his hard stare narrows in on me. A single tear trails down his cheek.

“Yeah, Dad, I’m here. I heard it all.”

THIRTY-ONE

silas

TEN MINUTES EARLIER

I LEFT Scarlett in the living room with Dan and Lucy. They seemed to need a moment of privacy. I set the bags down on my bed. My phone starts to ring. When I look down at the caller ID, I see it's my dad.

"Hey, Dad. I just got home."

He clears his throat, his telltale sign of something being wrong. I'm either in trouble or someone died. My skin feels tight.

"Hey, Silas. Do you have a minute to talk?"

"Yeah, is Mom okay?"

"Yes, of course. We got home an hour ago. I spoke to your grandfather."

My heart feels like it's in my throat.

This is about Scarlett.

He continues, "I wish we could have this conversation in person. It's … it's one of those things I always thought I'd tell you when you were older, maybe after you were married and could understand."

I slowly lower down to sit on the bed. "Dad, I'm not following you. What are you talking about?"

"You and Scarlett have always been drawn to each other. Your mother and I noticed that the first Sunday they visited our church. You two sat next to each other every chance you got. It was cute … for a while. As harsh as this is going to sound, women like Jackie and her daughter are not … the kind of women you should be with, not where you're going. You need to understand that."

My blood is beginning to heat. My father, the man who teaches love and acceptance, is telling me I can't be with the woman I love because …

Because of what? Some old scandal? Because she made a mistake when she was fourteen?

"I don't know why you're talking about her like this, but I don't want to hear it. She's not a bad person. She's kind, she's honest, and she's very *real.* She's someone who knows how to love—*fiercely* love. She gave up everything when she had her daughter. She's had bad things happen to her, but that doesn't make her a bad person." I clear my throat before continuing, "I love her."

My dad is speechless on the other line. He's never heard me talk to him that way. I've never stood up to him—until now. I've never needed to. I love and respect him, but I know he's in the wrong right now.

He stutters before finally speaking again. "S-son, what do you mean, she had her daughter?"

"I'm talking about Lettie. I don't care at all that she's a young mother, trying to get a college degree and better her life. In fact, it makes me love her more that she's so strong and dedicated to her future."

"That little girl is not Scarlett's daughter. I don't know why she would tell you that, but … that little girl is Jackie's. Scarlett is her half sister."

I'm dumbfounded. I stare at the wall for a full ten seconds before responding. My mind is whirling.

Maybe he doesn't know.

"How do you know that? You're wrong. It doesn't make any sense for her to lie to me about something like that."

My heart rate has steadily increased the longer this conversation goes on. I'm holding my head in my hand, trying to make sense of what he's saying and what Scarlett told me.

"I know because I went to see Jackie after she moved away. I was worried they were homeless or starving. She was pregnant—very pregnant—and Scarlett was not. I saw it with my own eyes." He inhales, blowing out his breath slowly over the phone. "Silas, that little girl is also … your half sister. She's … she's my daughter. I had an affair with Jackie."

My breathing is shallow.

My skin grows clammy.

I can't tell if I'm levitating or falling, but something about my state of being is suspended. I close my eyes, squeezing them tightly together as I process his words.

"You … you and Jackie … you had an affair? With Scarlett's mom?"

The other end of the line suddenly feels far away. His voice sounds like it's coming through a tunnel. "Yes, son. I'm sorry to tell you like this. I'm sorry you're finding out this way. I … when Pops said he saw you with her at the hotel, I knew I had to come clean about my mistake. Your mother has forgiven me, and we've worked through my infidelity. Our relationship is stronger than ever now. But you need to know because … Scarlett is just like Jackie. She's the woman who tempts you. You can't be with her, Silas. You and Scarlett share a sister, my daughter. It's awful, and it's

heartbreaking, but it's the truth. You have a future in the majors. You're going places—places much bigger than Bonnet Valley, bigger than Ole Tex, bigger than her. You're better than her. You will do better than her. I need you to hear me. Don't make the same mistake I did, Silas. Do you hear me? Are you there?"

The click of the door opens as Scarlett walks into my room. I slowly turn around. A tear slips down my cheek.

"Yeah, Dad, I'm here. I heard it all." My voice is hoarse.

Scarlett's eyes are wide as she stares at me. She seems to know exactly what he told me, exactly what I just heard. She inhales a deep breath before slowly stepping closer to me, shutting the door behind her.

My dad is still talking, but his voice has become monotone to me. He's nothing more than static. I hear something about how he and Mom were distant, about how he had a midlife crisis, about how life was hard and Jackie was easy.

I tune him out, staring at Scarlett.

She's beautiful, as always. Her chestnut-brown hair is cascading around her angelic, tempting face.

She lied to me. She kept this from me. For years, she kept this from me. She made me believe she had another man's baby when I was in love with her.

Why?

Scarlett takes a step closer to me, and I take a step back from her.

"Silas? Hello?" My father's voice is booming in my ear.

"I heard you. I'm going to bed." I take the phone away from my ear, hitting the End button.

Scarlett's stormy-gray eyes are focused on my face. Her lips part as she starts to speak. "I guess you know," she whispers.

I slowly nod. I have nothing to say to her, nothing I can voice.

Why?

She bites her lip, looking away from me. "I was … I was afraid to tell you. I was going to. After the season was over, I was going to tell you."

I scoff, shaking my head as I start to laugh. "Is that so? Were you? Were you ever planning to tell me?"

Her face has fallen, eyes teary as she nods. "I swear."

"Do you? You didn't think maybe lying to me about having a baby with someone else instead of telling me she's my *sister* was going to cause a

problem?"

My chest is rising and falling rapidly as my vision begins to blur.

Her face twists with anguish as she nods. "Silas, I never wanted to keep it from you. It wasn't … it wasn't my choice."

I nod rapidly, taking a step toward her. "Oh, right. None of this is your fault. None of this is on you. You didn't actually have a baby. It's just that … I don't understand why … why you would tell me that. Why would you send me that hate letter and act like you got knocked up if it didn't actually happen?"

I walk over to my dresser, pulling out the top drawer. I dig around for the letter I've kept since I was sixteen.

"This wasn't you, I'm guessing. You didn't write this?"

I hold up the old, yellowing paper. It's crumpled from being read so many times over.

She sucks in a breath, looking up at the ceiling. "I wrote it." Her voice is hoarse.

I nod, crushing it up and dropping it to the floor. "Right. I'm sure you did. Hurting me has always been easy for you. The truth? Now, that's a different story. The truth isn't your strong suit."

She starts to cry harder, big tears falling down her cheeks. Her hand comes up to wipe one away, brushing it back off her face.

My heart aches. Part of me—a big part—wants to comfort her. I want to run to her, dry her tears, and tell her I'd kill whoever put them there.

But suicide isn't something I've ever considered.

"I don't know what you want me to say, Silas. I lied to you. I couldn't … I couldn't tell you. My mom asked me not to because your dad would have fought for custody. She would have lost Lettie—maybe me too. It was her choice, not mine. She never told me he knew about her."

She's sobbing now. I look down at my shoes. Tears drip on the floor beneath me, but I don't look up.

I need time to think. I need to process the fact that my dad isn't who I thought he was and the woman I love kept an enormous, life-changing secret from me for four years.

"I want you to go. Leave."

I don't have to tell her twice. I hear the doorknob twist open as she escapes, her steps light as she runs away from me.

I collapse on the bed, letting the moisture from my eyes trail down my face as I realize how much I've lost in one night.

Respect for my father.

The girl I love.

The entire idea I have of who my family is and where I belong in this world.

I have a sister.

Scarlett and I share a sister.

I finally fall asleep. Restless dreams of Scarlett and me finding out we have the same parents and we can never be together haunt my sleep.

Nightmares plague me as my sheets grow damp with sweat. It feels like morning will never come.

The metal bar is loaded down with two hundred-fifty pounds. I press it up, grunting as I finish out the reps. My spotter, Jenson, helps me rerack it. I sit up, wiping the sweat from my brow.

It's been four days since I spoke to my dad. He's called me. My mom has called. I answered her call once, telling her I love her but that I'm not ready to talk about it.

It's Thursday afternoon. I've avoided Scarlett, and she hasn't reached out to me at all. I've been eating at my apartment, not entering the cafeteria once.

She's been at practice, but we've gone back to ignoring each other's existence.

I feel like my head is going to explode. Dan tried talking to me Tuesday evening about what happened, and I told him that I have no desire to say anything about it.

Literally everyone in my life is a liar.

Coach Simmers walks into the room with his clipboard.

I approach him, using the bottom of my shirt to dry my face. "Coach, can I talk to you?"

He looks up at me. "What's up, Saint?"

I look around at the guys lifting weights within earshot. “In your office?”

He turns around to lead me through the halls. “Ready for the game this weekend?”

“Yes, sir. We’ll crush New Mexico.”

He chuckles, opening his office door. “That’s the spirit. What can I do for you?”

I shut the door behind me, taking a seat in the chair across from his desk. I release an exhale. “Can you put me in contact with your old college buddy Dave?”

Surprise crosses his face as his eyebrows rise. “I can give you his phone number. He told me he’s planning to be at the games this weekend.”

I nod. “That’s what I was hoping for. I have something to speak to him about.”

Coach slowly nods, studying me. “Anything you need to get off your chest?”

I shift in the chair, clearing my throat as I wonder if I should open up to him. Simmers is a good guy. He’s known Dave his entire adult life. I trust that if I asked him to keep this between us, he would.

“Do you know when Dave and Jackie met?”

He leans back in his chair. “You should ask Dave about that. He really loves to brag about Jackie. His first wife passed a couple of years before they met, and he never had any kids. But he’s a pretty open guy. I’m sure he’d tell you the story if you asked him.”

Coach leans toward me, interlacing his fingers on his desk. “I’m assuming this has something to do with our equipment manager.”

I don’t answer for a moment, debating on what he already knows about Scarlett and me and what that could mean for my place on the team. I’m so numb right now. I don’t know if I even care.

He smiles. “Don’t be nervous. I was once in college. When I made *the rule*, it wasn’t really about you. It was for her sake that I did it. Dave asked me to watch out for her, and I take that honor very seriously. I have a daughter. She’s still in high school, but if I had one in college, you’re a player I’d let take her out. After the season ends, of course.”

My tense muscles relax a fraction.

My next words spill out of my mouth. “She lied to me. She told me Lettie was her daughter.”

His brow creases with concern. “What would make her say that?”

I lean back, rubbing my hand over my face. “Because she’s my sister. Lettie is Scarlett’s half sister … and my half sister.”

Coach Simmers leans back, processing this new information. He’s silent for a few moments.

“I see. I’m guessing she kept this from you … and when you asked questions, she tried to mislead you by saying she was her daughter.”

I nod, my teeth clenched. “How can I ever trust her after that? How can I trust my father? How could he have not told me about this?”

I grew up an only child. I remember begging my parents to have another baby when I was in kindergarten. All my friends had siblings, a friend to play with all the time. The fact that I’ve had a baby sister out there for four years without knowing is soul-crushing.

Simmers’s eyes are kind as he nods, listening to me intently. “What is it that you want to talk to Dave about?”

I shrug. “I guess I just wanted to ask if he’d be okay with me getting to know Lettie. Obviously, my dad doesn’t give a shit, but if … if they’d let me just be around her, I’d really like to.”

He nods. “I wouldn’t be so quick to assume anything, Silas. Whatever happened back then, there’s much more to the story, I’m sure. Jackie has a side in this too. Scarlett was young. Fourteen is a difficult age to make the decision to tell her friend that his dad had an affair and her mom is now pregnant.”

She’s not fourteen anymore, and she still lied.

I stand up. “I have a lot to think about.”

He stands with me, grabbing a sticky note and writing a number on it. “Dave is an understanding guy. I’d give him a call.”

I thank him before turning around and heading for the showers. I pull out my phone on the way, saving the number and hitting the Call button.

THIRTY-TWO

scarlett

MY HANDS SHAKE as I sit in therapy on Friday morning. I called Marcy for an emergency session on Tuesday, but this was as soon as she had any availability.

"You're shaking, Scarlett. What's bothering you?"

I know I look like hell. She won't say it, but the bags under my eyes indicate how little sleep I've gotten this week.

"Silas found out about Lettie." My voice is weak.

Marcy nods, almost like she knew or isn't at all surprised by this.

Tears are already threatening to spill out of my eyes. "I just … I don't think he'll forgive me. I should have come clean. I shouldn't have waited, but now, he thinks he can't trust me. He's hurt, obviously. He's had a sister all this time, and I was selfish in keeping her to myself."

Marcy keeps a tissue box on an end table beside the linen sofa.

I reach over for one before continuing, "He had every right to know. I'm a horrible person. I've loved him for so long, but now, he won't speak to me. He won't even look at me." Tears spill over, no longer a threat, but a reality.

"I'm sure he's hurt, and that's understandable. You need to try and view the situation from his side. Your choice to keep this from him was in the interest of your sister's well-being, even if he can't see that. Your mother told you not to tell him to avoid a custody battle."

"But Lettie should've gotten the chance to know her dad. Even if he is a cheating, married scumbag. He's a really good dad to Silas. Why didn't my mom stay and let Pastor Saint be in her life?"

Marcy debates on her words before answering, "Have you talked to your mother about her choice? Now that it's out and now that you know he

signed away his rights? I would encourage you to speak to her about it before making assumptions."

"Dave is great, obviously. I'm just upset that it happened in general. I wish … I wish it weren't what it is."

Marcy's voice is comforting. "I really believe this will work out. Whatever happened all those years ago, there were two families at stake, and all the lives involved in those families matter. I'd really encourage you to sit down with your mother to understand the dynamic of what happened when she chose to move away from Bonnet Valley."

Quickly, the hour flies by, and our session concludes.

Marcy is right. I have to talk to my mom. I'll be seeing her tonight at the home game. I send her a text as soon as I walk out of Marcy's office.

Can we please meet up before the game? Just you and me.

She responds right away.

Of course! Do you want to have an early dinner?

Sure. There's a little sandwich shop that shouldn't be too busy with the crowd in town for the game. I'll send the address.

I float through the rest of the day, going to class, but not really hearing my lectures. My ability to zone out and completely dissociate has always been uncanny. I live in another world when my mind is preoccupied.

I make it back to my dorm with just enough time to get ready and meet my mom for a forty-five-minute dinner before I have to be at the game.

I gather my thick waves up into a ponytail. A few strands are framing my face, and I tease the top of the pony to make it full. I brush mascara on my lashes after my basic makeup routine. The jersey-style shirt I wear at home games is white with blue lettering. I pair it with my navy pants and white tennis shoes.

It's early April, so the Texas weather doesn't require a jacket anymore. I make it out to my car a couple of minutes ahead of schedule. Campus is already getting busy with the families who came to town to see the Mustangs baseball team beat New Mexico. We're slated to win this weekend's games. I wonder absentmindedly if I'll know anyone on the team, considering it's the college close to where my mom and I lived for a while.

My car starts easily, and I breathe out a sigh of relief. The sandwich shop is a seven-minute drive. I roll the windows down, feeling like I need the fresh air to filter through my lungs. I've been on edge all day, leading up to this meeting.

But Marcy is right. It's time I asked my mom for the truth about her history with Lettie's dad and why she ran.

I pull up to the deli. It's not busy at all, considering it's only four p.m. I have to be at the ballpark by five p.m.

I get inside and grab a table. My hands are shaking as I wait for her. A waitress comes to take my order.

"Just two waters for now. I'm meeting someone."

"Sounds good." The young waitress walks away.

The door opens, and my mom walks in. She scans the room for me. My entire body is high-strung. She sees me, a smile spreading across her lips as she walks toward me. My mother turns heads everywhere she goes. Men of all ages follow her with their eyes. Her hourglass figure is similar to mine, a slim size four with rounded breasts. We're the same height. She's cropped her dark hair shorter, up to her chin. It's a cute, messy-styled bob that suits her well.

"Love the hair."

She pulls me into a hug before taking her seat. "Thanks, honey. You look gorgeous. Excited for the game?"

I nod. I wish I had the ability to engage in small talk with her, but I can't wait another second before blurting out the question I should have asked her years ago.

"Why did you leave Bonnet Valley without telling Pastor Saint you were pregnant?"

She stills, her eyes slowly meeting my gaze.

The waitress returns with our waters. "Are you ladies ready to order?"

I haven't even glanced at the menu.

"We need a few minutes," I tell her.

She nods, walking away.

My mom takes a sip of water before speaking. "I guess it's time I told you the entire story. I know you told Silas, and I understand why."

"I didn't tell him. His dad told him. I was going to wait until the season was over so he could focus, but … his father took matters into his own hands. How did you know that he found out?"

My mom's steel-gray eyes focus on my face for a moment. "Silas called Dave. They're having breakfast in the morning to talk."

My heart is thundering in my ears. The restaurant fades away, and all I can see is my mom's face as she continues.

"I know it's long overdue, but I want to explain it all to you. You deserve that much … and Silas does too." She clears her throat. "When I found out I was pregnant, Ray had already broken things off with me. We had both felt guilty the entire time. It was honestly … it wasn't fun for long. The guilt crippled me every time I saw his wife was just too much. We ended it, and we didn't speak for three weeks. I was on birth control, but … I missed a period."

She stops when the young girl comes back, clearly annoyed with us.

"You ladies ready?"

We still haven't looked at the menu, but if we don't order now, we won't be able to eat before the game.

"Can we just get two orders of the grilled cheese with butternut squash soup?"

My mom nods in agreement. The girl leaves.

"So, when I took the test and it was positive, I-I panicked. The Saints had been helping us. I was living partly off of their generous financial help at this point. Half the town already viewed me as trash … and Pastor Saint was a known and beloved man in the community. I was the struggling single mom who already had one daughter without an active father figure. Even so, I couldn't imagine not having you in my life."

I lean forward, feeling overwhelming compassion for my mom. What she did was so wrong … but I remember how she was those days. She could barely get out of bed, much less take care of me and a baby.

She sucks in oxygen before going on, making eye contact with me again.

"I went to him. I didn't tell him I was pregnant. I just asked if he would … if he would ever consider leaving his wife for me. It was my height of selfish, desperate behavior, and I'm greatly ashamed of it. He said no, of course. He was planning on telling Maura he'd had an affair, but he didn't want the word to get out that it was with me, which would tarnish my reputation more than it already was. He said he was going to have to stop financially supporting me too, so people wouldn't catch on that his

indiscretions were with me. I decided right then and there that my only option was to leave without telling him about the baby.

"I'd begged your father for help until you were two years old. He was in and out of my life, and it caused you so much hurt, never knowing when he'd show up."

I don't remember anything about my dad. My mom told me he was there for a while, but then he took off once he found a new woman.

"There were two options for me. I could stay and split custody, but my fear was that with the state that my life was in, a judge would take the baby and give the Saints full custody. I had nothing, and once I lost the Saints' support, we were going to be homeless. As hard as being a single mom was, losing my baby wasn't an option. Mrs. Saint is a charitable woman, and I really believed she'd raise her husband's illegitimate child even if the baby was another woman's. She was infertile. Silas was a miracle baby."

My limbs feel numb as I listen to the story. I never knew any of this.

"Once I found a cheap apartment for rent in New Mexico, I took off without telling anyone. You were so angry, but I knew in the end, living in a town with a scarlet letter on your chest would be more damaging than uprooting your life. When we got there, I found that job at the laundromat next door. The owner was that kind woman, Angel. To this day, I believe she wasn't really a person; she was an actual angel sent down to help us. Did you know that?"

I nod. She told me once before that Angel was a celestial being. I don't know what I believe about it. She seemed real to me, just extremely kind.

The waitress arrives with our food. I don't have an appetite.

My mom keeps going. "It wasn't until I was eight months along that Ray showed up. He had found me somehow—maybe through tracking the cell because he'd bought it for me. I think he felt guilty, like he'd run me out of town and we were barely scraping by. He saw my belly and immediately asked if it was his baby. I lied, telling him I was sleeping with another man. I couldn't tell if he believed me or not. He asked for a DNA test, saying there was no way for me to know if the baby was his or someone else's."

I take a bite of my food, barely tasting it.

"What I want you to know is that he tried. He sent money to us several times. I kept sending it back. I told him there was no way we could raise

this child together without it ruining his life and mine. She was safe. Lettie had me and you. Finally, he showed up with his wife one day."

I had no idea any of this had happened. "Where was I?"

She takes a bite of her sandwich, chewing and swallowing before answering, "At school, thankfully. Lettie was four months old. Angel was keeping her while I was at work. I told them that I'd met someone and we were moving again so I could be with him. They threatened to call CPS and said they were going to fight me for custody. I panicked. We were doing okay by this point, but I knew he deserved a chance to know his daughter if they wanted it that bad. It wouldn't have been fair to Lettie if I'd denied them that.

"That was when I downloaded the dating app. I had to find someone to be with, someone closer to Bonnet Valley. I didn't care if it was true love. I just needed a friend, someone stable.

"It was my desperate, downward spiral all over again. Postpartum depression hit me hard. I matched with Dave on the first day. He became a source of comfort, a bright light in my dark situation. He paid for me to start doing online therapy. It was like someone in my life was finally dependable, a man who wanted me and not just my body. Angel is the one who convinced me to go meet him. I went alone the first time. He was everything I'd expected, even kinder and more understanding in person. I contacted the Saints and let them know that I'd be willing to split custody once Lettie turned one year old."

My jaw drops. This information is completely new to me. At the time, all my mother did was demonize the Saints and act like they would take my little sister from us without blinking. I had no idea they'd fought for partial custody. They had all the power to come in and fight for full.

Mom takes a bite of her sandwich, letting me take a minute to process.

"What happened? Why didn't they? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to keep having to deal with it. Once it became official, I would have told you. You'd already endured so much because of my mistakes. You were sneaking out, dating different guys, and starting to drink. You were wild and unpredictable, and I knew I was to blame for it.

"After Dave and I started getting serious, I broke down one night and told him the entire story. He was getting to know Lettie, and he loved her like his own daughter. I knew we were probably going to get married, but he had to know my dark past first. Surprisingly, he actually knew the Saints.

He'd met them at one of Silas's Select baseball games that his nephew was playing in. He told me not to panic. He went to talk to Ray and Maura.

"Basically, he asked them if they would agree to wait until Lettie was older. She'd be fully supported and taken care of with two loving parents once he proposed, which he was about to do. Once Lettie was older and could understand who they were, they'd get the chance to know her. By this point, she was almost one, but she didn't have a clue who they were. They were complete strangers. Being ripped away from the family she knew would be traumatizing for her.

"He … he said they both cried, but eventually, they agreed to wait. You know Dave. He's got a way with people—something you and I do not have at all. It wasn't until she turned four that he asked their permission to adopt her, if they'd agree to sign away all parental rights.

"We send them photos of her every year, and once she turns twelve, she will get to go see them for a month in the summer. That time will increase as she gets older.

"In the end, it truly was a massive sacrifice on their part. Dave was able to convince them that what was best for Lettie was stability. If they started keeping her now, the entire town would find out what happened. Pastor Saint would lose all respect. Their lives would fall apart. They had a lot to consider."

Tears have been sliding down my cheeks as her story continues. Here I was, thinking they didn't know this entire time. Silas and I were both in the dark.

"I know how much pain this has caused you. I hope, one day, you can forgive me for how much you had to lose because of my selfishness. I love you, Scarlett. I love you and Lettie so much. Please understand that the fault lies with me."

I shake my head, a tirade of emotions whirling inside me. "You should have told me. I was too young to make the decisions I had to make at fourteen. Silas deserved to know her too."

She reaches for my cold hand, grasping it. "I'm so sorry … I'm sorry for all the pain you've had to go through. I'll spend the rest of my life making up for it. I was in a broken place. I wish I could change the past, but I can't. All we have now is our current situation."

I wipe away the tears on my face. "I just want better for Lettie."

My mom nods. Her eyes are wet. “She will have better. She’s blessed to have a sister like you, willing to sacrifice so much for her.”

I debate on telling her about Silas and me. It seems pointless now. Whatever happens tomorrow with Dave will put the ball in Silas’s court. If he chooses not to be with me over this, I have to accept it.

Even if my heart never recovers.

THIRTY-THREE

silas

"YOU PLAYED a hell of a game last night. That arm is something else, son." Dave sits down across from me.

I asked him to meet me at a coffee shop fifteen minutes away from campus. I don't want to risk anyone overhearing our conversation.

He reaches over to shake my hand. His grip is firm. His salt-and-pepper hair is thinning on top, and his eyes have smile lines that give him the appearance of being trustworthy.

I can't sit still. My knee bounces under the table. "Thank you for meeting me. I know this is a little awkward."

He takes a sip of the coffee he ordered before sitting down. "It's not awkward at all. I'm glad we have the chance to talk."

My legs are shaking. I nod, trying to find the words to begin. "For starters, how did you and Jackie meet?"

"It was about three and a half years ago. I had this big, empty house, and I was lonely. I was online dating, which was horrible most of the time. I lowered my age range on a whim one night, and we matched. She had a baby and an older daughter. I had always wanted kids and the family life. I was already falling for her in the first few weeks, even though we hadn't met in person yet. It was six months or so before we finally got together."

I nod, putting some more of the pieces together. "Did she say anything about the father of the baby? Why he wasn't involved?"

"She told me he was married and had his own family. Jackie was worried he'd try to fight her for custody since she was a single mom and didn't really have a stable income. She'd sort of run from him, not wanting to risk losing Lettie altogether. It was only recently that your dad signed away his parental rights so I was able to adopt her as my own."

My stomach churns.

My dad signed away rights to his own daughter … just like that?

My throat is dry as I nod. "I … I wanted to talk to you about Lettie. This week has been hell for me … but I guess I'm here to ask you if I can meet her."

Dave smiles. "Of course you can meet her. You deserve to know her."

I'm dumbfounded at how quickly he said yes. I gape at him as he sits there, casually crossing his leg over his knee.

"What would you tell her about me? What about Jackie?"

"Jackie and I have discussed it. She's comfortable with you getting to know Lettie. Your parents will need to be considered, of course."

I lean forward, placing my elbows on my knees and looking down. My hands are clasped in front of me.

"Silas, have you talked to your parents about Lettie?"

I shake my head without looking up.

"You should really hear them out. When I spoke to them six months ago about signing away their rights, they were both extremely distraught about how this all would affect you. There was never an easy solution to any of this."

"Well, I'm glad the solution everyone agreed on was to lie to me about it for four years." My voice is tinged with bitterness.

I sit up straighter, leaning back against my chair. My heart hurts. I feel like the entire world has crumbled. Last night, I pitched the game completely on autopilot. I threw harder than I ever had, only because it was fueled by my anger.

Dave nods in understanding. "When I went to your parents and asked them to sign the papers, you were on my mind. I offered to speak to you on their behalf. After the agreement that they would stay out of Lettie's life, it seemed logical that there was no reason for you to be involved until they spend time with her when she turns twelve."

"Twelve is so late. She'll be in junior high. Why can't they get to know her now? Even just as family friends?"

"You want your mother to spend time around the woman who had an affair with her husband? You want your father to? As Jackie's husband, I have no ill will toward her for the mistakes she made in her past, but that doesn't mean I want her to be best friends with her former lover."

I slowly nod, realizing how that would never work.

“Well, whatever happens with them, I’d really like to get to know Lettie, even just as a friend.”

Dave smiles warmly. “I think that would be good for her. Once she does meet your parents, it would be ideal for her to already know you, so she might feel more comfortable about spending time with them.”

Relief trickles through my body, releasing some of the tension I’ve been holding on to all week.

“Thank you.” My voice is choked up as I look into his eyes.

“Silas, where does this leave you and Scarlett?” He leans forward over the table, resting his elbows on the surface.

I shake my head. “She didn’t outright lie to me, but she let me believe a lie. I don’t know where this leaves us. I don’t know how to trust her.”

Dave slowly bobs his head as he listens to me. “One of the things Jackie has confided in me about is how her poor decisions affected her eldest daughter. Scarlett raised herself. In some ways, she even raised her mother for a while. She certainly helped raise Lettie, who is the sweetest child you’ll ever meet. Scarlett was forced to grow up fast, and because of that, she had to make difficult decisions she wasn’t ready for. Decisions like cutting off your friendship because she and her mother believed they’d lose Lettie if she didn’t.”

I know what he’s saying is true. I know Scarlett was just as much of a victim in all this. My chest aches with my desire to see her, but the feeling of being betrayed on so many fronts holds me back.

Dave continues, “Scarlett has been in therapy since she started attending OTU. I personally have seen a lot of growth and maturity in her. She’s learned from her mistakes. She’s learned that her behavior has consequences. I’ve tried for years to crack her hard exterior. She was forced to grow a protective shell around her heart after so many disappointments growing up. She was always the strong one. Once I finally started breaking down those walls, I’ve been getting to know the soft side of her, the side of her that’s still young and vulnerable. It’s the side of her that fiercely loves, the side of her that is loyal—loyal to a fault even—when it comes to those she loves.”

My throat constricts at his words. This man has an insane ability to communicate.

“I love her,” I choke out. “I have always loved her.”

I don't know why I'm opening up to him. He has an incredible ability to disarm my natural instinct to be closed off.

He leans forward, gripping my shoulder. "It's not easy, loving a woman with so much heart, a woman who's always had to love on defense to protect herself. But let me tell you from experience, it is *so* worth it."

The game starts that afternoon before I even see Scarlett. She walks into the dugout with Coach Simmers's clipboard. I'm sitting on the bench since I pitched last night. I'll be up to bat in a few minutes, but I can't focus on the game with her nearby. She's watching the play, eyes focused on the pitcher's mound.

She finally looks over at me. Her stormy gaze is on my face. The corner of my mouth turns up slightly in a half smile. She blinks twice before turning away from me.

Once it's my turn to bat, I walk right up to her, standing next to the coaches.

I lean down to whisper in her ear, "Can we talk after the game?"

Her eyes are wide as she nods. I don't know exactly what I'm going to say to her, but I want to let her know that I met with Dave and I'll be meeting Lettie soon.

Coach Jones pats my shoulder. "You got this one, Saint. He's curving them left."

I nod, looking down at Scarlett for another second before jogging out onto the field. I level my gaze with the New Mexico pitcher. He's got an amused smirk on his face. He's chewing gum obnoxiously with his mouth open.

I get my stance ready, tapping the bat on home plate before looking up at him again. He winds up, throwing the ball straight at me. I jump back, nearly getting hit with it.

What the fuck?

He's still grinning. He looks over at our dugout before looking back at me and winking. The umpire calls it a ball.

I get my stance setup again, tapping the bat on home plate before squatting down and staring him down.

He winds up, throwing the ball directly at me. Again, I jump out of the way. My blood starts to heat, my skin prickling with anger. The umpire calls it a ball.

The team in our dugout starts shouting.

"What the fuck was that?" Cole sounds pissed.

"You ever played baseball before, prick?" Jenson's voice is mocking.

The pitcher ignores them, eyes leveled on me. Once again, he glances toward our dugout.

What the fuck is he looking at?

He winds up, hurling the ball toward me again, still directly aimed at my body. I jump out of the way.

This time, I throw the bat on the ground and start walking toward the mound.

I don't know who the fuck you think you are, hitting me with a ball going ninety miles an hour.

My guys in blue are out of the dugout now, slowly walking toward the other players. They don't appreciate their star pitcher getting smacked with the ball.

"Hey! Back in the dugout—now!" Coach Jones shouts.

They ignore him. The team in the outfield is moving in toward our guys. As I continue walking toward the pitcher, he takes a few steps in my direction, that smirk still on his smug face.

We're a foot apart before I speak.

"Got a fucking issue with throwing a strike?"

He grins again, and the strong desire I feel to deform his facial structure roars through me.

"I can throw a strike. I just thought it would be fun for Scarlett to see you get hit."

How does he know her name?

My head jerks toward her. She's gaping at me, her arms folded over her chest. Her wide eyes dart from him to me. The light bulb in my head flips on.

This team is from New Mexico, where Scarlett went to high school, where Scarlett dated guys, guys who treated her like shit.

“Yeah?” I turn back to him. “Maybe it would be more fun for her to see you get hit.”

He takes off his glove, throwing it on the ground and raising his fists. “Let’s see it then.”

The umpire comes between us, right as I pull my helmet off my head to take him up on the offer. The pitcher moves around the umpire, swinging his fist at me. I jerk out of the way, but he connects with the corner of my jaw. A stab of pain shoots through me. I’m not sure if he knocked my jaw out of place, but I twist my face back to him with a smile.

“Ladies first,” I taunt.

My fist hurls through the air, connecting soundly with his nasal bone. I hear a sickening crack in before the umpire gets between us again. Someone pulls back on my arms, holding me firmly so that I can’t struggle to get out.

“That’s enough. In the dugout. Now,” Coach Simmers’s voice commands.

I see around the field that a few other individual fights are being broken up. Cole and Ryan are both being shouted at by assistant coaches to get back to the dugout.

Coach Simmers lets me go, and I stalk into the dugout. I reach my hand up to hold my jaw, feeling that it hasn’t actually been knocked completely out of place.

I glance back to see the pitcher with a towel against his face, blood staining the fabric.

“Training room *now*,” Coach Jones demands.

I look around for Scarlett, but I don’t see her. The team marches through the hallway, Jones leading the way.

Once we get to the training room, she’s there with Leo. Her eyes are wide as she stares at me in disbelief. I pull my hand back to see that my jaw is bleeding a little.

I collapse on a chair, letting out an exhale. That was the first fight I’ve ever gotten into during the middle of a game.

Scarlett walks up to me, extending an ice pack. She bites her lip.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers.

“Sorry for what?”

She looks around. “I’m sorry about Rex.”

I clench my jaw. I remember her telling me now. Rex is her ex-boyfriend, the prick who played baseball. The pieces fall into place. He saw

me talking to her before I went up to bat and decided to act like the complete and total dick that he is.

The urge to protect her at all costs rises inside me like a flash flood, overwhelming me.

“I’m not sorry at all. I hope I shattered his nasal bone. Wish I’d had the chance to give him a black eye.”

She reaches for the ice pack I’m holding against my jaw, adjusting it to cover the area better. Her face is unreadable. I have no idea what is going through her mind, and it’s driving me mad. Our fingers brush together, and I want to hold her so bad that it physically hurts me.

“Saint, are you going to be able to get back out there? Their relief pitcher is taking over. They kicked number eight out of the game for throwing the first punch.” Coach Simmers is standing with his clipboard in the doorway.

“Yes, sir.”

THIRTY-FOUR

scarlett

THE EQUIPMENT USED during the games is finally all put away. I turn off the lights, grab my purse, and head for the exit. It's dark and almost completely silent, except for the sound of the janitor's cart being rolled through the halls to collect trash and dirty towels.

I push through the exit doors. A shadow moves next to me. A tall, built, manly form starts moving toward me.

I step back, sucking in a breath.

"It's me," Silas says.

I sigh, relief coursing through me.

"You scared me." I keep walking.

He falls into step with me. I'm headed for my dorm room, but I'm hoping he invites me to his apartment to talk.

"I have a lot to talk to you about. Do you want to come over?"

I smile, trying to make my voice sound indifferent before I answer, "Yeah. I guess we should talk."

He reaches over to grip my elbow, steering me toward his truck. I love the feeling of his touch on my skin, and it inevitably drags my mind into the gutter.

Something about tonight feels different. The energy between us is electrified, probably something to do with his taking and throwing a punch for me.

Silas takes me to his truck, tossing his bag into the back of it before going around to the passenger side to open my door for me.

As he moves around to the driver's side, I try not to get used to the feeling of being his passenger princess. We'll have to come pick up my car later. I exhale a deep breath before he opens his door.

“How’s your jaw feeling? I’m sorry you had to get into a fight because of me.”

He chuckles, shifting the gears into reverse. “Wasn’t the first time. Takes a lot more than a lousy cheap shot to get me down. I’m good, sweetheart.”

Cole.

This is the first confirmation I’ve gotten that he hit Cole in the cafeteria over something involving me.

I feel horrible that Rex took a swing at him. He must’ve seen Silas talking to me and thought we were an item. He was always a jealous dick.

“He’s never been a nice person. I guess he hasn’t changed at all.”

Silas doesn’t respond. We’re almost at his apartment complex, and I suddenly feel stupid for even bringing it up. My nerves are shot. After talking to my mom and hearing so much more of the story about the Saints and Lettie, I want nothing more than to cry to Silas about how sorry I am for not confiding in him and taking on this battle together.

He parks the truck, hopping out as soon as he turns off the engine. He comes around the truck to open my door. I follow him up the stairs to the second level.

He uses his key to twist open the door. A lamp on the end table beside the sofa is on. Dan is nowhere in sight. He must either be out late or already in bed.

Silas leads me through the living room up to his bedroom door. He opens it, stepping aside to let me enter first. His eyes are focused on my lips as I pass through. My skin is crawling with nerves.

I walk up to the bed, intertwining my fingers together as I lower myself down onto the foot of the mattress. Silas steps through, shutting the door softly and dropping his game bag. His pale-green eyes focus on me as he slowly approaches the bed.

He’s as sexy and irresistible as ever. His jaw has a small cut on it and a faint bruise. He’s wearing a royal-blue Mustangs baseball pullover with slate-gray track pants. His hair is damp from the shower.

He sits down near his headboard, a few feet away from me, a safe distance.

“I had coffee with your stepdad this morning,” he begins.

I nod, letting him know I’m aware.

“I’m going to meet Lettie soon. I won’t tell her … who I am. I just want to get to know her.”

I nod again, my eyes conveying I’m okay with that. He exhales, looking down at his forest-green comforter.

“I know she’ll love you. I’m afraid she’ll like you more than she likes me.”

He smirks. “Oh, yeah? I doubt that’s possible. She clearly adores you.”

I scoot closer to him, needing the proximity. “I … I wanted you to know that I’m sorry. I’m sorry about it all. I wish I could take it all back, Silas. I wish—”

He lifts up a finger, pressing it against my lips to silence me. “I forgive you. I understand now … why you did it. I’m not angry with you.”

My intake of oxygen quickens as I stare into his eyes. My heart is pounding.

He’s forgiven me?

Just like that?

Silas grabs for my wrists, pulling me toward him. I move willingly, scooting my body closer to him until I’m nearly in his lap. He reaches for my waist, lifting my entire body up and placing me on his thick, muscular thighs. He’s warm all over, and my body temperature rises.

“I want to make something very clear,” he says.

His gaze is intense, his face only inches from mine. His hands are moving slowly over my hips and thighs, the nerves on my skin lighting up as he makes contact.

I nod, not trusting my voice to make an intelligible sound right now.

He leans forward slightly, our lips a breath apart.

“I won’t be able to fuck you until I hear you say that you’re mine, *only* mine. I want exclusive rights. I want exclusive commitment.”

My lips part, a gasp escaping me. I’m dumbfounded, unable to believe that he’s actually saying he wants me to be his … *girlfriend?*

Silas Peter Saint is asking me to be his girlfriend.

I feel my head nodding. It’s not good enough.

“I want to hear you say it.”

I smile, biting my lip as I try to find the words. “I—”

He interrupts me. “You what?”

I lean forward, my lips nearly on his. My arms wrap around his neck. “Before we … go there, I have a disclaimer.”

He pauses, waiting patiently for me to share.

I blurt it all out. “I’ll never fit into your box. I’ll never be the girl who does the right things and always looks the part. I’m a little too scandalous for respectable people with their pretty families and structured lives. I grew up in a double-wide. I have, like, seven tattoos I want to get, and making impulsive decisions absolutely rules me. My mind rejects any form of doing what’s expected and proper. I’ve tried. I tried to wear those ugly cardigans and watch my mouth, but guess what, Silas. I hated every second of it, and no matter how hard I tried, I still screwed it up.”

I finally stop, inhaling a deep breath.

Silas cups my face, eyes intensely focused on my lips. “I want you with all your perceived ‘flaws,’ Scarlett Jane Cohen.” He pulls back his hands to put *flaws* in air quotations. “Not in spite of them. But because of them.”

I let out a tiny whimper, hugging him closer. “I’m yours then, if you want me.” My voice is a whisper.

A low growl escapes his lips as he squeezes my hips, drawing my body flush with his and pressing his lips against mine in a kiss. His need for me is growing underneath me.

“You’d better have condoms,” I murmur against him.

His tongue is exploring my mouth. He breaks contact briefly to reach over to the nightstand, opening the drawer to pull out a yellow box, unopened. He tosses it on the bed before reaching for me.

My lips curve into a smile as he kisses me again. I almost need to pinch myself to make sure this is reality.

Silas threads his fingers through my hair, groaning into my mouth. My stomach is tight. Nerves from years of buildup make my enthusiasm unmeasurable. I can feel the wetness pooling between my legs.

I push back from him for a moment, breaking the seal of our lips to move my leg to the other side of his lap, straddling him.

I pause for a moment, panting for breath as I gaze into his eyes.

We’re doing this.

His lips are slightly parted as he darts his tongue between them, eyes drinking me in. I want him to see all of me.

I reach my hands down to pull the hem of my shirt up, slowly revealing my pale skin. Once it’s over my head, I toss it onto the floor. Silas’s gaze dips down to my chest as he reaches behind me to unhook my lacy crimson

bra. It takes him two tries before the hooks loosen, my full 32D breasts spilling out.

He wastes no time taking my nipple into his mouth, sucking it between his teeth. The sensation shoots directly down to my core. I let out a moan, and it ignites an unhinged boldness in him.

He easily lifts me off of his lap as if I weigh nothing, throwing me beside him on the bed. He looms over me, using his hand to squeeze my breast as his mouth descends on mine again.

He's unleashing years of pent-up need, and it's overwhelming in the best way.

Silas likes to dominate.

My excitement triples. He's supporting his weight with one arm, his veins bulging out. His lips are devouring me roughly, and I return his enthusiasm, sucking his bottom lip into my mouth and biting it. His silver chain dangles in my face, a tiny little cross at the end of it.

My hands move around to his back, pulling his shirt up and using my nails to scrape over his skin.

"You're going to drive me wild," he says.

"I'm good at that."

His fingers are reaching for my waistband. He tugs it down, but it won't move with the way I'm lying. I scoot down to help him, wiggling out of my pants and underwear.

His hands extend for me, sliding easily over the wetness between my thighs.

"Holy fuck."

His finger slips inside me. I bite my lip, my head starting to swim with pleasure. He's already done this to me with his fingers and a few times with his tongue. He knows where I like it, and he slowly grazes his touch over me.

"I've fantasized about this so many times," he whispers.

My body is overheating. His fingers continue to slide over the right spot.

"I've spent night after night, sweating in this bed, wishing you were right where you are now."

My head is lying on the pillow, hair splayed around me. His words and his touch are undoing me, and I'm nearly ready to burst.

"Don't stop," I pant.

“Sweetheart, an army couldn’t stop me right now.”

THIRTY-FIVE

silas

THE SHAPE of Scarlett's body has been burned in my brain since that night in the hot tub. My fantasies of her didn't live up to reality, nowhere near it.

Her breasts are round and heavy, pink nipples like candy that I can't stop tasting.

After my fingers have spread her wetness all over her, I want to taste her there too. I slowly kiss my way down her body. She's quivering underneath me. For as long as I've waited for this, I'll be taking my time, enjoying it.

My tongue finally swipes over her peak, and she bucks up underneath me. My fingers are moving inside her as my tongue makes contact again. Her taste isn't strong, but I love it.

Her hands reach down to grip my hair, holding my head in place. It's only a couple of minutes before her legs start to shake and she lets out a moan.

"I need to feel you," she pants.

I don't move from where I'm at, knowing her well enough already to feel that she's close. It's only moments more when she tenses, her wetness filling my mouth as she lets out a cry.

"Silas."

I smile against her, lapping her up before pulling away.

I move above her, pulling down my track pants and underwear with one hand. I kick them off my legs as she extends her hands for me. I suck in a harsh breath, loving the feel of her touch on my skin.

The box of condoms is still there. I grab it, ripping it open with my teeth and pulling out a foil. Her hand is still stroking me. It's euphoric, her skin on mine, brushing gently with just enough pressure.

I tear open the foil with my teeth before rolling it over myself. She lies back down on the bed, eyes meeting mine.

"Are you sure?" she asks me.

I look into her eyes as I move toward her. "I've never been surer."

In the next moment, I push into her. She gasps, gripping my arms on my triceps.

It's a glorious feeling of completeness, like everything is right in the world. She's flawless underneath me, and I'm nibbling her ear, her neck, all of her that I can make contact with as I continue to move into her.

I consume every noise, every breath, every second of her as I make love to her. She's my person. She's the one who got away, and her being back here with me feels like a miracle I don't deserve.

"Scar, baby, you know you've always been the only one for me, right?" I murmur to her.

She nods her agreement, unable to form words.

My lips capture hers again, kissing her as I slow down, trying not to let this end too quickly. It's technically not my first time, but unsurprisingly, she feels much better than my hand. I didn't get to enjoy her for the split second I was inside her in the hot tub.

My lower back is sweating. Her fingers intertwine with mine, and our faces are close together, the intense eye contact making me feel like I need to tell her exactly how strongly I feel for her.

You can't say it the first time during sex.

It's not long before I finish, gripping her tightly as my body tenses. I look down at her face, hoping she felt as incredible as I did, even though it didn't last long.

"I need more practice."

She smiles up at me, giggling as she pulls my pillow up against her chest. "I think you're pretty damn near perfect, but I'm happy to be your practice dummy."

The fact that I've spent my entire life waiting for her to be mine makes this moment a heady experience. I feel almost high off of her.

I peel off the condom, standing up and walking to my en suite bathroom to dispose of it.

I have a million more things to express to Scarlett, things I've wanted to tell her for way too long. Once I pull on a clean pair of boxers, I go back to

my bed, and she's already crawled under the covers. Her eyes are closed, long lashes brushing against her pale pink cheeks.

She's angelic as I lie down next to her, pulling her into an embrace.

"I love you, Scarlett Cohen," I whisper, kissing her forehead gently before laying my head down and closing my eyes.

The next morning, Scarlett and I wake up, tangled up in the sheets. Her sleepy face brings a smile to mine.

"Morning," I say.

She extends her arms back in a stretch. "Hmm, is it already?"

"How'd you sleep?" I reach my thumb out to touch her bottom lip.

She sucks the tip of my thumb into her mouth. My bottom half twitches at the warm, wet feeling.

"I always sleep so good with you."

"Hmm."

My phone starts ringing, interrupting the moment.

"Hold that thought, baby." I twist around, grabbing my phone.

"Hello?"

"Where you at?" Cole's voice is on the phone.

"I just woke up."

"Uh, are you planning on showing up for our game?"

A burst of anxiety rips through my chest. "What time is it?"

"Bro, it's, like, nine fifteen. Game's at ten."

I spring out of bed. I've never slept this late in my entire life. I guess after so many nights of tossing and turning because of Scarlett, the exhaustion finally caught up to me.

"Can you stall for me? I'm on my way."

He laughs. "Okay, not sure how to do that, but I'll give it a go. Hurry up."

Scarlett is up, throwing on her clothes from last night.

"How did we sleep in this late?" she asks, running to my bathroom.

"You make me lose all sense of reality when you're naked."

I pull my clean jersey for today's game over my head.

“I think you fucked me into a coma,” she says loudly from the bathroom.

I chuckle, pulling on my baseball pants, socks, and shoes. I follow her into the bathroom. She’s scrubbing her teeth with her finger and toothpaste. I grab my toothbrush, smiling at how much this feels like a coupley thing to do.

“What?” she says, spitting into the sink.

“I just like this. I’ve never done the *girlfriend staying over* thing.”

Her eyes widen as she dries her mouth. “It’s so weird hearing you say that.”

She rushes out of the bathroom. I keep brushing, watching her put her shoes on.

“I have to go to my dorm and change. Can you drop me off?”

I nod before turning to spit in the sink. “I just wish it weren’t a secret.”

I grab my baseball bag, opening the door.

“Wait.” She shuts it, turning to me and pushing up on her toes while pulling me down to her level.

“What?” My hands wrap around to grip her waist.

“Kiss, because we won’t get to touch all day after we leave here.”

I grin, tilting my head down to meet hers. Our lips touch lightly before I open mine up, brushing my tongue over hers. I don’t want to be any later than I already am, so I pull away from her.

“You’re so tiny.”

She smiles up at me. “You’re gonna be so late.”

I know she’s right, so I open up the door, and we rush out.

THIRTY-SIX

scarlett

THE MUSTANGS WIN the last game against New Mexico by one run.

Rex winks at me as they move off the field, raking his eyes over my body. I shudder.

Since I've been in therapy, I've worked through a lot of my trauma from ex-boyfriends. Rex was probably the worst of those, going so far as to strangle me at one point. The worst part of our relationship was the sexual abuse. I wasn't even aware of everything that he did to me that constituted abuse until I opened up to Marcy about it. I'm not sure how much of that particular part of my trauma I'll be able to open up to Silas about.

He's so good, so honest with how he views me as untarnished and fully worthy of his affection. He doesn't have any idea what it's like to be treated so horribly by someone who's supposed to love you, and I don't know if I'm ready for him to hear about it.

But I trust him, and if we stay together, one day, that trust will allow me to open up.

Silas comes up beside me as the team is clearing out of the dugout, glancing back at the other team across the field. Rex has a bandage on his nose from Silas punching him. It looks broken from here. He didn't play today.

"Are you okay?"

I nod, glancing over at the assistant coaches still lingering in the dugout. "Let's talk later."

I feel exposed, like I'm partially naked in front of people. Rex being here and acting the way he is brings out a vulnerable side to me I don't like.

“Okay.” Silas picks up one of the buckets of baseballs for me to carry it inside.

Coach Simmers addresses the team while I start organizing equipment into its proper place. Home game weekends are so much easier for me because I don’t have to lug all the baseball stuff on and off the bus.

“We’ll be entering the playoffs if we win two out of the three games next weekend. I’m proud of you boys. You played hard.”

There’s some whooping and hollering as the guys celebrate how close they are to the playoffs. A smile touches my lips. I feel like I’m somewhat a part of the team, and seeing them get so close is exciting. Coach continues to give his speech.

Cole walks into the equipment room ten minutes later, once Coach has wrapped it up. I’m almost done with the job, ready to get home and shower before the big dinner tonight, where Silas is meeting Lettie.

“So, turns out, she’s always had a thing for pitchers.” He leans up against a shelf of helmets.

I tilt my head, trying to ignore the spark of fear that shoots through me. “Rex was primarily a catcher when we were together. He’s since changed positions.”

Cole nods, chuckling to himself as he glances back into the nearly empty locker room. Silas is getting dressed. His muscular back is turned toward us as he faces his locker.

“Guess I can’t blame you. Saint’s a good guy. What is it with you two? When I met you, it seemed like y’all had more of a past than what you let on.”

“We were friends growing up.”

If we deny it, no one can prove anything has happened.

His eyes narrow at me like he knows that’s only a very small piece of the story. “You didn’t act like friends when you first showed up.”

I grab my purse and sling it over my shoulder. “Yeah, well, we had a falling-out somewhere along the way.”

Silas turns to look over at us, eyeing Cole for a moment before he grabs his bag.

Ryan steps up to us, folding his arms over his chest. “I guess Saint won the bet.”

I roll my eyes. It’s typical for men to treat me like a body, literally like I was only created to boost their confidence among other men.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Silas speaks up from behind Ryan. “Hey, Ryan, watch your mouth.”

His words have bite.

Ryan turns around, a smirk on his face. He holds up his hands. “Didn’t mean anything by it. I guess congrats are in order.”

Silas leans closer to him, their faces inches apart. Silas is taller by about five inches.

“Don’t ever talk about her like that ever again. I happen to like how it feels to crush nasal bones.” He tilts his head to face me. “You ready?”

I nod, trying not to let a smile out. I walk past Cole and Ryan, falling into step with Silas.

Cole laughs behind us. “Mr. Protective, you’re getting me all hot and bothered over here.”

He shakes his head, teeth clenched. “That was overdue.”

“You think they’ll say anything to Coach?” I ask.

Silas shakes his head. “They wouldn’t risk losing me for the playoffs.”

My phone starts ringing as we walk out of the building. I look down to see *Life-Giver* flash on the screen. I swipe to answer it.

“Hey, Mom.”

Silas looks straight ahead. We’re walking out to his truck.

“Hey, honey. We’re at the arcade.”

I look up at him as we get to the truck. This is it. This is happening. A ball of nerves settles in my belly.

“Okay … we’re leaving campus now. We’ll be there in about five minutes.”

I can hear my mom exhale on the other end of the line. “Okay. See you soon.”

She hangs up the phone.

I look up at Silas as he pulls open the passenger door for me. His green eyes are unreadable.

“Are you ready for this?” I hop into the truck before turning back to him.

He leans forward, his hand resting on my thigh. “I am. Are you?”

I nod. “As ready as I’ll ever be. She’s going to love you.”

He smiles, shutting the door and walking around. He climbs into the truck and starts backing out.

This is more than just Silas meeting *our* sister. It's him meeting my mom as an adult, as my boyfriend. He'll be socializing with my entire family for the first time since I've known him. I've had boyfriends meet my mom, but never Lettie and Dave.

I never considered Dave my stepdad until the last few months when he sent me to college and adopted Lettie. He was in my life before that. I just never brought a guy around him. I didn't see the point. I thought my mom would leave him like she did every other guy.

A few minutes later, we pull up to the arcade. Silas reaches over to squeeze my hand. I let out a deep sigh before opening the door and stepping out. He comes around the truck, looking down at me.

I give him a weak smile before turning to walk up to the doors. He opens it for me, and I walk inside. I look around the '50s-style arcade for my family. It's not too crowded, but there's more people occupying half the booths and three of the six bowling lanes.

Lettie spots me the same time I see her. Her eyes brighten as she hops out of the booth, running toward me. She's wearing pink leggings and a white-and-pink baseball-jersey-style top that says *Team Princess*.

"Sissy!" She leaps into my arms, wrapping hers around my neck.

"Hi, sweet girl. I missed you." I reach a hand up to brush it over her long, dark hair.

She pulls back, a grin on her blue-stained lips. "Daddy got me a slushy."

I grin at her. "I see that. Hey, I want you to meet somebody special."

I turn to glance up at Silas. His eyes are red-rimmed, but he's holding back his tears.

"This is my very special friend, Silas. Can you say hi?"

Lettie turns her cute face up. She tilts her head, frowning. She extends her little hand. "Are you sissy's boyfriend?"

Silas chuckles, reaching out his hand to grip hers, shaking it gently.

"I am sissy's very *special* friend. It's lovely to meet you, Lettie. I've heard a lot about you."

Lettie looks at me. "Did you tell him about Scooter?"

I laugh, feeling tears well up behind my eyes. "No, I was going to let you do that."

She looks back at Silas. I knew they had the same color eyes, but in person, I see the shade is the exact same pale green.

“Scooter is my best friend. My daddy got him for me when I turned four. He likes to eat lettuce.”

Silas widens his eyes like he’s intrigued. “Wow, is he really soft?”

Lettie nods. “Oh, yes, very soft and white. If you’re not sissy’s boyfriend, do you want to be mine?”

Silas and I both laugh. We start walking toward the booth, where my mom and Dave are sitting.

“No, he can’t be your boyfriend. He’s way too old for you. I thought your boyfriend was Charlie from preschool?”

Silas scoots into the booth, greeting Dave and Jackie with handshakes. I let Lettie climb in after him, sitting next to her after she makes room for me.

“Charlie isn’t my boyfriend anymore. Mommy, can you show Silas my picture of Scooter?”

Jackie pulls out her phone, tilting the home screen toward Silas. It’s a picture of Lettie squeezing a tiny white bunny in her little hands. She has a big smile on her face, but the bunny looks like he’s low on oxygen.

“I realized she was cutting off his air supply as I took the picture.”

Dave laughs, reaching his arm around my mom’s shoulders. In the past six months, my perspective on Dave and my mom has altered drastically. I can’t help but smile when I see them now.

“Do y’all want to order anything? You must be hungry,” Mom says.

I look over at Silas. “I’m starving.”

Neither of us had a chance for breakfast, so I’m assuming he’s hungry after playing in his game. It’s past one.

“Yeah, I could eat.”

The waitress comes around to the table right then. We each order a burger with fries and a drink. Silas asks for water, and I get a Coke.

“Lettie, you wanna show your sissy’s friend the whack-a-mole game over there?” Dave asks her.

She squeals, “Yes! Silas, come let me show you how to whack the moles.”

She tugs on his elbow, pushing me out of the booth at the same time.

Silas smiles at me as he follows Lettie and Dave over to the arcade side of the room. I sit back down, placing my elbows on the table.

My mom reaches for my hands, grasping them tightly in hers. “Well, she loves him.”

I sigh, relief and an overwhelming emotion I can't put a name to settling over me. "I'm not surprised. He's pretty lovable."

I look into her gaze, trying to determine how she's feeling about this whole thing. She's staring at me, moisture building up along the rims of her eyes.

"I shouldn't have … kept you from each other. I shouldn't have made you lie for me." Her voice is strained. "I'm sorry, Scarlett. I want you to be happy. I hope you know that."

I squeeze her hands harder, leaning forward. "I am happy, Mom. I'm happy he finally knows and … that he's here with her."

My mom nods, a tear dripping down her cheek. "How are you feeling? What's going on between you two?"

I turn my head to look over at the three of them. Silas is now racing against Lettie and Dave in a virtual race car game. They're all smiling and laughing as Silas fakes passing out from a car crash. My chest feels tighter as I realize the overwhelming emotion I'm feeling is *love.*

I love him. I'm in love with him.

A smile creeps over my lips as I turn back to face her. "Um, nothing serious. I think we're in love."

Her eyes widen as she lets out a small laugh. "Oh. Is that all?"

I nod, chewing on my lip. "Also, I've decided I want to become a sports agent. I love traveling with the team for the entire season, and Coach Simmers is going to help me make connections in the industry."

She lets go of my hands to reach for a napkin, wiping the moisture around her eyes.

"Are you okay, Mom?"

"I'm just … I'm so proud of you. Despite all my mistakes and shortcomings … you've grown into a strong, independent woman. You're thriving, sweetheart. There's nothing a mother wants more than to see her children happy, healthy, and finding their place in the world."

"You did the best you could, Mom. I love you so much. We're all going to be okay."

She blinks away the last of her tears. "Yes, you're right. We really are. I love you too."

THIRTY-SEVEN

silas

TWO MONTHS LATER

WE CRUSHED Oklahoma in the championship game, winning the title of national champions. My inbox has been swarmed with invites to visit more professional teams. After playing for the last five months straight, I'm ready for some time to relax and unwind.

Scarlett and I have been steadily spending almost all of our time together.

I went to Coach Simmers right before the playoffs started, telling him that as soon as the season was over, I'd be officially taking her on our first date. He nodded, thanking me for respecting his rule while the season was still ongoing. I saw him smiling as I walked out of his office.

I didn't see it really necessary to mention her sleeping over at my apartment occasionally while we waited for the chance to go on a real date.

It's mid-summer, and we're headed to the beach on a trip with Dan and Lucy—who are just *good friends*—tomorrow morning.

Tonight, we're having a celebratory dinner with my parents. It's the first time Scarlett will talk to them since she was a child. We're at my apartment, getting ready for dinner.

She looks stunning in a floral yellow dress. It's been an amazing few weeks, being able to take her out in public and show her off as my official girlfriend.

"You ready? You are breathtaking."

She spins to face me, spritzing herself with perfume. Her expression is somber.

"Are you up for this?" I reach for her hand.

She nods. "They're your parents. I've talked to Marcy about it a lot. They're the reason you and Lettie exist. Withholding forgiveness is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies."

I cup her cheeks. "It's going to take time to shake off years of resentment and really learn to change your mindset."

She nods. "I know that. We're gonna be late if we don't go."

I guide her out of the apartment and down to my truck. I'm wearing nice jeans and a pale-blue collared shirt with three buttons at the top. After opening her door to let her in, I go around to my side.

The restaurant is fifteen minutes away, right in the downtown area of the adjoining town to Greencity. I find us street parking. It's just starting to rain, cooling off the Texas summer evening.

Scarlett hops out of the truck and reaches for my hand. I hold it tightly as we walk inside the upscale Italian restaurant.

The space is dark and moody, with polished wooden walls and deep-burgundy cushions. A live violinist is playing a classic tune near the waiting area.

"Saint," I tell the hostess.

She's wearing all black, her face emotionless.

She nods. "Follow me. The rest of your party is already seated."

Scarlett's grip on my hand tightens as we weave through the other guests. In the back corner of a dark booth, my parents are seated. They look as frozen and nervous as I feel.

My dad rises, smiling at me. I haven't spoken to him about anything except for baseball since I found out about Lettie.

He reaches out a hand to shake mine. I grasp it firmly, just like he taught me growing up.

"Good to see you, son." His eyes move toward Scarlett, kindness in their depths. "Good evening, Scarlett. It's wonderful to see you too."

He moves around the table, reaching his arm over to pull her into a side hug. She smiles timidly, clearly not expecting such warmth.

"Hello, Pastor Saint. Good to see you."

My mother is standing up. She comes around the table next, reaching to hug me tightly.

"So glad y'all could make it. I know you're leaving tomorrow for your trip." She reaches for Scarlett next. "I'm sure you have a ton of packing to do. It's great to see you again, sweetheart."

They both return to their seats. Scarlett and I make eye contact as we sit down. I wonder if she's thinking the same thing I am.

This greeting is not what I expected.

My dad motions to the water and breadsticks on the table. "We ordered you water, but feel free to get something else. Your mother got the Italian soda."

"It's delicious," she offers. "The breadsticks are still hot."

Scarlett reaches for one, probably just to be polite. She hates eating when she's nervous. The tension between the four of us is palpable.

Everyone is shifting their gaze around, not sure who to look at or what to say.

I clear my throat, deciding to dive in and break the ice because the tension is unbearable. “I met Lettie.”

I make eye contact with my dad, who slowly nods. I turn to look at my mom, whose eyes are already glassing over.

“I just wanted y’all to know. I needed to finish baseball before we could really sit down and talk about it. I didn’t tell her that … I’m her brother. Scarlett just introduced me as a friend—for now.”

My mom sniffles. My dad shifts his arm under the table to grab his wife’s hand. I do the same to Scarlett, who grips my fingers like she’s holding on for dear life.

“What’s she like?” My mom speaks up first, surprising me with her question.

I look over at Scarlett before answering her. She nods.

“She’s spunky. A lot like her sister. She’s bossy for a four-year-old.”

My dad chuckles. Mom’s eyes are focused on my face.

I go on. “Her eyes are the same color as mine.”

My dad’s eyes are starting to water now. He and my mom look at each other for a moment before turning their gaze to Scarlett, who’s sitting beside me, as still as a sculpture.

The waiter comes by to take our drink orders. Scarlett and I both ask for an Italian soda.

“Scarlett, honey, we wanted you to know that we never intended to … steal Lettie from you and your mother.” My mom’s voice is soft. “I’m a mother. I know what it’s like to have a tiny baby. We just knew she was struggling and needed help. We thought … for a while, it would be what was best for Lettie.” My mother’s voice is strained.

She’s emotional, clearly just hoping to mend the bridges that have been broken because of my dad’s affair. She’s a victim in all of this, and she still wanted to raise a baby that was never hers if it was what was best.

Scarlett nods. “I understand. I was … I was too young to understand all the dynamics of how bad off things were. My mom always did her best. She struggled, but we always had food and shelter. Lettie never went without.”

I’m holding on tight to her hand, making sure she knows I’m here for her and she never has to go through anything like that alone ever again.

My dad leans forward. “I hope you know how sorry I am for the mistake I made. Your mother needed my help, and what happened between us was wrong in so many ways. Not only did I betray my wife and my family, but I also betrayed my duty to your mother as a member of my church. I’ve recently stepped down from the position.”

My eyes jump up to look at my dad’s face. His face is solemn.

“It’s been five years since the affair started. Why now?”

My mom leans over the table. “It should’ve happened back then, but with the instability between Jackie and us with the custody disagreement, we didn’t want to cause any more issues. Your father stepping down would’ve caused a huge upset in the community.”

I look over at Scarlett, who’s studying my dad’s face. He’s looking back at her too.

“Thank you for acknowledging it. And thank you for letting Dave become Lettie’s father legally. He loves her. He never had any children.” Her voice is low, emotion threatening to push over the edge of it.

My father nearly breaks down then. I see it in his eyes, but he manages to hold back the wave of tears.

“I’ve always believed that a father is the one who loves a child wholeheartedly, who is there for them and guides them through childhood. A father isn’t always biological. I was ready to be Lettie’s father, but since Dave stepped up and could love your mother … I knew it was what was best for that little girl.” His eyes turn to look at my mother’s face. “One day, we hope to meet her. Maybe as an aunt and uncle, until she’s ready to learn the truth. We want a place in her life, whatever that means.”

I finally realize, in that moment, the sacrifice they made in giving up his rights was out of love for Lettie. It would have been complicated if they had forced Jackie to let them see her on weekends or if they’d tried to take full custody. The instability it would have caused her would have been detrimental, especially once Dave entered the picture and could provide the home life with two present parents that she never would’ve had otherwise. Jackie couldn’t have moved back. It would have tarnished everyone’s view of her and my dad permanently, which would have eventually affected Lettie negatively.

My heart is torn for my grieving parents, who are both sitting in front of me and Scarlett, clearly hoping to present their side of the story and express their attempt to do the right thing during a difficult and complex time.

The waiter brings our drinks to the table. “Are you folks ready to order?”

My dad looks up at him. “Not quite yet. Can you give us some time?”

“Of course.” He smiles and walks away.

“I’m sorry for how distant I’ve been. It sounded like you just tried to take her away from her mother and then … signed away your rights when it didn’t work out. I’ve been hurting over being in the dark all this time, but I didn’t stop to think about how hurt y’all must have been.”

My dad’s watery eyes are focused on me as he nods. “I understand, son. It was so messy, so convoluted. We didn’t want to drag you into this hurtful situation, knowing there was nothing you could’ve done.”

My mom nods. “We’re so glad you’re getting to know Lettie. She deserves that, and so do you.”

It’s impossible not to notice that they haven’t given their opinion about me and Scarlett being together. It must be difficult for them to accept me with my father’s former mistress’s daughter on my arm.

I look down at her. She smiles—a true, genuine smile. Finding out their feelings toward Lettie is what really matters right now. Me and Scarlett being together is a truth they’re going to have to accept. It might take time for them to be happy about it, but now that she’s in my life, she’s here to stay.

My feet are spaced out on the surfboard as I finally try to stand up. The wave I’m riding is massive, spraying the ocean water around me as I soar over the turquoise ocean.

“Woo-hoo!” I shout, raising my hands slightly in the air.

I see Scarlett waving at me from the shore, her pink bikini standing out among the other vacationers.

Once the wave crashes over me, I swim up to the beach. My hair is sopping wet, dripping saltiness into my eyes. I squeeze them shut as I push my hand back through my hair.

“Damn, I need a camera to capture the way your muscles ripple while you’re out there, babe.”

Scarlett is lying down on her beach towel. Her red shades are shaped like hearts. Lucy is right beside her in a modest black one-piece. She's naturally tan, but she's spritzing herself with tanning oil.

"Where's Dan?" I plop down on my towel next to Scarlett.

I start tracing my finger around her navel, wishing we were alone on a private beach so I could taste her nipple.

"He heard someone say there was a margarita cart somewhere down the beach, so he went to go check it out." Lucy looks up. "There he is. Looks like he found the margarita cart."

Dan walks up, a grin plastered on his face as he holds out a frozen pink drink with a little umbrella sticking out of it. "This is so good. There's a coffee cart right next to it, serving iced coffee."

"Ooh, that sounds good. I want one," Lucy says, sitting up.

"Babe, give her money so she can get me one," Scarlett says.

I reach for my wallet, pulling out a twenty-dollar bill. "Dan, get me a margarita."

He nods. He clearly loves the island. We all needed a vacation.

Lucy stands up, grabbing her sun hat before she and Dan walk back toward the drink stations.

I lie down next to Scarlett, whose eyes are closed underneath her glasses.

"If you keep touching me, we're gonna have to go back to the resort for half an hour," she mumbles.

"Mmm, that doesn't sound like a bad idea at all. I am *really* hungry."

She props herself up on her elbow, pulling off her sunglasses. "Oh, yeah? You craving something sweet or salty?"

I pretend to think about it for a moment, squinting as I look back out over the water. "Both."

She tosses her head back in a laugh. "Oh, is it both?"

I push her back gently so that she's lying down again, moving my torso over hers. "Yeah, it's the perfect balance of sweet and salty. I'm starting to feel the effects of thinking about it too, which could be embarrassing for me once I stand up."

She grins, reaching her arms up around my neck. "Well, better stop thinking about it then."

"With you traipsing around in this little pink bikini, I'm finding that quite challenging."

“We’ll go upstairs after they get back with our drinks. How about that?”

I nod, my excitement growing even more now.

“Hey, guess what,” I say, leaning closer to her lips.

“What, PK?”

“I love you,” I say simply, as if I’d said it a thousand times before, but this is the first time.

Her eyes widen as she gapes at me. She’s frozen for a second before she slowly starts to smile, her eyes lighting up as she pulls me down further.

“I love you too,” she whispers, pecking my lips with a kiss.

I pinch her waist with my fingers as I press my lips against hers, tasting the salt of the ocean water in my hair and smelling coconut in hers.

My heart is overflowing with love for her as she holds my neck tightly, our lips hungrily devouring each other.

“Hey! This is a family-friendly beach, you two!” Dan shouts from far away.

I pull back from her. “Yeah, well, they gotta learn how families come about somehow.”

She giggles, pulling me back down toward her. “Take me upstairs, Saint.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

epilogue

SCARLETT

THREE AND A HALF YEARS LATER

"I DON'T KNOW what else to tell you, Dale. My client won't be accepting the deal unless you're going to double the offer. Saint has quite a few options on the table for athletic wear. I can't tell you what their proposals are, but I promise you that you're coming up short."

I tap my fire-red nails on the metal table in the coach's office. My tips match my oversize blazer and stilettos. The outfit is complete with white pencil pants and a nude V-neck bodysuit. My thick, dark hair is curled, half of it pulled back from my face and the rest cascading down my back.

The man on the other end of the line grunts. "I'll talk to the execs about doubling it. I'll email you."

He hangs up on me without so much as a good-bye. I shake my head, taking a seat in the black leather chair across from the empty desk.

I've been tapping out emails on my phone for half an hour while I wait in an assistant coach's office.

My number one client, Silas Saint, is the starting pitcher for the Malibu Sharks. He signed a three-year contract right after graduating from Ole Tex, and his second season in it is about to start.

He hired me as his agent after I graduated last year, during the off-season. Some say it's a conflict of interest, but I've negotiated better contracts than his previous agent ever did.

Dale will call back, doubling his offer to send Silas running shoes to wear during his workouts, paying him one hundred thousand dollars to post about it on social media three times this month.

The door behind me opens, and I turn to see Coach Simmers walk through, a giant grin on his face.

I stand up, not being able to resist grinning back at him.

"Well, you sure look the part after less than a year in the business. How's that boy doing?" Simmers draws me into a hug.

"That boy is about to crush his second season in the pros. He told me this morning he's feeling stronger than ever."

I take a seat in the black leather chair, and Coach Simmers sits in the one beside me. We have about ten minutes to chat before he'll meet up in the media room to take a photo with Silas.

"I heard he threw one hundred-three." Simmers's eyes are bright.

I nod, pride surging through me. My boyfriend is currently one of the top five fastest pitchers in major league baseball.

Simmers shakes his head. "That arm has always been something else. He'll get faster."

I tilt my head, studying the man who mentored both Silas and me at a critical point in our lives.

"You know that you are a big part of why he is where he is, why we both are. Don't you?"

He ponders my words for a moment, scratching his chin. "It's a strange thing—those critical moments in life that feel small at the time but end up altering the course of someone's entire life. When I first scouted Silas, I almost passed on him. He'd performed well in Select ball, but none of his coaches ever poured time into him. He was still just a kid. It's hard at that age, especially since he was homeschooled, to know exactly the determination he has to really go somewhere." He pauses, leaning forward. "I just knew there was something. I knew if he had the right coaching, he'd go somewhere."

He looks around the office with a corner window and a view of the massive parking lot below, the Malibu coast in the distance. "I didn't know this would be where he'd end up."

If he'd passed on recruiting Silas to play at Ole Tex, I might not have come into contact with him again.

I check my watch to see that it's time for us to leave. I stand, and Simmers follows suit.

"Well, now that we're here, we want to express our gratitude to you."

I lead him out of the room, my heels clicking on the concrete floor. It's cold in Malibu in February, and a slight chill runs down my arm. We turn down a hallway, nearly at the media room. It's overcrowded with sports reporters.

They see me and immediately begin to swarm around me. A microphone and several smartphones are shoved in my face.

"Is it true that you and Silas Saint are engaged?" the woman holding a phone says.

I hold up my bare left hand. “Silas and I will not be answering any personal questions about our relationship. We’re here to talk baseball.”

I shove through the crowd, Coach Simmers close on my heels. We make our way up to the podium. The background is the Malibu Sharks logo with a smaller logo of the sports drink company that paid handsomely to claim that spot.

As soon as we are in place, the door to the side of the media room opens. The head coach for the Sharks walks through, followed by three assistant coaches and Silas, *the Saint Slugger*. He still carries the nickname, considering his batting record is in the top ten players of the MLB.

He’s wearing a navy suit, his broad shoulders filling it out perfectly. I have the pleasure of knowing my fingernails scratched tiny red marks into those shoulders early this morning before we went our separate ways.

Silas’s pale-green eyes search the crowd, finally landing on me directly in front of him before a tiny smirk touches his lips. He winks at me subtly before turning to give the reporters a polite wave.

They rush toward him, mostly the female ones. They erupt with questions, all trying to shout over each other.

The professional camera crews have all their lenses focused on Silas until the head coach raises a hand to silence everyone.

“Thank you all for coming to this preseason press conference. Silas Saint has asked his former head coach—Coach Simmers from Ole Tex University in Greencity, Texas—to join us today. Coach, welcome to Finn Park.”

The cameramen and the reporters suddenly realize the massive guy standing behind me isn’t a bodyguard, and they shove the cameras toward him, erupting in more questions.

Coach Simmers waves awkwardly. “Glad to be here.”

Silas approaches him, extending a hand. They shake before Coach pulls him into a one-armed hug.

I can see the smile on Silas’s face as he pulls away.

“Thanks for being here,” Silas says, inaudible to anyone not within our small space with the noise of the reporters and camera clicks.

Silas begins to address the crowd. “Coach Simmers and Ole Tex University mean a lot to me. I was just a kid when I started playing there. In a lot of ways.” He glances back at me for a moment before continuing, “I grew into the man I am today on that field. Which is why I’m donating one

million dollars of my signing bonus with the Malibu Sharks to improve the baseball facility at Ole Tex. I'm also going to start a camp every summer for high school kids to come and stay for a week and learn to love the game from Coach Simmers and me."

Coach Simmers looks stunned. He grips Silas's hand again, pulling him back into another hug. The cameras flash. I see tears in Simmers's eyes as he finally steps back. He and Silas pose for a few more pictures before Silas holds out a hand to me, motioning for me to come join the photo op.

I stand between the two massive men, thankful I decided to wear heels today.

My cheeks hurt from smiling by the time it's over. Silas holds my hand, leading me off the stage. All the coaches are chatting as we walk through the halls.

Silas pulls me along, walking faster to get us ahead of them. He tugs my hand to turn us left, going the opposite direction of the locker room, where I thought we were meeting up to give Coach Simmers some Malibu Sharks merch.

"Where are we going?"

He turns around, flashing me a grin. His sandy-blonde hair is styled perfectly to show off his waves.

He finally pulls me to a stop right in front of the exit doors.

"Are we just ditching?" I look up at him, growing anxious the longer he doesn't loop me in on what's happening.

"Scarlett Cohen, do you trust me?" His voice is lit with excitement.

I roll my eyes. "Next question, one you don't already know the answer to."

He chuckles, reaching into his pocket and pulling out one of the small towels from the trainers room. I'm getting more confused every minute that goes by.

He lifts it up, wrapping it around my face and covering my eyes. He ties the back around my head.

"Silas! What the hell are you doing?"

"Shh, trust me, baby."

I feel him on my lips next, pressing a tiny kiss to them before the sound of the metal doors clicking open reaches my ears. He guides me by my elbow outside.

“I’m going to trip and fall on my ass. These heels are so hard to walk in.”

Next thing I know, he’s scooping me up so that I’m in his arms like a bride on her wedding day.

Stop thinking about being a bride.

As much as I try to tell myself not to, it’s been on my mind lately.

“Sissy!” Lettie’s little voice reaches my ears.

“Lettie?” I’m stunned.

Our seven-year-old sister should be states away in Texas right now.

“It’s so pretty, sissy. Si did good.”

“What’s so pretty?”

Silas sets me down on the concrete slowly, helping me get my footing. I stand there, waiting for someone to say something.

His hands pinch my waist briefly before reaching up to untie the blindfold. I squint in the bright light, allowing my eyes to adjust before seeing what’s in front of me.

A brand-new fire-red convertible with a giant white bow is parked a few feet away. Lettie is strapped in her booster seat in the backseat, and my parents are grinning in the front seats.

“Surprise,” Silas whispers in my ear, tickling it with his warm breath.

“Hello, sweetheart!” My mom opens the door, running up to hug me.

My mouth is gaping open. I’m shocked at their presence and the very expensive car right in front of me.

“Hi, Mom! What is this?”

Dave lifts Lettie out of the car so she can run to me, squeezing me into a hug before leaping up into Silas’s arms.

“This is your signing bonus for being my agent. Your parents flew up here so they could drive it over for me while you were busy meeting with Coach Simmers.”

I’m too stunned to speak. My mom gives me a side hug.

“You deserve this, baby. We’re so proud of you.” She lets go of me, giving me a little push toward the car.

“I … I don’t know … I can’t speak.”

Silas walks around the car, opening the driver’s door for me. “You’ve helped me negotiate so many contracts, and you’re truly outstanding at what you do. This isn’t a gift from me as your boyfriend. This is a thank-you for all the hard work you’ve put into being my badass agent.”

"*Ass* is a bad word, Si," Lettie corrects him.

"You're right. I'm sorry." He kisses her on the cheek, and forgiveness is granted immediately.

I blink up at him, trying not to let the tears flow down my cheeks. I lick my lips, debating on how many blow jobs I can fit into one week because I'm so freaking in love with this thoughtful, sweet, generous man.

He slowly lowers Lettie down, who skips back over to her parents.

He cups my cheeks. "Look, I have more money than I know what to do with. All I want is to spoil the hell out of you—specifically with a big, shiny rock on your left hand sometime soon."

My eyes bulge out of my head.

"But this is just the beginning. So, I suggest you get used to it now."

I slowly nod, swallowing over the lump in my throat at this new reality of money and more shiny things than I ever thought I'd have.

"I love you. Thank you." I'm nearly weeping now.

He pulls me tightly into an embrace.

"You wanna take her for a spin after we give Coach his stuff?"

I nod, reaching my arms up around his neck. I pull him down for a kiss, pressing my lips to his.

"Yes, that's perfect. Everything with you is perfect."

the end

Sign up for my email list here to receive a bonus epilogue of the four friends reuniting at a dinner party, along with a sneak peek of Dan and Lucy's story.

Scan QR code to read *The Dinner Party.*

also by mj

If you missed Adam and Harley's bad girl/good boy story read ***Falling for Temptation***.

If you missed Levi and Kenna's nerd boy/popular girl story read ***Seeing Double***.

If you're all caught up on the Good Ol' Boys, make sure not to miss Dan and Lucy's grumpy-sunshine/best friends and roommates story when ***Kissing Friends*** is released in the fall of 2023.

Sign up for email alerts or follow Mj on Amazon to be notified of new releases.

The tattooed vixen in my first college class is everything I shouldn't crave if I want to stay on the straight and narrow path.

My family expects me to find a sweet, innocent girl. Harley Kain's questionable past and skin-baring clothing definitely don't fit the bill.

I think she might be the temptress my momma prayed I would resist, but I can't look away. All I want is to get an Agriculture degree and go back to the cornstalks and dirt. It's the only life I've ever known, and I'm perfectly content on the farm.

Until I see her.

She's guarded, but my protective instincts kick into overdrive when I find out she's been walking home alone at night. When she finally confides in me, I start to realize the dangerous life she's running from.

I want to protect her. I want to do more than that. But if I give in to my overwhelming desire for her, I'll be throwing away my future. My family will never approve.

Even if I am willing to sacrifice it all and fall for temptation, convincing Harley she's worthy of love could be impossible.

Read ***Falling for Temptation*** now.

about author and social links

Mj adores when a fictional man is humbled by a feisty woman who he never anticipated.

She began envisioning love stories when they kept morphing out of her fevered soul, craving a place of rest.

Writing is natural state of mind, whether in be in a drive-through line or near the calming lake she lives down the road from.

She is a single mother and eternally indebted to her writing, which rescued her from the darkest place she'd ever been.

Mj's lifelong dream is to reside in a house by the sea.

You can keep up with Mj and her writing/publishing journey through her amazon author profile, social media, or her website.

She's most active on TikTok as @mjhendrixauthor **and Instagram as** @mjhendirxauthor

www.mjhendrix.com/

You can join her reader group here to connect with more Mj readers. (Mj's Hot Mamas on facebook).

Follow her on amazon to get notifications for all new releases.

acknowledgments

Imposter syndrome is an old, familiar friend to me. I've probably asked myself a thousand times while writing this story, "who do you think you are, writing a book? You can't do this."

And this is my fourth book to write and release. I'm starting to think that feeling never goes away.

The beginning of Silas and Scarlett is actually a true story. The entire town of Bonnet Valley is very similar to where I grew up, down to the little white church and the purity culture teachings.

I had a childhood crush who wrote me letters until I wrote him one as a teen that broke his heart. We reconnected while I was in college, after both of us had wrecked the other one a little bit in our immature misunderstands of how to love someone. Then we did it again.

Our story ended there.

I have no lingering feelings for that old love now, but I've always secretly loved the beginning of us, even though it didn't last. (That one very much needed to end, and I've made peace with that).

I guess I've finally learned that not every man I love will be with me forever, but that doesn't mean I never truly loved them. It doesn't mean I didn't learn something.

Every person I've ever loved, no matter how briefly or how long, has forged me into the woman I am today writing this story.

It seems we all have a first love who truly demolished us in some life-altering way, forever changing our perception of unconditional love and the idea of a soulmate.

I wanted Silas and Scarlett to get that first love happy ending, even with all the ugly scarring they inflicted upon each other along the way. I wanted Pastor Saint and Jackie to mess up badly, but to also be forgiven by their children and find peace, even after nearly destroying so many lives.

I see so many broken parent/children relationships, and I know that sometimes people get older and remain hardened in their ways. But I love

when they can see their mistakes, try to make it right, and experience true remorse and reconciliation with each other. That's really what this love story is about deep down in its bones, the love of family, love that surpasses heartbreak and betrayal.

Even after all the heartbreak I've endured, I still believe in that love which can forgive grave offenses. After all, without forgiveness, what is love?

I pray the team who makes these stories possible will never tire of my stories. You ladies mean everything to me, and my books wouldn't happen without you.

Starting with my beta girls, Raeanna, Keri, and Cassandra. You girls see this book first and somehow still weed through my messy second draft, pre-editing ramblings. Thank you, thank you so much for your feedback. You are invaluable to me!

Jovana and Misha make me question if had the flu the week we learned comma's in school. Thank you for your very detailed and thorough editing that makes these books clean enough to be officially published.

I also owe a big thank you to Kate for designing all the Good Ol' Boys covers with beautiful water colors I couldn't have dreamed up myself.