

# THE BAD BOY'S FOREVER EXCERPT

BLAIR HOLDEN

## CHAPTER ONE

### Where We Stand On Operation Laxation

Soft light filters through the window, and beside me I feel Cole start to wake up. I've been awake for some time now; after the bomb he dropped last night, I couldn't really relax enough to go back to sleep. There's a reason behind why he's so adamant about protecting me, about protecting my privacy. I remember feeling awed and then it hit me, the realization that everything's about to change.

Things happened at the training camp, big things for Cole's career. He's an engineering major so he's always got a more practical backup plan. But of course, like every college boy playing football, the dream's always there—the one where you go pro, and life as you know it tilts on its head.

I swallow heavily. I've always known he's remarkable, always known that he's meant for great things, but this is huge, and whenever I think about it, I feel like the breath's been knocked out of my body.

Gentle kisses rain down my neck, hands shift inside my shirt...well, technically Cole's shirt, and keep moving upward. I'm shaking, shivering with a need to be close to him after it's been so long, and I can feel the same need in his touch. The way his strong hands move over my body, touching and caressing, kissing my neck, my jaw.

Instinctively, my back straightens as I realize that I still do have a roommate who might need to have some form of psychiatric therapy after the number of times she's witnessed Cole and me in compromising positions. Beside me, Cole grumbles, "She never came back, Shortcake, said her boyfriend's visiting so she's staying with him."

I turn my head so fast, it's surprising I don't pull a muscle. He's here; he's here and we still have a while before he tells me that even this, him being in my dorm room, is too much. I take in everything about him, from his ruffled, sleep-tousled hair to his bright blue eyes to the sharp slope of his cheekbones. I run the back of my hand across his unshaven jaw and he exhales heavily before swooping in and kissing me deeply.

Morning-breath kissing is okay as long as both people have morning breath.

He pushes me onto my back and hovers above me as we continue kissing. I've missed him; I'm scared and still upset, but the time we've spent apart, the time I've spent doubting everything we have, and now when he's so close to me, when he's touching me, I can't muster up any other emotion than the kind of heady love I have for him.

"You kill me when you look at me like that." Cole's voice is husky from a mixture of sleep and desire.

I wind my arms around his shoulder and pull his mouth down to mine. "I fell asleep on you last night. We didn't even get to..."

He kisses the corner of my lips. "Talk?" I can feel his smile against my skin.

"Among other things. That was some bomb you dropped."

He looks apologetic but distracted, mostly, as he rains kisses all over my face.

"I want a timeout, let's discuss this later. Right now, I just want to remind my girlfriend why she shouldn't give up on me."

I quirk an eyebrow. "Pretty confident about your skills, aren't you, Stone?"

"I have yet to be proven wrong." He winks at me as he makes me sit up so that I can push his shirt over my arms.

His distraction is working quite successfully, but something still irks me—it's that word.

Girlfriend.

"Am I still your girlfriend?" My voice sounds hollow, losing the previous playfulness almost immediately. Cole's expression falls, his eyes growing somber.

He cups the back of my neck with his palm and presses our foreheads together. With his free hand he takes my wrist and drags my hand up his naked chest and places it right above his heart, which races furiously beneath my fingers.

"That word doesn't even come close to explaining what you are to me." He looks me right in the eyes as he says this, and I see the conviction, the belief, the possibility right there.

"I want to call you something else if we're giving out titles, but I know that'll freak you out right now. But one day soon, I'll ask you a very important question, Tessie, and everyone will know that there's no one out there for me but you."

I can't speak; I can't breathe. I can only look at him and know with every part of me that he loves me more than I could ever imagine someone would love me.

"But to answer your question, yes, you're my girlfriend, you're the fucking love of my life. I'm only pretending for as long as it takes me to make sure that I can take care of you. Between us, you're still mine and I'm still yours. For everyone else...I don't give a fuck about them, but they'll know to not even look your way."

I kiss his shoulder. "You'll be putting us through hell. Nothing has to be this complicated."

"Damn it, I know that, Shortcake!" He growls against my neck, "But I'd go through hell ten times over to make sure they never get to you."

You can't fight that kind of conviction, so I didn't. I just draw his mouth to mine and kiss his worries away. I'd be there every step of the way for him; all that worries me is if Cole's digging himself a hole too deep to be able to find his way out.

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I learn the hard way that wanting to teach someone a lesson isn't as fun as you'd think. But my intentions were more than noble; I wanted Cole to get it into his head that whatever comes our way, I'd be more than happy to face it with him. But if he keeps wanting to wrap me up in Bubble Wrap and wishes to keep us in "storage" until he feels the time is right, then we'd be there for a long, long time.

I'm at the gym, working out under Bentley's strict supervision. I attempt to bring up Amanda or even the day's weather, to be honest, to keep his scrutinizing gaze away, but he's watching me carefully.

Not like, it's my responsibility if she manages to smash in her skull with training weights, but more like her boyfriend supposedly broke up with her; shouldn't she be a little catatonic?

Like I'm doing with everyone else on campus who seems to be vaguely aware of my situation, I could ignore him. But with Bentley I know he's coming from a good place and is only concerned for me as a friend, so I make it a goal to remember to tell him that nothing has happened recently that should put me on suicide watch.

"So," he asks once I'm done working out, "if you haven't got any plans for the weekend, I was thinking you might want to finally meet Amanda. She wants to see more of my friends but they're, well..." he shrugs, "dicks, to be honest, who'll spend way too much time staring at her chest."

"Well, clearly, I won't be doing that. Sure, I could embarrass you by acting like a complete idiot, but I won't be sleazy."

He laughs, looking partly relieved that I still have some sense of humor left. He tells me that he'll text me all the details and that we'll probably go for dinner sometime in the evening. We part ways as I head back to my dorm and only then do I finally check my phone. It's blowing up with texts from my best friends, Megan and Beth, and my brother. They've been witnessing my roller coaster of a relationship

since Cole's interview on ESPN, and surely they'll want to know what the recent update is. Who needs all those different versions of the Real Housewives when you've got me?

"Hey." I balance the phone between my ear and shoulder as I use my student ID to get inside the elevators leading up to my floor. Thankfully I'm alone so nobody hears Beth yell, "Do I need to cut an appendage?"

I cringe at the volume. "Bethany," I sigh leaning against the back of the elevator, "why are you shouting? Didn't Travis tell you to lay off the sugar until after six p.m.?"

"Hey, this isn't the result of three bags of Sour Patch Kids. I'm at the mall and one of the Hemsworth brothers is here; people are going crazy. I swear I saw one woman just take off her top in front of her eight-year-old."

I shudder; I'm sure actually viewing it must have been a more traumatizing experience.

"And that reminded you to call me."

"Hey, I was in the food court, trying to kill some time, and I noticed that the ESPN interview from hell still hasn't been taken off, which means Cole hasn't rescinded his statement. I still feel the need to do something really violent."

"Calm down, femme fatale, we're working on it."

I can practically see that one calculated eyebrow raise. "How are you working on it if that interview hasn't been taken down and he's still breathing?"

"How do you know he's still breathing?"

"I know someone who knows someone," she says casually, like that doesn't make her sound like a crime boss.

"So you either spoke to Cami or Sarah, and since Sarah's petrified of you, it's got to be Cami." The doors open and I make my way down the floor down the hallway feeling numerous pairs of eyes on me.

"I just wanted to know where we stand on Operation Laxation."

Well, thank Christ I don't start having a coughing fit in the middle of the floor. Hurrying down to my room, I shut the door behind me and whisper-yell into the phone despite the fact that Sarah isn't here.

"Please don't tell me you did what I think you did!"

"Well, if you haven't heard about it from Mr. Douchebag Heart of Stone, then my little minion has been slacking on the job."

"Beth, you have no idea about what's going on; leave him alone," I hiss, feeling my blood pressure start to rise. Between my friends and boyfriend, I'll be lucky if I make it past the age of twenty-five.

"What I do know is that you're hurting and that you're probably as confused as I am. Those two things don't go well together, and they are certainly not what you need from a relationship."

I press my fingers into my throbbing temple and take a seat at the foot of my bed.

"He made things pretty clear last night when we talked."

There's silence on the other end, but I can sense the question she's about to ask.

"Last night as in you guys were together with a bed in the vicinity?"

"He didn't sleep with me to manipulate me, Beth; he's not that kind of a guy and you know it as well as I do."

Although Beth doesn't talk about her past a lot, I get the feeling that she's always met the wrong kind of guys, so it takes her a lot more time to trust them. She has no reason to be so mistrustful of Cole, but I guess the doubt's always going to be there.

"Okay, yeah, that was way out of line, but I did think that for a second. But you know you can't always use sex to shove your problems into a corner."

"We didn't; he didn't. We talked about stuff, a lot of stuff, and he told me something big, which we'll know more about in the coming days. I understand a lot more now than I did before and..."

"And?"

"I've never wanted to kill Nicole more than I do right at this very moment."

"Ah, so that's the whole problem, isn't it? The fake breakup? Is he honestly still hung up on the idea?"

"He's more than hung up; he's actually going through with it."

More silence.

"Well, I can't wait to see that shit storm blow up in his face."

Groaning, I fall onto my back and stare at the ceiling. "Everyone can see that but him, and the only solution I see is making him realize that he doesn't always know what's best."

Amusement colors Beth's voice. "You're up to something, aren't you? You're going to teach him a lesson."

"One he can't forget."

"God, you're lame, but I love you; hope you kick his smug ass."

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I feel really smug right now.

"Going out like hell!"

Cole's throwing a tantrum, an actual live tantrum like the four-year-olds all men are inside. So I watch him in silent joy as he stomps around the room, all while painting my nails.

"It's a club, not a live Magic Mike reenactment, Cole, relax."

If he could have fire coming out of his nostrils right now, it probably would be happening.

"Have you ever been to the place? Do you even know what it's like?"

"It seems like you're rather well acquainted with it." I arch an eyebrow, hoping it looks intimidating.

He doesn't even look guilty. "We went there once after a game; you said you were studying."

I blow out a breath so that I don't end up throwing something at him. "Well, I'm going now, and since we can't be seen together..."

"Whoa, hold up, that's not what I said. There's no reason for me to stay away from you; like I said, people will think we're hanging out."

His words make me cringe since he's making it sound like we're in a friends-with-benefits situation and I'm the girl who starts to have feelings that are never reciprocated.

"Look, I know we're doing this to keep me away from the public eye or whatever, but what will it say about me when we're seen 'hanging out' just days after you've more or less publicly humiliated me?"

"I haven't—" he begins to bellow but I raise a hand to make him stop.

"Hear me out. This is what it's at right now; everyone thought we were together and even though none of them could stomach the fact that someone like you was with someone like me, they still didn't come right out and question whether or not we were a couple. Now that you've very publicly announced that we've broken up or, even better, told everyone that you're not one for relationships, people have started thinking that I let you use me."

His face grows tense, but he's a wise man, since he doesn't try to interrupt me.

"What kind of person will they think I am if I'm so comfortable parading around on your arm; do I not have any self-respect in this hypothetical alternate universe you're trying to create?"

"Damn it, you're sexy when you get mad at me."

What am I going to do with this boy?

"I need you to take me seriously. If you're fine with people thinking I'm a spineless, desperate, ditzzy blonde with no self-respect, then we've got a problem."

All at once his playful expression dies, and he stares at me, hurt all over his face. He starts to say something but then stops and stares at me a little and then leaves his own room, slamming the door behind him. I fight tears and take a seat at the edge of his bed because I don't trust my shaky legs.

Suddenly I feel the urge to rip the designer skinny jeans and silk halter top off my body in exchange for one of Cole's t-shirts. Yes, I'd made plans with Bentley, Cami, and Sarah, but I don't want to

leave behind an angry Cole. We're not going to be caught up in that vicious cycle where he hurts me and I attempt to hurt him back even worse.

My phone vibrates in my pocket; the others must be wondering where I'd been held up. A big part of me wants to cancel on them, find Cole, and make things right. But the other part knows that if I stay here, wallowing in misery over why things couldn't work out the way I wanted them to, I'd be sitting alone in a dark room my entire life.

I debate very briefly whether or not to take the keys to Cole's car and then think better of it; it doesn't seem right when I've just been so horrible to him. Calling a cab, I make my way through the empty apartment and hate every second of it. Where is he?

I get my answer when I'm standing outside the building, waiting for my cab to show up, when I'm grabbed by the wrist and pushed into the wall of the alley adjoining Cole's apartment building. I'd scream but I'm too busy being kissed the life out of by my boyfriend, who seems to be as bipolar as the British weather.

"I swear you make me so mad," he gasps before leaning in to kiss me again. His kisses are wild and out of control, just like him.

I should stop him, push him away, and be embarrassed about possibly being caught, but I don't do any of those things. Moaning deeply, I wind my arms around his neck and kiss him back just as eagerly as he's kissing me.

His hands go to my hips, tightening around them, letting me know what to do next. My cab could be here any second, but I let him hoist me up so that I could wrap my legs around his waist.

"Ditto." I struggle to breathe as he kisses down my neck then pushes aside my top to kiss lower.

"I would never disrespect you, Tessie, never," he vows as he veers away from the riskier territories and kisses my lips again.

"I didn't mean it like that, I know you wouldn't, not intentionally."

I run my fingers across his jaw, over his lips, and then his cheekbones.

"I should go, everyone's waiting for me."

"I'll come with."

"No, you—"

He cuts me off with a kiss and presses his forehead to mine. "No one will even know I'm there; I promise. I'll get a drink, blend into the crowd; heck, I'll be like the fucking wallpaper."

I laugh because the idea is so absurd. "You'll never be wallpaper, Cole, never for me or for anyone else. You're too...bright."

We certainly make a sight, hidden in the alley all wrapped up in each other. Now's not the time for a heart-to-heart, but he needs to know some things. "You stand out in the crowd, Cole, always have. Sometimes I'm scared that the kind of energy that surrounds you, the attraction that forces people to come your way, could burn me." I confess, "It's crazy how I can never stay away from you."

He swallows, his breath becoming choppy. "That feeling that pushes you toward me, babe? Yeah, that's not what other people even come close to feeling. That's us, that's what we have with one another. Calling it love seems like a fucking injustice. You'll never get burned, not with me, because I'd rather die than let that happen."

A single tear escapes that he kisses away. "We're experiencing things that are new and scary, but as long as I've got you, we're good, right?" He kisses the corner of my eyes and I press my face into his chest, inhaling his scent.

"Yeah."

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We make it to the club, a place called Sapphire that seems like the wet dream of every coed on the planet. There's loud music, flashing lights with just enough darkness to conceal the more disturbing visuals, and a flowing bar. Even though it's all-ages night, the bouncers don't seem really concerned with making sure

that those below twenty-one have the right wristband. Cole and I slip by without being carded, and he doesn't seem really happy about it.

"Drunk Tessie and this place aren't really the best combination," he grumbles as he walks behind me, keeping a protecting hand at the small of my back at all times. So much for being wallpaper, but I need to hand it to him. I'm sure once we get in better lighting, he'll have all the attention in the world.

I spot my friends sitting at one of the tables near the bar, not surprisingly nursing their drinks. Cole knows what to order for me to make sure I don't end up on everyone's social media feed, caught swinging from the chandelier or taking a police car for a joyride.

Drunk Tessa is capable of anything; you never can tell.

But as I'm about to turn and tell him to bring our drinks to the table, he turns me around and gives me a quick kiss on the lips.

"I'll have your drink served to your table."

"Come with me, they're just my friends; they won't say anything."

"There's a guy sitting down the bar from you who's a reporter. He's known for being an extra-sneaky son of a bitch; I'm not letting him breathe anywhere near you." Cole kisses my temple and pushes me in the direction of where I can see Bentley and someone who must be Amanda.

"Just text me when you're ready to leave; you're staying over tonight."

I feel really unsure and frazzled but agree and let him walk off. Walking down to meet my friends, I'm introduced to a kind-faced and stunning brunette that Bentley's been infatuated with. As we get to know each other, I find myself really starting to like her and am genuinely happy for my friend for being with someone like her.

That's until she leans in closer and whispers, "Thanks for coming out tonight. I know it's not my place to say, but being around so many people after such a public breakup must be tough."

I freeze and Cami, who's been sitting quietly next to me for a while, swoops in. "Did you seriously just bring that up?"

Amanda's face goes red with mortification and I realize that she hadn't meant the early statement as a dig, that she'd simply been thanking me, and I'm such a moron for overreacting as always.

"I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to upset you, I just—"

"It's fine," I think I'm smiling, "you didn't know; besides, like you said, it was a public breakup, so I can't blame people for being curious."

She's still apologizing as I excuse myself to go to the ladies' room, Cami hot on my heels.

"That went well." She studies me closely as we join the long line leading up to the bathrooms.

"Yup."

"You could at least attempt to look more heartbroken," she chastises, and before I can ask her what she knows and how much of it, I arrive at the conclusion.

"You and Beth need to stop scheming together; the world isn't ready for the outcome of that kind of trouble."

She shrugs. "I like the way that girl thinks; we're going to be really good friends, I can tell."

Once we use the ladies' room and go back to our seats, and the somber mood seems to have lifted, and after apologizing a couple more times, Amanda is able to start to relax and enjoy herself. My eyes keep wandering around the room, however, and I'm a bit ashamed to admit that I haven't been paying attention to most of the conversation going on around me.

"You're being a bit obvious, Tessa. Just go find him and maul him, if that's what you'd like," Cami whispers conspiratorially in my ear. I grin at the image and take out my phone to do just that, but Cole beats me to it. There's an incoming text that contains a message that has me blushing all over.

"My God," Cami fans herself, "that boy's got a way with words."

"Hey! Boundaries, Camryn, respect them." I shield my very personal text and stand up, looking for him.

Because, like he very convincingly told me, I don't need to be afraid of always wanting to be near him, of always being attracted to his direction. That energy pulling us together won't burn me because it's

what keeps me running, day in and day out. It's what gives me the highest of highs and sometimes the lowest lows, but I could never imagine living without it running through my veins.

I know he feels the same, so when I see his figure lurking in the shadows, an area of the club obscured from the flashing lights, and see him smiling at me, a wide grin that squeezes my heart to the point it could burst, I'm all but ready to let him incinerate me.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Mrs. Weasley's Howlers Cower Before Tessa's Verbal Bitch Slaps

It may be snowing outside, but inside the gym it feels like every inch of my skin is on fire. Once the routine finishes, I drop to my knees and very attractively pant like the dog I never had. A pair of tanned and toned legs appears in front of me, and I can practically hear the smugness on her face.

"I thought you were in shape," Lindsey Owens, star of the college dance team and the girl I'd begged and stalked at times to let me audition for the team, says as I resist the urge to sprawl on the floor.

"I thought so too; my trainer has a lot of explaining to do," I mumble, but she still manages to hear me and lends a hand so that I can get up.

"You'll get used to it. I should've warned you that we do some hard-core cardio to get in shape for the season. This particular routine was made to single out the yuppies from the professionals."

I wrinkle my nose and wonder how on earth I ended up being the yuppie in this situation.

She notices my crestfallen expression and gives me a sympathetic smile. "But you did good. You're definitely better than all of them." She looks disdainfully at all the other freshman recruits who aren't fairing any better than me; one of them actually looks quite green, and just as I'm making that observation, she rushes past us and into the adjoining locker rooms, where we can hear the sound of her retching.

"Charming," Lindsey snorts and then beams at me, "they've been in conditioning since before school started, and yet they can't even make it past the first ten minutes." She shakes her head. "You've got good form and you pushed through. We like that, and I know that if you keep working hard at it, you'll ace every routine."

With that she swishes her still-perfect hair and walks away. Since it's taken a whole lot of effort for my limbs to keep operating while we talked, I give them a break and crumple on the floor. What have I gotten myself into?

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The next day after practice is a Tuesday, a day no one really appreciates or talks about, and rightly so, because it's brutal. I'd had a full, busy day on Monday with getting up at six for my first official team practice, and then I'd been at the library getting work done ahead of finals week. After that I'd been in classes till the evening before going to my room and crashing for a good couple of hours. I'd woken up and gotten some more reading done, fitting that in between talking to Cole and making sure that his streak of doing things for me without even asking me would come to an end.

I'd gone home with him after staying at the club for a short while. He doesn't seem to have a set agenda of the things we could or could not do as a couple that others no longer considered a couple. Ugh, it's too early for me to think about the convoluted maze that is this new strategy, especially since I haven't had coffee. I'm standing in line in the coffee shop trying to plan my day when someone bumps into me,

and the cell phone I'm holding in my hand falls to the ground. Grumbling, I pick it up hoping that I don't have to replace it when the person behinds me leans in too, as if to help me pick up the phone.

"You lasted longer than I expected, O'Connell."

I freeze, since, unfortunately, I've become all too used to hearing her voice. She's inconsequential, another backyard bully who thrives on making people feel bad about themselves, and I've had it up to here with her. It's nice to think how immune I've become to her opinion when a couple of months back it would've made me shrink into myself and run straight for the hills.

Straightening my back, I turn toward her and smile. She may have dropped my phone, but she hasn't seen my latest text. Looking her in the eyes and giving Allison a saccharine smile, I speak to the person on the other end of the phone when they finally pick up.

"Hey, I'm just grabbing some coffee. Do you want to meet here instead?"

Allison frowns at me, like she thinks I'm stupid for not having more of a reaction.

He says he'll be there in two minutes, and as the long line moves, I turn my back on Allison but can feel her eyes boring into my back. I'm still ignoring her when the murmurs start around me. Ever since Cole's come back from the training camp, he's become somewhat of a local celebrity. Everyone wants to know more about the boy who's going to make it big in the NFL. People assume it's just a matter of time before he goes pro and drops out, but I can't help but think of the haunted look in his eyes when he now talks about his future.

I think they're expecting a showdown, those who were aware of our relationship, that is. Much as I'd like to think so, the world doesn't revolve around us, and there are people here who just want that damn cup of coffee.

"Hey," he breathes into my ear while cutting the line. I'd love to be the one to tell him that we're supposed to have boundaries now, but it's his game and he better know how to play it.

I angle my body so that I can see Allison's shell-shocked expression.

"Do you want me to grab you something?"

He shakes his head, grabs my wrist, and pulls me away from the line. Tipping his head toward the seating area, he smiles lovingly at me. "Go take a seat, I'll grab the food."

I begin to protest but it's pointless, and we've already attracted enough attention. Shaking my head, I grin at Allison and give her a little wave as I walk away. I love Cole for not even noticing that she's there or even acknowledging her. He comes back shortly afterward with our order, and as we begin to sip our coffees, I finally ask him.

"How is this any different from when we were going out?"

He grimaces. "Well, for one, I wouldn't have to control every single instinct that I have to kiss you right now."

"Poor life choices, Stone, you reap what you sow."

He laughs, but there's no humor on his face. "I got a couple of calls today, more reporters who want to turn me into an overnight superstar. One of them...fucking hell, one of them brought up my mom's death because everybody loves a sob story, right?"

My heart clenches painfully for him, and without thinking, I put my drink down and place my hand over his. Just because he doesn't bring her up a lot doesn't mean that his mom never meant anything to him. Yes, she passed away when he was still very young, but I know for a fact that he still has some memories of her, and even worse, he'll always miss the fact that he couldn't have more.

"How did they even find that out?"

"They're reporters, apparently invasion of privacy is in their job description."

"I'm sorry. Just try to stay calm about it all, okay? They might just be looking for something to make you upset enough, and then they'd have a headline on their hands."

"If only they knew the real headline."

"What?"

"Nothing, it's nothing."

He looks at me intensely for a bit and clenches his jaw. I get the feeling that he's trying to tell me something but he won't. I know him as well as I know myself, but even I can't read his mind.



He exhales. "I won't let them find out anything worth blowing my fuse over."

The somber mood is broken by one of Cole's teammates coming around and slapping him on the shoulder. I duck my head and busy myself with my gigantic mug of coffee as they exchange pleasantries, but my attempt at being invisible fails as the wide receiver's eyes pin me down and widen in surprise.

"Blondie and you still going strong then? And here I was about to tell you we've got a whole sorority willing to be your own personal cheerleader till next season. The offer's pretty tempting if you're still interested."

He eyes me accusingly, like I'm the sole reason why Cole would turn down such a magnanimous gift.

But we're playing a game, right, putting on an act? Well, then now's as good a time as any to show people that we're "friends," and as his friend, I couldn't possibly let him give up such an incredible opportunity.

I square my shoulders and look Paul, I think his name is, in the eyes. "Which sorority is it?"

"Kappa Delta," he tells me reverently.

"Hmm, cute girls. Most of them were prom queens, and in future will likely become wives of professional athletes." I turn to Cole. "You should take them up on their offer; I'm sure they know just how to treat you."

Cole's glowering at me and then at his meathead teammate. "I'll see you at practice, Donaldson."

"But man," he whines pathetically, "I need to get back to them soon, or why don't you do it directly? They want a photo op before the next big game."

"I said I'll talk to you at practice."

"But your girlfriend is okay with it! I'm really digging this new open relationship you've got going on, so why not take advantage of it while you can?"

Cole's seconds away from shoving the guy's face into our table, so I try to fix the situation.

"I'm not his girlfriend anymore. Haven't you heard? We broke up and it was amicable. So now we're two friends who just want to have breakfast together in peace before people like you begin posting about it on Twitter. He'll see you at practice, and he'll be ready to accept any services the Kappa Deltas want to offer; now go."

He has the decency to look a little bit embarrassed, and it's almost comical how fast he leaves. Cole's silent, his head bent, and I'm just about to ask him to lighten the heck up when my phone buzzes on the table.

Cole: You're sexy when you're bossy, Shortcake. I'm doing some dirty things to you in my mind right now.

I have a legitimate coughing fit and tap at my chest to make it go away. Cole walks around the table and leans over me. His hot breath fans my ear. "You all right there?"

"You think?" I hiss at him and grab the bottle of water in my backpack.

His hand goes to the small of my back as he pretends to help me get over the cough attack. But his slow, circular rubbing motions all over my lower back are deliberate and sensual; they drive me crazy. As much as I want to drag him to the nearest empty room with a lock, I also want to pour scalding hot coffee all over this smug face. And given that the coffee is more accessible than a room to hook up in, he better stop pushing my buttons.

"I'm just trying to do what you asked."

"You don't have to make it so damn difficult."

"How else are we going to convince people that we're no longer together? I'm sure your plan isn't going to do much. Are you aware your hand is currently halfway up my shirt?" I wrench away from him feeling riled up and turned on in equal parts. Grabbing my backpack from the floor, I quickly slurp the rest of my cappuccino, burning my tongue in the process, and give Cole a perfectly platonic kiss on the cheek.

"I'll be in classes all day, but do let me know if the Kappas offer to do your laundry; I'll throw mine in the mix as well."

His eyes are slits, his face devoid of amusement as I walk away. I have a feeling I'm going to get in a lot of trouble for all my smartassery today.

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"So the latest rumor is that you and Cole have now entered the territory of being friends with benefits." The bed bounces as Cami barges into the room and plops down on it. I close my textbooks knowing there's no use trying to study when my friend plans on killing even more of my brain cells with the mindless gossip she's been enjoying listening to the entire day.

"Why would we leave a perfectly good relationship only to become friends with benefits? That's like a reversal of the natural order and pretty damned twisted, in my opinion."

"Well, you did put up quite the show in the cafe this morning. People are dying over the sexual tension between you two, and it's even hotter because they think you're exes."

"I seriously don't understand humans; why do they have to find happiness in someone else's misery? No one wanted me to be with Cole, but now that we're not together, they expect us to rip each other's clothes off in public? That's horrible!"

She looks at me sadly. "I think it'll take me a lot longer than freshman year to become the kind of psychologist that could answer your question. But if it helps, don't you think anyone who lives off of someone else's pain is the most despicable kind of human?"

"Yeah," I tell her as I think about the reporter who brought up Cole's mom. Since then I'd looked up several articles featuring my boyfriend and had found the particular one. The story had been so far-fetched that I'd wanted to reach into the screen, scrunch up the words, and align them right. Funny how some adjectives, if placed right, could make a world of difference. Then I'd thought about Cassandra and how heartbroken she'd feel once she read that the sheriff then replaced Cole's deceased mother with a divorcee, hungry to move up in the world of corporate medicine, and how the new doctor desperately wanted the perfect family to back up her ambitions. They'd gone on and on about how Cole had always been an outsider, how he'd been sent packing to military school, and how the Stones didn't want him to taint the family name.

The article had sickened me, and I understood finally why Cole felt the desperate need to protect me.

"On a much brighter note, I did what you suggested. My friends, well, former friends turned polite acquaintances, were far too happy to meet with now that I'm part of Cole Stone's posse."

"He has a posse?"

"Of course he does, and I'm a part of it! Can you believe it? Who knew there'd be so many perks to it," she squeals. "Anyway, so they were ready to help him out and owe him big time. I told them that he didn't want to get stuck with some clingy Kappa sister because he wants to focus on football right now and he's not into hooking up. I also might have implied that he just got his heart broken into smithereens by you and that he's massively hung up on the idea of getting back together once things with the NFL calm down. If those girls talk like how I remember they do, no one's going to go near your man."

"Are you sure it's going to work?"

"Like hell it is! Ain't nobody gonna mess with my Team Colessa."

"You seriously need to stop talking to Beth, I beg you."

She waves off the idea like it's the most absurd thing she's ever heard and points to my books. "How's the redo of Bitch McBitchy's paper going?"

I cringe at the name she calls my professor because, in all honesty, the "D" I got on one of the most important papers I'd had to write this semester was the result of my own stupidity rather than her grading. Now that I'm rewriting it and going over all my mistakes, I realize that my paper reads like the person who wrote it feels the need to just throw all the knowledge she has on the paper without even realizing the meaning behind any of it. It's cold, meticulous, and without any emotion in it, which would be great were I a science major, but alas, that's not the case. The good thing is that now I have enough

inspiration to go about my literature paper mostly because I've got a cocktail of emotions swirling inside me.

"I can fix it if," I give her a pointed look, "my friend stops interrupting me with minute-by-minute updates about what people think is going on in my life."

"Hey! I haven't even gotten to the best part yet." She grins devilishly. "So ever since I told The Worst Excuse for Humans on the Planet about you stomping all over Cole's heart, they've let their imaginations run wild, something I may or may not have wholly encouraged. So, my point is, if someone asks you tomorrow if you've hooked up with one of the two sexy vampire brothers on that show I can never get into, you'll know who to thank."

I scrunch my face in confusion. "How does that even—"

She slaps a hand over my mouth. "The polite thing to do would be to thank me, Teresa."

"That's not even my name," I mumble, but she's already flitting out the door telling me she'll see me at the butt crack of dawn since we're working out together.

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I'm in the cafeteria the next morning eating my yogurt and granola when several people settle down around me. Since Sarah's in class and it's Cami's day to sleep in, I can't possibly figure out who'd be brave enough to barge in on my quality time with food. I wipe my chin with the bottom of my sleeves and hesitantly take my eyes away from the bowl of goodness in front of me.

And I'm surrounded by my...teammates, as weird as it feels to say that. Wow, I've got teammates and they're totally having breakfast with me! If only they could tell how hard I'm geeking out on the inside right now, they'd get right back up.

I smile brightly up at them, hoping that I haven't ventured into serial killer territory. "Hey guys!"

They respond, but not quite as enthusiastically, given it's still early enough in the day to be cursing your very existence.

After they down their first cups of coffee, the six girls who've sat down around me, including Lindsey, start to look at me quite speculatively.

"So we've heard things." There's no malice in her voice, her expression blank. "You certainly do attract your fair share of attention, don't you, O'Connell?"

I blush, feeling the familiar tinge of embarrassment creep up my neck. "You're talking about what happened at the cafe?"

"Yup," she pops the p and stares at me for a while, "I want to know if it's going to be a constant thing, people talking about you and the guy who may or may not be your boyfriend."

"Would that be a problem?"

"Not a significant one, but I don't want that kind of drama attached to my team, and I don't want one of my dancers to be constantly distracted by the drama in her life. No one's bigger than the team, and every member's got to give it one hundred and ten percent. Got it?"

She's not being mean or spiteful, just protective of something she's obviously worked really hard at.

"I understand, no more drama."

She smiles then. "Well, I'm not exactly expecting that, given you're sort of attached with Cole Stone, but let's just try and limit it to once a month?"

I give her a salute. "Aye, Aye, Captain, I'll be like clockwork."

She pauses mid spooning some oatmeal in her mouth. "We're going to have to work on your social skills a little."

And I shrink into my seat.

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That day I have the rare free evening so I walk to the bookstore where I used to work in the summer before college started. I help out there occasionally; when my schedule affords me regular working hours,

only then do I let them pay me, but since these days I can only come in once a week, I work as a volunteer. Since it's a children's bookshop, I've had a fun day of working with kids and helping them find their next best book ever. It's a great activity, and when they come back wanting to get the rest of the books in the series I introduced them to, it just makes my heart burst with joy. Earlier events of the week have been pushed to the back of my mind, and for the five hours that I work behind the counter, all I concentrate on is trying to make someone else's life just a little bit better and not thinking about the constant restlessness in my own.

Once I'm done working and say goodbye to my coworker for the day, Dianne, I prepare to walk back home. It's gotten much chillier outside than when I first walked here late afternoon. I pull my coat tighter around my body and nearly stuff my face in my scarf, trying to increase my pace as I walk to the dorms. Cole's apartment would be closer and I could easily crash there for the night but...

This is ridiculous!

I huff and continue walking, Lindsey's words playing back in my mind. What's worse is the email I got while at work, a request from the editor of the student newspaper. Well, it wasn't a request, more so a bribe to get me that permanent position on the paper. He wants me to write a feature on Cole, the rising superstar, but that feature wouldn't be the good old interview with some heart-stopping photos of him in uniform being thrown in, oh no. I was told that the feature would be highly in depth and personal, that I'd have to give a play-by-play of the tragic life he lived before coming to Providence.

Honest editorial, my butt!

I didn't refuse, though, as much as I'm in favor of a strongly worded email. Mrs. Weasley's Howlers cower before Tessa's verbal bitch slaps, but I restrained myself and counted to ten, like my sometimes-therapist, Cami, recommends I do. If they want an article all about Cole Stone, they'll get one, and it'll be the best damn article that'll ever be written about him. I begin planning it in my head, already excited about how good it could be. I'm so lost in my thoughts that I don't recognize the familiar sound of footsteps running behind me.

"Damn it, Tessie, I've been calling your name for the last five minutes." Cole comes around me and pulls me to his chest, hugging me close.

"Oh hey." I'm taken aback, too surprised by his sudden appearance to say anything else.

He cups my face in his hands. "Are you okay? Why didn't you answer me?"

"Sorry, I was just lost in my own head, I guess." I smile sheepishly.

"You're trying to kill me, aren't you? Is that it? Is this your passive-aggressive way of sending me to an early grave? First the Kappas, and now letting me think that you're purposely ignoring me?"

Playfully I shove my fist into his shoulder. "I'm not passive-aggressive, you jerk!"

He grabs the fist and brings my hand to his lips, kissing all the grooves of my knuckles one by one and making me swoon.

"That's debatable, but right now can we get out of the cold, and will you for crying out loud call me the next time you need a ride?"

Without even asking, he removes my backpack from where it's slung over my shoulder and hoists it on his own. Then he grabs my hand and begins dragging me to his car.

"I'm perfectly capable of walking, you know."

"We've had this conversation before. When it's dark and when it's cold, I don't care if you're the Road Runner, call me, okay?"

I nod, stifling a smile.

I groan in satisfaction once I'm in the heated interior of his car and he grabs my hand over the console.

"Do I have to drop you off at the dorm?" he asks through gritted teeth, clearly unhappy at the prospect.

"You know you do. Exes who're friends don't really have sleepovers anymore."

"Don't say stuff like that when we're together." His hand shakes slightly in mine. "The more I hear those words coming from you, the more real they sound, and I can't deal with that."

"Okay," I say softly, "just so you know, I hate having to say them."

He looks at me with both helplessness and determination in his eyes. "We're going to come out of this on top, Shortcake, just stay with me."

"You know I will."

He attempts to give me a reassuring smile, but, like I said, I know him like he's a part of me, and because he's just that, I know that it's his insecurities and fears this time around that are really going to test us to the breaking point.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Alcohol Manages to Turn Me into Charlie Sheen on Fleek

In the weeks that follow, my time is filled with cramming for finals and writing papers. I redid my paper for Professor Flynn's British Lit class and got an A. It is around that time that I realize that grades weren't going to come as easily to me as they did in high school. That particular realization has resulted in me retreating into my awkward turtle shell and spending all my time in the library. Occasionally I venture out for sustenance and sleep, but mostly because the staff tends to look at me like I need to pay a visit to the campus counselor. So I drag my sorry butt out of there and use the dorms only for sleeping and showering, wasting only enough time in the cafeteria so that it doesn't look too bad when I venture back into the library.

I think my friends are worried about me; Cami has definitely tried bringing up the topic several times, but she knows better than to try to give me the "it's not healthy" lecture. We're all in the same boat, all struggling to just be done with the first semester of freshman year and just have weeks to do nothing but catch up on sleep. It's closer now, the possibility of having more to look forward to than just countless words on countless pages, since I'm done with all but one of my finals. It'll also be incredible to spend some time with my best friends, knowing that we'll have plenty of time to spend together, just like we used to. Beth doesn't start school till late January, and Megan and I will be free around the same time, so we're already planning pre- and post-Christmas activities, which mostly involve a lot of sleepovers, even more food, and enough chocolate to support an entire village.

The only thing I haven't planned to death is how things are going to be with Cole. Just the thought of him makes my heart ache because it's been more than a few days since I've seen him. Either he's busy with practice or his games, or I'm too swamped with coursework to see him when he's free. I know it's frustrating, even more so for him, because last night on the phone it seemed like he was itching for a fight. For someone who's so headstrong and used to getting what he wants by any means necessary, it can't be great having to remind himself of the thousand reasons why he can't do what he wants.

Sighing, I power my laptop down and rub my tired eyes. In the room it's dark, with Sarah having gone to bed an hour before. She'd been working on her own essay and it'd been so quiet in here that Cami had walked in, bursting to tell us about whatever adventure the night had brought with her and then walked right out. We weren't exactly hospitable, and the silence might've seemed eerie to an outsider, so she slowly retreated and left us to our laptops. Sarah gave up long before I did, having been too exhausted to work anymore, but I'd powered on and finished my essay. Now I feel the weariness in my bones, but there's also elation because once I hand this in to my professor, I'm done for the semester. Done!

Carefully placing my laptop on my desk, I make a trip to the bathroom down the hallway. It is as quiet as one would expect it to be at four a.m. on a Wednesday, and so I quickly get done with business and hurry back to my room, ready to snuggle into my covers and rest for a bit. I have one afternoon class

tomorrow, where I'll be marked for a presentation, and then I'm done till after winter break. The thought makes me giddy, almost as much as knowing that when Cole and I go home, we'll finally be away from the public scrutiny that has him holding back. The thought brings a smile to my face, and for the first time in weeks, I find it easy to go to bed.

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Cole waits for me, grinning widely as I rush outside of class. I can't believe it's over! That I officially survived the first semester. Maybe I'm overreacting, because it's not like I've come out of a war zone or anything, but finals in an Ivy League institution aren't that far behind. Resisting the urge to throw myself at him, I resort to jumping on the spot like a loon.

"I take it your presentation went well?"

I notice him clenching and then unclenching his fists like he, just like me, is physically restraining himself from touching me.

"It was horrible! I got stage fright and I couldn't get past the first two sentences, and I'm sure it looked like a train wreck, but I'm so happy right now, I don't even care." I grin and, what the heck, give him a quick, discreet hug. He holds me to him for more than what's considered the appropriate time, and I fall back, feeling a little flustered. It's already cold out and I shiver in my thick wool coat, but something about not being able to be with him in public makes the cold seep right into my bones.

Keeping my eyes planted firmly on the ground so that he can't see the hurt in them, I ask, "So is everything still on like we planned it?"

I can practically hear him gritting his teeth because he knows I'm feeling a little vulnerable right now.

"Yeah, I'll get done with my last final in a couple of hours and then we'll drive home."

"Because you can't leave your ex-girlfriend stranded on campus?"

He takes a couple of steps forward so that his shoes align with mine. "Because we're practically neighbors and it would be stupid for us to go home separately. But if anyone asks, I'll tell them it's none of their fucking business."

"Easy there, buddy, we don't want the other side to see your weakness."

And because this seems like one of those things that would get him most riled up, referring to myself as his weakness, I should have seen it coming. Cole comes to stand behind me and gently but purposefully pushes at the small of my back, propelling me to move. He walks alongside me as I quietly follow him. I have no idea where he's taking me, but because his body's so tense and his expression carefully blank, I have second thoughts about asking him. I know it makes him mad when I'm tough on myself or when I let my insecurity overwhelm me, but I've gotten so much better at conquering it lately. But then things like this happen, when I feel that the only reason Cole has to push me away in public is because I'm not good enough, and everything I've worked so hard at threatens to topple over.

I still can't tell where he's walking toward as we move past the campus eateries and the library. The dorms are still a bit far off, and just as I decide that he's taking me to my room to lecture me, he turns so that we're walking toward the football stadium right on the other side of campus. I give him a confused look, which he promptly ignores, and we continue to walk in silence. Once at the stadium, of course the security guard lets us go in without any identification, because who the heck would question the newest football god? But instead of leading me into the stadium that I strategically tend to avoid at all times, Cole leads me to their state-of-the-art gym. His frosty attitude is making me squirm, and I want nothing more than to shake him up and tell him to quit with the attitude.

But I let him lead me past the workout machines and the weights, right into the men's locker room.

"What are you doing?"

The words are barely out of my mouth when he slams the door shut behind him and presses me up against it. He's kissing me wildly and unrestrained like he'd been holding back by a thread. I don't

question him, I don't try to ask him what spurred this on because I know, I know that sometimes his need to feel the safety of our relationship is greater than mine.

Anyone could walk in on us, but he probably knows they won't. It's the middle of the day, but most of the players will be taking advantage of their short break from training, packing to go home or studying for finals.

"I can't wait to be home with you." He comes up for air and traces my cheek with the back of his hand. "Can't wait to be around you all the time and not have to think even for a second before doing this."

He swoops in and kisses me again.

I reciprocate, entwining my arms around his neck and pulling him close.

"I didn't mean what I said back there. I wasn't trying to get you to feel sorry for me. Never think that I don't understand how hard it is for you too."

The light in his eyes dims a little and he sighs, resting his face in the crook of my neck. His arms go around my waist and I feel his warm breath on my collarbone as he whispers against my skin.

"Sometimes I think about what people would say." He swallows heavily. Whatever he's about to tell me must be really difficult for him, so in a feeble attempt to comfort him, I wind my arms around his back and rest my chin on his shoulder, my hands gently stroking his back. There isn't even an inch of space remaining between us now.

"What if I no longer wanted to play the game?"

I stop breathing.

"For no other reason than the fact that it no longer gives me that rush of adrenaline I always craved. Do you think they'll understand or call me weak? If I throw it all away, all the plans people have for me, what then? What about you, Tessie? If I just gave it all up, would you think less of me?"

My heart breaks for him. A shudder passes through his body and instinctively, I pull him even closer, hold him tighter, and tell him the words that he needs to hear more often from the people that care about him.

"You're one of the greatest people I've ever met. Maybe I don't say this to you enough, but you're the kind of person who makes people light up with joy when you're around them. You make people feel good about themselves, you radiate with happiness and kindness. You've got such a beautiful spirit, Cole. You took a broken girl and pieced her back together. You've shown me so much love that sometimes it makes it difficult for me to breathe because I love you just as much. If something as small as choosing not to play football will make people think less of you, then they don't deserve to be in your life. And guess what? I'm not planning on going anywhere."

He starts to say something and I hold my breath, because I can't help but feel that he's hiding something from me. Football has been a part of him for as long as I can imagine, and for him to think about quitting, I know the reason must go deeper than what he's telling me, but I don't probe him. It might be something I regret later, but right now he just needs me to be there for him.

Something changes between us then, perhaps the acknowledgment of the fact that we're a permanent thing in each other's lives, and that no matter what happens, the one constant we can rely on is each other. In a flash we're a tangle of greedy hands and lips, because that affirmation leaves us greedy for each other; no amount of closeness is good enough.

We need to be closer.

And the rest fades away.

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Cami, Sarah, and I exchange gifts before we head off to our homes. Yes, we'd repeatedly told one another to not bother with presents, but it's apparent that no one listened, and now I'm the proud owner of a very cute sweater, and a mug that says "Best Boyfriend Ever" with an image of what I'm pretty sure are Cole's abs, and a calendar that has a different photograph of Cole for each month. I'm not sure whether to be touched or creeped out by her gift, but in the end, I decided that I love them. They're clearly not meant to be used in public, but I still cherish her thoughtfulness.

I give Sarah a boxed set of Felicity since we started watching it together and she really likes it so far. Cami is much harder to shop for, but I end up getting her two tickets to a music festival, which I know for a fact that Parker, Cole's teammate that she's crushing really hard on, also desperately wants to go to. She squeals when she sees the tickets, and then I casually suggest how she uses the other ticket. Yup, my job here is done.

We say goodbye and it's just a little bit teary, which is ridiculous, since we're seeing each other in little less than a month. But it just goes to show how far I've come since being the girl that no one knew existed in the first couple of months here. Now I have friends, people I care about and people who I know have my back. I laugh a little as I think about how hard Bentley had blushed when I'd given him his present, something I'd splurged on. He'd badly needed some new running shoes but had been putting off buying them, so I got him those. I'd given him a card too, telling him the things I couldn't say, because he deserved to know just how much I appreciated everything he did for me. He'd resisted the gift, but then awkwardly rummaged through his bag and thrust a neatly wrapped present toward me, saying that I'd have to accept his gift if I wanted him to keep mine.

So I now own a fitness journal to chronicle all the ways I suffer in the gym.

My heart feels full with joy as I trek back across campus to where Cole's waiting with his car. My suitcase is already in the trunk, so we're ready to drive off and...

Behold the chairman of the grabby hands committee.

I grit my teeth as I walk in on a poor, defenseless Cole backed into a corner by yet another soul-sucking leech with zero percent body fat. She doesn't seem to understand that he's obviously uncomfortable with her presence, and she's doing everything but attempting to climb up his body. Sighing, I quicken my pace until I reach them and prepare myself to do some damage.

"I can't believe this! You're already looking for another hookup?"

Cole's eyes widen as he mistakes my anger as being directed toward him. But we don't have time to discuss the semantics. Little Miss Bleach Blonde also directs her attention toward me and glares.

"Aren't you his ex? Are you stalking him, weirdo?"

I give her a sympathetic smile, like I'm on her side. "I'm assuming that you only feel the need to mark your territory like a dog because you want to sleep with him?"

She stutters, turns a little red, but holds her ground. "That might be my intention—why?"

"Well, you might want to do a little research before you get to that point." I pretend to stare at Cole with horror. "Why do you think we broke up? But if you're okay with his test results, then who am I to question your judgment?"

I think he's finally caught on.

Cole struggles not to laugh as the girl's jaw nearly comes unhinged. She backs away slowly and then looks mournfully at Cole like he's the cupcake she knows she can't have after dinner. The poor thing looks so crestfallen that I have half a heart to tell her I'm kidding, but then she's walking so fast that I can't really get a word in.

"I...and you...well, I'll see you later!" she screeches and runs away, and as soon as she's out of earshot, Cole doubles over laughing.

I pretend to dust my hands. "Works like a charm every single time."

My boyfriend wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. "With the way you're going at it, you're going to convince the entire country that I have some horrible, unspeakable disease."

"I might as well have been talking about mono. You're so quick to assume," I say lightly but end up laughing as well. The look on that girl's face is going to make my entire journey.

Speaking of the car journey, it's tense even after the moment of lightness we had earlier in the parking lot. The weight of Cole's confession hangs over us, and I can see him thinking, making things bigger than they need to be. He's killing himself inside his own head and I want to shake him up good, tell him that no one in their right mind would think any less of him if he chooses not to play anymore. But I also know that he needs some time to himself, to come to terms with his decision, whatever it may be.



We reach home more than an hour later than it usually takes us because of the holiday traffic. As soon as we step into my house, I feel a sense of peace. The last month has been such an emotional and mental roller coaster ride that I need some stability and a moment to catch a breath. I think Cole feels the same way since he flops down onto my bed and sighs with relief.

"Can I just stay here forever?"

"In my bedroom?"

"Home, wherever you are."

I sit down next to him and run my fingers through his hair and then smooth the creases forming on his forehead.

"You have to leave shortly after Christmas, don't you?"

His team made it to the National Championships. Yes, we choose not to discuss football a whole lot, but that doesn't mean I'm not invested in his game, because it's something he works so hard for. I'm incredibly proud of him and how much he pushes himself to win. So the fact that he's playing for something that could be the highlight of his college football career makes me ecstatic.

"It's going to be amazing, you know. Once you get back on the field with the guys, you'll realize just how much you love what you do. Maybe you don't love the game enough to make a career out of it, and I guess that's where you'll have to really think about it. Do you want to go pro? You're so intelligent, Cole; not every football player puts in the work and commitment toward an engineering degree. It comes so naturally to you, you never have to struggle at school. What I'm saying is, you could do whatever you want and you'd be brilliant at it."

An expression I can't quite understand falls on his face. "What if I stop being good at it? What if it's no longer natural to me?"

Again the feeling that he's not telling me something important claws at me, but as soon as he creates an opening for me to ask the important questions, he closes his eyes, looking weary and bone-tired. I think this relaxes him, and as my fingers trace the dark circles beneath his eyes from the countless nights he's stayed up having these wild thoughts, I want nothing more than for him to have some quiet and a little less noise in his head. Sure enough, as I continue to run my fingers through his hair and give him a head massage, he falls asleep, right there in the middle of my bed, with his long legs dangling off it. Smiling to myself, I press a quick kiss to his forehead and leave him. The boy needs some rest.

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My dad isn't home right now but the housekeeper seems to have made sure that everything's ready for the holidays and for my arrival. There's a huge tree in our living room that's obviously professionally decorated. We don't have special or meaningful ornaments or heirlooms; as our family disintegrated, so did the traditions, but it's nice to see that Dad's making a conscious effort to get us back on track even if it is through hired help.

I heat up a roast chicken dinner and begin to eat it on the kitchen counter when the man himself walks in. For a man well into his fifties, my father is in pretty good shape, and the fact that he still manages to date women half his age reaffirms that. He's tall and in good shape; given his position as the mayor, he also likes to dress well and has a bit of a Pierce Brosnan vibe going on. We've had our ups and downs, but in the end, he's come out as the parent that actually cares.

His face lights up as he sees me, and I'm pretty sure he forgot that I was coming home today. Oh well, I can't blame him as his job takes up more than enough of his time.

"Honey," he rounds the counter and kisses the top of my head, "when did you get here?"

I stop inhaling my food for a second and push my plate and utensils away, hugging him around the waist.

"Just an hour or so ago; I figured you'd be coming home soon, so I wanted to surprise you."

"You don't think I forgot, did you? I've had the date marked on my calendar for days, but something came up at the office and...I don't want to bore you with the details. Eat! I'll be right back."

He looks so animated and happy that I don't feel guilty for thinking that he's much better off without my mom. I finish my food and then text my brother, confirming when his flight's going to land. These days he and Beth are looking for an apartment near Berkeley, where they'll both be going to school in the coming semester. I'm so proud of Travis for rebuilding his life and of Beth for moving on from such a big tragedy and then staying by my brother's side for so long. Yes, it's sad to think about how far away they're moving, but it's the right step in the right direction for them.

"Cole's car is outside, is he here?"

Dad's changed from his suit into a pair of well-worn jeans and a sweater and taken a seat at the counter opposite me.

"He fell asleep and I couldn't find it in me to wake him up. He's been so tired lately."

"College and football will do that to you. And how about you? Anything new happen since we talked on the phone last week? Are we still doing okay in classes? Are you partying? Have you figured out the meaning of life through a questionable substance legal only in twenty-three states plus the District of Columbia?"

I laugh at that one because yeah, if alcohol manages to turn me into Charlie Sheen on fleek, I can only imagine what drugs would do, medicinal or not.

"No, Father, I'm still boring old me, and this conversation can't distract me from asking you what happened to the giant jar of Nutella I left behind when I last visited?"

He coughs, then turns red, which is totally unexpected. I suspected he threw it out, but what he actually says simply blows my mind.

"Well, I..." he hesitates even more, "I'm dating someone and she's a big fan of pancakes with that chocolate spread of yours all over them. She makes them for us on Sundays."

I blink a couple of times.

Then blink again.

Sunday breakfasts? And a woman who makes him Nutella pancakes? And in order to make those pancakes, she'd have to be in our house. Dad's girlfriends never make it to the house, so it's a massive deal that she's staying over.

"Wow...that's something. Have I met her?"

He exhales, relieved that I'm not breaking dishes. "You haven't, actually. She's on the board of an environmental action committee, and the first time I saw her was when she barged into my office telling me I'm destroying the planet."

"That's nice—she likes to tell it as it is."

My dad grins, like a stupid, infatuated, teenager grin, and you can see the hearts appearing in his eyes. Oh boy.

"Her name's Danielle. She's been working with my office to try to make our town more eco-friendly. You'll like her," he says, and there's so much hope in his eyes that even if she turns out to be the stepmother from Disney movies past, I will force myself to like her.

"I'd love to meet her; why don't you invite her over for dinner when Travis gets back?"

"Yeah? You think that'd be a good idea?"

"I think it'd be great."

"Thanks, kiddo, you just lifted so much weight off my chest. I'll ask her soon."

And that's that.

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Cole sleeps in for a good couple of hours. By the time he gets up, it's dark outside and I've already paid a visit to Cassandra and Sheriff Stone so that they aren't out of their minds with worry. Cole looks adorable with his sleep-rumpled hair and the lost expression on his face when he can't place himself for a second.

His body goes lax when he sees me on the other side of the bed, listening to an audiobook.

"Hey, Tessie."

"Hey, sleepyhead, feeling rested?"

"I feel like I got run over by a train." He huffs and falls back into bed with a thud. "That was some nap."

"I'm glad you got some sleep. You've been running around like a machine lately."

"I couldn't sleep back there, even when I tried. You'd think staring up at the ceiling all night would get exhausting."

My heart aches for him, but I know the feeling. I've missed being near him, being held by him as we fall asleep. The only time I've managed to get some rest is when I've passed out from utter exhaustion after hours of studying.

I turn off the light on my bedside table and snuggle up next to him.

"Got a few more hours of sleep in you?"

He still looks tired, and all of a sudden, like it's infectious, I feel utterly worn out. My head hits the pillow and I crash, but not before knowing that Cole's here and he's still holding me as I pass out.

