

SECOND QUARTER COMEBACK



KENDALL HALE

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COMEBACK***

KENDALL HALE

Also by Kendall Hale

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*To the readers who fall too fast for fictional men
and pretend it's research.
Don't worry, I do it too. This book is basically fieldwork.*

“I did not know I was lonely until I saw your face.”

— *Tyler Knott Gregson*

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Chapter One



Camille

Cami's Crash Course in Bad Decisions

"I don't know. It's not really my scene, Zindy." I shrug, popping the last bite of a flaky, buttery pastry into my mouth. Crumbs scatter onto the pages of *Foundations of Biochemistry: Proteins and Enzyme Dynamics*, my not-so-loyal companion for the past twelve hours. I swipe them away absently, though the textbook and I both know I'm woefully unprepared for Monday's test.

"Please, Cami-Camillion," my roommate wails, throwing herself onto my bed like a damsel from a Regency romance, all melodrama and sequins. She clutches a sparkly halter top to her chest, the fabric catching the light like it's auditioning for Broadway. For the record, the concept of plain doesn't exist in Zindy's closet. I haven't seen anything that's just one solid color—unless we count her jeans. Even those have been bejeweled. "You're breaking my heart. Do you really want me to show up alone at a frat party? Do you know how humiliating that'll be?"

I glance up, eyebrow arching. "You weren't humiliated last weekend when you and Jess infiltrated that Law Society meeting pretending to be pre-law students."

"That was totally different." She waves the halter top in the air as though it's a banner of her upcoming triumph—or surrender, hard to tell with Zindy. "That was networking. And it worked. I got five numbers and an invite to moot court."

"You're not even on track to become a law student."

"Yet. I'm undecided and I like to keep my options open." She rolls onto her side, fixing me with a smug little smirk as if she's just casually declared her inevitable ascension to the Supreme Court. "Anyway, this is *the* Alpha Sigma Delta party, Camille. Do you know how hard it is to get on their guest list? It's basically an underground society. You should be honored."

She should seriously consider acting. The theatrics alone could land her an Oscar. Zindy is dramatic about everything.

I snort, flipping another page in my textbook. "Honored to be squished into a basement with two hundred sweaty

undergrads and zero ventilation? Sounds dreamy.”

“Imagine this . . . Cami and Zindy, queens for the night,” she declares, leaping up and tossing the sequined halter top onto my desk—directly over my carefully highlighted notes. I shoot her my best are-you-kidding-me look, but she just grins, completely unfazed. “Come on, you never do anything fun. This is college. You’re supposed to make bad decisions so you’ll have something scandalous to tell people when you’re rich and famous.”

“Who says I want to make bad decisions?” I counter, tapping my pen against the textbook. “Maybe I’d rather make good ones and, you know, get into med school. The whole reason I’m here?”

Zindy groans like I’ve personally offended her, then slides dramatically to the floor, draping an arm over her face like a fainting starlet. “I’m trying to save you from yourself, Cami. One day, you’ll look back on college and regret spending it all with—” she squints at the book cover, —“‘Enzyme Dynamics.’ You’ll be old and boring, wondering why you didn’t go out more.”

“You say ‘old and boring’ like it’s a bad thing,” I tease, biting back a smile. “I happen to enjoy being boring and we’ll all be old at some point. It’s a fact of life.”

“Camille.” Zindy scrambles up, grabbing my hands with an intensity that should honestly concern me. “Don’t let this be your villain origin story. What’s next? Cats? Crochet? A crippling houseplant obsession?”

“What’s wrong with houseplants?” I ask, genuinely confused.

Her gasp is so loud, I’m pretty sure the RA downstairs heard it. “Oh my God. It’s happening. I’m losing you to the dark side.”

“You’re so dramatic.” I laugh, shaking my head. “Why don’t you just go to your party? Have fun. Tell me all about it tomorrow morning. I’ll even invite you for breakfast.”

“Nice try, but no.” She crosses her arms, her expression set in a way that tells me resistance is futile. “You’re coming with me, Camille. Even if I have to drag you there in your pajamas.”

I glance at my old pink sweats and mismatched high school sweatshirt. “I don’t own pajamas. I sleep in sweats.”

“Even worse,” she says, recoiling like I’ve just confessed to a heinous crime. “You’re hopeless.”

“I’m practical,” I correct, popping the last bite of my pastry into my mouth. “And busy. My test’s on Monday, and I need to focus.”

For a moment, Zindy is uncharacteristically quiet—a rare occurrence that immediately puts me on edge. She’s like Clayton, my dog. If he’s quiet, he’s probably destroying Mom’s shoes or he’s in Dad’s office making a mess. Then, with the precision of a skilled lawyer, she goes for the jugular.

“Remember Devon?”

My chewing slows, and I glance sideways at her. Is she really going there? “What about him?”

“What if he hadn’t tried new things? Put himself out there? Where would he be right now? Where would you be right now?” Her voice is soft, almost too gentle, and I know she’s trying to hit a nerve. “Sometimes you just have to take a leap, Cami. You’re not going to find your Charles sitting in this dorm.”

My Charles? I don’t need a Charles. I need to pass this test. But I’d be lying if I said her words didn’t sting, just a little. Not because I miss Devon—he’s happier now than he ever was with me. It’s more that nagging question of whether I’m missing out, too.

It’s great that Devon found himself and fell for his roommate. The question is, what about me? And do I even need someone right now?

Before I can spiral further, Zindy snaps me out of it, tossing the halter top into my lap. “Try it on,” she says, her tone leaving no room for argument.

I stare at the top, then at her. “You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

“Not a chance.” Her grin is triumphant. “Come on, Camille. Live a little. When was the last time you had sex?”

Before I moved to this dorm. Not that I’m keeping count or anything, but yeah, it’s been a while. Long enough that I’ve almost forgotten the specifics—the weight of Dev’s body against mine, hands exploring skin, the kind of kiss that makes you forget you need air. Do I miss it? Not really.

At least, I don’t think I do. I mean, the buildup was always better than the actual experience, and half the time, Devon either didn’t know what he was doing or cared more about his own performance than mine. So no, I’m not exactly pining for a repeat. Still, maybe that’s the problem. Maybe I need to mix things up a little, shake off this semi-monastic routine.

With a sigh that I hope conveys extreme reluctance, I set my book aside and hold up the sparkly scrap of fabric. It’s tiny. It’s also . . . kind of cute. The way the glitter catches the light, I have to admit it would look good on me. I mean, I could rock it tonight. Why not try something new? What’s the worst that could happen? Scratch that. Don’t answer that.

Mom is always asking if I’m having fun in college. Her idea of fun is wildly different from mine, of course. She swears my roommate will become my BFFL, just like Aunt Rachel is to her. Zindy and I are such opposites I doubt we’ll talk to each other after we move out of this dorm. And just like that, Mom swears that I’ll meet the love of my life—but she said the same about Devon, so, you know . . .

Maybe going out just this once wouldn't hurt.

"One hour," I say, pointing a finger at Zindy. "That's all you're getting."

She squeals, clapping her hands like a kid on Christmas morning. "You won't regret this, Cami. I swear. Go shower. I'll find the perfect outfit, and we'll fix that fiery red hair. Tonight's the night we find you a man."

A man? I scoff, rolling my eyes, already dreading whatever disaster this will lead to. "God help me," I mutter as I head to grab my toiletries.

With Zindy, it's never just a night out. It's a mission. And knowing her, this will end one of two ways: I'll be holding her sequined top as evidence in a trial, or we'll be googling how to dispose of a body. Honestly? I'm not sure which option terrifies me more.

Chapter Two



Killion

The Huddle Encounter

“I’m not going to miss this,” Lucian says, tossing a crumpled hoodie onto his bed. “Do you think our parents will let me declare for the draft sophomore year?”

No. Absolutely not. I barely got away with declaring during my junior year—and that came with the condition I finish my degree online within the next four years. I’m still amazed our parents didn’t insist that I graduate before stepping anywhere near a professional field. Lucky me, I guess.

But Lucian? He’s dreaming. Our parents would rather eat glass than let him bolt after barely a year in college. Although, to be fair, they let Kaden, my twin, head to Canada at sixteen to start training. Meanwhile, I’ve been treated like the backup quarterback of our family—good enough to play, but only after the star gets his shot.

Okay, fine, I know why he got to leave. I’m the party guy. The one who’s raised more havoc than touchdowns. Maybe I wasn’t exactly a poster child for good decision-making, but I could’ve entered the draft sophomore year too.

Instead of launching into my usual rant, I lean back against the doorframe, crossing my arms over my chest. The edge of the wood digs into my shoulder, but I’m too tired to care. My shoulders ache from drills, and my brain feels fried after another marathon training session with Dad. All I wanted tonight was to sit on the couch, watch something brainless, and not think about the next playbook.

“So why do we have to go to this party?” My voice comes out flat, edged with frustration. I shift my weight, rolling the stiffness out of my neck, but it doesn’t help. “I just wanted one night to chill, Luc, not babysit you at some secret society kegger.”

I flick him a glance, hoping he’ll take the hint, but with Luc, it’s always a gamble. He just rolls his eyes, jamming a pack of gum into his pocket. “It’s not babysitting. It’s me letting you bask in my collegiate glory while you recover from Dad’s version

of military boot camp.”

“Bask?” I repeat, raising an eyebrow.

He spreads his arms wide, a grin plastered across his face like he’s unveiling the eighth wonder of the world. “Witness the future NFL star in his natural habitat. You, on the other hand, are going to be . . . average.”

Average? I can’t be fucking average. Not when I have to at least be as good as our father. Truth to be told the comparison with Dad is starting to wear me down. Maybe I should’ve chosen a different position—like Luc, who’s a running back with stats that made college scouts drool. His high school record? Impressive. His college stats? Even better.

So many teams in the league want him.

Mine? Well, mine aren’t bad. In fact, they’re solid. But being solid isn’t enough when your dad’s a legend. People don’t just watch me—they scrutinize me. Every pass, every play, every decision is measured against the great John Crawford, and I’m not even playing professionally yet. It’s like running a race with a shadow that’s always ten steps ahead, no matter how fast I go.

I groan, letting my head thump back against the wall. “Dad’s killing me, you know. Every day it’s ‘run this, throw that, now review game tape until your eyes bleed.’ When I agreed to skip the second half of junior year and train, I thought he’d ease me into it.”

Lucian snorts, grabbing his phone off the desk. “Ease you into it? It’s Dad. The man doesn’t know the meaning of the word. He has two speeds: win or die trying.”

“Yeah, well, he’s killing me, Smalls,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck. “I’m starting to think I made a mistake.”

Lucian grins, grabbing his keys with the kind of smug confidence only a younger brother can pull off. “Lucky for you, tonight’s your chance to forget all about it. One party. No football. Just hot girls, alcohol, and no Dad breathing down your neck. Let’s go.”

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. The last thing I want is to spend the night dodging drunk college kids while pretending I’m not dead inside. But Lucian’s looking at me like he actually wants me there—not as backup, but as his brother.

“Fine,” I say, pushing off the wall. “But we’re not staying all night.”

Lucian’s grin widens as he opens the door. “We’ll stay as long as necessary.”

“Not reassuring,” I mutter, following him out. “At all.”

THE ALPHA SIGMA DELTA HOUSE ISN’T SO MUCH A HOUSE AS A MINI-MANSION PERCHED ON THE EDGE OF CAMPUS. IT SCREAMS “trust fund” and “future senator” at the same time, with glowing windows that radiate warmth and a faint bass-heavy thrum that hints at questionable decisions being made inside.

As we walk up the sidewalk, the music grows louder, and the muffled sounds of laughter and shouting spill out. Inside, the scene is exactly what I expected: loud, buzzing, and packed with people who definitely pre-gamed a little too hard before arriving. Expensive furniture has been shoved aside to make room for a makeshift dance floor that’s already sticky with spilled beer.

Lucian disappears into the crowd with the kind of swagger only a freshman who feels invincible can pull off. I follow at a slower pace, dodging clusters of very wasted people. Someone offers me a beer, but I shake my head and stick to the bottle of water I grabbed from the car. Dad’s lectures about hydration—and avoiding drinks from strangers—are permanently burned into my brain. He’s probably still worried I’ll waste myself in college, though I wonder if he’ll be just as paranoid with my siblings.

“Luc,” I call, spotting my brother near the kitchen, already surrounded by a group of guys who seem to have adopted him as their new mascot. He’s in his element, flashing that easy grin of his while someone hands him a drink. I roll my eyes, weaving through the crowd, but before I reach him, someone bumps into me, and I turn to apologize.

That’s when I see *her*.

She’s standing by the window, a book in one hand and a red cup in the other, looking like she’s somehow wandered into the wrong house. The rest of the party is all neon lights and chaotic energy, but she’s calm, focused—like the eye of the storm. Her soft cardigan and colorful top seem at odds with the ripped jeans she’s wearing, and the loose waves of her red hair frame her face like she belongs in a completely different setting.

Her eyes flick up from her book, sweeping the room with a casualness that feels oddly intentional. Then they land on me. For a second—no, longer than that—we just look. Her gaze isn’t just curious. It’s bold, a little intense, like she’s flipping through a mental Rolodex to figure out where I fit in all this.

My pulse stumbles, like my body’s caught off guard by something it can’t define. Her expression is a challenge, a silent dare to explain why I’m here and what, exactly, I want. In the charged seconds between us, it happens—a spark, sharp and electric, igniting just below the surface, ready to blaze if I let it.

“You lost?” I ask, taking a step closer, my voice loud enough so she can hear me, but not so much that everyone becomes

part of this moment between us.

She raises an eyebrow, a flicker of amusement tugging at her lips. “I could ask you the same thing. You don’t exactly blend in. Not preppy enough . . . or designer enough for this crowd.”

Is designer even a term? Instead of asking, I glance down at my hoodie and joggers, letting out a dry laugh. “Didn’t know there was a dress code.”

“There’s not.” She shrugs, her lips curving just enough to suggest she finds this all very entertaining. “But you still stand out.”

“Good to know.” I nod toward the book in her hand. “What are you reading?”

She lifts it slightly, just enough for me to catch the title: *Foundations of Biochemistry*. Her expression stays deadpan as she says, “Riveting stuff. I’d recommend it, but I don’t think it’s your style.”

“You brought a textbook to a party?” I ask, my eyebrows shooting up. “Bold move.”

She shrugs again, this time more defensively. “I was studying when my roommate dragged me here. Something about living a little and finding my Charles. Apparently, that means standing in a corner while everyone else drinks punch that looks like antifreeze.”

“Finding your Charles?”

“Long, boring story,” she says, waving me off like it’s not worth the explanation.

I glance toward the dance floor, where Lucian is attempting what I can only assume is his version of a moonwalk. It’s bad. “It’s good to know I’m not the only one who got dragged here.”

She follows my gaze, a small smile pulling at her lips. “Crawford is your brother?”

“Unfortunately.” I lean against the wall, letting out a long breath. “I’m in town visiting. He wanted me to come, so here I am.”

“Let me guess—big brother guilt?”

“Something like that.” I shrug a shoulder, as if confirming she’s right. She doesn’t need to learn that I’m ditching my parents for the night. Hopefully Pop will entertain Dad enough that tomorrow will be a light day.

“I’m Camille,” she says, holding out her hand. Her lips quirk into a knowing smile that somehow feels equal parts challenge and invitation. “You have one of those . . . names?”

“Killion,” I reply, taking her hand. The moment our palms meet, there’s a subtle jolt, the kind of spark that makes your brain stutter. Her hand is warm, her grip firm, and yet there’s this softness to it, like she’s letting me in just enough to keep me intrigued.

For a beat, the music fades, the crowd blurs, and it’s just us. Her green eyes hold mine, searching, assessing, as if she’s piecing together who I am and why I’m here. And judging by the slight tilt of her head and the ghost of a smirk on her lips, I’ve passed.

“Nice to meet you, Killion,” she says, her tone teasing. “You going to let your brother have all the fun, or are you planning to live a little too?”

I glance back at Lucian, now attempting some kind of impromptu dance battle, then at her. “I think I’ll stick to the sidelines tonight.”

“Good choice,” she says, raising her cup in a mock toast. “Welcome to the corner crew.”

I lean casually against the wall beside her. Maybe this party won’t be such a disaster after all.

Chapter Three



Camille

Never Underestimate Chemistry

Oh my God. Is this even real? I mean, this guy. He's definitely not my Charles, but can we all take a moment to appreciate the view?

He's tall—taller than most of the guys here—and moves with that effortless kind of confidence that makes you wonder if he was born knowing he'd be the most interesting person in any room. His dark brown hair is slightly tousled, it has that just-rolled-out-of-bed-but-make-it-fashion look that somehow works for him. It's cropped short on the sides, with just enough length on top to give him something to rake his hand through—and he does, casually, as if he's forgotten how unfairly good it makes him look.

Then there are his eyes. Blue eyes, or maybe gray. It's hard to say with the dim light in this place. But they're deep and thoughtful but with just enough edge to keep you guessing. When they land on me, it's like he's peeling back my carefully constructed layers one by one, leaving me standing here, trying not to look as ridiculous as I feel.

His jawline can cut glass, his cheekbones belong in a museum, and there's a hint of stubble that makes him look like he's stepped straight out of some "athlete with depth" magazine spread. He's not smiling, but the way his expression shifts—subtle, deliberate—says more than words ever could.

He's . . . delicious. The kind of guy you'd want to lick like a popsicle and maybe, you know, test his proficiency in kissing. For research purposes, obviously. After all, I'm a scientist and everything has to be tested and replicable.

But no. Focus. I can't afford to lose brain cells over a guy when my last midterm is on Monday. *Priorities, Camille. Priorities.*

"So," he says, snapping me out of my spiraling thoughts. His voice is low and smooth. There's just enough gravel in it to make your knees a little weak and make you have a little orgasm in your ears. "You have to be honest. Do you always bring a

textbook to a party, or is tonight special?"

"I like to be prepared," I say, hoping my tone comes off as casual and not completely flustered by your existence.

"For what? A pop quiz during a keg stand?" His mouth curves just enough to show he knows how funny he is.

I laugh before I can stop myself. It's easier than I expected. "Something like that."

His gaze still on me, but not in an intimidating way. It's more like he's genuinely curious, and somehow, that's even worse.

"What's your major?"

"Biochemistry," I say, lifting my chin slightly. Then add, "But I'm planning on going into med school. I'm a freshman. You?"

"Football," he replies with zero hesitation.

I arch an eyebrow. "That's not a major."

"Depends on who you ask," he says, the faintest hint of a smirk playing at his lips. "I'm training for the draft. Quarterback. I'm a junior but I stopped going to school last semester."

"Did you even declare a major before dropping out of college?" I ask, unable to resist poking a little fun.

"Judgy much?" he counters, but there's amusement in his voice.

"Not judging," I clarify, shrugging. "Just curious. Me and athletes don't exactly run in the same circles. I don't know how all that works."

"But you know Luc," he says, tilting his head slightly.

"Luc?" I repeat, blinking.

"Lucian Crawford," he clarifies, like it should be obvious.

"Oh, Crawford. Ugh, everyone knows him," I say with a wave of my hand. "He doesn't blend in. You two don't look much alike, though."

I don't tell him that he's slept with a few of my friends—not Zindy, who swears he's a walking STI.

"Nope. He looks more like Dad, and I look more like Pops—same egg donor, different fathers," he says casually, like he's explained this a hundred times before.

"Oh. So, your mom married your—"

"No," he cuts in smoothly. "We don't have a mom. Our fathers used an egg donor and a surrogate to have their six children."

"There's more than two of you?" I ask, but without waiting for him to answer, I blurt out, "So, are you any good at football?"

"Decent," he replies, though his tone is self-deprecating.

"Decent doesn't get you into the draft," I say, tilting my head knowingly.

"Touché," he says.

There's a beat of silence, and I half expect him to make an excuse and walk away. But instead, he straightens, pushing off the wall. "Do you want to get out of here?"

"What?" I blink, caught off guard.

"This place is too loud, and I'm too tired," he says, glancing around the room like he can't believe anyone would willingly stay. "And if you're going to read a textbook, you might as well do it somewhere quieter. There's a spot I like—not far from here—best hamburgers in town. Great dessert, I think you'll like it."

"How are their fries?" I ask, narrowing my eyes slightly.

"You'll never eat fries as good as theirs," he promises, his tone completely serious.

I hesitate, the practical part of my brain screaming no. But another part—the part that's been running on autopilot since I got here—whispers, *why not?*

"Okay," I say finally, setting my drink on the windowsill. "Lead the way."

His smile widens, and I'm already wondering if this is the best or worst decision I'll make all semester.

Probably both.

THE RESTAURANT IS THE EXACT OPPOSITE OF THE PARTY: QUIET, UNASSUMING, AND TUCKED INTO A STRIP MALL THAT'S SEEN better days. It's one of those places you'd drive past a hundred times and never notice. Vinyl booths with cracks patched up by duct tape line the walls, and the air carries the comforting smell of coffee, grease, and fried potatoes.

"This is the spot?" I ask, sliding into the booth across from him, my eyebrow quirking in mild skepticism.

"Don't judge it by the duct tape," he says, already scanning the menu like it's an old friend. "They have the best pie you'll ever taste. Trust me."

The waitress comes by, a no-nonsense woman who looks like she's been here since the place opened and probably knows every customer's life story. Killian orders coffee and apple pie without hesitation, and after a moment, I do the same—though I

add a side of fries. Because priorities.

As we wait, the conversation flows easily, almost unnervingly so. He tells me about training with his dad, a legendary quarterback whose name alone sends people's expectations through the roof. I tell him about my parents and their not-so-subtle dream of having a doctor in the family. My sister is halfway through law school, and my brother is weighing options between architecture or dentistry. And yes, we're all choosing safe careers. The kind parents can brag about and will have a guaranteed salary to keep a roof above us.

"Do I actually love science and medicine? Yes," I say, stirring sugar into my coffee. "But knowing they're depending on me makes it feel . . . like a chore more than a joy."

"I get it," he says, leaning back in the booth. "It's like there's this invisible pressure. Like you can't mess up—not because of what it'll mean for you, but because of what it'll mean for them."

"Exactly." I nod, a surprising wave of relief washing over me. "Everyone says college is about finding yourself, but it feels more like . . . proving yourself. Like you have to earn the right to even be here."

Before he can respond, the waitress slides plates in front of us. The pie is golden, flaky, and practically glowing under the dim diner lights. My fries arrive hot and crispy, the steam curling invitingly. I take one bite of the pie, and it's everything he promised—sweet, buttery, and perfect.

But the fries? Oh, the fries. I ask for ranch, and when the waitress brings it over, I dip one in, dragging it through the creamy dressing before taking a bite. The tangy, salty combination hits my tongue, and I let out an involuntary moan.

Low, soft, but unfiltered.

Killion freezes, his fork halfway to his mouth. His dark eyes lock on me, and the air between us seems to shift. Suddenly, I'm aware—of the way his gaze drops to my lips, the slight clench of his jaw, and the way his chest rises a little faster, like he's forgotten to breathe.

I set the fry down slowly, feeling my cheeks heat under his stare. "What?" I ask, trying for nonchalance but failing miserably.

His lips curl into a slow, almost dangerous smirk. "Nothing. Just didn't realize fries could . . . do that to someone." His voice is lower now, with a teasing edge that sends a shiver down my spine.

"Well," I say, lifting another fry like it's a weapon, "maybe you're just eating them wrong."

He leans forward, elbows on the table, his eyes still locked on mine. "Maybe you should show me how it's done."

My heart skips a beat, but I keep my composure—or at least try to—as I dip the fry into the ranch again. This time, I take a slower, deliberate bite, my lips wrapping around it like I'm performing for an audience. His gaze doesn't falter, fixed on me with an intensity that makes the air between us feel charged, alive.

"You're killing me, Camille," he mumbles.

This is definitely not how I pictured my night going. But I'm definitely not complaining.

"I . . . I don't think I have the experience you do or anything to show you," I say, the words coming out a little breathless, my nerves betraying me.

His smirk deepens, his dark eyes flickering with mischief. "We could test that theory," he says, leaning forward slightly, his voice dropping just enough to send a shiver down my spine.

"My theory?" I almost stammer, the words catching in my throat as I force myself to meet his gaze.

"No," he says, tilting his head as though he's about to deliver the most scandalous secret. "My theory. I don't think it's about experience. It's about chemistry." He pauses, letting the word linger, his grin edging toward devilish. "And you know chemistry, right?"

I blink, caught somewhere between a laugh and a gulp. "Uh . . . yeah?"

He leans back, completely at ease, his smirk turning downright sinful. "You mix the right elements together, and boom—magic. No prep, no practice. It just works. You don't need to know in advance if it's perfect . . . you feel it."

The way he says "feel" sends heat curling in my stomach, and for a split second, I forget how to form words. I glance at my plate, breaking the moment just enough to remember how to breathe. "Umm . . . I guess you're right, that's chemistry," I manage, my voice a little higher than I'd like.

He chuckles softly, and the sound is warm, almost reassuring, as if he knows exactly what he's doing to me and is giving me just enough space to recover. "See? Told you I was good at theories."

The tension breaks with a laugh—mine, this time—and the conversation shifts, mercifully, to safer territory. We talk about favorite TV shows, weird family traditions, and, of course, the best way to reheat pizza. His method: stovetop, with a lid to trap the heat and keep the crust crisp. Mine: microwave, because seriously, who has the patience for oven or stovetop when you're hungry?

The time slips by faster than I realize, and by the time we leave, the restaurant feels like a little bubble, separate from the rest of the world. Outside, the cool night air hits me, crisp and refreshing after the cozy warmth of the diner. I'm happy—happier than I've felt in a long time.

"Thanks for this," I say softly, turning to him.

“Anytime,” he replies, his eyes catching mine in the kind of lingering way that makes your pulse stumble. There’s a quiet sincerity in his tone, like he means it.

We walk back to my dorm together, the easy conversation from earlier giving way to a comfortable silence. Every now and then, his shoulder brushes mine, and it’s enough to keep my thoughts racing.

When we reach my building, he stops, hands sliding into his pockets as he looks at me. “So . . . I’ll see you around?”

“Yeah,” I say, suddenly shy but trying not to show it. “I’d like that.”

We exchange numbers, and as I tuck my phone away, he leans in. My pulse skyrockets, every nerve screaming for what’s about to happen. He’s going to kiss me—I know it, I can feel it in the way his gaze drops to my lips, the air between us buzzing like static. My breath catches, my lips part, anticipation clawing at me, needy and undeniable. But then his lips brush my cheek, warm and lingering, just enough to leave me spiraling, my heart pounding at what didn’t happen but damn well should have.

“Goodnight, Camille. It was nice meeting you,” he says, his voice low and just a little rough.

“Goodnight, Killion,” I reply, my cheeks flushing as I turn and head inside.

When I reach my room, I catch my reflection in the mirror. There’s a tiny smile on my face, one I can’t quite shake. And somehow this time I hope the guy calls me—he’s going to call, right?

Chapter Four

Killion: You up for breakfast? My treat.

Camille: It's seven in the morning. I have a test on Monday, can't be going out.

Killion: Did I wake you up?

Camille: Nope. I've been up since six, studying.

Killion: Don't you need something to eat before you start studying?

Camille: Probably, don't you need to be training or something?

Killion: Yes, but not until noon. I have a few hours to spare and I was wondering if I could spare them with you.

Camille: So I'm like your second choice, your afterthought? You make me feel fuzzy and warm on the inside.

Killion: Actually, I promised Dad I would work out tomorrow if he let me start late today. I did that so I could eat breakfast with you.

Camille: Oh.

Killion: Does that mean 'yes, I'll get dressed and see you in ten?'

Camille: Fine, but only breakfast.

Killion: Unless you change your mind (wink emoji)

Chapter Five



Killion

How to Turn Breakfast into a Date

I don't know what it is about Camille Ashby that had me staring at the ceiling until almost three in the morning. Her green eyes, maybe—bright and intense, like they see straight through me. Or that fiery red hair that seems to catch the light and hold it hostage. Or maybe it's the way talking to her feels so effortless, like we've known each other forever instead of just one day. It's unsettling, really. Girls in high school and college only saw the quarterback—the guy with the arm, the wins, and the crowd's approval. But Camille? She looks past all that. She sees . . . me. Or at least, she's trying to.

It's like she's found the cracks in my walls and decided it's her personal mission to tear them down. I don't know if that's exhilarating or terrifying, but either way, I couldn't stop thinking about it. About her. Hence, I shamelessly begged my dad to let me start late today. He agreed but reminded me I'll be pulling double shifts for the rest of the week. Worth it.

Now, here I am, sitting across from Camille in a diner that looks like it hasn't changed since they opened it decades ago. My parents used to bring us here when we lived in Boston, so there's nostalgia baked into the smell of coffee and syrup. Camille is nursing a mug of coffee that's seen better days, studying the laminated menu like the fate of the entire world depends on her choice. Her brow furrows, her lips press together, and she tilts her head slightly—like a scientist solving an impossible equation. It's fucking adorable. Erase that, she's fucking adorable.

"What's good here?" she asks, finally glancing up.

"You can't go wrong with the pancakes," I tell her. "But fair warning—they're almost as big as your head."

She presses her lips together, shifting to one side. "Not sure I'm ready for that kind of commitment. Pancakes that big need a lot of syrup, and I don't have time to go into a sugar coma. I reserve that for Halloween and other holidays."

I laugh, leaning back in the booth. "Then try the omelet. It's solid, or you can build your own if you're feeling bold."

"Do they have good fries?" she asks, her tone suspiciously serious.

“Fries? At breakfast?” I raise an eyebrow.

“They’re life,” she says with a shrug, handing her menu to the waitress who appears at just the right moment.

Camille orders like a pro: omelet with ham, broccoli, and mushrooms, coffee, fries (of course), and ranch on the side. She’s decisive, confident. Meanwhile, I stick with my usual—coffee, two eggs over easy, bacon, pancakes.

When the waitress leaves, Camille leans back, her gaze drifting over the mismatched decor. “You come here often?”

“Once or twice when I’m in town,” I say. “It’s quiet, no one bugs you, and the pie’s good. Not as good as the one yesterday, though.”

Her brow arches. “You eat pie for breakfast?”

“I’ve done worse,” I admit with a smirk. “Soda and chocolate. If my dad found out, he’d lose it.”

Camille chuckles, the sound light but genuine. She folds her hands, her fingers tracing small circles on the edge of the table, and then she levels me with a look that feels way too insightful. “So, Killion, tell me—what’s it like being you?”

“That’s a loaded question,” I say, leaning forward.

“Is it?” she asks, her expression somewhere between curious and amused.

“Depends,” I say, letting my grin soften. “Right now, being me means sitting across from a girl who’s too smart for me, wondering how I got lucky enough to have breakfast with her.”

Her laugh is soft, her head shaking like she’s trying not to be charmed. “You’re good at this.”

“At what?”

“Charming people. I bet you’ve never heard the word no in your life.” Her tone is playful, but her eyes narrow slightly, like she’s testing me. “Let me guess, you’ve had everyone wrapped around your finger since you were five.”

“Maybe,” I admit, scratching the back of my neck. “Grandma says I got Pop’s charm. My twin, Kade? He’s more like Dad—dry and no-nonsense. But for the record, I’m not trying to charm you. I just want to get to know you.”

Her gaze softens, like I passed some unspoken test. Before I can say anything else, the waitress reappears with our food. Timing, as always, is everything.

Camille starts with her fries, dipping one into the small cup of ranch. She takes a bite, and her eyes flutter closed for a moment, a soft hum slipping out as she chews. Her lips part slightly, curling into a satisfied smile. It’s not subtle—it’s downright sensual, like she’s fully immersed in the experience of eating a fry.

My throat goes dry, and my thoughts derail in a direction that’s way less innocent than fries and ranch. “Good?” I ask, my voice lower than I mean it to be.

Her eyes flick to mine, mischief dancing in them. “Perfect,” she says, licking a bit of ranch off the corner of her lip.

I swallow hard, trying to keep my head in the game. Not easy when every move she makes feels like it’s pulling me closer to the edge. How is it that she can make eating fries look like a goddamn art form? And why the hell am I thinking about how much I want to kiss her instead of finishing eating my food?

We talk between bites, slipping into an easy rhythm. She tells me about her roommate, Zindy, who apparently has a flair for drama and owns sequined pajamas—actual sequins. I counter with my siblings: Kaden, the hockey star who’s annoyingly perfect. Leif, the weird-as-fuck goalie. Luc, who’s plotting his escape from college. Our sister Scottie, the bossy one who keeps us all in line. And there’s Greyson, the baby who knows exactly how to play the favorite card.

Camille laughs, full and unguarded, and it hits me like a punch to the gut. God, that laugh. It’s impossible not to smile back, even as my thoughts keep drifting to how much I want to reach across the table, pull her closer, and see what her lips taste like.

By the time our plates are cleared, the conversation has shifted to the deeper stuff—future plans, dreams . . . stuff I barely discuss with anyone.

“I want to go to med school,” she says, her voice softer now, almost hesitant. “Biochemistry’s just the start. The plan is to specialize—surgery, maybe. I want to help people.”

There’s something in the way she says it that draws me closer. She’s not bragging or fishing for praise—it’s honest. A glimpse of someone who’s thought about this deeply, who’s shouldering her ambition with a quiet determination that leaves no room for doubt.

“That’s incredible,” I say, leaning forward without realizing it. “I know you can do it. I mean, you party and bring your books with you. I call that determination.”

She looks at me like she’s trying to decide if I mean it. “What about you? What’s the big dream for Killion Crawford?”

“Play in the big leagues,” I answer automatically. It’s the line I’ve given a thousand times, but this time it feels . . . shallow, almost rehearsed. I’m not helping anyone. I’m not changing anyone’s world with what I do. Do I? But the thing is that . . . “Well, it’s what I’ve been working toward my whole life.”

“And after that?” she presses, her tone gentle but pointed.

“After?” I hesitate, running a hand over the back of my neck. “I don’t know. Spend my twenties and thirties playing ball. The rest? I’ll figure it out when I get there.”

She nods slowly, like that answer isn’t good enough, but she doesn’t push it. Instead, she glances at her phone and sighs. “I should probably get back. I have a ton of studying to do.”

Even when I'm disappointed and I want to protest, I pay the bill, and we step outside into the crisp morning air. She stops just shy of the curb, turning to face me.

"This was fun," she says, her smile soft and genuine. "Thanks for convincing me to tag along this morning."

"It was," I agree, and I wish I could say more so she could stay if only just for one more beat.

Since I have nothing coherent to start a conversation, I step closer, close enough to feel the warmth radiating from her. My hand moves almost instinctively, tilting her chin up as her breath catches. Her lips part slightly, and for a moment, I think she's going to say something—but she doesn't. Instead, her eyes flutter shut, and that tiny, almost inaudible gasp undoes me completely.

When our lips meet, it's slow, deliberate. Her hands come up, resting lightly against my chest, and I swear I feel my heart trying to hammer its way out of my ribs. The kiss deepens, her lips soft and inviting, moving with mine in a way that feels effortless—natural, like we've done this a thousand times before.

By the time we pull back, her cheeks are flushed, her eyes searching mine.

"Definitely better than fries," she murmurs, her lips curving into a teasing smile.

I chuckle, still trying to catch my breath. "I don't know. The fries were pretty great."

She laughs, and I know, without a doubt, I'm in way deeper than I ever planned. And I don't care one bit.

Chapter Six



Camille

I'M SLIPPING ON A PAIR OF BOOTS WHEN ZINDY MATERIALIZES IN THE DOORWAY, LEANING AGAINST THE FRAME LIKE SHE'S THE queen of judgment. Her sequined pajama top glimmers under the soft yellow light, as if to remind me she exists in a universe where "casual" involves glitter.

"You're getting dressed? At almost seven? On a school night?" Her tone hovers between amused and appalled. "What is happening to you, Camille Ashby?"

"Welcome back," I reply, zipping up my boots. "You've been gone almost all week."

"That senior guy I met at the party has been keeping me busy, if you know what I mean," she says, her voice taking on a dreamy, faraway quality. "We're seeing each other. I mean, just temporarily. He's graduating soon, and you know I don't do commitment."

"Obviously," I mutter, like it's the most natural thing in the world. Zindy doesn't do long term anything. Everything in her life is temporary, and I stopped trying to figure out why two months into living with her.

Her eyes narrow as she shifts focus. "The real question is, where are you going?"

"Dinner," I say, keeping my tone casual. "I just finished studying, and I—"

"Are we having dinner with the hunk you were making out with last night?" she interrupts, crossing her arms like she's caught me sneaking out past curfew.

"How—" I start, but she cuts me off with a knowing chuckle.

"Oh, sweetie," she says, shaking her head. "You think I didn't notice the tall guy on top of you when I tried to come to our room last night? Hence me spending the night with Roger—again."

I freeze, busted. "I . . ."

She raises an eyebrow, victorious. "That's the same guy you were hanging out with at the party, isn't it? I saw you two leave early. So spill. What's going on?"

I shrug, smoothing the hem of my sweater as if that'll keep my blush at bay. "We're having fun."

"Fun, huh?" She gives me the once-over, her eyes lingering on my outfit—dark skinny jeans, a fitted sweater, and my favorite boots. "Fun could use a little more color. And mascara. But seriously, who is he?"

"A junior," I lie. Technically, he was a junior last semester. It's not my fault she's asking trick questions. Besides, if she knew it was Luc Crawford's older brother, she'd combust on the spot.

"Major?" she asks, clearly not buying it.

"Not sure. It hasn't come up yet," I say, which isn't exactly a lie, but it's not the full truth either.

She smirks. "With his tongue down your throat and his hands running every play in the book, I doubt majors were part of the conversation."

I glare at her, grabbing my coat. "It's not like that."

"Uh-huh," she says, clearly not convinced. "So what is it like?"

"It's . . . fun," I say again. Even I'm annoyed by how lame that sounds.

Zindy studies me like she's trying to crack a code. After a moment, she nods. "Okay. But if he screws this up, I will destroy him. Just so you know."

"I'll keep that in mind," I mutter, ducking past her before she launches into one of her TED Talks on love and revenge.

I head downstairs, pulling my coat tighter as the brisk evening air seeps into the dorm lobby. And then I see him—Killion Crawford, leaning casually against the wall by the doors like he owns the place. His leather jacket fits perfectly, his hair is just the right amount of messy, and when his eyes lock on me, his whole face softens in a way that makes my heart skip a beat.

"Hey," he says, his voice low and warm as he steps toward me.

"Hey," I manage, barely above a whisper, and before I can overthink it, his lips find mine.

It's not a quick, friendly kiss. It's lingering, deliberate, and leaves me clinging to him like my brain's forgotten how legs work. His hands slide to my waist, pulling me closer, and the heat between us feels dangerously addictive. When he finally pulls back, I'm breathless, and I can't decide if I want to punch him for being this perfect or kiss him again.

"Where are we going?" I ask, trying to sound casual and failing miserably.

"My place," he says, his hand finding mine as we step outside. "Dad's out of town for the week. I might even be able to convince him to let me stick around and train here until May. Maybe even June."

"Oh," I say, not sure if I should be thrilled or terrified. Two more months of Killion Crawford? Two more dates with him and I might be falling for this guy. And falling hard.

The thought lodges itself in my head as we walk. How do I handle the heartbreak if this ends? Does it have to end? Or am I just too scared to admit that I don't want it to?

Chapter Seven



Killion

The Art of Falling Apart

Dinner. I invited her to dinner. We ate, we talked, and now . . .

Now we're kissing.

And this kiss—God, this kiss. It's not wild, exactly, but it's not tame either. It's everything. Breathless, addictive. The kind of kiss that leaves me drunk on her and wondering how I went so long without tasting her lips. When her soft whimper reaches my ears, it's like a spark igniting every inch of me. Her hands clutch my shirt, and I lose myself in the heat of it, in the way she melts against me like she belongs here.

I don't want to stop.

Hell, I want to drag her straight to my room and do every sinful thing I've imagined with her. But I didn't invite her here for this. Did I? My willpower is hanging by a thread, and her lips aren't helping. They're soft and insistent, and the little noises she makes as our hands explore each other . . . let's just say my jeans are getting uncomfortably tight.

"Cam." My voice is rough, barely a whisper against her lips. "Camille." I pull back slightly, enough to meet her hazy eyes and take a much-needed breath. "This isn't why I brought you here. I swear."

"I know." Her voice is soft, but her arms don't move. They stay locked around my neck, her fingers grazing the nape of my hair like she's afraid I'll pull away entirely. Then she presses the sweetest, most disarming kiss to my chin. "But I want to," she says, her words delicate but sure. "I really do."

"You do?" My heart stutters as I search her face.

She nods, biting her bottom lip, and something about the shy way she does it slays me.

"What do you want, Camille?" I ask, my tone firm but coaxing, as if my sanity hinges on her answer.

"I . . ." Her gaze drops, cheeks flushing. She hesitates, then peeks back up at me through her lashes.

“Sweetheart, you have to tell me,” I murmur, my lips brushing her temple before trailing down to her cheek. My voice is low, coaxing, but firm enough to make her pulse quicken. “I can’t give you what you need if you don’t tell me. What if I just flip you over and fuck you hard and fast, when what you really wanted was to feel me take my time—slow, deep, until you’re trembling for me?”

I pause, letting my lips graze the curve of her neck, breathing her in before whispering, “What if you wanted me to kiss you here . . . suck your nipples while my fingers slid into your tight, wet cunt?” Her sharp gasp makes me smirk, my hands tightening around her waist.

“Imagine wanting that, but not asking for it,” I murmur against her skin, my lips dragging along her jawline. “What if I didn’t do it? What if I left you aching for more, because you couldn’t say the words?”

Her breath hitches, and I swear her blush deepens. It’s adorable, really, the way her cheeks turn that soft pink like she’s never been this close to losing herself.

“Camille,” I whisper, brushing her hair back, my fingers threading gently through the soft strands. Her wide eyes meet mine, and I can see the conflict there—the vulnerability mixed with curiosity. “Tell me. What do you want?”

“I . . . I’m not sure what I want,” she says softly, biting her lip. “I mean, I’ve had sex before, but he didn’t ask me. We just . . . did it, you know?”

I stop. My lips hover against her skin, and I pull back to look at her, a mix of disbelief and protectiveness stirring in my chest.

“Oh, baby,” I murmur, pressing a kiss to her neck before letting my mouth trail lower, lingering just enough to tease. “That’s not how it’s supposed to be. Someone should have shown you how good it can feel when it’s about you. Don’t worry, though,” I add with a grin, slipping my hands under her top and starting to lift it slowly. “We’ll figure it out together. I’ll make sure of it.”

Her eyes widen like a deer caught in headlights. “Together?”

“Yes, together. Step one,” I say, my voice a playful drawl as I ease her shirt over her head, “we start by seeing what makes you melt. Step two? Well, that’s where the real fun begins.”

Her lips part like she wants to say something, but no words come out.

“Tell me something, Camille,” I say, my hands slipping to her waist, fingers brushing her warm skin. “Do you touch yourself, baby?”

Her frown is immediate, and she shakes her head. “No, not really.”

I freeze for a moment, blinking at her. “Not . . . really? Are you telling me you’ve got all this”—I gesture to her body, my tone incredulous—“and you don’t even know how good you can feel? Oh, sweetheart, we’ve got so much work to do.”

She starts to say something, but I cut her off with a quick kiss and a smirk. “Lucky for you, I aced anatomy. And I’m pretty sure you know a thing or two, right? Being the owner of this masterpiece and all?”

Her laughter is soft and nervous, but it’s there. Good. That’s a start.

“C’mon,” I say, taking her hand and gently tugging her toward my room. “Lesson one starts now. Let’s get you unwrapped.”

I lead her through the doorway, pausing just long enough to flick on the lamp. The soft golden glow casts a warm light over the room, and I turn back to her, catching the way her eyes dart nervously toward the bed.

“It’s okay,” I say, easing her closer until she’s standing in front of me. My hands go to the button of her jeans, and I take my time, popping it open and sliding the zipper down. “Think of this like opening a present. You wouldn’t want me to rush, would you?”

Her soft laugh turns into a gasp as I hook my fingers into the waistband and start to pull them down, my lips grazing her collarbone as I go.

“See? Nice and slow,” I murmur, letting my hands skim the curve of her hips as her jeans drop to the floor. “We’ve got all the time in the world, baby. No rushing, no guessing. Just you and me figuring out exactly what makes you feel like a goddess.”

Her breath comes in quick little huffs, and I grin against her skin. This is going to be fun.

She’s standing in front of me now, her cheeks flushed, her lips slightly parted as if she’s waiting for a cue, for me to take the lead. Slowly, I trail my hands up her sides, skimming over the smooth, warm skin of her waist until I reach the clasp of her bra.

“May I?” I ask softly, holding her gaze.

She nods, her breath coming in soft little gasps.

I undo the clasp with deliberate care, letting the straps slide down her shoulders and my hands follow the motion. When the fabric falls away, I can’t stop the low groan that escapes me.

Her tits are perfect. Full, round, and flawless, with taut, rosy nipples that make my mouth water. I take a slow step back to look at her, running my tongue over my lower lip as I drink her in.

“Jesus, Camille,” I murmur, my voice reverent, as if she’s a work of art unveiled just for me. “You’re . . . breathtaking.”

She bites her lip, glancing down shyly. “You like them?”

“Like them?” I laugh softly, shaking my head. “Baby, I love them.” My hands hover near her breasts, not touching, waiting. “Can I?”

She hesitates for only a moment before nodding, her voice barely above a whisper. “Yes.”

Carefully, I cup her breasts, marveling at the way they fit perfectly in my palms. My thumbs brush over her nipples, and the soft gasp she lets out is like music to my ears.

“You’re so sensitive,” I murmur, my thumbs circling slowly, teasing. “Does that feel good?”

“Yes,” she breathes, her eyes fluttering shut.

I lean in, pressing a kiss to the corner of her mouth before trailing lower, letting my lips hover just above her skin. “Can I suck on them?”

Her breath catches, and she nods again, her voice trembling. “Please.”

That single word is all I need. I take her nipple into my mouth, swirling my tongue around the peak and savoring the way her body reacts. She arches into me, her fingers tangling in my hair as a soft moan slips from her lips.

“Do you like that, Camille?” I ask between kisses, switching to her other breast, giving it the same attention.

“Yes,” she whimpers, her voice shaky. “I love it.”

I press one last kiss to the swell of her breast before trailing lower, my lips brushing over her ribs, her stomach, every inch of her that I can reach. She’s trembling now, her hands gripping my shoulders as I guide her backward toward the bed.

“Lie down for me, sweetheart,” I whisper, and she obeys, stretching out across the sheets. Her hair fans out around her, her skin glowing in the warm light, and she looks up at me with wide, trusting eyes.

She’s beautiful. Sprawled out for me, open, vulnerable, and completely perfect.

I kneel on the bed, running my hands up her thighs as I lean over her, capturing her lips in a slow, languid kiss. It’s not rushed, not frantic—just deliberate and thorough, letting her feel every ounce of the desire coursing through me.

“You’re incredible,” I murmur against her mouth, trailing kisses along her jaw, down her neck, and back to her chest. “I’m going to take care of you tonight, Camille. Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she whispers, her voice soft but sure. “I trust you.”

Her answer sends a surge of warmth through me, and I vow to make this night unforgettable for her.

I kiss her down her torso again, slow and deliberate, my lips tracing a path that makes her tremble beneath me. Her skin is soft and warm, her scent intoxicating as I move lower, taking my time, savoring every inch of her.

When I reach the curve of her hips, I pause, pressing a gentle kiss just above the waistband of her panties. Her breath hitches, her thighs shifting restlessly against me. She’s so responsive, so perfect.

“So,” I murmur, brushing my lips over the delicate fabric covering her, “you don’t touch yourself, Cam?”

Her face flushes deeper, and she shakes her head, her voice a soft, nervous whisper. “No . . . I just . . . I’ve never . . .”

I hum softly, my hands sliding along her thighs, kneading the soft flesh as I work my way closer to her center. Her body tenses slightly, but I keep my movements slow, my thumbs grazing her inner thighs to ease her nerves.

“That’s a shame,” I murmur, pressing a kiss just below her navel, my voice low and teasing. “All this beauty, and no one—including you—has given it the attention it deserves?”

Her breath stutters, her hands fisting the sheets beneath her. “I didn’t know it could feel like this,” she admits, her voice trembling with a mix of nervousness and anticipation.

I chuckle softly, the sound vibrating against her skin as I nuzzle closer, my lips grazing the edge of her panties. “That’s okay, sweetheart. We’ll change that tonight. Together.”

Hooking my fingers under the waistband, I pause, looking up at her. “Can I take these off?”

She nods quickly, her lips parting, but no words come out.

“Use your words, Camille,” I say gently, my thumbs stroking her hips.

“Yes,” she whispers, her voice barely audible. “Please.”

With her permission, I slide her panties down, dragging them slowly over her thighs and savoring the way her body reacts—her soft gasps, the way her legs shift instinctively, the slight arch of her hips.

When she’s bare before me, I take a moment, letting my gaze drink her in. “God, you’re stunning,” I murmur, my voice filled with awe.

Her thighs press together slightly, but I gently guide them apart, my hands massaging her soft skin as I settle between them. “Relax, Cam,” I whisper, pressing a kiss to her inner thigh. “Let me take care of you.”

She nods again, her breaths shallow, her trust palpable in the way she opens up for me. I kiss her thigh again, closer this time, my lips lingering as my fingers trail up and down her skin, coaxing her to relax further.

“Tell me if anything feels too much, okay?” I say, my voice soft but steady.

“Okay,” she breathes, her voice shaky but filled with trust.

I press one final kiss to her thigh before letting my lips hover just above her core. The anticipation in her trembling body makes me grin. “Let’s find out exactly what makes you fall apart, sweetheart,” I murmur before lowering my mouth to her.

“Touch your breasts for me,” I whisper against her thigh, my voice rough with arousal. “Pinch your nipples, hard, while I kiss your pretty cunt. Can you do that for me, Camille? Let me watch you.”

Her eyes widen, her blush spreading down her neck, but she nods, her lips parting as she lifts her trembling hands to her chest. When her fingers graze her own nipples, rolling them hesitantly, a soft moan escapes her lips.

“That’s it,” I murmur, my gaze locked on her, drinking in every reaction. “Don’t hold back, sweetheart. Show me how good it feels.”

The sight of her obeying, her hands moving over her perfect tits, sends a bolt of heat straight through me. My cock throbs in response, hard and aching, but I force myself to focus on her, on the way her breathing quickens, her body arching slightly.

“You’re so beautiful,” I rasp, lowering my mouth to her center, pressing a soft kiss just above her clit. Her body jerks, and I grin against her skin. “And you taste even better.”

She moans, her thighs trembling as I press my tongue flat against her folds, dragging it upward in a slow, deliberate stroke.

“Does that feel good, baby?” I ask, my voice muffled as I press another kiss to her swollen clit.

“Yes,” she whimpers, her hands still working over her breasts, her head thrown back against the pillow.

“Good,” I murmur, licking her again, swirling my tongue around her clit before flicking it gently. Her hips buck against me, and I press my hands to her thighs, holding her steady. “Keep touching yourself for me, Cam. I want to see how much you like this.”

Her moans grow louder as I devour her, alternating between teasing licks and gentle suction. The way she squirms beneath me, her body completely uninhibited, makes my cock ache, but I don’t stop. Not until she’s trembling and slick against my tongue.

“You’re so wet for me,” I murmur, sliding my tongue lower, teasing her entrance. “Do you know how much that turns me on? Knowing this is all for me?”

She gasps, her thighs pressing against my shoulders as I press a soft kiss just below her entrance. “Camille, you’re perfect,” I whisper, my lips brushing her sensitive skin. “I want to feel you. Can I?”

“Yes,” she breathes, her voice shaky but eager.

I slide a single finger inside her, slow and careful, her warmth enveloping me. Her gasp turns into a moan, her hips arching as I curl my finger slightly, stroking her from the inside.

“That’s it,” I murmur, pressing my mouth back to her clit, kissing her gently. “Let me take care of you, baby. Let me show you how good this can feel.”

Her moans grow louder, her body responding to every movement, and I know she’s close. The thought of her falling apart because of me, because of my hands, my mouth, drives me wild.

I add a second finger, sliding it in beside the first, and the way her body tightens around me makes me groan against her skin. Her slick heat coats my fingers as I thrust them in and out of her, slow at first, testing her, letting her adjust.

“God, Camille,” I rasp, my lips brushing her clit as I speak. “You feel so fucking good. So wet and tight. Do you know how perfect you are?”

She gasps, her hands clutching at the sheets, her hips arching to meet my movements.

“That’s it, baby,” I murmur, curling my fingers inside her, searching until I find the spot that makes her cry out. “Right there, huh? You like that? You’re taking me so well. So fucking perfect.”

Her breathing turns ragged, her moans filling the room as I pick up the pace, thrusting my fingers deeper, faster. My mouth latches onto her clit, sucking gently, and her entire body trembles beneath me.

“Look at you,” I growl, glancing up to catch her flushed face, her parted lips, the way her chest rises and falls with every gasping breath. “You’re so beautiful like this, spread out for me, letting me make you feel good. You’re going to come for me, aren’t you? I can feel it. You’re so close.”

She whimpers, her hands flying to grip the back of my head, tangling in my hair as she presses me closer.

“Come on, baby,” I coax, thrusting my fingers harder, curling them just right. “Let go for me. Let me feel you come. I want to hear you scream my name when you fall apart.”

Her gasps turn into desperate cries, her body arching as her thighs tremble around my shoulders. I don’t stop, don’t let up, my mouth and fingers working in perfect rhythm to push her over the edge.

“You’re mine, Camille,” I murmur against her clit, my voice rough with arousal. “Every fucking inch of you is mine. Mine to make it feel fucking good. Now, come for me, baby. I know you can.”

Her back bows off the bed, a jagged cry escaping her lips as she shatters beneath me. Her orgasm crashes over her in waves, her walls pulsing around my fingers, soaking me as she gasps and moans my name.

“That’s it, sweetheart,” I murmur, slowing my movements but not stopping as I ride out her climax with her. “God, you’re amazing. So perfect. So fucking gorgeous when you fall apart for me.”

Her body collapses against the bed, trembling, her chest heaving as she tries to catch her breath. I press one last kiss to her inner thigh before easing my fingers out of her, watching the way her body shivers at the loss.

As I crawl up beside her, brushing a strand of damp hair from her flushed face, I can’t help but smile. Her cheeks are still rosy, her lips swollen from my kisses, and she looks absolutely stunning—like a woman who’s just discovered a whole new world.

“You’re incredible,” I whisper, my lips grazing hers in a soft, lingering kiss. It’s unhurried, tender, a way to ground her after what we just shared. “That’s just the beginning, Camille. I’ve got so much more to show you. But for now . . .” I tuck a

strand of hair behind her ear, meeting her gaze. “We’ll call it off.”

She blinks up at me, her brows furrowing in confusion. “What about you?” she asks, her voice still breathless, eager.

“Me?” I chuckle softly, cupping her cheek and brushing my thumb along her jaw. “I can wait.”

Her lips part as if to protest, but I press a gentle kiss to the corner of her mouth, silencing her. “Listen to me, sweetheart. I need you to know yourself first—what you love, what makes you feel alive—before we go further. I’m demanding, baby. When it’s my turn, I’m going to ask for everything. Your trust, your time, your body. But I need you to know your boundaries before we get there.”

Her eyes soften, and I can see the mix of emotions swirling in them—gratitude, understanding, and something deeper. “You understand, don’t you?” I ask, my voice low but steady.

She nods, her hand coming up to rest on my chest. “I do.”

“Good.” I smile and gather her into my arms, wrapping her up in the warmth of my body. “But that doesn’t mean we’re done tonight.”

Her curious gaze meets mine, and I grin, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Right now, it’s all about you.”

I pull the blanket over us and settle her against my chest, running my fingers through her hair in soothing strokes. “Let’s start with this,” I say softly, tilting her face up to meet my gaze. “What do you need, Camille? A warm bath? Something to eat? Or maybe just my arms around you while you fall asleep?”

Her lips curve into a small, content smile, and she burrows closer. “This,” she whispers. “Just this.”

I tighten my hold on her, letting the silence settle around us, broken only by the sound of her steady breaths. My fingers trail gently along her back, and I press one last kiss to her temple.

“You’re so perfect, Camille. If I’m not careful, you might become my everything,” I murmur, my voice barely audible. “And while you’re with me, I’m going to make sure you always feel that way.”

As her breathing slows, her body relaxing into mine, I know I’ve done something right. This isn’t just about the moment—it’s about building trust, brick by brick, for something even bigger.

And I’ll wait as long as it takes.

Chapter Eight

Killion: I'm heading home this weekend, babe. Then it's the draft.

Camille: Okay.

Killion: I'll be back though. We'll see each other between the breaks I have, and then I'm all yours between June and late July.

Camille: I know. I mean, I'm busy with homework and will be studying—summer classes are starting mid-May and I'm taking both sessions. So it's cool.

Killion: I'm going to miss you too.

Camille: I never said I'll miss you.

Killion: Why do you have trouble telling me how you feel?

Camille: It's weird, maybe? I don't know. I mean, why should I miss you when we've known each other only for a month. It doesn't make sense.

Killion: Feelings don't make sense—they defy logic and refuse to be neatly categorized. They just exist, raw and unfiltered, demanding to be felt. Don't fight them, don't overanalyze them. Let them flow through you, teaching you, grounding you, and reminding you that to feel is to live. Embrace the joy, the sorrow, and everything in between—they all have a purpose.

Camille: Wow, that was very deep. Where did you get that?

Killion: Dad gave an entire lecture to Scottie the first time someone broke her heart. Randal Moss, seventh grade. She said she would never feel again.

Camille: So you feel everything, let yourself be all vulnerable. Will you ever tell me how you feel?

Killion: Oh I will. Let me tell you, I'm falling. I'll let you know when I'm in love with you. Not planning on holding back.

Camille: You're nothing like I imagined.

Killion: You imagined me?

Camille: Not what I meant.

Killion: What are you doing this weekend? Maybe I can call you, we can talk, and have sex over the phone.

Camille: We're finally going all the way?

Killion: You're eager, aren't you? I'm not sure if you're ready.

Camille: You just like to eat me.

Killion: Your pussy might be my favorite thing in the world.

Camille: When are you going to let me return the favor?

Killion: Are you ready for that?

Camille: I'm ready for a lot more.

Killion: Then, next time ask. Use your words and you shall receive.

Camille: So if I want to go all the way?

Killion: Ah, will you ask me to fuck you, baby? I can't wait to see if you dare.

Camille: I'm late for my class. Talk to you later?

Killion: Text me when you're free. Miss you, baby.

Camille: Miss you too.

Chapter Nine



Camille

When Love's on the Line

I'm standing outside the Crawford family house, my heart doing this ridiculous fluttery thing it shouldn't be doing. For a moment, I hesitate. It's not that I don't want to see him—I do. But something about this feels . . . different. A week ago, he was just Killion, the guy I met at a party. Now, he's Killion Crawford, first pick in the draft, future star of the New York Gladiators. No pressure or anything.

I'm still working up the nerve to knock when the door swings open.

And there he is, hands shoved into his pockets, that familiar grin on his face—the one that says he knows exactly what kind of effect he has on me.

“Did you miss me?” he asks, his voice warm against the cool night air.

Before I can think of a sarcastic response, he closes the distance between us and kisses me. Hard.

Sucking the breath out of me while giving me his. One of my hands grip his hoodie for balance because apparently, I've forgotten how to stand. His lips are demanding but somehow still soft, like he's trying to show me just how much I missed him before I even realized it myself.

When he finally pulls back, his forehead rests against mine, and I can't help the laugh that escapes. “Well, hello to you, too.”

“Hi,” he says sheepishly.

“You're going to New York,” I say, taking a shaky breath. I wrap my arms around him, pulling him close. “Congratulations. First pick, huh? I heard that's kind of a big deal.”

“It's . . . you know, cool,” he says, shrugging like it's nothing. Like it's not everything.

I step back, giving him a once-over. He looks the same—messy dark hair, that worn sweatshirt that I'm 90% sure he's had

since high school, the guy who pulled me out of a loud party and took me to a tiny diner for pie and fries. But there's something in his eyes now, something quieter, more thoughtful.

"You're not freaking out?" I ask, tilting my head.

"Not yet," he says with a small grin, holding the door open for me.

The smell of tomato sauce and cheese hits me as soon as I step inside. It's comforting in the way only a family home can be.

"Do you want anything?" he asks, heading for the kitchen. "I ordered us half meat lovers, half just cheese. Got water or juice if you're thirsty."

"Water's fine," I say, trailing after him.

He pours two glasses and hands me one, leaning against the counter like this is just another night.

"So," I say, taking a sip, "how does it feel? Being the guy everyone's talking about?"

He shrugs again, but his grin falters just a little. "Weird. Good weird, I guess."

I lean against the counter across from him, studying his face. "You're underselling this, Crawford. First pick? Future star? This is your moment."

"Yeah," he says, running a hand through his hair. "It's a lot, you know? Everyone's expecting me to—" He stops himself, shaking his head.

"To what?" I press, stepping closer.

"To be as perfect as my father," he admits, his voice quieter now. "And maybe I'm not ready for that. Maybe I should've waited until I graduated. Been more mentally prepared."

I set my glass down and close the distance between us, taking his hand in mine. "You don't have to be perfect, Killion. You just have to be you. That's the guy they drafted. And for the record, I think he's pretty damn great."

He looks at me for a long moment, the corner of his mouth twitching into a small smile. "You're dangerous, you know that?"

"Why? Because I'm right?"

"No," he says, his grin widening. "Because you make me want to believe it. Though, it's scary too. A lot's about to change."

I nod, because what else can I say? He's right. Everything is changing—for him, for us, if there even is an us.

"When do you leave?" I ask, trying to keep my voice even, though the question weighs more than I'd like to admit.

"I'm not leaving Boston just yet," Killion says, his tone calm, like he's thought this all through. "Dad and I worked out a schedule. I'll be in New York for minicamp and whatever else they've got lined up for the rookies. But I'll be here from mid-June until the end of July."

He says it like it's simple, like the thought of him juggling two cities isn't monumental. But all I can hear are the words 'leaving' and 'New York.' The rest is white noise.

I nod, my lips pressing into a tight line as I try to process what that means. It shouldn't feel like a goodbye—not yet. But it does. And I don't want to think about endings. Not now. Not when everything feels so new and full of potential.

Before I can stop myself, I step forward and wrap my arms around him, burying my face against his chest. His body tenses for half a second before he relaxes, his arms coming up to pull me closer.

"I don't like thinking about you leaving," I mumble, my voice muffled against his sweatshirt.

"I'm not gone yet," he says softly, one hand sliding up my back, the other settling at my waist.

The warmth of his touch makes it both better and worse. I tilt my head to look up at him, my breath catching at the way his dark eyes meet mine—steady, thoughtful, like he's memorizing this moment.

And then he kisses me.

It's not rushed, not desperate. It's deep and deliberate, the kind of kiss that says everything we're both too scared to put into words. My fingers grip his sweatshirt, and I press closer, as if I can keep him here, in this exact moment, just a little longer.

When we finally pull back, I'm breathless, and his forehead rests against mine.

"You're really not leaving until July?" I ask softly, needing to hear it again.

"Not until July," he confirms, his lips brushing mine in a whisper of a kiss. "And even then, I'll still be close. We'll figure things out. You'll see me more than you want to."

"That's not possible," I say with a shaky laugh, my chest tightening at the thought of missing him anyway.

He cups my face, his thumb brushing over my cheekbone, his touch both tender and grounding. "You don't have to worry about the end, okay? We're not there. We're just getting started."

Before I can respond, his lips crash onto mine. There's no hesitation, no holding back—it's fierce, claiming, the kind of kiss that steals my breath and makes my knees go weak. I barely register him stepping forward, pressing me against the wall, his hands sliding down to grip my hips.

In one swift motion, he hooks his fingers into the waistband of my leggings, tugging them down past my thighs. The cool air brushes my skin, but it's nothing compared to the heat radiating off him as he works his jeans open, shoving them and his boxers down in one fluid motion.

He lifts me effortlessly, his strong hands gripping my thighs as he pins me against the wall. His body presses into mine,

hard and hot, and I gasp at the intensity of it all. His steely gaze locks on mine, his dark eyes burning with desire.

“Stop me,” he says, his voice low and gravelly, “if you don’t want this. Stop me if you don’t want me inside you.”

My heart is racing, my breaths shallow, but I don’t hesitate. “I want this,” I whisper, my voice trembling but sure. “I want you.”

A growl rumbles from his chest as he reaches for his wallet, pulling out a condom and tearing it open with practiced ease. My legs tremble in his hold as I watch him roll it on, the sight making heat pool low in my belly.

He lines himself up, the thick head of his cock brushing against my slick folds. The anticipation is electric, my body tensing in a mix of excitement and nerves.

“Look at me,” he commands softly, his voice steady but laced with raw need. I do, and the intensity in his eyes makes me feel completely exposed, like he’s seeing every part of me.

Slowly, he pushes inside, the stretch almost too much, and I cry out, my nails digging into his shoulders.

“Fuck,” he groans, his head dropping to my neck as he pauses, letting me adjust to his size. “You feel so good, baby. So tight. So perfect. So mine.”

The burn fades into a deep ache, a need that builds with every second he’s still inside me. I rock my hips against him, and he takes the hint, thrusting in deeper, filling me completely.

“Oh my God,” I gasp, my head falling back against the wall.

He moves, his rhythm slow at first, deliberate, each thrust driving me higher. His hands grip my thighs tighter, holding me up like I weigh nothing. The wall behind me is solid, grounding me as he fucks me, his cock sliding in and out, hitting just the right spot with every stroke.

“You feel incredible,” he growls, his lips brushing against my neck. “So wet, so perfect for me.”

My moans grow louder with each thrust, my body completely under his control. His grip is firm, his hand sliding from my thigh to cup my ass, pulling me even closer, deeper, until I’m gasping, the pleasure building into something unstoppable.

“Touch yourself,” he growls against my ear, his voice rough and commanding. “Show me how much you want this, Camille. Let me see you fall apart.”

I hesitate, my breath catching, and his gaze locks onto mine, intense and unyielding. “Do it,” he orders, his tone leaving no room for argument. “I want to see you touch that pretty clit while I fuck you.”

My trembling hand moves between us, my fingers finding my swollen, sensitive clit. The moment I touch it, the sensation is overwhelming, a jolt of electricity shooting through me as his cock fills me completely, thrusting deep and steady.

“That’s it,” he groans, his thrusts quickening as he watches me. “Good girl. Keep going. Make yourself come for me.”

The combination of my fingers working my clit and his relentless pace is too much. My body trembles, the pressure coiling tight in my belly, ready to snap.

“Fuck, you’re so sexy like this,” he murmurs, his voice thick with arousal. “You have no idea how good you look. How good you feel. Come for me, Camille. I want to feel you come all over my cock.”

His words are my undoing. The orgasm crashes over me, blinding and intense, my fingers faltering as my body tightens around him. I cry out his name, my nails digging into his shoulders as wave after wave of pleasure rolls through me.

“Jesus, Camille,” he groans, his rhythm faltering as he buries himself deep one last time, his own release hitting him hard. His body trembles against mine, his breaths ragged as he rides out his climax.

The only sound in the room is our labored breathing, our bodies still tangled together. Slowly, he pulls back, his hands gentle as he brushes a strand of damp hair from my face.

“You’re incredible,” he murmurs, his lips finding mine in a soft, lingering kiss. “I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of you.”

As the last tremors of our climaxes fade, he holds me close, his strong arms steadying me as he gently lowers me to the couch. My body feels boneless, utterly spent, but he doesn’t let me go—not even for a second.

“Stay here,” he murmurs, brushing a kiss to my forehead. “I’ll be right back.”

I nod, too dazed to respond, watching as he disappears into the bathroom. Moments later, he’s back with a warm, damp towel, his jeans hastily pulled up but unbuttoned, the sight of him both endearing and devastatingly sexy.

He kneels beside me, his touch soft as he cleans me up, taking his time, his movements unhurried. “You okay, baby?” he asks, his voice gentle but firm, his eyes searching mine for any hint of discomfort.

“I’m perfect,” I whisper, my lips curving into a small, content smile.

“Damn right, you are,” he says, his grin softening as he leans down to press a kiss to my lips. “You’re mine, Camille. My girl.”

The words make my heart stutter, warmth spreading through me as I reach up to cup his face. “Yours,” I echo, the truth of it settling over me like a blanket.

He tosses the towel aside, pulling me into his arms. His hands move soothingly along my back, his fingers tracing idle patterns that make me shiver.

“I love you,” he murmurs, the words quiet but certain, as if he’s known it for a while and couldn’t hold them in any longer. “You have no idea how much.”

I freeze for half a second, the weight of his confession hitting me—but then I melt into him, pressing my face against his chest, my arms wrapping around him tightly.

“I love you, too,” I whisper against his skin, the words spilling out before I can overthink them.

His hold on me tightens, his lips pressing to the top of my head. “You’re everything, you know that?”

I smile faintly, nuzzling closer, but the words slip out before I can stop them. “I’m scared. This feels too soon.”

He tilts my chin up, a small smile tugging at his lips. “You can’t stop yourself from falling, Camille,” he says softly, his thumb brushing over my cheek. “But we can make damn sure that while we’re falling, we take care of each other’s hearts.”

And I hope he’s right, because I don’t what’s going to happen if he suddenly realizes I’m not enough. I’m too little for the kind of person he’s about to become. I just pray I can survive the fall.

Fourteen years later

Fourteen years later . . .

Chapter Ten



Killion

The Return Play No One Expected

Present Day . . .

Tuesday evenings after training are usually predictable. By now, the adrenaline from Sunday's win has faded, leaving me stuck somewhere between exhaustion and routine. Slinging my duffel bag over my shoulder, I step out of the car in front of my building. The high-rise gleams against the gray evening sky, its sleek glass reflecting the muted glow of the city.

As I move toward the entrance, I notice a moving truck parked at the curb. The logo on its side is faded, and the movers unloading boxes look like they'd rather be anywhere else. My eyes narrow.

"Let's hope this isn't for my building," I mutter. The idea of a new neighbor disrupting the peace I've carved out in my penthouse doesn't sit well. And, okay, I know it sounds conceited, but the only unoccupied unit is the one next to mine.

When they left, I was half relieved, half concerned about who would arrive in their place. I even had my agent reach out to the family that owns it and offer to buy it, but they turned him down. Something about spending a few years in Europe to immerse their young kids in other cultures. Once they're older, they plan on coming back. Listen, I'm not judging their educational style, just sell me the place so I can control my environment. They can buy something new when they're back, right?

"Evening, Jerry," I greet the doorman as I reach the revolving doors.

"Good evening, Mr. Crawford," he replies with his usual polite nod.

As I step into the lobby, I freeze.

Near the elevator stands a woman, clipboard in one hand, phone in the other, directing the movers with calm efficiency. Her cream sweater clings in all the right places, her dark jeans molding to her curves. Red hair, tied into a bun with a green scarf, glints like copper fire under the fluorescent lights.

There's something about her that stops me cold—the tilt of her head, the way she moves with that purposeful sway, the soft press of her lips as she concentrates, like the world around her doesn't exist. It's too familiar, too goddamn haunting.

My pulse kicks up, and my cock stirs before my brain catches up. My eyes roam her figure like they've been starved for years—and hell, maybe they have. That hair. That fucking red hair. It's enough to make me feel unhinged.

It can't be her. It shouldn't be her.

But then my chest tightens, the memory crashing in hard and fast. She looks like her. My Cami. My fucking Cami.

And there I go again, losing my damn mind, thinking that any redhead who stirs up my blood like this could be her. But this time, it's different. My body isn't just reacting—it's zinging, every nerve on high alert like it's found its missing piece.

It's her.

Camille Ashby.

“Fuck,” I mumble under my breath. “No way. It can't be her.”

I narrow my gaze, zeroing in on her like a predator catching sight of prey. It's been years, but there's no mistaking her. That wild red hair I used to tangle my fingers in. The proud tilt of her chin, the way she carries herself like she owns every inch of the space around her.

And if I got close—really close—I'd find those freckles, wouldn't I? The ones that used to drive me crazy. I'd trace them with my tongue, one by one, just to hear that soft, breathy sound she made when I kissed her skin. I wonder if she still tastes the same, like honey and temptation.

Her eyes. I know if she turned around and looked at me, they'd still have that same fire, that way of locking on to me like I was her whole damn world.

But that was years ago. We were stupid kids back then, drunk on dreams and each other. She had plans, big ones that didn't include staying put. And me? I had a career carved out for me before I even knew who the hell I was.

It seems like now, she's here, and I can feel it in my bones. I can feel the pull, the need . . . it shouldn't be there, but I feel it.

She turns suddenly, her gaze sweeping the lobby before landing on me. For a moment, her expression remains neutral—a polite smile, the kind you give to a stranger you've caught staring. No flicker of recognition.

“Hey,” I greet her, unsure on how this is going to go down.

“Hi,” she says, her voice calm and smooth, with a warmth that hits me straight in the gut. Exactly how I remember it.

“Sorry,” she continues, a small, apologetic smile playing on her lips. “Am I blocking the entire floor? These guys swear they're the best, though. They'll have it done before you have to head to . . .” Her eyes flick to the bag slung over my shoulder. “The gym? Or wherever.”

That's all it takes. A few words, one look, and I know.

It's her.

Camille.

The woman who once made my world spin. The woman I loved so hard, I couldn't keep her. And the woman I've spent every day since trying—and failing—not to think about.

“No worries,” I manage, though my throat feels tight. “Just moving in or helping a friend?”

“Moving in.” She nods, her focus shifting back to the movers. “First day. The movers were late, of course, but they've been great. So far.”

“Welcome to the city,” I say, my voice dipping into something smoother, almost instinctive. “If you need tips—best fries, where to grab coffee, anything—I'm right next door.”

Her brow furrows, her lips parting slightly in confusion. “Okay, thank you,” she replies cautiously, like she's not sure if I'm weird or just overly friendly.

“We can catch up—”

She cuts me off, tilting her head. “I'm going to stop you right there. Why are you being so . . . friendly? Did you see me on social media or something? Got the wrong idea, buddy? Because I'm not here to make friends.”

“No, it's not—social media?” I blink, confused.

Her lips purse. “Oh. So . . . are you the marketing guy Liz mentioned lived in the same building? Sorry, creeps tend to be over friendly sometimes.”

“What?” I step closer, my gaze locking onto hers, refusing to let this moment slip away. “Camille, it's me. Killion. Killion Crawford.”

She tilts her head, her expression blank, like I'm just another stranger in her way. “Did we meet at one of those branding workshops? Sorry, I'm terrible with names—and faces. Give me a textbook and I'll memorize it. People . . . it's hard.”

Her words hit harder than they should, a punch right to the chest. My jaw tightens as I take another step, closing the distance between us. “No. You don't get to play I never met you,” I say, looking at her intensely. The same way I did when I was about to fuck her. “I'm Killion. The guy you dated during your freshman year of college. The one who—”

Stop, my brain screams, but the memories crash over me like a tidal wave, dragging me under. The way her skin felt under my hands, soft and warm, her breath hitching when I kissed that spot behind her ear. The way she whispered my name like it

was her favorite secret as I showed her just how good we could be together. The way she'd pull me closer in the middle of the night, her body molding to mine like we were made to fit.

She was my first everything in all the ways that matter. The first girl I made laugh so hard she cried. The first girl who trusted me with every part of herself—body, mind, soul. And yeah, the first girl I taught how to touch herself, to really touch herself, until she came undone beneath me. I thought I had time to figure out how to keep her, but I was wrong, and I fucking blew it.

I swallow hard, the ache of losing her burning in my chest like it just happened yesterday. I want to grab her, kiss her, make her remember me—not the quarterback or the guy who left, but the boy who was hers before the rest of the world got in the way.

Her eyes widen for a second, the tiniest crack in her composure, before she lets out a sharp, humorless laugh. “Oh. That fucking Killion,” she says, her tone cutting, dripping with sarcasm. “Well, then. Walk away, Crawford. You and I have nothing to say to each other.”

Her words are ice, but the fire in her eyes tells a different story. There's still something there, buried deep, beneath the anger and hurt. I know it because I feel it too—like a live wire humming between us, ready to spark at the slightest touch.

“Cam—” I start, but she holds up a hand, silencing me.

“Don't. Don't you dare,” she says, her voice low and firm, but there's a faint tremor that tells me I've shaken her. “I hope you got everything you wanted in life, Killion. Now, leave me the fuck alone.”

She turns back to the movers, her fingers gripping the clipboard so tightly her knuckles pale. Her jaw clenches, but she doesn't look at me again. Not even a glance.

I stand there, frozen, watching her bark instructions to the movers like she's in control, like I didn't just rip open a wound she thought was long healed. She's more beautiful now than she was at eighteen, with the same fire, the same determination. But there's a wall around her I never had to fight before, and I don't know if I can climb it.

All I know is that I still want to. Even after all these years, after all the mistakes, I still want her.

Chapter Eleven



Killion

How to Keep Your Cool Under Pressure

As soon as the elevator doors close, I pull out my phone and automatically hit my twin's number. He answers before the second ring.

"Killion, we were just talking about you." My brother's tone is smug and it grates on my nerves. I can already hear Valentina, his live-in girlfriend, saying something I can't make up in the background.

"Who's this *we* you're talking about?" I ask, pressing the button for my floor.

Maybe Scottie is visiting him and they're roasting me because I'm an easy target. Or . . . I can't think much because my encounter with Camille has numbed me.

"Val and I, of course. Who else?" he replies. "We were discussing your love life—or, you know, the tragic lack of one."

I scoff, leaning against the steel wall of the elevator. "And what about my love life, asshole?"

"Val thinks you need one," Kaden says casually. "She was talking about setting you up—"

"I don't need blind dates," I cut in.

"Don't start interrupting, asshole," he snaps back. "I already told her you're too jaded to date anyone. No way I'm letting her subject any of her friends to an idiot like you."

"I wouldn't call myself jaded," I protest, even though we both know I'm lying through my teeth.

"Right. All these women who date you use you for your fame and money, and you pretend not to give two fucks until, surprise, you do. That's the literal definition of jaded. Look it up."

"It's called being realistic," I counter. "And you don't see me meddling in your love life."

"Because I'm forever attached to the most beautiful, brilliant woman in the world. No need for anyone else," Kaden says, his voice dripping with the kind of lovesick devotion that makes me want to gag.

Listen, I'm happy that he found someone like Valentina to love him the way she does. No one can stand his insufferable ass better than her. However, it is sickening to see them all smooshing and cuddling when you visit them. Am I bitter because I don't have that? Let's not talk about it, shall we? I have to focus on what really matters.

"I saw her," I say, hoping to move on from his perfect relationship. I don't hate it—I hope it lasts forever—but I'm not in the mood to listen to him get all poetic and lovesick right now.

"Who?" he asks, and for once, there's no teasing in his tone.

"Camille."

The silence on the other end stretches just long enough for regret to settle in my chest.

"She didn't recognize me at first," I add quickly, sounding like it doesn't feel like a fucking dagger to the heart that the woman I've thought about more than anyone else looked at me like I was just another guy in the way. "How could she not recognize me? After everything . . ."

"Everything?" Kaden repeats, his voice skeptical. "You mean the three or four months you dated, like, twenty years ago?"

"It was fourteen years," I correct, cringing at how pathetic it sounds. But it's not like I can help it. "That's not a long time to forget what we had."

"No shit. That's more than a long time, Kill. That's another life ago."

I hear him muttering to Val, something like, 'Yeah, I told you. He loved once, broke her heart—and his.'

"You don't have to give her the fucking SparkNotes on my love life," I snap. "The point is, I saw her. And she looked at me like I was nobody."

Kaden sighs, and I can practically picture him rubbing his temple, like I'm a recurring problem he's too tired to solve. "Maybe she meant more to you than you meant to her. People at that age are too impressionable. You've heard that the human brain doesn't develop until you're in your mid to late twenties. She probably started fucking the next guy who crossed her path and moved on, Killion. It's what people do. Maybe you should try it too."

I bristle at the implication, stepping off the elevator as the doors slide open to my floor. "I moved on. I've had plenty of relationships since her." Okay, I sound defensive. Like, way too defensive. I might as well have shouted, "I'm fine," while ugly-crying into a pint of ice cream. Have I dated after her?

Sure, casual shit because no one has ever come close to Camille. No one.

"Right," Kaden says, his tone so unimpressed it might as well come with a slow clap. "And how many of those relationships have ended with you dramatically sighing and saying, 'I knew she wasn't the one'?"

I push open the door to my penthouse, tossing my gym bag onto the couch. The space feels bigger tonight, emptier somehow, like even the walls are mocking me because I'm fucking lonely. I pace to the kitchen, yanking open the fridge for no real reason. "This isn't about me being stuck in the past. It's just . . . weird, seeing her after all this time. And her not—fuck, what am I going to do?"

"Ah, there's more to this tale, and what else, Kill?" Kaden prompts.

"When I reminded her who I was she told me to go and fuck myself. . . and, well, there's the part where she's my neighbor now," I admit, the words coming out like a confession.

That gets a low whistle out of him. "Neighbor? Like, same building, or . . .?"

"Penthouse neighbor," I clarify.

"Fuck," he says, mirroring my thoughts for once.

"Exactly," I mutter, grabbing a water bottle and twisting off the cap, taking a long sip to cool the frustration burning in my chest.

"Well," Kaden finally says, his tone light but careful, "you could ignore her. Pretend you never saw her. Didn't you say the guy next door wouldn't sell? She's probably just renting for a few months."

I raise an eyebrow. "Sure but what's going to happen in the meantime? What do I do when we run into each other in the hall? Or on the shared balcony? It's only divided by a fucking glass wall that's maybe three feet tall."

"Act the same way you did with the neighbors before. Be polite. You're good at that—when you're not being a dick," he says, and I hear Val mutter something in the background that sounds suspiciously like 'he's always a dick.' "Val says to use your PR skills and not create an issue or she'll fire you as her client."

I scoff and say, "Thanks for the pep talk, coaches."

"Hey, you called me," Kaden reminds me, his tone amused now. "Look, maybe this is your chance to make peace with whatever you're still holding onto. Closure is good for the soul. Or, crazy idea—you could just get to know her again. As friends. No expectations."

"Friends?" I repeat, the word bitter on my tongue.

How the fuck am I supposed to be her friend? She wasn't just some girl I dated. She was my everything. The first person I ever loved. The person I walked away from because I was too much of a coward to fight for what we had. Is that even the truth? Why did I walk away?

"Yeah. Friends. You know, those people you talk to without trying to sleep with them. Try it sometime," Kaden says, the

sarcasm in his voice undeniable.

I lean against the counter, staring out the horizon. The idea of seeing Camille as just another person feels impossible. But Kaden's right about one thing—I'm not the guy I was at twenty-one.

"I might follow some of your advice," I say finally, though I don't even believe it myself.

"Good. Let me know how it goes," Kaden says, and then, after a beat, "And when you get closure, I'll let Val introduce you to one of her friends from yoga. Yogis are pretty bendy, if you know what I mean."

"Noted," I reply, ending the call before he continues digressing.

Chapter Twelve



Camille

The Passive-Aggressive Pivot

The moment the elevator doors close, I let out a shaky sigh. Relief? Hardly. My heart is beating faster than a cheetah on Red Bull, and my palms are damp. This isn't supposed to happen. This isn't how I planned it. And believe me, I planned everything. I even made a mood board to avoid this exact scenario. Yet, here I am—heart racing, knees weak, and cursing the universe.

Maybe this is what Zindy meant when she said I'd jinx myself if I continued obsessing.

"There are millions of people in Manhattan," she'd said, barely glancing up from her glossy magazine while I spiraled. "What are the odds, Cami-Cami? Zero. You won't even see him. Just stay in your lane for six months—a year, tops—and you'll be back home. Unscathed."

Unscathed, my ass. Zindy's flair for drama might rival mine, but she was wrong. The deal I made with myself was simple since he broke up with me: avoid him and move on. And for fourteen years, it worked. Perfectly.

I stayed far away. I transferred to Stanford and went there for med school, followed by years on the West Coast doing my residency, my fellowship, and . . . I picked places he'd never touch. Sure, I knew he'd play the occasional game nearby, but most athletes go in and out of town like clockwork. They don't have time to visit. See, easy to avoid.

Distance was my safety net, and I clung to it like it was the only thing keeping me afloat. It kept me from reliving the worst heartbreak of my life. We stayed in our lanes. He had his stupid football career, and I had my dream of becoming a doctor. We were both happy. At least, that's what I told myself every time his face appeared on ESPN while I was at a sports bar, or on the cover of some magazine while I was in the checkout lane of the grocery store.

The worst moments, though, are when I come across him on social media. Seeing his stupidly perfect face next to some even more perfect woman. Women who are exactly what he deserves—polished, poised, and nothing like the nerdy bookworm he left behind. Women who can be his everything, who are enough.

Okay, fine. Maybe I'm still a little bitter. But can anyone blame me? He didn't just break my heart. He shattered it.

"Sorry, Cam, but football is more important," he'd said . . . okay, it wasn't exactly that, but more or less. He acted like he wasn't tearing apart the best thing I'd ever had. Like my love for him meant nothing. Nothing. "You get it, right? Things between us can't go anywhere."

That last part will always be seared in my heart. He said it like it was nothing. Like I was nothing.

And now? Now, he's living in the penthouse next to mine.

The adrenaline coursing through me doesn't fade, not even a couple of hours after the encounter. I try to focus on organizing, on making sure the movers set things up exactly as I asked. But as I step into the elevator with another box, I freeze.

There he is.

Killion Crawford. Sweaty, shirtless under a zip-up hoodie, with gym shorts slung low on his hips. His hair is damp, his skin gleaming, and I hate the way my body responds—like it's some kind of Pavlovian reflex. My pulse quickens, my cheeks flush, and every nerve in my body feels like it's buzzing.

He glances over at me, and the corner of his mouth twitches. He knows. Damn it, he knows. The air between us feels thick, almost suffocating, as the elevator doors close.

The silence stretches, the tension palpable. I shift the box against my hip, determined not to meet his gaze. But I can feel him watching me, his presence a gravitational pull I can't escape.

When the elevator reaches the penthouse floor, Killion steps out first. The moment lingers, his gaze flicking back to me as he walks toward his door. My hands tremble as I adjust the box, the weight suddenly unbearable.

"Need help with that?" he asks, his voice lower than I remember, rougher, with an edge that sends an unwelcome shiver down my spine.

"I'm fine," I say, my tone clipped as I push past him toward my door.

Killion doesn't take the hint. He steps closer, unhurried, and suddenly it feels like the world has narrowed to just the two of us. His presence is magnetic, overwhelming, and I hate how much I notice—how much I feel.

Don't feel, Camille. Not for him.

"Stay in your lane, Crawford," I warn, my voice louder now.

"I'm just trying to help," he replies, his tone infuriatingly calm.

"Which I don't need," I snap, struggling to keep my composure.

"Cam, we're neighbors now. Don't you think—"

"Camille," I correct, cutting him off. "The name is Camille. And from what I've heard, New York neighbors are supposed to ignore each other. So why don't we do that? I'll be out of here in a few months, a year, tops. You do you, I'll keep to myself."

His eyes narrow, his jaw tightening. "Are you alone?" he asks, his voice a little too casual.

That's a weird question. Like he wants me to invite him or . . . I'm not sure what he means with that question but I answer, "No. Ben should be here tomorrow."

His expression shifts, a flicker of something—hurt? Anger?—crossing his face. "Oh, there's a Ben," he says, stepping back like I just punched him in the gut.

"Yes. A Benedict," I say coolly, adding, "He'll be friendly, as long as you are."

Killion's lips press into a thin line, and after a moment, he nods. "I can be friendly," he says, his voice softer now. "Welcome to New York."

His words are polite, almost casual, but they linger long after he disappears into his apartment. I close my door and lean against it, exhaling sharply.

This can't be happening. Not here. Not now. I spent years rebuilding myself after Killion Crawford dumped me. Years convincing myself that what we had was a teenage fantasy—a mistake I could learn from and leave behind.

But now he's here. Living next door. And there's no safety net, no distance to protect me from the man who seems like he still has the power to unravel me with a single look.

LATER, AS THE LAST BOX IS UNPACKED AND THE MOVERS FINALLY LEAVE, I STEP ONTO THE BALCONY WITH A GLASS OF WINE, THE cool air brushing against my skin. The city hums below, alive and relentless, its lights stretching endlessly into the horizon. It's overwhelming and exhilarating, and if I weren't already emotionally wrung out, I might appreciate it more.

I toy with my phone, tempted to call Zindy or anyone, really. But the three-hour time difference means all my West Coast friends are probably having dinner with their families or binge-watching *Love Island* without me. By the time they're free to talk, I'll either be asleep or lying awake, replaying today's train wreck in my head.

I hear a noise from the other side of the balcony—a soft murmur of a phone call, the distinct clink of glass against metal. My stomach tightens. Of course, he's out here. The divider between our spaces isn't exactly reassuring, reaching just to my hip.

Too low to be comforting, too high to pretend I'm oblivious.

Before I can stop myself, my gaze drifts toward his side. And there he is—Killion Crawford, leaning against the railing like he owns the damn night. One hand holds a glass, the other a phone pressed to his ear, his broad shoulders impossibly relaxed, as if the weight of the world doesn't dare touch him.

He murmurs something into the phone, his voice low and smooth, then pulls it away, ending the call with a quick swipe of his thumb. The device disappears into his pocket, and he takes a slow sip from his glass, his eyes fixed on the skyline like it's just for him.

"Eavesdropping isn't very neighborly," he says, his tone casual, without sparing me so much as a glance.

I freeze, heat rushing to my cheeks. Caught. Of course, I got caught. Subtlety has never been my strong suit.

"Neither is talking loud enough for someone to overhear," I counter, stepping fully into view because if I'm going down, I'm doing it with dignity. Or whatever's left of it.

He turns to face me, and the faint smirk tugging at his lips is enough to make my blood pressure spike. God, I hate that smirk. Hate that it still does something to me, something I'd rather die than admit.

"Maybe you're right," he says amused.

We stand there for a beat, the silence stretching between us. The city feels too quiet, the hum of traffic below not nearly enough to drown out the way my pulse is hammering.

"You really planning to ignore me for the next year?" he asks, like it's a casual question, like we're old friends catching up instead of . . . whatever the hell this is.

I take a sip of my wine, letting the sharpness settle me. "I don't see the point of having this—or any—conversation, Killion," I say, keeping my tone as even as possible.

"We could be friends," he dares to suggest. He fucking dares to say it, like he didn't obliterate any chance of friendship fourteen years ago.

"We could," I say with a smile so sweet it could curdle milk. "But I choose not to. I'm pretty selective about the people I surround myself with. You and I . . . You get it, right? Things between us can't go anywhere."

I feel some kind of satisfaction that I'm able to throw those exact words in his face. That's exactly what he said to me the day he broke up with me.

"Cam—"

"No, you're not allowed to say anything. You lost that right, remember?" I cut him off, shaking my head. "But tell you what, Killion. We'll create a schedule to use the balcony. When you're out here, I'll stay inside. When I'm out here, you stay inside. That's as friendly as this can get."

"But—"

"Have a good night, Killion Crawford," I say, my tone tight, as polite as I can manage without screaming at him. Because that's who I am now. Fucking polite.

"See you around, baby, sweet dreams," he says, his voice softer than I expected, almost resigned. Though I'm sure he's trying to bait me with the 'baby' and 'sweet dreams' but I don't turn around.

I retreat to my side of the balcony, my heart racing as I shut the door behind me. The glass is cool against my back as I lean against it, clutching my wine.

The distance I created all those years ago—the thousands of miles, the years spent avoiding his name, his face—has collapsed in an instant. And I don't know how to rebuild it. How to keep this polite. How to not scream at him for the way he left, for everything he didn't say, for all the ways he broke me.

He deserves the rage of that eighteen-year-old girl who didn't know better, who trusted him with her heart only to have it smashed to pieces. But instead, here I am, playing nice. Playing polite.

God, I hate this city. No. It's not the city, but him.

I fucking hate Killion Crawford, and there's no way around it.

Now, to live next door to the enemy for a year—I'll make it less. There's no way I can stick around for longer and not burn his place down to the ground—because I know him. He'll be stubborn about creating a friendship and will piss me off so much that I'll have to teach him a lesson.

Chapter Thirteen



Killion

How to Read the Defense and Still Fail

The apartment falls silent again, but my thoughts are louder than a stadium crowd. Camille on the terrace made everything real. Too real.

She's really here. Here. After all these years.

I glance toward the balcony, half-expecting to see her leaning against the railing again, but she's gone. Just the thought of her being next door makes my chest feel tight, and I can't decide if it's excitement, dread, or a fucked-up combination of both.

Can I keep being this polite? Pretending that her telling me to fuck myself—twice in one day—didn't get under my skin? Because, spoiler: it did.

Part of me wants to remind her. Of what, though? That we had something real once? That I wasn't always an asshole? But then again, what right do I have? I lost any claim to her the moment I walked away.

So how the fuck do I convince her I'm not that same stupid kid?

Back then, I thought breaking it off was the right thing to do. Camille was just finishing her freshman year. She wanted to do summer school, finish her degree in two years so she could get to med school faster. I was headed to New York. I had to show the Gladiators that I was so good, I could be their starting quarterback. Not just some back up to the back up.

My Pops warned me I was too young to be thinking about serious relationships. I listened, because, well, he was Pops. Football needed my full focus, and Camille had years of studying ahead of her. Asking her to uproot her life for me would've been selfish. Right?

But now, looking back, I wonder if I was just a coward.

No, Pop said it back then. People grow up. They change. And she would realize. . . but what if he was wrong? I love playing the game, but football is not my life. It's not my personality. Yes, that's what I let people think because it's easy. I'm a

portrait of the All-American quarterback they want to love. After I close the door though, I'm different.

And maybe, just maybe, I'm not the guy I was at twenty-one. But how do I explain that to her when she's got me pegged as the same asshole who broke her heart?

What if I tried texting her? We can text, right? Except, does she even have the same number? I've changed mine at least five times in the past fourteen years. Shit. I could Google her, but that feels . . . creepy. Or I could call Jacob. He's good at finding things—or people. That's part of his job as my agent, right? Do what I need because he wants me happy. After all, I'm the guy who brings him the most money in his entire roster. And yes, I make sure to let my siblings know who's best.

I hit Jacob McCallister's number, and he answers after two rings.

"Finally," he says, sounding exasperated. "Are you going to sign the contract with the energy drink company? They're on my ass about it."

"Nope," I reply. "I already told you I'm not drinking that shit. It tastes like rat poison."

"Do you even know what rat poison tastes like?" he fires back.

"I have a pretty solid idea after those cans you made me drink. I'm sure I still glow in the dark," I grumble.

"You're such a fucking diva, Crawford," he says with a sigh. "When we started, you'd take any deal as long as they paid you."

"Yeah, well, that was then," I counter. "Now I know better. Get me Lotus or Ferrari. I'll sign right away."

"You're a quarterback, not a race car driver," he deadpans. "But I'll see what I can do to get you more deals. Maybe I'll get the other Crawford to take the energy drink deal."

"Which one?" I ask, though I already know where this is going. He wants to play me against one of them so I'll say yes. Instead, I divert his attention, "Greyson? He'd say yes to anything if you wave a check in his face."

"He's still in college. I'll get him deals when he makes it to the big leagues—if he gets there this time," Jacob mutters. And I hope he does, because not getting into any team at eighteen really fucked with him. The scholarships to all the Ivy leagues and Big Ten schools didn't matter. He wanted to be in the league just like Dad and Kaden.

"So, if you didn't call me to talk contracts, what do you want?"

I hesitate, then launch into the basics about Camille—leaving out the part where she told me to fuck myself. Twice. Jacob is silent for a beat before saying he'll call me back in ten minutes.

Exactly nine minutes later, my phone rings.

"Okay," Jacob says, his tone way too gleeful. "So, you want the rundown on Dr. Camille Ashby, MD, FPMRS. That's Female Pelvic Medicine and Reconstructive Surgery, in case you're wondering."

"Seriously?" I ask, leaning back against the couch.

"Dead serious. She's one of the most sought-after doctors. Not sure if she's still practicing, but you can find her online under @TheHappyHooHaCoach. Her videos are not what you expect. She's got tips for keeping things . . . tight."

I blink. "You're fucking kidding me."

"Nope. She's got over three million followers. And she's making bank," Jacob continues, clearly enjoying himself. "She's running her own company, selling products, and get this—she's got a book."

"A book?" I ask, sitting up straighter.

"Yep. It's about postpartum care," Jacob says, and I hear a muffled voice in the background. "Noelle says her stuff works. She and her friends swear by her exercises. And I can tell you—ouch, babe. I wasn't going to tell him *that*."

There's a scuffle on the other end, and I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Jesus, Jacob. I didn't need all that information, even when you didn't say much." Though good for him if his wife has a tight pussy. Isn't that the dream? And now I'm digressing.

"Anyway," he says, recovering quickly. "She's the real deal. Honestly, if I could sign her for a sponsorship deal, I'd do it in a heartbeat. Maybe she'd want to write another book? I could—"

"Don't," I cut him off, my mind reeling. Camille fucking Ashby. The girl I once knew—the one I loved—is now the Happy HooHa Coach with three million followers and a thriving company. And here I am, still trying to figure out how to tell her I'm sorry, please give me a chance to . . . what do I want?

Jacob's voice snaps me back to reality. "So, there you have it, your new neighbor. Now, as your agent, I ask you to behave, Crawford. I don't need another one of you needing a PR emergency clean up."

I stare out at the city lights, the question lingering in the air like a challenge. What the fuck am I going to do? Then I remember she mentioned a Benedict coming tomorrow. That I should be nice to him.

Meaning she's with someone, and if she's with someone maybe it'd be best if I just stay in my lane. Be happy for her, right? I don't ask for her number or any other detail. It's not that I'm giving up, it's that twenty-one-year-old me fucked up my future and I have to live with my mistakes for the rest of my life.

"I'll . . . stay in my lane. Don't worry about it," I assure him before ending the call.

Chapter Fourteen



Killion

When Facing a Downward Dog Disaster

My alarm jolts me awake at six sharp, as it does every morning. I stretch, my muscles tight from yesterday's workout, and shuffle downstairs toward the kitchen. Coffee first. Always coffee first.

The espresso machine gleams under the soft light of the kitchen. I press the button for a latte with a double shot and watch as the rich, dark liquid streams into my mug before the frothed milk. The aroma is enough to shake off the last remnants of sleep.

With the first sip warming me from the inside out, I step onto the balcony, ready to soak in the morning skyline and clear my head before another grueling day. Today during training we'll be watching the Washington Warlocks. Then tonight we'll be heading to Seattle so we can acclimate for our game.

Maybe it's a good thing that I won't be in town until Friday. Camille can welcome Benedict and I can . . . what am I supposed to do? Maybe I should rent another place while she's so close. I don't think I can act like she means nothing to me. She's still someone and the least I ask is for her to let me get some kind of closure. Is that too much to ask?

As I'm lost in my thoughts about what I'm going to do with her—or about her, because, let's face it, I'm hopeless—my entire world narrows the second I see her.

This is my life now: Camille, everywhere I turn. Like she's got a sixth sense for ruining my peace of mind. Back when she wasn't around, I could at least pretend she was a dream. A far-off, impossible dream I let slip through my fingers years ago. Now? Now, the universe has decided to shove her in my face as a constant reminder that I royally screwed up the game of a lifetime. Thanks, karma. Message received.

And there she is. Right there. On her side of the balcony. Practicing yoga, of all things. Her mat is dead-center, perfectly aligned, because of course it is. She's all symmetry and serenity, while I'm over here gripping the railing like a man clinging to

sanity.

She's mid-pose, stretched and arched in ways no human should be able to bend. It's impossible not to notice. Believe me, I'm trying, but of course, I'm failing spectacularly.

And then there are the yoga pants. Those yoga pants. You know the ones—the kind that defy the laws of physics and cling to every curve like they were designed by a team of hopeless romantics with a flair for tormenting poor fools like me. As if that weren't enough, her fitted tank dips just enough to reveal a sliver of golden skin, catching the early morning light like it's been choreographed.

Seriously, it's like the universe hates me. Or maybe it's just showing off. Either way, I'm one downward dog away from losing what little dignity I have left. I could just jump to the other side and beg her to take me back. To let me in, to let me fuck her at least one last time. Okay, that's not very romantic, but my body . . . my body has the urge to touch her, to fuse with her at least one more time.

My eyes trace the line of her back as she folds forward, her hands stretching toward the ground, her hips tilting just right. It's hypnotic, unfairly so. Heat flares low in my stomach—a slow burn I haven't felt in years. Not like this. Not from just looking.

Before my brain can overrule my body, I'm gripping the edge of the railing tighter, my knuckles white as I take what I hope is a casual sip of coffee. Of course it doesn't help. The coffee's as hot as my blood, and it scalds the roof of my mouth.

She shifts into another pose, smooth as silk, her movements so fluid it's like she's putting on a private performance. I know she isn't—it's not for me—but tell that to my traitorous brain. Her ponytail sways, red loose strands framing her face as she exhales deeply, serene and focused.

That is, until she glances over her shoulder.

Our eyes meet. Hers are green and intense, maybe even furious. They narrow like she's just caught me stealing her streaming password. Instantly, the peaceful vibe she had going evaporates, and she straightens, turning to face me with all the intensity of a teacher catching a kid with a cheat sheet.

"You're supposed to stay in your lane, Crawford," she says, crossing her arms over her chest.

Her tone is calm, but there's a razor-sharp edge beneath it, sharp enough to slice my ego clean in half.

"My lane?" I echo, setting my mug down on the railing with a practiced casualness that doesn't fool either of us. My body, on the other hand, is one electrical pulse away from short-circuiting.

"Yes," she says, her gaze locked on mine, unyielding. "Your lane. Away from this side of the balcony. And just so we're clear, that doesn't include gawking at me while I'm trying to stretch."

Have I been demoted from balcony neighbor to creepy yoga lurker? That's fucking pathetic.

I shrug, feigning indifference even though my pulse is hammering like I just ran sprints. "Hard not to notice someone doing Warrior Pose before the sun's fully up."

"It's six," she snaps, her tone clipped.

"Too early, don't you think?" I reply, letting a smirk tug at my lips.

Her jaw tightens, and I can tell she's debating whether to pack up her mat and storm inside. But then she steps closer to the divider, her body screaming irritation even as she exhales deeply—probably some yoga trick to keep from throwing her mat at me.

"Look, Killion," she says, her voice softer now but no less firm. "I'm here for work, not to relive whatever this is."

"Whatever this is?" I repeat, grinning wider. At least she's acknowledging it. Even if she doesn't want to, she can't pretend there's nothing here. "You mean the fact that we used to know each other?"

"Barely," she shoots back, quick and precise like a jab to the ribs. "We hung out for what? Two months? That's nothing."

The casual air drops from me like a weight. I straighten, my tone cooling. "That's not how I remember it."

"Well, maybe your memory's a little skewed," she says, her voice rising to meet the tension crackling between us.

I push off the railing, stepping closer to the divider, close enough that the air between us feels electric. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I don't have the luxury of pretending everything's fine," she says, the words tumbling out in a rush. "You walked away, Killion. You decided football was more important, and now you think you can stand here and act like it's no big deal? Like we can be besties?"

I open my mouth to respond, but she cuts me off, her gaze locking onto mine with enough fire to scorch the city below us.

"I moved on after you," she continues, her voice steady but simmering with barely contained anger. "So whatever this is—whatever you think it is—just leave it alone."

The silence that follows is deafening, louder than any argument we could've had. Her words hit hard, but it's her expression that guts me. The hurt beneath the anger, the way she's looking at me like she's trying to bury something that refuses to stay dead.

"Camille—" I start, my voice soft, but she holds up a hand, cutting me off again.

"I have a meeting to prepare for and, after that, a few consultations," she says, her tone final. "I don't have time for you or

your nonsense.”

She picks up her mat, her movements deliberate, and heads back toward her apartment without another glance.

I stand there, watching her disappear inside, the ache in my chest settling deeper.

Whatever this is, it's not over. Not by a long shot.

And as for this Ben guy? He can go fuck himself. Camille's mine. She always has been. She just doesn't know it yet. I need her to remember it.

Chapter Fifteen



Killion

How to Use a Kitten as a Wingman

I'm halfway to the elevator, gym bag slung over my shoulder, when I see him. A guy loitering outside Camille's door, shifting his weight from one foot to the other like he's debating whether to knock or bolt. He's tall, though not quite my height, with the wiry build of someone who spends more time hunting for vintage band tees than lifting anything heavier than a cold brew.

He's got dark jeans rolled at the cuffs, boots so pristine they look allergic to dirt, and a tousled haircut that probably required three different products to achieve that "just rolled out of bed" look. Round glasses frame a face straight out of an indie movie, and at his feet is a bulky black bag that could be a duffel, a suitcase, or who the fuck knows.

I stop dead in my tracks, my brows knitting together. "Can I help you?"

He glances up, startled, then immediately checks his phone, like talking to me is an inconvenience. "I'm looking for Camille Ashby. She moved in yesterday."

"Benedict?" The name slips out before I can stop myself. The regret? Instant and absolute.

He blinks, adjusts his glasses, and nods like he's pleasantly surprised I've passed the first test in some secret society. "Yes, Benedict. So you're aware. Did she leave you any instructions?"

Instructions? What am I, her secretary?

"No," I say, crossing my arms, my voice tight. "But if you need help . . ."

Why the hell am I offering to help? I should be telling him Camille moved to France. Hell, I should grab his bag and fling it off the balcony just to establish dominance. Instead, I'm standing here like a moron, watching him check his watch with the air of someone far too busy for this conversation.

"Obviously," he mutters under his breath. "My flight leaves soon, and I don't want to miss it, but she's not here."

"Flight? I mean, you probably should leave," I repeat, thrown off by his rushed tone.

Without missing a beat, he steps toward the elevator and jabs the button like it owes him money. “Yeah, the instructions are in the side pocket if you need to wait for her. Just tell her to transfer the rest of the money.”

The elevator doors open immediately—because of course they do when I’m not the one calling it—and he steps inside without so much as a glance back.

“Wait, what money—” I start, but the doors close with a soft ding, leaving me standing there like I’ve been hit by a very confusing train.

I look down at the bag he left behind, the confusion in my head quickly morphing into full-blown suspicion. What the actual fuck just happened?

For a solid minute, my brain spirals into worst-case scenarios. Is this a bomb? Did Camille piss off a sociopath who decided to leave her some deranged parting gift? Or—and honestly, this one feels more plausible—did she hire someone to get rid of me? It’s kind of genius if you think about it. Nobody would suspect her if she outsourced the dirty work to *Benedict Indie Movie Extra*. And now I’m the only witness. Fucking fantastic.

I crouch next to the bag, my heart pounding like I’m disarming a bomb in a spy movie. Because, let’s face it—my luck is that bad. Just as I reach for the zipper, I hear it.

“Meow.”

I freeze, staring at the bag.

“Meow. Meow.”

Okay. So, this is either the weirdest bomb in history or . . . just a cat. Swallowing my nerves, I unzip the side pocket slowly, half-expecting a trap. Instead, I’m greeted by a pair of impossibly bright green eyes blinking up at me.

An orange ball of fluff lets out another soft meow, and I blink back.

“What the fuck . . .” I mutter, scooping the kitten out of the bag like it’s some kind of alien artifact. It fits easily in my hands, tiny and warm, its soft body nuzzling against my thumb like we’re best friends.

“You’re a little too friendly for a cat,” I say, my voice softening against my will. The kitten purrs, tilting its head like it’s mocking me. That’s when I notice the collar.

“Benedict Cumbercat,” I read aloud, my lips twitching into a smirk despite myself. “So, you’re Ben?”

“Meow.” The kitten sneezes in response, and I let out a long, dramatic sigh. Glancing between Camille’s apartment door and the furball in my hands, I can’t help but feel like I’ve been drafted into some weird cosmic joke. The guy didn’t explain much—just dumped the bag and ran. Now I’m holding literal baggage.

“Guess we both need Camille,” I say, tucking Ben back into his carrier.

From inside, he stares up at me with those unsettlingly bright green eyes, blinking slowly like he knows exactly how much I’m losing it. His nose twitches, and I swear, for a second, he looks smug.

“You’re lucky you’re cute,” I mutter, pacing my apartment with my phone in hand. “Because otherwise, you’d be on your way to Jerry’s or a shelter right now.”

Ben stretches, curling up inside the bag like he’s royalty. Meanwhile, I’m one minor inconvenience away from throwing my phone across the room. I can’t leave him—not when he’s this small and . . . okay, kind of adorable. But I also can’t miss practice. Not with a game coming up.

“Great,” I mutter, running a hand through my hair. “Now I’m a fucking cat sitter.”

Ben yawns like this is the most boring day of his life, and I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

I have no idea what to do next—with Ben, with Camille, or with any of this. All I know is that this day has already gone spectacularly off the rails.

I SCROLL THROUGH MY CONTACTS UNTIL I LAND ON JACOB’S NAME. HE PICKS UP ON THE THIRD RING, HIS TONE FAR TOO RELAXED for someone whose full-time job is managing my chaos.

“What now?” he says, exasperation laced with just enough familiarity to be annoying. “If it’s about the energy drink sponsorship, forget it. Luc signed the contract this morning.”

“Luc?” I bark into the phone, pacing the kitchen. He seriously has to be a lot choosier about his sponsorships, but that’s his stomach he’s killing, not mine. “Great. He can drink poison while I stick to actual water.”

“Noted. So what’s the emergency?”

I glance at the carrier sitting on my counter, where a tiny orange kitten is blinking up at me like it’s dared me to solve all its problems. “We’ve got a problem,” I say, my voice tight.

Jacob groans. “Define problem.”

“I need you to get in touch with Camille Ashby,” I say, cutting straight to the point.

There’s a pause, then a faint chuckle. “Camille Ashby? You need her to tighten something down there? You watched her videos and want some action?”

“Don’t fucking start with me,” I snap. “She has a cat.”

“A cat?” His amusement is palpable. “Why the fuck do you care about her cat?”

“Because it’s currently sitting in my kitchen,” I grind out. “Some hipster dropped it off and bolted. Something about a flight and a transfer. Now I’m stuck babysitting this thing.”

Jacob laughs, loud and long. “You? With a kitten? This I have to see.”

“Laugh it up, Jacob,” I snap, rubbing the back of my neck. “I can’t leave him here alone, and I sure as hell can’t bring it to the doorman. Does Camille even have permission for pets in this building? What if the owner finds out?”

“Killion,” he says, his tone turning patronizing. “It’s a kitten, not a ticking time bomb. Calm down.”

“It might as well be,” I mutter, glancing at the carrier. The kitten tilts its head, its green eyes gleaming like it’s enjoying my suffering. “I have practice, Jacob. I can’t just leave it in my house. I don’t have the supplies and I don’t know when she’s coming back.”

“Then take it with you,” he says simply, the grin evident in his voice.

“Oh, sure,” I say, pacing again. “I’ll just waltz into the training facility with a kitten and act like it’s normal.”

“Honestly? Do it. You’re just watching tape today. No one’s going to care.”

I stop mid-step, staring at the tiny fluff ball that’s now yawning like it owns the damn place. “This is insane.”

“It’s temporary,” Jacob says, clearly trying not to laugh again. “Keep it in the carrier, and I’ll work on getting Camille to call you back.”

I let out a heavy sigh, glaring at the kitten as if it’s to blame for this entire fiasco. “Fine. But you owe me for this.”

“I owe you nothing. You pay me to deal with your shit,” Jacob fires back.

I hang up, muttering curses under my breath as I grab the carrier and my gym bag. The kitten meows softly, like it’s saying, *Good luck, sucker.*

By the time I walk into the training facility, the kitten is meowing again, louder this time, like it’s trying to make a scene. Great. Just great.

The receptionist gives me a long, raised-eyebrow look as I stride past her desk, a carrier in one hand and my gym bag in the other. “Don’t ask,” I mutter, not breaking stride.

Inside the film room, the guys are already gathered, their conversations dying the second I step in. A few heads swivel toward the carrier, and then the comments start.

“Uh, Killion?” one of them asks, barely stifling a laugh. “You realize that’s not a football, right?”

“Congratulations,” I reply dryly. “Your observational skills are unmatched.”

A ripple of laughter spreads through the room, and I ignore them, setting the carrier down in the corner and pulling out a chair. The kitten meows again, its tiny voice cutting through the chatter like a knife.

“Is that . . . alive?” another guy asks, half curious, half horrified.

“No,” I deadpan. “It’s animatronic.”

The coach walks in a moment later, pausing just long enough to glance at the carrier. His expression is unreadable, but he shakes his head like this is just another day dealing with my bullshit and starts the tape without a word.

I sink back in my seat, grateful for the distraction. The kitten quiets down, curling into a little orange ball in the corner of the carrier, blissfully unaware of the chaos it’s caused.

“Camille,” I mutter under my breath, barely loud enough for myself to hear. “You fucking owe me for this.”

But deep down, I know it’s not just about the kitten. It’s about her. I have something that belongs to her and maybe she’ll have to talk more than leave me the fuck alone if she wants the kitty back.

Chapter Sixteen

Unknown number: Where are you, Camille?

Camille: Who is this?

Killion: Killion Crawford.

Camille: How did you get my number?

Killion: Benedict.

Camille: What does that mean? Are you telling me Ben gave you my number? Because I know that's a lie.

Killion: Why would it be a lie? Unless your living partner doesn't speak English.

Camille: He's not my living partner. I mean he lives with me, and we're partners in crime, but . . . obviously he doesn't speak English.

Killion: Why would you make me think he does?

Camille: I didn't do shit.

Killion: I asked you if you lived with someone.

Camille: I told you yes, Ben. If you assumed he was human that's your business. Not mine.

Killion: Benedict Cumbercat? What kind of name is that?

Camille: How do you know his name?

Killion: I just know it, why name him that?

Camille: I was going to name him Sherlock Meow but Karla snatched the name before me.

Killion: Your sister has a cat too?

Camille: Yeah, Dad thought it'd be cute to give us orange tabbies for Christmas a few years ago. I guess once your daughters can pay for their own stuff it becomes harder to find a good gift for them.

Killion: What about your brother?

Camille: I can't remember what Ken got, but it wasn't a cat. He can barely keep himself alive.

Killion: What did he end up studying?

Camille: Killion, focus, what do you want? And most importantly, how did you get my phone?

Killion: I had to find it since your boyfriend or . . . that guy dropped your cat with me. He said something about transferring him the money. The instructions he said he left just say when to feed Ben. My agent already got him food, but I can't look after him.

Camille: You have Ben?

Killion: Yes, and he's learning a lot about the Washington Warriors in case you're wondering what he's doing.

Camille: But he was supposed to arrive at eight tonight. Not in the morning.

Killion: Cam, focus. Your cat is here and I need to board a plane at three. How do you want to handle this?

Camille: I have one last consultation in twenty minutes, and then I'm free. Can we meet outside your penthouse at one?

Killion: That'll be pushing it too close.

Camille: I'm sure your team will wait for Killion Crawford.

Killion: Coach would bench me if I don't make it on time. Also I need to be a good example to my team.

Camille: Oh, right, you're the good twin. How's the black sheep of the duo? I heard he's engaged. True, or is it a publicity stunt to make him look good?

Killion: If you're a good girl, I'll introduce you to Val. You're going to like her.

Camille: Don't do that.

Killion: What did I do? Tell you I'll introduce you to Val?

Camille: Call me a good girl. I know where that's going.

Killion: Baby, I'll go wherever you allow me to.

Camille: Behave.

Killion: I'm behaving unless you request it any other way.

Camille: I appreciate you taking care of Ben, but keep your dirty words (and paws) to yourself.

Killion: I want something in exchange for the feline.

Camille: You can keep him and take it . . . Where are you going again?

Killion: Seattle, and yes, if anything, I can take him with me.

Camille: That'll be kidnapping.

Killion: More like catnapping, but I have proof in these texts that it's you who doesn't want to pay for catsitting.

Camille: I'm confused and busy. I'll see you at one and there won't be any reward or payment.

Chapter Seventeen

Killion: How's my pal Ben?

Camille: He's not your friend.

Killion: I'd like to differ. By the time I dropped him off with you, we were chatting about . . . well, everything: life, kitties, and his future.

Camille: We had a long talk and he's now aware that you're a persona non grata. Ashbies don't like you.

Killion: Why are you manipulating your kitty? That's not very nice, Camille.

Camille: I can be mean, sue me.

Killion: I won't sue you, but can you tell me why you became the hoochy coach?

Camille: I'm not the hoochy coach.

Killion: My apologies. The Happy Hoo-Ha Coach. That's a catchy name. I thought you like to call any anatomic part of the body by its name. What's the story there, Cami?

Camille: It's Camille. Not Cami nor Cam.

Killion: That still doesn't answer my question. I heard you're a surgeon, and yet you have videos on how to tighten cunts.

Camille: I do and I'm not ashamed of it, if that's what these questions are trying to do.

Killion: No, I'm curious. I remember you didn't know your specialty. I want to know how you went from 'I have no idea' to . . . being an online sensation.

Camille: (rolls eyes)

Killion: Sure, roll anything you want, Cam. But can you tell me more about it?

Camille: Why did you contact me again?

Killion: I wanted to check on you and Benny-boy.

Camille: Ben, Benedict. Not Benny-boy.

Killion: Have you discussed with him the possibility of different pet names?

Camille: He's doing fine. Can you leave me alone?

Killion: Why didn't you travel with him? And who was that guy who brought him over?

Camille: I traveled with the investor and his wife. She's allergic to cats. I hired a guy who could bring Ben over, but he couldn't do it the same day so . . . Zindy arranged it.

Killion: Ah, that's why things didn't go as planned. She hasn't changed, has she?

Camille: What does that mean?

Killion: She always did everything last minute and didn't care if it was done right. Which works for some things, but for your cat . . . she should've been more careful.

Camille: She has a busy life. Business, children, husband, and pets. I admire that she can keep up with all that and still is able to help me.

Killion: So the guy is nothing to you.

Camille: Nope. Never met him. Zindy did. She said he's good at what he does, transporting animals from one state to another.

Killion: He left your cat with a stranger.

Camille: He thought you knew Ben. You could've said something like . . . aren't you forgetting your cat?

Killion: Technically, I didn't know he left a cat until I opened the carrier.

Camille: That's pretty irresponsible of you, Killion.

Killion: You want the truth? I thought this guy was Benedict, your boyfriend, partner or husband. I was trying to figure out how to get rid of him so I could get a second chance with you.

Camille: Have I mentioned you're a sociopath?

Killion: A few times when I broke up with you.

Camille: Obviously, YOU haven't changed.

Killion: I'm a brand new man. You should try to get to know me.

Camille: Hard pass.

Killion: I can be lovable.

Camille: You can fake being lovable.

Killion: What would it take to get a second chance with you, Cam?

Camille: Camille. The name is Camille. And don't waste my time. It's over. *You* called it off. I'm not the same stupid eighteen-year-old who believed in love, who believed in . . . you.

Killion: I fucked up, but if I can have a few minutes to talk to you.

Killion: Cam, hear me out, don't block me.

Killion: One chance?

Killion: Fine, ignore me. But remember, I never give up.

Chapter Eighteen



Camille

The Dirty Fry Tactic

Killion's texts have me trembling with anger. Is he kidding me? *I made a mistake and just give me another chance*. Like it was yesterday and he only told me *I can't go out tonight but see you tomorrow*. That's not how the break up went. I know it, he knows it . . . and obviously he forgot how bad it was. Well, he didn't stay to see me cry like a baby who couldn't be consoled with anything. My parents even thought something bad had happened to me because I was just crying and not eating at all.

The moment Dad told me he was cancelling the second summer session I wiped the tears and swallowed all the pain. Killion wasn't going to take everything away from me. I had a plan and I would be executing it, even if it was happening with a broken heart. Look at me now, being a doctor and . . . not having to deal with assholes like him.

But of course, I'm so worked up that today I have to call Zindy.

"You know what's more annoying than having Killion Crawford texting you that he wants a second chance?" I say, gripping my phone like it's the only thing keeping me sane. "Him sending me fries. Greasy, warm fries with ranch dressing."

"Umm, hello to you too," Zindy responds, her voice amused on the other end of the line.

"Yeah, good whatever to you," I blurt, pacing the length of my apartment.

"You want to talk about it?" she asks, her tone shifting to something softer. "Let's start with . . . did you say Killion fucking Crawford?"

"Yes, that one," I mumble, rolling my eyes even though she can't see me. "He's my neighbor."

There's a pause, then a loud gasp. "And why am I just learning this now?"

"Last night I was too flustered to call, and today has been a long day," I explain, switching the phone to my other hand.

"But you called me last night to ask why Benedict ended up on your neighbor's doorstep," she says. "You could've

mentioned then that *the* Killion Crawford was right next door.”

“Oh, right. I forgot to mention that he’s the neighbor,” I say, my tone dripping with false innocence. “And he fucking dares to send me fries. Like . . . how dare he?”

“I see. This is worse than I thought,” she says, and I can practically hear her shaking her head. “So, you live next door to the bastard, he had your precious Ben, and now he’s bribing you.”

“And did you hear the part where he’s asking for a second chance?” I ask, my voice climbing.

“After what he did?” she huffs indignantly. “Asshole. I can have my husband there in no time. He can take a swing or two—after asking for his autograph and a signed jersey. You know, they sell for a lot.”

“Zindy, focus,” I say, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“Sorry, sorry. It’s just . . . wow. The audacity of this guy. What did you even say to him?”

“Nothing yet. What am I supposed to say? Thanks for the fries, but also, fuck you for breaking my heart?”

“Fries are a dirty tactic,” she says, and I can hear the grin in her voice. “He knows your weaknesses. He’s playing dirty. Typical Killion.”

“Exactly,” I say, throwing myself onto the couch. “This is what he does. He’s all charm and big gestures, and then when it really matters, he drops the ball. He’s a quarterback. How does he keep dropping the fucking ball?”

“That’s a question for a sports caster,” she says, but then there’s a loud crash in the background, followed by what sounds like a kid screaming.

“Zindy?” I ask, sitting up.

“Hold on,” she says, her voice muffled as she yells something about putting the lamp down and not climbing the bookshelf.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“Depends on your definition of okay,” she says, coming back on the line. “My house is basically a war zone, thanks to my offspring. One second. Connor. No.”

The line goes dead, and I stare at the phone, unsure whether to laugh or cry.

With a sigh, I set it on the coffee table and stare at the fries sitting in their takeout bag on the counter. The ranch dressing is in a separate container. I don’t know where the fries are from, maybe some big ass corporation that doesn’t know how to make them. Or he could’ve found a small diner that makes them crispy and delicious . . .

I lean back on the couch, crossing my arms over my chest as I glare at the bag like it’s personally offended me.

“This doesn’t change anything,” I mutter, though the truth is harder to pin down. Because if it didn’t matter, I wouldn’t feel so unsettled.

And I wouldn’t still be thinking about those damn fries.

Chapter Nineteen

Camille: What part of “leave me alone” don’t you get?

Killion: What did I do now?

Camille: Well, that took you long?

Killion: I’m getting ready for a game. If I had known you’d be contacting me I would’ve kept my phone close.

Camille: No need to. Actually, I shouldn’t have texted you.

Killion: Sure, tell yourself that. It was eating you alive that I wasn’t responding.

Camille: No it wasn’t.

Killion: Of course it was, because you’re pissed at me. What did I do now that I made it to your shit list?

Camille: I don’t have a shit list.

Killion: Cam, babe, it’s me you’re talking to. I know there’s a list. What did I do?

Camille: You sent a cat tree to Ben and taffy to me.

Killion: You have to practice your Qs & Ps.

Camille: Again, Qs doesn’t make sense when you refer to thank you.

Killion: Discuss that with my parents, not with me. They always told us never to forget our Qs & Ps. You seem to have forgotten them.

Camille: Thank you for torturing me, please stop. Better?

Killion: Not what I was looking for, but I like the way you’re applying it. It wasn’t that hard, was it?

Camille: Why are you sending me stuff?

Killion: I need you to talk to me. Just for a few minutes. Give me a date, maybe let me convince you that I’m not that guy . . . I don’t know, Cam. I see Kaden happy and all I think about is: I had that. I had that and I fucked it up.

Camille: Oh, I had no idea you were engaged. Well, good for you. Why don’t you go and nag your ex and leave me the fuck alone? Please and thank you.

Killion: Well, we weren’t engaged, but we had that.

Camille: Again, go to your ex and leave me alone.

Killion: I’m talking about you and me, Cam.

Camille: (burst into hysterical laughter)

Killion: You’re not amusing and I have to head out for the game. I’ll text you once I’m back at home.

Camille: Good luck, and please don’t text me. Thank you and goodbye—forever.

Chapter Twenty



Killion

The Pass, the Plan, the Problem

The energy in the locker room is electric, practically crackling off the walls. Everyone's riding the high after this win, and I can feel it vibrating through the air—through me. We've been undefeated so far, but we're just halfway through the season. Sweat and adrenaline cling to everything: the walls, the benches, the noise. Guys shout over each other, cracking jokes, slapping backs, and rehashing plays like we didn't all just live through them.

I drop onto the bench in front of my locker, the cool metal biting through the heat still radiating off me. My fingers fumble with the laces on my cleats, my muscles protesting after four quarters of battle. It's a good ache, though—the kind that reminds me I'm exactly where I'm meant to be.

There's nothing like this: being out there, feeling the field beneath me, the roar of the crowd vibrating in my chest. I love everything about it—the strategy, the split-second decisions, the sheer weight of being the one who has to deliver when everything's on the line. Being the quarterback isn't just a position. It's the heart of the damn game.

"You better not act like you're tired," Tank says, dropping onto the bench beside me, a shit-eating grin plastered across his face. His knees are bouncing like he's ready for another down, like he didn't just spend the past few hours smashing into walls of muscle disguised as linebackers.

"You got hit because you can't stop running into people," I shoot back, smirking. "That's on you."

"Yeah, yeah," he says, waving me off. "Keep talking, Crawford. We both know who keeps this team alive."

I snort, shaking my head as I peel off my socks. The noise in the locker room intensifies again as the coaches make their rounds, throwing out quick praise before ducking off to their postgame meetings.

"What about that last drive, though?" someone shouts from across the room. "That throw to Darnell was fucking insane, man."

“Darnell made the play,” I call back, keeping my tone light, even though I appreciate the compliment.

“Don’t be modest, Crawford,” Darnell says, leaning against the lockers with a towel draped over his shoulders. “You have a fucking arm that knows where to land. I was wide open because you put the ball exactly where it needed to be.”

“Team effort,” I say, nodding at him.

“That’s right,” Tank bellows, smacking the side of a locker like it’s his personal drum. “Team effort, baby.” He starts a ridiculous dance, one that somehow pulls in half the room.

I laugh, shaking my head as a chorus of off-key singing and stomping fills the space. If this football thing ever falls through, these guys have a solid backup career as the world’s least-coordinated boy band.

For a moment, I let myself soak it in. Wins like this don’t come easy. As much as the media loves to slap my face on every highlight reel, I know better. This team? They’re everything.

Still, the adrenaline is running high, and I need to cool off. I grab my towel and head for the showers, letting the noise fade behind me.

Camille.

The water pounds against my shoulders, and my mind—traitorous as always—wanders to her. To the texts we sent before the game, to the way her words tangled in my head like a goddamn spell, making it harder to focus than I’d like to admit. She shouldn’t have this kind of hold on me anymore. I shouldn’t let her.

But, fuck, I do.

I try to shake her out of my head, letting the water cascade over my skin, the roar of the pipes filling the space around me. It doesn’t help. Instead the memory of the last time I saw her—her biting words, the way she looked at me like I wasn’t worth a second thought—clings to me, burrowing deeper with every passing second.

Back at my locker, I towel off and start getting dressed, the noise of the room creeping back in. I pull my phone from my bag, scrolling through the flood of congratulatory texts. Family. Friends. Jacob. Even my brother, Luc. But nothing from Camille.

I shouldn’t care. Not now, when the team’s riding high, and tomorrow’s headlines will be all about us. About me. But I do.

I swipe to her contact, my thumb hovering over the screen. There’s a tiny, stupid part of me that wants to text her, to ask if she has ever watched, if she saw me on that field and thought, *That’s the guy I used to know.*

It doesn’t make sense. In fact, I’m not even sure what I’m doing. What’s my next move here? “What’s your endgame, Crawford?” I mutter to myself, locking the phone and tossing it back into my bag.

Tank’s voice cuts through my thoughts, as loud and unrelenting as ever. “Yo, Crawford, you zoning out?”

“Nah,” I lie, shaking my head as I pull on my hoodie.

He gives me a look but doesn’t push, heading off to join the others. I lean back against my locker, staring at the ceiling like it’s holding the answers I can’t find.

The thing is, I don’t have a plan. Not yet. But I know one thing: I’m not giving up. Not on her. Not this time.

Because even if she doesn’t believe it—especially if she doesn’t believe it—I’m not the same guy who walked away all those years ago.

I’m going to prove it to her, even if it kills me.

Chapter Twenty-One



Killion

What to Expect When Your Family Meddles

I'm back at home late, and in the few hours I could get some rest, I'm . . . well, restless. Even after my morning swim—the one sacred ritual that usually drowns out the noise in my head—I'm back to pacing my penthouse like I'm auditioning for the role of the world's most pathetic rom-com lead. The worst part? Ben, the allegedly adorable orange tabby, is perched on the balcony railing, basking in the January sun like he's a Mediterranean prince on holiday. Meanwhile, I'm two espressos deep, spiraling.

Ben stretches, flexing his absurdly tiny, murder-capable claws, then turns to shoot me a look through the glass. It's not a regular cat look. No, this is judgment incarnate. If he could talk, I imagine he'd sound like an old-school English butler saying, *Pull yourself together, man. She's not going to be impressed with this.*

"Stop looking at me like that," I shout. Ben yawns in response, the picture of indifference, and then does that dramatic cat thing where he flops over onto his side like his only worry is whether the sunbeam will shift.

Lucky little asshole.

I drop onto the couch, elbows on my knees, staring at my phone like it's going to spontaneously combust into a set of instructions for winning Camille back. I know what I want to say to her—I've rehearsed it so many times I could perform it as a TED Talk—but saying it isn't enough. I need a moment. Something bold. Something unforgettable. Something that screams, *I've evolved from the emotionally stunted idiot you once knew.*

Ben meows again, louder this time, and I swear it sounds like, *Tick-tock, buddy, your time is almost up.*

Grabbing my phone, I scroll to Leif's contact and hit call before I can talk myself out of it. The second ring barely finishes before he picks up, his voice already saturated with that signature smirk of his.

"Well, well," Leif drawls. "To what do I owe this honor? Don't tell me you're calling to gloat about having the best game of your season. Wait—no. That's not your 'I'm amazing' voice. This is something else. What happened? Did you finally figure

out how to parallel park?”

“I think I’m about to do something crazy,” I blurt out, skipping past hello, because time and pride aren’t on my side right now.

Leif laughs, low and lazy, like he’s leaning back in a chair somewhere. “Crazy like you bought a yacht crazy, or crazy like you’re thinking of running for public office? Because if it’s the latter, you should really call Kaden. He’s got that politician’s fake smile locked down.”

“Leif,” I snap. “I’m serious.”

“So am I. Do you need the number for a therapist? Or, I don’t know, a life coach? Maybe a priest? Because from the sound of your voice, you’re one breakdown away from joining a monastery.”

“You’re hilarious,” I mutter. “I hope your dog eats one of your favorite shoes.”

“She’s a very well educated lady, I doubt she’ll ever do anything so beneath her,” he says because his dog is the most well trained dog in the world. “You calling me to vent, or do you want to swing by this weekend so we can discuss your game and bad decisions over tequila?”

“Did you watch the game last night?” I ask, caught off guard by the shift in his tone.

“Nothing else was on, and I needed a laugh,” he says, but there are laughs crackling on the other end of the line.

“Oh, we’ve got company,” I say, wondering if he has some chick for the weekend which will be weird since he doesn’t date when the hockey season is on. “Should I call back later?”

“Nah, it’s just Hailey,” he says like she’s not the center of his entire universe. He’s fooling no one but himself. The guy’s been orbiting her since high school, insisting she’s just a friend.

“You know, you’re going to lose her if you don’t get your act together.” Unfortunately, I say that from experience.

“And you’re going to stay miserable if you don’t get to the point of this call,” he fires back smoothly, as if I haven’t just warned him. “What’s this crazy idea of yours? I assume it has something to do with your new neighbor?”

I freeze, my grip tightening on the phone. “What makes you say that?”

“Oh, just a wild guess. Kade already told us who moved in next door. Don’t growl at me—it’s not like he was gossiping. Okay, maybe he was. And now we’re all dying to know what you’re going to do about it.”

“You all?” I repeat, incredulous. “Who’s ‘we’?”

“All the Crawfords, obviously. We’re taking bets. Even the ones who don’t know hockey from figure skating—that’d be Val. And, for the record, Dad said, ‘Stop meddling in your brother’s life.’ Though he probably didn’t say meddling. He’s not that polite. Pop only growled something about ‘not this again.’”

“Fucking fantastic,” I mutter. “My entire family’s betting on my love life. Just what I need.”

Leif laughs, unbothered. “To be fair, you made it their business when you started sulking about her years ago. So? What’s the plan? Or are you just winging it?”

“I’m not winging it,” I lie, the words tasting like cardboard.

“Sure you’re not,” he says, his grin practically audible.

“What if I show her the ring?” I ask.

“The fuck?” Leif’s voice is a little disconcerted. “Wow. Didn’t pawn it. Didn’t toss it into a lake. Impressive. You really know how to hold a grudge against yourself.”

“It’s not about the ring,” I snap, pacing the length of my living room. “It’s about showing her I wasn’t just screwing around back then. That I meant every word.”

“And what about now?” Leif presses, his tone shifting to something more serious. “Are you doing this because you love her, or because you love the idea of fixing what you broke? Big difference, Kill. And if you’re not all in, don’t even start or you’ll break your heart all over again.”

“I love her,” I admit, my voice quieter now. “Not just the memories or the what-ifs. Her. The way she used to call me out on my bullshit. The way she made me want to be someone she could believe in. Am I in love? Obviously not. We both changed, but I want to fall in love again. It’s her. She’s the person I’m meant to be with for the rest of my life. I know it. Even when she’s telling me to go fuck myself, she’s the only one who’s ever made me feel alive.”

Leif is quiet for a beat. Then, he exhales. “Fuck. That was almost romantic. Look, man, if you’re going to fight for her, fight for her. But don’t show up half-prepared and expect her to do all the heavy lifting.”

“I’m not half-assing this,” I say firmly. “Fourteen years is long enough to know I’m not walking away again.”

“Good,” he says. “Then show her the ring. But expect to grovel.”

The call ends, and I stare at the balcony where Ben sprawls like a king surveying his kingdom. Maybe he’s also the key to get to her. Camille might not trust me yet, but that’s about to change.

This time, I’m all in. And I’m not leaving without her.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Killion

When Your Family Bets on Your Love Life

My next call is to my father. Papa. The man, the myth, the unsolicited advice dispenser. He's a legend in his own right—always there, always ready with wisdom that usually lands. Usually. Except when it came to Camille. That one? Total fumble, Papa. Okay, it wasn't all him. It was partially him. He came with this whole lecture right after . . . well, after Camille's father gave me one of his own.

He answers on the first ring, like he's been sitting by the phone, waiting for my inevitable spiral. His voice is calm. It makes you think he's already solved your problem, won a trophy for his efficiency, and started a podcast about it. "I'm surprised it took you this long to call."

"We talked yesterday," I remind him, flopping back on the couch. My legs stretch out, but my chest? It's in full vice-grip mode. "You congratulated me on the game, remember? Before I boarded the plane."

"Sure," he says, a smirk practically dripping through the phone, "but you didn't mention Camille. And judging by what Leif said in the chat group, you're probably ready to hit me next."

I squint at my phone, scrolling through messages. "What chat group?"

"Oh, there's a new one you're not a part of," he says, like it's totally normal to exclude your own kid from a family chat. "They didn't want you influenced by the bets."

I sit up so fast the couch lets out a protesting creak. "Wait—what?! You're betting on my love life now? Even you, my father?"

"Of course not," he says, mock offended. "I'm just moderating. You know how competitive your siblings get. Someone's gotta keep the peace."

"Oh, yeah? And what's the pot this time? My dignity?" My voice cuts through the air, but inside, I'm unraveling. They're

betting on my goddamn love life.

“There’s a lot riding on this bet,” he says casually, like they’re discussing the outcome of a family game night and not the wreckage of my relationship history.

I drag a hand over my face, the kind of exasperated move that usually calms me down. Not this time. “You should just cancel it. The whole damn thing.”

“Not what the playbook says,” he replies, and I can almost see the shrug in his tone. “I can’t just stop bets once they’re already set up. Your dad and I wish we’d caught it before.”

Fucking playbook.

“This is my life,” I snap, my voice rough. “Which is why I’m calling you. Why did you stop me from proposing to her? She could’ve moved with me to New York. I had the money. Not only to get us a nice place, but to pay for her education if that was needed.”

His tone shifts, steady but firm. “I told you. You two were too young. She was only eighteen. You didn’t have the right to uproot her life, Killion. She had a plan. And I bet she would’ve said yes. What I said was something along the lines of, ‘Are you so selfish that you’ll make her change her entire life for you?’”

Yes, he did, and the fact that he called me selfish just added to what Mr. Ashby had told me a couple of days before Pops did. “Leave my daughter alone or I’ll use everything I have to not only drown your career but create a media nightmare for your fathers.”

Not having the support of my parents and knowing that pushing for this would create a nightmare for my fathers was . . . well, the reason I had to walk away from her. I couldn’t do it to them. Me and my career . . . it was scary to think what he could do to it, but my parents? That’s something no one fucks with. If this man were to threaten me right now, I would show him what the name Crawford can do. Back then I was just a kid though. And the last thing I wanted was for anyone to be affected by my bad decisions. I didn’t want her to suffer or . . . but was it a good idea?

“Because I once was.” Pops brings me back from my thoughts. “I did exactly that. I asked the girl I was dating in high school to follow me. She did, and guess what? She wasn’t the love of my life. It was infatuation, or maybe something else, but the point is, she regretted going to Michigan with me. She hated it and ended up hating me. There’s also the fact that she made me realize I was in love with my best friend.”

That’s a story I didn’t know. And yeah, I can’t imagine him and Dad not being together. I mean, they have pictures of them together since they were young. They weren’t super close, but close enough.

“And you thought—”

“Was it me, or was it what I said, Kill?” he asks, cutting me off. “I never asked you to break up with her. Did I?”

I stop short before something I don’t mean comes out. Because maybe he’s right. He didn’t say ‘fuck up your life and break her heart.’ He said . . . what were his exact words? I can’t even remember but the last thing I wanted was for her to fail at something she was good at because of me.

“I don’t know what would’ve happened if you’d proposed to her,” he says after a moment. “Maybe she would’ve said no, or maybe she would’ve said yes. You can blame me if it makes you feel better. I had no idea she was the reason you can’t settle down. The point is, you can’t keep living in the what-ifs. Get some fucking closure, move on—you’re thirty-five.”

I exhale slowly, his words sinking in like a slow, painful truth I’ve tried to outrun. “Kill, you have the chance to try again or to realize that she wasn’t the love of your life,” he says, his voice so soft now it almost doesn’t sound like him. “You’re older. Wiser. So is she. This time, whatever decision you make, it’s hers too. Not just yours.”

The line goes quiet, and for a second, I wonder if he’s still there. “You’re right, I’m older, but also it wasn’t only what you said.” And I tell him what happened with her father.

“We would’ve handled him, Kill. If anyone threatens your family, you come to us and we handle it,” he says angry. “You were too young and that man was out of line. I can see why things played out the way they did. As I said, you’re not him anymore. Things can be different now.”

“I don’t even know if she’ll let me in,” I admit, my voice raw. Vulnerable.

“She might not,” he says simply. “But you’ll never know if you don’t try.” And then he pulls out the kicker: “You’ve got the ball, son. Don’t fumble it.”

It sounds simple, but nothing about Camille has ever been simple.

I stare at my phone for a long time, then pull up her contact again. I type out a message, my thumbs hovering over the keyboard, before finally hitting send.

Can we talk? I want to make things right.

I set the phone down and wait.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Killion: When are you coming home?

Killion: Don't ignore me. I'm going to keep messaging you.

Killion: Do. Not. Ignore. Me.

Killion: Cam, answer, please.

Killion: Don't make me search for you.

Camille: What do you need, Killion?

Killion: Finally, I've been trying to contact you for hours. I need to discuss something very important with you, and you're not home.

Camille: I've been in back-to-back surgeries. Some of us have important jobs, you know.

Killion: Oh, so that's what your social media story means? "Today I'm at CHMC." I'm assuming that's Central Heights Medical Center?

Camille: Are you stalking me, Killion?

Killion: No, just trying to figure out where to find you, since someone won't answer her texts.

Camille: Remember the part where I said, "leave me alone"?

Killion: I have a deal for you.

Camille: No.

Killion: Just hear me out. You give me five minutes of your life, and after that, I swear I'll leave you alone—unless you change your mind.

Camille: Nothing is going to make me change my mind.

Killion: And I'll respect that. Five minutes. That's all I'm asking.

Camille: Fine. I have one last surgery, and then I'll head to my place.

Killion: How are you getting back?

Camille: I'll walk or . . . something.

Killion: I'll have a car waiting for you.

Camille: I don't know when I'll be finished.

Killion: That's fine. The driver will wait until you're ready. Take your time.

Camille: Why do I feel like you're going to play me into doing something I don't want to. Is this something from the Crawford Playbook? Are you going to guilt me into it?

Killion: The playbook has nothing to do with this. Guilt? Never. Just a masterclass in persistence.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Camille

The One Where He Opened the Wound

You know what I don't need after a day of back-to-back surgeries? Killion Crawford standing outside my door holding a takeout bag and a small jewelry box.

I'm exhausted, worn down from hours in the OR. All I want is to get inside, feed Ben before he decides to hold a grudge, and fall into bed. Instead, Killion is here. And damn it, he looks good. Very edible, not that I'm hungry. Okay, I might be a tad hungry since the last time I had sex was . . . well, I can't even remember. It's hard to find a guy who'll take me seriously when I talk about tightening your vagina online more often than I want to.

Exhaustion is settling into my bones, but here he is, leaning against the wall like he stepped out of a fever dream I never wanted. His t-shirt clings in all the right places, his jeans are slung low on his hips, and somehow, even in something so simple, he looks like he's trying to casually ruin my life.

Though, I'll admit, the driver waiting for me outside the hospital with boba was a nice touch. After a day like today, it felt good to have someone think about me for a change. Not that I'd tell Killion that.

"Thank you for the driver," I say, shifting the strap of my bag higher on my shoulder, ignoring how his eyes linger like he's memorizing every detail. "And for the boba. It was . . . appreciated."

"I'm glad I was able to help," he says, his voice calm, like we're old friends having a casual chat. "He'll be at your disposal while you're in New York."

I frown. "Why?"

"Because it's safer," he says, shrugging as if this isn't a ridiculous conversation.

"I'm capable of walking," I reply, cutting off whatever noble nonsense he's about to spout.

"And you've got more than three million people following your every move on social media," he counters. "I figured a

driver could help . . . keep an eye on things. Mostly you.”

There it is. The hero complex. Classic Killion Crawford.

“What do you want?” I sigh, my patience thinner than surgical thread. I’ll fight the driver thing another day.

He holds up the bag. “Fries. They’re fresh. Eat them before they get cold.”

I blink at him, caught between irritation and confusion. “Are you bribing me with fries?”

“Maybe.” He shrugs again, too casual for a man holding a jewelry box. “Or maybe I just remembered how much you love fries. Especially when you’re exhausted.”

Damn him.

“Thanks,” I mutter, taking the bag because, well, he’s not wrong.

But before I can escape, he says, “Can we talk? Here, or inside. Your call.”

“Here,” I say quickly. No way am I letting him into my space. Ben might maul him, and frankly, I’m not sure who I’d root for.

Killion doesn’t argue. Instead, he steps closer, and I notice the box again. My stomach twists as he pops it open, revealing a ring.

It’s breathtaking: an emerald and diamond entwined like they were made to fit together. For a second, I forget how to breathe.

“I was twenty-one,” he starts, his voice low, intimate, like he’s telling me a secret. “And I met this girl who was smart, sharp-tongued, and hypnotizing. Watching her eat fries was . . . erotic.”

My eyes snap to his, and he smirks. The nerve.

“I didn’t want the night to end,” he continues, softer now. “I stayed in Boston, thinking I’d have more time with her. And then I fell. Hard. In love. Unexpectedly, completely. You were it for me.”

“Killion—” I start, but he holds up a hand.

“I thought I’d propose, you’d transfer to New York, and we’d get married. Live happily ever after.”

He looks at me, his expression raw. “But then my dad asked if I was going to be that selfish. Not in those exact words. He said you had a life, a plan, and it wouldn’t be fair to uproot you for me. And I believed him. I listened to him.”

The words feel like a scalpel cutting through old scars, too precise, too familiar.

His voice falters, and he closes the box with a quiet snap. “Up until then, he hadn’t steered me wrong. But he fumbled this. He didn’t know what I knew—that you were it for me. That I loved you more than anything. I broke your heart and mine because I thought it was the right thing to do.”

His words hit like a blow, cracking open a wound I thought had healed years ago. I’m not eighteen anymore, but right now, I feel just as confused and hurt as I did then. There’s no defense against the flood of emotions he’s unleashed. Anger. Hurt. Betrayal. They crash over me, leaving me raw and exposed.

“I can’t do this,” I whisper, turning to unlock my door.

“Cam, please.” His voice cracks, a vulnerability I’ve never heard from him before.

“Not right now,” I reply, my voice shaking.

“Just give me a chance, baby,” he says. “Please.”

I stop and turn to face him. His eyes are bright, his shoulders slumped. For the first time, I see the boy who broke my heart—but now, I also see the pain he’s carried. The pain I was too hurt to notice back then.

“No,” I say, my voice firm despite the knot in my throat. “You need to give me at least a couple of days to process what you just told me, Killion. You had a ring. You took that choice from me. You decided for both of us, like I didn’t matter. But at the same time, I don’t know if the decision I would’ve made at eighteen is one I could trust now. I wouldn’t be who I am today if I had gone with you. I don’t play the what-if game because it gets you nowhere, but right now, I’m upset with you.”

He bobs his head, accepting what I’m saying without argument.

“I understand,” he says quietly. “But I’ll be here if you want to talk. Maybe it’s not about a second chance. Maybe it’s just about closure. Convince me that even though it was wrong, it was the best thing for you.”

“No, it wasn’t. It will never be,” I say, the words rushing out like they’ve been waiting to escape for years. “You hurt me. You made me believe I wasn’t enough. Not after everything we . . . I trusted you. You made me trust you and fall in love with you.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, but it’s not enough.

I shake my head, tears stinging my eyes as I turn away. “I don’t know what to do with this, Killion. Stay away for now.”

And with that, I step inside, closing the door softly behind me.

On the other side, I hear him let out a long, shaky breath.

And for the first time in years, I wonder if letting him go all those years ago wasn’t just his mistake—but mine too.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Camille: You had a ring.

Killion: Yes, I had a ring.

Camille: Where do we go from here, Kill? I . . . you can't . . . I have a life.

Killion: You do.

Camille: I'm here temporarily.

Killion: Why are you here?

Camille: My company grew too fast. I couldn't keep up with production and I need an investor. I mean, we haven't signed the contract yet because I need to show that I'm indeed worth the money they plan on injecting.

Killion: So you still need the money for production?

Camille: I currently have a loan, but yes, I still need more.

Killion: I can invest.

Camille: I'm trying to avoid you. That would be stupid of me.

Killion: I know of a physical trainer who might be interested in investing.

Camille: Really? Who's this made-up person, Kill?

Killion: Scottie.

Camille: Scottie is a physical trainer? Wasn't she a soccer player?

Killion: She retired a couple of years ago. For someone who doesn't like us, you seem to be keeping up with my family—a lot.

Camille: I don't know your family. I don't like you. But also, it's hard to avoid the Crawfords. You're everywhere.

Killion: That we are. So what do you say, can I connect you with Scottie?

Camille: Nope. That'd be too close to you.

Killion: Yeah, but wouldn't you prefer someone who might be in this because she believes in your philosophy rather than just taking your money?

Camille: Don't you use logic on me, Killion. I'm still angry at you.

Killion: I was a very stupid kid.

Camille: You had a ring.

Killion: I loved you and planned to spend the rest of my life with you.

Camille: What was really your plan?

Killion: You could transfer to NYU or Columbia. If not, we could commute from Boston to New York. I don't know, I thought . . . okay, I didn't have a good plan. And maybe my father was a little right about the part that we weren't ready for that.

Camille: We'll never know.

Killion: Would you have come with me?

Camille: No what-ifs, Killion. I'm not going there. I'm pissed and the worst part is that all my friends are busy and no one can take my call.

Killion: What is more important than their friends?

Camille: Their families, jobs, spouses. They have lives and they're all the way on the West Coast so no way to get their attention.

Killion: I have some wine if you want to talk.

Camille: Have you ever come close to . . . ?

Killion: To?

Camille: Nevermind.

Killion: What can I do for you?

Camille: If I were into physical violence I would ask you to let me use you as a punching bag.

Killion: Ouch. Not sure if my insurance covers angry ex-girlfriend.

Camille: I wouldn't break your arm. How much is that insured for?

Killion: I can't tell you, and next year when I sign again, they'll be adding a bigger policy.

Camille: When are you retiring?

Killion: I have at least five more years. I'm still in good form.

Camille: What if you find someone, fall in love and marry? Would you retire for her?

Killion: Do you want me to retire for you? I'll do it. If that's what gives me my second chance I'd tell my agent right now. Fuck the season.

Camille: I don't know how to take that last statement. But I would never make anyone choose between their future and mine.

Killion: So maybe you get it. I didn't want you to have to choose or mess up your future.

Camille: Okay, you want to go down that road . . . What if I had been given a choice? What if we had decided to break up—mutually? Not saying: you get it, right? Because I didn't fucking get it.

Killion: I'm sorry.

Camille: I honestly don't know what to do with this information. Why would you even tell me?

Killion: Can we talk in person?

Camille: Let me finish my dinner and shower. I'll text you.

Killion: Thank you.

Chapter Twenty-Six



Killion

The Comeback Plan

I walk out the door and head toward Camille’s penthouse, my breath unsteady, like my body’s trying to stage an intervention. Her door is just a few feet away, but it feels like I’m crossing a minefield instead of a hallway. I’ve spent all morning convincing myself this is a good idea—win her back, Killion, don’t overthink it. But when she texted two minutes ago saying I could come in, I went full-blown panic mode. What if this is a colossal mistake? What if she finally says, *Screw you, don’t ever speak to me again?*

Now, staring at the sleek number on her door, all my carefully rehearsed words scatter like confetti in the wind.

I knock, and the door swings open almost immediately. Not to Camille, but to Ben—the orange fluff ball who apparently owns this place and just lets her live here. Benedict strides past me with his tail held high in what can only be described as smug disdain. He pauses mid-strut to glare at me, then continues, his tiny feet clicking against the hardwood like he’s personally offended by my presence.

“I swear he loved me the day I rescued him,” I say as I step inside. “Now? I think he plots my downfall while I’m at the balcony relaxing.”

Camille closes the door, a faint smile tugging at her lips. “He doesn’t like just anyone new. Don’t take it personally. Benedict is . . . selective.”

“Selective?” I glance over my shoulder at the cat, who has perched himself on the arm of the couch, glaring at me like I’ve interrupted his evening plans. “That’s a polite way of saying he’s a tyrant.”

Her laugh is soft, guarded, but she doesn’t say anything.

I take in her penthouse as I enter. It’s nothing like mine—mine’s all sleek whites and cool grays, like a showroom that doesn’t know what a soul is. Hers has warmth—soft greens, deep blues, and accents of yellow and coral that make the space

feel alive. A throw blanket is draped across the couch, and a bookshelf, crammed with paperbacks and framed photos. She's only been here a short while, but it already feels lived in. Like her.

"Nice place," I say, trying not to sound like I've just compared it to my soulless museum of an apartment.

"Thanks." She moves to stand near the couch, arms crossed, her posture guarded. Her expression is unreadable, but I can feel the distance she's trying to create.

I follow, stopping a few steps away. Before I can speak, she breaks the silence. "Why did you have to tell me about the ring?" she asks. There's no preamble, no more small talk.

"It felt like the only way to show you how much you meant to me. That you were my everything," I say, forcing myself to hold her gaze. "It's a symbol. And maybe I got it wrong. Maybe I've been holding onto something that's ancient history for you. But I had to try. I owed it to us—to the kids we were when I made the dumbest decision of my life."

Her eyes narrow slightly, her head tilting in that way she does when she's about to dissect every word you've said. "You keep talking about those kids, Killion. But I'm not eighteen anymore. The twenty-one-year-old goofy guy I met is now . . . a celebrity that I bet almost no one knows. So, who are you now? Because I'm not interested in being someone's nostalgia project."

Her words hit harder than I expected, and for a moment, I'm scrambling for how to respond. "I'm not looking for nostalgia, Cam," I say, stepping closer, my voice quieter. "I'm here for the woman standing in front of me. The one who built a life, who lives with tyrannical cats, who still rolls her eyes the same way she did fourteen years ago when I try to impress her."

"I'm not staying," she says, her voice firm, but there's something in her tone—something that doesn't sound as certain as her words.

"No one's asking you to uproot your life," I say gently. "I just want a chance. To get to know you. To show you who I've become. I'm not the same guy who walked away, Camille. But my soul . . . well, my soul never forgot you. That part of me that still loves your essence? That hasn't changed. You'll always be a part of me, even if we . . . even if I have to live the rest of my life without you."

Her arms stay crossed, but there's a flicker of something in her expression—a hesitation, a softness that wasn't there a moment ago. For a second, I think I might've broken through.

"That's a lot of words," she finally says, her voice dry, "for someone who doesn't even know if he's staying past five minutes."

"Give me ten at least," I plead, letting a small smile tug at my lips. "I'll leave if you want me to. But if you let me stay, I'll do everything I can to prove I deserve it."

Her gaze softens, just enough to make me feel like I'm standing on the edge of something that could change everything. "You're not making this easy, you know," she says, her tone quieter now, almost resigned.

"I'm not trying to," I reply, taking a careful step closer. "Easy never got me anything worth having."

Her lips press into a line, but there's no real resistance in her expression anymore. It's like she's weighing the possibility of letting me stay, even for a little while. Then, the faint buzz of her phone on the table breaks the moment. She glances at it, frowning when she sees the screen light up.

"It's my mom," she says, grabbing the phone and stepping back instinctively, like she's bracing herself for the call.

"I'll give you a minute," I say, backing toward the door. "Take your time."

She hesitates, her eyes flicking to me briefly before answering. "Hi, Mom," she says, her voice shifting to something softer, a little more guarded.

I don't catch much after that. I step out into the hallway, closing the door gently behind me, but my mind is already racing. Her mom's timing might've cut our conversation short, but now I have a plan. I saw it in her eyes, felt it in the way her words softened. She's starting to let me in.

Now, I just have to prove to her that she's worth every battle, every relentless drive to remind her that we still matter. And I've never been one to back down from a challenge. This is my second-quarter comeback—a chance to turn the game around and fight for the win that matters most: us.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Camille

How to Rewrite the Rules

I watch Killion leave, the door closing behind him, the sound of the door being too loud or . . . maybe it's my imagination. It's as if the universe itself is throwing a dramatic pause for good measure. Ben, lounging on the couch, lets out a loud, judgmental meow. He's obviously displeased because nothing is about him at the moment. No one has given him attention in the last thirty seconds.

"Who's there?" Mom asks.

"Huh?" I ask because I'm not sure if she's asking about me or someone in her house.

"It sounds like someone's coming and going," she presses. "Are you moving things around? I thought you texted me saying everything was done. Do you need me to come over and help?"

"No, Mom," I reply, already imagining her showing up uninvited with clothes enough to last her a year and unsolicited advice. "I already moved in. The people we hired set up everything. The door? That was nothing. Just my neighbor leaving."

"Your neighbor?" Her tone shifts immediately from suspicious to curious. "Is he handsome?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose, fighting the urge to groan. "Mom, I don't need a man. You already have three grandchildren from Karla, and Ken's wife is pregnant with number five. Isn't that enough?"

"Yes, but wouldn't it be nice to have a couple more?" she counters, her voice bright with unwelcome enthusiasm. "Imagine—"

"Before you start planning my future, you should know that the neighbor you're so curious about is Killion. Killion Crawford," I interrupt, knowing well enough they're not fans of him. Not since he broke my heart.

The silence on the other end of the line stretches out, thick and icy.

"Killion Crawford," she finally repeats, and the disapproval in her voice sends me back a few years—twenty at least. I just

have to remind myself I'm not a teenager and she won't meddle in my life. "The guy you dated in college?"

"Yes," I admit. "That Killion."

"And why," she demands, her tone rising, "is that man back in your life?"

"As I mentioned," I say, struggling to keep my tone even, "he's just my neighbor."

"You two have nothing in common," she snaps, as though I've just announced I'm eloping with him tonight. "We made sure he was out of your life for a reason."

That stops me cold. I step out onto the terrace, the cool air brushing my face as I try to process her words. "What do you mean you made sure he was out of my life, Mom?"

"It doesn't matter," she says quickly, her voice shifting to defensive. "What matters is that you're a doctor now. Look at your life, Camille. You're successful. Isn't it better this way?"

"Mom," I press, my voice firm. "What. Did. You. Do?"

She sighs, the pause is so dramatic I'm bracing myself for the full impact. "We encouraged him to leave, that's all. Your father didn't think he was good enough for you. He said, 'Can you imagine being tied to someone who smashes his head into people for a living? By the time he's thirty, he won't even recognize his own wife.' We thought it was best."

"You encouraged him to leave me?" I repeat, the pieces clicking together with a sickening sense of clarity. "You loved me so much that you manipulated him into walking away?"

"Camille," she says, her tone exasperated. "Focus on the now. The past doesn't matter. You're successful, independent, everything we wanted you to be."

I lean against the railing, staring at the park below. The distant sound of traffic is somehow easier to process than the tornado she's just unleashed. My parents didn't just interfere—they sabotaged. And all it did was reinforce every fear I'd ever had: that I wasn't enough for him or that he wasn't enough for me.

"How exactly did you 'encourage' him?" I ask, my voice colder now. "What did you do?"

Before she can answer, someone clears his throat nearby. I turn, and there he is—Killion, standing on the terrace next door, looking both sheepish and defiant.

"You listened to them?" I snap, glaring at him.

"They threatened my parents," he says, shrugging as if that's all the explanation I need. "I was more afraid for them than myself. You told me how your dad could be when people pissed him off. Remember?"

I do remember. He has done despicable things in the name of justice. That's one of the things my father and I can't agree with. I stare at Killion, then at my phone, my grip tightening. "You could've . . . you could've told me." My voice breaks on the last word, and I hate how raw I sound.

"I thought I was doing what was best for you," he says quietly, his eyes locking on mine. "And for my family."

I open my mouth to argue, to say *what if you hadn't left?*—but the words don't come. Because deep down, I'm not sure what would've happened if he'd stayed. And that, more than anything, terrifies me.

I take a deep breath, my fingers tightening around the phone. "Mom, I can't do this right now," I say, trying to sound calm, even when I'm furious at her and my father. "We'll talk later—after I've had some time to think about everything I've learned today."

"Camille—" she starts, but I cut her off.

"Later, Mom," I say, cutting her off before she can argue, and hang up. My pulse thunders in my ears, but I can't tell if it's anger, confusion, or the past I thought I'd left behind storming back into my life.

Beside me, Killion clears his throat, shifting like he's unsure whether to stay or retreat. "Uh . . . permission to cross over?" he asks, motioning to the low railing between our terraces. "I could go back through the door, but this seems easier."

I lift an eyebrow, half intrigued. "Go for it."

He doesn't hesitate, swinging a long leg over the glass divider with practiced ease. When his other foot lands on my side, I realize how close he is—close enough to notice the taut set of his jaw, the tension radiating through his shoulders, and the conflict flickering in his eyes.

"Thanks," he murmurs, his voice quieter now. His hands slide into his pockets for a moment, but then, as if deciding against keeping any distance between us, he steps forward. Slowly, deliberately, his fingers tilt my chin up, his touch warm and steady.

"I'm sorry," he says, his voice rough around the edges. "For listening to them. For walking away. For being a goddamn idiot who thought leaving you was some kind of noble sacrifice."

I open my mouth to respond, but the intensity in his gaze stops me. His thumb brushes against my jaw, sending a shiver through me, and for a moment, I forget how to breathe.

"I thought I was protecting you," he continues, his tone softer now. "Your parents convinced me I'd ruin your future if I stayed. That you deserved better than some guy who spent his days running into people for a living. And I believed them because . . . because my father told me something almost similar. But also, I loved you too much to risk being the reason you didn't get everything you wanted."

I don't know what hits harder—the fact that he left because he thought it was best for me, or the realization that he's still

carrying the guilt.

“You were my everything, Cam,” he says, his voice breaking just slightly. “And I thought walking away was the right thing to do. But I’ve regretted it every single time.”

I swallow hard, my pulse thrumming in my ears. “You should’ve told me. You should’ve let me decide what was best for my future.”

“I know,” he whispers, his forehead brushing against mine. His breath mingles with mine, warm and hesitant, as though he’s treading on fragile ground. “But I can’t go back. I can only fight for you. For us. Now. All I can do is tell you the truth and hope you’ll let me prove I’m not that guy anymore.”

His words hang between us, raw and unpolished, trembling with a hope that feels too fragile to touch. Slowly—agonizingly slowly—he begins to close the space separating us. My heart thrums, erratic and loud, drowning out the warning in my mind to keep my distance.

“Killion,” I murmur, my voice softer than I mean for it to be, betraying the cracks in my defenses. “You can’t just show up, say all the right things, and expect me to forget what happened.”

But even as the words leave my lips, his graze against mine—light, tentative, a whisper of a kiss, as if he’s asking permission with every heartbeat. And when I don’t pull away, he presses closer, his kiss unraveling more emotions between us, drawing me into something fragile, something undeniable, something that’s been here all along.

“I don’t want you to forget,” he says, his gaze locked on mine, unflinching and unrelenting. “I want to show you that I’m still here. That I’ll keep showing up until you tell me not to.”

My chest tightens, my voice barely holding steady. “But I don’t know if I can allow this,” I whisper, the words thick with doubt. “We’re not who we used to be.”

Before I can say more, his lips crash against mine, cutting through my hesitation like a blade. This kiss isn’t soft or careful—it’s raw, demanding, driven by a hunger that ignites every nerve in my body and obliterates the space between us. His hands grip my waist, his fingers pressing firmly, almost possessively, as though afraid I might vanish. Then I feel it—his body closing the distance, his strength guiding me backward until the cool glass wall presses against my spine.

The tension vibrates between us, his desperation spilling into every kiss, every touch. His lips part mine, his breath ragged, his hands sliding down to grip my hips and pull me closer, leaving no room for doubt about what he feels. The glass against my back is cool, a contrast to the heat radiating from him as he presses harder, his body a force that pins me in place.

“Killion,” I gasp between kisses, but he doesn’t stop, his mouth finding my neck, the hollow of my throat, like he’s searching for something he’s terrified of losing.

His voice is low, hoarse, almost broken. “I can’t stop,” he murmurs against my skin. “Not when I’m this close to losing you again.”

The air between us sizzles, heavy with tension as his hands slide from my hips, trembling slightly as though he’s giving me one last chance to step away. But I don’t. I can’t.

His lips crash against mine again, fiercer this time, his fingers moving to the waistband of my leggings. He pauses, just for a breath, his forehead pressing against mine as he murmurs, “Stop me now.”

I should. I know I should. But instead of pulling away, I arch into him, my hands sliding under his shirt, feeling the taut muscles beneath my fingertips. My silence is the answer he needs. With a growl of need, he pushes my leggings down, his fingers brushing my skin in a way that sends a shiver through me.

His own movements are swift but controlled as he pushes his gym shorts down, his breaths mingling with mine, wild and unrestrained. I grasp his shoulders, urging him closer, my nails digging into his skin as I let go of any lingering doubt.

“Killion,” I whisper, not in protest but in encouragement, my voice trembling with everything I’m feeling. And in the next moment, he presses into me, every hesitation replaced with a raw, unspoken need as the glass at my back cools my overheated skin.

His hands grip my thighs, lifting me as he thrusts forward, his body pressing mine firmly against the glass. The air catches in my throat as he fills me completely, the sensation overwhelming and consuming all at once. A deep, guttural sigh escapes him, his lips brushing my ear. “I’m finally home,” he murmurs, his voice thick with emotion and desire.

The words hit me as hard as the way he moves—fast, powerful, like he’s been holding back for far too long. Each thrust sends shockwaves through me, my body arching against his, craving every inch of him. My nails dig into his shoulders, and I can’t stop the desperate plea that escapes my lips. “Yes . . . please. Don’t stop.”

“You like this, don’t you?” he growls, his breath hot against my neck as his hands tighten their grip. “You want me to take you, make you mine, right here where there’s no escape.”

I gasp, my head tipping back, the words sparking something electric deep inside me. “Yes,” I breathe, barely able to form the word, but it’s all the permission he needs.

His rhythm quickens, each thrust hitting harder, deeper, pulling cries from me I can’t suppress. “That’s it,” he groans, his voice low and rough. “Take all of me. Let them hear how much you want this.”

His hands slide lower, gripping me with bruising intensity as his thrusts grow relentless, each one claiming me more

completely than the last. The world narrows to just us—his body overpowering mine, his ragged voice coaxing me closer to the edge with every word. And I give in, at least for now. Later, I'll think about what this means. But right now—

“Stay with me, Cam,” he growls, his voice sharp and commanding. His hand cups my jaw, forcing my gaze to his. “Look at me. Don't you dare close those beautiful eyes.”

I'm barely holding on, every nerve ending firing at once, but he doesn't let up. His other hand grips my hip, pulling me harder against him. “Now grab my shoulder,” he orders, his breath hot and uneven against my lips. “One hand there, but the other . . .” His voice dips, his words dripping with dominance. “Touch yourself for me. I want to feel you fall apart while I'm buried inside you.”

My hand trembles as I slide it between us, my fingers brushing against where we're joined, sending a jolt through my already overwrought body. “That's it,” he groans, his pace quickening, thrusting deeper, harder. “Let me see you lose it. Let me feel you tighten around me while I fill you up.”

My moans grow louder, his words pushing me closer to the brink. His voice is rough, dark, filled with raw hunger. “You're mine, Cam. Every inch of you. And I'm not stopping until I've given you everything—until you're screaming my name and dripping with me.”

The pressure builds unbearably, and I shatter, my body clenching around him as waves of pleasure crash over me. His movements grow erratic, his grip unrelenting. With a guttural moan, he stills, his body pressed flush against mine as I feel the warmth of him spilling into me, marking me in a way words never could.

“Perfect,” he rasps, his forehead resting against mine, his breathing ragged. “You're so damn perfect, Cam. And now you're mine. Completely.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Killion

How to Apologize Without Words

What the fuck did I just do?

“Cam,” I say, my breath coming in shallow bursts as I try to steady myself. “I’m . . . I didn’t mean to come inside you without a condom. I mean, we’ve done it like this before, but I shouldn’t have assumed. I can send you my last physical—no STIs—and I . . . you’re the only person I’ve ever been with without one.”

Her gaze meets mine, her expression unreadable but filled with a mixture of emotions that tears at my chest. “This . . . it’s not the lack of a condom,” she says softly, her voice trembling. “But none of this should’ve happened. We haven’t even discussed what happened. I—”

“Let me take care of you,” I interrupt, desperate to salvage what I can, “and then we can talk. About everything. About how I, again, fucked up because I let myself get carried away.”

I pull out of her slowly, the intimacy of the moment hitting me harder than I expect. She winces slightly, and guilt punches me square in the gut. I fix myself quickly, tugging my gym shorts back up, before reaching for her.

“Here,” I say gently, kneeling in front of her. My hands slide to her leggings, still bunched around her thighs, and I carefully ease them down her legs. I can feel her watching me, her silence heavier than any words she could speak. “I’ve got you,” I murmur, more to myself than to her, trying to believe it.

Once her leggings are off, I scoop her up, lifting her in my arms bridal-style. She stiffens slightly but doesn’t pull away, and I take that as permission to keep going. Her head rests against my chest, and I carry her down the hall toward her bedroom.

In her room, I lay her gently on the bed, brushing stray strands of hair from her face. She looks up at me, her eyes still guarded, but there’s a vulnerability there that makes me want to fall to my knees and beg for another chance.

“Stay here,” I say softly, brushing a strand of hair from her face before heading to the bathroom. I grab a warm washcloth,

moving with purpose but not rushing. When I return, I sit beside her, the bed dipping under my weight.

“Let me take care of you,” I murmur, my voice quiet but firm.

I start cleaning her, slow and careful, every movement deliberate. I trail the warm cloth along her skin, my hands gentle, reverent, as though she might shatter if I move too quickly. “You’re so beautiful, Cam,” I say softly, my gaze flicking to hers. “Inside and out. I don’t know how I got so lucky to even be here right now.”

She doesn’t speak, just watches me with those eyes that see straight through every layer of bullshit I’ve ever built. Her silence doesn’t feel angry, but it still concerns me. I keep going, using this moment to show her how much I worship her.

When I’m done, I set the cloth aside and pull the blanket over her, tucking it around her shoulders with care. She’s everything—so much more than I ever deserved—and I need her to feel that. “You’re incredible,” I say quietly, brushing my thumb along her jaw. “Strong. Smart. And so fucking kind, even when I don’t deserve it.”

Her lips part, but she says nothing, and I lean closer, resting my forehead against hers for a moment. “I’m sorry, Cam. For all of it. For not giving you the respect you deserve. For letting my own selfishness get in the way. But I promise you—whatever you need from me, I’ll do it. Whatever it takes to make this right.”

I don’t pull away, not yet. My lips brush her temple, soft and lingering, as if trying to press every unspoken promise into her skin. “You mean everything to me, Cam,” I whisper, my voice raw.

She exhales, her hand trailing along the blanket. “It’s okay. I was caught up in the moment too. I didn’t think about protection or . . . anything. And it’s you. We stopped using condoms back then because I was on the pill.”

Her voice falters, and before she can spiral into explanations, I cut in, tension tightening my chest. “Are you not . . .?” My heart stumbles as I force the question out. “Fuck, should we get a Plan B?”

She shakes her head, reaching for her arm, her fingers brushing against it. “Instead of the pill, I have an implant.”

Relief washes over me, but before I can say anything, she tugs her top over her head and tosses it aside, her bare skin glowing in the dim light. I watch, transfixed, as she turns toward the bathroom. My pulse kicks up as she twists the shower knob, steam beginning to curl around her like a veil.

Her voice pulls me back. “The problem isn’t just the physical, Killion. We’re not in a place where we can just have sex like we’re together again. There’s too much between us.”

“Clearly,” I agree, my eyes never leaving her as she steps into the shower. “Again—”

“Don’t apologize,” she cuts me off sharply, glancing over her shoulder with a raised brow. “Not for what happened out there, or I’m going to get more upset.”

I smirk, leaning against the doorframe. “Oh, you’re bossy,” I tease, my gaze shameless as the water begins to cascade over her skin, clinging to every curve.

She rolls her eyes, but there’s a flicker of a smile. “So, can I join you?” I ask, already reaching for the hem of my shirt.

“No. I’m not falling into the trap,” she says with a squeaky voice.

“Trap?”

“You’re going to use your mouth and those hands to convince me of . . . I don’t even know what,” she says, washing her hair.

“Come on, Cam. I promise to behave.”

Her lips twitch as she bites back a grin. “Fine, but keep your hands—and maybe your eyes—to yourself.”

“That’s a tall order,” I reply, stepping into the steam as I drop my clothes on the floor. Her eyes dart toward me briefly, then away, but I catch the faint blush creeping up her neck.

I step into the shower, the heat of the water cascading over my shoulders as I grab the loofah, my eyes locked on hers. The steam curls around us, making the space feel smaller, more intimate, like there’s nothing outside this moment. “Let me help,” I murmur, my voice low, dripping with intent.

She hesitates, her arms crossed defensively over her chest, but when I raise the loofah and swipe the soap against it, she exhales sharply, the resistance already starting to crack.

“Kill, we shouldn’t,” she insists, shaking her head even as her gaze dips to the water trailing down my chest.

“Oh, but I know you need it, baby,” I whisper, stepping closer, my lips brushing the shell of her ear. My breath fans against her skin as I move the loofah to her shoulder, gliding it gently across her collarbone. “And you’re going to be a good girl and let me take care of you, aren’t you?”

Her breath hitches, her body leaning ever so slightly.

“Answer me, Cam. Are you going to allow me take care of my girl?” I insist. “You know I won’t touch you if you don’t respond.”

“Yes please.” Her voice is throaty. The loofah trails lower, circling the curve of her shoulder and gliding down her arm. My lips press to her damp skin, following the path of the loofah, warm and teasing, just enough to make her tremble.

“Kill . . .” Her voice wavers, but there’s no conviction behind it now, just need.

I hum against her neck, the vibration making her shiver as I work the loofah down her chest, pausing just above her breasts. I move slowly, deliberately, every touch calculated to unravel her. My mouth follows, leaving open-mouthed kisses against her

throat, down the hollow between her collarbones.

Her fingers twitch at her sides, and I smirk against her skin. “You can touch me, you know,” I murmur, my voice teasing as the loofah dips lower. “Or is this all too much for you, sweetheart?”

She gasps as I slide the loofah over the swell of her breast, my thumb brushing the skin just above it, bare and slick from the water. Her knees tremble, and I catch her waist with my free hand, pulling her closer. “I’ve got you,” I say softly, my lips grazing her jaw. “You don’t have to fight this. Let go for me.”

The loofah moves down, circling her hips before brushing the inside of her thigh. My mouth trails down her neck, hot and deliberate, as my hand presses her firmly against me. Her breathing grows ragged, her body arching into my touch.

“Kill, please,” she whispers, her voice barely audible over the water.

I grin against her skin, my hand stilling as I pull back slightly to look at her. “Please what?” I ask, my tone dark and coaxing. “Tell me what you want, baby. Say it.”

Her eyes lock on mine, wide and pleading. “Let me come,” she begs, her voice trembling with desperation.

I chuckle softly, my lips brushing hers. “Not yet,” I murmur, sliding the loofah between her thighs. “You’ll come when I say, and not a second before.”

She moans, her body trembling in my arms as my lips trail along her jaw, nipping and kissing, each movement deliberate and teasing. The loofah slips from my hand, forgotten, as I replace it with my fingers, sliding them between her thighs. Her gasp is sharp, her body arching against me as I find her heat, slick and pulsing.

“Fuck, Cam,” I growl against her ear, my fingers stroking her folds slowly, spreading her open. “You’re so wet for me. Is this all for me, baby? Tell me.”

“Yes.” She nods, her breathing uneven, but that’s not enough for me. I press harder, my thumb circling her clit as two fingers slip inside her, curling just right. She cries out, her nails digging into my shoulders as her hips instinctively roll against my hand.

“That’s it,” I murmur, my voice low and rough, each word brushing against her skin. “Take my fingers, baby. I want to feel how much you want this.”

I add another finger, stretching her, filling her completely, and she gasps, her head falling back against the shower wall. My thumb trails lower, teasing her other entrance, the light pressure making her shudder. Her whole body is trembling, her thighs quivering as I keep her pinned between me and the wall.

“Do you want more?” I rasp, my mouth brushing against her ear, my fingers curling deeper inside her. “Do you want my fingers deeper? Harder?”

“Yes,” she whimpers, her voice breaking. “Fuck me harder. Please, Killion.”

Her plea sends a bolt of heat straight through me, and I oblige, thrusting my fingers into her, faster, harder, each movement coaxing louder cries from her lips. My thumb presses firmer against her other entrance, circling in time with my fingers, making her gasp and writhe against me.

“You’re so fucking needy,” I growl, my teeth grazing her earlobe. “You can’t get enough, can you? You love how I fuck you with my fingers, how I make you fall apart.”

She moans louder, her hips bucking against my hand as she chases her release. “That’s it, baby. Use me. Take everything you need,” I encourage, my voice rough with desire. “Come for me. I want to feel you squeeze my fingers when you fall apart.”

Her cries grow frantic, her body trembling violently in my arms as she finally lets go, shuddering around me. Her release is hot and wet, coating my fingers as I keep moving, drawing out every last wave of her climax.

“Good girl,” I murmur, my lips pressing against her temple as her body relaxes against mine, spent but glowing with satisfaction. “You’re so fucking perfect when you come undone for me.”

As her trembling subsides, I hold her close, letting the hot water wash over us both. Her head rests against my chest, her breathing ragged but slowing, her body soft and pliant in my arms. I trail my hands down her back, soothing her with gentle strokes as the water cascades around us.

“Let’s finish up,” I whisper, pressing a kiss to her damp hair.

She nods weakly, her body still leaning into mine as I reach for the soap again. This time, I work quickly but tenderly, running my hands over her skin, cleaning away the remnants of our passion. Her eyes flutter closed, and a small, contented sigh escapes her lips.

When I’m done, I rinse her off, making sure every inch of her is taken care of. Then I grab a towel, stepping out of the shower first and holding it open for her. She follows, her movements sluggish but trusting, and I wrap the towel around her, drying her gently.

“Lift your arms,” I murmur, and she does without question, letting me dry every curve, every inch of her. I kneel to dry her legs and feet, my touch soft, reverent, as if she might break. She leans on my shoulder, her hands resting lightly on my hair, and for a moment, it’s just us—quiet, intimate, no barriers between us.

Once she’s dry, I lead her to the bedroom, supporting her as she walks. She sinks into the bed, and I pull the blanket over her, tucking it around her with care. She looks up at me, her eyes hazy but content.

I sit beside her, brushing a damp strand of hair from her face. “We’ll talk tomorrow about everything else,” I say softly, my voice steady and sure. “Thank you for letting me take care of you tonight.”

Her lips part as if to respond, but she just nods, her hand reaching out to rest lightly on mine. I stay with her until her breathing evens out, her body sinking into sleep. Only then do I stand, watching her for a moment longer before turning off the light and quietly leaving the room, my mind already racing with what tomorrow will bring.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Killion: Morning, babe. I had to go to my parents' estate. I would've invited you, but when I rang the bell, you didn't answer.

Camille: I'm out all morning, but even if I wasn't, we're not in a place where:

a) you call me babe.

b) I go and visit your parents.

Killion: When can we talk about us?

Camille: I don't know. Last night could've been a great opportunity, but you . . .

Killion: Me? I asked for permission.

Camille: Sure, but it was supposed to be us discussing what happened, not you using your special powers to make me . . .

Killion: To make you come so hard you forgot why you were mad? You're welcome.

Camille: That's not the point. And don't be so cocky.

Killion: I think it's exactly the point. You seemed to need something to relax. I just gave it to you.

Camille: That's your excuse?

Killion: Yeah, why not?

Camille: We can't do this again.

Killion: Like never? Because I was thinking about eating you for breakfast tomorrow morning.

Camille: No.

Killion: I could also feed you. I know how much you like my cock.

Camille: Killion, stop.

Killion: Stop what? Reminding you how good it feels when I slide it deep inside you?

Camille: You're impossible.

Killion: And yet, you're still reading. You're still imagining it. Me, pulling you onto the kitchen counter, spreading your legs, and tasting you until you're dripping all over my tongue.

Camille: I'm not imagining anything.

Killion: Liar. I can see you now, trying to fight the ache between your thighs. Do you miss the way my fingers filled you last night? Do you want me to make you beg for more?

Camille: This is not appropriate.

Killion: Appropriate? Nothing about how I want you is appropriate. I want you bent over your counter or the table, skirt hiked up, panties pushed to the side while I fuck you so hard you won't even remember your name, only mine.

Camille: Killion —

Killion: Don't pretend you wouldn't like it. That you wouldn't love my hands gripping your hips, my cock driving so deep you'd forget every single reason you think we shouldn't do this again.

Camille: I hate you.

Killion: No, you don't. You hate how much you want me and you can't have me. Not right now.

Camille: This conversation is over.

Killion: Sure, babe. But when you're lying in bed tonight, your fingers won't feel as good as mine. And you know it.

Camille: I'm blocking you.

Killion: You won't. Because the next time you see me, I'll remind you exactly how good we are together. And you'll let me.

Camille: Goodbye, Killion.

Killion: You sure you want to stop this? You don't want me to tell you what to do with your hand and your cunt?

Camille: Killion. Stop.

Killion: You're already wet, aren't you? Thinking about sliding your fingers inside while I tell you exactly how I'd fuck you if I were there.

Camille: I'm in public.

Killion: Even better. Imagine me pulling you into a bathroom stall, pushing your panties down, and taking you so hard you'd have to bite your lip to keep quiet.

Camille: You're insane.

Killion: Insane for you, baby. I'd have you gripping the wall, your ass in the air, begging me to go deeper. And I'd make you come so hard you'd forget where you were.

Camille: You're impossible.

Killion: You love it. Admit it. You're picturing my tongue between your legs, tasting every inch of you, and making you come until your knees give out.

Camille: I'm not.

Killion: Liar. If I told you to touch yourself right now, you'd do it, wouldn't you? Slip your fingers under your clothes and rub that pretty little clit while you think about my cock filling you up.

Camille: You're delusional.

Killion: Delusional enough to know exactly how you moan when I hit that spot inside you. How you gasp my name when I don't stop, even when you're shaking.

Camille: This conversation is over.

Killion: Oh, baby, we're just getting started. You'll be thinking about this all day, wishing it was my hand instead of yours. Don't worry—I'll make it up to you later.

Camille: You're the worst.

Killion: And yet, you still haven't blocked me. Think about that while you're trying not to moan my name tonight.

Camille: I hate you.

Killion: No, you don't. You hate how badly you want me to tell you exactly how I'd fuck you until you forget your own name.

Camille: I'm done with this.

Killion: You're done when I say you're done. Now be a good girl and think about my cock buried inside you while you try to focus on anything else.

Camille: Goodbye, Killion.

Killion: Come on, Cam, don't leave me hanging. Pick up that video call.

Killion: Cam?

Killion: Next time I'm going to leave you hanging just like you did right now. No coming for hours until I'm satisfied.

Killion: Really, not even that will make you answer?

Killion: Fine, I'll see you tomorrow. Miss me, babe.

Chapter Thirty



Camille

What to Do When He Tips the Scale

I stare at the screen of my phone, my cheeks burning as I reread the text Killion dared to send me.

You sure you want to stop this? You don't want me to tell you what to do with your hand and your cunt?

I nearly dropped my phone the first time I read it, my pulse spiking so hard it felt like I'd just run a marathon. Now, standing just outside the building where I'm currently living, I grip the phone tighter, willing the heat pooling low in my stomach to dissipate. It doesn't. The worst part? He's right.

I bite my lip, the ridiculous heat pooling low in my belly refusing to dissipate. The need bubbling up inside me is absurd, overwhelming, and utterly inescapable. Not now. Not again. Shaking my head, I shove the phone into my bag like that'll somehow silence the explicit words Killion dared to send me.

My soaked underwear clings to me, a humiliating reminder of just how badly he gets under my skin. The audacity of that man.

"Morning, Dr. Ashby, back already?" Jerry, the doorman, greets me with a friendly smile as I step into the lobby.

"Morning, Jerry," I reply, forcing a professional tone even as my thoughts run wild. My cheeks burn, and I silently pray he doesn't notice the way my body feels like it's vibrating with the need for Killion Crawford's hands—and probably his cock.

I take the elevator up to the penthouse, the short ride feeling like an eternity. By the time I unlock the door and step inside, the only thing on my mind is stripping out of these clothes and resetting my head before my next session. At least I'm home. A cold shower and a fresh change of clothes will fix me.

I glance at the clock on the wall as I head upstairs. Just enough time to get cleaned up before diving back into work. Meetings and coaching sessions. On a Saturday.

This wasn't what I'd signed up for. Balancing everything is a precarious act, and I'd made it crystal clear from the

beginning: my patients came first. People traveled from across the country for consultations and surgeries with me. I couldn't just drop everything for a side project, no matter how passionate I was about it—or how lucrative it might be.

Still, moving temporarily wasn't the issue. In theory, it worked. The reality? Thursday was packed with consultations, Friday was a marathon of surgeries, and now Saturday was swallowed up by back-to-back coaching sessions and nonsense meetings. I hope this doesn't last long. All this needed to prove that I wasn't just a social media stunt. That I can bring people to me.

I kick off my shoes in the bathroom, the cool tile soothing against my warm skin. Balance, I remind myself. I can do this.

Peeling off my damp yoga pants and underwear, I cringe at the undeniable evidence of how deeply Killion's words affected me. The wet fabric clings to my skin like a mark of my weakness. He's my kryptonite.

"Get a grip, Camille," I mutter, tossing the garments into the laundry basket with more force than necessary.

Stepping into the shower, I let the hot water cascade over me, closing my eyes as it washes away the tension in my body. Balance. That's what this is about.

Except all I can think about is Killion.

His texts. His voice. The way his hands felt on my body last night.

The memory of him right here, in this very shower, slams into me like a wave. His fingers touching me everywhere, his mouth trailing water-soaked kisses down my neck, the way he teased me until I was trembling, wanting him to fill me.

My head falls back against the shower wall, and I curse under my breath. I can still feel him—his grip on my thighs, his deep growl in my ear, the way he pushed inside me, slow and relentless, making me gasp, making me his.

My hand moves without thinking, brushing against my stomach, sliding lower, and I stop myself with a sharp inhale. No. This is exactly what he wants. To live in my head, to make me ache for him even when I know better.

But, God, I want to feel him again. To hear that cocky voice whispering filthy promises in my ear as he takes me apart piece by piece. To let him ruin me, just one more time.

I press my palms to the wall, the water soaking my hair, trying to push the memories away, but they're relentless. His laugh. His smirk. The way he looked at me like I was his last breath.

"Damn it, Killion," I whisper again, my voice trembling as the hot water cascades over me, masking the sound of my desperation. Balance. I need balance. I tell myself that, but right now, the only thing I need is him—his touch, his voice, the way he commands every part of me without hesitation.

My hand moves almost instinctively, sliding down my stomach, finding the heat between my thighs. I gasp as my fingers slip inside, the sensation igniting every nerve. My other hand trails up, cupping my breast, kneading it as my thumb brushes over my nipple. A shudder courses through me, my body arching into the fantasy building in my mind.

"Killion," I whisper, my voice ragged. "Please . . . please make me come."

My fingers curl inside me, searching for the spot he finds so effortlessly. It's not the same, not nearly enough, but the memory of him, the way he touches me, keeps me chasing the feeling. My other hand moves to my clit, circling it the way he does when he wants to make me beg.

"Oh, God," I moan, my knees weakening as the pressure builds. My mind is filled with him—his cocky smirk, his growling voice in my ear, the way he takes me apart with his hands, his mouth, his cock.

"Tell me what you need, baby," his voice echoes in my mind, low and commanding, the way it always does when he's got me at his mercy. "Be a good girl and say it."

"I need you," I murmur, my voice barely audible over the pounding water. My hips rock against my hand, chasing the release I know only he can give me. "I need you to fuck me. Hard. Please, Killion. Don't stop."

The fantasy is so vivid. His hands pinning my wrists above my head, his mouth on my neck, his cock driving into me with a rhythm that leaves me breathless.

"Take it, Cam," I imagine him saying, his voice rough and relentless. "Take every inch. You know you love it."

My breath hitches, my fingers moving faster, deeper, as my body tightens, the edge just within reach. "Please," I whimper, my voice breaking. "Please, Killion, make me come. Make me yours."

And then it hits me, the release crashing over me in waves, leaving me trembling, gasping, gripping the slick tiles for support. My knees nearly give out as I ride the high, the fantasy of him still thick in my mind.

As the aftershocks fade, I lean against the wall, the water cooling against my overheated skin. "Fuck you, Killion Crawford," I whisper again, my voice softer now, almost resigned. He wasn't even here, and he still managed to ruin me.

He's a distraction.

A frustrating, infuriating, insatiable distraction.

As I wrap myself in a towel, my phone buzzes from the counter, pulling me back to reality. For a second, I hesitate. Another text? A part of me wants to ignore it, but the other, more reckless part of me wonders what else he has to say.

And just like that, I'm staring at the screen again, biting my lip as I read his latest message.

Let me know if you're free tonight. I'll even behave . . . unless you want me not to.

My pulse jumps. A small, traitorous smile tugs at my lips before I remind myself why this is a bad idea. I haven't even had

the time to think about what happened between us. The break up, my parents meddling and . . . I can't just fall back into something, I know it has to end.

I dress, slipping on fresh underwear and a comfortable pair yoga pants, I can't help but wonder what I'd say if I didn't have that next meeting.

Balance. Right.

I shake my head and grab my bag, determined to stay focused. Except as I step outside and the door clicks shut behind me, I realize one thing.

Killion isn't just tipping the scale. He's flipping the damn thing over entirely and I'm not sure how I'm going to avoid him. Not when I'm craving it just as much as I craved him when we were younger.

Chapter Thirty-One



Killion

How to Avoid Losing Everything

I've always loved the house where we grew up in upstate New York. We weren't there full time until Kade and I started high school, but that was our home base. The sprawling property has this timeless charm, with rolling green hills, towering oak trees, and all the space you won't find in the city. Eighty acres with everything you need to help your children become the athletes they could be.

I barely make it to the front door before it swings open, and Scottie, my younger sister, barrels out like a whirlwind, her long hair streaming behind her. "Look who decided to grace us with his presence—the prodigal son returns," she teases, throwing her arms around me.

"Prodigal?" I smirk, hugging her back. "Pretty sure that's your title. When was the last time you were in Manhattan?"

She pulls back, narrowing her gray eyes at me with mock indignation. "I've been busy with my practice, unlike some people. And for the record, I call our dads more than once a month—or when I have problems. What's your excuse, oh absent one?"

Before I can retort, Greyson, our youngest brother, appears in the doorway, grinning like he's up to no good. "I thought it was going to be an asshole-free weekend. Your twin is inside if you're here to see him."

"Good to see you too," I reply dryly as he walks away.

I glance at Scottie, who shrugs. "I think he broke up with his boyfriend or . . . who knows?" She rolls her eyes. "He's always moody when he comes to visit our fathers. I'm sure it's about going professional. It's a sensitive subject for him."

"That it is," I agree, nodding toward the sprawling estate. "So, why are you here?"

Unless it's family dinner night—which has become more sporadic lately with everyone busy training, playing games, and pretending to have a life—we don't get together that often. When we do, it's usually for something pressing. Like today, for

example. I'm here to talk to my fathers about my future and maybe get some wisdom. After all, they managed to make their relationship work while playing for two different teams in two different cities. Sure, it got easier when Dad retired, but they made it work.

Would I have loved to bring Camille with me so Dad could finally meet her in person? Absolutely. But let's be real: Cam isn't anywhere near ready for that. I still can't believe I got as lucky as I did last night. She let me in—not completely, of course—but enough to touch her. Enough to remind her of us, of what we were.

We were more than sex and lust, though. We were friends. We were each other's person in such a short time.

She had become my everything.

"Hey, are you still here?" Scottie asks, snapping her fingers in front of my face.

"Umm, yeah. Sorry, I got distracted," I mumble, shaking off my thoughts. "You were saying?"

"Never mind," she says, crossing her arms with an exaggerated sigh. "Let me guess—you're here to talk about your next-door neighbor."

"Not you too," I groan, glaring at her.

"Oh, me too," she mocks, mimicking my voice. "Do I get to meet her this time, or did you already fuck the whole thing up?"

"Language, Ella," I say mockingly, slipping into the tone our fathers used to use when she was younger and got caught swearing.

She sticks her tongue out at me, spinning on her heel to walk away. "Oh, don't be mad, Scottie. I was just kidding," I call after her, smirking.

"Whatever. I hope she doesn't take you back," she shoots over her shoulder, but there's a playful lilt to her voice.

"Wait a second," I say, trying to reel her back. "You know, she might need an investor for her business."

That stops her. She turns, her curiosity piqued. "Go on . . ."

I pull out my phone, scrolling through Camille's Instagram feed. I show Scottie the videos of her coaching and explain what I know so far.

"Why did she agree to move just for this?" Scottie asks, shaking her head. "There are plenty of people who'd jump at the chance to back her without . . ." She trails off, eyes glued to the screen. "Oh, she had a workshop today. Or at least I think that's what this is."

She scrolls through the posts, studying them like she's preparing for a test. "You know, you could help her," she says after a beat.

"I could," I admit, leaning back against the counter. "But she doesn't want me to."

Scottie taps her chin, her eyes narrowing in thought. "I like what she's doing. I could invest if you let me talk to her."

"Since when do you need permission to do anything?" I ask, raising a brow.

She rolls her eyes but points a finger at me like I'm a particularly dense student. "You need to understand that this could get awkward if she doesn't take you back. I can't just pull out of a partnership because my brother is a dumbass."

"Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence," I deadpan.

"You're welcome," she chirps, handing my phone back. "But seriously, if you're not going to help her, I will. Not because of you, but because I think what she's doing is important."

I stare at her for a moment, the wheels in my head turning. "You know, you're not wrong. But if she agrees to let you invest, you better warn her that you'll be the most annoying business partner on the planet."

Scottie grins, giving me a wink. "Oh, I don't need to warn her. She's already dealing with you, isn't she?"

THE NEXT FEW HOURS ARE A BLUR OF LAUGHTER, SIBLING BANTER, AND GENERAL CRAWFORD FAMILY FUN. THIS TIME THERE'S NO games, which Val is thankful for because she always ends up too tired for our mayhem. Though Greyson and I end up locked in a heated pool game while Scottie acts as the self-proclaimed referee, calling out every minor infraction with dramatic flair. Kaden, my twin, watches from the couch with a drink in hand and Val next to him reading a book she just bought before heading here. He of course throws in the occasional sarcastic comment to keep things lively.

By the time Greyson finally admits defeat—after much whining and an attempt to distract me with a wildly inaccurate story about his college life—I'm feeling lighter than I have in weeks. This is what I needed. Family. Dad and I talk about my relationship, or the lack of it. He says that before I start planning on how we're going to manage a long-distance relationship, I have to get back the girl. Then, we'll figure it out. The most important thing is communication, which we didn't have the first time.

Later, after dinner, Kaden and I find ourselves on the back patio, the cool night air wrapping around us. The stars are out in full force, and the distant hum of crickets fills the silence. He sips his whiskey, eyeing me with that knowing look only a twin can give.

"So," he starts, leaning back in his chair, "you gonna tell me what's been eating at you, or do I have to guess?"

I sigh, swirling the amber liquid in my glass. “It’s Camille.”

“Of course it is,” he says with a smirk. “What’d you do this time?”

“I didn’t—” I stop myself, shaking my head. “Okay, I did. I got carried away. I thought . . . I thought if I could remind her how good we are together, I could skip the groveling part. And obviously, I need to go back to the groveling.”

“Obviously.” Kaden snorts. “No shit it didn’t work. You shouldn’t be taking shortcuts, Kill.”

“I know, but I also think she needed it,” I state, running a hand through my hair. “But now . . . it’s hard, man. I screwed up, and now every time I try to fix it, I feel like I’m digging the hole deeper.”

Kaden studies me for a moment, his expression softer than usual. “You’re not going to fix this with words, you know. Camille’s smart, and she’s been through a lot. She’s going to need more than an apology.”

“I know that too,” I say, my frustration mounting. “But what does that even look like? How do I prove to her that I’m serious?”

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “You start by showing up. Be consistent. Let her see that you’re not just here for the easy parts.”

I let out a short laugh. “That’s asking a lot.”

“Yeah, well, groveling isn’t supposed to be easy,” he points out. “You need to show her that you’re willing to put in the work for the long haul. It’s not only about flowers, but big gestures. Remind her why she fell in love with you for the first time . . . because you made her feel like she was the only person in the entire world. Listen to her. Show her that you’re not just saying the right things—you’re doing them.”

I sit back, staring out at the dark expanse of the property. “I just don’t want to screw it up again.”

Kaden claps a hand on my shoulder. “You won’t, as long as you stop trying to skip the hard parts. She’s worth it, right?”

“She’s everything,” I admit quietly.

“Then you’ve got your answer,” he says, standing and stretching. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to check on Val. I swear every time we’re here she just wants to be in the big ass bathtub for hours.”

“Have fun,” I smirk, knowing what they might be doing in the bathtub.

He doesn’t even acknowledge me though. And I let it be. Kaden’s right. If I want Camille back, I have to stop cutting corners. It’s time to show her that I’m all in—for real this time.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Camille: Thank you for the flowers. What are you doing?

Killion: Sending you flowers, of course.

Camille: What's the end game?

Killion: Just reminding you that I'm thinking of you since I'm not heading back home until tomorrow. Also, I heard you ditched the driver.

Camille: I don't need a driver. I can walk.

Killion: No doubt, but wouldn't it be better if someone is watching after you? You're famous.

Camille: No. *You* are famous. Do you have a driver?

Killion: Ted is my driver. I'm loaning him to you. My schedule is different from yours. I'm sure we can share him.

Camille: Now we're sharing? Interesting. I thought you didn't like to share.

Killion: Don't do that.

Camille: What am I doing?

Killion: Taking things to a place you know I can't resist.

Camille: Oh? I was just talking about Ted. Where's your mind going, Kill?

Killion: You know exactly where it's going. And if you keep this up, you're going to find out what happens when you tease me.

Camille: Tease you? I'm just curious about what else we could share.

Killion: Careful, Cam. You're walking a fine line.

Camille: Am I? Maybe I just want to know how far you're willing to go.

Killion: Obviously not sharing you, but far enough to have you begging me to stop—and then begging me not to.

Camille: That's bold of you to assume I'd beg.

Killion: Oh, baby, I don't assume. I know. You'll beg. You always do when I've got you pinned beneath me, whispering exactly how I'm going to ruin you.

Camille: Ruin me? You sound so confident.

Killion: Because I am. You're already thinking about it, aren't you? Thinking about my hands on your hips. My mouth on your neck. My cock filling you so deep you forget how to say anything except my name.

Camille: You're awfully sure of yourself.

Killion: I don't need to be sure when I've already seen the way you fall apart for me. Just say the word, Cam, and I'll remind you why you'll always come back to me.

Camille: Tempting, but I'm not sure you can handle me.

Killion: Handle you? Baby, I don't just handle you—I own you. Your body remembers me even when your mind wants to fight it. And right now, you're wishing it was my hand sliding between your thighs, aren't you?

Camille: You're ridiculous.

Killion: Maybe. But I'm also right. Go ahead, touch yourself, baby. Pretend it's me. Or better yet, let me do it for you when I get back.

Camille: You think I'm just sitting here, waiting for you to come back?

Killion: No, I think you're sitting there, soaking wet and wishing I was there to make you come instead of this conversation.

Camille: You're wrong.

Killion: I'm right, but I'll let you pretend you're not almost panting, wishing I was there.

Camille: I'm okay without you.

Killion: Sure, why don't you get past the lies and just tell me what you're wearing? Or better yet, tell me how much longer it'll be before you're wearing nothing at all.

Camille: I'm fine, Kill. Really. Fully clothed and entirely unaffected.

Killion: Liar. I can practically hear you squirming.

Camille: Squirming? I think you've got me confused with someone else.

Killion: I don't confuse you with anyone, baby. You're one of a kind, especially when you're falling apart under my hands. Or are you forgetting how quickly you came last time I touched you?

Camille: You're awfully full of yourself.

Killion: No, I'm full of you. Or at least I was. Don't tell me you've forgotten how good I feel inside you.

Camille: Maybe I have. Why don't you remind me?

Killion: Touch yourself, baby. Right now. Pretend it's me. Slide your hand down, under your waistband, and feel how wet you already are for me.

Camille: You're too cocky for your own good.

Killion: Am I? What are you doing right now, Cam? Tell me. Are you doing as I say?

Camille: Maybe.

Killion: Don't tease me. Don't tease yourself. Slide your fingers inside, baby. Pretend it's me stretching you, filling you. Tell me how it feels.

Camille: It feels . . . good. But not enough.

Killion: Of course it's not. It's not me. You need more, don't you? My cock instead of your fingers. My tongue teasing that sweet little clit until you're begging for me to stop and begging for more at the same time.

Camille: You sound like you're very sure of yourself.

Killion: That's because I am. And if I were there, I'd be on my knees, making you come on my tongue before flipping you over and fucking you so hard you forget every reason you think we shouldn't do this again.

Camille: You're all talk.

Killion: Try me. Hell, I'd have you on the floor by now, your legs over my shoulders, my cock so deep in your throat you'd be seeing stars.

Camille: I want you in my mouth. I want to feel you on my tongue.

Killion: Fuck, baby. Keep talking. Tell me how you'd take me, how you'd suck me so good I'd lose my goddamn mind.

Camille: I'd take you deep, let you fuck my throat, let you watch as I make you lose control.

Killion: Jesus, Cam. You're going to kill me. Keep going.

Camille: Only if you promise to do the same when you're here.

Killion: Baby, when I get back, I'll make sure you can't walk straight for a week. Now, come for me. Be a good girl and let go.

Killion: Did you come, baby?

Camille: Yes.

Killion: Good. Now imagine how much better it'll feel when it's my hands, my mouth, my cock making you come. And that's a promise.

Camille: We . . . we shouldn't be doing this. It's like we're skipping what really matters and the foundation has cracks. Could we even survive if we try again?

Killion: I know, I know I should be showing you how much you mean to me, but this . . . this is something I crave and I'm so fucking hungry. It's been years without you. Will we survive? I fucking hope so. Does this mean you'll let me in? You'll give me a chance?

Camille: I . . . yes. Just don't make me regret this, Killion.

Killion: You won't regret it, baby.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Killion: Morning, I didn't want to interrupt your yoga session. Maybe you can give me access to your place so I can drop off your morning coffee tomorrow?

Camille: Nice try, Crawford. You're not entering to my place freely.

Killion: But I gave you my code last night after dinner.

Camille: My birthday is not necessarily a code. I've known it for a long time. And why would you use my birthday as a code?

Killion: I know it well.

Camille: We never celebrated.

Killion: No, by September I had already done the most stupid thing in the world.

Camille: It wasn't very smart, but I get it. You knew how Dad handled the people who pissed him off. You were looking after your fathers.

Killion: Have you talked to them? Your parents?

Camille: Yep. They called me last night. We had a long discussion. I'm upset at them. Sure, they were looking after me and my future, but that didn't give them the right to threaten you.

Killion: It's in the past and we're moving forward.

Camille: You say it as if it's so simple.

Killion: Nope, I know you're still upset and I have to make you fall in love with me if I want the girl.

Camille: By the way, Scottie texted me. She'd like to discuss my business. I already have an investor.

Killion: Have you signed yet?

Camille: Not yet, but I can't just drop them like that.

Killion: Check with your lawyer. If you haven't signed it's their problem.

Camille: I would be an asshole if I don't sign.

Killion: They're using you, and what happens if they decide not to invest? You uprooted yourself for nothing.

Camille: You know what's funny?

Killion: What's funny?

Camille: You sound like my father. You two don't trust anyone.

Killion: I trust plenty, but so far there's nothing that makes me believe these people are serious about your business.

Camille: They moved me to New York.

Killion: So they're paying for everything—even the penthouse?

Camille: Well, no, it was all paid by me, but . . . they're going to invest millions and only get twenty percent of my earnings. That's a great deal.

Killion: What if I invest millions, only get five percent, and you stopped worrying about these people?

Camille: They have great connections with social media influencers.

Killion: If you need that, I can have my publicist connect you with the people you need.

Camille: Let me talk to my lawyer.

Killion: What are today's plans?

Camille: I have a few consultations.

Killion: You still haven't told me how you got to be the Hooha coach or why you're still working as a doctor.

Camille: I love medicine, but the business is fun and helps women who don't need reconstruction. Many don't really need it, they just need the exercises. Plus . . . there's a lot more involved.

Killion: How did you become a reconstruction surgeon?

Camille: Karla. After her first baby she was having issues. The doctor recommended surgery to fix it. She came to me and I began to look into that. It didn't make sense that at her age she'd need reconstruction. I began researching. Many new moms go through two or three surgeries because there's no one helping them with exercises and tips. Would they need the surgery at some point? A good doctor will tell them if they really do.

Killion: You are passionate about this.

Camille: I am.

Killion: So, you're tight with all those exercises, huh?

Camille: Don't start, Crawford.

Killion: I'm just asking if you only teach or if you do . . . how does that saying goes?

Camille: I don't think it applies to this.

Killion: Sure, tight cunts are applicable, always.

Camille: You're unbelievable.

Killion: Oh, come on, Cam. It's a valid question. You're so passionate about helping these women, teaching them how to strengthen everything . . . you're telling me you don't put all that knowledge to good use yourself?

Camille: My patients' health and recovery isn't a joke, Killion.

Killion: I'm not joking. I'm just appreciating the potential . . . side effects of all that expertise.

Camille: You're impossible.

Killion: Maybe. But I'm also imagining how all that "tightening" knowledge might apply to you. Makes me wonder, Cam—are you as tight as I think you are?

Camille: You're skating on thin ice.

Killion: Thin ice? Baby, I'm ready to dive headfirst. I mean, the thought of you, with all that precision and control . . . it's enough to drive me insane.

Camille: I'm not entertaining this.

Killion: Oh, but you are. Tell me, Cam—do you ever practice what you preach? Ever think about me while you're focusing on all that control?

Camille: Killion.

Killion: Do you? Because I can't stop thinking about how incredible it'd feel to have you clenching around me. Tight. Perfect. Exactly the way I know you'd be.

Camille: I should turn off my phone and block you.

Killion: But you won't. You're already picturing it, aren't you? How good it'd feel to have me buried deep inside you, stretching you, making you lose every ounce of that control you're so proud of.

Camille: You're ridiculous.

Killion: And yet, you're still here, listening. Because you know I'm right. You know how good we'd feel together.

Camille: You've got a dirty mouth.

Killion: And I'd use every filthy word to make you come, Cam. Imagine it. Me, on my knees, tasting every inch of you, whispering exactly how I'm going to fuck you until you can't even remember your own name.

Camille: Killion —

Killion: Say the word, baby. Just one word, and I'll show you exactly how tight, how perfect, how completely mine you are.

Camille: We're supposed to be on a get to know each (again) other basis, not . . . this.

Killion: I agree, but what if there are some benefits? Maybe you can reward me with, you know . . . sex?

Camille: I have to go to work, Killion. Keep your dirty thoughts (and texts) to yourself.

Killion: Miss me. I know I'll miss you, a lot.

Chapter Thirty-Four



Camille

How to Parent Your Parents 101

I stand in front of the mirror, holding two tops like I'm auditioning for a *Who Wore It Best?* contest no one asked for. One's plain white, the other a soft sage. It's not exactly *Sophie's Choice*, but my brain is too cluttered to make a decision. With a huff, I toss the sage one onto the bed and pull the white over my head. Practical, professional, forgettable. It works.

There's so many thoughts swirling inside my head that today's attire isn't that important. It's definitely not a dress-for-success day. It's more like a 'what the fuck am I doing with my life?' day.

The text exchange with Killion is taking all my brain cells. I told him my discussion with my parents had been amicable. Was it wrong lying to him? Absolutely. But let's be honest, this whole second chance with Killion might not work out at all. We'll soon figure out that being together is as realistic as me suddenly liking kale. He lives here, he's famous, and his life is a whirlwind of people cheering his name while I'm over here wondering if I can handle not seeing him for weeks at a time.

And then there's my family.

Last night's call with Dad is still rattling around my brain like a particularly annoying song I can't turn off.

"He shouldn't be back. I'll terminate him," Dad snapped, the same fire in his voice that used to terrify my high school boyfriends.

"Dad, I don't think you have that power," I said, trying not to laugh. Sure, my dad's got connections, but who's really going to listen to a guy trying to take down the nation's football sweetheart?

It's not like Killion is just anybody. One time, I was on vacation in Cancun, and a restaurant was broadcasting a Gladiators game. Everyone was screaming his name like he was their long-lost cousin. That's what I'm dealing with.

But Dad's vendetta wasn't even the worst part of the conversation. Nope. I grab my necklace from the dresser, clasping it behind my neck as his words replay like a bad voicemail.

“This business of yours, Camille . . .” His tone was deceptively calm, which in Dad-speak meant brace for impact. “It’s fine for now. Well, barely fine. You almost undressed, moving your hips like you’re . . .”

“Like I’m what?” I interrupted, knowing exactly where he was going.

“Inappropriate,” he finished, every syllable soaked in disapproval. “Do you know how it feels to see my daughter doing that on the internet?”

“Inappropriate?” I repeated, staring at my reflection like it might back me up.

He sighed—a long, theatrical sigh, the kind that comes with a side of disappointment and a sprinkle of judgment. “You’re working hard. I see that. But do you think it’s sustainable? You’re a doctor. You should focus on that. And maybe, if you spent less time on this . . . side venture, you’d meet someone. Settle down.”

Ah yes, the marriage talk. My favorite.

“Dad,” I said, keeping my voice even, “I’m not running this business to meet someone. It’s important. Women need resources and education about their health. And it’s not a side venture. It’s part of my work.”

Silence. The kind that’s somehow louder than yelling because I’m a total disappointment.

Finally, he spoke, his voice quieter but no less cutting. “I just want what’s best for you. And this . . . this isn’t it. Not the business. Not that man. And certainly not you being single at this age.”

I yank on a pair of jeans, tightening the belt like it might keep his words from sinking in any deeper. The way he said it made everything I’ve built sound like some phase I’ll grow out of, like my career and my relationship choices are just placeholders until real life starts.

And then there’s Killion.

Dad would never approve of him. A football player? Please. In Dad’s eyes, Killion’s entire existence is a ticking time bomb of instability and public drama. I can already hear Mom’s lectures about how I’d be setting myself up for heartbreak.

But here’s the question I can’t shake: Does it even matter what they think?

I sit on the edge of the bed, slipping on my heels as the thought twists in my gut. Was I wrong to lie to Killion about my parents? Maybe. Probably. But what good would telling him the truth do? All it would do is confirm what he already suspects—that my family doesn’t think he’s good enough. Or maybe that I’m not strong enough to stand by him.

Ben hops onto the bed, staring at me with the judgmental expression only a cat can pull off.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I mutter. “I’m figuring it out.”

He stretches, curling into a smug little ball, clearly unbothered by my existential crisis.

Grabbing my purse, I head for the door. My phone buzzes as I step into the hall. It’s a text from Killion telling me not to dodge the driver.

I stare at the screen, the words digging under my skin like they know too much.

As I step into the elevator, I tell myself this is for the best. One complicated relationship is enough to handle. Adding Killion to the mix? That’s a mess I’m not ready to clean up.

Not yet, anyway.

SLIDING INTO THE SLEEK BLACK SUV, I’M IMMEDIATELY GREETED BY THE SMELL OF COFFEE. THERE’S A TO-GO CUP IN THE holder and a neatly wrapped pastry on the seat beside me. Typical Killion. He’s infuriatingly thoughtful in ways that make it impossible to stay mad at him. I take a sip of the coffee, and yep—he nailed it. My exact order: a triple-shot, soy vanilla latte, extra hot, with a light dusting of cinnamon on top. How did he remember that?

I hate him a little for knowing me so well. But also . . . I don’t. Deep down, I like that someone thought about me today. I pull out my phone and dial Karla. She picks up on the second ring, and the sound of madness spills through the line.

“Hold on,” she says quickly. “Eli, put that down. No, we don’t climb the fridge. Yes, Mom’s on the phone with Auntie Cami. One second, Camille.”

There’s a muffled crash, followed by Eli’s unmistakable giggles and Karla’s exasperated sigh. A full minute passes before she comes back on.

“Okay, I’m here,” she says, her breath a little short. “Sorry about that. Eli thinks he’s Spider-Man today.”

“Better than Superman. At least there won’t be any visits to the ER because your child tried to fly.” I laugh, as I break off a piece of the pastry. “So, how’s everything over there?”

“Loud,” she says with a laugh. “But what else is new? What’s up? You don’t usually call this early.”

I hesitate, twirling the coffee stirrer between my fingers. “I talked to Mom and Dad last night.”

Karla groans softly. “Oh, that explains why Mom texted me this morning saying you’re not ‘making good choices.’ What happened this time?”

“It was about my business and Killion,” I admit, leaning back against the seat. “Dad’s upset—they apparently threatened him back when we were dating and now he’s ready to fulfill some grand threat. And he made it sound like my business is just a

temporary distraction from being single. He doesn't think it's real. And Mom—"

"Let me guess," Karla interrupts. "Mom brought up grandchildren?"

"No," I say dryly. "Just my very loser, famous ex-boyfriend and how I'm clearly spiraling out of control for not being married yet."

Karla snorts. "Classic Mom and Dad. What did you say?"

"I told them I'm going low contact for now," I say, breaking off another piece of the pastry and popping it into my mouth. "I can't keep doing this. Every conversation feels like they're just waiting for me to fail so they can swoop in and say 'I told you so.' And they still refuse to acknowledge what they did when I was eighteen. Every time I tried to bring it up during our phone call, they interrupted or brushed it off like it's nothing."

There's a pause on the other end. Then Karla sighs. "I get it, Camille. I really do. But you know they'll come around eventually."

I stare out the window, the city blurring past. "Will they? Or are they just going to keep waiting for me to fall in line?"

"Remember when I didn't finish law school and then got pregnant after knowing Peter for six weeks?" she says, her tone half-joking. "That was a disaster, but they came around. Sort of."

"Sort of," I echo, my lips twisting into a faint smile. "Mom still snubs you for not finishing your degree. And she acts like Peter's some kind of underachiever because he doesn't have a fancy job title."

"That's true," Karla admits. "But at least they're nicer about it now. Most of the time."

I press my forehead against the cool window, trying to absorb some of her optimism. "If my parents looked down on my husband like that, I'd stop talking to them altogether."

"Maybe the free babysitting is why I still talk to them," Karla says with a dry laugh. "Or maybe I just got used to it."

"You shouldn't have to get used to it," I say, my voice dropping. "You, Peter, and the kids deserve better than that."

"Thanks," she says softly. "But, Camille, you can't control how they are. You can only control how you deal with them. If low contact feels right for now, do it. But don't shut them out completely. It'll pass. It always does."

Her words linger, twisting in my chest. Do I want it to pass? I can't live with their constant judgment. They should change too—at least enough to respect my boundaries.

"I don't think I can do this today," I say finally, my voice quieter now.

"Then don't," Karla says simply. "Take a breath, focus on you, and call me before you do anything drastic. I'm better at managing our parents than you are."

I let out a reluctant laugh, the tension in my shoulders easing a little. "Deal."

"Good. And hey, don't let them get to you too much. They're just . . . them. You're doing great, Camille. Don't forget that. And if you want to talk about Killion, I'm here."

The chaos on her end picks up again—Eli shouting something about a cape, followed by a crash that makes Karla groan.

"Go," I tell her, smiling despite myself. "You've got your hands full."

"Always," she says with a laugh. "Love you."

"Love you too."

I hang up and sip my coffee, the familiar flavor grounding me for a moment. Karla's right—this will pass. But for now, distance feels like the only way to protect myself.

And maybe, just maybe, that distance will give me the clarity I need to figure out what's really going on between me and Killion. Can there really be something real?

Chapter Thirty-Five



Killion

Hustle 201: Killion's Comeback

The whistle blows, cutting through the humid air like a referee signaling a game-changing penalty. Practice is grinding me down, each drill feeling like fourth-and-long with no clear play. I jog to the sideline, my gear clinging to me like an unwanted second skin, sweat dripping in rivers as I try to shake off the frustration of another rough session.

This upcoming game isn't just another game. It's *the* game. A family showdown wrapped in a national spectacle. Lucian's been hyping it up for weeks, dropping shit talk in the family group chat like we're on some reality show. I'm lucky he hates social media, or I'd probably be tagged in fifty posts about how I'm going down. Whatever that means.

Classic Lucian—always trying to one-up me, even though we don't even play the same position. This game isn't just about the team. It's about proving, once and for all, who's better. And if I don't pull it together, I know exactly what'll happen. He'll be grinning like an idiot all over the news, talking about brotherly love while privately gloating for months.

Coach's voice snaps me out of my spiraling thoughts. "Crawford!" His tone is commanding. It's the scary tone that makes anyone around stand straighter.

"Yeah, Coach?" I jog over, trying to look less like I've been mentally drowning for the last hour.

He crosses his arms, giving me that I'm-not-mad-I'm-just-disappointed look that cuts deeper than yelling. "You're distracted."

I shake my head automatically. "I'm good, Coach."

"No, you're not," he says flatly, tilting his head like he's sizing me up for how much yelling I can handle. "Your timing's off. Your passes are sloppy. And you're hesitating on plays you should know like the back of your hand. Where's your head at?"

I glance at the field, avoiding his eyes. "Just an off day."

“Bull,” he snaps, his arms crossing tighter. “You’ve been off all week. Look, Crawford, I don’t care what’s going on in your personal life—leave it off the field. This isn’t just any game. It’s *the* game that decides if we keep the streak alive. And you’re playing against your brother, which means the stakes are higher. Get your head on straight, or we’re fucked and I’ll bench you for the rest of the season.”

He wouldn’t bench me, but his words hit harder than I want to admit because he’s right. My head’s a mess. Lucian’s ready to embarrass me on live television, and right now, I don’t see how I’m going to shut him up.

And then there’s Camille.

She’s living next door, but I haven’t seen her all week. We’ve been texting, but the second I try to add a little heat to our exchange, she shuts it down with some excuse about being busy. How are we supposed to fix things if she’s avoiding me?

It’s like I’m racing against the clock. If I don’t figure out a way to make her fall in love with me again, I’m going to lose her. For good this time.

“You with me, Crawford?” Coach’s voice cuts through my thoughts. “You’ve got to be here, with us. Not off in la-la land.”

I nod, clenching my jaw. “I’ve got it under control.”

“Do you?” His tone sharpens, like he doesn’t believe a word of it. “You’ve got talent, Crawford, but talent doesn’t mean shit if your head’s not in the game. Get it together, or we’re going to have a very different conversation on Monday.”

He doesn’t wait for a response. The whistle blows again, and he’s already barking orders at the defense.

I jog back onto the field, his words weighing on me like lead. The guys are lined up, ready for the next play. I take my position, gripping the ball tightly, trying to shake off everything else.

The snap comes. I drop back, scanning the field. Darnell’s open, but for a split second, I hesitate. The pass gets to him, but it’s not clean enough for a solid run.

“Come on, Kill, what the fuck?” Darnell yells, holding up the ball like a coach tossing a flag for a rookie mistake.

I mutter a curse under my breath, jogging back as we reset.

“You good?” Tank asks, clapping me on the back.

“Yeah,” I lie, even though it’s obvious I’m not.

The next play is better—not great, but at least Darnell doesn’t have to yell at me again. By the time practice ends, I’m drenched in sweat, my frustration boiling over.

The locker room is loud—guys shouting and laughing, slamming lockers—but I head straight for the showers, letting the water drown out the noise.

Lucian’s cocky grin flashes in my mind, that smug look he gets when he knows he’s gotten under my skin. He’s been waiting for this game since they announced the schedule, and I can’t let him win. Not this time.

But it’s not just Lucian. It’s Camille.

Her laugh, her smile, the way she used to look at me like I was the only thing that mattered—it’s all there, lingering like a bad play replaying over and over in my head.

And the worst part? Right now, I don’t know if I’m playing this game to beat Lucian . . . or to prove to myself that I’m still the guy she used to believe in.

“YO, KILL,” TANK’S VOICE SNAPS ME OUT OF MY SPIRALING THOUGHTS AS I STEP OUT OF THE SHOWER. HE’S LEANING AGAINST the lockers, already dressed, a towel slung over his shoulder. “Coach ripped into you today, huh?”

“Yeah,” I mutter, grabbing my stuff and heading to my locker.

“You good?” he presses, watching me like he already knows the answer.

I nod, but it’s a half-hearted gesture at best.

“Come on, man,” Tank says, plopping onto the bench next to me. “Talk to me. What’s going on? Is it Lucian? The game?”

“Both,” I admit, yanking on my shirt like it’s offended me. “And Camille.”

At the mention of her name, Tank raises an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth twitching like he’s holding back a smirk. “Camille? Is that the chick you always talk about when you’re drunk? You know, the ‘one that got away’ chick?”

I sigh, running a hand through my damp hair. “Yeah, that’s her. Except now she’s my next-door neighbor, she’s given me this so-called second chance, and she’s keeping me at arm’s length. It’s driving me fucking insane.”

Tank leans back, crossing his arms like he’s about to deliver some overdue advice. “You’re in deep, huh?”

“Deeper than I’ve ever been,” I say quietly, because this time I know what happens if I lose her. I’m aware of how painful life is without her.

He whistles low, shaking his head. “Damn, Kill. You’re whipped, and she’s not even yours.”

I glare at him, but there’s no real heat behind it.

“Look,” Tank says, leaning forward, his tone turning serious. “You’ve got to decide what’s more important right now. The game or the girl. And don’t give me that ‘I can do both’ bullshit. You’ve got Lucian breathing down your neck and the whole

country watching. Focus on the game. Lock it down, block everything else out. Then, after you win, figure out how to show her you're serious. Not just with words—actions.”

I groan, leaning my head against the locker. “How am I supposed to do that when she's dodging my calls and avoiding me like I'm the plague?”

Tank stands, slinging his bag over his shoulder. “You'll figure it out,” he says, clapping me on the back. “But first, win the damn game. Then go get your girl. One thing at a time, bro.”

I watch him walk away, his words bouncing around in my head like a ping-pong ball I can't catch. He's not wrong. The game is everything right now.

I sit down, staring at the floor, my thoughts tugging in two completely opposite directions.

Tank's right. First, I have to beat Lucian. Prove to myself that I can still dominate on the field. Then, I'll figure out how to win her back.

I stand, shoving my gear into my bag. It's time to get my head in the game. Lucian might be my brother, but on Sunday, he's the enemy. And I'm not losing. Not to him, and definitely not to the fear of losing Camille.

It's game time. In more ways than one.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Killion: Not sure what's going on, but I'm going to give you space before I fuck up our relationship and the game. I'm concentrating on the game not because it's a priority, but because it seems like you need time.

Camille: Thank you.

Killion: Can you at least tell me what's going on?

Camille: I'm busy.

Killion: Don't bullshit me, Cam. If this is going to work—or not, we need to communicate.

Camille: There's a lot happening. My investors might pull out. Not sure if it's them realizing this isn't what they wanted, or my father being an asshole. I need to figure things out. Then there's you.

Killion: Thank fuck there's still a me in the equation.

Camille: Technically, I'm not sure. If I'm leaving, what's the point?

Killion: Scottie is interested.

Camille: I might give her a call, but if things between you and me don't work out . . . what then? That'll be awkward.

Killion: If things don't work out it's probably because I'm an asshole who deserves to suffer for the rest of his life. You and my sister will have a partnership and life will go on.

Camille: It sounds simple.

Killion: It is simple.

Camille: Good luck with the game, Kill.

Killion: Thank you. I hope you are open to talk once I'm back.

Camille: I hope so too.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



Camille

When the Game Shifts

It's been that kind of week—the kind where Monday feels like it was three years ago, and I'm half-convinced I've aged a decade. The door creaks open, and for a moment, I think I've hallucinated a supermodel. She's tall, with dark, sleek hair that looks like it came straight out of a shampoo commercial. Her gray eyes flicker over me like she's assessing my life choices. Her tailored blazer over a silk blouse, radiate that intimidating mix of elegance and efficiency.

"Camille Ashby?" she asks, her voice smooth, professional, but with just enough warmth to make her seem human.

"That's me," I manage to say, confused by who this woman is.

"I'm Ella Crawford, it's nice to meet you," she says, extending her hand. "Most people know me as Scottie. Do you have a few minutes to talk?"

I shake her hand while my brain is trying to figure this out. Scottie? Instead of asking what she's doing here, I step aside. "Sure, come on in. It's nice to meet you."

Her heels click softly on the hardwood as she glides into the living room, the kind of confident walk that makes you stand a little straighter just by proximity. Ben, my perpetually unimpressed cat, barely glances up from his spot on the couch. He flicks his tail once, clearly deciding she's not worth his energy, and goes back to doing nothing.

"Your cat's a tough critic," Scottie observes, her lips quirking into a small, knowing smile. "I like him."

"He judges everyone equally," I reply, gesturing to the seating area. "Can I get you something? Coffee? Tea?"

"Water's fine," she says, setting her sleek leather bag on the armchair like it belongs there before sitting gracefully on the couch.

I disappear into the kitchen and return with a bottle of water, catching a glimpse of her flipping through a pristine leather folder. Papers—probably alphabetized and laminated because of course they are—peek out as she scans them like she already

knows how this conversation is going to end.

“Thanks,” she says, taking the bottle with a polite smile. “I appreciate you making time for me. I’ve looked into your company, and I have to say, I’m impressed. The Happy HooHa Coach is growing. You know your demographic, and you know what they need.”

I sit across from her, crossing one leg over the other, trying to appear composed when inside I’m silently cheering. Go me. “Thank you. It started as a way to fill a healthcare gap, but it’s grown into something I’m really proud of.”

Scottie nods, her expression thoughtful. “It’s clear you’re passionate about this, and that’s why I’m here. I think we have a real opportunity to collaborate. Women’s health is underserved, and products created by women, for women? That’s powerful.”

Her words are good—almost too good. I study her, trying to gauge whether she’s for real or just another suit in heels looking to make money. “And what does collaboration look like to you?”

She leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees like we’re co-conspirators. “A partnership. You’ve built a strong foundation, and your brand has a loyal following. Your products are innovative. I’d like to help you expand—distribution, marketing, scaling production. But more than that, I want to ensure women have access to something they can trust. I understand you already have an investor, but I’m here to offer more than money.”

Her words hit me like a lightning bolt. For months, I’ve been stuck in a hamster wheel of pitches, nodding along as investors pretend to care about the importance of vaginal health while visibly squirming in their seats. My current investor only agreed because his wife thought it was a cute idea, but now she wants to play CEO. She wants control. She wants her face on the brand.

But that’s not why I’m here. I’m here to grow a vision, not hand it over to someone else’s vanity project. And yet, they’re holding all the cards. No signature, no funding—and maybe no hospital, either, considering the strings they’re threatening to pull to have me pushed out.

If I can get to the director first, I might have a shot at staying. But timing is everything. Go too soon, and I risk overplaying my hand. Wait too long, and I’ll be out of options entirely.

It’s a tightrope walk, and honestly? It fucking sucks.

“I like the idea,” I say carefully. “But I’m not just interested in expanding what we already have. I want to do more—supplements, probiotics, holistic health products. There’s so much untapped potential. If I bring on an investor, I need to know they’re here to build, not take over.”

Scottie leans back, studying me with a confidence I both respect and envy. “You’re the brand. Why would anyone want to change that?” she says, her tone almost incredulous. “And I like what you’re planning. Women’s health isn’t one-size-fits-all. Tailored solutions, prevention, wellness—it’s all overdue.”

The excitement builds in my chest, a feeling I haven’t had in weeks. “It’s not just about products, either. It’s about education. Teaching women about their bodies, giving them the tools to advocate for themselves. It’s bigger than just business.”

Her lips curve into a smile, genuine and warm. “Exactly. Honest, effective products. No gimmicks, no pandering. Just something real.”

I take a breath, the kind that feels like it’s pulling in fresh air after being stuck in a stuffy room for hours. “I’m not going to lie, Scottie. I’ve been drowning in investor meetings lately, and most of them only see dollar signs. They don’t care about the people we’re trying to help. It’s exhausting.”

Her expression softens. “I get it. That’s why I’m here. I believe in what you’ve built. I want to help, not change it.”

Ben, who’s been watching us with his usual air of feline superiority, lets out a small, judgmental meow, as if to say, *Well? What’s your decision, human?*

I glance at Ben, who’s now licking a paw like he’s preparing a judgmental closing argument, then back at Scottie. Maybe, just maybe, she’s the ally I’ve been waiting for—the unicorn in a sea of suits who actually gets it.

“I want to do it,” I say carefully, meeting her steady gaze. “But I think it’s something we’ll need to discuss with lawyers first. I want to make sure everything’s airtight before we move forward.”

Scottie nods, already reaching into her sleek leather bag. Of course she came prepared. She pulls out a pristine folder.

“This is my proposal,” she says, sliding it toward me with the kind of finesse that makes me wonder if she practiced it in front of a mirror. “Take your time. Go through it, show it to your lawyer, and add anything you think is necessary. Or, if you’d rather, we can set up a meeting next Monday and go through it together. Whatever works best for you.”

I pick up the folder, feeling the slight chill of the leather against my fingers. This feels real.

“That sounds good,” I say, flipping it open to scan the first page. It’s as organized as I expected, down to the bullet points and color-coded highlights. “I’ll go through it and draft some modifications.” I glance up. “Monday’s not great for me, though. I have back-to-back surgeries all day.”

Scottie raises an eyebrow, impressed. “Surgeries? And here I was thinking you couldn’t get more badass.”

I laugh softly, setting the folder back down. “It’s not as glamorous as it sounds, believe me. But how about Tuesday? Anytime after one works for me.”

“Tuesday it is,” she says, her lips curving into a confident smile. “You won’t regret this, Camille. I promise.”

As she gathers her things, the tension I didn’t realize I was carrying starts to ebb away. For the first time in weeks, maybe months, it feels like I’m not fighting this battle alone. There’s a glimmer of hope—a partnership that doesn’t come with strings wrapped in red tape or veiled ultimatums.

Scottie pauses by the door, glancing back at me with a knowing look. “And, Camille . . . I hope things between you and my brother work out.”

Her casual delivery is anything but. My head tilts, my eyebrows raising in automatic defense mode. “Scottie, I—”

She cuts me off with a shrug, her expression softening. “I’m not saying it should be easy for him. He’s an idiot. Make him grovel. Make him really work for it. He deserves that. But he was . . . pretty broken after what happened. It’d be nice to see him happy again.”

My throat tightens, and I swallow hard, unsure how to respond. “And if things don’t work out?”

Scottie hesitates, her smile turning wistful. “I hope they do. But if they don’t, it won’t interfere with this. I’m a businesswoman, Camille. I know how to separate my personal life from my professional one. Can you?”

Her question hangs in the air like a challenge.

I straighten my shoulders, feeling the weight of her gaze. “I can.”

Scottie studies me for a beat longer, as if testing the truth of my words, then nods. “Good. Then we’re fine.”

She opens the door, letting a soft breeze waft in from the hall. “I’ll see you Tuesday,” she says, her tone lighter now. “And it was nice meeting you, Ben.”

Ben flicks an ear but doesn’t look up.

As the door closes behind her, I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. The living room feels quieter now, like it’s taking a moment to reset. I glance at the folder on the table, then at Ben, who finally decides to grace me with his attention.

“Well?” I ask him, collapsing onto the couch. “What do you think?”

He stretches luxuriously, his tail flicking as he stares at me with those half-lidded eyes that scream, *You’ll figure it out—or you won’t. Either way, feed me.*

A small laugh escapes me not sure why. Maybe it’s because Scottie seems genuine. Maybe it’s because she understands the vision I’ve been clinging to for so long. Or maybe it’s because, for once, I don’t feel like I’m standing on this island alone.

Either way, I have a lot to think about. But for tonight? I’ll take the win.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



Killion

How to Outplay Your Brother

The air practically hums, thick and electric, like the universe itself is holding its breath. Second down, third quarter. We're down by three points, and the crowd is losing its collective mind. Their cheers rise and fall in waves, crashing into my ears like an endless, roaring tide. Every step I take feels like I'm wading through mud—not that I'd ever admit it out loud. My eyes flick to the scoreboard. Time hates us tonight. And Lucian—damn him—is soaking it all up like he's starring in his own soap opera.

He's across the field, bouncing on his toes like a smug kangaroo, his helmet tilted just enough to scream too cool for this game. That cocky grin of his? It's pure Hollywood villain. He thinks he's the main character in this story, the hero ready for his shining moment. My brother, Lucian the Perfect. Always so annoyingly good at everything. He's been writing this script in his head for years, and there's no way I'm letting him stick the landing tonight.

Coach's voice barks through my helmet, rattling me back to reality. The play comes through loud and clear. My guys gather around me, their eyes sharp and expectant, like I'm the only one standing between us and a lifetime of highlight reel humiliation. Their frustration radiates, but beneath it, I see something else: hope. They're waiting for me to flip the script.

"Trips left, 43 stretch," I say, calm and deliberate. My voice is steady because it has to be. I lock eyes with Darnell, holding his gaze a beat longer than anyone else's. "Be ready to improvise. You see daylight? Take it. I'll find you."

Darnell nods, his jaw tight, his focus razor-sharp. He believes me. Thank God someone does.

The huddle breaks. We line up, the defense glaring at us like they just took our last slice of pizza. My linemen crouch, ready to throw down like their reputations—and my ribs—depend on it. My heart thrums against my sternum, fast and wild, like it's in on the drama.

"Seven, blue, go." My voice can be heard through the stadium. "Set, hut."

The ball snaps into my hands, and suddenly the world narrows. Time bends in that weird, sports-movie way. Everything is chaos, but it's a chaos I know, a storm I've lived a hundred times before. My feet move fast, light against the turf as I scan the field. The pocket holds—barely—but I can feel the pressure coming, a freight train of blitzing defenders closing in.

I spot the linebacker charging like he's got a personal vendetta against me. For a second, the safe play flashes in my mind: dump it off to the running back, avoid disaster. But nah, where's the fun in that?

Darnell's moving, cutting toward the sideline, his jersey a streak of white against the melee. He's not open yet, but he will be. I know it in my bones.

The linebacker lunges, all brute force and bad intentions, and I spin on instinct, barely dodging his arms. My cleats grip the turf as I pivot, the movement sharp and fluid. The crowd gasps in unison—a collective inhale that reverberates through the stadium.

There. Darnell breaks free, a flash of brilliance in the chaos. No hesitation. I plant my feet and launch the ball, every muscle in my arm protesting the force. It's a perfect spiral, slicing through the air like it's on a mission from the football gods.

For a second, the world slows. The ball arcs high, defenders leap, and I hold my breath. Darnell dives, his body stretched impossibly long, his fingertips grazing the leather.

He pulls it in.

The stadium explodes. The sound is deafening, a thunderclap of cheers that shakes the ground. Darnell hits the turf, rolls, then pops up like he's just saved the world. He holds the ball high, grinning like he's the happiest man alive.

I jog over, adrenaline coursing through me like liquid fire. My teammates swarm, their cheers loud and unfiltered. Darnell smacks the ball against my chest, his grin wide enough to split his face.

"That's what I'm talking about," he shouts, his voice ringing with pride.

I can't help but laugh, the tension finally easing. "Hell of a catch, man."

"Hell of a throw," he shoots back, pointing at me before jogging off to the sideline.

The energy shifts, a buzz rolling through the team like electricity. It's in the way they move, the way they rally to the line for the next play. We're alive. We're dangerous.

Across the field, Lucian glares at me, his jaw set, his eyes practically daring me to do it again. I flash him a grin, full of teeth and no apologies. Challenge accepted, little brother.

This? This is our moment. And Lucian? He's just the opening act. We still have five minutes in this quarter and the fourth one to go.

THE FOURTH QUARTER GRINDS ON LIKE A WAR OF ATTRITION. PLAY AFTER PLAY, NEITHER SIDE GIVES AN INCH. THE DEFENSES ARE relentless, like two immovable forces slamming against each other, refusing to budge. Every yard gained feels like a small miracle, every incomplete pass a gut punch. The clock ticks down, each second dragging like molasses, and still, no one scores. It's not football anymore. It's a battle of wills, a test of who can hold out longer without breaking. My shoulders ache, my legs scream, but there's no time to think about that. Not yet.

Then, in the final minute, everything changes. A perfectly executed play, a slant route that Darnell runs like his life depends on it. The ball leaves my hand, and for a second, I swear time stops. The crowd goes silent, every eye tracking its spiral. Darnell stretches, the defenders just a step too late, and snags it in the end zone. Touchdown. The stadium explodes into a frenzy. We've done it. The Gladiators are up, 31-28, with only seconds left on the clock.

The defense holds strong in the last moments, and when the final whistle blows, everything stops. My heart hammers, my lungs burn, but the silence is deafening. For a split second, it's like the world holds its breath, waiting for the moment to catch up.

And then it hits.

The roar of the crowd erupts like a bomb, a tidal wave of sound that drowns out everything else. My teammates swarm me, their shouts and cheers blending into a chaotic blur. Someone grabs my helmet, shaking it like they're trying to knock my brain loose. Another slaps my back so hard I nearly stumble. I don't care. We did it.

Across the field, Lucian stands with his hands on his hips, staring at the scoreboard like he can will it to change. His helmet is off, and his hair sticks out at odd angles, but his expression is pure frustration. I can't help it—a grin tugs at my lips as I jog toward him, pulling off my helmet.

"You were close, little brother," I call out, my voice just loud enough to carry over the noise.

He shakes his head, a reluctant smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Too fucking close. One more play and we would've won," he mutters. "You got lucky."

"Lucky?" I arch an eyebrow, letting the grin grow. "That last pass wasn't luck. That was skill. Pure, unadulterated skill."

He rolls his eyes but can't hold back the full force of his grin. "Sure. Keep telling yourself that."

He sticks out his hand, and I take it, pulling him into a quick, sweaty hug.

“Good game,” I say, meaning it. “You’ve come a long way, Luc.”

“Don’t get used to this,” he replies, pulling back. “Next time, I’m taking you down.”

I laugh, shaking my head as I jog back toward my team. “We’ll see.”

The field is absolute mayhem. Reporters swarm the sidelines, cameras flashing like fireworks. Fans scream from the stands, waving signs and chanting like their lives depend on it. My teammates are hugging, fist-bumping, shouting over one another as the reality of the win sets in.

Coach finds me near the fifty-yard line, his face a mix of pride and exhaustion. He claps a hand on my shoulder, his grip firm enough to tell me he means every word.

“Good work, Crawford,” he says, his voice gruff but warm. “You kept your head when it mattered.”

“Thanks, Coach,” I reply, still catching my breath. But my mind is already somewhere else—Camille. Did I give her the space she needed? Sure. But now? Now, I’m hoping we can share dinner, coffee, wine—anything, really. Just a few minutes with her, her presence enough to quiet the buzz in my head.

Coach nods, his expression softening just enough to show he’s human under all that intensity. “You earned this one. Enjoy it. Monday, we’re back to work.”

“Got it.” I watch him head toward the locker room, his pace slower than usual, and feel the ache creeping into my own body—every hit, every scramble, every second of this game catching up to me.

Darnell jogs up, grinning wide enough to rival the scoreboard lights. “Man, that last drive? Legendary. They’re going to be talking about this for weeks.”

“Not just this game,” I say, matching his grin. “That catch? It’s going on highlight reels for years.”

“You already writing my Hall of Fame speech?” he teases, slapping my shoulder.

“Just the first draft,” I shoot back.

We walk toward the tunnel, the noise of the crowd following us like a living, breathing thing. Fans reach over the railings, shouting my name, waving signs that read *Go Gladiators* and *Crawford for MVP*. It’s surreal, moments like this. They always are.

Before stepping off the field, I glance back. Lucian is still there, talking to his teammates. But then he catches my eye and nods. It’s small, almost imperceptible, but it says everything.

We’re good. We both know tonight wasn’t just about football. I might have bragging rights, but we’re still brothers.

Next time, though? Maybe those three points will swing his way.

I shake my head, chuckling to myself as I head for the locker room. Next time can wait. Tonight? Tonight’s about another win. Camille. I have to win her back and hopefully I have given her enough space to start talking about a future.

Her and me.

Us.

Chapter Thirty-Nine



Camille

Fool the Defense with Some Slow Burn

The crisp night air brushes against my skin, biting just enough to remind me that I probably should've grabbed a sweater. The skyline stretches out before me, the city lights look like a thousand tiny promises just out of reach. My glass of wine sits forgotten on the coffee table, and the book I meant to lose myself in lies abandoned on the small table beside me. I've spent the entire day preoccupied with Scottie's proposal, yet the tension pressing at me now has a very different name.

"Killion Crawford," I mutter, the words tasting bitter and sweet at the same time. I shouldn't have watched his game. I told myself I wouldn't. But it felt . . . important. Like I'd miss something if I didn't.

And then, as if my thoughts have somehow conjured him, his voice cuts through the quiet. "Evening, beautiful."

Startled, I turn to see him leaning against the divider of his balcony, all casual arrogance wrapped in a hoodie and joggers. The warm light from his apartment spills onto him, softening his edges in a way that feels unfair. His broad shoulders rest easily against the railing, and his hair—a deliberate mess—makes him look maddeningly effortless.

"I was hoping you'd be here," he adds, his grin infuriatingly self-assured, like he already knows he's charmed me.

"Hoping, or were you stalking me?" I ask, raising an eyebrow and folding my arms across my chest.

"Hoping," he says, holding up his phone like it's a Get Out of Jail Free card. "I just got here a few minutes ago. Got comfortable, came outside, and voila, there you were. If that hadn't worked, I was going to text you. See if this time you'd give me more than, 'I'm busy, Crawford. Leave me alone.'"

"I don't think I ever said that," I reply defensively. I have been short with him all week, but still. "And I sent you a good-luck text before the game today. You never replied."

"Cam," he says, giving me a look that's half-annoyed, half-amused. "You sent it while I was playing. I didn't see it until afterward."

He leans in, just a little, and I hate how much space he seems to take up—even when he’s technically on his own balcony.

“It’s late,” I say, turning away from him to focus on the skyline. Anything is better than his stupid, arrogant grin.

“Late enough that you could just ignore me,” he teases, his voice light but persistent. “But I hope you don’t.”

“Do you need something, or are you just here to ruin my evening?” I try not to sound sarcastic but fail miserably.

“We need to talk, Cam,” he says, his tone softening. “Preferably tonight. Like I said the other day, I gave you space but . . .”

“Why?” I whip back toward him, arms still crossed like I’m trying to shield myself from whatever he’s about to say. “Can’t it wait? You waited fourteen years, didn’t you? What’s a few more days—or weeks?”

His grin falters, replaced by something unguarded that flashes across his face. It’s enough to make me pause.

“Is that your way of asking why I didn’t come back sooner?” he asks.

I shrug, forcing indifference into my posture. “Maybe. Or maybe I think this isn’t the time for whatever grand speech you’re planning. It’s been a long week for both of us and you might still be buzzing with adrenaline after the game.”

His gaze locks onto mine, steady but full of something I can’t quite name. “The answer to your silent question is simple,” he says. “I wasn’t smart enough to come back for you. I listened to the wrong people, let fear make my decisions for me, and convinced myself that leaving you alone was the right thing. It’s pathetic, I know. It is.”

He sighs, running a hand through his hair, leaving it even messier than before. “But now that you’re here I want a chance to show you that I’m serious. Camille, I screwed up. I’ve been screwing up for fourteen years, and I’m done pretending it doesn’t matter.”

His words claw at the edges of my resolve, and I hate how much they stir something in me. “I thought we agreed you’d give me space. Why do we have to do this now?” I ask, my voice sharp with frustration. “Why show up like this and act like you can fix everything with a heartfelt speech?”

“I’m not trying to fix it with words,” he says, his voice firm. “I’m trying to fix it by showing you I’m here. That I’m not going anywhere. That I’ll do whatever it takes for you to believe in me again.”

I snort, swirling the wine in my glass idly. “And how, exactly, do you plan to do that?”

“By starting here,” he says, his voice steady. “By telling you I’m sorry every day if that’s what it takes. By showing up, over and over, until you know I mean it. And if that doesn’t work, I’ll find something that does. But I’m not giving up on this, Camille. Not this time. However,” he adds, his lips twitching into a faint smile, “I need you to stop shutting me out. It’s hard to maneuver when you’re rejecting me most of the time.”

His words hit a nerve I didn’t want to acknowledge. I glance at him, my defenses wavering. “You say that now, but what happens when life gets messy again? When it gets hard? Are you just going to walk away like before?”

“I won’t,” he says, his tone firm but not defensive. “I know I don’t deserve your trust right now, but I’m asking for the chance to earn it. I’ll fight for you this time, Camille. For us. Even if it takes the rest of my life. It doesn’t matter if your father tries to shut down my career. I care about you. Us.”

I swirl the wine again, more to give my hands something to do than anything else. “Big words, Killion. Let’s see if your actions match.”

“They will,” he promises, his eyes never leaving mine. “And if they don’t, you can throw that wine at me. I’ll deserve it.”

The corners of my mouth twitch despite myself. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Maybe,” he says, his grin returning full force. “But I’m also not going anywhere.”

I look back at the skyline, letting the silence stretch between us. He doesn’t fill it, and I don’t ask him to leave. Maybe that’s enough for now.

Killion watches me in silence for a moment, the soft glow of his apartment framing him like a golden reminder of everything I shouldn’t want but can’t seem to resist. Then, as if deciding something, he straightens.

“Can I come over?” he asks, with a low steady voice.

“What?” I blink, caught off guard.

“Can I cross over to your side?” He nods toward the small divider separating our balconies. “Unless you’d rather I try to impress you by climbing over that wall, which, for the record, I can do. But I feel like that’s not the move that wins me points right now.”

I roll my eyes but can’t help the tiny smile tugging at my lips. “You’re impossible, you know that?”

“Completely. But I’m also asking nicely.”

I hesitate, my fingers tightening around my wine glass. The rational part of me screams no, but the part of me that’s tired of pretending I don’t care nods, almost imperceptibly.

Killion takes that as his answer, stepping over the low divider with infuriating ease. Soon enough he’s beside me, his presence suddenly overwhelming. I want him closer and yet I want to run away, fearing that I’ll do something stupid. Like beg him to fuck me against the glass wall—again.

“So, this is what it looks like from your perspective,” he murmurs, glancing around before his eyes settle on me. “I like it.”

I cross my arms, trying to ignore how close he’s standing. “You’ve been here before, but was there a reason you wanted to come over, or are you just here to invade my personal space?”

He doesn't answer right away. Instead, he closes the distance between us, his expression turning serious in a way that makes my pulse stumble. "There is a reason," he says, his voice quiet but deliberate. He takes away the glass of wine from my hand. "I've wanted to do this since I saw you ten minutes ago, Camille. But I'm asking first. Can I kiss you?"

My heart stutters, and for a moment, all I can hear is the rush of blood in my ears. He's looking at me like I'm the only thing in the world that matters, and it's undoing me.

I nod, barely trusting my voice. "Yes."

The word is barely out before his lips are on mine, and everything else falls away.

His kiss isn't tentative. It's bold, deliberate, like he's trying to himself into this one moment. His hands frame my face, steady and reverent, as his lips move against mine with a determination that leaves me breathless.

I grip his hoodie to ground myself. But grounding myself is impossible because this kiss—it doesn't just touch my lips. It seeps into me, passes through every inch of my soul like a wildfire, burning away every doubt I've held onto for so long.

His kiss speaks of apologies he's too afraid to say out loud, of promises he's desperate to keep, of a love that has stubbornly refused to fade no matter how much time has passed. It's overwhelming, consuming, and exactly what I didn't know I needed.

When he finally pulls back, we're both breathing hard, his forehead resting lightly against mine. His thumb brushes my cheek, the gentleness of the gesture a stark contrast to the intensity of the kiss.

"I'm going to prove it to you," he whispers, his voice low and rough. "Every single day. I'll show you that you can trust me again. That you can trust us."

I can't find the words to respond, my thoughts still spinning, so I just nod.

Killion smiles faintly, pressing a soft, lingering kiss to my forehead before stepping back. "Goodnight, Camille."

He turns and steps back over the divider with maddening calmness, leaving me standing there, my lips tingling and my heart racing.

I glance down at my empty hands, then back at his balcony where he's already heading inside. Satiated and frustrated, I exhale sharply, muttering to myself, "That man is going to be the death of me."

Ben jumps onto the table, giving me a disapproving look before curling up like none of this ever happened. At least one of us is unfazed.

Chapter Forty



Camille

Reviewing the Rules of Restraint

Camille: You just left.

Killion: Is there a problem?

Camille: After that kiss you left.

Killion: I had to, baby. I'm not touching you until things between us are settled.

Camille: But that kiss.

Killion: What about it?

Camille: You know what about it.

I stare at my phone, my thumbs hovering over the screen. My heart's still racing, and every nerve in my body feels like it's vibrating. That kiss wasn't just a kiss—it was an event. A life-altering, soul-igniting moment. And now he's acting like it's no big deal? Like he can just waltz back to his side of the balcony and leave me hanging here, reeling?

The three little dots appear on the screen, showing he's typing, and my breath catches.

Killion: It was incredible. Perfect, even. But I meant what I said. I'm not pushing this further until you know I'm all in. I'm not going to mess this up, Camille. Not again.

The audacity of this man to be responsible right now.

Camille: So your plan is to kiss me like that, leave me standing here questioning my entire life, and call it restraint?

Killion: Pretty much.

Camille: You're insufferable.

Killion: You're irresistible.

I groan, throwing my phone onto the couch, but the vibration buzzes against the cushion almost immediately. I grab it before I can talk myself out of it, his name lighting up the screen.

Killion: Go to sleep, Camille. I'll see you tomorrow.

Camille: Tomorrow?

Killion: You didn't think I'd just let you simmer in that kiss forever, did you?

Camille: I don't know what to think anymore.

Killion: Good. Keeps me unpredictable.

I roll my eyes so hard I'm surprised they don't pop out of my head. But before I can fire back a reply, another message comes through.

Killion: Sweet dreams, baby. I'll make them sweeter tomorrow.

My phone slips from my hands as I collapse onto the couch, staring at the ceiling like it holds the answers to all my problems. He's maddening. Confident, cocky, frustrating as fuck. And yet, I'm smiling like an idiot.

Ben hops up beside me, curling into a ball without so much as a glance in my direction. "At least one of us isn't losing their mind," I mutter, rubbing his ears.

But even as I sit there, pretending to be annoyed, my lips still tingle from his kiss, and my thoughts swirl with the promise of whatever "tomorrow" brings.

Tomorrow better come fast, because tonight? Tonight is going to be torture.

Chapter Forty-One



Killion

When Killion Calls the Play

I step out of my penthouse, practically humming with energy. A day off. A *real* day off. No games, no press, no obligations—just me and Camille. And the best part? She actually said yes to my text. No excuses, no polite deflections, just a simple yes.

I walk down the hall toward her door, my excitement buzzing just beneath the surface. For once, I’m not trying to tamp it down. My hand hovers for a second before I knock, the sound echoing lightly through the hallway.

When the door swings open, she’s standing there, and for a second, the world tilts.

She’s breathtaking. Her jeans fit like they were made just for her, hugging every curve with a natural ease. The soft fabric of her white blouse skims her frame, the flouncy sleeves shifting slightly as she moves, delicate and effortless. Her red hair cascades over her shoulders in loose, glossy waves, the kind that make you want to reach out, just to see if they’re as silky as they look. My breath catches audibly, and I know she notices because her lips curve into a teasing smile.

“Hey,” I manage, grinning like a lovesick fool.

“Hey,” she replies, her tone warm but curious. “So what’s the plan for today?”

“That’s for me to know and for you to enjoy,” I say, my voice low as I lean in, closing the small distance between us.

The kiss isn’t rushed—it’s deliberate, a quiet confession of how much I’ve missed her. My lips meet hers softly, savoring the warmth of her skin and the way she tilts ever so slightly into me, as if drawn by a force neither of us can resist. Her breath catches, just barely, and her lips linger on mine, teasing me with the temptation to stay right here.

I pull back slowly, the urge to press her against the door threatening to undo me. If I let myself lean just a little closer, we’d never leave this spot. Her eyes meet mine, bright and searching, and I have to force myself to step away before I give in completely.

She blinks up at me, her cheeks a little pink, and that tiny flicker of satisfaction lights up my chest.

“Ready?” I ask, taking her hand.

“Depends,” she says, narrowing her eyes playfully. “You’re not dragging me to some boring sports thing, are you?”

I laugh as I guide her out of her apartment. “Do I look like the kind of guy who would ruin our first official day out together by talking stats and plays?”

She arches an eyebrow. “You do realize I’ve known you for a while, right?”

I press the elevator button, smirking as the doors slide open. “Trust me, Camille. I’ve got this. You’re in good hands today.”

She steps inside, her hand still in mine, and I can feel her relax just a little. The elevator doors close, and as we descend, I glance at her, unable to stop myself from stealing another look.

She catches me staring. “What?”

“Nothing,” I say, my grin widening. “Just happy you said yes.”

Her lips twitch, like she’s trying not to smile, but she doesn’t say anything. Instead, she looks straight ahead, though I swear I catch the hint of a blush creeping up her neck.

Today is already off to a great start. And I’ll be damned if I don’t keep it that way.

Our first stop is Central Park. It’s buzzing with life, but that’s part of its charm. The paths are alive with runners, tourists, and kids zipping past on scooters like they’re training for the Olympics. Overhead, the trees filter sunlight into patches of gold, creating a scene so picturesque it could be a postcard.

We grab coffees from a small stand, the kind that probably hasn’t updated its menu since the ‘90s, and start strolling. The air smells like roasted nuts and faint whiffs of hot dogs from nearby carts. Somewhere in the distance, a street performer is belting out a slightly off-key rendition of *New York, New York*, but it just adds to the ambiance.

At another cart, I stop to buy us a pretzel, handing it to her with a grin. “You have to admit, this is one of the best parts of New York.”

She tears off a piece, giving me a skeptical look. “The pretzels or the park?”

“Both,” I say, nudging her shoulder lightly. “But I really enjoy the park. Sometimes, instead of hitting the gym in my building, I come here for my morning runs.”

She gives me a look like I’ve just suggested eating kale for dessert. “If I were into running, I’d join you. But since no one is chasing me, I fail to see the point.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “You don’t need someone chasing you to enjoy running. It’s peaceful, clears your mind—”

“It sounds like punishment,” she cuts in. “Voluntarily making yourself tired? On purpose? For fun? No, thanks. I’d rather sleep.”

I smirk, popping a piece of pretzel into my mouth. “You’d change your mind if you tried it. The endorphins are amazing. Plus, it’s great for your heart.”

“Great for my heart?” She raises an eyebrow, her lips twitching with amusement. “You’re telling me that sweating, gasping for air, and risking shin splints is better for me than a leisurely stroll through the park with coffee and a pretzel?”

“Absolutely,” I say, grinning. “It’s scientifically proven.”

She rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling now, that soft, teasing smile that gets me every time. “You keep running. I’ll stick to not running and being happy about it.”

“Fair enough,” I say, holding out another piece of pretzel. “But one day, you’ll be begging me to take you on a jog through this park.”

She snorts. “Yeah, that’ll happen right after I voluntarily sign up for a boot camp class.”

“Don’t knock it ‘til you try it,” I counter, nudging her with my elbow again.

She takes the pretzel, shaking her head. “You’re relentless.”

“And you’re adorable,” I reply without missing a beat.

Her steps falter just slightly, a hint of color rising to her cheeks. But she recovers quickly, taking another sip of her coffee like my words didn’t just completely derail her thoughts.

The banter flows as easily as the sunlight streaming through the trees, and as we weave through the park, I can’t help but feel like I’ve already won today. She’s here—laughing, her guard down just enough to let me in.

And yeah, this day? Pretty perfect.

Camille rolls her eyes at something I’ve said, but the laugh that escapes her is genuine. Her face softens in a way that makes me wish I could freeze this moment forever.

We wander through the park, letting the energy of the city buzz around us. At Bethesda Terrace, a crowd has gathered to watch street dancers. One of them leaps into the air, flipping clean over his partner in a move so smooth it earns gasps and cheers. Camille claps along with the crowd, her excitement contagious.

She sneaks a glance at me out of the corner of her eye, her lips twitching with a smile she’s trying to hide. I lean in and steal a quick peck, grinning when her cheeks turn pink.

“Let’s go to our next stop,” I say, taking her hand.

“What’s the next stop?”

“You’ll see.” I wink at her.

She narrows her eyes. “That’s suspicious.”

“It’s not. It’s thoughtful,” I counter.

She sighs dramatically. “Fine. I’ll play along. For now.”

We make our way back to the entrance, where my black SUV is waiting. Ted greets us with a polite nod as I open the door for Camille.

“You love art,” I say simply as she slides in.

“You remember?” she asks, looking at me with a mix of surprise and something softer.

“Of course I remember,” I reply, my voice low. “You lit up talking about that art class you took in college—against your parents’ wishes. It had nothing to do with biochemistry. Doing something different made you happy.”

She doesn’t respond, but the slight smile on her lips says enough.

The ride is quick, the familiar rhythm of the city blurring past the windows. When we pull up in front of the Whitney Museum of American Art, her eyes widen.

“The Whitney,” she says, turning to me with a grin. “I’ve never been here. Good choice.”

We spend the next hour wandering through the galleries, her hand in mine. Camille moves with a quiet curiosity, stopping to study each piece like she’s unraveling a story hidden in the brushstrokes or the shape of the sculptures.

I observe her more than the art, captivated by the way her brow furrows slightly when she’s reading a plaque or how her head tilts just enough when something catches her eye. She has this unfiltered enthusiasm for art, and it’s impossible not to be drawn in.

When she catches me staring, she pauses mid-step. “What?”

“You’re better than anything in here,” I say without hesitation.

She shakes her head, laughing softly. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Maybe,” I say, kissing the tip of her nose. “But I’m also right.”

Her cheeks flush, and she pretends to ignore me as she tugs me toward the next gallery.

From the Whitney, we head to our next stop, a cozy bistro tucked into a quiet side street. Lunch is simple but perfect—paninis with gooey cheese, fresh salads, and a bottle of wine we share between bites. She tries to swipe one of my fries, but I catch her hand mid-reach, grinning.

“You could’ve just asked,” I say.

“I prefer sharing,” she replies, popping the fry into her mouth triumphantly.

Afterward, we walk hand-in-hand through Washington Square Park, stopping near the arch where a jazz band plays a lively tune. Camille sways gently to the rhythm, her fingers snugly laced with mine. The warmth of her touch, the music, the way she loses herself in the melody—it all feels timeless, like something I’d never want to let go of.

Next, I surprise her with a visit to The Strand. The moment she spots the iconic green awning, she freezes mid-step before turning to me with wide eyes.

“Are you serious?” she asks, her voice a mix of disbelief and glee.

“Dead serious,” I reply, grinning.

She doesn’t wait for further confirmation. She’s practically halfway through the door before I can say another word. By the time I catch up, she’s already staring at the endless rows of books like she’s walked into heaven’s library.

“This place is incredible,” she says, her fingers skimming the spines of the nearest shelf. “It smells like paper and dreams.”

I chuckle, stuffing my hands in my pockets as I follow her. “So you like it?”

“Like it?” She spins around, her face lit up with excitement. “If you tell me there’s a coffee bar in here, I might actually cry.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” I tease. “You’re already at risk of moving in.”

We start weaving through the shelves, her pace quick and purposeful, like she has a plan—or at least a very long mental list of books she needs. Every few seconds, she stops, tilts her head, and pulls a book off the shelf with the kind of reverence usually reserved for priceless artifacts.

“Pick something,” she says, holding up a copy of *The Great Gatsby*.

I raise an eyebrow. “Trying to impress me with the classics?”

“Maybe,” she replies with a wink. “But if you’re really offering to buy me books, I might just pick one. Or ten.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Pick as many as you want. But if you can’t carry them, don’t look at me to play pack mule.”

Her eyes narrow mischievously. “I see your challenge, and I accept it.” She grabs a basket from the corner like a gladiator arming herself for battle.

For the next half hour, she darts between shelves like a woman on a mission. Every few minutes, she holds up a book for me to inspect. A thriller, a romance, a cookbook titled *Death by Chocolate*.

“Do you bake?” I ask, holding back a laugh.

“I could learn,” she replies, tossing it into the basket. “For science.”

By the time we get to the checkout, her basket is packed so full I'm worried the handle might snap. She hesitates, glancing at me like she's bracing for me to call off the deal.

"You sure about this?" she asks, biting her lip.

"Of course," I say, smirking. "But if you're expecting me to build you another bookshelf, that's going to cost extra."

She snorts, handing her books to the cashier. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, Crawford."

When the total flashes on the screen, I swipe my card without hesitation, though I make a show of pretending to wipe sweat from my forehead.

"This might be the most expensive date I've ever been on," I say as we walk out, the bag of books weighing heavily in my hand. "Worth it, though."

"Thank you." She kisses my cheek.

"For you, anything, baby."

We head down the street, her bag of books swinging in her hand like it's filled with treasure. She glances up at me, her smile contagious.

"This was perfect," she says softly, her eyes sparkling.

And as I watch her, happier than I've ever seen her, I know I'll be taking her to every bookstore in New York if it means I get to see that smile again.

The last stop is the one I've been saving, knowing full well how much she loves churros and ice cream. It's practically her kryptonite.

The place is called Churro Bliss, and it's everything the name promises and then some. The air is thick with the smell of cinnamon and sugar, and the display case near the counter shows off a rainbow of ice cream flavors alongside golden churros twisted into intricate shapes. The tables are packed with couples sharing desserts, kids smearing melted ice cream across their faces, and groups of friends snapping pictures of over-the-top sundaes. It's buzzing with energy, and the vibe is nothing short of joyful.

The hostess leads us to a small table by the window, where fairy lights strung across the ceiling cast a warm glow. Camille slides into her seat, her eyes already darting toward the menu in the center of the table.

"Have you been here before?" she asks, her voice curious as she picks up the menu.

"No, but Darnell brings his wife and kids here all the time. He swears by it," I say, leaning back in my chair.

Her lips twitch into a grin. "He's your running back, right?"

"One of them," I reply, smirking. "But yeah. According to him, this place is a game-changer. He even claims their churro ice cream sandwiches fix bad moods."

Her eyebrow arches, playful suspicion lighting her features. "Oh, so this is your strategy? Bribe me with churros and ice cream so I forget how annoying you can be?"

"Exactly," I deadpan. "You caught me. My entire plan hinges on the power of fried dough and frozen dairy."

She laughs, shaking her head as her eyes scan the menu. "Okay, but if this doesn't live up to the hype, I'm holding it against you forever."

"No pressure," I say, picking up my own menu. "But you'll love it. Trust me."

We spend a few minutes debating options, and by debating, I mean her listing every single dessert she wants while I nod and agree to all of it. Finally, we decide on The Churro Overload Special—a massive platter with churro ice cream sandwiches, churro bites drizzled in caramel, and churro bowls filled with different ice cream flavors. It's excessive and ridiculous, and I already know she's going to love every second of it.

When the dessert arrives, Camille gasps, her eyes lighting up like it's Christmas morning. "This is insane."

"Insanely good," I say, grabbing a churro bite and popping it into my mouth.

She picks up one of the churro ice cream sandwiches, the warm churro spirals dusted with cinnamon sugar practically melting into the vanilla ice cream. Her first bite is almost comical—her eyes close, and she lets out a small, muffled moan that makes the table of teenagers behind us burst into giggles.

"Oh my God," she says after swallowing. "This is life-changing."

"Told you," I say, reaching for a caramel-drizzled churro bite.

She narrows her eyes at me, holding her ice cream sandwich protectively. "If you try to take a bite of this, I will stab you with a churro stick."

I burst out laughing. "Noted. But there's an entire platter here, Camille. You don't have to go full *Lord of the Rings* over dessert."

"Are you calling me Gollum?" she asks, mock-offended.

"If the churro fits," I tease, earning myself a playful kick under the table.

For a while, we dive into the platter, swapping bites and banter. I manage to sneak a bite of her churro sandwich when she's distracted by a group of kids singing happy birthday at the next table, and she retaliates by smearing a dollop of ice cream on my nose.

“Not cool,” I say, wiping it off with a napkin.

“Revenge,” she replies sweetly, batting her lashes.

By the time we finish, the platter is nearly empty, and we’re both leaning back in our chairs, completely stuffed. Tomorrow I’m going to pay for this indulging, but it’s worth every second. She looks at me, her cheeks still pink from laughing, and I can’t help but think that this might be my favorite version of her—unfiltered, happy, and full of churros.

“This was perfect,” she says softly, her hand resting on the edge of the table.

I reach across, lacing my fingers through hers. “You’re perfect.”

Chapter Forty-Two

Camille: You drop me at home with a quick peck on the lips. What's going on, Crawford?

Killion: I'm trying to behave.

Camille: Really? After last week, now you're trying to behave.

Killion: Yep.

Camille: You're weird.

Killion: No, I'm trying to convince you that I love you without distractions.

Camille: Sex is a distraction?

Killion: Yes, it is a distraction. The kind that makes me forget my name, what day it is, and that I had a perfectly rehearsed speech planned about how much I love you.

Camille: Speech? What are you, proposing? It's too soon, you know that, right?

Killion: It's never too soon. But no, it was more of a heartfelt monologue, actually. But then I started thinking about the things I want to do to you —

Camille: And why couldn't you do them?

Killion: Because right now I'm not going to be whispering filthy little words in your ear while I fuck you hard. I'm trying to win your heart.

Camille: Oh.

Killion: Exactly. You get it, right?

Camille: It's probably for the best.

Killion: It definitely is. Right now I'm planning on cutting contact so I don't get distracted.

Camille: Maybe you should work on your focus, Crawford. Cutting my time is not fair. It's not my fault you can't keep it together.

Killion: (smirking) Oh, I keep it together just fine. You, on the other hand, have a habit of falling apart when I —

Camille: Okay, now who's distracting who?

Killion: Still me, baby. Always me.

Camille: You're impossible.

Killion: No, I'm yours. Now shut up and let me take a cold shower, before I give in to every single distraction running through my head right now.

Camille: I wouldn't mind if you come over and distract me.

Killion: Behave.

Camille: Behaving is overrated, but have a good night, Killion.

Chapter Forty-Three

Camille: Morning. Thank you for the ride to the hospital and the coffee.

Killion: You're welcome. Thank you for yesterday.

Camille: It was fun. I forgot how amazing you are at planning dates.

Killion: You forgot? I'm appalled.

Camille: Don't be appalled.

Killion: Dinner tonight? I'll cook.

Camille: Don't you have to train?

Killion: I don't train all day. We do take breaks to eat meals. Is this you looking for an excuse to avoid me?

Camille: Nope. I promised to give you a real chance. I was just wondering.

Killion: See you at my place at six?

Camille: Make it six-thirty, I have to feed Ben.

Killion: You should teach me how to feed him so I can help you when you're away.

Camille: I can do that. See you later tonight, K.

Chapter Forty-Four

Killion: When were you going to tell me that you're now Scottie's business partner?

Camille: She told you?

Killion: Yeah, apparently she's been in town since last week and just now she decided to grace me with her presence. Something about saying hello before she heads back home.

Camille: We signed yesterday. I'm nervous and excited.

Killion: Why?

Camille: Excited because there's a lot happening, but nervous because I need to find a place. The owners of this penthouse need their place back within the next two months.

Killion: Are you going back to California?

Camille: Not right now. With Scottie living on this side of the country it makes sense that I stay at least for six months. That's how long I leased my house. I'm technically displaced.

Killion: Why are the owners of the penthouse asking for their place?

Camille: Leasing it to me was a favor for their friends. Since I'm no longer working with them . . . you know.

Killion: Do you have a leasing contract?

Camille: Yes, but in the contract it says they can ask me to move out with a sixty-day notice.

Killion: You can move in with me.

Camille: Nope. We're going steady, not skipping steps. If you're not willing to have sex with me . . .

Killion: (choking with laughter) Hold on—what? Not willing to have sex with you? Where are you even getting that?

Camille: (grinning) Oh, I don't know. Maybe the whole peck-on-the-lips-and-behave routine you've been pulling lately. Feels like you're holding out on me, Crawford.

Killion: I am not holding out. I'm trying to be a gentleman until I win your heart back.

Camille: A gentleman? Wow, you're really going for the long game, huh? What's next, flowers at my doorstep and a mixtape of '90s boy bands?

Killion: I was going to go with early 2000s emo, but thanks for ruining the surprise.

Camille: Seriously, though. I'm not moving in with you just because I'm technically homeless. That's a huge step.

Killion: And offering you a roof over your head is somehow a step bigger than, oh, I don't know, having me do that thing you like with my . . .

Camille: Okay, okay, point made.

Killion: Thought so.

Camille: Look, the no-moving-in thing isn't about you. I just don't want to be that girl. The one who moves in, eats all your snacks, takes over your bathroom, and starts hiding your stuff when you forget to do the dishes. I don't think you're ready for a roommate like me.

Killion: You mean living with my dream girl?

Camille: Oh, please. You'd regret it the second you opened your fridge and realized I replaced your beer with kombucha.

Killion: You wouldn't.

Camille: Try me.

Killion: (sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose) Fine. Don't move in yet, but we have sixty days to make you realize we can be epic roommates.

Camille: You're stubborn, Crawford.

Killion: Yeah, and apparently off my game.

Camille: I hope not, because you have one coming up this weekend.

Killion: Yep. Are you going to eat dinner with me tonight?

Camille: Another invitation. I'm starting to like you, Crawford.

Killion: Is that a yes?

Camille: It's a definitely 'let's have dinner together, but I'll cook tonight.'

Killion: I think I like you more than this morning, Ashby. See you later tonight.

Chapter Forty-Five



Camille

Playing Defense with the Ashbys

The soft glow of the pendant light over the dining table gives the room a cozy warmth. Killion finishes his plate with the enthusiasm of someone who hasn't eaten in a week. He uses the last piece of salmon to swipe up the remaining lemon-dill sauce, and I can't help but laugh when he moans while he's chewing it.

"You're an amazing cook," he says, once he's done with his meal. He leans back, clearly satisfied.

"That's the third time you've said that," I reply, sipping my kombucha. But I'm smiling. I can't help it. Watching him enjoy a meal I made? It's embarrassingly satisfying.

"That sauce, though," he says, pointing to his plate like it's evidence in a court case. "You could bottle it and sell it."

I laugh again. "You really liked it, huh?"

"Liked doesn't even begin to cover it," he says, leaning forward and resting his chin on his hand. "Do you cook like this for all your dinner guests, or am I just ridiculously lucky?"

I roll my eyes. "It's usually just me, so I keep it simple most of the time. But if we're alternating meals . . ." I shrug, feeling a little self-conscious because I honestly don't know if this is just a temporary thing or if we'll be able to continue having meals together every evening. "I can find more recipes."

He grins, the kind of grin that makes you forget why you ever tried resisting him in the first place. "If this is your version of low effort, I'm officially intimidated."

"Oh, please." I shake my head. "You're just trying to butter me so I cook more often."

He rolls his eyes and asks, "How's the hunt for a place going?"

"Honestly? I haven't done much," I admit, taking another sip of kombucha. "Scottie suggested I look in Boston too."

"Fuck no," he says, so immediately and so emphatically that I almost spit out my drink. "You're staying in New York, with

me.”

“Wow, tell me how you really feel,” I tease, laughing.

He scowls, but it’s the kind of scowl that’s more adorable than intimidating. “Why would she even say that? She hates me.”

“She actually suggested I tease you with it,” I say, grinning now. “And judging by your reaction, it worked.”

He groans, dragging a hand down his face. “Scottie’s a menace. She plays all of us like she’s some evil genius. Love her to death, but she’s a nightmare of a little sister.”

“She knows how to push your buttons, that’s for sure,” I say, still grinning.

Instead of deciding to retort, he steers the conversation back. “So, what’s the plan with the house hunt?”

“This guy—Jacob, I think his name is—gave me some contacts,” I say, leaning back in my chair.

“Jacob McCallister?” he asks, narrowing his eyes.

“Yeah,” I reply, setting my glass down. “Scottie suggested I talk to him in case I feel like I need representation. You know, since I’m apparently becoming a public figure now.”

“He’s my agent,” he says, eyebrows shooting up. “The asshole’s good, I’ll give him that. But you know my offer still stands—you could just move in with me. I’ve got more rooms than I know what to do with.”

I open my mouth to respond, but before I can say anything, my phone buzzes from the counter. I glance at the screen and see Jerry—the doorman.

“Hold that thought,” I say, standing to answer the call.

“Dr. Ashby,” Jerry says, his tone careful. “Your parents are here. Should I send them up?”

The words hit me like a bucket of cold water. My parents. Here. Now.

“What?” I blurt, gripping the edge of the counter like it might keep me from floating away. “Like . . . downstairs?” Okay, not my most intelligent response, but seriously—what the fuck are they doing here?

“Yes, ma’am,” Jerry replies patiently. “They’re asking to come up.”

“I mean . . . I guess?” My voice shakes a little. “It’s not like I can keep them in the lobby.”

I hang up and turn back to Killion, who’s watching me with a raised eyebrow, his fork frozen mid-air.

“What’s going on?” he asks, setting it down and leaning forward.

I take a breath, my thoughts spinning. How do I explain this? I haven’t talked to them since I told them I was going low contact. And now, out of nowhere, they’re here? Uninvited? Unannounced?

“My parents,” I finally manage, my voice barely above a whisper. “They’re downstairs.”

“Your parents?” he repeats, glancing toward the door. “Didn’t you say everything’s okay now? Water under the bridge?”

Is that what I told him? I don’t even remember what I’ve said about them. Damn it.

“Um . . . it’s complicated,” I say, rubbing my temples. How do I even begin to explain the mess of our relationship?

Before I can elaborate, there’s a knock on the door, loud and insistent. I jump, my heart pounding like it’s trying to escape.

Killion stands and heads toward the door, throwing me a quick glance over his shoulder. “You want me to get that?”

“No—yes—” I stammer, panicking. “I mean, sure, go ahead.”

He opens the door, revealing my parents standing there, dressed to intimidate. My mom’s wearing one of her impeccably tailored suits, her hair styled with such precision it looks like it she’s heading to one of her charity events. Her gaze sweeps over the room like she’s cataloging every imperfection. My dad’s expression is unreadable, but his posture radiates disapproval.

“Oh, good,” my mom says, her voice as smooth as silk and about as comforting as a blanket made out of barbed wire. “You’re home.”

“Camille,” my father says, his tone clipped, each word like it costs him something. “We need to talk.”

“No, we don’t,” I reply, crossing my arms. “I was very clear over the phone when I said, ‘I need time to digest your past behavior and current beliefs in my love life.’ Why are you here?”

Before he can answer, his gaze shifts to Killion, who’s standing by the dining table, calm as ever. That, of course, only makes my dad’s expression darken further.

“Why is this man in your house?” he asks, though the disdain dripping from his tone makes it clear he already knows.

Stepping closer to Killion, I reply evenly, “We were having dinner.”

My mother’s lips press into a tight line, her expression so disapproving it could probably curdle milk. “Killion Crawford,” she says, her tone icy enough to freeze the room. “The football player is already in your house. I thought I made myself clear.”

Killion looks between them and then at me, his expression polite but unbothered. “Mr. and Mrs. Ashby, it’s nice to see you again,” he says smoothly, as if this is just a casual meeting and not my parents attempting a hostile takeover of my life.

“What is he doing here?” my father demands again, his gaze snapping back to me like I’ve personally betrayed him.

I lift my chin, refusing to shrink under his stare. “I told you, we were having dinner. And we’re seeing each other.”

My mother’s eyes narrow, her lips twitching like she’s trying to hold back some cutting remark and failing miserably. “Camille, this isn’t the kind of man you should be associating with.”

“He’s not right for you,” my father says bluntly. “And you’re not eighteen anymore and naive enough to believe this could

work.” He continues, his voice cold and clipped, “He’s an athlete. A transient career with no stability. You need someone who can offer you more. Someone who can support your future, not jeopardize it.”

Killion lets out a scoff, stepping forward. “My *transient career* includes a \$275 million contract over four years that’ll increase next year *if* I re-sign,” he says, his tone measured but with enough bite to make my dad blink. “But sure, call me unstable if it makes you feel better. For the record, I do have a future, and I could absolutely take care of your daughter if she let me. Not that she needs me to—Camille’s a successful, independent woman who doesn’t need a man to—”

“Exactly,” I cut in, glaring at my parents. “Which is why I don’t understand why you’re here. We had an agreement. You respected the space I needed, and I would consider forgiving you for interfering with my life. Remember that? Because this—” I gesture between them and Killion “—this is not space.”

“You’re making a mistake,” my mother says, her tone cold enough to frost the windows. “We’re just looking after you.”

“No, you’re trying to control me,” I snap, my voice rising despite my best efforts.

Before I can say more, Killion steps forward, calm and collected. “With all due respect, Mr. and Mrs. Ashby, Camille doesn’t need anyone deciding her life for her. She’s strong, smart, and capable of making her own choices. And as for me,” he pauses, his voice softening as he glances at me, “I might not have your approval, but I love her. And I’m not going anywhere this time.”

My father’s jaw tightens, his hands clenching at his sides. “I’ll ruin you, Killion Crawford.”

Killion doesn’t flinch. Not even a little. He steps closer, meeting my dad’s glare head-on. “You can try,” he says evenly. “But I’ve faced tougher opponents on the field and off. What I won’t do is back down when it comes to Camille. Not this time. So, if you want to talk about ruining someone, you’re better off focusing on rebuilding whatever relationship you have with her, because I’m not the one standing in your way. You are.”

My father’s face darkens further, but my mother steps in, her voice cutting through the tension. “You think you’re clever, don’t you?” she says, her eyes narrowing on Killion.

“No, ma’am,” Killion replies smoothly. “Just honest. Camille deserves to be happy. And if that’s with me, great. If not, I’ll respect her choice. But that choice? It’s hers to make. Not yours. And maybe you should think about the future, because if she agrees to marry me and have a family . . . well, that family won’t be near you if you are not supporting her.”

I can’t help the way my breath catches at his words. He glances at me then, his eyes warm, grounding me in a way I didn’t even realize I needed.

My mom opens her mouth to respond, but my dad cuts her off, his voice low and dangerous. “This isn’t over.”

“It should be, Dad,” I respond. “You need to back down, accept that I can make my own decisions and support me. I’m in a relationship with Kill, and if things go further I hope you change your attitude.”

“We’ll see,” Dad says. And just like that, my parents turn and walk out without even saying goodbye.

Killion exhales, turning to me with a small, self-deprecating grin. “So, dinner went great, huh?”

Despite everything, I laugh. “You really know how to win over a room.”

“Hey, I tried,” he says, raising his hands in mock surrender. “I’m not exactly *Meet the Parents* material, but I’m working on it. Maybe next time, they’ll be less . . . asshole-y and more, I don’t know, welcoming?”

A laugh bubbles out of me despite everything. “They’re good and loving—until you don’t do what they say. Then it’s like they’re auditioning for some mobster movie or series. Typical controlling parents.”

His lips twitch into a grin. “Ah, so I’m dating someone in the mob. That explains the intimidation tactics. I hope I passed this test.”

I shake my head, but the smile lingers. “You’re doing fine,” I say softly. “They are more bark than bite.”

He takes a small step closer, his expression softening as he brushes a strand of hair away from my face. His fingertips barely graze my skin, but the sensation sends a quiet thrill through me.

“You okay?” he asks, his voice low and steady, like he’s trying to ground me in this moment.

I nod, leaning into his touch. “I will be.”

His eyes search mine. It feels like time stretches out between us, everything else falling away.

“Good,” he murmurs, his voice like a promise. “Because what I said is true. I’m not going anywhere, Camille.”

Then he dips his head, slow enough that I see it coming but fast enough that I don’t have time to prepare. His lips brush against mine, soft and deliberate, like he’s asking a question instead of making a statement.

The kiss deepens gradually, his hand sliding to cup my cheek, his thumb tracing small, soothing circles. It’s not hurried or rushed—it’s intentional, like he’s pouring every word he can’t say directly into the kiss. And damn it, it’s working.

I grip his shirt instinctively, grounding myself because my legs suddenly feel unreliable. There’s this slow-burning heat to the way his lips move against mine, igniting something in me I hadn’t realized I’d kept so carefully under wraps. My toes curl against the hardwood floor, and a soft sigh escapes me before I can stop it.

When he finally pulls back, his forehead rests lightly against mine, his breath mingling with mine in the quiet space between us.

“Better?” he asks, a faint smirk tugging at his lips, though his voice carries a softness that twists something deep inside me.

I don't trust my voice, so I nod, my fingers still clutching his shirt like it's the only thing keeping me upright.

"Good," he says again, his thumb brushing over my cheek one last time before he lets his hand drop. "Because I meant every word, Camille. I'm here for the long haul. Even if your parents hire hitmen, even if it takes me forever to make you fall back in love with me."

I laugh, the sound shaky but genuine, and let my head fall against his chest for just a moment. "You're ridiculous."

"You like me that way," he murmurs, pressing a quick, playful kiss to the top of my head.

And damn it, I do.

Chapter Forty-Six



Killion

Camille Meets the Crawfords

Thanksgiving traffic on the way to my parents' estate isn't as bad as I expected. New Yorkers tend to fly rather than drive during the holidays, leaving the roads strangely cooperative for once. Still, the long, winding driveway leading to the house feels a lot longer with the silence in the car. Lucky for me this is my bye week and I can spend this day with her and my family.

I glance at Camille in the passenger seat of my black Range Rover. Her fingers are wrapped tightly around the strap of her bag. She's staring out the window, her lips pressed into a thin line.

"You nervous because you're meeting my family or anxious because you skipped Thanksgiving with your parents?" I ask, breaking the quiet as I ease the SUV up the drive.

"Neither," she says quickly, a little too quickly. "I'm fine."

I raise an eyebrow, giving her a look that says, *really?*

She sighs, her shoulders slumping slightly. "Fine. Maybe a little of both. Your family is . . . a lot. And my parents?" She pauses, her voice dropping a little. "They've decided that until I 'realize I'm making a mistake by dating you,' they won't talk to me. So, yeah, we're probably not going to speak for years."

That hits harder than I want to admit, but I keep my tone light. "At least you're sticking around to work things out with me. That's worth something, right?"

Her lips twitch into a faint smile, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"My family is tame," I say, steering us toward safer ground. "Well . . . mostly tame."

"Mostly?" she asks, her eyebrow arching in mock horror.

I shrug, playing it cool. "Scottie already grilled you about everything, so you've survived the worst. Lucian might try to drag you into some ridiculous competition, though. Leif will probably just be Leif—unless his friend Hailey's here. Then

they'll be somewhere in the house pretending they're just friends while openly pining for each other. Greyson . . . no clue what his mood will be today. And Kade and Val might not even be here—they were thinking of spending this holiday with her family. Or maybe that was Christmas. Either way, you'll be fine."

"What does 'fine' mean in Crawford family terms?" she asks, a small smile tugging at her lips.

"You'll see," I say, pulling up to the sprawling house.

"Is there a specific play in the book about Thanksgiving?" she asks.

I scoff. "Nope, but that would be funny."

The estate comes into view, all wood shingles, big windows, and a wraparound porch that somehow manages to make the massive structure look inviting instead of intimidating.

Camille's eyes widen slightly as she takes it in. "This is . . . wow."

"It's a house," I say with a shrug, pulling the car to a stop near the front steps.

"A house," she repeats, her tone teasing. "More like a mansion. Or maybe a small country."

I chuckle, stepping out and walking around to open her door. She hesitates for a second, then takes my hand, her palm warm against mine as she steps out.

The front door flies open before we even make it to the porch, and Scottie bounds down the steps like she's been waiting all day to ambush us. Her dark hair is pulled back into a sleek ponytail, and her expression practically glows with mischief.

"There they are," she says, her voice full of mock exasperation. "You're late."

"Blame the traffic," I lie smoothly. The truth? The cat sitter was late, and Camille vetoed my idea to bring Ben because, apparently, Ben and the family pets might be a recipe for disaster. He doesn't play well with other pets.

Scottie rolls her eyes, turning her attention to Camille. "Welcome to the Crawford madhouse," she says, pulling Camille into a quick hug like they've been best friends for years. "Come on, everyone's inside."

Before I can say anything, Scottie loops her arm through Camille's and whisks her up the steps. I trail behind, shaking my head but smiling.

Inside, the house smells like Thanksgiving—roasting turkey, cinnamon, and something faintly fried. My dad, Papa, is in the kitchen, carving one of the turkeys with surgeon-like precision, while Dad stands nearby, taste-testing something from a wooden spoon.

"Kill," Papa calls out when he sees me. "And Camille, nice to see you again."

"Nice seeing you too, Mr. Crawford," Camille says politely, shaking his hand.

"She's a doctor, you know," Scottie says, leaning against the counter.

"I know," Papa replies, glancing at me with a raised eyebrow. "Killion's been talking about her nonstop."

"Has he?" Camille asks, her tone light and teasing as she turns to me.

"Not nonstop," I mutter, clearing my throat.

Then, Lucian enters, balancing a plate piled high with appetizers. Behind him, Leif and Greyson file in, already bickering about something inconsequential.

"Camille," Lucian says, grinning. "Finally, someone to keep Kill in line."

"She's not here to manage me," I shoot back, but Camille just laughs.

"Let's all cool it," Dad says. "It's very nice to meet you, Camille. Welcome to the Crawford home. We're glad you were able to join us."

Dinner is loud, messy, and perfect in its own way. Plates are passed around the long dining table like a well-rehearsed dance, interrupted only by the constant buzz of conversation. Scottie squeezes in at least five questions about Camille's career, each one more pointed than the last. Meanwhile, Lucian and Leif argue over who makes the better mashed potatoes—an argument that devolves into a blind taste test judged by Greyson, who declares them both losers because Papa's mashed potatoes are obviously superior.

Camille, to her credit, is all graceful and friendly, answering Scottie's rapid-fire questions with ease and laughing at Lucian and Leif's antics. I catch her eye across the table, and for a moment, it feels like she belongs here, chaos and all.

When dinner winds down, and dessert is brought out, I lean over to her, keeping my voice low. "See? Mostly tame."

She laughs, shaking her head. "If this is 'tame,' I'd hate to see wild."

"Trust me, this is mild," I say, smirking. "You should be thankful that we're not having games today or it'd be a disaster. The important part is that you do fit in."

After dinner, we move to the living room, where the fire is already crackling. Greyson and Lucian argue over what movie to put on, while Papa and Dad sit together on the couch, sharing a glass of scotch.

Camille leans into me, her head resting against my shoulder, and I wrap an arm around her.

"Your family is incredible," she says softly.

"They like you," I reply.

She tilts her head up to look at me, her eyes warm. "Do you?"

"More than you know," I say, kissing the top of her head.

Chapter Forty-Seven



Camille

The Great Stable Escape

The warm glow of the fireplace and the chatter from the dining room make me feel almost—dare I say it?—at home. Killion’s family is loud, overwhelming, and the complete opposite of mine, but somehow, I’m not drowning. I’m surviving. Thriving, even.

That is, until Lucian’s dog, Sarah, comes trotting into the kitchen like she owns the place. She’s a beautiful Vizsla with sleek reddish-brown fur, floppy ears, and bright amber eyes that glint with an intelligence far too mischievous for her own good. Her tail wags furiously, a blur of energy and trouble waiting to happen.

“She’s cute,” I say, watching as Sarah sniffs around the counter like she’s conducting a search and rescue mission.

Lucian, sitting at the island with what has to be his fifth helping of pie, grins. “Yeah, she’s adorable. And smart. Too smart. She knows how to open doors if they have handles or latches.”

I blink, staring at Sarah as she stands on her hind legs to sniff a dish towel. “Like . . . with her paws?”

“Sometimes,” Lucian says, shrugging like this is perfectly normal. “Mostly she just jumps at the handles until they give in or uses her nose to move the latches. It’s hilarious.”

“Hilarious,” I repeat flatly, a sinking feeling blooming in my stomach as Sarah’s tail wags harder. She sniffs the air, zeroing in on the back door like a heat-seeking missile.

And then, just like that, she bolts.

“Wait—”

But it’s too late. With an impressive leap, Sarah hits the door handle, and, sure enough, the door swings open like she’s been doing this her entire life.

“Lucian,” I shout, pointing as the dog takes off like a rocket.

Lucian doesn't even look up from his pie. "She'll come back. She always does."

"Lucian, your dog just escaped," I snap, grabbing my coat in a panic.

"She's a very independent woman," Lucian says, waving a fork dismissively.

"She's trouble," I mutter, throwing on my jacket and heading for the door.

Killion steps into the kitchen just in time to hear me. "What's going on?"

"Your brother's dog just escaped," I say, glaring at Lucian, who still hasn't moved.

"Again?" Killion groans, rubbing the back of his neck.

"She opened the door," I exclaim, my tone accusing.

"She's a very talented girl," Lucian says with a shrug, finally taking a sip of his drink.

"She's gone," I shout.

Killion grabs his coat, muttering something about how this always happens, and follows me outside. The crisp November air bites at my cheeks as we jog toward the stables, Killion's long strides making it hard to keep up.

"Why the stables?" I ask, nearly tripping over a rock.

"Because that's where she always goes," he says, sounding more amused than worried. "She loves the horses."

"Of course she does," I mutter. "Why wouldn't she?"

When we reach the stables, the barn doors are wide open, creaking slightly in the breeze.

"She can open these too?" I ask, incredulous.

"Yep," Killion says, stepping inside.

The stable smells like hay and horses, warm and earthy in a way that would usually be comforting. But not now. Now, Sarah is wagging her tail furiously by an open stall, looking way too pleased with herself.

"She opened one of the horse stalls," Killion groans.

Lucian jogs in behind us, finally looking concerned. "Dad's going to maim me if we don't get Blaze back," he mutters, eyeing the empty stall.

The horse—a massive, chestnut beauty with a white blaze down its nose—is trotting casually toward the barn door like it's out for a Sunday stroll.

"Oh, no," I whisper, my eyes widening.

"Relax," Killion says, rolling up his sleeves. "It's not two horses this time."

"This time?" I choke out.

Sarah barks happily, clearly proud of herself.

"Okay," Killion says, already moving. "You grab Sarah. I'll handle the horse."

"Oh, sure," I say, dripping with sarcasm. "Let me wrangle the four-legged escape artist while you channel your inner horse whisperer. Sounds completely fair."

He flashes me a grin that shouldn't be as attractive as it is. "Teamwork, baby."

"Teamwork, my ass," I mutter, lunging for Sarah. But she thinks it's a game, darting out of my reach with a playful bark.

"Sarah, stop," Lucian calls with a commanding voice. "Come."

The dog freezes mid-bolt, her ears flicking back. She looks at Lucian, then at me, then back at Lucian, before finally trotting over to him like an obedient angel.

"You could've done that ten minutes ago," I grumble, brushing hay off my jeans.

He grins. "Now how fun would that be?"

Meanwhile, Killion approaches the horse with calm, practiced ease. He clicks his tongue, murmuring something low and soothing as he extends his hands. The horse slows, its ears flicking toward him, and I watch, mesmerized, as he gently grabs the halter.

"Gotcha," he says softly, patting the horse's neck.

"That was . . . weirdly impressive," I admit, still holding my hands on my hips like I did all the work.

"I've got skills," he says, leading Blaze back to its stall. "Growing up here has its perks."

"Oh, I'm sure you were just a regular horse whisperer growing up, weren't you?"

"Jealous?" he teases, shutting the stall door securely.

"Of you? Never," I say, though my smile betrays me.

He steps closer, his grin softening as his eyes meet mine. "You okay? No injuries from our little adventure?"

"Just my dignity," I say, brushing at imaginary dirt on my jacket.

He chuckles, leaning down to press a quick, lingering kiss to my forehead. "You handled yourself pretty well."

"Yeah, well," I say, glancing at Sarah, who's now lounging by Lucian's feet like she hasn't just caused complete mayhem.

"Your brother's dog is the real mastermind here."

Lucian smirks. "She's brilliant. You just have to keep up."

"Next time, you're chasing her," I shoot back, heading toward the house.

"Next time just tell her to stop. Very simple," he calls after me, laughing.

As Killion falls into step beside me, he takes my hand, bringing it to his lips with a kiss so soft it sends a shiver through me. The gesture is effortless, like he does it without even thinking.

“I love you, you know?” he says, clearing his throat he adds, “Thank you for coming with me.”

His words land somewhere deep, unraveling a knot I hadn’t realized I’d been carrying. My steps falter slightly, and I glance up at him, my heart doing that annoying thing where it skips like it’s auditioning for a romcom montage.

“You really love me?” I ask, my tone light and teasing, even though his words hit me like a tidal wave. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I am, Cam. You’ve always been it for me. My soulmate, the love of my life,” he

“I love you too,” I finally manage. The words feel big, bigger than the moment, but true all the same.

His grin fades into something warmer, more serious. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say, though, every part of me feels like it’s teetering on the edge of something terrifyingly wonderful.

We stop just a few feet from the porch, the glow of the house spilling out around us. He turns to face me fully, his hands coming up to frame my face, his thumbs brushing lightly over my cheeks.

“Sorry again for . . . you know, fucking up fourteen years ago,” he murmurs, his eyes locked on mine like he’s afraid to blink and miss my reaction.

“We were young,” I say, my voice soft but steady. Then I let out a breath and break his gaze, staring at the ground like it holds all the answers. “And if I’d been in your place . . .” I trail off, forcing myself to meet his eyes again. “I probably would’ve done the same. Leave because everything back then felt huge—like life-or-death huge. And now? It’s just . . .” I shrug, letting the words hang between us.

And then he kisses me.

It’s not rushed, not one of those desperate, pin-you-to-the-wall kind of kisses. It’s slow—deliberate. Like he’s testing the waters, waiting for me to pull back. But I don’t. God, I don’t.

His lips are soft but firm, and the way he tilts his head just right makes my brain short-circuit. I feel it everywhere, from the tips of my fingers gripping his jacket to the slight tremble in my knees. It’s like he’s rewiring something inside me, flipping switches I didn’t even know were broken. Every moment I doubted this—doubted us—just dissolves.

By the time we pull back, I’m breathless. My lips tingle like they’ve been electrocuted (in the sexiest way possible), and my thoughts? Oh, they’ve completely abandoned me, probably off sipping margaritas on a beach somewhere.

He leans in, resting his forehead against mine, and his breath mingles with mine in the crisp night air. “You have no idea how much I love you,” he whispers, his voice low and thick with promise. There’s something tender there, too, and it makes my chest ache. Not in a bad way, though. More like my heart’s growing three sizes, Grinch-style.

I manage a smile, though I’m still working on that whole breathing thing. “I might, Crawford.”

His laugh is soft and warm, and it curls around me like a blanket fresh out of the dryer. He presses another quick kiss to my lips—just a teasing brush—before straightening up and taking my hand.

“Come on,” he says, his thumb sweeping over my knuckles as he tugs me toward the house. “Let’s go back inside. Maybe we can . . . head to bed?”

I stop dead in my tracks, my brow lifting. “Huh? We’re sharing a bed? Are we talking actual sleeping, or are we finally breaking the no-sex clause you’ve been clinging to like it’s some sacred vow?”

His lips twitch like he’s trying not to smile, but he fails miserably. “We can break it, but only if you’re a good girl.”

A laugh bursts out of me, sharp and loud, and I don’t even try to smother it. “Oh, I can be very good.” I lick my lips.

He grins, all wicked confidence now, and it sends a shiver down my spine. “We’ll see about that.”

And just like that, he tugs me inside. But the heat in his eyes? That promises we won’t be doing much sleeping.

Chapter Forty-Eight



Killion

Breaking the Line

We stumble into my bedroom, the door clicking shut behind us with a sense of finality. My hand fumbles with the lock, the sound of it turning somehow louder than it should be, like it's announcing our intentions to the entire world. I turn to face her, my breath uneven as I meet her eyes. They're wide, uncertain, but blazing with a heat that matches the inferno building in my chest.

"Are we really doing this?" I ask, my voice low and gravelly, carrying the weight of too many emotions I've spent years avoiding. My heart is hammering so hard, it's probably visible through my shirt. Romantic.

Camille's lips part, and her breath hitches. For a second, I think she might back out, and I brace myself for rejection. But then she leans in, her eyes locking onto mine. "I hope so," she whispers, her voice so soft it could dissolve me on the spot.

I cup her cheek, my thumb gliding over her skin. It's smooth and warm, and I wonder if she feels the tremor in my hand. "I need you, Cam," I admit, the words tumbling out rough and desperate. "So fucking much."

"Shut up and kiss me, Killion," she orders, her tone half a challenge and half an invitation.

Oh, I'll shut up. I crash my mouth onto hers, leaving no doubt about who's in charge—or at least trying to convince myself I am. The kiss is explosive, a heady mix of hunger and emotion that steals every rational thought I've ever had. My hands move instinctively, skimming over the thick, winter layers that feel like they're conspiring to keep us apart. I tug at her scarf, then her coat, discarding them onto the floor like unwrapping the best Christmas present I've ever gotten.

The heat between us builds, a living, breathing thing that sparks with every touch. My senses are overwhelmed—her scent, a mix of vanilla and something floral, clings to the air. Her lips taste faintly of chocolate, and I realize with a grin that it's from the damn cookies she stole earlier.

"Chocolate?" I murmur against her lips, my voice teasing.

Her laughter is breathless and warm against my mouth. “You’re one to talk. Your lips taste like bourbon and bad decisions.”

Probably.

I press her closer, my hands sliding to her waist, feeling the curve of her body beneath the knit sweater she’s wearing. It’s soft, but not as soft as her skin, which I’m suddenly desperate to feel. My fingers tug at the hem, the fabric resisting slightly before giving way. Beneath it, her skin is warm, and the contact sends a jolt of electricity straight to my core.

She leans into me, her hands roaming over my chest, tugging at my shirt like she’s done waiting. “You have too many clothes on,” she murmurs, her breath hot against my ear.

I chuckle, the sound rough and self-deprecating. “So do you. Let’s fix that.”

Her sweater joins the growing pile of clothing on the floor, and I marvel at the sight of her—flushed cheeks, slightly messy hair, her lips swollen from our kisses. She’s stunning, and I feel like a mess in comparison, but somehow, she’s looking at me like I’m the only thing she wants.

The room feels hotter, like the air itself has thickened around us, wrapping us in a cocoon of shared heat and desire. Every nerve in my body is tuned to her—her soft sighs, the way her fingers dig into my shoulders as I kiss the sensitive skin of her neck. Time seems to stretch, each second heavy with need and anticipation, each touch igniting a fire that threatens to consume me entirely.

Camille stands before me now in nothing but her bra and panties, the soft fabric clinging to her curves. My boxers feel like they’re burning against my skin, a cruel barrier that only amplifies my growing ache for her. She’s perfect—absolutely breathtaking—with her flushed cheeks and eyes half-lidded with want.

I step closer, my hands trailing up her sides, over her ribs, until they find the clasp of her bra. My fingers fumble for a moment, my eagerness getting the better of me, but then the clasp gives way, and the straps slide down her shoulders. The garment falls to the floor, forgotten, as I take her in.

Her breasts are full and flawless, her nipples pebbled from either the cold air or the heat of the moment—or maybe both. My breath catches, and I can’t help but let out a low groan. “God, Cam, you’re . . . fuck, you’re incredible.”

She bites her lip, her cheeks darkening in a way that tells me my words affect her just as much as her body affects me. “Are you just going to stare, or are you going to do something about it?” she teases, her voice breathy but laced with challenge.

I answer by cupping her breasts with both hands, my palms warm against her soft, supple skin. She arches into my touch, her breath hitching as my thumbs circle her nipples, teasing them until they stiffen further under my ministrations. Her moan is quiet but needy, and the sound sends a jolt of desire straight to my core.

“Fuck, you’re so soft,” I murmur, leaning in to kiss her neck, her collarbone, trailing my lips lower. The faint taste of her skin—salty, sweet, and entirely her—fuels my hunger. My mouth finds one of her nipples, and I draw it into my mouth, swirling my tongue around the sensitive bud.

Her reaction is instant. She gasps, her fingers tangling in my hair, pulling me closer. “Killion,” she breathes, her voice trembling, somewhere between a plea and a command.

I suck gently at first, then harder, pulling more of her into my mouth. My hand kneads her other breast, my fingers tugging and teasing her nipple until her hips buck against me, seeking more contact. The sounds she makes—soft, breathless moans and whispered curses—are like music, and I want to hear more, to make her completely lose herself in this moment.

Switching to her other breast, I lavish it with the same attention, my tongue flicking and swirling as my lips tug at her sensitive flesh. Her nails rake lightly against my scalp, and the slight sting only heightens the pleasure coursing through me. She’s trembling now, her body responding to every touch, every kiss, every deliberate motion of my hands and mouth.

“You taste so good,” I murmur against her skin, my voice rough and thick with need. “I could do this all night.”

Her laugh is breathless, edged with desire. “You better not stop,” she manages, her voice shaking as her body presses against mine.

I chuckle, low and deep, the sound vibrating against her chest. “Oh, I’m just getting started.”

I trail kisses back up to her neck, my hands sliding down to her waist, then to the curve of her hips. The heat radiating from her skin is intoxicating, and I know I’m on the edge of losing all control. But for now, I want her to feel everything—to be consumed by the same fire that’s burning through me.

Camille’s body is pliant beneath my hands, her breathy moans filling the room like a melody only I get to hear. She’s the embodiment of temptation, her flushed skin, soft curves, and the way she whispers my name like a prayer. My lips trail back to her collarbone, my hands exploring her hips, dipping to the waistband of her panties.

I pause, looking up at her, waiting for her permission. Her eyes meet mine, and she gives a small nod, her teeth catching her bottom lip. I hook my fingers under the thin fabric, slowly peeling it down her legs, savoring every inch of skin revealed. She’s bare before me now, utterly stunning and breathtakingly real. My cock strains against my boxers, and I bite back a groan as the sight of her ignites something primal in me.

Her hands slide to my waistband, and I raise an eyebrow, my smirk playful despite the heat building between us. “Impatient, are we?”

“Fair’s fair,” she replies, her voice laced with amusement and desire. She tugs my boxers down, and they fall to the floor. Her eyes sweep over me, and the way she bites her lip makes my pulse skyrocket. “You’re not exactly hard to look at.”

I chuckle, but the sound catches in my throat when her hand wraps around me, her touch firm and electrifying. “Careful, Cam,” I manage, my voice strained. “You’re playing with fire.”

She grins, her confidence intoxicating. “Maybe I like getting burned.”

Before I can respond, she shifts, pulling me onto the bed with her. The mattress dips under our weight, and she leans in, capturing my lips in a kiss that’s equal parts tender and consuming. Her hands roam my body, exploring the planes of my chest and the muscles of my back, before she pulls back, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“I have an idea,” she murmurs, her voice low and sultry. She pushes me gently onto my back, her lips curving into a wicked smile. “Lie back and trust me.”

I obey, my body humming with anticipation as she straddles me, her warm skin pressed against mine. She trails kisses down my chest, her lips soft and teasing as they move lower. I shudder under her touch, every nerve in my body on high alert. But then she shifts again, turning her body until her thighs frame my head, her heat just inches from my lips.

Fuck.

The sight of her like this—completely uninhibited, her body offered to me—is enough to make me lose my mind. “You’re perfect,” I murmur, my hands gripping her hips as I pull her closer. “Absolutely fucking perfect.”

She laughs softly, the sound vibrating through her body as her lips brush the tip of my cock. “Let’s see if you can keep up.”

Challenge accepted.

I lower my head, my tongue darting out to taste her. She’s warm and wet, her arousal intoxicating as I explore her with slow, deliberate strokes. She gasps, her body trembling above me, and I feel her lips part as she takes me into her mouth. The sensation is almost too much—her tongue swirling, her hands stroking, while her moans vibrate against me.

We move together, each of us giving and taking, the rhythm of our bodies perfectly in sync. The room is filled with the sounds of our pleasure—her breathy cries, my low groans, the wet slide of skin on skin. Every touch, every taste, every moment is a perfect blend of passion and urgency.

My hands grip her hips tighter as I bury my tongue deeper, savoring the way she writhes above me, her movements growing more frantic. She responds in kind, her mouth driving me to the edge, her hands exploring me with a hunger that matches my own.

Time ceases to exist as we lose ourselves in each other, every sensation amplified, every touch electric. The world outside the room fades away, leaving only us—tangled together in a heated blur of desire and need.

Her thighs tremble around my head, and I feel her warmth pressing closer as she lowers herself fully onto me. My tongue dives into her, exploring her slick heat, teasing her clit before gliding back down to circle her entrance. She’s intoxicating, every soft moan and shiver making me harder, more desperate to consume her.

At the same time, her lips close around the head of my cock, her tongue swirling in maddening circles that have me gripping her hips tighter, holding her firmly in place. The sensation of her mouth is almost too much—wet, hot, and impossibly good as she takes me deeper, inch by inch, until I’m groaning against her core.

I thrust my tongue into her, matching the rhythm of her movements, my hands tightening around her waist to guide her. Her muffled moan vibrates along my length as she sucks harder, her hands working the base of my cock in perfect coordination with her lips.

Fuck, she’s perfect—so fucking perfect.

I slide one hand down, trailing my fingers along her slick folds until I press one inside her. She gasps around me, the sound sending a shiver down my spine. Her walls grip me as I curl my finger, searching for the spot that will drive her wild. I find it quickly, and her hips jerk against my face, her thighs quivering as she tries to keep her balance.

“God, Camille,” I growl, my voice muffled against her. “You taste so fucking good.”

Her only response is a moan, her lips still wrapped around me as she moves faster, her tongue flicking against me with deliberate precision. I can’t tell if I’m making her lose control or if it’s the other way around, but I don’t care. I add a second finger, thrusting them deep and curling them with every stroke, my tongue never leaving her clit.

Her pace falters for a moment as her moans grow louder, her body trembling as I push her closer to the edge. But she doesn’t stop. She doubles down, taking me even deeper, her hand gripping me firmly as her mouth works me with an intensity that has me on the brink of losing it.

Every sensation is overwhelming—the way she moves, the way she sounds, the way her body responds to every flick of my tongue and thrust of my fingers. The room is filled with the wet, sinful sounds of us, the heat between us building to an almost unbearable level.

I feel her starting to fall apart, her hips bucking against my face as her thighs clamp tighter around my head. Her cries are muffled against me as she shakes, her release overtaking her, and I don’t let up, riding out her pleasure with my tongue and fingers, savoring every moment of her climax.

At the same time, she moans deeply, her mouth pulling me in even harder, and it’s my undoing. My groan vibrates against

her as I spill into her mouth, the pleasure ripping through me like a wave. She takes every bit of me, her movements slowing as we both come down from the high, our bodies trembling and tangled together.

She shifts slightly, her lips leaving me as she moves to collapse beside me. Her chest heaves as she catches her breath, her face flushed, her hair messy, and a satisfied smile playing on her lips.

“That,” she says between breaths, her voice husky, “was fucking incredible.”

I chuckle, my own breathing unsteady as I turn to look at her. “You think you’ve had enough?”

Her smile widens, eyes gleaming with mischief that sets my pulse racing. “Oh, Killion,” she purrs, dragging a finger down my chest, “we’re just getting started.”

I capture her mouth in a searing kiss, murmuring against her lips, “And this is exactly why I love you so fucking much.”

Chapter Forty-Nine



Camille

SITTING IN THE BACKSEAT OF KILLION’S PARENTS’ CAR IS THE KIND OF AWKWARD NO ONE PREPARES YOU FOR. THERE’S NO etiquette manual for sharing a confined space with the people whose house you . . . well. . . defiled. Let’s just say I haven’t seen them since Christmas, and I’m not exactly itching to bring up the memory.

In my defense, Kill and I weren’t trying to traumatize anyone. His room is allegedly soundproofed, and I was, uh, too preoccupied at the time to worry about acoustics. Still, every time his dad, Mathieu, flashes me a smile in the rearview mirror, that tiny, panicked voice in my head whispers, *What if they know?*

“You’re quiet, Camille,” Mathieu says, his tone warm and teasing, like he doesn’t suspect I’m spiraling. “Nervous about the game?”

I plaster on a smile and fidget with the strap of my purse. “A little, I guess. It’s a big deal, right?”

“Big deal doesn’t even cover it,” John pipes up from the passenger seat, his tone brimming with pride. Honestly, you’d think he was the one gunning for his third championship ring. “This is legacy stuff. Killion was born for moments like this.”

“Born for them,” I repeat, nodding along like a good future daughter-in-law who definitely doesn’t break their son’s headboard during visits.

This isn’t my first rodeo—or time I attend a game, technically. Back in January, I went to his final regular season game in Vegas. We even toyed with the idea of eloping while we were there, but we didn’t. Neither of us is ready for that step just yet. Kill is laser-focused on winning the championship, and I’ve got my hands full opening my practice next month. One major life milestone at a time, right?

When we pull up to the stadium, the energy hits me like a freight train. Fans are everywhere, decked out in Gladiators gear, waving signs, and chanting at top volume. The air smells like hot dogs and ambition, and I swear I can feel my stomach auditioning for Cirque du Soleil.

Kill texted me this morning—a simple, cocky “Can’t wait to see you after we win.” The confidence practically jumped off

the screen. It's one of the many things I admire about him. He's so sure of himself, his team, and their ability to win. Meanwhile, I've spent most of my life overthinking whether I should text someone back in five minutes or twenty. That level of certainty? Equal parts inspiring and mildly terrifying.

Inside the VIP box, I'm immediately shown to the table with drinks, canapes, and snacks. I'm surrounded by a swarm of Killion's family and friends. His brothers are already in heated debates about stats, their voices climbing over each other like this is their game to win. Lucian is betting against him, but I'm pretty sure it's because his team lost last week and they're out for the season.

Scottie shoves a plate of hors d'oeuvres into my hands. "This is ours. We're not sharing with anyone. Today is amazing. Finally, I have two sisters and don't have to deal with the boys on my own."

Val, who I've only met twice but have decided is an angel, laughs. Before she can respond, Kade pulls her close and kisses her deeply.

Scottie groans. "Ugh, please. Can you guys at least wait until you go home?"

Before she can roast them further, the room erupts into cheers. The Gladiators are taking the field, and every nerve in my body flips into overdrive. My eyes immediately find Kill. He glances toward the VIP box, and for a second, I swear he locks eyes with me. Then he gives the tiniest nod—at least, I think he does.

Scottie leans in, smirking like the chaos gremlin she is. "You're blushing."

"Shut up," I mutter, though the grin on my face completely betrays me.

Because she's right—I'm absolutely blushing. And damn it, I'm too proud to care.

As the game begins, the tension in the air is palpable. The Gladiators start strong, their offense slicing through the defense like a hot knife through butter. Every time Kill throws the ball, the crowd roars, and I find myself clapping along, my heart racing with every play.

By halftime, the score is tied, and the box is buzzing with anticipation. I excuse myself to grab some air.

"You okay?" Scottie's voice startles me, and I turn to see her leaning casually against the railing.

"I'm fine," I say, though my hands grip the railing a little tighter than necessary. "Just . . . it's a lot."

Scottie studies me for a moment before smirking. "You're nervous for him."

"Of course I am," I admit. "This is huge for him, and if they lose—"

"They're not going to lose," she interrupts firmly. "Trust me, I've seen him in moments like this. He thrives under pressure."

I nod, wanting to believe her.

"And for the record," she adds, her tone softer, "he's lucky to have you here. He knows it too."

The second half is a rollercoaster. The Gladiators pull ahead, only for the opposing team to come roaring back. By the final two minutes, the score is tied again, and my nails are practically embedded in the seat armrest.

When Kill takes the snap for what could be the game-winning drive, the entire stadium holds its breath. He drops back, scanning the field, then launches a perfect spiral down the sideline. His receiver catches it just inches from the end zone, and the crowd explodes.

One more play.

The tension is suffocating as the team lines up for what could be the final snap of the game. Kill takes the ball, fakes a handoff, and rolls to his right. The defense collapses on him, but at the last second, he scrambles, diving into the end zone himself.

Touchdown.

The noise is deafening. Fans are screaming, players are piling onto Kill in celebration, and I'm on my feet, cheering so loud my throat hurts.

Scottie grabs my arm, jumping up and down. "He did it."

Tears prick my eyes as I watch him on the field, grinning ear to ear, his teammates lifting him onto their shoulders. He looks up toward the box, his gaze finding mine again, and this time, the nod is accompanied by the kind of smile that makes me forget anyone else exists.

Yeah, he did it. And somehow, I feel like I did too.

THE SOUND OF CELEBRATION HITS ME BEFORE I'VE EVEN STEPPED INTO KILLION'S PENTHOUSE. I'M BEGINNING TO REALIZE THAT not living next door to him anymore is a royal pain in my ass. Moving to a small studio in Brooklyn seemed like a good idea at the time—until I realized I'd practically relocated all my stuff to his place anyway. The only thing I haven't moved in permanently is Ben, my cat, who occasionally graces Kill with his disapproving presence.

As I unlock the door and step inside, the laughter and clinking glasses intensify. His family has clearly made themselves at home, and I brace myself for the chaos.

And then I see him.

Killion stands in the middle of the living room, now dressed down in a plain T-shirt and jeans. His hair is slightly tousled—like he’s been raking his hands through it—and it’s maddeningly, unfairly attractive. The second his eyes land on me, his whole face lights up, like I’m the only person in the room.

“There she is,” he says, his voice carrying over the chatter as he strides toward me with the kind of confidence that could probably cure my anxiety if it were bottled up and sold.

Before I can so much as squeak a greeting, he sweeps me into his arms, lifting me clear off the ground like I’m some sort of championship trophy he’s just snagged.

“Kill,” I squeal, laughing as I swat at his shoulder. “You’re squeezing all the air out of my lungs—and people are watching.”

“Let them watch,” he says with a laugh, his grip loosening just enough to set me down gently, though his hands linger on my waist like they’ve forgotten they’re supposed to let go. “Missed you, baby.”

His tone is soft, but there’s an edge of possessiveness in it that sends a shiver down my spine.

“You were incredible out there,” I say, looking up at him, and I mean it. Watching him on the field, so in control, so focused—God, it was awe-inspiring. And not just in the wow-he’s-great-at-football way. More like the strip-me-down-and-call-me-helpless kind of way.

His lips quirk into a crooked grin, and he leans in just a fraction, enough that I can feel the heat radiating off him. “Incredible, huh? Careful, baby, you’re gonna give me an even bigger ego.”

I roll my eyes, trying to play it cool even though my body is very much not cooperating. “Oh, please. Like your ego needs any help. It’s already at max capacity.”

His grin widens, all cocky charm, and he dips his head to murmur in my ear, “Speaking of max capacity . . . should I let everyone clear out so we can test your theory?”

My face heats faster than I can stop it, and I shove at his chest with a laugh. “You’re impossible.”

“But you love me anyway,” he states.

He’s not wrong. And judging by the way his hands tighten ever so slightly on my waist, neither of us wants me anywhere else. “That I do,” I agree.

His grin softens into something more intimate, his thumbs brushing lightly over my sides, sending a shiver down my spine. “Thanks to you,” he murmurs, his voice low and thick with sincerity. “Knowing you were watching? That was all the motivation I needed.”

I blink up at him, torn between swooning and teasing him. “Oh, so you’re saying all those plays weren’t for the championship, the team, or the fans? Just for me?”

“Exactly,” he replies without hesitation, his grin morphing into that devilish smirk that makes my knees weak. “Though if you hadn’t shown up, I might’ve thrown the game. Guess we’ll never know.”

I laugh, rolling my eyes. “You’re ridiculous.”

“And yet, you love me for it,” he fires back, his tone so cocky that I almost want to smack him—except his hands are still on me, and I don’t really want him to stop.

His parents’ voices in the kitchen pull me back to reality. I glance over to see Mathieu and John toasting with champagne while nibbling on appetizers. Lucian is sprawled on the couch, arguing with Leif over who deserves more credit for the win. Meanwhile, Greyson stands by the window, nursing a drink and looking unusually relaxed.

Mathieu spots me from across the room and raises his glass in my direction. “Camille, you’ve done wonders for our boy. Don’t let him forget it.”

Heat floods my cheeks, and I try to laugh it off. “I don’t think I’ve done anything.”

John turns from the kitchen with a warm smile. “He’s happy, and that’s everything.”

“My fathers are right,” Killion says, his voice steady and serious for once, drawing my attention back to him. His hands leave my waist, but only so he can take one of mine in his, his thumb brushing over my knuckles in that soft, deliberate way that always makes my heart race.

The room around us seems to fade, the buzz of conversation dimming as he sinks to one knee right there in the middle of the living room.

“Killion,” I whisper, my breath catching.

“Camille,” he begins, his gaze locked on mine, unflinching and so full of love that I think I might actually combust. “You’ve been my biggest supporter, my biggest challenge, and the reason I wake up every day wanting to be better. I don’t just want you in my life—I need you. Forever.”

He pulls a small box from his pocket, opening it to reveal a stunning ring that catches the light just right, sparkling like it’s as smug about this moment as he is.

“Marry me, baby. Be my partner, my teammate, my reason for every win from here on out.”

The world tilts, and I realize the room has gone completely silent. All eyes are on us, but I don’t care.

“Yes,” I blurt out, the word tumbling out before I’ve even had a chance to think it through. Not that I need to—this has always been the easiest decision of my life.

His grin spreads wide as he slips the ring onto my finger, standing to pull me into his arms. “You just made me the luckiest man alive.”

“And you’re stuck with me now,” I tease, my voice breathless but light. “Hope you’re ready.”

“Oh, I’ve been ready,” he says, leaning in to kiss me like we’re the only two people in the room. And for the moment, that’s exactly how it feels.

Epilogue



Killion

THE MOVING TRUCK PULLS AWAY FROM THE CURB, LEAVING BEHIND A TOWERING PILE OF BOXES—AND ONE VERY TRIUMPHANT Camille. She stands on the front steps of the brownstone with her hands on her hips, her red hair catching the late afternoon sun. She’s got the kind of smile that says, *I just conquered the world, and yes, you’re welcome.*

“You’re staring,” she says, not even bothering to look at me, her voice light and teasing.

“I’m admiring,” I counter, leaning casually against the railing of our new front steps. “There’s a difference.”

She turns to me, one perfectly arched eyebrow raised. “Well, Mr. Admirer, are you going to stand there looking pretty, or are you going to help me unpack?”

I smirk, pushing off the railing and closing the space between us in a few easy strides. Wrapping my arms around her waist, I pull her close and drop a kiss on her forehead. “I’ll do whatever you want, Dr. Ashby.”

Her grin softens, and for a moment, we just stand there on the steps of our new home, the world around us a gentle hum of distant car horns and chirping birds.

The brownstone is everything Camille wanted—historic charm, a tree-lined street, and just enough space to feel like home. It’s also everything I didn’t know I wanted until now. We’ve been engaged for a year, and I’ve love every second of it. Our wedding’s in June, though her parents are still warming up to the idea of me being their son-in-law. Let’s just say, I don’t see us spending the holidays together anytime soon.

“Think they’ll like it?” she asks, tilting her head toward the front door.

“They’ll love it,” I say, glancing over at the two fluffy cats peering out the room window assigned to them, like disapproving royalty. Ben and Silus—our new cat—have made it abundantly clear they’re only tolerating me because Camille’s around. But I’m patient. One day, I’ll be more than just the guy who fills their food bowls.

Inside, the brownstone smells like fresh paint and possibility. The hardwood floors gleam in the sunlight streaming through the big bay windows, and the built-in bookshelves Camille fell in love with are ready to be packed with her favorite titles.

The kitchen is a dream—stainless steel, marble countertops, and more counter space than I know what to do with. She walks me through each room, rattling off what’s missing and what we’ll unpack first. The guest room, the office, the cozy nook by the window where she’s determined to put a reading chair.

“And this,” she says, stopping in front of a door on the second floor, “is my favorite part.”

She pushes it open, revealing a bright, airy space transformed into her personal sanctuary. Calming greens and soft whites cover the room, with a yoga mat in one corner, shelves stocked with candles, books, and framed photos.

“It’s perfect,” I say, meaning it.

“Your turn,” she says, nudging me with her elbow.

“For what?”

“To tell me what your favorite part is.”

I don’t even have to think. “Wherever you are.”

She rolls her eyes, but the smile she gives me is pure sunshine. “That was disgustingly smooth.”

“You loved it.”

“Shut up.” She kisses me anyway.

The past year has been a whirlwind. Camille’s practice has taken off in ways neither of us expected. What started as a small consultation business is now a thriving center for women’s health. She’s running workshops, hosting community events, and building a network of resources that’s reaching far beyond Brooklyn. I couldn’t be prouder.

As for me, I’m still with the Gladiators. Last year’s championship win was the highlight of my career. Sure, I’ve got a few seasons left, but I know my playing days are winding down. For the first time, that doesn’t terrify me.

“Kill,” Camille calls from downstairs. “Can you grab the bag of linens from the car?”

“On it,” I shout back, jogging down the stairs.

By the time I return with the bag, she’s in the kitchen, unpacking mugs and humming to herself. I set the bag on the counter and slide my arms around her from behind, resting my chin on her shoulder.

“You’re in a good mood,” I say, pressing a kiss to her temple.

She tilts her head slightly, her smile warm and easy. “I am. It feels good, doesn’t it? Starting fresh.”

“It does,” I agree, tightening my arms around her. “And just think—this time next week, we’ll be hosting a housewarming party with the entire Crawford clan.”

She groans, but there’s no real annoyance behind it. “Do you think Sarah will open every door in the house again?”

“Probably,” I admit. “But at least there aren’t any horses this time.”

We laugh, the sound filling the kitchen and spilling into the rest of the house.

Later that evening, after the last box is unpacked and the cats have begrudgingly approved the new furniture, we curl up on the couch together.

“This is it,” she says softly, her head resting on my shoulder. “Our new beginning.”

I kiss the top of her head, pulling her closer. “Our forever. And believe me, baby, I know a thing or two about second-quarter comebacks.”

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He’s the guy who always shows up, even when I don’t ask.

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WE’RE OPPOSITES IN EVERY WAY.

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I’m a documentary disaster who panic-texts from foreign countries and gets rescued from dates with guys who think “baby” is an acceptable nickname for someone they just met.

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THE FINAL FACEOFF



Hailey

How to Switch Lines Without Losing Your Mind

If I had a dollar for every bad decision I've made, I'd have enough to bribe my way out of this one. But it's impossible. I have to be there for my grandmother's thirtieth birthday.

Okay, technically, it's her seventy-eighth, but she insists she's celebrating her "thirtieth"—again. She claims thirty is the perfect age: old enough to know better, young enough to pretend you don't. I don't question it. I love her dearly, quirks and all, and if she wants to keep turning thirty until the end of time, who am I to argue?

Usually, I never visit my family or friends when I'm working. When I'm deep in a project, the rest of the world fades out, and I convince myself that answering texts and sending the occasional "miss you" counts as keeping in touch. But the whole, "*this might be my last birthday*," thing seemed important. Major guilt trip, sure, but important.

So, I'm here. Just for a week. Then it's back to Greece, where I'm knee-deep in unraveling the world of Greek superstitions, curses, and the infamous evil eye.

It started as a curiosity—a lighthearted look into ancient folklore—but the more I dig, the more I realize how deeply these

beliefs still shape everyday life. Fishermen won't sail without their blue glass charms. Shopkeepers spit—discreetly but deliberately—after receiving a compliment. And I've met a yia-yia who swears she cured a neighbor's back pain with nothing but olive oil and a whispered prayer. Some people laugh it off. Others won't even speak about it out loud, just in case.

After that, Aspen—my best friend—and I will turn our focus to *The Women of Santorini*, documenting the widows, grandmothers, and independent women who have spent their lives fighting to keep their homes and way of life intact. It's a project I'm passionate about, one that feels deeply human and necessary. But before that, I'm here—for a week, for a birthday, for a brief pause before diving back into work.

Maybe that's why New York smells different this time. Or maybe it's just the airport. Not the usual mix of espresso-fueled ambition and car fumes, or even that undeniable, electric pulse of the city that hums beneath your skin. It's something else. Something I can't quite put my finger on as I make my way through the arrivals hall, dodging travelers clutching suitcases and bleary-eyed families reuniting. My duffel slips lower on my shoulder as I grip a half-full bottle of overpriced airport water that's warming in my grip.

I know, I know—I should be carrying a reusable one. But mine got lost somewhere along the way, swallowed by one of the many airports I passed through in the last thirty-six hours. That's the trade-off with booking the cheapest flight possible: multiple layovers and misplaced belongings.

Still, the scent is . . . I can't pinpoint it yet, but I will figure it out soon enough.

Leif would say I'm romanticizing things again, the way I do whenever I land somewhere new and convince myself the air holds possibility. But this isn't new. This is New York—as close to home as I get.

Not that I actually have a home.

For the past few years, I've been a professional nomad. My belongings live in a storage unit in Queens, waiting for me to figure out where I belong. For now, I'll stay at my grandparents' house. Maybe visit Leif while he's playing at . . . Speaking of Leif, I better check in with him before he has a coronary.

I wrestle my duffel higher on my shoulder, the weight threatening to slide it right back down. With my other hand, I dig into my backpack, fingers fumbling past tangled cords and a crumpled boarding pass until I find my wireless headphones. The strap slips again as I try to pop them in, forcing me to hitch the bag up with my elbow while dodging a businessman charging past with his roller suitcase. JFK is a blur of bodies and overhead announcements.

Still, I manage to tap my phone screen and call him, exhaling as the line starts ringing. Honestly, it's a miracle I haven't taken out a small person or face-planted into someone's luggage yet. Coordination has never been my strong suit—especially not when I'm juggling half my body weight in baggage and sleep deprived.

"Hey," he answers immediately, like he was already waiting for me to check in.

"So, I made a new friend," I say, weaving through the crowd.

On the other end, Leif exhales. It's partly amusement and frustration but mainly concern. "Ugh, Hailey."

"It wasn't my fault."

"Of course not," he groans. "You're just too . . . chatty."

"Listen, I was minding my own business at one of the airport's coffee shop when this adorable older woman asked if I wanted to split a blueberry scone. And obviously, I said yes. I mean, I had to do it. What kind of monster says no to a grandma?"

A low, knowing sound rumbles through the phone. He already sees where this is going, but he lets me tell him anyway.

"She told me all about her grandson—a doctor in Miami—showed me pictures, and then—get this—asked if I'd consider dating him."

A pause. Then, flatly he asks, "And?"

I push through the rotating doors and head toward the train. "And I told her that while he looks like a very nice man, I'm not exactly in the market for that kind of thing."

Leif hums, the sound vibrating in a way that makes it clear he's holding back judgment. "And by 'that kind of thing,' you mean a relationship with someone who is functional and emotionally available?"

A slow smirk tugs at my lips. "Exactly."

"But you still exchanged numbers with her, didn't you?"

"Of course. I mean, if I'm ever in Miami, I wouldn't say no to dinner."

The sigh he lets out is pure exasperation. "You're a menace."

"I prefer the term 'opportunistic.' See, I'm taking advantage of the situation," I correct, sidestepping a man who is aggressively texting while walking, like he has a personal vendetta against spatial awareness.

"Someone opportunistic would've taken her number for future emotional blackmail, not for dinner with her professionally stable grandson."

"Damn. Missed opportunity."

His chuckle rolls through the phone, and the sound relaxes me. Sure, I was in multiple airports for almost thirty-six hours. But a call with Leif feels like . . . well, like I'm home.

I shift my bag again, clearing my throat. “Anyway, I’m officially in New York.”

There’s a pause—just long enough for me to glance at my screen and check if the call dropped. Then—

“Finally. May I suggest taking a direct flight next time? How many stops did you have?”

I groan. “Ugh, don’t ask. I lost my water bottle and my carryon during one of the layovers.”

“Again?”

“You’re judging me,” I singsong.

“No, I’m impressed you still manage to arrive at your destination,” he says. “One day, I fully expect a call from Antarctica saying you got on the wrong plane.”

“You’re not funny, Leif.”

“I’m hilarious.” A beat. Then, casually he adds, “I’m in New York too.”

I stop short, blinking at the phone. “Nooooo.”

“Yeah.”

I sigh with sadness for my friend who’d sworn this time it’d be different. “You guys lost already? What was that? Like, only five games?”

Silence. Nothing but silence on the other side. Should I search on the internet to see how bad it was?

“Too soon to discuss it?” I ask.

“Too fucking soon,” he growls.

Oof.

“My agent’s working on a trade,” he mutters. “I’m done with the Arizona Armadillos. Every year, it’s the same shit.”

So, he’s not just upset—he’s done. I shift tactics.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Yeah. Skip your sister’s place and come with me.”

I could argue with him that Jules and I have to be at my grandparents’ in a couple of days. She’s expecting me. We have plans. I don’t have much energy left for any of that so I just ask, “Where?”

“Not sure yet. I’m currently staying at my fathers’ penthouse for the next few weeks. At least until Jacob and I figure out some sponsorships and how to get me the fuck out of Arizona.”

A pause.

“After that, well . . . it depends.”

On where they move him. Or if he just quits and starts coaching because that might be better than counting on a bunch of assholes who like to “sit on their asses”—his words from last year’s flop. Sometimes he’s so much like his older brother, Kaden. They expect too much from everyone, but it’s mostly because everyone expects a lot from them.

I don’t blame him. It’s frustrating having some of the best stats in the league and still not making it past the first round of the playoffs. Of giving everything, only to hit the same wall year after year.

He’s still young. That’s what his father, Mathieu, keeps telling him—goalies have longevity, they peak later. He should have at least ten more years left. But knowing that and feeling it are two different things, and I don’t know what to say to make any of this easier.

“Come on, Hay,” he says. “Come to me.”

The train pulls into the station, the brakes shrieking in protest. I roll my shoulders, shifting my bag higher. I should say no. My sister is expecting me. But who am I kidding? I never say no to Leif. Especially when he barely asks for anything.

“Fine,” I say, stepping onto the train, gripping the pole as the doors slide shut behind me. “But you’re feeding me.”

His breath of laughter is soft. “Let’s meet at—”

He hesitates just long enough for me to know exactly what he’s about to suggest.

“Oh my God, Leif, you cannot be serious. I’m at the airport.”

“Come on,” he says, and I can hear the smirk in his voice. “It’s tradition.”

When we were in high school, sometimes we played hooky and took a train to the city just to eat there—a tiny hole-in-the-wall Korean BBQ place in the East Village. It’s pretty small, with too few tables and a grill that makes the entire block smell like sizzling beef. The first time he took me there, I swore the ventilation system was broken, but it turned out it was just part of the experience.

“You just want an excuse to make me cook my own food,” I grumble, shifting to lean against the cool metal of the train door.

“Exactly. See you in an hour.”

The call disconnects, leaving me staring at my reflection in the smudged window, the city stretching wide beyond the glass.

New York still feels different.

Maybe I’ll figure out why soon enough.

Preorder Today

Dear reader,

Thank you so much for spending time with Camille and Killion. Whether you read this in one sitting with a snack in hand (Camille would approve) or slowly savored every spicy, banter-filled chapter, I'm so glad you picked up this book.

Who knew I'd be writing spicy sports romance this year? Definitely not me. A few months ago, I wasn't even sure if writing would be part of my future—and now here we are, somehow on book two of what started as a fun little escape and turned into something I *actually* get excited to wake up and work on.

This story was born from a desire to play, to laugh, to flirt with disaster (and maybe with a quarterback or two), and to let my imagination run wild in a world where second chances come with sass, fries, and just enough emotional damage to keep things interesting.

Thank you for giving this story your time. It means the world.

And hey—if you screamed “OH NO THEY DIDN'T” at any point while reading, then I did my job.

Please one more thing, don't forget to leave your review on Goodreads, Amazon, and Bookbub.

If you're not part of Kendall's Krew yet, I'd love if you sign up to be a [part of it](#).

With love and quarterback-level intensity,

Kendall



Kendall Hale is a daydreamer and a bookworm with a dangerous addiction to chocolate and wine.

At night, she’s a fiery wordsmith with a penchant for creating romantic mayhem with a lot of heat. She believes in the power of laughter, love in its messiest form, and the magic of happily ever afters.

When she's not crafting swoony, steamy stories, Kendall can be found at home with her family, including her adorable furry companions. She loves experimenting with new recipes, watching movies, and losing herself in her favorite books while music plays in the background.



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