PITCHING TO WIN

OVER THE FENCE, BOOK 1
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To my Sir, thank you for always believing in me.
“You’ve got to be very careful if you
don’t know where you’re going because you might not get there.”

— YOGI BERRA
1

MINKA
You know when people say they would never, ever want to go back to high school? That it's the most vicious, awkward period of life? Those whiners have nothing on me.

I shouldn't have come here. The sliver of doubt rings out clear-as-day in my mind as I make my
way through the throngs of people cluttering the backyard.

I can practically read the thoughts of my drunken classmates, who throw a mixture of judgmental and pity-filled looks my way. “Why did Minka Braxton subject herself to these parties?
She’s so desperate.”

Maybe they were right. Was I so desperate to erase the memories of my past in this house that I’d submit to the temporary frozen state my body assumed when I entered it?

No I wasn’t desperate. I just simply didn’t care what people thought about
me anymore. Years of ridicule will do that to your average teenage girl.

The entire school, not to mention town, had come out for this beginning-of-summer boozefest. Reaching the far-most corner of the backyard, I sit down at the deep end of Jason
Hinkley’s pool, slipping off my leather sandals, letting my bare legs dangle in the water. I take a drag from my bottle of wheat beer, and let the musky smell of humid June air, cheap beer and marijuana fill my nostrils.

Jason is one of the richest kids in Mitchum,
hence the all-out ragers he throws while his parents travel to summer homes and ski lodges, and that's saying something. Mitchum, North Carolina is the picturesque upper-middle-class suburb. With its tree-lined main street and Ivy League-producing high school, this was every
couple’s dream from the moment that doctor put a bouncing baby in their arms. Almost every kid I went to high school with got a smart phone for their 10th birthday, and a new car on their 16th.

It’s not like I didn’t have friends; Chloe and Kelsey were the ones who
had insisted on coming here tonight. But I’d always been labeled the fool, the naive girl they snickered at when my back was turned. And most times when it wasn’t.

Forget the preference for books over drugs, or my affinity for movie nights rather than
sneaking out; my more humble activities of choice had always ruled me out of the inner circle. But that fateful night two-and-a-half years ago, in an upstairs bedroom of this mansion, had solidified my ostracization.

Looking across the can-filled yard, I spot my best
friends gyrating their bodies to the hip-hop song booming out of the speakers. The noise spills onto the makeshift dance-floor, otherwise known as the patio. They cling happily to each other, sloshing their drinks and making flirty-eyes at the guys standing around
them.

If only I felt free enough to do that anymore.

I was surprised as the thought crossed my mind. No, I didn’t yearn to be as boy-crazy as Chloe or as daring as Kelsey, it just wasn’t in my nature. But sometimes, I thought it
would be fun to come out of my tightly-bound skin. I simply couldn’t afford the consequences, though.

I eye them, semi-jealous of Kelsey’s auburn colored hair that seemed to cascade around her slim body, jangling in time with the dozens of bangles she wore on her wrists. Kels
was a total free spirit, as demonstrated by the teal streaks now peppering her long locks, a hippie chick who was all about peace and love.

Chloe was the sweet, graceful one, with her lithe ballerina body, which she was. A ballerina that is. Her tan Italian skin was
the only thing that contrasted the normal ballerina stereo-type she fit, but if anything it made her even prettier. As if she needed it. Chlo was taller than both of us, with straight jet black hair and a smile that made anyone within its path instantly warm to her. I wouldn’t
even be surprised if she’d told me she’d landed a deal with some high-level modeling agent.

As if feeling my eyes on them, Chlo and Kels started to scream and motion for me to come “get my groove on.” I laugh, shaking my head, waving my hand passively
to let them know I was having a good time people-watching. They relent after a couple more pleas and go back to shaking it.

While they pushed me, I knew they loved and understood me. Of course they loved me, they had stood by me at the
toughest point of my life. Glancing down at the orange-lit pool, I slice my scarlet-painted toes back and forth through the water, enjoying the natural buzz coming on after finishing my second beer. “What’s the matter, dancing isn’t really your thing?”
2

MINKA
He tilts a smile my way, and I swear I can hear the thud from my heart flopping over in my chest. Standing before me is a guy so devastatingly handsome, it's becoming increasingly harder to breathe. It feels like my brain is short circuiting as I drink him in. He towers

H
above me at six foot three, and that wasn’t a guess because I’d studied this particular human at length.

Would it be weird if I sank below the water’s edge to cool the burn flooding my cheeks? Okay yeah, he might think I was certifiable.
I work my way up, cataloguing as my eyes feast on the khaki shorts standing against muscular thighs, falling at his knee where tanned calves end in perfectly pristine white high-tops. His navy blue t-shirt stretches across his broad chest where powerful arms are crossed,
arms that I’d watched set the school pull-up record. God, I could stare at his arms for days. They weren’t steroids big, I never found that level of muscle attractive, but they were built enough that the chorded ropes flexed as he adjusted them in front of his body, and my heart did
another little swoon.

Glancing up into his face, I had to make sure not to let out the gasp now stuck in my throat. It was tan and chiseled; a strong jawbone and harsh cheek lines dotted by dark five’o’clock shadow. I’d never thought facial hair was sexy, but his scruff made
me want to change my entire stance. No Shave November, sign me up, I’m a fan.

While the face was purely masculine, his eyes were all boyish; startlingly blue, the color of sapphires and sparking with something mischievous. His brownish blonde hair
peeked out from under his baseball cap that sat backwards atop his head.

I’d definitely been staring at him for more than a few minutes, because he was staring at me like I was either slow, or really obviously checking him out. Option two, please.
“Uhhh...um, parties aren’t really my thing.” Smooth, Minka.

He sits down next to me, not close enough to touch but close enough that I can feel the heat radiate off him. His eyes roam over my face, and I can feel my cheeks heat under his stare. His lips
turn up at the corner, and his baby blues level me. I feel stuck to the pavement, and the music becomes muted as I focus on the chills working their way up my spine despite the summer heat. He tips his head back and takes a long chug from his bottle of beer, and I watch his
throat bob as he swallows. And suddenly I want to be the rim, touching his full lips. This guy makes taking a sip look sexual. A bead of the foamy brew clings to his bottom lip, and I have the strongest urge to lean forward and swipe it away with my tongue.
“Ah I see, you just come to sit by the pool and get drunk alone. Is that your thing?” He smirks.

The ticker on my bullshit meter notches up a few pegs. Mistrust simmers in my gut, after all, my instinct is well-honed after years of snide comments and jabs thrown
my way. I didn’t need summer to start by being the victim of my peers’ latest prank.

Someone had probably taunted this hot specimen to go tease the loser, knock her down a few levels more. They had to have caught on that, in the last year, I’d steeled myself to
the torment. I’d simply stopped caring so much, and had made a promise that senior year would be different.

Disappointment sits heavy in my stomach, for a split second I had actually hoped he was into me. But I know where hope got me.
“Typically I crack open a bottle of Jack by myself, but I thought tonight it might be fun to feel other people’s sweat dripping down my arms on the dance floor or watch drugged out teenagers awkwardly paw at each other in public.” Sarcasm is my greatest weapon,
and I use it liberally.

He barks out a laugh.

“Well then, I promise not to awkwardly paw at you. I’d like to think my skills are better than that. I was only trying to see if I might join you. You see, other people’s bodily secretions aren't my thing either,” he winks, “I’m
Of course, I already knew that...although he’d just proved he definitely didn’t remember me. Owen Axel, Mitchum’s golden boy, former all-state pitcher and all-around stud. He’s athletic, handsome, talented, smart and two years older than
He is on a full-ride to Grover University and headed for the majors, or so everyone said. Everyone knows Owen and everyone likes him, and any girl at this party would drop their panties for him in an instant. Any girl except for me.
Ok so maybe it wouldn’t be an instant, but a few minutes, if I was heavily persuaded by alcohol.

“"I know who you are. Aren’t your boys looking for you right about now? Isn’t a funnel calling your name?"

Owen and his crew
always turn up at these things in the summer. School is out and the boys come back to town, ready to relive their glory days for the three months they could. They came back, hooked up with the same popular girls who tormented my everyday school existence, and
generally all basked in their entitled awesomeness.

I can make out his aquamarine orbs flashing in amusement as the sun slowly descends behind him. My heart beats in a wild thrum just having his eyes on me, and I can feel my hands start to sweat.
Damn it if I wasn’t furious at my body betraying me. I can’t let him get even one point to use against me if he was going to report back to his cronies.

“Alright snarky. While I love a beautiful girl with a sharp tongue, it might be better if she wasn’t a stranger.” Owen smiles,
ignoring my question. He rubs a big calloused hand over his jaw, and I have to fight the urge to reach out and trace that line too. So apparently my body has decided to ignore the “We won’t cater to the popular people anymore,” memo.

Wait, did he just call me beautiful? My neck
joins my hands in the sweatfest, and I’m sure he can hear the pulse beating rapidly at my neck while he just stares expectantly at me, a lock of golden hair flopping out of his hat and landing on a chiseled cheekbone.

Why am I getting so worked up? I’ve been prey
to this kind of pursuit before, in this backyard in fact, and I had sworn never to fall victim to it again.

“Minka. Although we shared an entire semester of physical education your senior year, so I’d say we are most definitely not strangers.” I shrug as I
glance towards the direction of the dance floor. Chloe and Kels curiously stare at me, not so subtly throwing thumbs-up.

He looks confused and taken aback by my confession, but only momentarily. He recovers, bringing back that mega-
watt smile, almost making me forget why I avoided guys like him at all costs.

And then he opens his mouth. "Nah, I wouldn’t forget a pretty face like yours, Minka."

I roll my eyes and move to get up, the bullshit meter now basically full with all I can
handle. All I’d wanted was a quiet night, no drama, and maybe a beer or four.

“Ok, Casanova, I get that this totally works for you, and by now your chosen sorority sister’s thong would be in pieces on the floor, but believe me when I tell you, it’s really not going to happen.”
I move hastily towards the house, ready as anything to down another beer and soothe the butterflies in my belly. It’s not like I wanted Owen Axel, but he is just so attractive. Not even my hardened exterior can resist blushing after receiving the full force of
his lazy grin.

As I hit the patio and slither between bodies to the back door, my head turns, seemingly on its own, as if it can feel his pull. Looking at the spot I had just fled, Owen stands there, his now almost indigo-eyes pinning me in the crowd. I can see the
molten heat flowing out of them, directed specifically at me. A faint smile ghosts his lips. He is so breathtaking that it's as if the spot I was standing on had just been engulfed in flames.

I was definitely going to need another beer.
God my head feels like fucking jackhammer drove through it.” I wake to Kels cursing and writhing about in my queen-sized bed. Looking to my right, I notice Chlo stirring as well, sleep all but ended by Kelsey’s bitching and moaning.

“You can’t drive a
jackhammer, but I am in the pits of hell with you.” Chloe moans as she jams a pillow over her head.

Sun streams into my room, blanketing the yellow walls and causing me to throw off the covers. Snuggling with my best friends was a favorite past-time, but lately that past
time involved more late-night wasted stumble-ins and less scary movies and popcorn. Kels and Chlo had gotten fall-down drunk last night, resulting in me half-dragging them to my room. If my dad weren’t so oblivious, or spending every free minute of his time at the
station, we would never have a place to crash.

That’s right, pretty ironic that the Police Chief’s house was the go-to crash pad for underage girls after a night of partying. But being found out would require my father to stay at home for more than three minute
intervals, which he most certainly didn’t.

He spent every waking, and a lot of times non-waking, moment at the station patrolling his force. Not that I blame him, he simply can’t bare to be in the house he’d once shared with my mom. He wasn’t a bad father by a long shot;
he kept a roof over my head, made a decent living as the top dog in this pricey town and I never wanted for anything. Except maybe a little love and attention.

“This hangover was well worth it though. That party was bangin’, and do I ever mean bangin’.”
Kelsey winked at me, wiggling her butt in the air as she grinned.

I did notice she’d disappeared there for a while last night, and I had a sneaking suspicion Bryce was involved. He was her man of the moment, or at least of the past couple months. Kelsey believed in
serious sex and casual relationships. She’d rather have orgasms than commitment.

“I feel like an elephant is sitting on my bladder,” Chloe whines as she stumbles for the hall in an attempt to find the bathroom. I have never met anyone who had to
pee as often as my best friend, I honestly didn’t know how she slept through the night. Much less made it through an entire performance of Swan Lake.

“Can we please talk about Mink’s steamy convo with none other than Owen Freaking
Axel!?” I hear Chloe shout from the open bathroom door. Another thing Chlo hadn’t mastered, boundaries.

“Oh em gee, I seriously almost forgot about that. Seriously Mink, what was he saying to you!?” Kels screeches in my ear, suddenly catapulting
herself to a kneeling position on the bed. Guess her “headache” was long gone.

“He wasn’t saying anything, besides the usual idiotic stuff guys like him say,” I turn my body away from Kels, trying to hide the deception I know is lingering in my eyes.
“Oh no, did you snap at him? I will kill you if you murdered your own chance to romance Mitchum’s star child,” Chlo sighs, shaking her head as she falls back onto her designated side of the bed.

“Yeah, Chlo, he really had feelings of romance
towards me. Those feelings were located right in his pants…” Chloe was always grumbling on about trying to find a man with a sensitive side. Good luck with that. “It really was nothing guys. He didn’t know who I was, fed me some line about being beautiful and
wanting to join me by the pool, and I left. You know I see through that transparent crap now.” I stare at the ceiling, willing them to move on to another topic.

“Woah, woah hold up! He called you beautiful? Owen Axel called you beautiful and you didn’t
automatically jump his bones? You are some kind of super human. I would have been on my back from the minute his eyes landed on me.” Kels scolds me, sighing as she inspects the split ends of her auburn mane.

“From you I’ll take that as a compliment. Plus,
jumping someone's bones at a party is just so me, right?” I fire back, harsher than I meant it to sound.

“Oh Minka, that’s not what I meant. Not every guy is like him.” Kels squeezes my hand under the sheet, but cocks her head. “Wait, they kind of are….but you need to beat
them at their own game. Don’t give them the power to take you down and everything gets sooo much better. So much,” she waggles her light eyebrows at me, clearly insinuating what the benefits of taking her own power brought.

“She’s right. At least
about the first part…not every guy is the scum of the earth,” Chloe chimes in, rubbing my back. “But I’m telling you Mink, you’re going to have to take a chance someday. I honestly don’t know how your heart is surviving.”

“Can we please drop this?” I plead as my cheeks
heat with this latest romance insight by Chloe. “He’s a player and probably only came up to me on a dare, or because Allison wasn’t there yet.” “Ugh that hoe-bag was there alright. She spilled an entire beer down my leg and proceeded to death-stare me like it was
somehow my fault. That bitch is nastier than my Aunt Felicia’s pet poodle.” Kels grumbles. She really does have a way with words.

Allison Renner was your typical queen bee. Head of the cheerleading squad, one of the richest kids in town, she drove a
convertible BMW and I wouldn’t be surprised if her bleach blonde mane was insured. She and Owen had dated almost our entire sophomore year, until he broke it off before leaving for college. Owen and Allison, the stereotypical teenage golden couple. They’d
won Homecoming King & Queen, made out in the halls between periods and there was a rumor way back when that she’d be following him to college where they’d live together. Excuse me while I vomit in my mouth.

I ignore the twinge in my chest as memories of
Owen pinning Allison to the nearest locker flood my brain’s personal movie theater. Why would I even care? It’s not like I want to be anything like her.

No, but after last night, my body had started to warm to the idea of being with him.

“Whatever, we don’t
need to waste anymore time on her. You guys want some cereal?”

“Ugh, we need to start staying at Chlo’s more often, Mama Trabucco always has homemade pastries. Mmmm, those delicious ones with chocolate and almonds in the middle…” Kels whines
as she strolls to the dresser and begins to brush her hair, “Anyways, no, I gotta head to the preserve.”

Kels spins her tendrils around until they form a neat knot on top of her head, which she secures with a bright orange hair tie. She’s worked for her father at the Mitchum
Nature Preservation since grade school. She didn’t need to work, her parents are wealthy non-profit do-gooder types, but Kels is so passionate about nature and animals that it was more like fun than work.

“Yeah I have to go too. Church first, and then mama promised to take me
shopping for new leotards. Of course I’ll send pictures. I think I want a few more—"

“Let me guess, pink ones?” Kels finishes Chloe’s sentence with an eye roll. Chlo lives for anything pink, she is the ultimate girly-girl. Kels, the proverbial tomboy of
our group, gets off on teasing her about it.

“Yes, and maybe I’ll even get a black one, to match your soul.” Chlo sticks her tongue out as she slides her feet into her pink flip-flops. Chlo’s family owns a string of highly successful Italian Restaurants. Most of them
are Zagat-rated, which is saying a lot considering this is North Carolina, home of fish fry and ribs. And with her Italian family values, attending church on Sunday was an absolute. The only excuse that got her out of it was recitals or a performance. I might have had two left
feet, but watching my best friend dance was like watching God perform a miracle. She really is destined to be a prima ballerina.

We make our way into the foyer of my father’s sprawling ranch. You’d be surprised how much the people of Mitchum paid
their Chief to keep any and all scandal out of the papers. I leave out crime because, really, the most that happens here is a cat gets stuck up a tree or some cocky boys steal beer out of someone’s garage.

“Aight’ bitch, we out. Call us later if you want to divulge any hot fantasies
about Mr. Axel,” Kels winks, licks her lips, blows me a kiss and is out the door.

“I’ll text you. Let’s get dinner tonight, or watch a movie or something. You aren’t allowed to sit on the porch reading books all summer,” Chlo shoots me a stern look before
wrapping her arms around me.

“But what if I like books better than people? Wait, rephrase that, I do like books better than people. So, let me live.”

“Oh, stop. Love you, see you later.” I close the door behind her and survey my surroundings.
It’s not that our house isn’t beautiful, it just doesn’t look like anyone lives here. The whole place has always reminded me of one of those extended-stay hotels. It lacks all the homeyness I’d come to envy when visiting my friends’ houses.

I walk back towards
my room, which at least has a little more flare. Pictures of me, Chloe and Kelsey hang around the wood mirror over my dresser, lotion and perfume bottles sitting in rows underneath them. Having a slight touch of OCD, ok maybe more than slight, I organize my closet
in color-coordinated sections by season. Yes, admitting to addiction is the first step to recovery.

One of my favorite things about my room is my bookshelf, or should I say wall of books. One of the only fatherly gestures Chief Braxton has shown me in the past decade was
installing that wall of built-in shelves in my room.

Books overflow from the brims of the ceiling-high towers, and it calms me just to have all of my favorite stories at the touch of my fingertips. Circling, I focus in on the nightstand that contains, in the bottom drawer under a
stack of notebooks, the only picture of my mother I’d ever come across.

Deciding not to suffer in the silence of my empty house, or be left alone with my Owen thoughts, I pull open my closet doors and grab my Nikes. Time to clear my head, and running always did the
trick.
4

OWEN
Sweat pours off my shoulders as the North Carolina sun beats down my back. I always forget how fucking hot it is here in the summer. At school in Virginia, it is a little less humid. Or at least less like this swamp-air I’m trying to run through.

My legs pump in a
rhythmic motion as my feet pound the pavement in Mitchum Park. My body vibrates with adrenaline, I knew running would clear my head. Plus, I’d missed this park. These trails. The heavily-wooded park that lay the outskirts of town.

I need my head clear these days, I prayed for it.
With only one thought plaguing my every waking moment, making it to the big show, I felt a little like a hamster on a wheel. Making it. The MLB. It had been drilled into my head since the day my former-pro father found out I was left handed.

Carter Axel, all-star
first baseman, had made sure his only son would be a great pitcher someday. Whether I wanted that or not.

Regardless of my unfortunate biological ties, I’m happy to be back in Mitchum for the summer. Seeing my boys, partying and no games for three
months. And last night had proven to be a great kickoff to what I kept thinking of as my last lazy summer. Except for the one little hiccup, Hinkel’s party had kicked ass.

So why can’t I stop thinking about the hiccup? Chicks always come so easily to me. Talking them
into bed, out of their underwear, and sending them on their way with a smile. Its what I did, and I was good at it. Great at it. So how had I managed to single out the one girl who was apparently allergic to my charm?

Minka Braxton is cute. No, not cute. She’s
gorgeous and sexy in a girl-next-door way. She has no idea how attractive she is, but exudes this brazen confidence through every pour. She is a walking contradiction.

When I’d spotted her across the lawn at Hinkley’s party, it was all I could not to trip over my
feet trying to get there first, before another guy could swoop in on what I wanted.

Her slim, tan legs wafting in the water, meeting her tiny waist hidden by those sexy-as-fuck jean shorts. Her white tank top highlighting the way her tits pushed
together, revealing some tan, sun-freckled cleavage but concealing so much more.

I wanted to find out what was concealed, and for a couple seconds all I could think of was what they would feel like in my hands. She had elegant but muscular arms that held
onto that beer, and when she took a long, lazy pull from that bottle, my dick twitched to attention.

Yeah, her body is slammin’, but it was her face that had me pushing people aside to reach her from across the backyard.

Minka has high cheekbones in a rounded
face, with features that make her look like a mediterranean model. Dark brown pools convey her every emotion, and flashed with a bit of uncertainty and annoyance as she surveyed the party. A slender hooked nose tied her face together, and I automatically wanted to
plant a kiss on it. Which was not my usual game, but even before I’d spoken to her I knew this girl wouldn’t be my typical conquest.

Long, unruly brown tendrils hung down her back, and my fingers itched to wrap them around my hand as I
yanked back to feast on her perfect collarbone. And her mouth, god, I don’t think I could focus on it too long or I’d keep imagining those plump, peach lips on my own. Kissing down my body. Or better yet, wrapped around my cock.

So, I was an idiot for
not realizing she was from Mitchum, much less that she had shared a gym class with me for four whole months. I was actually still kicking myself for that one, how had I been so close to that beautiful creature and not noticed?

Her sarcasm and biting comebacks surprised me,
no chick had ever talked to me like that. Usually they didn’t even do much talking. But it actually left me wanting more. I was surprised I wasn’t drooling on her halfway through her verbal attack.

As if my mind could conjure her, I focus in on a perfectly rounded ass
jogging at a steady pace about 30 feet up the trail. When I see the mass of curls tied back and swishing just above her lower back, I don’t even think and break into a sprint. This girl is already affecting my usual game in all sorts of ways.

Pulling up closely
behind her, I turn down the rock music I’d been blasting in my headphones.

I can hear the rap music booming so loudly in her ears that I know Minka definitely didn’t hear me sneak up behind her. I watch as she trots along for a few minutes, rapping
the lyrics under her breath. Damn, she can do that pretty well for someone who’s keeping pace with a nine-minute mile.

Her perky ass taunts me and my dick, which can’t seem to stay anywhere lower than semi-erect around her.

She moves her body
fluidly, arms matching the pace and rhythm of her shapely legs. Sweat gathers on her neck and all I want to do is to take her down and lick every inch of her gleaming figure. She looks pretty doing something that made me smell like a sweaty jockstrap. Where had this
girl been all my life?

Still not aware of my presence, I decide it’s time to stop being a stalker and announce myself. But how? I’d like to think I could give that peach of an ass a spank. But fuck, as much as my hand is itching to, Minka would probably use my
headphone chords to strangle me.

She loathed me trying to cheaply seduce her last night, I had a feeling she might murder me with her bare hands if I touched her without asking.

Moving forward, I fall into step with her and lightly tap her tan, bare
shoulder. My dick rears up from just the contact with her flesh. If I am ever lucky enough to seduce this girl into my bed, I will for sure have to excuse myself to jack it before we got down to business. Wouldn’t want to embarrass myself in front of her.

She immediately
stiffens and looks back, a mixture of fear and fury painting those beautiful features. She’s afraid? What’s she got to be afraid of?

I move quickly in front of her to block her path, trying to make her aware that it was only me. But, I hadn’t anticipated my
movements throwing her off balance.

As she turns back, I move around her, forcing her to turn her head on a double-take. This takes her attention away from her feet, which are now tangling and giving out from under her. I watch the surprise on Minka’s
face, almost in slow motion, as she begins to fall, and I immediately reach out to grab her waist. Dragging her descending form towards me, she throws my center off balance and we begin to fall together. We’re going down, and seconds before we hit I angle my
body under hers so that I take the brunt of it.

Grunting on impact, my lower back and shoulders make contact with the gravel. We bounce and skid, once, twice, before coming to a stop. I can already feel cuts on my calves from where they’d scraped along the
ground. But all is forgotten the moment I realize Minka is lying flush against me, with my arms hooked around her hips.

Looking down, I can see the tops of her breasts peeking out of her sports bra. The mounds are dotted with tiny sun freckles and I swear I
imagine laying her down in my bed and counting those endlessly. I can feel the sweat on her waist and my hand moves slowly to the curve of her lower back, relishing her silky skin as my cock presses against her tight stomach.

Down boy, I have a feeling we are about to be
scolded. And I was right, for when I finally meet those beautifully rounded eyes, it’s as if I’d pissed off an extra-gnarly rattlesnake.

“What the hell?! Are you fucking crazy?” Minka explodes, pushing off of me.

My dick surges
forward as the curse flies past her lips. Nothing gets me harder than a girl with a dirty mouth. But now was most definitely not the time.

“Are you ok, you’re not hurt?” I voice my concern as I start to get up, already feeling my sore tailbone protest the movements.
“Why the hell did you do that?” She starts to stalk away, and my eyes roam over her body, checking for scrapes or bruises. She seems fine, but I have to jog to keep up with her.

“Sorry, I saw you ahead of me and wanted to get your attention. I had no idea you had the grace of a
newborn pony. It’s not my fault you couldn’t hear me, what with the rap party going on in your ears.”

Her face reddens and she casts her eyes to the side, as if she’s embarrassed that I’d found out her music taste.

“Why did you look afraid when I tapped on
your shoulder?”

Now she looks a little pale. It shouldn’t turn me on, but her face is just so expressive. “I thought you were….someone else….never mind.”

I walk backwards in front of her as she tries to outrun me.

“Are you always going
to try and run every time I want to talk to you? Because it's going to be mighty hard to tear your thong to pieces—" I break off as she stops dead in her tracks, proceeds to punch me rather hard in the arm.

"Listen up Golden Boy, and listen good. I have no interest in having a
conversation with you, nor am I going to drop my panties any time you sniff in my direction. You and I really have nothing in common, and I’m far from your usual damsel-slut in distress, so keep your hands off me, and leave me alone.”

God, she’s sexy. Her
dark mocha-colored ponytail drapes sexily over her shoulder as raw anger pours from her slim figure, and the gleam in her eyes could spark a fire. It was all I could to keep from hauling her over my shoulder and showing her what I could do with my hands.
“So you think I’m a Golden boy, eh?” I wink at her, licking my lips over-enthusiastically.

For a millisecond, Minka’s eyes drop to my mouth and I can see blatant desire flash in those dark chocolate pools. And then she takes off. I need to sprint to catch up
to the vicious pace she’s now keeping. Pulling ahead of her and stopping short, I cut her off, effectively stopping her.

“Ok look, I’m sorry. I wanted to get your attention and it totally backfired. I promise to keep my hands off of you until you positively beg
me for it,” I throw her what I know is my megawatt smile. “But, can you please take me somewhere to clean out these cuts?” I motion to my legs and send up a prayer that my plan to buy more time with her will work.

“Do I look like your candy-striper? You caused
your pain, you can surely clean it up.”

Ah shit, now I was picturing her wearing a short little red nurse’s uniform and that really wasn’t doing anything to help my swelling boner. But I really can’t go back to my parent’s like this. My father would lock me in
the house for the rest of the summer for fear of injuring his MLB prodigy.

“I can’t go home like this. My dad would have a conniption if he knew I’d been doing anything besides preserving my body for baseball. Please, seriously you have to help me.”
I see a flash of emotion in her eyes, it reminds me of something very close to pity, which makes me scowl. I don’t need this girl’s pity. Minka turns around and starts walking down the path. Just when I think it’s a lost cause, she yells back without looking over her shoulder.
“Fine all-star, you can come over and grab some Band-Aids. I’m warning you though, even think about pulling another stunt like that and you’ll be hurting a lot worse when it comes to things that involve balls.”
5

MINKA
Ok, so I caved. But in my defense Owen was standing there with sweat glistening down his drool-worthy arms. They look like steel encased in tan smooth leather. And his shirt was soaked through, so much that I could see it clinging to a six…. no, make that eight, pack. It
just wasn’t a fair fight.

And he had this slightly panicked look on his perfect face when he mentioned his father. All of my lady parts were yelling at me, drowning out my common sense. So I agreed to be his candy-striper. But I still had my head about me.
He didn’t have to realize that I’d crumbled with just a glance at his very tight stomach. I was mainly trying to deny how heat had pooled in my belly when I was flush against his perfect body. My lady parts had been entombed about a year ago, never being heard
from again, and I couldn’t even lie to myself that I wanted the sensations down south to stop.

And he was making it clear from the get go what he wanted, not leading me on with promise of a forever, or even a right now. No hope, no chance at getting hurt, right?
We walk through the front door of my house, and I’m just waiting for the comments about how small my moderately sized abode is compared to his parent’s estate. But when I sneak a glance to my right, Owen’s face is neutral, as if he doesn’t even notice.

“You can sit there
while I grab some supplies,” I motion to the kitchen table and make my way to the designated medicine cabinet in our kitchen. I grab hydrogen peroxide, cotton balls, gauze and bandages. Heading for the table, I look up and halt. And suddenly there is
hydrogen peroxide running into my shoe.

Sitting backwards on a chair, with his big body slumped over the rungs, is Owen Axel. Completely shirtless. In my kitchen. I think my mouth is hanging open but I can’t seem to shut it.

“I….um...oh shit,” I
mumble as I feel my sneaker becoming immersed in peroxide. Quickly kneeling down and scooping up my supplies, I make quick work grabbing at the items until a hand stills my arm, slowly taking them from me.

Cursing the gods for
putting this delicious playboy in my path, I painstakingly take my time looking up.

I first make eye-contact with the indented muscles trailing down his stomach and defining his hips. Those crevices can only lead to one place, a place I’ve only been once before
with one other boy.

Next, my stare roams over ripple after ripple of stomach muscle. My hand is burning to reach out and touch the skin there, but I restrain myself. Owen is built, not like a college-age boy, but more like a man. He is, seriously, one of the hottest males I’ve ever
Finally I make it up to his eyes, which are now capturing mine with so much heat and amusement that I feel I might just melt into the floor and become a Minka/hydrogen-peroxide pool.

“You going to nurse me back to health or just oggle
“Me?” Owen drawls, looking down at me with a shit-eating grin on his face. With a ticked off snort, I amble to my feet and motion for him to sit. Starting on his back, I cover a cotton ball in solution and wipe at the nicks marring his sides and backs of his arms.
“Fuck!” He flinches as the dampness stings him.

“Oh what? The big bad baseball star can’t handle a little sting?”

“I’ll have you know I once pitched a perfect six innings with a broken thumb. So don’t talk to me about pain.”

“Fine, we can talk
about stupidity. Because that seems severely stupid.” I laugh as he jumps under the sting of the cotton ball as I move to his calves.

He really does have the perfect body. He is chiseled but lean all-in-one. He has just the right amount of lankiness that I
like, but muscles that make it look as if he could throw me over his shoulder and take me to his cave. My insides quiver at the thought of what he could do to me.

“Well as much as this stings like a bitch, thanks for taking care of me. You’re actually pretty
good at the whole mending my wounds thing.” He flashes those ocean-colored orbs up at me from under his golden brown lashes and I can feel tingles from the balls of my feet all the way to the base of my neck.

“I’ve actually considered pursuing
nursing when I start applying for college.” Wow, I really must have been mesmerized by his eyes, because I haven’t told anyone that little tidbit yet. And it surprises me even more that I don’t feel the least bit uncomfortable sharing that very personal choice with Owen.
“That’s cool,” he nods, not catching on that I’ve just given him more of myself than I ever intended to. “Any reason why? Are you like, one of those people who is really good at science and math?”

To be honest, I enjoy english and history much
more, but that doesn’t mean I don’t excel in my other subjects. No, nursing is a choice that came to me after a quick trip to the ER in sixth grade. I’d cut my hand on a machine in shop class, and the school nurse had sent me to the hospital to get it professionally stitched up.
My father was working, I had a sneaking suspicion he couldn’t handle entering the hospital. A nurse named Beth sat with me for four hours, helping me through the pain. I want to be able to give others that kind of comfort. But I’m not about to tell Mr. MVP Pitcher all
that.

“I’m actually like, one of those people who is really good at school in general. That’s what us mere mortals must do to get by when all-star athletic skills are not bestowed upon us.” And my sarcasm is back to save the day.
I finish bandaging the last cut and walk towards the cabinets to replace the supplies on their shelves. I feel him before I hear him behind me. Electricity zips up my spine as he makes contact with my skin, his hand brushing my hair over my shoulder, giving him a better view of
my back and neck.

“Would you like me to show you just what kind of skills I do possess?” Owen breathes against my skin. His lips are so close to the curve in my neck that my flesh physically aches. “I absolutely love your sarcastic mouth. Its refreshing. But I think I’m
going to love shutting you up a lot more.”

He’s running just his pointer finger up and down the inside of my right arm that now hangs limply at my side. My other hand grips the counter for support, I didn’t think I’d be able to stand without it. We stand
there, his naked chest so close to my back, his breath running goosebumps down my neck.

The only point of contact is that one finger, stroking slowly up and down my skin, sending sizzling jolts straight to my core. I have never been
more turned on in my life. What the hell is he doing to me?

My breaths come in short puffs, I was nearly panting with...what? Anticipation, fear, desire? All of the above? The whole time I keep my gaze straight on, trying to be as still as possible yet willing
him to make the next move. My head wages war with my body to put an end to this. After what feels like years, I hear the tiniest shift, and then warm, rough lips plant a soft kiss on the skin under my ear.

I go crazy. My skin feels like it's on fire. I am
burning up from the inside out. He holds there for a few seconds and I let out a soft moan. As soon as the sound leaves my lips, Owen whirls me around and pins me to the counter, dipping his head and looking me straight in the eye, almost asking for permission, before he
swoops in to capture my lips.

I’m powerless. At first I just stand there, letting him feast on my mouth and run his big hands up and down my body. There are so many sensations, emotions that I had never felt before, coursing through me.
He kisses me like a starving animal, and I am only too happy to stand there and be his prey. Lust, hot and raw claws through my core and up to my breasts, where I can feel my nipples tighten into hard beads.

When his tongue pushes through my teeth
and laps at the roof and sides of my mouth, I ignite. He’d lit the match and set off the fireworks that had laid dormant in my body for so long.

Fisting my hand in his soft brown locks, I pull his head to allow myself a better angle. I slide my lips over his and match him
breath for breath. I want to
taste each inch of his rough
mouth, lips and teeth. I
want to be able to replay
this moment over and over
in my head with exacting
precision.

He smells like the
woods after a
thunderstorm, musky and
damp. I hadn’t kissed
many boys, okay, I’d only ever done this with one other person, but I knew as I watched him kiss Allison all those years ago that kissing Owen wouldn’t be normal.

He knew what he wanted and he was taking it, and I was taking what I wanted right back. My
body was acting of its own accord, as if telling my brain to take a hike.

I was taking Chloe’s advice. Owen Axel didn’t want me to be his girlfriend. He wasn’t making romantic gestures to try and get me into bed. He’d been honest in his actions and insinuations
from the start.

And if he wanted me for my body, I could want his right back. I would have to get back on that horse, literally, someday. I deserved this. So when Owen grabs my hips and ass, hauling me up off the ground, I wrap my legs around his waist and
surrender my body.
I know I’m taking this way too fast. I should slow down, take my time. Or better yet, I shouldn’t have even kissed her. Minka is the type of girl I should take out on a date, get to know, before I attack her like some horny gorilla. But I couldn’t help it. She was like a bone being
dangled in front of me. All I wanted to do was have her. I couldn’t get my head straight.

She didn’t resist when I’d begun to seduce her, more as a Hail Mary pass than anything. But she’d leaned into my touch. And when I heard that sexy little sigh bubble up from
her throat, I was a goner.

I blacked out, went blind. I couldn’t touch her, everywhere, fast enough. There was so much I wanted to taste and feel and suck and lick. I was a parched man and Minka was water.

So here we are, sprawled on the couch
with her writhing under me as I bite gently into her sexy, slim neck. Her skin feels like silk wrapped in velvet. I wish I had more hands so I could cover every inch of this beautiful girl.

Her legs are wrapped like a vise around my waist, bringing my
engorged dick to rest on what it now knows must be the happiest place on earth. I can barely hear her hot groans because the blood pulsing through my veins is drowning out all sound. I think my heart is about to explode, and I know I should stop, but I can’t seem to. My hands
have minds of their own as they skate over her hot flesh and reach under the hem of her shirt.

My fingers explore the tight, quivering skin of her stomach as they move upward, and I think I may just cum in my pants before she ever blesses me with the pleasure of
making it all the way to her tits.

Focus, Owen, this isn’t about you right now. I want to see Minka come undone, its the thought-up image that has been playing on a loop in my head for the past 24 hours. Bringing my head up, I let my heated stare roam her
face, and dammit this was a bad idea if I wasn’t trying to bust yet.

Her eyes are the color of deep melted chocolate, and hooded as if her body can’t handle the pleasure. Her hair is a mess of curls haloed around her head, and quiet moans are coming from her perfectly
shaped mouth that is swollen a cherry red from my kisses.

I keep my gaze on her as I slowly reach my hand up over one of her breasts and gently roll her nipple between my thumb and forefinger. Her head snaps back into the couch cushion, and her mouth
forms a silent O. She’s so responsive, and it’s all I can do to hold back from tearing her clothes off and sinking into her.

I alternate between her breasts, slowly rolling the nipples and bringing them to stiff peaks. I am getting even harder, though I didn’t think it was
possible, but apparently this girl can get me stiffer than a steel beam.

Minka’s making mewling sounds when I finally remove my hand from her top and venture further down her body. I don’t think she’s paying attention until my hand breaches the band on her
tight spandex running shorts and comes to rest over her underwear, directly on top of where her clit is pulsing beneath my fingers. She is staring at me wide-eyed, and I wink at her before rubbing right where I know she needs it.

Her hips rear off the
cushions and she lets out a throaty yelp, and my cock practically tears open my shorts with how bad it wants to replace my hand right now. I keep my pace, slow but steady and with just enough pressure, and I can see Minka’s eyes rolling back in her head.  

“Tell me Minka, has a
guy ever made you cum before?”

Her eyes flash with raw desire, and she pushes into my fingers as I pose the dirty question, and begins to speed up the pace. She’s riding my hand and it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. She is completely letting go, and
its adding to my ego that she’s letting me see it.

Her pace is frantic now as she grips my shoulders, grinding my hand harder into her sweet mound. With my free hand, I thrust into her shirt and tweak her hardened bud, an action that causes nonsensical moans to burst
from her lips. I continue my perusal of her body as she gets more and more worked up.

Finally she stills in my arms, her eyes drawn together in an almost painful expression, before letting out the sexiest fucking sound I’ve ever heard. I stroke her through
her underwear as she rides out her orgasm, watching her sweet face tighten and then melt into bliss.

I change my position on top of her, ready to sink so deep into her that she forgets her own name, when I realize just what I’ve forgotten.

Condoms, fuck. I may
be a cocky son of a bitch sometimes, but not a big enough one that I bring protection just in case I come across a willing female during my workouts.

Looking down at her, all I can think of is getting myself as close as humanly possible to every part of
her. I knew I had to ask, no matter how presumptuous.

“Listen sweetheart, that was one of the hottest things I’ve ever experienced in my whole life, and I want nothing more than to fuck you into next Tuesday. But, since I didn’t anticipate the
afternoon taking this kind of turn, I don’t have any condoms on me. Do you —”

Minka’s whole body turned to ice before I could even get the rest of my question out. She stiffened underneath me and her eyes went wide with what I could swear was fear.
What the fuck? With the speed of a panther, she is up and off the sofa, adjusting her clothes and hair while giving me a look that could burn the Ozone.

“You need to leave. I should have never let things get as far as they did.....but, you have to
Wait what? I stand there, baffled. Her reaction took a minute to sink in. Maybe she didn’t want to take it to that next level. Duh, you horny idiot, you had all but attacked this girl you barely know. I wanted to smack myself in the head. “Shit, I’m sorry,
Minka. I shouldn’t have assumed you were on the same train of thought. Uhh.....we don’t have to have sex, let me just uh.....stay. We can talk.....or I’ll uh...make you food.” Smooth, bro.

“As if I’m going to try to let you charm your way more into my pants. I
know your type, and I don’t want anything to do with it, get out,” She demands, throwing me the shirt I’d discarded earlier and practically pushing me to the door.

“I don’t get what's going on, did I hurt you?” Suddenly aware that this could be the problem, I do
a quick inspection of her. She looks ok to me, better than ok. Her cheeks are flushed and glowing, and her hair floats wildly around her face, making it look like I’d just laid her down and had my way with her for hours. Fuck, she was perfect.

“Oh don’t give yourself
so much credit, Axel.” She laughs off my question, but her movements are off.

She’s trying too hard to come off snarky. “Maybe I just didn’t like the skills you had to offer. Maybe I don’t feel like being the trophy you bring back to your friends. Or maybe, hey I bet this is a new one
for you, I have values! Sorry to put the kibosh on your summer entertainment, but this won’t happen again.” She opens the door, pushing me out onto the front porch.

Anger simmers deep in my veins and begins spreading through my
body like wildfire. Before she can slam the heavy oak slab in my face, I plant a hand in the middle and shoved hard, the door hitting the inside wall with a harsh thud. I crowd into her space, my large body looming over hers, making her look small and helpless.
“It sure seemed like you were enjoying my skills, or do I need to remind you how hard you were riding my fingers? Keep lying to yourself honey, it’ll only make that need you try to smother grow stronger. I’ll just leave happily knowing that tonight, when you’re
writhing around restlessly in bed, its the feeling of my hands you won’t be able to get off of your skin.”

And with that, I grab the door handle, slamming it shut so hard behind me that it almost cracks the frame.
7

MINKA
Throwing the heavy textbook off my lap, I huff and slump back into the couch. I was mentally and physically drained. It had been a week since Owen had blown my world to smithereens, and just like he’d predicted, every night I laid awake in bed, unable to will away
the assault of memories
that made my skin tingle
and my center clench.

I’d tried my best to stay
distracted, following my
daily schedule and not
veering. As if OCD was the
cure-all for hot, muscled
men who wanted to give
you mind-blowing
orgasms and then “fuck
you into next Tuesday.” When I could finally pick myself up off of the floor where I’d collapsed in a confused and angry heap after Owen had slammed his way out, I’d gone into autopilot. My daily chores got done, I worked out, attended my pre-college summer
courses and drowned myself in novels. But constantly, going on a loop in the back of my head, was Owen.

His hands on me, the way he looked into my eyes with that molten stare that made me feel like I was going to combust. The way he rolled his hips in to
meet my core, and how freaking good that had felt. The smell of his musk as he moved his lips over mine, tasting and savoring how we fit together, all the while his hands exploring my cheeks, neck and jaw.

When he’d asked me if any guy had ever made me cum, I didn’t know it was
possible to be so turned on and embarrassed at the same time. His talk was dirty and exciting. I hadn’t answered though. He didn’t need to know he’d only been the second male to ever touch me like that, and the only one to get me to that spot.

Coming down from
that high had been like nothing I’d ever experienced. But once I had, reality gave me a swift kick in the ass.

He’d gotten me right where he’d wanted me. And he hadn’t even had to work for it. He didn’t even know my middle name. God, I had officially
become *that* girl, again. I should have ignored his tactics, his charm, his smile.

I’d told him multiple times that his panty-melting smile wouldn’t affect me, and then he’d gone and incinerated them from the first moment he’d laid a finger on me. No
wonder he’d lumped me into the slut category with all the other groupies he’d banged.

That one unfinished sentence, “Do you...?” hit me square between the eyes. Was I that predictable that this was happening to me again? Did they all think of me as
easy?

I thought having some fun would be good for me, letting go and figuratively getting back in the saddle. But when he’d broached the sex topic, all I could see was Gregory’s face looming over me.

That smile. At the time I hadn’t suspect just how
horrible the intentions behind it were. His eyes raking over my body, the uncomfortable feelings and sensations. How stupid I’d been.

Owen could take the story back to his friends. They could all hurl whatever new abuse at me that they wanted, but I’d
rest well knowing I hadn’t fallen into their trap. Again.

You don’t get your hopes up for guys like Owen Axel. Not when they smile at you, not when they call you beautiful, not when they get you to start opening up, not ever.
So I did what I always do, brought out the raging bitch, intending to repulse and piss him off. Except now, I’m thinking I was the one who ended up with the raw end of the deal, because I hadn’t slept in five days.

After I’d read a sentence in my biology
textbook for the fifth time, I finally decided to take a break. Taking summer courses for college credit, in some ridiculous attempt to complete undergrad in three years, had been my idea. And now I only had myself to blame for trying to ram knowledge into a brain on summer
programming.

Just when I thought I’d have to force myself to finish the required reading, I hear the front door open with a whoosh.

“Minks, we have come to save you from your self-imposed solitary confinement!” Kels yells as her flip-flops clack on the
tile in the hallway.

She and Chloe round the corner to where I sit in the living room, huffing when they see the open textbooks and notebooks strewn about. Neither of them even bother with a phone call or the doorbell anymore, they we were my family and came and went
as they pleased.

“Seriously? You’re doing homework? It’s the second week of summer break, you’re pale as a ghost, and we haven’t talked to you in four days. What the hell is up with you?” Kelsey practically screams at me.

“I’ve texted you like a
million times! Either your phone is broken, highly unlikely, or more likely, you’re avoiding us,” Chloe goes in on me next.

“I’m fine guys, just been busy with these classes and um, getting chores done.” I know I’m lying straight through my teeth, and lamely at that,
but I can’t help it.

“Oh bullshit, your dad can’t even bother to check if you’re alive, much less care if the house is clean,” Kels visibly winces at her beyond true statement, “Sorry, that was harsh. I just mean that you pulled those excuses out of your ass. Now what’s going on?
We’re worried.”

I’d been so wrapped up in my own head for the past week, that I hadn’t realized how much I needed my friends. They would understand why I’d thrown Owen out. I recount the tale, leaving out a lot of the naughty details I know they would
feed on like hungry wolves.

“Woah, woah, woah, let me get this straight. So he kissed you, said dirty things in your ear and then hijacked your body to do very naughty, delicious things to you? I don’t get the problem here.” Chloe tips up her chin, looking
very much like she was trying to imagine the sexual fantasy. I needed to shut down that visual recap ASAP.

"It wasn’t as 50 Shades as you think, so quit creating the porn scene running through your head right now."

"Yeah, I don’t get it
either. Isn’t this what you wanted? You should be proud. He’s hot and willing, and lord knows you need to dust the cobwebs out of your downstairs. So what does this mean? God I will be so proud if you tell me you’re striking up a friends-with-benefits deal!” Kels grins.
“Kels, I threw him out. He was using me, and don’t ask me how I know, I just do. That’s what these guys do to you. They seduce you, charm you into crushing on them and then pull the rug out from under you and laugh while you fall down the rabbit hole. Besides, why would I
willingly agree to have a fuck buddy? Especially one who is a leader in the Mitchum cool crowd?" I arch a brow her way. "No, nothing is going on. I’m steering clear of Owen Axel." I throw them a warning look, letting them know the conversation is done.
“Come on. I mean not every guy is trying to claim you for some prize. What happened was horrible, but you can’t live your life thinking every guy is going to suddenly take out a machete and gut you.” Kels faces me, worry lines dotting her face despite the ridiculous
metaphor she’d just made. “We’ll drop it for now,” Chloe jumps in, sensing my walls going up, “But I’ll just say, for someone who says nothing is going on, and that she doesn’t care, you look like shit. No offense. Case in point, those bags under your eyes are humongous and it
looks like you haven’t straightened your hair in days. And we DO know you, so we know that means this is affecting you enough not to sleep, or care about the rat’s nest forming on your head.” Shooting me a half sympathetic, half amused look, Chlo tries to run her
fingers through said rat’s nest.

“But, we won’t talk about it until you are ready. Back to the original point of why we’re here. We’re going out. And before you argue, you’re coming so don’t even fight us.” Kels goes digging around in her bag. She
pulls out a hair straightener, makeup, and begins to throw dozens of tiny little lacy items onto the coffee table.

Realization setting in, I begin to back away from what I know is coming.

“No, no, no. Uh-uh get away from me....” I tried to make my way out of the
room, but Chloe grabs me from behind.

“That’s right! Makeover time! Sit in this chair and let us work. No fussing, like we said, you have no choice.”

The small amount of energy I have left in my body flees, and I give myself over to their
torture, knowing that they’d prod and poke me for the next couple of hours whether I put up a fight or not.

THREE HOURS later I wiggle my way into the car, careful not to expose my butt in the white high-
waisted shorts Chloe demanded I wear. Its a hard feat though, because leaning too far forward means my boobs will go tumbling out of the lacy peach tank top I’d fought to wear.

Kels had tried to put a crop top over my head until I’d grabbed the
curling iron and warned her that she’d get burned, literally, if she tried to force me into the belly-baring shirt.

For all of their meddling, however, I did feel better. My mahogany hair fell in smooth sheets down my back, thanks to Chloe’s expensive
European hair straightener. Kels, the makeup master, had outdone herself. Smoky brown tones made my eyes appear even bigger than they already were, but in a pretty way. Not like an alien, which is what usually happened when I tried that looked natural,
but made my eyes pop. Not that I didn’t usually do myself up a little when we went out, but I usually went for casual chic and comfortable. Chlo and Kels always took it to the next level, but I had to admit that tonight their magic had me feeling confident.

“Ok, I’m in the car now
and clearly am not going to jump into traffic. Can you please tell me where we are going?” I eye my two best friends who are now sharing a giggle in the front seat.

“Fine. We are having an all-out, ridiculously fun night attt......THE FIELD!” Chloe claps, taking her
hands off the wheel of her BMW.

“Aw, man come on guys, really? You thought you’d bring me out of my slump by bringing me to a party at which all the people who worship Owen and his cronies drink themselves silly and then get naked in tents?”
Jumping out into traffic really didn’t sound like such a bad idea at this moment.

“Minks, relax. We brought your favorite beer, they’ll be playing the sickest music, and once we all get too wasted to stand, we’ll crash in our tent. Alone. It’s girl’s night, yes,
but we could not pass up a Field Party.” Kels replies with a “duh” in her tone, as if this logic was going to convince me to put my party hat on.

The Field was exactly what it sounded like, a gigantic empty field. It sat on the 150-acre farm of the Merry family, who had
five boys ranging from 13 to 24-years-old. Louis Merry was in our grade, and thus had taken over Field Party duty from his older brother Jackson about a year ago.

Their parents couldn’t care less what trouble they got up to on the property, and it was a great tradeoff
for the teens of Mitchum, who were supplied with a place to get drunk, high and naked without fear of being caught by the cops.

Mitchum might be an affluent town with affluent people, but it was still North Carolina. These kids partied like country folk, even though one could
consider Field Parties way more on the side of glamping.

Chloe winds the car up the hilly roads leading out of Mitchum. The only people who live on this side of town are those rich enough to build McMansions on the farm properties that used to
exist, or the one or two families who still actually own farms. Hooking a right at the discrete gravel road, the car begins to rumble over the rough three mile stretch before Chloe pulls off, parking the car on a dryer portion of grass.

Climbing out of the
back seat, I can feel the bass of the rap music emanating out over the field a few hundred yards away. My mood lifts considerably as the beat surges through my tendons, muscles, and bones. I might look like the typical conservative girl-next-door bookworm, but
my guilty pleasure was hip-hop. Although I like all music, rap and hip-hop are my favorite. The bass and beat invade my body, sending pleasurable trills down my spine.

I walk toward the party with more of a pep in my step now that I can feel the beat conjoining with my
blood.

“Oh look, DJ Braxton is a bit happier to be here now that she’s drowning her feelings in sick beats.” Kels hooks her arm around my neck, smiling. She and Chloe knew about my obsession and loved to tease me for being “so hood.”
I giggle as we walk arm and arm into the circle of partiers. The weight that has been sitting on my chest for the past seven days start to lift. So maybe giving this Field Party a chance wouldn’t kill me. Chlo plops her pink cooler on the ground in between two others, conjoining
them to make a ring around the bonfire crackling in the center of the circle. Dusk has set in, and when she hands me a beer, I don’t hesitate to take a long pull from the neck before letting it rest in my hands.

I survey the party from outside the inner ring,
which is probably a metaphor for my life. I’m not necessarily an outcast, but anytime I’ve felt like I could rejoin school society and begin to trust my classmates again, someone in the popular crowd was only too happy to remind me of the past. And that someone was usually
Allison.

People laugh and talk, while a few lacrosse bros jostle each other over who would be able to jump through the fire. By the end of the night, I was willing to bet all three did it, whether they were successful or not.

The girls have already
disappeared, and I spot them flirting with two guys in our grade who I can’t quite remember the names of. I take a seat on the cooler, casually continuing to sip my beer, and feel a sudden jolt of awareness niggling my spine. My head begins to swivel as if it's attached to
a string, and my vision latches directly onto Owen. Shit.

He’d just walked up the path into the circle, and is surrounded by a small group. I see him smile as his friend Miles throws him a beer, and my insides go haywire. My stomach drops and my feet start to
tingle in their haste to move my body off this cooler and into his arms. But I stay planted.

I try to avert my eyes, but I can’t stop staring at how incredibly built and tan he is. Tonight he’s opted for a red and white striped cutoff tank and navy blue khaki shorts that
outline his perfect backside. He looks like a Ralph Lauren model. His usual bed-head hair has been slicked back to one side, giving him this drool-worthy European vibe. He holds his big body with ease and confidence, and I want so badly to be under him, giving into his oh-so-
good fingers.

Don’t let him have you. I need to repeat this mantra to myself. He didn’t think of me as anything but a challenging conquest, and had proven it when he hadn’t bothered trying to contact me for the last seven days.

Sure, he didn’t have my
cell, but he knew where I lived and could have probably gotten my number from someone. The first thing he’d thought about was sex, not getting to know me. If that wasn’t an indicator of how truly wrong this whole thing was, then I didn’t know what was.
I don’t even know why I’m so hung up on this. It wasn’t like I wanted to date the guy. I knew how dangerous wanting something like that with someone like him was. He was a total charmer who used girls for what he wanted. A total charmer who was the only other
guy I’d ever allowed to do such an intimate thing to me. I inhale a sharp breath, trying to calm my frayed nerves.

And suddenly he was looking at me. Great, I’d definitely been staring too long, again. Sitting on opposite sides of the fire, flames obscured my view
as they climbed higher into the darkening sky, but I can clearly see his eyes, now a shade of cobalt, glaring at me. Damn, he looks pissed. Was he seriously mad because I wouldn’t let him hit it and quit it?

I was like a deer in headlights. I should
probably get up, stop this frozen connection we were having, but I’m stuck, powerless to his visual assault. Bringing his gaze straight to my eyes, he looks into my face. And sneers.

His look is so full of judgement and indignation that I actually flinch from
the feeling of disgust punching its way through the air towards me. I must have not hidden my shock well, because he ends our eye-contact with a smug tilt of his head, and then pulls a nearby blonde into his lap. She nuzzles her head into his shoulder while thrusting her chest
into his face, and he wraps his thick arm around her tiny waist.

I can feel the embarrassment and anger creep into my face, my skin tingling from the shame. I kick myself for being so freaking naive. Well, there was the confirmation. Someone
had told him. My reputation had proceeded me, and it was clear Owen was looking for a good-time-gal, and since I wouldn’t give it up, he’d found someone who would.

Screw this. I’d said I was done letting these people dictate how I lived.
I wasn’t going through life second-guessing my every action and distrusting all I saw around me. I down the last of my beer and saunter over to the table Kels and Chlo are playing flip cup at.

“Got room for an extra player?” I ask the guy running the table, adding a
bit of insinuation to my tone. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Kels’ jaw nearly hit the floor.

“Sure, gorgeous. But there is a little twist to this game. It’s not just regular ole’ flip cup,” He leans in closer, trying his best to get me to what, giggle or squeal? This guy clearly
didn’t know who I was. Or that having never grown my social butterfly wings, I had no idea what the regular ole’ rules to flip cup were. “Before you down your beer and flip, you have to take a shot.” He wiggles his eyebrows at me. While he was cute in a total surfer dude way,
he just wasn’t cutting it for me. Damn you, Owen Axel.

Peering around the table, I notice the tiny shot glasses seated next to every red plastic cup. Reaching for the nearest one, I tip my head back and bring the glass to my lips. The acidic burn
slowly rolls down my throat, cheap vodka numbing my veins and anger. Yeah, this is exactly what I need. Slamming the glass down, I catch the shock on my friends' faces. They look like statues, they’re so mesmerized by my actions.

“Well, if those are the
rules I’d say I’m officially winning. Right?”
Field Parties are without a doubt one of my favorite things in the world. I’ve been coming here for years, ever since Tyler Merry, who graduated a year before me, had started throwing them during my freshman year of high school. Sitting out under the stars in the
middle of Nowhere, North Carolina, the fire crackling in front of you, a beer in your hand, hot girls running around in those cutoff shorts intended to tease. There was really nothing better.

These nights could clear my mind of the pressure, the fear, the
doubts. The wide open spaces gave me room to breathe, actually free myself of the poison I sucked in daily. The tension in my life was constant; How many strikeouts have I recorded? Could I have thrown the ball faster? Should I add an extra weight to pump up
my triceps? What scout would be in the stands today? Is dad going to be disappointed that I couldn’t paint the corners?

I didn’t know how many of these nights I had left.

Which is why I was severely pissed that Minka had officially taken it upon
herself to be the one-woman night ruining parade.

I hadn’t seen her since she’d thrown me out of her house. The girl totally freaked and then proceeded to trash me and my skills. And I know, from past experience and her breathy moans as she
came around my hand, that my skills were very well honed.

I don’t typically go for chicks who can hold their own, it was easier to bag the easy ones, as bad as that sounds.

So it was strange that I was so turned on by the fact that she was smart,
and could hand me my ass in any conversation. That fact that she was insanely beautiful was just an added bonus.

I typically went for hot and easy; girls who knew what I was down for. And that was not a girlfriend. Girlfriends brought pressure and expectations,
which I had enough of in spades thanks to baseball and my dad.

I knew I’d moved too fast by getting physical with Minka too quick, but then she started throwing around the word “values,” and accusing me of being some dick who brags to his buddies about all the
pussy he scores. She doesn’t even know me. When she’d started hauling assumptions in my face like a bratty two-year-old, I’d decided I was done pursuing her. She could have her “morals.”

But that didn’t mean I hadn’t fantasized about her, 24 hours a day, for the
past seven days. It was like she’d taken over my brain and was residing there permanently. All I could think about was the way my hands melded to her smooth, velvety skin. The way her chocolatey eyes widened, and that sexy mouth formed an O when I worked my fingers over
her hardened clit. The way she writhed beneath me, clawing at my back as if she was physically fighting me for release. My dick was hard just thinking about it, not that it hadn’t immediately raised to full salute when I’d spotted her across the fire.

Shouldn’t my cock be
tired of her? My hand was sore from how much attention I’d been giving it the last week.

Remembering her sexy little whimpers was all I needed these days to bust in 30 seconds flat, which was sort of embarrassing.

Since I’d kissed her, the taste of berries and mint
still lingering on my tongue, I’d been obsessed.  
Leaves it to me to crush hard for the one chick who didn’t want to straddle me from the minute she heard my name was Owen Axel.  
Whatever, I’d learned my lesson, I wasn’t going to try to pet the dog that already bitten me, twice.
Except that nothing, not even this ditzy blonde on my lap basically shoving her nipples in my face, was helping to get my attention off of her.

And I can’t seem to stop my hands from balling into fists as I watch her sling her arms around this fucking surfer dude’s
neck. She was drunk, really drunk. And while I was beyond buzzed, I know what it looked like to be desperate drunk. And Minka fell right into that category tonight. She was trying way too hard to make her problems go away by hitting the bottle. I should know, I had been
an expert at times.

Surfer bro reaches down to grab a big handful of her ass, and I’d seen enough. Before I know it, I’m up, the blonde tumbling off my lap into the dirt, and my feet carrying me in her direction. I shove the dude away before his hands can
do anymore roaming, and then catch a falling Minka who can’t seem to stand on her own.  

“Hey what the heck—” she trails off as she sees me holding her, her bloodshot eyes narrowing. “Get off me, you asshole.” She spits at me, pushing at my chest. I lock my arms
securely around her, making sure she can’t break my hold to stumble off.

“Hey bro, let go of her. What’s your problem man?” Surfer bro gets back up and is gesturing at me. He looks like he’s questioning whether to fight for her or not, but is
smart enough not to challenge me. I shoot him a hard look that illustrates just how badly I could bash his face in, and his mind is made up. He hurries off, leaving Minka in my arms and her friends staring at me like I’ve just revealed I’m Superman.

“Hey, we are going to
“go for a little walk, ok? Don’t worry I will keep her safe and return her soon.” I smiled at them, phrasing it as a question but not really meaning it as one.

They both slowly nod at me, and the one with blue streaks running through her hair rolls her eyes, adding, “Its about
time. You were only eye-fucking her for the last three hours.”

I let out a snort. So maybe I had been more obvious than I’d thought.

“I like your friend.” I say to Minka. “I’m Owen, by the way.”

“Kelsey, and this is Chloe. We know who you
are, baseball god. Now, you can take our girl here. Just know you’re on potential puke duty.” She half-jokes as they walk away giggling.

“Ummmm, I’m not invisible. And I’m also not going anywhere with you, asshole. I was having fun with Brad, thanks very
“much.” She slurs, her speech coming out in more of a tinkly, high tone than usual. But she’s damn adorable. Acting so bossy and cute, it takes all of my restraint not to scoop her up and crush my lips into hers.

But I wasn’t going there with her again. I was
only helping out a girl who clearly had gotten herself into a situation she didn’t want to be in.

I could keep telling myself all night that I wasn’t going to continue pursuing this girl, but that didn’t make it true.

She needs to cool down and sober up. I rub my
hand through her silky hair, which hangs stick straight tonight, almost to her butt. God, she looks incredible. She fits so well against my side as I guide her away from the noise. Every time I look down at her, my eyeline has the fucking greatest view of her tits framed by that lacy
top. It was not doing anything to tame my swelling dick.

Images of her under me flash through my brain. The way she rubbed her soft, slim body into mine. This girl had made me nearly blow in my pants. And she’d definitely gotten me harder than any
of the college groupies I’d boned this year. And now I need to think of anything — dead fish, my grandmother— to get this massive boner to go away.

“Seriously, let me go,” she wriggles against me, breaking free for a second before I trip, pulling her back into me and righting
us both. Yeah, no. Boner still on high alert.

“Jeez you’re a mean drunk. Both times you’ve tried to blow me off, and apparently I have some duty to catch you whenever you fall.” I say, half-teasing.

“You wouldn’t have to catch me, or hear my
smarty-pants self, if you stopped coming around. Or if you weren’t such a jerk.” She grins, looking pleased with herself for that comeback.

“Honey, I hate to break it to you, but your smart mouth really takes a hit when you’re drunk. Sit with me,” I motion to the
log at our feet. I’d walked us a good 75 yards from the party.

She frowns, but doesn’t resist when I pull her hand and her body follows. We sit in silence for a few minutes, me just staring up at the stars and reveling in the quiet, feeling 100 times better now that I had
Minka’s warm body pressed into my side.  

“Why are we out here? If this is some move to get your hands down my panties, I already told you, I’m not having sex with you.” She huffs, the anger in her voice receding a bit, replaced with exhaustion.  

“And why would you
think this is some kind of ploy to get you to spread your legs for me?” I bite back, not the calmest, or soberest, myself. She doesn’t respond, only looks at me like she wanted to say more, but then turns away to stop herself. Her brown hair floats on the breeze and I
catch the scent of lilacs.

“Whatever, you looked like you were having a great time with Pamela Anderson. Why don’t you get back over there, champ!” She shrugs, rubbing her shoulders as if she was cold despite the 80 degree night. I know she’d seen me sneer at her
before, and I mentally punched myself for acting like such an idiot.

I just didn’t expect to see her, and my ego had been severely bruised when she’d practically shoved me onto the sidewalk the other day. So, I’d resorted to being an eight-year-old;
symbolically hitting the girl I liked on the playground.

“
It's not like you were giving me the warm and fuzzies either, sweetheart. Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot.”

She snorts when I utter the words “got off” and the blood in my dick pulsed.
God, her sense of humor turns me on. “Yeah I know, I kind of attacked you the other day, but you weren’t exactly saying no. I don’t know why you freaked, but I meant what I said. I would like to talk, get to know you. And I promise I won’t act like a cocky jerk, or at least I’ll try. It’s just
hard since I’m so good looking and excel at everything that I do…. I trail off as she half-heartedly punches my shoulder. But she was finally smiling in a non-annoyed, super-adorable drunk way.

“I’m tired,” she yawns sleepily, leaning into my
Her closeness surprises me, but I haven’t felt more at home ever in my life than when her skin made contact with mine. This girl was throwing me for a loop. I barely knew her and yet she felt more familiar than when I stood out on my island during a
I wrap my arm around her shoulder, nestling her further into my side. My skin tingles where she wrapped her slim arm around my back, and I’m overcome with this quiet sense of contentment. We stay locked like this, on our own island in the
middle of the field, until my eyes begin to droop and I surrender my mind to the abyss.
9

MINKA
t is so freaking bright, someone needs to turn that light off. And why does it hurt so fucking bad when I move my head? Am I even moving my head?

At first I think I must still be dreaming, but when I crack an eye open, I know that the hangover
fairies have taken root inside my skull. I look over the damp, dewy field, wondering why I’m not in the dry, warm tent with my friends. When I begin to blink the haze from my vision, my heart starts racing.

Me, cradled in Owen Axel’s lap as he sleeps
propped up against a large log about 100 yards away from where the party had been happening last night. Me, with my head nuzzled into Owen Axel’s neck and hair that smell like musk and evergreen, my hands on his hard chest that is rising steadily with each breath he takes. Me, as
Owen Axel’s arms snake around my body for protection. This is what I see when I wake up.

I shift to get a better look at our position. Ah crap, that was a bad move. Because I can most definitely feel a very large, very hard part of his anatomy poking right up
into my butt as I sit on top of him. How did we get out here?

Suddenly, our conversation comes flashing back at me, and I bite my lip to keep from smiling at his sweet words. He wanted to get to know me. And he’d come over to take me for a walk
before I’d made a stupid mistake with surfer dude. Not that these were points in his favor, but they were nice gestures. And now they needed to end, before I could let hope seep into my pores.

“Owen, wake up!” I whisper scream in his ear, trying to wake him quickly
but quietly. I didn’t need people to notice us out here. The big rock softly snoring under me doesn’t move an inch. I poke his chest, flick his ear, and pry his eyes open like I’d seen little kids do in movies.

I didn’t know how to wake someone up, I’d never been in this
situation. So, I do the only thing left to do. I reach down between us and squeeze the steel rod between his legs. Okay, so maybe that wasn’t the only thing left to do, but it would definitely get his attention. And I also maybe want to feel what he’s packing.
“Mmmm, good morning,” he growls, and snuggles me closer while grinding his hips into my backside.

“No, get up. This isn’t some booty call. We have to get out of here.” I urge, trying to rouse him from his sleepy state.

“Its technically not a
booty call if its in the morning, but I won’t fight semantics with you. No more talking,” he nuzzles his face into my neck and begins to lick and bite the sensitive skin under my ear.

Ahhh, that feels insanely good. Sensation zings down my spine, and
a groan rips its way through my throat. I really need to get off of him, but my body won’t budge while he is lighting it on fire.

His rough hands rub circles over my stomach while his playful mouth teases and kisses every inch of skin north of my
cleavage. I drop my head forward, unable to move or think with his hands on me. It has only been a week since I’d first spoken to him, but I already crave his touch.

“Slumming it now, are we Owen?” That sickly-sweet voice snaps me out of my Owen trance. And
is coming from the one person I hate more than anything on this earth.

Scrambling to my feet, I pull at my clothes and hair, trying to adjust them to look semi-presentable, even though I am probably covered in dirt and the heavy eye makeup Kelsey had applied the night
before. Owen looks up, still blinking sleep out of his eyes, and scowls.

“What do you want Allison?” He throws her a pissed-off glance as he slowly gets to his feet.

She flicks her long blonde mane over her shoulder as she wraps a hand around Owen’s large
right bicep. Allison’s hair, and her appearance for that matter, is always effortlessly perfect. She has the exact amount of wave that made hair fall on the sexy, and not unmanageable, side of curly. Her cutoff jean shorts and red crop top accentuate her Miss Teen
North Carolina figure. She wore makeup, but knew how to disguise it so well that it didn’t even look like it was on at all. She was beautiful in a Hollywood starlet kind-of-way. Too bad her insides were so hideously ugly.

Since the incident sophomore year, Allison
had been one of the people to ensure I never forgot. She tore me down whenever she could, reminding me and everyone within earshot just what had happened with Gregory.

The day I’d found out just how badly he’d toyed with me, she’d been
among the leaders to circle around my locker, basking in the spectacle I’d become.

Gregory had been the one to steal my innocence and ruin me from any future relationship, but Allison had been the one to cement my social suicide. She’d murdered my high
school existence and then powdered her nose on my dead body.

“Baby, where else would I be? The real question is, why didn’t I see you at all last night? I had a very special present for you.” She bats her lashes at him, licking her lips and baring her teeth in
a move that had her looking more like a feral cat than a temptress if you asked me. “I see you’ve taken a ride on the town bus,” She giggles, hitting his arm. She’s pretending as if I’m not standing two feet from them.

“What the fuck did you just say?” His whole body
tenses and vibrates, as if he was tightening every muscle to keep his anger at bay. "You know what, never mind Allison. You're not worth it. You might apologize for interrupting us, but I know the word sorry doesn't happen to be in your vocabulary. We have to get going, have a
nice summer.” He politely smiles at her while steering me away with a hand at the small of my back.

I turn around just in time to see Allison staring daggers into my back, her eyes full of the promise of revenge.

My chest swells with happiness at Owen picking
me in that showdown. He hadn’t even engaged her. I was surprised he’d acted so coldly towards her, but then again, I realized I didn’t know much about him below the surface. I had been judging him this entire time, just like my classmates had always judged me.
“Well, looks like you two are just the best of friends,” Owen gives me a sly, humor-filled smile. “Don’t mind Ali, she’s just mad that her soul is a blackhole of evil. You can’t help feel bad for the girl.” I choke on my laugh, shocked at what I’m hearing from him.
“So, I take it you two haven’t made out in front of your lockers recently?”

He winces at my bringing up that memory. “Ew, I’m sorry you had to witness those unfortunate moments of my life. It took me way too damn long to figure out that Miss America over there only
wants to spend her future athlete husband’s money on Botox and Prada.” His face turns stony, and he looks almost sad. It’s unexpected, but heartwarming.

“So, she interrupted us, huh?” I try to lift him from the funk that has settled over our conversation, but
was surprised when I broached the subject of what had happened before she’d so rudely arrived.

“Oh you like me, you don’t have to deny it anymore. Here give me your phone,” he made grabby fingers at me.

“Why?”

“So I can put my
number in it. I’d really rather not go a week without talking to you after I grope your ass again.” He deadpans. I narrow my eyes at him, keeping my phone safely in my grasp. “I’m kidding, Minka. I’d like to call you. So, let me give you my number.”
Reluctantly, I hand my phone over. “I’m only letting you do this because you’re so annoying and relentless,” My smirk gives away my lie. So maybe I like him, but I was being cautious, looking for any signs to duck and run.

He taps at the screen on my phone for a minute or
two, his cellphone rang, and then he locks my phone and hands it back to me. "I called myself so I have your number. Now we can text all the time." He winks. I have to bite my lips to stop from smiling at his adorable gesture.

"Well, I gotta get outta
here. Summer training waits for no one, especially this stud,” he jokes, pointing his thumbs at his already spectacular upper body. Would it be weird if I asked to watch him lift weights? Perhaps without his shirt on? Yeah, okay, that would be weird.

“Alright.....well, I’m
going to go find my friends....I guess I’ll, uh, see you around.” I shuffle my feet awkwardly, not quite knowing how to end the exchange.

Waking on him this morning had been....nicer than I expected. I’d slept really well, surprisingly well, and as weird as it
was to admit it, waking up in his arms felt natural. It had me freaking out a little.

He reaches out, using his thumb and forefinger to frame my chin and lift it up so that I’m looking him in the eye. Rubbing his thumb over my cheekbone, he gives me that
devastating lazy grin, “Yeah, you’ll definitely be seeing me around.”
Walking the grocery store always calmed me down. The aisles of choices, the singular decisions needing to be made. If the store wasn't full of bumbling morons getting in the way, then it was almost zen-like.

That's why I came at 10 a.m. on Tuesdays. No one
was here to bother me. I could mull over my problems in peace while picking out which slice of meat would cook best.

That is, *usually* no one was here to bother me. Chloe had decided to tag along to pick up a new notebook, and she would not let sleeping dogs lie on
the Owen issue.

"So, what are you feeling?" She asks me for the fiftieth time since we pulled out of the gravel lot of the field Sunday morning.

Grabbing a few steam-in-bag freezer pouches of vegetables and throwing them, rather aggressively,
into the cart, I turn to her. "I don't know. Can we please just shop in blissful peace?" I grunt and push the fallen strands of my hair out of my face.

"I don't understand why you like this? You should definitely harangue this duty onto your dad." Chlo skips down the aisle
and does a little turn. She’s always dancing to get from place to place. Hazards of being a ballerina and all.

And no, I couldn't schlep this responsibility on my dad. Mostly because I would never eat, because he would never shop. But I think this was one of those things that
reminded him of mom. And I typically tried to spare him any pain when it came to that arena.

"I just do. Now zip it or we won't lay out later." I move towards the bread aisle, quietly weighing whether I want wheat bread or deli thins.

The truth is, I don't
know how I feel. I have been really trying to avoid Owen since the summer started. Of course, a girl isn't perfect and she must have a few slips. Like when he stripped me naked from the waist down after our run. Or how I ended up on his lap last weekend. I thought
those moments of pure stupidity would have cleansed my system of him. Given me the satisfaction I needed to move on.

But now that he's gotten into my bloodstream, the addiction seems stronger than ever. I can't forget his chorded,
muscled arms around me as I woke up from one of the best sleeps I'd ever had. I can't forget the sexy, arousing noises he made in his groggy, morning voice as he grinded me against his lap.

When a moan almost slips past my lips, I have to check myself and...
remember where I am. I have to forget those moments. Owen, and everything he brings with him, is bad news. He is exactly what I was trying to avoid going into this summer, not to mention the rest of my life.

He's one of the golden ones. Part of those people
who can do wrong, who
get away with everything
and take anything that
catches their eye. I swore
to myself that I wouldn't
get tangled up in that
fucked-up spider's web
once again. And I need to
stick to it.

Now if only someone
could tell my body that.
And not that I would ever, ever admit this out loud or even consciously to myself, but someone needed to tell my heart that too. Because ever since that night, Owen had been texting me non-stop.

*Ding!* My phone chimed with yet another text from him.
"Oh my god, is that him again! He definitely likes you. Or at least wants to feel you up again." Chloe shrugs as if they were one in the same. Jesus.

Owen: Ok, are you a dog or a cat person?

He'd been doing this "get to know you" game for almost three days
straight. I told him this classified as stalking, and he told me it wasn't creepy unless he held me down against my will and forced me to spill my favorite ice cream flavor.

Which is an image I still can't get out of my head. My panties can't either.
Huffing, I answer. He only gets more annoying if he doesn't get a response.

Minka: Dogs. But not those little rat dogs. If it’s smaller than a cat, it’s really not a dog, is it?

Owen: Thank god. If you said cats, I probably would have had to stop talking to you. And we both would have
been disappointed.

Smirking, I sent a response back.

Minka: Scratch that. I like cats. Love them. I want to die with like 87 in my house.

Owen: Smartass. Ok, now if you had a magic carpet to take you anywhere, where would you go?

Was “back in time to
correct the biggest mistake of my life,” an appropriate answer? Probably not. But, I'd had this answer in my head for a long time.


Owen: Oh yeah, right. You're so sexy when you talk 19th century lit to me,
Braxton.

I smiled, an earnest genuine smile, at his funny jab.

Shit, what was I doing? Looking up, Chlo was at a dead stop in front of me, a bored look on her face.

"When you're done toreplaying with golden boy over there, I'm ready
to go." She taps her foot for emphasis.

"Toreplaying?" I seriously didn't know what the hell she was talking about half the time.

"Text foreplay. Massaging each other through the phone, romantically. That's what your smile would indicate
anyway."

"Ew, that sounds disgusting. Also, you’re a complete hopeless romantic. A beautiful, graceful one, but hopeless none the less."

She grabs the side of the cart, as if she’s my five-year-old child, and motions for me to start
walking. I wheel us toward the checkout, turmoil building in my head.

I had to stop this with Owen. It had gone on long enough and I really didn't need to genuinely like this guy more than I already did. Yes, he was sweet, funny and had really great abs. But he would hurt me.
I could feel it in my bones that if I went any further, got any more wrapped up in his orbit, that golden boy would burn me up in his rays.

I simply couldn't afford it again.
11

OWEN
There is no better smell than that of a worn-in glove. The whiff of crushed-in leather, form fitted to the hand of the owner, mixed with fresh-cut grass and sand pulled right off the track. The tinge of November air that still lingers in the seams. If you lean in close, you can sniff
the trademarks of the ballpark, hot dogs and cheap beer. Maybe even a tobacco stain or two.

Forget religion, baseball is my church. And the mound is where I come to worship.

I launch ball after ball at the net setup behind home plate, glancing now
and then at the radar display board. 85 MPH… 89 MPH… 97 MPH. Curveball, fastball, slider. Rinse, repeat, and perfect.

It's somewhat ironic that the very thing I feel the most pressure about in life is also my therapeutic outlet. Which explains why, after a father-son
battle that could rival World War II, I’ve been standing on my little league field for the last two hours. Dusk has begin to set in, but I have no intention of dragging my ass home to hear more about “priorities” and “expectations.”

You would think that I
wasn’t the most highly scouted college player of the year. That I didn’t have six or seven calls a month, from the agent who had already signed me, telling me which farm team was asking me to leave college now and play full time. That I didn’t put every ounce of my energy, drive,
blood and sweat into this game. Carl Axel always expected more.

You’re looking a little pudgey, son. Sure you aren’t overdoing the beer and under-doing the workouts this summer? What was your latest pitch
speed? You need to be working on perfecting that slider, boy, remember that Southern Virginia scored three home runs off you after you fucked that pitch up.

Leave it to dad to remember every single
strike, or in this case hit, against me. And mom, yeah, she tried to keep him off my back, but she wasn’t much help.

Raquel Axel was a former Brazilian supermodel who had moved to the U.S. in the late 80s, meeting, and shortly thereafter,
marrying my father when they both lived in New York. They didn’t have the perfect marriage, but she was just stubborn enough to keep him in line for the most part, and is still just as beautiful as when they’d met, meaning he stayed faithful as far as I could tell.
My mom was great—nurturing, encouraging, supportive—but that was overshadowed by anything he said. A father’s approval is what every son chases.

“Keep throwing 95-ers for shits and giggles and your arm will be deader than Thurman Munson.”
I turn around to see Farris walking leisurely down through the chain link dugout, grinning like a moron at his stupid ass joke.

“*The baseball gods are seriously going to smite you one of these days, bro. And it was 97, not 95.*” I whip the ball half-
heartedly at his head, but he’s always one move ahead of me with his short-stop ninja skills.

Miles Farriston and I have been best friends since the day we discovered our mutual hatred of the hitting tee. Shithead little punks that we were, we thought we’d...
swing our Louisville Sluggers au natural from the word “go.” While we’ve improved over the years, and leaned on coaches and trainers for advice, our friendship has always been a constant.

“Yeah, well, all I’m saying is you gotta cool it man. We need that arm to
take us to championships again this year.” When we’d been applying to colleges, it was an unspoken agreement that we’d end up at the same one. Miles had been cleaning up my mistakes on the second base line since elementary school, and we weren’t splitting
up now.

“What’re you doing here anyway, man? I thought Olivia was coming to visit this week.” I walk into the dugout with him, joining him on the bench and hunching over, resting my elbows on my knees.

“Nah man, she bailed again. Had some last
minute emergency come up.” He tried to shrug it off casually, but I could sense the unease behind his movements.

He’d been dating Olivia for the past year, but she’d yet to come visit this summer like she’d promised. In my opinion, she was a spoiled groupie
brat who was milking Miles for his campus celebrity status and money — the Farriston’s basically owned half the east coast — but it wasn’t my place to tell him who to date.

Before I could dole out some lame ass remark about it being ok, Miles goes for the jugular, “So,
what’s with you banging the high schooler?”

What? How did he know I’d been hanging around with Minka. “What do you mean?”

“I saw you traipse off with that hot brunette at the field. Hinkley told me she’s in his grade. You tap that? Cause she has a
seriously nice rack man.”

“Don’t talk about her like that. And no, I haven’t ‘tapped that.’” I shoot him a pissed-off glare. I have the sudden urge to punch him for eyeing Minka’s tits.

“Woah, calm down A-Rod. Get it, cause he was on the roids?” he flashes
me his trademark goofball smile.

“Dude, we’ve gone over this, if you have to explain the joke, it was not a good one.”

“Whatever. But bro, do you like this girl or something?” He eyes my curiously, and a beat of silence passes when I don’t
give him an answer.

“Wait a second, you do! You gushy son of a bitch.” Miles punches my arm and starts bouncing his legs up and down, vibrating the metal bench we’re perched on. “Did you throw rocks at her window? Stand under her balcony with a radio over your head?”
Man, was your first kiss in the pouring rain?”

I think my jaw hung so low in shock that it was hovering over the tops of my shoes. “Dude, your knowledge of romantic comedies astounds, and nauseates, me. Also, if you talk about her tits again I’ll take a bat to your junk so
hard, you won’t be able to walk for a week. I’m seeing where it goes. Leave it at that.”

“Axel, I knew you always wanted on these nuts, but you gotta warm me up before you take your bat to me.” He winks and then doubles over at his own joke. Miles is all
about the laughter, jokes and fun. Although he’d never officially confided in me, a thought that still disappointed me because of how long we’d been friends, I had a feeling his home life was a lot worse than mine. His jokes were his shield.

“Alright dickwad, I
gotta split. See you next week for arms? I’m gonna kick your scrawny ass.” Walking towards my car, I throw a cocky smile at my best friend, who no one would ever in their life describe as scrawny. Farris is a beast; he has at least three inches and fifty pounds on me. But bicep
and tricep work is his worst area, and I rag on him whenever I get the chance.

“In your dreams, pussy.” I hear as I reach my black pickup, my cell vibrating against my thigh. Pulling it out, I read the text from Minka.

Minka: White chocolate
Since our night of cuddling at the field on Saturday, I’d been texting her on and off for four days. I was trying to take things slow, because if I knew anything, it was that she spooked easily. Or that any girl would kick you out after basically anything.
humping them like a horny gorilla without asking their middle name. Nonetheless, I was trying to get back in her good graces.

My previous text had asked her what her favorite candy was. My plan was to try and pry information from this
stubborn, formidable girl. So far we’d covered favorite movies, books - of which she had an itemized list, foods, colors and music.

She desperately wanted to travel to England, hated roller coasters and thought video games were the spawn of Satan. And she
was funny. Hilarious, actually. She spoke out loud, or texted in this case, what people were usually too afraid to say, and had no qualms about spouting her opinions.

But for the past couple of days I could tell she was trying to push me off. Her answers were getting less
and less involved. Her responses were less frequent. So she didn’t want to let me in? Too bad. I’d bulldoze through that wall and make her get to know me.

Folding myself into the driver’s seat, I checked the time on my dash radio. 7 p.m. I’d waited long
enough to make my next move. And in all honesty, I was dying to see Minka’s face. She was quickly becoming an addiction, drinking in her sun kissed complexion, those dark oval eyes framed by long, sexy lashes.

Yeah, decision made. I swing my car out of the
parking spot and plan my next course of action.

I stand in front of her door, Mitch’s Deli bag in hand, forty five minutes later. I knock lightly, hoping to god her parents aren’t home and that she doesn’t get pissed that I’m here. I
also hope that she is in a towel, fresh from the shower. I’d definitely been watching too much porn this year.

The heavy oak door of Minka’s spacious ranch-style home opens, revealing the most breathtaking sight. Seriously, this girl literally
takes my breath away every time I see her. I mentally kick myself again for not noticing her the two years we attended high school together.

She wore short olive green pajama bottoms that looked like they’d be blanket-soft to the touch. They rested about two
inches down her thigh, and the rest of her shapely, sexy legs were bare.
Above, she wore nothing but a brown strappy tank top. Her beautiful, round tits were straining against the material, and when I saw her nipples start to harden beneath my stare, all the blood in my body
poured directly into my now stiff cock. Shit, she wasn’t wearing a bra. Taking this slow was going to be very, very hard. Literally.

“What’re you doing here?” She asks suspiciously, but doesn’t look pissed. Actually, she looks kind of happily
annoyed. I can work with that.

“So, did you know that white chocolate isn’t even really chocolate? Its sugar. And its nasty. Buttt... I’ve learned, through my superior investigative skills these past few days, that we both have the same order from Mitch’s.” I
shake the brown paper bag in hand at her.

“You brought me a cheesesteak with extra pickles?” Minka asks in disbelief.

“Wait, I thought you said you liked pulled pork on potato bread....” I trail off and smile when she scowls at me. “Yes, I
brought us cheesesteaks, with extra pickles. But, you can only have it if you invite me in.”

My offer dangles in the air, she’s leaving me hanging on purpose while she hops back and forth from foot to foot with a thinking face on. The little brat.
“Ok fine, you may come in. But only because I’d give up my first born child for a Mitch’s cheesesteak.”

She turns, leading the way into her house, giving me an outrageous view of her mass of curls sweeping over the curve of tailbone. I groan inwardly, trying to
keep my lust in check.

She takes some dishes and silverware out of the cabinets, and sets the table so I can sit at the head with her on my right side. I empty the contents of the bag and set the items out accordingly.

“One loaded pickle cheesesteak for the
beautiful lady.” I smile a Cheshire cat grin at her. I really, really need to win her over tonight. This constant rejection wasn’t good for my ego.

She rolls her eyes at me and climbs into the chair, sitting Indian style while she eats. I watch her unwrap the sandwich as I
do the same. I was constantly enthralled by her movements. She had such interesting ticks; the way she tucked her hair behind her ears every 10 seconds, how she blinked those long lashes whenever she looked another direction, the way she chewed her ring finger
when she was nervous. Minka had so many movements, all I wanted to do was sit there and study them forever.

“So, what did you do today?” I try for small talk as I take my first bite.

“What is this, family dinner time?” She rolls her eyes at me. Another
movement that she liked to do, a lot.

“Well no, I am glad that we are far from family.” I wink. “But I’d really like to know what you have on your plate for the rest of the summer.”

She pops a pickle in her mouth. “Fair enough. I’m taking some university
level courses down at the community college.”

“Wow. That’s ambitious. Towards….nursing, right? You’d mentioned you wanted to be a nurse.” I take a massive bite of my cheesesteak. Just the right amount of meat to cheese to onions ratio. My
stomach thanked me. “That’s right.” She looks a little surprised that I’d remembered that.

“Biology 101 and some other pre-req courses. I’m trying to fast-track and earn my degree in three years.”

“Why would you want to do that? I’m staying
until they kick me out.”

“Let’s just say that school is not my thing.” She looks down at the cheesesteak which she’d yet to take a bite from.

“But you said before that you were great at school, that mere mortals had to be smart because they didn’t look like Greek
gods and have the ability to give any woman a mind-blowing org...."

"OK!" She cuts me off. "First of all, I never said those things about you, quit stroking...er, building, your ego." She blushes at her almost slip up. Damn she was cute. "Second, yes I'm super smart. Its the
“classmates and social scene thing I can’t stand.” I can see hesitation and a tinge of sadness in her eyes, and I wonder who put it there. And where I could find them to pummel the living shit out of them.

“That’s too bad. College is awesome, I have a feeling you might like it.”
The partying and the girls are fun, yeah, but being able to get away from your parents and their pressure…. it's so damn freeing.” I swallow, realizing I’m projecting my own shit onto her situation.

“You feel pressure? That seems impossible.”
She takes a bite, looking doubtful.

“When your father was one of the best baseball players in the last 70 years, you’re expected to be just as good, if not better. Do you know how many college baseball players wash out before even making it to the minors?”
Do you know how many left handed pitchers there are playing in the majors? Not many. I’ll be lucky to make it through my college career without throwing my arm out.”

I blink, realizing I’ve just unloaded a ton of baggage onto her lap. When I look up, I meet her
soft brown eyes. Thankfully, they aren’t filled with pity. They’re filled with…..understanding.

“I’m sorry. That does seem like a lot of pressure. For what it’s worth, I hear you really have what it takes to go big time.” She gives me a small smile.
And just hearing those words from this girl has made me more confident than I’ve ever been that I’ll make it to the MLB.

“So what else? Stalk any Jane Austen characters lately?” I tease her. She’d told me earlier that Pride and Prejudice was one of her favorite books, and
that she’d read it more than 15 times.

“Ha-ha, very funny. You’re no Mr. Darcy.”

“No, I’m definitely a Mr. Bingley. Which is so much better, since he’s the real dreamboat.” I bat my lashes at her, pretending to fawn.

“You read Pride and
Prejudice?” I can hear the shock in her voice.

“Don’t act so surprised, your rudeness is showing.” She lifts her hands up as if to say she’s sorry. “Yes, I don’t live under a rock. I may have read it for school, but it didn’t suck.”

“If only your buddies
could hear that you enjoyed an 19th century romance novel.” She chides me as she pops another pickle in her mouth. And if I keep thinking about pickles in her mouth I might die. Yes, the pre-pubescent boy in me can still get hard hearing the most asinine of
innuendos when it comes to Minka.

“Where else would I learn all of my woo-ing moves?” She throws a fry at me, which I promptly catch in my mouth. “But seriously, I read. I just finished the last ‘Girl With the Dragon Tattoo’ book. It was awesome, Swedes are
badass.”

She blinks and then gives me a smile I swear would knock me off my feet if I was standing. “Those books are awesome.”

We eat the rest of our meal in relative silence, which is only broken up by brief small talk and her
groans of satisfaction as she eats the entire cheesesteak. It's refreshing to hang out with a girl who doesn't pretend she only eats kale and yogurt.

“Thank you for dinner.” She says with no trace of sarcasm at all.

Here's my opening. I mentally prepare myself
for the rejection, when it hits me off guard in the side of the head. Shit, I hadn't even been able to get two words out.

"Owen, whatever you're doing. It's not going to work."

Charm, keep that charm. "What do you mean, gorgeous?"
Minka rolls her eyes. "This. Whatever plan you have. Listen, I actually do think you might be a nice person. But believe me when I tell you, not only am I not looking for anything, but I'm definitely not looking for anything with a superstar athlete golden boy."
I frown at her summary of me.

"Don't give me that face, you know where you come from. And again, it's not because you aren't nice. You've been nothing but kind since we met. I'm just not in your league, and I personally don't want to be there."
Well there it is. The underlying issue. This girl really does hate the popular crowd. Not that I blame her. And I also really hate that people lump me in there.

"I understand your...feelings about people like me, as you say. But give me a chance. You
have no idea who I am. I like you, and I want to get to know you more. By shutting me out now, you are basically judging me the same way you think 'people like me' judge you."

I can see her warming to the idea. She knew that she was doing to me
exactly what had been done, or what I assumed had been done, to her for years.

"Fine. But only because you played the ‘don't judge a book by its cover’ card. And I love books."

She gives me a small smile. "So....I was planning to do a complete Lost marathon
on Netflix. You could stay if you want....”

She’d left the door open and there was no way I was going anywhere.

“Well that depends. Are you Team Jack or Team Sawyer?” I eye her, plastering my big-time flirt smile on my face and placing my chin on top of
my hands.

“Team Jack, all the way. He and Kate are meant to be together.” She answers quickly and vehemently.

“Ok, then I can stay.” I nod, making a show of relaxing my body, “While Sawyer is a total badass, Dr. Jack Shephard is my
ladies-man idol.”

Minka glowers at me. I follow her into the living room after she dumps the dishes in the sink.

Rounding the corner, I see the couch that held the memories from that fateful afternoon. She catches my eye, and as if she can read my thoughts, raises her
brows suggestively at me. Woah….is she taunting me? My dick does a happy jolt, wanting very much to be in between her legs, pressed up against her heat on that couch. I adjust myself when she turns around. I really don’t need her bolting now, and take a seat more towards the
middle of the it, hoping she’ll sit close enough so I can feel her smooth body.

She jiggles some wires in back of the TV and grabs the remote, setting up the streaming on her Netflix app. Now this isn’t an insult to girls, but I know plenty who have no idea how to turn on basic
cable. The fact that Minka sets up the entire thing herself has me semi-hard. Chicks who know technology are a turn-on.

She settles on the couch, and isn’t sitting on the opposite end, but also isn’t close enough to touch either. She presses some buttons on the remote, and
suddenly we are falling from the plane onto the deserted island. I study her out of the corner of my eye, itching to wrap my arm around her slim shoulders, massage the skin under my fingers and feel it go warm under my touch.

She’s tuned into the
show now, so much so that she gasps when the engine on the beach explodes, forcing Hurley to grab the pregnant chick. Meanwhile over on my side of hell, you could cut the tension in the air with a knife.

It's like there is this electric current running in the empty space between
her and I on the couch. I want to breach it so bad, but don’t want to send her fleeing like last time. I ignore my stupid manly urges and try to focus on the TV. She asked me to stay, and I don’t want to jeopardize my chance by doing something horny and idiotic.
By the time Jack is getting stitched up by Kate, Minka and I have slowly inched into the valley that spanned between us. Her thigh is so close to mine now that I can feel the goose bumps running down my legs to the balls of my feet. Her scents wafts over me;
citrusy and fresh yet sweet, like flowers. Its driving me insane. I want to bury my face in her neck and hair, hear those whimpers she made for me when she was on her back in this very spot, my fingers milking her orgasm.

But, I’ll settle for cuddling. Hell, I would
settle for being allowed to just look at her for several hours. But....I want to touch her so bad it hurts....so the bastard I am makes a break for it.

Slowly, and with all the control I can manage, I lift my right hand up to my ear, scratching a fake itch. I hesitate with it there, my
elbow in mid-air, and slowly arch it back as if I’m stretching, all while fake yawning in the process.

Great. I’ve basically reduced myself to a 12-year-old trying to touch a girl for the first time in the movie theater. But Minka just makes me so nervous, something I’m quickly
learning that I actually like. No girl has ever made me feel like this, and I want to know why she does. I groan inwardly, but keep going, because there is no way I’m pulling back now.

Finally, my arm lands on the back of the couch with a soft thud, and its
more like she’s sitting in my embrace rather than snuggling. I let out a whoosh of breath, realizing I’d been holding it, waiting to see how she would react.

Minka looks cautiously at my arm draped over her space, and then swings those beautiful eyes up to
mine. I see amusement in them, and a smirk dusting her pouty lips. Without saying anything, she burrows into my side, moving closer, and drapes her arm across my stomach.

My heart starts spasming and jumping for joy as I curl my arm
protectively around her and adjust so that her head is in the crook of my neck. I try to forget that her hand is dangerously close to the tool between my thighs desperately calling for her. We sit conjoined like this for the next two episodes, not talking but simply watching and
enjoying each other’s company. I’ve never hung out with a girl without the purpose of it leading somewhere. It feels nice.

While I may want to strip her naked and get my mouth all over her, that’s the understatement of the year, there’s no pressure on the situation. Which is
strange.

When I’m hooking up with a girl, because I rarely ever hang out with them on a platonic basis, there is always a clock on it. I want to get in them, get us off, and get them out of my room. I don’t usually want all of the strings that come attached to anything more.
But Minka could make me her goddamn puppet and I’d be so fucking happy. Allison was my only true girlfriend, and with her, we’d been horny teenagers trying to prove something. We would go at it, not smoothly or successfully either, whenever we had alone
time.

We weren’t really interested in what the other liked or had to say, because in truth, we were just using each other. I was popular, she was popular, people expected us to date. I liked the perks of having a girlfriend, and she liked wearing my jersey.
In college, I’d had my fair share of drunken hookups and groupies throwing themselves at me, but it was all empty. The entire time I fucked one of them, I was worrying about how I’d talk her out of my bed after.

Netflix begins to cue up episode four, and I wave of
panic hits me in the chest as I realize how late it is, and that I’ll have to let go of her soon. I tighten my arm around her, gently nuzzling the top of her hair.

“You feel amazing.” I blurt out as I rub my fingertips up and down her silky arm. So much for
not scaring her away, asshat.

Minka chuckles.

“You’re not so bad yourself, Mr. Washboard.”

“Checking me out, eh? Does that mean I can return the favor?” I angle my body to semi-leer at her, which earns me a gentle swat to my cheek. I
quickly cover her hand with my own, loving the feel of her soft palm caressing my stubble.

We stare at each other, a buzz starting to form in at the top of my spine. It’s like my whole body is vibrating I want to kiss her so bad. I watch her big brown eyes drop to my
lips, and my heart hammers against my rib cage. Slowly, I remove my big hand from where it dwarfs hers on my cheek, and reach for her heart shaped face.

I frame it delicately, reveling in how her smooth chin feels in my rough hands. Minka leans
into my touch, her upper body facing me now, legs tangled with my mine as we sit intertwined. I run my thumb along her cheekbone, feeling my skin spark with yearning as I go. Her eyes fill with lust, and a bit of apprehension, but not enough to stop me from my perusal of her
skin.

It seems like hours that I sit there, just feeling her face under my fingertips, mesmerized by her eyes.

A sensation in my chest has me anxious, only because I’ve never felt it before. When I look into Minka’s eyes, it's as if she’s seeing me, right down to
the soul. Like with her eyes she’s saying, “I understand you. Your fears, your doubts, what makes you tick.”

And it should scare me, especially because we’ve barely spent any time together, but oddly, it's like a puzzle piece has locked into place. We sit
there, feasting on each other’s eyes, roaming the other’s face, and all I can think is, complete.

I crane my head towards hers, never breaking eye contact, and hear Minka’s sharp intake of breath. Goosebumps trail down my arms and I’m literally shaking with
the need to take her lips, fast and hard, but I hold myself back with all of the control I can muster.

I don’t want to scare her, I want to do this right. I trail my thumb from her temple down to her jawbone, stoking her skin and forcing her to pucker her lips toward me. Her
eyes flutter closed, as if she’s waiting for me to close the gap and initiate. But I can’t seem to. All I want to do is stare at her, like this, so ready and full of anticipation. The build up is almost as good as actually kissing her.

I move a fraction, feeling like I’ll explode if I
don’t kiss her now, and seal my lips over her soft and delicate pair. And fuck, this is so much better than the build up. She rubs her lips over mine, and I feel my dick go rock solid in my pants.

I slide my lips over every inch of hers, angling my head to taste her in
slow, lazy kisses. Inside my chest, my heart is keeping a frantic beat, and every time she makes a breathy sigh when we come up for air, I feel little electric jolts of need pulse through my body.

I can feel her getting bolder, beginning to bite at my lips, which sends every
ounce of blood in my body directly to the massive hard on I’m sporting. I have to slow her down or I’m going to get carried away. I already want to swallow her whole as it was. But her tongue is now doing a damn sexy twist with mine, thrusting into my mouth like I’d
imagined thrusting into her tight body.

And now she’s pulling away. Eyeing me with a potent stare, her hands go to the hem of her cotton shirt. My mouth is dry and my hands begin to tingle. I want to touch her so bad in the place she’s soon to reveal to me that I might
convulse. I probably look like a jonesing drug addict instead of the debonaire stud I’m going for. I should stop her, but I’m frozen.

And then its off. The little brown wisp of a shirt flutters over her head and to the floor. And now I think I’ve died and gone to
heaven.
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MINKA
sit there, naked from the top up, as Owen stares at me. He looks like a starving animal about to devour me, but all he can do is sit there with his jaw hanging open, staring at my now very alert nipples. And it makes me feel oddly...powerful.

Powerful is not
something I ever felt with Gregory. I always felt like I was being dragged under the ocean, willfully going with the current but not in control of my own body. And now that I felt this power, I was *almost* not regretting my bold decision.

I’m very aware that I
am a walking cliche. One minute I’m warning him off, and the next I’m stripping for him so I can be completely naked for his hands to roam over me.

But the way Owen was kissing me with such care, mixed with such scorching heat, lit something up inside of me and started
burning down all of my defenses. I was tired of denying my body what it wanted, what I wanted, because of a stupid decision I’d made years ago. I wasn’t going into this blind, and I could protect myself from falling for Owen. I just wanted his body.
This had nothing to do with the fact that he’d brought me a cheesesteak from Mitch’s. I didn’t hear my heart sigh and dramatically swoon when I’d opened the door to that familiar smell. Damn traitorous heart.

I’m still posed there on the couch for him, and I
start to feel too exposed. He’s still just gaping at me, and I have the urge to cross my arms over my naked breasts. I start to move them when he says, “No don’t. I’m sorry…I’m just staring at you like an idiot…..but Jesus. Minka you’re incredible.” He reaches out
tentatively and grazes his hand on the outer part of the right mound, causing goosebumps to break out over my skin. I whimper and close my eyes, because his fingers whispering over my skin is already undoing me and he isn’t even really touching me. Slowly, he bends
forward, molding both hands over the tips of my breasts and tweaking my nipples, not gently, but not painfully either. The pressure is exactly what I need, and I arch my back, sending them more firmly into his hands.

Then he starts licking and sucking my
collarbone, which gets me even more turned on than I already am. I imagine him licking and sucking me where I ache, and more wetness floods the lace boyshorts that I, thank god, am wearing.

His tongue begins to scale my neck, and when it gets to the certain spot that
shoots heat straight to my core, I let him know, “Yes, right there.” I groan as he fuses his lips to my skin.

He lifts his head, his blue eyes now molten, the color of an ocean in the eye of a storm. “You like when I kiss that spot, huh?”

Lowering his head to my nipples, he never
breaks eye contact as he latches onto one. Its erotic and embarrassing at the same time. I want to look away, but am so mesmerized by what he’s doing, and what that was doing to my already soaked panties, that I simply can’t.

Whenever Gregory and
I had done anything, the lights were off. He hadn’t bothered to talk or look at me. If this is what everyone experienced during sex, which we were far from, I now got why they made such a hoot about it.

My skin is on fire as he kneads my nipples.
between his lips and teeth, working me up and then pulling away periodically to study me or place a scorching kiss on my lips. His hair is tousled from my fingers running through it, and I can’t wait any longer to see what’s underneath those clothes.

I try to push him back
and sexily undress him, but end up pawing his back awkwardly when he won’t take his mouth off my breasts. I let him continue his oral exploration while pulling at his shirt.

“God, you’re always trying to get me naked.” He jokes and pulls his t-
shirt over his head.

I suck in a gasp and can’t help it when my hands immediately fly to his stomach, tracing and massaging the lines of his glorious abs.

“Ah...fuck.” Owen flinches as I continue touching him. I look up when he curses, fearing
I’ve done something wrong, and meet his eyes.

“You have to stop.”

I bring my fingers quickly back to my lap as if I’d been burned. I was doing it wrong. I could feel the shame creep into my cheeks.

“No, no, Minka. Not because it doesn’t feel
good. Shit.” He looks apologetic and frantic, which brought some relief. I wasn’t the best at this, but I was trying so hard to make this good for him. “I just.....if you keep touching me like that, this is going to be over way too soon.”

I snort, finally
understanding his discomfort.

“No please, laugh at the guy who just admitted he was about to come in his pants. Makes me feel so much more macho.”

I lean in, cupping his face and taking his lips with my own. For some reason, around Owen, I
feel brave. Sure, he made my stomach do flips, and his drop-dead gorgeousness made me dizzy, but I didn’t feel like that young, inexperienced girl who had gotten in over her head. I wanted to take control, have the normal experience all high school girls were supposed
to have.

I pull him down with me as I lie back on the couch, and he moves so that we are laying side by side, my breasts pushed against his magnificent pecs. His skin is hot against my front, making my nipples impossibly harder.
His mouth moves over my mine, his tongue controlling the kiss. My head was spinning, and when he eased out and bit down on my lip, a guttural sound cut the air. I didn’t even realize it had come from me until he was attacking my mouth, growling down my throat.
I felt his hand brand my hip, kneading and caressing the skin overtop my bone. With every swipe, I felt my clit throb. I could feel how heavy and hot it was against the lace fabric every time I writhed against him.

As if hearing my silent pleas to move further
south, his hand slips under my waistband. I was so worked up, I didn’t even care that we were back in the same place we’d been two weeks ago. I wasn’t questioning this, it felt too good. Let regretful and angry Minka surface later. His fingertip brushes my clit, and just that touch
sends a lightning bolt up my spine. I choke out a cry of relief, and then a long moan as he circles two fingers around the sensitive nub.

“You’re so fucking wet. Fuck…” I can hear him groan into my neck, where his head currently rests as he eases a finger inside me.
Oh god, that feels good. Heavenly. It had been so long since someone other than myself had touched me there.

And Owen was amazing at it. He touches me reverently, like he’s worshipping every section of my skin. He knows exactly where to press,
where to stroke, so that in minutes, I am so close to release I can feel the familiar tingling in my belly. I’m shaking like a leaf in his arms, my body so tense, it was resting on a peak that I was about to tumble over.

He begins to kiss me, his lips coating mine and
sending my nerve endings sparking. “Come for me, Minka.” He breathes raggedly into my mouth. His words send me tumbling head first into the sensations. I tense for split-second, all of my focus zeroed in on his fingers pressing against my clit, and then the
orgasm hits me.

I gyrate against his fingers, my nipples brushing the light smattering of hair on his chest, and bury my face in his neck. My orgasm reaches into every crevice of my body, melting into my skin, and I stretch with it from my fingertips to my
toes, trying to hold on to every last second of it.

My breathing slows and I bring my head up to look at Owen. He eyes are smoldering, switching back and forth from my own as if he was trying to watch the last of the orgasm drain out of me.

“That was......the
“hottest thing I’ve ever seen.” He kept up his search in my eyes while I grinned like a moron. It was the best thing I’d ever felt. And all I wanted to do was return the favor. Make him feel as good as I felt. And maybe, just maybe, prove to myself that I could do this. I could make
someone unravel.

Putting a sultry expression on my face, or as sultry as I could muster, I place my hands back on his abs, feeling the ridges and his muscles contracting under my fingertips.

“You don’t….you don’t have to do this.” Owen
says, doubt and hope mixed in his breathy declaration. I continue my exploration of his chest, while at the same time silencing him by sealing my lips over his.

I tease his lips, coaxing him and trying to mimic everything he’d just done to me. “I do what I want.”
Anxiety, and something else, maybe power, swim in my veins as I slip my hand further down, inching my fingers past the elastic band on his basketball shorts. I feel his stomach tighten, and he steals the breath out of my mouth as he sharply inhales into our kiss.
I break away from his lips, too nervous and focused on concentrating on where to put my hand. I was going blind, too embarrassed to look down and correct my movements, when my hand connected with something hard and fleshy.
“Ahhhh,” Owen grunts as I realize I’ve brushed the tip of him.

I circle him with my hand and tugged gently upwards, feeling a bead of wetness drip onto my semi-closed fist.

“Fuck…..Minka...hmmn Owen’s talking in non-words now, reassuring my
confidence and causing me to pick up my motions. After I travel up and down his rigid cock a couple more times, I can feel his breathing get ragged as he buries his face in my neck, nibbling lightly at the skin there. I still wasn’t sure if I was making him feel good, so I
said so. “Is this...am I doing it right?”

He lifts his head, his brown locks falling into his eyes, which now assessed me with raw hunger. “This is the best fucking thing I’ve ever felt in my life, and all you’re doing is jacking me off. Yes, you’re doing it right. You’re
doing it the best way it's ever been done.”

I give him a small smile even though, inside, I’m beaming with pride. I begin my motions again, picking up the pace when he growls at me to go faster. Before I know it, he’s making the sexiest noises, that also happen to
be waking up my exhausted libido. He’s a drug, Owen, one I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get out of my system.

“Minka, Jesus…..I’m going to come.” He lets out a low, husky sound as he pumps his hips to meet my hand when it moves down to the base of him.
I try to keep the same fast pace, holding my breath in my anxiousness to please him. His eyes lock onto mine in a scorching stare, and I feel my cheeks color. I can’t look at him while I do this. I cast my eyes down and concentrate.

“Look at me. I want
your eyes.” He grasps my chin and drags it up so that my eyes are inches from his, both of us locked onto the other. At the same time, I feel his breath stutter on my lips, his hips jutting wildly.

“Yeah…..fuck, Minka.” He’s coming, and I feel his wetness spread over my
fist as he slows his pumping hips, his eyes still on mine but now glazed over in his satisfaction.

We lay like that, his legs tangled with mine, my hand down his pants covered in his come, our faces floating mere centimeters away from
each other, for a very long time. He’s breathing me in as he recovers, and my mind is going a mile a minute. What does this mean? Why can’t I stay away from him? Why am I still so turned on? Can we please do it again?

Owen chuckles and presses his forehead
against mine.

"Why...why are you laughing?" Fears grips me right in the gut for a few seconds. Until he responds with the cockiest answer I’ve ever heard.

"I need to bring you cheesesteaks more often. Like everyday. Putting it in my calendar now."
July moves in faster than expected, and with it, responsibilities. June knew I was having too much fun, and spending too much time with a certain beautiful girl, so it decided to end.

Clinics start back up this month, which means I’ll be on the road at least
two long weekends out of the next four. Meaning less Minka time. Me, and my dick, are already mourning the loss.

Since the night I brought her dinner, something has shifted. She was now almost all that I thought about, the only person I ever wanted to be
with. I’d spent nine and a half of the last 12 days with her, and I was nowhere near bored or tired of hanging out. It was a new sensation for me, one I’m not particularly sure I like since it leads to this horrible “missing-a-limb” feeling whenever I’m not near her.
We’ve texted while I’ve been gone for the past three days, and I’m praising the heavens that I get to see her tonight. As corny as it sounds, I can’t wait to have her back in my arms. I shoot her a text, something I’ve been doing all hours of the day since I left for summer training at
my college, Grover University.

Owen: Certain parts of my anatomy can’t wait to get reacquainted with certain parts of your anatomy tonight ;)

When Minka doesn’t respond for a minute or two, I get desperate. This girl, she makes me act like
a dog in heat.

Owen: And by that I mean my heart with your heart :) 

Minka: Don’t try to save ass now. You meant your penis, douche.

Mmm, there is my girl. 

Owen: Oh yeah, that too. And babe, it’s a dick. Or a cock. Or even a boner. The
word penis makes me think of this creepy old pediatrician I used to see....

Minka: While I’d love to keep discussing your freudian issues, some of us don’t think about your “dick” nearly as much as you do.

Owen: Noted, she likes me for my superior intellect and not my smoking hot
body. I guess that means she doesn’t want me to bury my face between her thighs tonight.

And I’m hard as a rock. We haven’t fucked yet. Or made love, or whatever stupid words girls wanted to use.

I might be a jock, but it didn’t mean I was stupid
enough not to notice Minka was definitely a virgin. We’d rounded all of the other bases, and that was just fine with me right now.

But, trust me when I tell you, sliding into third with her was better than any sex I’d ever had. The sounds she made as I
lapped up her sweet juices, the blush that seemed to creep all the way down her body as she got close to exploding on my tongue. Damn. I could do that for the rest of my life. No sex required.

Minka: You’re so vulgar, Axel.

She had no idea. I
could feel her blushing through the phone. Jesus, she’s cute. And sexy, and funny…and my hard on throbbed at her use of my last name.

“Why the fuck are you smiling like that?”

I look up just fast enough to dodge the batting helmet that Miles
has thrown in my direction. Clint Bellows and Parker Avery jog down the dugout steps after him, hauling their sweaty asses onto the bench.

“You lazy fuck. Pitchers always get the long end of the stick. You don’t even have to run
wind sprints.” Avery grumbled at me.

Dude was always in a pissy mood. But he was a great fucking outfielder. We put up with his attitude, usually ending up force feeding him alcohol to tolerate him. Parker was like the Hulk, but reverse. Get him drunk and he was
the nicest guy on the planet. And also one of the best wingmen. He could snag any guy, no matter their looks, a 10 on the hot-girl scale. Not that I needed his services anymore.

“That’s right sunshine. I just stand up there and look pretty. Oh...and don’t
forget, win you national championships.” I pat his cheek.

“Bro, gross. Why’re you sporting a semi?” Clint chokes on the Gatorade he’d just swigged.

“The real question is, why are you looking at my dick?” I wink at him and
readjusted myself. Damn baseball pants, you can’t hide anything in these bad boys.

“He’s probably daydreaming about the high school hottie he’s been smashing. Chicks got legs for days,” Miles whistles.

I zip a batting glove at
his face, effectively slapping him between his eye and his cheek. “I told you not to talk about my girl like that, Farris.”

“Woah-ho-ho, his girl, fellas. Did you hear that? Axel’s got himself a ball and chain. Not to mention an 18-year-old one.” Miles dances around the dugout,
mocking me.

“No way man, you have a girlfriend?” Clint asks in disbelief.

“Not exactly, dickwads. But if you must know, yeah, I’m spending a lot of time with her.”

“Why does this sound like a goddamn romance novel?” Avery quips.
“She’s not like these groupie chicks you douchebags bring home. She’s smart, and seriously funny. And she could kick any of your scrawny asses. And yeah, she’s got some serious legs,” I give Miles a shit-eating grin.

“Yeah whatever man, I guess that’s great. I’m
happy for you.” Parker stares out into the field stoically. I can never figure out what’s going on in that guy’s head.

“Alright, weirdo. I don’t know why you guys so are worried about my business, you all had your asses handed to you in batting practice. I can hit
better than that, and I’m not even required to.” Being a pitcher means I get special perks, depending on how you look at it. No, I didn’t have to condition as hard, or work on slugging one outta the park, but all of the pressure rested on my shoulders. My
performance determined whether we won or lost games.

“Dude it’s July. Our first scrimmage isn’t until the last week of September. I’ll get back to over three hundred in no time,” Miles stands up, juggling a bat between his hands.
Farris is our best hitter; he’s so close to breaking the school record for home runs averaged and he’s only a sophomore.

“Well, just make sure you take us to finals next year and no one will be complaining,” Clint adds, strapping the mass of catcher's equipment to his
body. Clint is my catcher, and while he can definitely be accused of skipping his schoolwork, baseball is his field of study. I swear the guy can read my mind and keep a hawk-eye on the field like no one I’ve ever seen.

“This is a team sport, idiot. Which means
everyone has to play together to win. Anything less has your ass on the bench in May.” Avery all but growls.

I know he’s still pissed about our regional championship loss, which took us out of contention for the World Series in June. Last year’s seniors
seemed to be more into the hazing and drinking aspects of being a college athlete, while all four of us wanted one thing. A College World Series ring. And maybe an MLB contract on the side.

“This year is our year, gentleman. We will get there,” I promise, feeling
confidence swell in my chest. This year would be different, I could feel it.

“Damn right we will. Now hurry up and let’s go through this pitching drill. I got places to be,” Clint heads up the dugout steps and out onto home plate.

I slide my glove onto my head, relishing the
familiar feel of the old leather conforming around it.

“Yeah we got places to be, people to bang.” Miles starts thrusting his hips into an invisible girl.

“Don’t let your girlfriend hear that,” I give him a stern look. While Olivia wasn’t high on my
list of favorite people, or anywhere on it for that matter, I didn’t approve of cheating. It was the lowest move you could pull.

“Yeah well, she’d have to be around to actually hear. Or care.” Miles sobers as he says this last part.

“Dude, I’m sorry, if
you wanna talk—” I start before Miles cut me off, shuttering his eyes and putting the joker mask back on.

“Don’t get all weepy on me bro! Hurry your ass up so I can get to a kickass party, and you can drive home to your high school hottie.” He runs out for a
casual toss with Avery while I work with Clint on my knuckleball.

Someday, he’d have to open up to me. I just hoped it wasn’t too late.

“CARO! I didn’t know you’d be home so soon!” I hear my mother screech.
Crap. I had been trying to go undetected, but that woman had ears like a bat. And it didn’t help that the gaudy all-marble staircase screeched like the cement of a parking garage anytime you stepped foot on it.

If I keep walking now, she will only keep
screaming my nickname, caro, or my dear in Portuguese, up the stairs. So, head hanging, I trudge into the library where she’s perched with a magazine in one hand, green juice in the other. My mom may have retired from the modeling world years ago, but it didn’t mean she
wasn’t constantly dieting and staying up to date with her fashion.

“Yeah, I’m just dropping my stuff and grabbing a quick shower before I head out,” I start to inch my way out of the room. I’m wasting precious time, time that I could be using to taste
every inch of Minka’s skin. It had been three days, and my need for her had me strung so tight, I can actually feel the kinks in my back at not being able to hold her.

“Excuse me!” She looks up from her magazine and points to her cheek. “I don’t see you all summer,
and you can’t even give your poor, lonely mama a kiss when you get home.”

I bend to kiss her cheek, smelling her signature sandalwood perfume. The entire house smells of it. The scent embodies my mother, sophisticated and beautiful, with an
underlying hint of wildness and freedom. While she isn’t the most conventional mother, she loves me with a fierceness that I thank God for. Who knows how I would have turned out if only my father had been around.

“Raq, have you seen my blue striped…Owen, I
didn’t realize you were home from clinics. Sit, tell me how it went.” Speak of Satan himself. My dad was ruthless in his pursuit of getting me signed to a professional team. Criticizing any part of my game was a regular occurrence for him.

“I actually really don’t
have time, I have to be somewhere…” I shuffle my feet, trying to escape this situation as fast as I can.

“You don’t have time for this? What could possibly be more important than your entire future? You really are lazy, kid, you know that?” His
voice raises three octaves by the second, and a flush starts to creep onto his cheeks. I want to punch the living shit out of him.

My entire life, I had been told by this man, who was supposed to encourage and support me, that I was a lazy, no good sack of shit. Maybe
not in those words, but he laid it on thick.

No, he hadn’t ever reached the level of physically abusive parent, but when you’re told your entire life that you’re not good enough, it starts to sink in. I don’t think my father had ever given me one high five, one “way to
go, pal.”

I can feel my blood pressure rising as I ball my hands into fists, physically restraining myself from acting on my earlier impulse to strike him.

“Are you done with pretending you give a shit how my clinic went, or did you need to berate me for
another fucking hour? Sorry we can’t all be you, Carl,” I practically shout in his face. I need to get it together. Focus on getting to Minka.

“You ungrateful little…” My father starts.

“Enough. Silêncio!” Mama shouts, her head swiveling between both of
us. “Carl, enough of this, please. He works so hard, let him be young. He has time for all of that, his future, if the majors is what he wants.” She soothes my father in her lilted Portugeuse accent.

“And you…” she points her finger at me, “If you ever curse under my
roof again I’ll wash your mouth out with soap. I raised you better. Don’t be so quick to yell at your father either, he only wants the best for you.”

I love her, but she just doesn’t understand sometimes. “He sure has a great way of showing it.” I seethe as I walk from the
room. Fuck the shower, I need Minka. No matter what I look or smell like. Breezing through the front door, I try to lift my mood as I head for her.
’d started to get cagey when he was 15 minutes late. By the time half an hour rolls around, I’m downright paranoid, chewing on my ring finger like it won’t bleed if I bite my cuticle for the thousandth time.

30 minutes. That’s how long I’d been waiting for
Owen. No call, no text. He was standing me up and I knew it. I’m so dumb. I’d let this happen again.

I stare at the clock. 7:31….okay, make that 7:32 p.m. Fuck this. I should go scrub my makeup off and pull my ratty old sweatpants on. Mint chip ice cream was just as good
as Owen Axel. That ignorant jock.

Just as I’m sweeping my long hair, which I’d actually taken the time to curl into long loose tendrils, up into a ponytail, a soft knock comes on the front door.

It can’t be him. Who would show up this late
into what was supposed to be a date? Moving towards the door, I peer through the peephole. Hercules himself stands on the other side, looking mussed up, but I can’t make out his outfit in the shadows of the front porch. But as usual, he looks lickable no matter what clothes adorn
his body.

Okay, so maybe Owen Axel shows up 30 minutes, no make that 32 minutes, late. Jeez, he was going to have some stupid excuse. I shouldn’t even open the door, he was just going to try and manipulate me into…

“Minka open up, I
know you’re there...I’m sorry,” he sighs, running a hand through his golden brown locks, causing the muscles in his biceps to flex. My heart gives a squeeze in my chest. God, he looks incredible.

I have to open the door, or I really would qualify as some immature high
school girl. Edging towards the knob, I slowly turn it, feeling the anxious tingles in my stomach spreading through my body. I don’t want to be excited that my very hot, very late, crush is on the other side of this door, but I can’t help it.

I have a witty jab ready
on my tongue, but it dies on my lips the minute Owen steps into the light pouring onto the porch from the foyer. He looks exhausted. He still has his baseball uniform on, *swoon*, which have hand- print sized orange dirt stains running down his thighs.
I’d never been jealous of dirt stains before, so this was a new one. His hair stuck up haphazardly, and my fingers were suddenly itching to run through it, to massage his scalp. Do whatever I could to wipe that defeated look from his face..

But its more than that.
He looks haunted. It scares me. Not because I didn’t know how to deal with it, but because the look he wore, with his eyes drawn together and his mouth bracketed by lines of sadness…it was the look I saw on my father’s face each and every day.

“Hey,” he breathes at
the same time I ask, “Are you ok?”

His lip curl up at our railroading of each other, but the smile doesn’t meet his eyes. I suddenly would sacrifice anything to plaster that charming grin he usually wore back onto his lips.

He moves toward me,
not uttering a word, and swoops me up so that my feet leave the floor while he embraces me. Talk about sweeping a girl off her feet, literally.

His hands go around my waist as he eliminates any space that had remained between us. My arms go to his strong
shoulders, and he buries his face into my neck. I realize that I didn’t know how not okay I’d been for the last couple of days without him. Not until he picked me up in his arms.

He keeps me there, suspended, for a few minutes, each of us just feeling the other under our
fingertips.

And I slowly began to acknowledge that I’m getting in way deeper than I had bargained for. And that I am too weak to stop it.

“Come with me somewhere?” he mumbles into my neck, pulling away to look into my eyes.
“Sure,” I mutter, mesmerized by his the flecks of turquoise in his baby blues. We walk hand-in-hand out to his truck and climb in. After he’d reverses out of my driveway, he takes my palm, lacing my fingers through his own rough, calloused digits. He
doesn’t let go the entire drive, as if I was some thread that would slip away if he didn’t hold on for dear life.

Owen maneuvers the car through Mitchum’s busy Main Street, which is coming to life on the beautiful Sunday night in July. People line the
sidewalks, speciality lattes in hand, checking out menus displayed in front of the chic restaurants abundant on this stretch of town. I had never observed the main drag much, I tended to shy away from it. Seeing it now, from the passenger seat of the town
superstar’s truck, I could almost understand that need to be seen.

My body jostles as Owen makes a sharp right, veering away from the hob-knobbers in the town square. I fall into his big body with an “oomph,” and he looks down to give me the most genuine,
despite it being small, smile he’s thrown my way all evening. I lean up and kiss his cheek, trying to soothe whatever he was warring with inside himself. I really had missed him the past couple of days.

Since he’d brought dinner over, and also
supplied some dessert, there had been a shift in our interactions. No, I wasn’t calling this a relationship. Yet. If I even wanted that.

But, something had changed. We texted and talked the entire time he’d been away at his clinic, something I definitely
wasn’t used to, not even with Gregory. A boy had never taken a genuine interest in things I liked or had to say. With Owen, it was just different. He was different. So damn different than I’d ever given him credit for.

And of course I can’t get enough of him. Besides
his obvious attractiveness, yes, he was insanely, panty-meltingly hot, he was smart. Really smart. He could debate me on a number of topics, and was versed in numerous subjects, whether it was politics or pop music. I never got tired of conversation with him.
And for someone who is an admitted introvert, that’s a big feat.

Owen drives us slowly around a bend in the road, and I suddenly know where we are headed. Giving an exasperated sigh, and not caring what’s going on with him for the moment, I voice my
objections.

“Seriously? You take the girl who hates high school, during the mandatory school day and beyond, to the high school? You *would* think this was a sick date spot, bro.” I huff, yanking my hand back from his.

And this is why,
besides being so damn different this past month, he was the same. The same as all of those people who had stripped me of my pride, my self-worth, and left me as this shell of a person. A person who would never, ever so easily trust anyone again.

I stare out the window,
calculating the distance between the football field and my house, seeing if it's plausible to run for it once he stops the car. I wasn't putting myself in another situation like I had two years ago. I'm smart enough to cut and run this time.

As we near the familiar
building with its all glass front, I actually start to sweat. I need to put my head between my knees for the fear of throwing up, but I have enough dignity left in me to not blow chunks all over Richie Riches’ leather seats.

But then he speaks, for the first time since we’ve
been in the car. “Trust me, okay? I would never take you anywhere that you didn’t feel comfortable.”

I look over to find his penetrating gaze on me, a slight smile playing on his deliciously full lips. Can I trust him? I would never admit this to him, or any breathing soul on this
planet, but I did. Which equally intrigued and scared the shit out of me. I just hoped he wasn’t leading me down a path of humiliation, because at this point, I was too far gone to turn back now.

“Ok,” I breathe. He nods at me and scoops my hand back into his.
Owen brings the car to a slow stop and maneuvers into a parking spot on the outermost row of the lot facing the wooded perimeter of the school.

Turning the ignition off, he reaches down and unfastens his seatbealt. “Ready?” He brings his thumb up to graze my
cheek in a sweeping motion. I can feel the touch all the way into my core, where a slow burn has started from just that gentle swipe. I have to stifle a moan, my body so wound up from not seeing him in days.

“Yes,” I sigh, moving into his hand that is now
firmly holding my chin. We climb out of the truck, and Owen rounds it to help me out. Grabbing a bag from the bed of the pickup, he wraps an arm around my shoulder and starts leading me towards the woods. I stare up at him curiously, raising one eyebrow.
“You’re awfully cute when you do that, you know?” he winks, my first indication that the Owen I know is on his way back to wherever he’d disappeared to.

“Well, it’s not everyday a guy lures me into a dark wooded area. You don’t have a knife in that bag
right, or a noose?” I joke, pretending to peer around at his backpack.

“Just keep walking, smartass,” Owen pinches my nose with the hand wrapped around my shoulder.

When we walk about fifty feet into the woods, I spy something ahead that
looks like a clearing. As we move closer, my eyes catch on a sign hung on one of the big pine trees.


Looking up, I see a pretty elaborate treehouse
high up into the pine. How had I never known about this place?

“What is this place?” I look over at Owen, who was smirking.

“Some seniors built it when I was a freshman, snuck out here to get stoned during school hours. And apparently,
engage in some other debauchery as well…” he snickers.

“Um...news flash, I don’t smoke. And if you really think you’re getting me naked in some seedy hook up spot, you clearly haven’t gotten to know me at all.” I start to feel cagey again. What the hell were
“Relax, goody-two-shoes. You’ll see why I brought you when we get up there. Now up you go,” Owen gives my butt a gentle smack, heat firmly replacing the sadness that had resided in his eyes just minutes ago.

Ok, so if he tried to get
me naked up there I wouldn’t exactly resist…

Nearing the tree, I put my foot on the first makeshift rung, essentially a slab of metal that had been driven into the tree. It would be a long climb, the treehouse looked to be almost 20 feet off the ground. I grab the rung
above my head and pull myself up, careful to go slow in the pitch black that had now set in around us.

“That’s it baby, take your time, go slow....”

Owen taunts from below me. So he wanted to play that game, huh? I wasn’t the only one who could get hot and bothered from
innuendo.

“Oh yeah, baby? Just try to keep up with me, I want us to get there at the same time,” I peer under my outstretched arm. I can’t see him well like this, the moon obscured by so many branches, but from his intake of breathe I know I’d accomplished my
mission.

I make it to the top, despite a few missteps and shaky hands, and pull myself up through the hole in the boards comprising the floor of the treehouse. Owen follows shortly after, pulling the backpack off once he stands up and spills its contents onto the
floor.

“Ok so we have….a blanket,” he winks as he spreads it out on the dirty wooden floor, “Juice boxes, every kid’s picnic favorite…..and….” Owen roots around in the bottom of the bag, finally pulling the item he was looking for free, “Swedish Fish!”
He smiles, taking a bow and then plopping down on the blanket, ripping the straw off one of the juice boxes and taking a large gulp.

I blink, stunned at this weird, yet adorably cute turn of events. And then a trickle of doubt niggles under my skin. *Is this his*
play? This is how he gets me
to completely fall?

“So, this is where you take all the girls, right?” I say, trying to keep my voice void of any emotion.

Owen snaps his head to me, his expression unreadable from where I stand in the moonlight.

“Actually no, I have
never taken any other girl, let alone person, up here with me. Jeez, you must really think that little of me.” he shakes his head, staring out over the trees.

Instant guilt floods my system. I had to stop doing this. I had to stop second guessing my gut. I had to stop letting the events of
my past rule my present. I sit down on the blanket next to him and fold my legs indian-style.

“I’m sorry. I just.....it’s not easy for me to trust. Especially someone like you.” I play with the frayed edges of the blanket.

“Someone like me?
We’re back to this again? I’m just me, Minka.” Owen edges his fingers close to mine, not quite holding my hand, but just laying his fingers there. “Who made you like this?”

His question is almost a whisper, almost as if he didn’t even want to ask it. Did he really not know?
Maybe he hadn’t realized that the girl who was humiliated was me. Was I ready to tell him?

Looking at him in the silent, dark night, his fingers drawing circles into my palm, I realized I wasn’t. I couldn’t reveal what had happened, not yet. I couldn’t stand to
think of the day he looked upon me with pity, or maybe even evil humor in his eyes. It was a mix between the two, the looks that my classmates gave me. I wasn’t ready to give this up. I wanted Owen to see me as he saw me right now, for as long as I could hang on to it.
“It’s….in the past. I’m sorry for snapping.” I need to change the subject, and fast. “What was wrong earlier?”

Owen lays back on the blanket. “Join me?” He motions for me to lay back with him, so I do. “This is what I come up here for.”

Following the direction
Owen’s muscled tricep is pointing, I stare straight up. “Oh my.....”

Overhead the tree’s formed a canopy, with an opening directly above where we laid in the treehouse. “I’ve never....”

“Seen the stars so clearly? I know. It's like you’re sitting in the clouds.
It’s addicting, this view.” He reaches out to find my hand on the blanket where it lays in between our bodies.

I’m star struck, literally. I can’t even seem to form a sentence. It feels like the sky is inches from my face, like if I was to reach out, I might be able to hold one
of those burning balls of light. Butterflies explode in my stomach as I realize, Owen had brought me out here. Obviously this spot was special to him, and he’d shared it. With me.

We laid there holding onto each other in a peaceful silence, until Owen spoke up.
“I have felt like a failure just about every day of my life.”

If he didn’t sound so goddamn sad just then, I would have thought he was joking.

“You probably think I’m just over-exaggerating. ‘How could a rich, popular jock like you ever feel like
that?’” He laughs cruelly at himself.

I stay silent, willing him to go on.

“My father……he’s this baseball legend. Set tons of records, played for the best, most notorious team in the world. He’s in the Hall of Fame, he has gotten everything he ever
wanted. Except for me that is....the son who can never, ever do anything right.”

I squeeze his hand, feeling the pain radiate off of him. I want to take him into my arms, but can sense his need to get this out.

“"All my life, the man I
was supposed to look up to, who was supposed to love me more than anything, he treated me like shit. Do you know that if someone tells you over and over again just how not good enough you are, you start to believe it? Well, that’s what he did. Nothing is ever good good
enough. I pitched three perfect games in high school.....in high school! Do you know how hard that is?! Do you know what he said to me after my last one? I came off the field, looking, finally, for some words of encouragement. He told me that my last four
pitches of the game registered under 90 miles per hour, and that I needed to work on that on the unlikely chance my sorry ass was ever going to make it to the majors.”

I move across the blanket and prop myself up on one shoulder. With my fingers, I begin to run
lazy circles up and down his arm, trying to comfort him.

I can’t believe what he was telling me. Him, not feel worthy? He had everything. It had never occurred to me that we were more alike than I’d ever imagined.

“I try so hard, you
know? I try to get good grades, stay a part of the ‘in-crowd’, and most of all, I try really fucking hard to be the best damn pitcher anyone has ever seen. And I don’t just try. I grind myself into the pavement day in and day out to make those things happen.” Owen pauses,
shaking his head as if he’s trying to work out some idea stuck in there. “He laid into me again tonight when I got home. Called me lazy. I just want to drop him sometimes, just lay his ass out. Sometimes I wonder if it wouldn’t be better if I just disappeared altogether…”
This last statement shocked me. I didn’t know Owen well enough to know if that was serious, but I knew how it felt to think everything would be better if you were gone. I’d struggled with those thoughts. I didn’t want to call them suicidal, because I personally know I would
never take my own life, but I knew what it was like to struggle with them.

“Fuck him,” I spit. The sudden thought of this handsome, gifted man doubting himself so severely pisses me off.

“Fuck him, Owen. If that’s how he wants to treat his son, who is so incredibly
talented, smart, funny and so many other things, then fuck him. You don’t owe him shit. You have worked hard for everything you have.”

He sits up then, a mixture of awe and sadness in his perfect blue eyes. He lunges for me, scooping me up into his
lap and engulfing me with his big body.

“But what if, when I get to the top, all they see me as is Carl Axel’s son?” he whispers into my neck.

I run my hands up and down his back over his shirt, wishing I could rub out the lingering doubt and fear inside him. “It’s
your choice, and your choice only, how they see you. Don’t resort to living in his shadow.”

“You’re the most amazing person I’ve ever known.” Owen brings his hands up to my face then, circling it and looking deep into my eyes. My heart starts to spasm. I
know in this moment, I am in trouble.

Because if I wasn’t in danger of being lead down the path, I was now. My heart wasn’t in danger of giving itself to him, because it had already given itself up to him.

Moving his lips towards mine, he kisses
me sweetly, reverently. Owen steals my breath, kissing me so tenderly that I forget to take air in.

Stopping the kiss, he rests his forehead against mine. "I want to take you somewhere next weekend. Will you come with me?"

"Where?" I can barely think to try and register a
sentence.

“The Outer
Banks....my parents have a
house there. I want to have
you all to myself before I
leave for summer league in
two weeks.”

I couldn’t have said no
if I tried. No matter how
many warning bells were
going off in my head. He’d
just opened up, way up, and I found myself wanting to spill my deepest secrets and fears to him as well.

“Of course I’ll go.”

Owen drops me back off past midnight. We might have gotten carried away
and lost track of time after I’d agreed to take a trip with him. I couldn’t seem to keep my head on straight whenever that boy got within 20 feet of my body.

Walking into the house, I freeze when I hear a thud come from the kitchen. I stop, my heart suddenly in
my throat, afraid it might be more than a bump in the night. I hastily grab an umbrella from beside the door, holding it over my shoulder like a baseball bat, ready to strike.

Creeping around the corner, I yelp like a mad woman when my dad appears through the
archway to the kitchen.

“Jesus, dad, you scared the crap out of me.” I drop the umbrella with a thud and place my hand over my chest to calm my rapidly beating heart. Little good that would have done to stop a potential intruder.

“Where the hell have
you been? When I’m at work, not to mention when it’s the middle of the night, I expect you to be at home.” he launches into a monotone tirade. I can feel the blood in my face start to rise, prickling along my skin. “I trust you to be responsible, Minka. You have demonstrated you
are anything but that."

I can’t even find it within myself to be furious. Was this a fucking joke? “Sorry I didn’t get the carrier pigeon you sent over alerting me to the fact this was the one night you’d be home for the month. I’ll make sure to jot that on my calendar next
I start walking towards my room, the elation I’d felt from my night with Owen quickly fading due to my father’s presence.

“Answer me, young lady. Who dropped you off? You know your curfew is 11 p.m., meaning you’re two hours late. One
o'clock in the morning is not acceptable, Minka.”

I was done. Not only had he ruined my night, but now he was trying to be some sort of fake parent? Give me a break.

“Not acceptable? Let’s have a reality check here, shall we, dad? I have been caring for myself nearly
my entire life; cooking my own meals, making sure I got to school, checking my own homework, and tucking myself in. I don’t do drugs, I’m not a teenage mother, and I haven’t marked my body with piercings or tattoos. I drink on occasion, but not to excess, and I never drive
under the influence. I pull a 4.0 GPA, am enrolled in college courses and overall am a pretty desirable child to have. A lot of parents would be beaming with pride to have a daughter like me. But then again, you’d have to be home to notice any of that. You’d have to give two shits
about your kid and her
safety and happiness to
have any say in how I live
my life. So no, father, I
don’t have to answer your
questions. I don’t have to
answer to you when you
feel like throwing the slim
amount of parental
authority you have
around, and I don’t have
to do it any other day of the week either. Now, go do what we both know you really want, and sleep at the station.”

With that, I slam my door in his face. I heave in mouthfuls of air, feeling a cataclysmic void rip open in the middle of my chest after vomiting the
emotions I’d held down for so long. My eyes burn with unshed tears, and my throat has gone hoarse.

I can’t believe I’ve finally snapped after all of these years, hurling the brutally honest thoughts I’d always buried deep inside.

Silence resounded from
the other side of the door, confirming that he had in fact packed up and headed off to the station. He couldn’t even be enough of a parent to punish me for talking back.
I’d barely seen Minka this week, she was so busy with her summer courses and I with baseball. We barely had time for a text. The only contact we’d had was a heavy makeout session in my car one night after I’d stopped by her house after practice.

I’m headed to Miles’ to
use his gym for strength training. Mostly because I can’t stand being in my own house, no matter how state-of-the-art my father kept his gym. We haven’t spoken since I’d stormed out five days ago. I was taking Minka’s advice. Fuck him.

Just remembering the
fierce look in her eyes as she spewed her diatribe about my shit of a father made something inside my chest feel like I’d just finished a round of wind sprints.

She understood me more than anyone I’d ever met, and I’d meant it when I told her she was the most
amazing person I knew. It didn’t matter that I’d only known about her for a little under two months. She was stuck in my head. And even though it was definitely too soon, I began to think she was stuck in my heart too.

The idea that I could have had her long ago if
I’d gotten my stupid head out of my ass wasn’t lost on me. I felt like shit that I’d been too obsessed with myself in high school to notice her. It also wasn’t lost on me that she was hiding something. Jesus, she’d started shaking the minute she realized where my car was headed. If and
when she opened up to me, I was finding and killing whoever had made her that scared, that ashamed, that she couldn’t even come within 50 feet of a place where kids were supposed to feel safe.

I pull up to the gates of Farris’ estate. Yes, I said estate.
While my family was rich, and had enough money so that none of us would probably ever have to work again, we were no Farriston. The Farriston’s had more money than God.

I plug in the code to call up to the house, needing Miles to buzz me
in. I ring once...nothing. I ring a second time. Nothing. The third time I ring, Theresa, their live-in housekeeper, comes on the intercom.

“Who is it, please?”

“Hola Theresa, it’s Owen. Can you buzz me in?”

“Oh, Senor Owen. Of
course!"

The gate buzzes and then slowly opens as I ease my truck past the ornate wrought-iron fence. Theresa has been with the Farriston’s for as long as I had been friends with Miles. I gathered that she was more of a parent to him than either of his
biological assholes had ever been.

Parking in the porte-cochère, yes, they have a fucking valet-style car park, I walk into the castle that Miles grew up in. My house is nice, downright Mansion if you asked most Americans, but Farris made my family look like
we were on welfare.

    Theresa was nowhere to be found, and Miles hadn’t even come to the door to greet me.

    “God, fuck you, you stupid fucking prick! Pick up the goddamn shotgun!”

    Well, that can’t be fucking good. I make my way towards the
basement, the fact that I can hear Miles shouting from my place in the marble foyer not registering as a good thing. I descend the basement stairs, peering my head around the corner as soon as the half wall clears from my view. Ok, not in here. I can’t see Miles in the main
basement room, which was a cross between a pool hall and an upscale bar.

Walking back towards our usual hangout spot, I finally hear him shouting again. “Fuckwad, what don’t you understand about covering my back?”

I enter the little hallway which houses two rooms.
On one side, the kick ass gym. Miles has all of the latest exercise equipment, even though no one in the house besides him uses it. His mother’s probably working out with the trainer’s equipment rather than this stuff, if you know what I mean.

On the other side of the
hall, a door stands ajar to the room I can definitely now hear shooting noises coming out of. I push it open to see Miles sitting in day old sweats on the humongous sectional.

The media room is less of a media room and more like a personal Best Buy store. Any electronic you’d
ever want to play with can be found in here. Old-school Pinball and Tetris machines stand in one corner, on the same wall as the most elaborate stereo system I’d ever laid eyes on. On the other wall, floor to ceiling shelves are filled with any movie you would ever want to watch.
The entire back wall of the room was a cinema-style projector screen. It was Miles’ favorite thing about this room, and was currently being utilized.

“You’re going on missions without me? I’m hurt!” I mock cry, feigning disbelief. Farris startles at the sound of my voice and
pauses his war game.

“What the hell are you doing here? Who let you in?” he scowls.

What crawled up his ass and died? “Nice to see you too, sunshine. I came over to lift, remember?” I point at my body, which sports the appropriate workout attire.
“Well I’m not in the mood.” Miles turns his attention back to the game, slinging his headset over his ears and hitting play.

“You can see yourself out.” What the fuck? “Dude, what is wrong with you?”

I shove at his shoulder from where I stand behind the couch.
Farris ignores me, opting to spray a hellfire of bullets down on the enemy. Two or three more minutes pass like this, me standing there in confused shock, him playing video games as if he was completely alone.

pulled the plug out of the wall.

“WHAT THE FUCK?” Miles screams as he watches the screen suddenly go black. When he whirls around to see me with chord in hand, he actually chucks the controller at my face.

I dodge it, so it strikes
the wall instead, denting some of the plaster.

“Now look what you fucking made me do, asswipe.” he grumbles, the fight seemingly leaving his body.

“Bro, are you okay?” I walk to where he sits and awkwardly drop to the couch next to him. Even
though we have been friends almost our entire lives, Farris and I don’t talk feelings. We never had.

“Olivia dumped me.” I see the tick in his jaw as he looks away from me, clearly trying to hide his upset.

“Jeez man...uh I’m
“I didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t really sorry, I was glad he was rid of that leech. But it didn’t mean I wanted my friend to hurt.

“Whatever. Stupid bitch was cheating on me for months.” I hear his voice break. Fuck. I really did hate that girl.
"Fuck her, man. You don’t deserve that. She wasn’t even worth your time. Good fucking riddance."

I’m not good at this brotherly love shit. But it was high time we tried, to start supporting each other emotionally. Miles was some of the only family I
had.

“Yeah….maybe you’re right.” he doesn’t sound convinced. “At least I can score all the pussy I want when we get back to school.” he smiles, but it isn’t a genuine Farris smile. His goofy grins usually light up his entire fucking face. This one
wouldn’t even make a puppy wag its tail.

“And what a bright side that is.” I throw him my best conspiratorial smile.

“Let’s get started this weekend. I’ll tell Merry to throw a Field Party. Guarantee I’ll be balls deep in the back of my truck by
Shit. I really didn’t want to rain on his parade even more with my suddenly prosperous love life.

“I can’t this weekend.”

“Why not? We don’t have any clinics or camps until next week.”

“Well….” I really don’t
want to break it to him this way, but I didn’t see any way around it. “I’m taking Minka to my beach house for the weekend.”

I cringe a little as the words leave my mouth. I really don’t want to look up and see the look on his face.

When I meet his eyes,
he’s scowling.

“Really? The minute I get my ass kicked to the curb, Mr. Perpetually Carefree & Single takes it upon himself to bag a high school wifey? Fuck you, Axel.” he grumbles, lifting himself off the couch and walking to the mini-fridge next to the Pinball
He reaches inside and pulls out a dark-looking beer, cracking the can and taking a long, hard swig.

“Bro, it’s like 10 a.m.” I eye him cautiously.

“No time like the present, dude.”

He finishes the can in three long chugs and goes
in for another. I’d seen enough.

“Whatever, dude. When you feel like talking and not being a dick, call me. I’m always here for you, even if you want to act like a melodramatic pussy.”

With that, I walk out of the room and make my
way out of the Farriston mansion. Place always felt more like a prison to me.

Feeling my bi’s and lat’s cry out in agony, I go hard through my last rep, killing myself to push the 250 pounds to full extension.
Grunting, I drop the weight bar back into its place above my head, thanking God that workout is over.

I’d pushed myself harder than I should have, but after my argument with Miles, and with the knowledge I’d be taking a few days off, I needed it. If
I was going to make the majors, I had to be in the best shape of my life. Giving my arms some extra muscle was an added bonus.

It turns out I didn’t have to fear running into dad at our home gym, he was away at some speaking engagement for
the weekend. Hilarious. Whoever paid to see my father make a motivational speech was better off dunking their head in a vat of bullshit.

I grab a towel from the steam rack mom installed down here and make my way to the kitchen. I needed a protein shake.
Walking into the upstairs hallway, I already hear the blender going. Smiling, I make my way into the kitchen. Mom stands at the enormous island, dropping things into the state-of-the-art blender dad had given her as a birthday present. I will say, for being such a prick,
my father sure did have a soft spot for his wife.

“How did you know?”

I smile at my mom. She really was my saving grace.

“Ah, you resided inside my belly, I am all knowing when it come to my baby.” she grins.

“Ew, mom, that’s
totally gross.” I run my hand behind my sweat drenched neck, suddenly my appetite waning.

“I’m just joking with you, caro. But, I am your mother. And I do know everything about you. Which is also how I know you have been avoiding coming home for the last
month.” She raises an eyebrow, giving me a pointed stare. Basically, she’s telling me to spill all my secrets before she uses her voodoo mother magic. “Couldn’t we just talk about something else? The weather, your next hair appointment?” I send her my puppy dog look, my
best attempt to curtail this disaster of a conversation. Instead, she swats me upside the head.

“Spill you little bugger. Or no smoothie for you. And I added extra peanut butter…” she moves the glasses away from where I sit at the counter.

“Ok, ok!” I was a
sucker for her chocolate peanut butter smoothie. “Well, it’s no secret that your husband is a douchebag, so I guess that’s why.”

“Do not speak about your father like that!” She shakes her head, grinding the contents of the blender one last time. “He is
looking out for you. He just wants you to do well, caro. But, we’ve spoken about his behavior. I think it might be good for you and him to sit down.”

She pours the thick smoothie into large glasses, and my mouth begins to water.

But, then I felt it.
Anger. Creeping up into my pours. She always took up for him.

“Not happening, mom. I’ve heard, my entire life, about how much of a failure I am. About how much I don’t measure up. I don’t need to sit down with the bastard to be berated for another 45
minutes. Tell him he can write me a note. Or better yet, text me. I can delete that faster.”

“Ay, caro, you only see the smaller picture. Sometimes we need to step outside our own box to put ourselves into someone else’s shoes.”

My mother, the
beautiful, elegant, smart woman that she was...had never, ever grasped the Americanized versions of cliches.

"Besides, I think he will have some things to say to you that might surprise you." She pushes my smoothie glass across the counter and takes a tiny,
bird-like sip of her own. “But let’s get to the real reason you haven’t been here. Who is the woman?”

I nearly shoot smoothie out of my nose. I swear to God, my mother is psychic. And has voodoo powers.

“Wha...how...how did you know?” There was no
point in trying to cover up my relationship, whatever it was, with Minka. First off, my mom would have seen right through it. And second, I didn’t want to hide Minka from anything or anyone in my life. I was damn proud that she even let me talk to her, let alone do the other things I had.
Okay, no thinking about Minka’s body in the presence of my mother was officially off limits.

“Oh you’re so cute, caro. I told you, I know everything. And…Maria also called and asked if it was okay to stock the beach house with liquor. You didn’t think you were
going to just call her and not have it come back to me, right?”

Shit. I hadn’t thought about Maria, the caretaker at our Outer Banks house, saying anything to my mother. Busted.

“Yeah...I should have known better. Should have asked her to lie.” I give her
my angel smile, and can see some of the fake scowl melt off her face. "But, you’re right. There is a girl. And she’s amazing."

A beat of silence goes by as I tip the glass up to my face and suck down some of the delicious smoothie. Damn, I hoped there was more in the
“Blender.”

“So, that’s all you’re going to say…?" She blinks at me, waiting for more. Jesus, women are such gossips.

“What else do you want to know, jeez…”

“Oh I don’t know, her name, where she lives, what she likes—”
“Her birthdate, social security number, family status.” I finish, smiling into my cup when she tried to swat me upside the head again. “Okay. Her name is Minka Braxton. She lives here. She’s smart, athletic, beautiful…” “Ahh, he is his father’s son. You and him, always
suckers for the beautiful ones.” She laughs, staring at the ceiling as if my taste in women is just all too funny. “You really like this beautiful girl?”

“Yeah, I really do.” I smile. Just thinking about Minka and everything I have planned for us this weekend makes my heart
feel too big in my chest.

“I think its great. You haven’t talked about a girl since that awful Allison in high school. If she makes you smile all goofy like this, she must be worthy of my perfect boy.” She touches my cheek, and I swear I see her eyes glistening with unshed
tears.

“Okay, calm down mom. It’s not like I’m getting down on one knee tomorrow. She isn’t even my girlfriend yet.” Although if I had my way, this weekend would change all of that.

“Yes, I know that, caro, but a mother can dream.
Ever since you’ve left my house all empty, all I can imagine is little grandbabies filling it back up!” She says dreamily as she walks to the sink, putting her glass in it.

Okay, girlfriend I could accomplish for her. Grandbabies…yeah that would have to wait.
MINKA
Ok, so I brought over like every sexy nighty I could find in my drawer!”

Chloe dumps a sparkly pink tote all over my bed, and a jungle of silk and lace cover the entire comforter.

“Chlo, I’m going for like..two and a half days…” I look to Kels for
help, who snorts and shrugs, turning away to wrap my jewelry in a pouch. Chloe catches my look, and scowls.

“Oh whatever, you two! This is the most romantic thing that has ever happened to any of us, I’m allowed to go a little crazy. Plus, you need
to look irresistible when you finally get back on that horse.” She winks at me, clearly talking about the sex that was apparently on everyone’s mind.

Yes, they were helping me pack for my weekend with Owen at the beach, but I really needed them here more for moral
support. This was the closest I’d ever gotten to having sex since Gregory, and I needed a pep talk.

“What if I freak out?” I voice the thought that has been circling my mind for days. Ever since Owen had asked me to go on the trip.

“You mean like seize up in terror and chop his
dick off?” My eyes flare wide at Kels’ imagination situation. I hadn’t even considered the possibility of physically hurting him! “Calm down, crazy. You’re not going to freak. And you definitely won’t chop his dick off. Although, you may give it the time of it’s life.” She sticks her tongue
out. What was this, make-sexual-innuendos-at-Minka Day?

“You’re going to be fine, boo. Nothing thus far has given you any indication you’ll freak out. In fact, you melt in that boy’s hands like putty if all the things you have told us are correct. So, I think it’ll
cum to you just fine,” Chlo snickers as she pats my arm. Then, grabbing a handful of pink and ribbons, “I think these ones are perfect!”

Yeah, no. Pink was my color in accessories, maybe a handbag or a shoe here and there. But, I couldn’t cover myself in the stuff
like Chloe did.

Sifting through the pile, I select a tasteful navy number and a lacey white bridal looking number. Hey, I was technically a born-again virgin, no one had touched my lady bits in a long time. It would convey the right message. “I’ll take these two.” I
fold them and lay them in my small tote bag.

“Those are sooooo Minka.” Kels rolls her eyes, turning back and stuffing two particularly teeny bathing suits in the bag.

“Oh, I’m sorry I’m not the nude beach type.” I drawl sarcastically.
“That was only a couple of times in France. And don’t knock it till you try it,” She points, giving me the stink-eye.

I need to change the subject. The butterflies in my stomach thinking about sex with Owen are giving me indigestion. And that’s the last thing I
need for this car ride with him.

“Hey, you know who is single?” I turn to Chloe, knowing the news will excite her.

“Who?!” My best friends chirp at the same time. We were nothing but shameless gossips, the three of us. But then again,
who wasn’t? If you try to deny it, I call your bluff.

“Miles Farriston.” I smile chummily, folding a pair of pajama shorts on top of the burgeoning pile of clothes in my weekend bag.

“What!? Ooooh, Chloe might have an orgasm on the spot!” Kels
bumps her hips into Chloe’s slender thigh. Yes, Chloe was tall, but my other soul-sister was tiny. Kels’ petite frame barely came up to Chloe’s shoulder.

“Wait, really? I thought he was dating some hoity-toity college bitch. Or at least that’s what his
Facebook said last week.” She blushes.

“Guilty! I see you Facebook stalker.” I stick my tongue out at her.

“Oh whatever, don’t think we don’t notice when you literally go through all of Owen’s pics in one sitting.” Her and Kels share a private grin.
So the boy had a lot of dreamy pics. I couldn’t help it.

“Yes, he is very photogenic. Sue me. Back to the matter at hand, though. Farris. You gonna make your move. Finally?”

She shrugs. “Maybe. What has Owen told you?”

Ah, the inside intel
game. I saw her strategy.

“Not much. Just that Farris isn’t taking the breakup well, but that his ex was a total scheming gold digger. Owen hated her. Maybe you can nurse him back to health, if you know what I mean.”

“Look at Queen Conservative making a
sexual suggestion! I like what Owen has been doing to you. He has my vote.” Kels nods seriously.

I pick up a beautiful blush pink maxi dress I’d bought up this week and fold it delicately before placing it in my suitcase. “Well he does have some magical fingers.” I wink,
and both girls gasp at my sudden kiss-and-tell attitude. "But that’s all I’ll say!"

“Well, getting back to me, maybe I will go after Miles. There is still about a month left to this summer. And it’s been totally boring so far. I need some action.” Chloe walks
across the room on tip toe and plunges into a deep plié when she reaches my dresser.

A knock came from my door. Hm, I wasn’t expecting Owen for another 20 minutes.

The door opens and there stands dad. My eyes widen and I stare in
surprise. Wow, he didn’t usually make an appearance in the middle of the day. Better yet, I don’t remember the last time he had made an appearance. He’d been avoiding the house like the plague for the last week. Ever since I’d unleashed almost 18 years of emotion
on him.

And shit. I hadn’t even told him I was leaving for the weekend. And now I was scrambling in my brain for some kind of excuse…

Which all went out the window because my two best friends, who I would have used in 99 percent of
excuses, were here.
Helping me pack. For my
trip to the beach with
Owen. Alone. With Owen.
Double shit.
He eyed the open
duffel bag on my bed
curiously.

“Hello girls, how are
you?” He asks politely.
“Great.” Chloe says, a
hostile tinge to her tone. Of course the girls knew my feelings about practically being an orphan, and Chlo wasn’t the type to leave the thoughts in her mind.

“Nice to see you, Chief.” Kels, on the other hand, flirted with my dad mercilessly. I think she partially did it because my
dad was “cute” (her words). Or the fact that it made him hideously uncomfortable.

“Ahh, Minka can we talk in the kitchen for a moment?”

Here we go. Better bite the bullet now. Whatever, if he threw a fit I’d just run away. Not like he would
notice for a day or two.

“Sure.”

I throw the girls an eye roll before following him through the house and into the kitchen.

We stand face to face, leaning against the granite counter tops. I wasn’t speaking first. He had called this little family
meeting, and I wasn’t about to start this chat off. “Listen, I…um, I want to apologize for not being around much lately.” He’s avoiding my eyes, looking anywhere around the kitchen but at my face. At this current moment, he looked like he was addressing the toaster.
I snort. “Lately? Try like, the last 18 years.”

“I know, Minka, I haven’t been the most attentive father, but—”

“No, dad. You really haven’t been.” I can feel the lump starting to form in my throat. Shit, today was supposed to be a good day. I did not want to cry.
“You know why it’s so hard for me. Why I can’t…” he made a waving motion between us.

“Yes, I know. Mom died, dad. But guess what? You still had one woman in your life. One woman who very much wanted you to be here.” I snap at him, feeling the tears shift
in the wells of my eyes. Soon they’d be spilling down my cheeks.

My father stands there, motionless. I think I see his jaw tick. We never spoke about her. Never brought her up.

My mother.

She’d died almost 18 years ago, while giving
birth to me. Complications with the labor, they’d told my father.

Not that he’d told me that. Kelsey’s uncle was friendly with my dad, and he’d spilled the secret after hours of drinking. Kels had told me when we were 10.

“You had me, dad. The
little girl who felt ashamed because her dad would never come home to spend time with her. Wondering what she had done to drive him away. The little girl who had to hide a picture of her mother in her bedroom drawer for fear she would get in trouble. The little girl who only
ever wanted love and affection. And instead was met with a big, empty house.”

I sniff, trying to suck up the tears that were already dripping down my face. My voice was hoarse as it left my body. I couldn’t keep the feelings in anymore. He’d wasted
18 years, 18 years, on his grief.

I look up and gasp. My father, the police chief, stands in front of me with tears in his eyes.

“You just....you look so much like her.” His voice barely registers above a whisper. His hand moves almost of its own accord
and comes to rest on my cheek. “It hurts to look at you sometimes.”

He wipes at his eyes, trying to get his emotions in check.

“I’m so sorry, Minka. I know I’ve drowned us both in my ocean of grief. I just…when your mother died, I went with her. My
soul was crushed. I didn’t know how to take care of a baby. And I especially didn’t know how to do it without the angel that I loved more than life itself.”

He stops, choking up at referencing mom. It was something he hadn’t said out loud in years.

“When I brought you
home from that hospital... this place. It smelled like her. It had her style, I could still see her clothes laid out on the bed. She was in every corner of this place. Those first few years were a special kind of hell for me. So as soon as I was able to put you in daycare and get out of this prison, I
did. Its why I never come home. I can’t stand to sleep in our bed. The bed I shared with Grace. It’s just so much easier to bury the pain in my work. And then you started to grow up. You have her hair, her eyes, her smile. When you put on that dress for your first spring dance, my
heart almost damn near stopped. You were the spitting image of Grace. I didn’t come home for a week after that. I couldn’t handle it.”

I know he hadn’t come home that week. If he had, he would have found me sitting on the bathroom floor, sobbing
uncontrollably while contemplating if I should end it all.

“"I’m just so damn sorry, Minks. You mean everything to me. And I’m so damn proud of you. I know how accomplished you are. What an amazing young woman you have become. I know...I know..."
I’ve messed up. And you don’t owe me a thing. But, I want to try. You only have one more year left at home. And I want to prove it to you that you mean more to me than anything else in this life. Can I do that? Can you let me do that?

I think I was standing
in a puddle I was crying so hard. Silent sobs wrack my body. I give him a slight nod.

I had never hated him. I understood his pain. But, I wanted to get through our pain together and develop our family. No matter how small it was.

He moved to envelope
me in his arms, and I squeeze him back. Relief pours through my system. This was the moment I had been waiting years for, and we were finally going to work on our relationship. Pushing back, I try to cut the serious moment with a joke.

“So now would be a
great time for you to begin your trustful-dad phase and let me go on a trip alone with my sort-of man friend to the beach.”

“Wait, what?” He looks down sternly as he wipes a tear from my cheek.

“Well so....there is this guy who recently came into my life. He’s really
great...and um, he asked me to take a trip this weekend with him. And he’s picking me up in 20 minutes.” I try for my best innocent smile.

“And you think I’m just going to let this little boy take my daughter away, alone I presume, for three days?”
“Yes? Come on dad, this is our first test. You can trust me, I promise. Owen is a great guy, and he will take care of me.”

Just then, the doorbell sings with the arrival of Owen. Welp, guess it was as good a time as any to introduce him to the folks. Or folk. Okay, that joke
was probably too soon.

“And that’s him now!”

I smile, turning to grab his hand and pull him toward the front door.

I pull the door open and lose my words for a minute. Owen stands casually on our front porch in a loose white button down and khaki shorts.
Both were perfectly tailored to him. I could make out the lines and curves of his muscles through the fabric. His golden brown hair was slicked back the way I loved it, and he was wearing aviators on his prominent nose. I think I had to pick my jaw up off
the floor.

And then I see his face as my father crowds into the doorway behind me. I can’t help but laugh at his panicked look as he rips the aviators he’s wearing off his face. Glancing back, I realize my father is still in uniform.

“Dad, this is Owen
Axel. Owen, my dad.” I make short introductions. “He...hello sir. Really nice to meet you. You have an amazing daughter.” Owen stammers as he sticks out his hand for my father to shake. My father grips it, hard. I see Owen go a little pale. I can’t contain my glee.
“That’s Chief to you. As in Police Chief. Which is who I am.” My father puffs his chest up. Oh lord. Owen shoots me a death glare. Whoops, had I forgot to mention that?

“I understand you want to take my daughter away for the weekend.”

“Uh, yes sir. Only if
that’s ok, Chief. I can promise you she will be protected, safe, and I will, and already do, regard her with the utmost respect.”

Suck up.

“Well, if you leave me the address of the beach house, your license, plate number and cell phone I can call, than she is
allowed to go. But I warn you, Axel. Any funny business with my little girl and I will have every cop in the state make sure to pay you a visit.”

Owen looks as if he might pee his pants. God, that little cry fest was so worth seeing this hilarity ensue.
“Yes...yes, Chief.”
I chime in. “Well, I’m going to go get my stuff. We can load up your truck and head out. Love you, daddy!”

And with that, I skip away to fill Kels and Chlo in quickly on the soap opera that was my life.
17

OWEN
“The police chief!? Really, Minka? The police chief is your dad! You couldn’t have given me a fucking heads up. Jesus!”

My little minx giggles in the passenger seat next to me. This situation was anything but funny. I nearly shit my pants when I saw her cop father walk
up behind her. That guy is seriously going to cut my nuts off if I ever even look at her the wrong way. Which of course I never will.

Speaking of looking at her, I can’t stop. She’s piled all those curls into a bun at the top of her head, which makes her look even
more fucking exotic and
delectable than usual. She
is wearing this curve
hugging white sundress
that I seriously am
considering ripping off of
her with my teeth.

I’ve had a boner ever
since she opened the door.
Which was kind of
awkward seeing as how
her father wanted to put a bullet in my balls.

I didn't need to admit to the girl I was crushing on that her father made me quiver in fear. Chief Braxton was not a small man. He wasn't even your average dad.

When you thought of someone's father, you
thought middle-aged, sporting a gut, mildly intimidating, but good-natured fellow. Minka's dad was a goddamn pitbull.

He was taller than me, probably about six foot five, in better shape than any cop I'd ever seen, and was menacing as shit.
When she'd walked away to do god knows what, possibly leave me to die, he turned his laser focus on me.

"Mr. Axel. So your Carl's son?" he sniffed as he said it, and I already got the feeling he didn't like
my father.

"That’s correct, sir."

"Hm. And how is it that you know my daughter?"

"We went to school together sir, but now I go to college. I reconnected with Minka when I
It was a lie but it sounded better than, "I finger banged your daughter after stalking her at an underage kegger."

"What are you in school for?"

"Teaching, sir."
Math specifically. And I’m also on a baseball scholarship.”

“Ah, so you coast by in school and hope to make your millions just like your father. Is that right?”

“Respectably, sir, no.” I didn’t need to elaborate. It wouldn’t
get me anywhere near his good book anyway.

“Let me tell you something. My daughter and I, we are working on our newfound relationship. But just because I’m trusting her to go with you this weekend, doesn’t
mean I trust you as far as I could throw you. And I could throw you, remember that boy. Keep your hands to yourself this weekend, and keep my daughter safe and happy.”

I almost choked, but that would have
required that my throat not be dry as a bone. This guy was really fucking intimidating. “Yes, sir. I plan to show her a great time.”

He sees Minka heading back towards the front door. He leans and whispers,
“And if you hurt her in any way, I will find you and I will kill you.”

“Sorry, it was just too good. And I’m getting used to this whole protective, overbearing dad thing.”

Hm, she was actually
revealing something without me having to pull it out of her. I decided to keep on this line of questioning.

“Yeah, he mentioned that you were working on your relationship. What did he mean by that?”

I reach over the console and drag her hand to rest
on my lap. Just her hand on my leg makes me instantly calmer. And also brings my dick to half-mast.

“We are. My dad and I, we haven’t always been the best communicators over the years. He’s been pretty absent, but…..well, I guess I should tell you that
my mother died giving birth to me.”

A frown marks her beautiful, plump lips and I instantly regret asking her about it. “I’m so sorry, babe. I didn’t know…”

I was never very good when it came to death, or comforting people in grief. I hadn’t experienced it all
that much.

“It’s ok. I’m not bitter about it. Never have been. Mostly I just get sad that I never got to know her. But that’s why it’s been so hard for my dad. He pretty much fell apart after she was gone. Threw himself into work, slept at the station most nights. It was
as if I lost two parents.”

I can’t imagine what that loneliness feels like. Sure, my dad could be an asshole, but my mom supported and loved me more than she did herself. My family was always together on holidays, birthdays and at least one weeknight dinner. Looking
at it from her perspective, my reluctance to sit down and talk with my father seemed petty. At least he was in my life.

“But recently, we had a blowup. Which was actually positive,” she snorts. “We aired our grievances, and he’s going to try to make more of an
effort.”

“That’s…great.” I smile, trying to forget his death threat on me just minutes earlier.

“Oh, you don’t have to pretend he doesn’t scare the shit out of you.” She squeezes my leg and my cock shoots from half-mast to wind blown sails.
“You do that again and he’s really going to kill me for what I do to you,” I stare into her eyes, which flash with heat. At this rate I’ll need to pull the car over and get her in the back. It’s been way too long since I’ve tasted her.

“So what about your father? I recommend a
huge blowup. It really does wonders for that fatherly bond.” She smiles, but I could tell she was trying to broach the subject of my dad.

This was definitely not the car small talk I wanted to engage in. “Alright, rap goddess. Can you take a little rock and roll?
Minka gives me a knowing glance, but thankfully drops the subject. This trip has already gotten off to a rough start, what with the firing squad I’d encountered at her house. I want to relax, see Minka let her hair down. I don’t want to sour our mood
with shitty talks about how much my dad sucks. The opening guitar chords of one of my favorite songs blasts out of the speakers, and I jack the volume up even more. I pull my aviators out of where they rest on my shirt collar, slip them on and begin to sing along.
Badly.

I peer over at Minka, and see her heated gaze taking in my entire form. A spark of lust hits me square in the gut. I can’t get us to the beach fast enough.

I begin to belt the words again, and I look over to see her laughing
hard. And damn, she’s a sight.

Her curls whips around in the wind coming through the open windows. She has her head tilted back, her mouth wide with a smile. Her delicate hand lays in my lap, and the other clutches her chest over her heart, as
if she can’t catch her breathe from giggling.

A little piece of my heart breaks off and makes its way across the car to her. If this girl keeps showing me these unfiltered moments, if she keeps letting me in, I might just fall in love with her.
The beach house is one of my favorite places on earth. The house itself is impressive, as was every piece of real estate my father purchased. But this place was pure, so much more toned down than his usual gaudy castle he bought.

The exterior sported
those faded gray shingles you always saw when you pictured Nantucket, and the front yard was more a mixture of grass and pebbles than sloping green lawns. I was always glad my father never tried to maintain that pristine standard here, it felt more natural.
The house was three stories. The bottom level featured a large garage that housed bikes, kayaks, paddle boards....basically any beach entertainment item you wanted, we had. The other side of the bottom level was made up of a huge media room. One side was its own private
movie theater, complete with the comfy black loungers. The other side held a ping pong and pool table side by side.

A memory slams into me....my father and I....him teaching me to play both. The memory brought a warm sensation into my chest.
It's why I loved this place most of all. I had only good memories of my father here.

I grab our bags from the trunk and escort Minka inside the media room.

"So this is the fun zone." I wave my hand around as she stares, not hiding her impressed
smile.

"Wow. I see you really spared no expense, huh?"

"Oh, quit playing the 'I loathe rich kids' card. You'll be thanking me when you can watch The Notebook in all its surround-sound glory later."

She wrinkles her nose.
"Ew, really? You take me for that kind of girl. I'd rather kick your ass in pool."

She makes me want to bound across the room and throw her over my shoulder. The girl’s full of surprises, and most of them turned me on immensely. "Duly, noted."
Spank Minka's ass in pool, I'll add that to the list."

"In your dreams, pal."

"Let's go drop these upstairs."

We make our way to the second level, which houses two of the four bedrooms, and a massive great room which doubles as the kitchen and living
The kitchen is state of the art, all stainless steel appliances and cream-colored counters. The overall theme of the house is beachy chic and neutral tones, beiges and creams stole over every piece of decor. Mama had picked rustic, antique pieces with
just enough flare to suit her expensive taste.

I move into the living room and set our bags down with a thud on one of the gigantic overstuffed couches.

"So here's the dilemma." I wait for Minka to stop drooling over the kitchen to propose my
plan. I know I need to tread lightly. "There are two guest rooms down here. But my room, and my parent's master suite, are both on the third floor."

She blinks, clearly not understanding where I’m headed with this.

"There is nothing more I want than to have you
share my bed this weekend. In which case I can take both of these bags upstairs. It has the best view of the beach too, just saying. If you need extra convincing." I stop, assessing her face. I can’t read the indiscernible expression that swims in her stunning eyes, which
were now the color of deep, dark honey. "But, I know you might not be comfortable with that. And I really want you to be comfortable. So this is absolutely your choice."

She contemplates me, and I can see the wheels turning in the back of that pretty head of hers. I
silently pray she picks my bed. I want nothing more than to hold her in my arms all night. And maybe there were some other especially dirty fantasies I wanted to put into action too.

But I would forgo the dirtyness, it would be tough but I would, if she
agreed to sleep in my bed. "I think I'd like to stay in the guest room. Don't hate me..." Minka cringes a bit and looks down at her shoes.

I’m across the room in two seconds flat. I gently push my fingers under her chin and tip it up until I can see her sharp, exotic
features in full view.

“First of all, I could never hate you. So forget that. Second, don't be ashamed or embarrassed for holding true to something. You don't feel comfortable. I would feel terrible if you chose to stay in my bed and didn't fully want to be there. I am
thanking my lucky stars that you even came on this little getaway."

Again, a niggling feeling at the base of spine alerts me to the fact that she has definitely been burned in the past. I won’t pry it out of her, but I also hate that she doesn’t feel one hundred percent
secure in my presence.

"Let's get you set up in the room down the hall. It has the better bathroom." I grin at her, trying my best to erase any fears or doubts taking up space in her head. "I promise I won't even try to sneak in here in the middle of the night."
When she speaks next, her voice is infused with a tiny bit more confidence. "No one said you couldn't try that."
Owen's room really does have the best view.

After settling my stuff into the guest bedroom downstairs, he'd convinced me to at least come up and see his rad Owen-cave. His words, not mine.

The room is enormous, it practically takes up half of the third floor. The half
that is not occupied by his parent's suite that is almost as big as my house. When I'd walked in and seen their bathroom, I told Owen he could lock up when he left, I'd be living in their soaking tub until I died.

Owen's room matches the rest of the house in its
creamy beige color palette, with accents of nautical decor throughout. His California King is backed by what looks like a huge piece of driftwood that has been painted ivory and made to look distressed. But what it faces is far more beautiful than the actual bed.
Directly across the room are floor to ceiling sliding glass windows that open up onto a balcony. The whole thing wraps around the entire top level of the house. I stare in awe as I make my way towards them, completely ignoring the hot slab of man putting his clothes away in the
free-standing armoire across the room.

Pressed up against the glass, so close I'm probably slobbering on it, I look out at the most breathtaking beach view I've ever seen. And that would also be only the second beach view I've ever seen.

Dad was never big on
vacations, as noted by his frequent absences. Chlo's family had taken me on a trip to Florida with them in middle school, but I found the beaches in Miami to be crowded. And filled with women in bathing suits that I'd be embarrassed to walk around in even today.
But this ocean view? It was majestic. Owen's house sat almost directly on the beach, save for a dune shielding the back of the house from the prying eyes of beach guests. All you'd have to do was walk up and over the sand hill to meet the ocean.

"You can go out on the
deck you know..." Owen chuckles, coming up behind me. I can feel his body heat against my back, and am instantly overcome with a warm buzz, wanting to feel his hands on me. Instead, he reaches around me, brushing his arm against my waist in the process, and clicks
open the latch, pulling the giant doors apart.

I wasn't sure I could move just then. Tingles move up and down my spine from just his contact against my skin. My body yearns so badly for him to just move his mouth down and close in on my neck. Like he'd done all those
weeks ago in my kitchen.

"Quit thinking about getting me naked, Braxton." He skims his finger down my arm, another repeat from my kitchen, goosebumps trailing in its wake. And then, just as my eyes close and a sigh forms on my lips, he smacks me square
on the ass.

"Ow! You dick!" I scowl at him as he twists around me and runs to the railing of the balcony.

"You only want me for my amazing body, we get it. But come over here and check out this view." He teases, facing away towards the ocean.
I join him at the railing and try to shove my elbow into his ribs, but he's quicker. He catches my arm and pulls me in front of him, bracketing me between the railing and his, yes, amazing body. My heart rate picks up.

"There, that's better." I feel him nuzzle my hair
and then rest his chin on my head. My heart literally melts into a pool of wilted-girly feelings. This is why I can’t stay in his room.

While the fear that he'd be just like Gregory had almost evaporated, Owen had done absolutely nothing but make me feel secure, it was replaced by
a whole new fear. The fear of falling. I was getting too close, letting him slip past my defenses and every wall I'd put up. I knew that if I'd agreed to share his bed, he'd tear them all down, shoving into the nooks and crannies of my heart. Places I'd never be able to get him out of.
I liked him too much, and it was only a matter of time until he left. I needed to keep straight about what this was, a summer fling. It was fun, sexy, and yes, he was great at romancing me. I had been seeing the world through rose-colored glasses ever since he'd stepped into it.
But the summer would eventually end, and I couldn't expect that Owen, a college sophomore, and someone destined for celebrity and superstardom, would wait around for me to graduate high school.

That's why I needed to keep a safe distance, avoid
getting caught in his orbit. Because if I did, I would definitely get burned.

"What's going on in that pretty head of yours?"

I can feel his breathe so close to my ear that it sends delicious shivers down my back. No way was I spilling all of the fears running through my
mind.

"I was thinking about how beautiful and quiet it is out here. Nothing like Miami."

I can hear the smile on his lips. "Oh, yeah? Are you a Miami connoisseur or something?"

"No, it's just the only other beach I've ever been
to me. My friend Chloe's family took me when I was thirteen.”

" Seriously? This is only your second trip to the beach?" I turn my head back and nod as he guffaws in disbelief. "Well shit, I have to show you what a real beach is like. Go slip into something
sexy and let's go for a walk." His hands squeeze my hips.

"You're a perv."

We make our way to our respective bedrooms, but not without him trying to follow me into mine and subsequently getting the door slammed in his face. When I’m finally alone, I
heave my suitcase onto the spacious king bed, and begin to rifle through it. 

Rooting around to try and feel for the straps of my bikinis, my hand hits the corner of a box. "What the...." I pull, finally freeing the item, and groan when I saw what my hand comes up with.
Condoms. Those idiots had put condoms in my bag. Chlo and Kels must have stashed them at the bottom of my bag when I'd been talking to my dad.

Tossing them aside, I start to pull out my clothes and arrange them in piles. I find my black bikini that ties in a bow at the center
of my chest, and think it qualifies as something sexy.

I tie the pieces of fabric to my body and then pull a long sun dress with a watercolor flower print on over my suit. Checking my hair and makeup in the mirror, I’m satisfied that I haven’t become too
smudged or wrinkled from the car ride.

Just as I finish applying some chapstick, Owen's knock sounds on my door. "Come on in."

He opens it as I set the tube back on the dresser, and I have to remind myself to breathe when I turn to him.
White board shorts hang low on his narrowed hips, and I can see the v-shaped muscles indenting the sides of his abs. His stomach muscles tense under my stare, and his skin, the color of buttery leather, looks like silk stretched across steel.

A white short-sleeve
cabana style shirt hangs open on his frame, unbuttoned. His thick arms are crossed in front of his chest, the white material of his sleeves stretched tight across his bulging biceps.

His college baseball hat makes his loose, syrup-colored locks fan out to
frame his face. When I bring my attention, finally to his face, his azure eyes have turned a stormy dark blue, a wolfish grin spreading across his full lips.

"Are you done? I'd like to take a walk this century."

I laugh, realizing I have
been openly gawking at him. "Yes, let me just grab my sandals."

I bend down to retrieve them by the night stand, and am horrified when I see what is sitting just in front of my face. Jesus, please just this once, don't let me be embarrassed.

"What are those?" Too
late. Owen has definitely seen the box of condoms, I can tell by the curious, smug expression with which he asks his rhetorical question.

"Nothing. I… I didn't put them in there."

"Sureeee, you didn't."

He teases. "Let's go, Miss Prepared."
I huff as I follow him out. I was going to kill those two.
Sea foam dots the shore line, tracing an invisible path that we walk along at a lazy pace.

Minka's sandals come off the minute we exit my house, I tell her to leave them by the hot tub, she won’t want them.

Now she digs her toes into the sand, her
turquoise painted nails peeking out every so often. Her curls are loose and windblown, and the dress she'd slipped on hugs her amazing curves as the ocean air blows through it. I have never seen a more beautiful thing in my life. It almost hurts to look at her.
I lace our fingers together, smiling warmly at her when she glances up at me through her lashes. "So...you never answered my question in the car."

Shit, this again. I needed to play this off. "What question?"

"I asked you about the
situation with your dad. Don't play dumb with me, Axel." She already knows me too well.

"Alright...alright. My mom asked me to have a sit down with him, said I didn't know the entire story. I don't know what I'm going to do yet." I lean down to pick up a shell,
running the smooth ripples of it through my finger. "The thing is, being back here...it brings back so many good memories of me and him together. We would play ping pong, he taught me how to surf, I'd help him grill. There isn't one bad memory here. But does that replace all of the
negative shit that has gone in the past couple of years?"

Her big brown eyes fill with understanding. "It can't replace it, but it can help you find the answer you're looking for. I think...that if you're so confused, you should sit down with him. Hear him
"This coming from the girl who told me to 'fuck what he thought,' the last time we had this conversation?"

"I remember what I said, but I was in a different place even then."

She stares out onto the water, as if the answer to
all of life’s problems can be found there. “Take this from someone who not only lost a parent, but never got to know them. If you don't take this chance to hash it out with him, you will regret it forever. No matter if the talk goes well, or if it ends terribly, you can walk away
knowing in your heart that you tried."

I motion for her to sit in the sand with me, and am impressed when she plops right down, not even once complaining about dirtying up her dress. We sit side by side, elbows resting on our knees, facing out towards the sea.
as the sun, lowering out on the horizon, paint the sky pink and orange.

"You're right, I have to try." I say quietly, more to myself than to her.

I feel her small hand squeeze my arm in a sign of reassurance.

"Can I ask you a question now? Is my turn
in the hot seat over?"

"Sure..." she replies cautiously.

"Why did you really bring those condoms with you?"

Minka huffs out a breath. "I told you, I really didn't pack them. My friends must have planted them in there as a joke."
"Did you think I expected sex for bringing you out here?" It was a reality I feared ever since I'd asked her to come here with me. I didn't want her to think she owed me a thing, and I didn't want to pressure her into something she didn't want to do. "Because I don't, at
all. I want you to experience that, preferably with me, but whenever it is, when you're ready. I would never, ever pressure you."

"Wait...Owen, I'm not a virgin."

Her answer slaps me across the face, and then makes it burn with shame.
Fuck, I shouldn't have assumed that. Now I’ve made an ass out of myself, and probably made her uncomfortable. And I’m also a tiny bit disappointed that someone had gotten to have that cherished gift of hers.

"I didn't...I'm sorry. I just assumed...because you
seemed so timid the first few times...and I...I'm sorry."

"I mean...I know it might be hard to imagine someone would want me in that way...." she shrugs her shoulders, dragging her fingers through the sand idly.

"No, Minka, that's not
what I meant by that at all. Truly. I just...you said a couple of times that you weren't as experienced, and so I just thought...Jesus, I'm an idiot. Just forget I ever said anything."

An awkward silence passes between us as the sun descends further into
the looming night sky.

"We should head back before it gets too dark." I hate myself for putting this kind of tension into her petite body. She stills me with her hand as I go to get up.

"I can, I can tell you about it. My first time. If you want to know." Her
voice sounds so small, fragile.

I really don’t want to hear about it, her with someone else. But this seems like a big step for her, by the way she’s breathing as if she’s about to unleash a giant secret. “I’d love to listen, to be here for you.”
"I was a sophomore. I'd never been particularly popular, but I hung on the outside rim of the in-crowd, mostly because of my two best friends. During the second week of school, this junior boy came up and introduced himself. I thought he was so cute, and I was freaking
out because he was actually talking to me. I'd never had that kind of attention before.” She smiles, but it's not right. It looks more self-deprecating than anything.

“Anyway, he asked me to hang out that weekend. He took me to the movies. Bought me Twizzlers, put
his arm around me, and at the end of the night, gave me my first real kiss on the lips." She pauses, a wane smile crossing her lips.

"It went on like that for a while, he was really sweet and attentive. But then he'd start asking me to do things. Intimate things. Just a little here and
there, and not aggressively enough that I thought anything of it. I'd convinced myself that he was older, and in order to be with him I needed to up my game. So I did. Things were usually all about him, but there were times that he pushed me a little too far, touched somewhere
that I wasn't exactly comfortable with. But he was so sweet after those times, that it made up for all of that." She looks pained now, as if old wounds are being sliced open and exposed to the salty air. I want to comfort her, badly, but am hesitant to. I don't want to spook
her.

"Winter Formal rolled around and he asked me to go with him. I was ecstatic. I'd never been asked to anything before. I was painstakingly thorough in my getting ready, the right dress, the perfect shoes. I even paid to have my hair done. When he picked me
up, I could smell the alcohol on his breath. I pushed it aside, not wanting to ruin the night. Tons of kids drank for these things, right?"

My blood singes in my veins, because I had been one of those kids. I want to punch myself. This prick wasn’t good enough for
her, and neither was I. "The dance was fun enough, he seemed a little out of it, but I was there with him. Everyone knew who I was, and knew we were unofficially a couple. I thought it was awesome. Afterwards, there was this huge party at Jason Hinkley's house."
I'd almost gone to that, but Farris had thrown a seniors only get together that I'd ended up at instead.

"When we got there, he kept drinking. I had one or two. He was sweet, hanging his arms around me, kissing me in front of everyone. When he asked
me to go upstairs, I was nervous, but I just pushed past it. This was what high school was about, right?”

She shrugs, clearly not believing her thought process.

“Well, the whole sex thing was fairly awkward, it hurt most of the time and he didn't pay much
attention to my needs."

Fuckbag. Only the biggest of pussies got off without helping out their woman.

"I thought, I'd done it, you know? At least it would get better from here. He was so nice the rest of the night, pumped up actually. And
then...when I got to school Monday morning. He dumped me. In front of everyone.”

Her voice cracks as she finishes that sentence, and I ball my hands into fists until I can feel my nails breaking the skin. I’m suddenly so angry I don’t think I can hear the rest of
her story.

"Turns out I was a prize in some game. He told the whole school I was easy, and anytime I saw him after that he'd cough some obscenity under his breath. Everyone did. I became the butt of the school wide joke for the next...well, I guess I still am."
I can’t see my vision is so black with rage. This f**ker was lucky enough to be with Minka, lucky enough that she gave him her virginity, and he threw it back in her face. And all of those people mocked her for it? I was ready to obliterate the world. "Who is he?"
"Owen, it wouldn't make a difference. Not now." she sighs, resigning herself to her fate.

"Who is he?"

"It doesn't matter anymore. Right before I met you actually, I'd decided to stop letting it matter. I'm not playing the victim anymore. I had a
hand in what happened, I could have chosen not to push aside those red flags."

"Don't you ever say that. None of that was your fault. Some asshole took this beautiful, innocent girl and used her. Used you. You don't ever deserve that. Fuck all of those people, Minka."
She gives a weak smile. "So...that's why I didn't want to get to know you. In some ways, the situation is all too familiar. Older guy pursuing me, so persistent and charming—" She nudges me, trying to make me laugh at her joke. I can't find the humor in it. "I would never do that
to you."

"I think I know that. Which is why I'm here with you." She snuggles closer, putting her small arm around my back, comforting me. "But Owen, don't hurt me. I don't think I could take it again."
After we’d walked quietly back from the beach, I'd grilled up salmon that Maria had stocked the fridge with. Minka put on some soft rock and pulled out two beers. I think she was trying to lighten the mood after our serious talks. It helped a little.

We laid on the sofa in
the living room, me flat on my back, her wedged between me and the back of the couch, wrapped around my body like a koala bear. I stroke her back absentmindedly while watching the baseball game lighting up the TV.

Something has
changed, shifted. Sure, I still want to have her naked and under me at pretty much all points of the day. But I have this strange need to fiercely protect her that wasn't there before. I guess her father and I have that in common now.

I need to keep her safe,
destroy anything bad that comes into her life. I'm surprised to find that I'm seriously falling for this girl. Surprised not because I don't want to fall for her, that's not it. It's just that...I've never really felt this way before.

But then again, I knew from the moment I'd met
her that nothing with Minka was going to be similar to any other relationship I'd ever had.

"Are you excited?" Her random question pulls me out of my deep thoughts.

"Huh?"

"To go pro. To be one of these guys." She flutters her hand towards the
TV, where the camera has a close up of the pitcher waving of signals at his catcher.

"Yeah...I think so. I'm not sure."

"You're not sure? Isn't it like a flight or fight response? You either have to have it, or you don't."

"I guess. I just...I've
always been good at baseball. It's not something I've ever had to struggle at. I do love it, there is nothing compared to that feeling of standing on that mound, controlling all of the players on the chess board. But sometimes I think I'll get there and think, 'This is it?'
She yawns, "I guess you won't know until you get there."

I glance at the clock, not realizing it was already midnight. The game being on the West Coast had thrown me off.

"Alright beautiful, I think it's time for bed. We have to be up early, I'm
teaching you to surf."

"Oh, yay! I've always wanted to try." She looks so cute in her sweatpants and tank top, cuddled up. Her eyes are half-lidded, she's so tired.

I take her hand and walk her down the hallway to her room. Pausing outside the door
frame, I kiss her forehead. "This is where I leave you."

Her arms wrap around my waist and she looks like she wants to say something else. Instead, she presses up on her toes and kisses me lightly.

Her soft, plump lips smoothe over mine, coaxing them in a slow
and sensual rhythm. I frame her face with my calloused hands, rubbing my thumb across the velvet of her cheek. When she begins to breathe heavy groans into our kiss, I know I have to break it off. After everything tonight, I need to show her that I’m not just here for the
physical.

"Goodnight Minka." I drop my hands from her face and pull her hands away from my body.

"Oh, okay. Goodnight." A tinge of something I can’t put my finger on lights in her eyes. It may be disappointment. Flashing one last smile, I
mount the stairs to my room.

Forcing myself to stay up there through the night is one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do.
We woman are the absolute worst. I'd been the one to tell Owen that I didn't want to stay in his bed. I'd told him about how much Gregory had hurt me and used me. I'd been the one who tried to push him away from the beginning. So why in the world had I been crushed when
he'd essentially dropped me off at the guest bedroom last night? Why had I laid in bed, not able to fall asleep until 2:30 a.m., cursing myself for ever telling him about Gregory? Thinking he probably wanted nothing to do with me now.

Why had I debated,
several times, not waiting for him to come to me and simply walking up to his room?

This is why I avoided shit like this. It made me crazy. It made all women crazy. We turned into paranoid, question-asking monsters who could do nothing more than blow
every situation out of proportion.

Of course, everything with Owen today had been completely fine. Good to know he hadn't lost any sleep over it.

Most of the morning and afternoon were spent down by the water, teaching me to surf. Which
hadn't been as much of a disaster as I'd originally thought. I even stood up two or three times.

We capped the day off with an early dinner, Owen had grilled steaks while I threw together my infamous pasta salad. We drank wine with dinner. The whole thing felt very
adult, which both excited and scared me. I couldn't help straying back to my earlier thoughts that he would never stick around for an inexperienced high school chick.

I was bent over the second floor balcony railing, staring out at the now descending sun
dropping into the ocean, when Owen came out from clearing the dishes. Instead of cradling my back against his front as he'd done yesterday, he stood beside me, just far enough away that we weren't touching. I gave an inward groan.

He'd been like this all
day. Friendly but not affectionate. If he did touch me it was quick, none of those lingering grazes or heated stares.

I didn't need to be treated with kid gloves. If this was my summer fling, the only chance I was going to have with Owen, than I wanted my money's
worth. I steel my nerves and dive head first.

"So...you were a great teacher today."

"Thanks. That's actually...um, my major."

Wow, hadn't known that. Now that I did though, I could totally see it. And I could totally picture him, in his school
appropriate button down, grading papers...okay, snap out it. That was one fantasy we could maybe act out later.

"You'd be great at that. But I'm wondering if maybe you had another lesson in you for today."

His eyes light up with interest. "And what did
you have in mind?"

"Well...I've never, I've never skinny dipped before. And I thought maybe you could show me?"

His baby blues liquefy into cobalt orbs, and his tongue darts out to wet his lips. I feel a little parched myself. That ask had taken
all of my courage, and my breath, with it.

"You...you want to go skinny dipping?" He nearly chokes.

"I do."

"Okay, sure."

He clasps my hand in his large one and leads me to the outside stairs that connect the decks above
and below us. When we come to the first floor, he pulls me across the wood expanse and down onto the grass. Of course Owen's family has a beautiful pool when the beach was just steps away.

By now the sun had fully gone down, the only light guiding us was the
half moon hanging low in the sky. At the edge of the pool, Owen drops my hand.

I was unsure of what move to make next. My brain had only gone so far as to think through the initial ask.

"So first, you have to take off your clothes."
Owen stares at me greedily, but warmth sparks in his eyes. I know he must have a lot of pent-up lust in there. We'd barely done more than cuddle and makeout for two weeks.

I hold his eye contact while I ease one strap of my periwinkle tank top
down. I watch him track the course of the skinny strap down my arm, and it gives me a buzz of power, knowing how much I affect him.

I slip the other strap down and then move to the tiny silver buttons that run all the way down the front of the shirt, keeping
it closed. My fingers tingle as I slip each button out of its loophole, with each one falling open, more of my skin is hit with the cool night air.

Owen’s eyes have gone black by the time I shrug the top off of my body, leaving me in my white strapless bra and white
Jean shorts.

Wordlessly, he pulls his navy blue t-shirt over his head, tossing it to the side. The moonlight bounces off the grooves of his muscles, highlighting just how amazing his body is.

He stands, waiting for me to make my next move. So that’s how we were
going to play. I throw him a small, flirty smile as I flick the button on my shorts. I hear his intake of breath at the tiny movement. I push the course material down my legs and stand up straight, a little more self conscience than before in just my white bra and bikini-style
underwear.

Owen pushes his khaki shorts down roughly and frantically. I hold in my laugh at his haste. Someone’s in a hurry.

As soon as he stands up, he takes one look at me, and before I can reach back slowly and unhook my bra, he whips his
I freeze. He was...he was just so beautiful. And I know that was a weird word to use in reference to a guy, but he just was. He looked like a sculpture, his muscles mimicking carved stone. And down below...wow. He stood stiff as a board, he was so turned on
it looked painful.

“Fuck this slow shit.”

One second he stood in front of me, the next I am in his arms, being pulled off the ground. A split second later we hit the cool surface of the water, breaking through and sinking under.

The shock of being
thrown, or carried, in hits me, and I begin to struggle from Owen’s arms, which we are rapped around my half naked body at the bottom of the deep end. Kicking off, I swim up and break the surface, sputtering.

Owen comes up while I’m coughing the water out

“What?” Rivulets of water drip off his wavy strands, and his chiseled arm comes up to slick it back out of his face. My core aches in awareness. Tingles snaked down my spine as I remember just how completely naked he
is under the water.

“ \text{I thought you were never going to touch me.} \text{ I’m not a china doll, Owen. I said don’t hurt me. That didn’t mean you can’t play with me.} ”

“ \text{Well get your sexy ass over here then.} ” \text{ He swims closer toward the middle of the pool, where he can}
stand.

He urges me to move closer, and my body moves of its own accord. All doubts and insecurities vanish the minute he pulls me into his tight, muscular form.

"How could I not touch you? How I could not worship you? God, look at
you."

I look down between us, trying hard to examine just what he sees in me that makes him want to declare me a god.

He moves his right hand from where it had been locked around my waist and ghosts his fingertips over the tops of
my breasts. Instantly, my nipples stiffen to a hard peak, something that is easily visible through the now soaking wet white piece of lace.

I hear his sharp intake of breath. "God damnit…"

Owen deftly reaches behind me, and I hear the snap as he unhooks my
bra, sliding it from my shoulders in one swift move. I watch as the whisp of white disappears into the dark water of the deep end.

My attention is quickly pulled back to the glorious, naked man standing in front of me.

He wrenches me harder
against him, with no barrier in the way now, my breasts mashing against his chest. My nipples are so hard that the sudden contact makes them sing with pleasure. He’s only been touching me for a couple of seconds and I’m already so ready to unravel that it won’t take
much more.

Feeling his impressive arousal nakedly pressing to the front of my belly has me nervous. And when I’m nervous, sometimes I babble.

"Isn't water supposed to shrink these things?"

I almost slap my hand to my forehead after
hearing that come out of my mouth. So sexy of you, Minka.

Owen chuckles, his desire not even phased by my stupid comment. I can see the heat pouring out of his eyes. He begins to move us through the water until he backs me up against the wall. "There
isn't a moment when I'm around you that I'm not hard. That I'm not aching to be inside of you. I know I said I wouldn't push you, but please, let me show just what this thing can do in water."

I audibly gulp. I am so turned on in this moment, I would probably let him
whip me or chain me up if he asked nicely. Moving my hands quietly where they are concealed in the murky water below us, I make contact with his cock and wrap one hand around it, stroking up lightly.

A low growl emanates from his lips, and it was all
the answer he needed.

Owen plunges his head down to meet mine, latching his lips onto my own and pulling long, sultry caresses from me. As my stroking increases on his nowhere-near-shrinking anatomy, up and down the bulging member to his hot, swollen head,
his kisses become frantic, eliciting moans and growls that work their way out of my throat.

And then, his hands tear my own away from what they so badly want to keep doing. I frown into his mouth, until he quiets me. "If you keep going, I will come way before I
want this to end. You are amazing."

His brilliant blue eyes connect with mine, and sparkle in the moonlight. Then his hands are on me.

One massages my left breast, rubbing slow circles which he makes smaller and smaller until he
brushes over my nipple, only to move back out and repeat the process over again. The other slips through my lace panties, expertly locating the spot between my legs. "Oh god yess..." I mewl and drop my head on Owen's shoulder.

"That's it baby, let me
hear how good I make you feel."

His dirty words sends a shiver through my body. Switching breasts, he kneads the right one while rubbing my clit at just the right pressure and speed. I can’t help but squirm.

"Shit, Minka, yes. Ride my hand."
I’m burning up from the inside out, and the cold pool water burns my skin when the ripples hit me. Between the contrasting temperatures and Owen's ministrations, I feel like my body is a grenade, seconds away from detonating.

Right as I feel the white hot pleasure spike low in
my core, about to send me tumbling over the edge, Owen stops.

"Wha...what are you doing?" I’m greedy and breathless, so pissed that he has left me teetering on the cliff.

I get my answer when Owen scoops me up, supporting my back with
one hand and using his other to wrap my legs around his waist.
Immediately, my body goes rigid with understanding. It's not that I wasn't ready for sex with him, but he hadn't even asked. An alarm sounds somewhere in the back of my mind as Gregory's eyes
loom in front of my face. "Minka, relax. Look at me." Owen says sharply but softly. It was a command, but not a gentle one. "I would never take something without asking. You tell me when you're ready for that. I just...I wanted to try something that I think you are really
going to like. So just...trust me?"

My body relaxes fractionally, and he pulls me closer. I’m now all but straddling his lap in a standing position.

He brings my arms around his neck, gently instructing me, and bends his head to kiss me gently.
but thoroughly. His tongue sweeps over mine, coaxing soft, needy sounds from my mouth to his. Just as the last of my tensions melt away, he brings our groins together, my clit lined up on his still bulging dick.

Pulling away from our kiss, Owen rests his
forward against mine and stares deep into my eyes. In an almost imperceptible movement, he lifts me an inch, maybe two, and then brings me down just as slowly.

The feeling it creates makes every hair on my body stand on end. I feel the tiny motion from my
toes to the top of my head, both of which were now tingling with jolts of pleasure.

He does it again, mimicking the motions of sex without being inside me. He uses his cock to massage my most sensitive part through my underwear, the rough lace
adding to the pressure and torture.

His hands grip my ass, digging in enough that I’m sure there will be bruises there for days. We both sigh into the other's mouth each and every time he moves me, and his eyes are like a mirror for mine. They are hooded, drunk
with passion.

But what I hope he can’t see in mine, what I hope I can conceal even while he’s unraveling my body, is the well of emotion appreciation and feelings for him firmly cemented in my chest. I feel my heart crack under the pressure with every
move, humbled that he would wait until I said okay to sex. Cherished that he wanted to find and introduce me to new experiences, both sexual and not. I was in grave danger of falling in love with him, and I had to hide it as best as I could. Especially from myself.
Owen's breathing becomes more labored, his motions with me more jerky. I can tell he’s close, and I’m not far off myself. I can feel the heat from his rigid tool grinding onto my clit, and I begin to move back, squirming for that release.

Sensing my need to
come, Owen readjusts, scooping my ass up in one hand and gripping me hard by the hair, pulling my mouth to his. The little bite of pain is all I need to start fucking him, over my underwear, back.

My senses go into overdrive, my brain hyper aware of Owen rubbing
against me and claiming my mouth in dirty, savage kisses. I break away to scream out as my orgasm breaks over me, exploding from within me and rippling through my body like the water in the pool.

A moment or two later, Owen lets out a deep groan followed by a string
of curses as he shoots hot, thin strands of come onto my stomach and his.

We’re both silent for what seems like minutes. I can’t even find the energy to push away from the concrete wall he’s backed me up against, which is now cutting into my back. When Owen finally
speaks, he can’t even form a full sentence. "You...that...Jesus."

I chuckle, and mentally pat myself on the back for rendering him speechless. He swoops down to place a gentle peck on my mouth. "Let's clean you up."

Moving us out into the
open water of the deep end, he washes evidence of his pleasure away from our stomachs, and then proceeds to dunk me. Cold water hits my lungs as I am pushed under, and come up sputtering. "You really know how to charm the ladies, huh Axel?" I cough.
"Just filling my daily asshole-jock quota for the day. Wouldn't want to give you any less ammo in your assault on my personality, you know?" He grins that devilish smile.

"Go find my bra. Some jerk took it from me and I need it back."

"Lucky jerk. But honey,
you don't need to cover any of that up." Owen winks and dives head first down into the deep end, presumably looking for the scrap of lace laying at the bottom.

I sigh and float onto my back, staring up at the moon in my afterglow of bliss. I'd never known it
could be like this.

In the dozen or more times I'd been with Gregory, he'd never once given me an orgasm. Which wasn't fine, but could have been semi-overlooked if he'd been decent afterwards. Usually, he'd carry on about how good it felt for
him, and then immediately get up to put his clothes back on. Then he'd either rush me out of his house, or quickly exit mine.

I had entered new and uncharted territory. Physically, things with Owen were amazing. Extraordinary. As good as they could get, and more.
But we also had a friendship, an easy banter and an understanding of the other's problems.

I'd never known what people meant when they said the full package, but I got it now. And it would be extremely hard to let go of when the time came.

And that time would
come, but right now, I wanted to live for myself. In this moment. No regrets or fears or doubts.

I hear Owen's body break the surface of the water, and am aware of his proximity to me. Right before he can grab me and do god know's what, I sink under and push away
from him, swimming into the shallow end and making a break for the stairs.

I amble up onto the stoned patio surrounding the pool, and stand in the moonlight, facing the pool in nothing but my tiny thong.

Owen remains in the
shallow end, frozen in place holding my bra. He stares, his eyes raking over my body like laser beams, hot and greedy, pinpointing my naked breasts, stomach and legs. I see him begin to harden again, his semi-erect cock rising above the shallow water.
"What the fuck did I do to deserve being here with you right now?" His gaze flicks up to my eyes, as if he was seriously asking me, expecting an answer. "You're so fucking beautiful, Minka. Everything about you."

His words stroke my heart, causing me to go a
bit weak in the knees. I don’t think before I ask.

"Will you take me to your bed tonight?"

He led me up the stairs, holding tight and firm to my hand as we went. When we made it the third floor, he stood toe-to-toe
with me. Sweeping me into a hug, he began to move, slowly, like we were dancing. His fingers were like flower petals, brushing gently up and down my body.

"We don't have to do this if you're not sure. You say how far and how fast."

I nod to his statement.
It’s all I can do, not sure what words might come out if I speak. I was sure about this, but I didn't want to get in my own way.

Owen, still hugging me to his chest, backs me up into his room. The moonlight streams through the big bay
windows, illuminating his large body.

Still naked, with water droplets clinging to his hair and chest, he looks like a Roman statue come to life. He took my breath away.

"Come here, beautiful." He demands quietly, giving me a look full of
lust and warmth.

One big hand frames my face, the other presses into my lower back as he takes my lips up. Taking his time, swiping his tongue in and out of my mouth, he backs us up toward the bed and gently lays us down.

We just kiss for a while,
so much so that I am trembling from the intensity and care he is putting into this moment. This was nothing like the pool, where we'd taken each other hot and fast. Owen was seducing me now, slowly and tenderly. It felt important. Deep. The connection he was
carefully building caused my heart to melt.

Moving his thigh out from between my legs, he begins to kiss slowly down my body, and I feel myself start to shake more.

"Calm down. I'm going to make you feel good."

Owen smiles up at me, and I relax a little.
And then his tongue is there, and I am shaking like my body is going through a seizure. He is lighting me on fire from the inside out, my body feeling like it was going to combust at any minute. Owen uses his tongue and his hands, building up slowly to the
very peak of my orgasm, and then slowing down right before I shatter.

"Owen..." I croak, and my voice sounds so far away, like I’m not even hearing it from inside the room.

He looks up, his eyes burning blue flames, just like the hottest tip of the
fire. I see him reach into his suitcase at the foot of the bed, and come up with a condom.

Laying down next to me, I rub his chest impatiently as he rolls the rubber skin onto himself. His cock is pulsing, engorged to the point that I don’t think it will fit
inside me.

Owen positions himself on top of me, staring into my eyes.

"I know you haven't...in a while. This might hurt. Just talk to me, ok?"

I nod, not even able to speak I'm so far gone at the moment.

And then he's pushing
into me.

He wasn't kidding about the hurt part. I don't remember much of the sex Gregory and I had, but I do know that Owen is way bigger than him.

There is a pinching sensation as he slides in.

"Ok?" He looks worried. A vein in his neck
is popping out, and I can tell he's trying to keep his desires in check.

"Yeah." I whisper, canting my hips. I know that it will feel better once he starts to move.

Owen strokes once, twice, slow and testing. A moan rips out of me as he pushes in to the hilt.
"Yesss..." he growls at the noises coming from my mouth.

I think I might explode at any moment. My body knows exactly what to do as Owen coaxes unintelligible sounds from my mouth. I’m so full of him that I’m afraid every next move will shatter me
entirely.

He takes my hands, lacing his fingers through mine and pinning them to the back of the bed near my head.

“I want to see you.” He shudders, and I can tell that we are both so close but trying to prolong this. We stare into each
other’s eyes as he rocks into me, the pressure oh so good when he fills me up. I let out a soft whine each time he retreats, as if my body won’t function properly without him inside me.

I’m not sure how I got so close so fast, but before I know it, the first signs of
orgasm are sending electrical pulses through my nerve endings, pooling low in my belly and then exploding out as the full force of it overtakes me.

I’m moaning and mewling into Owen’s chest as he barricades me to the bed, picking up speed to get himself there and keep
my orgasm going. Shudders and aftershocks wrack my body, and I feel myself hurdling toward the peak again as he pounds into me.

“Shit, baby, oh my god. I’m gonna…” Owen can’t even get the last word out as he stares into my face, letting out the sexiest
growl I’ve ever heard as he jerks into my body. Then he stills completely, and I can feel his release pouring out, the veins in his cock milking every last drop. He lowers onto me carefully, kissing my neck, my collarbone, and finally my lips.

“You’re perfect.” He
looks at me in awe, and I can’t wipe the goofy grin off of my face.

My body was in pure bliss, riding high from my orgasm. And I was happy. Really happy. I’d been brave enough to give myself to another boy, to try and erase the bad memories that this
intimate act held for me.

Owen hadn’t just erased them. He’d obliterated them.

“Give me a second, I’ll be ready for round two in just a minute.” Owen breathed sarcastically, heavily rolling off of me and pulling me to him.

My eyes widen at his
dick, which is still rock hard.

“Remember the first time we met, when you said you wouldn’t take your thong off for me…”

“You’re a jerk.” I laugh, knowing exactly where he is going with that one.

“But I’m your jerk.” He eyes me greedily, rolling
me onto my back.

And my smart mouth doesn’t protest one bit.
My mother, while she loved me and doted on me non-stop, hadn't done my laundry in years. After a few baseball games where I'd come home covered in dirt, sweat, or worse, blood, she'd gotten the hell out of Dodge. Her message to me? If I wanted to continue with baseball, I'd
have to wash my own vile uniforms.

While it sucked those first few years, I didn't mind it so much now. Plus, it had prepared my spoiled ass for college, where there is no mommy and no maids.

The rest of the weekend with Minka had gone
perfectly. Fucking perfectly. We spent most of it in bed, naked, and that was just fine for me. After a short beach excursion the next morning, we’d headed home on Sunday. I’d left her blushing on her front steps after a very long makeout session.

I couldn’t get enough of
her. What she gave to me, not only her body, but her complete trust? I felt like locking it up and eating the key. I was going to protect her and it with everything I had.

Folding another practice jersey and placing it to the side, I glance up to make eye contact with
none other than my dad, standing in the door frame. I regard him silently. I haven’t spoken to him since our blow up when I'd gotten back from the clinic almost a month ago, and had seen him just about as much as that.

"Just wait until you're in the majors and someone..."
does that for you. Major perk." He gives me a thumbs up in his lame attempt to start this conversation. The fact that he starts off with mention of the majors only ticks me off more.

"Is there something you needed?" I disjointedly begin whipping clothes
out of the basket and folding them haphazardly. If I can just finish, it means being able to leave this room and walk out on any talk with my dear old dad.

When he doesn’t say anything for several seconds, I’m forced to look back up. And have to mentally check myself to
not let my jaw hit the floor. My father actually looks nervous.

I'd seen him arrogant, cocky, and on the certain occasion happy. But never have I seen him nervous.

"I know you're mother talked to you about sitting down with me. I was wondering if we could do
"Sure, I'm sitting." I am a prick, but doing it on purpose. Let him grovel a bit more.

"This is probably a talk I should have had with you a long time ago...." He starts in, his Adam’s Apple bobbing as he swallows, visibly shaken. What the
hell has him so on edge?

“My childhood, it wasn’t an easy one, Owen. You know I grew up poor, but you don’t know the circumstances of it. I never talked about it, and there is virtually no one left from my past, so nothing has ever come out.”

I knew he was poor
growing up, it was actually one of the things that connected my parents. The other was that they worked their way to the top from nothing, which I respected immensely.

He keeps going. “I grew up in this shit poor town in Arkansas. My dad...he was a drunk, a
total loser. I never met my mother, she either took off or died before I could remember her.”

Shock overtakes my system...I can’t ever imagine my powerful, arrogant father in a situation like the one he’s describing.

“This house, yes its a
mansion by any standards. But my childhood home? It makes this place look like a fucking castle. I grew up in a one bedroom trailer. The water tank would go out every other day, I slept on the couch for fifteen years. Fifteen years, Owen. I didn’t have a bed until I joined the minors.”
His eyes dart around the room. I can feel the angst and pain pouring off of him, this being a topic he obviously never wanted to address again.

“Dad, you don’t... we don’t have to talk about this...” I say cautiously. I suddenly feel very young sitting next to my father,
who is close to tears.

“No, I need to tell you this. We weren’t just poor, Owen. That would have been bearable. But no. That bastard couldn’t just live with that. He had to abuse me on top of everything else.” He whispers out these last words, as if saying them quietly means
he’s not really putting them out into the world. “He kicked the living shit out of me on a daily basis since I can remember. He would have friends, girlfriends, drug dealers over.”

Rolling up his sleeve and turning his arm over, I see dozens of tiny scars
I’ve never bothered to look at before. “They would slap me, kick me, and even put out cigarettes on me.”

A tiny tear slips out of his eye, rolling down to his sturdy jaw. I have never in my life seen my father cry. It makes me feel incredibly helpless and small, like the world is closing in on me.
“Dad, I’m sorry…I didn’t know—” I’m nearly choking on the words now.

“No. I’m sorry.” He sighs, rolling down his sleeves and checking his emotions. “I didn’t know what my place as a father was. One minute I didn’t want to be anything like my father, and the next I
thought that his rough treatment of me got me to where I was. And maybe it would make you a star, too. All I’ve ever wanted was for you to achieve your dreams. And ever since you were little, you wanted to play ball. I just wanted to help you get there.”
He looks at me then, regret and apology in his eyes. The same color as mine. "And now I fear that I’ve done it all wrong. I thought being a hardass was what was best. But it’s not how I feel. I am so goddamn proud of you, Owen. You are ten times the player that I ever was,
and you are destined for the history books.”

The straightjacket of pressure that has been strapped to my chest for nearly my entire life suddenly snaps. Relief and my father’s words are the balm that cools my hurting soul. Proud. It was the one word I’d always yearned
to hear, and here he was, serving it to me on a silver platter.

“Thanks, dad. For uh... telling me about your past... but also for being proud of me. I... I was always doing all of this for you. Sure, I love the game. But you’re the one who taught me to love it.”
“I’d like to start over. If you’ll let me.” His eyes plead with me. Surprise still runs through my veins. I have never seen him so contrite. It’s like staring at a complete stranger. I don’t really know how to process or feel about this entire exchange. But this is what
I’d always wanted. If he could try harder, so could I.

“I think that would be great.” I hold out my hand for him to shake, but he pulls me into a hug instead.

I am beyond shocked that I think my body goes kind of stiff. The whole
thing is a bit awkward, but we’ll work on it.

We both pull back, smiling sheepishly at the weird affectionate moment.

“So, uh, mom says you’ve been seeing a girl.” This was his attempt to try harder? Well, I guess girls was a neutral subject.
“Yeah, I have. She’s… incredible.” I smile wide just thinking of Minka.

“Uh oh,” Dad laughs, a big hearty laugh. “You’re in deep boy!”

“Huh?”

"I mean, you are in the shit deep. That was the exact look I had when I was first trying to get your
mother to date me."

He raises an eyebrow at me, and I think about it. Yeah, I really like Minka. A lot. But we have only spent a month or two getting to know each other. Can I already be in that deep? Yeah, I definitely can. She wasn't like any other girl I'd ever
encountered. She was shy, yet bold. She was conservative, yet carefree and would hand anyone who questioned her their ass. She was so fucking smart, something that turned me on almost as much as her fucking perfect face and figure. And she understood me,
but also called me on my crap.

I had to be a goddamn moron not to have locked her down already.

"You should bring her to dinner this week, we'd like to meet her." Dad comments before rising to walk to my door.

Before he turns out, I
stop him. "Hey dad...thanks for this. And yeah, I’ll bring her by."

He nods, a small smile flashing across his face.

Once he'd leaves, I grab my phone from where it lays across the bed, and unlock it. Flipping onto my back, I punch the screen, and Minka's number
flashes across it.

I didn't want to wait another second. Being away from that girl was torture. And if I had any say about where this was headed, she would soon be my girl.

She picks up on the third ring.

"Hello..." her voice has
a questioning ring to it.

"Hey, its me." We hadn't talked on the phone all that much, but uh, she had my number. It was programmed into her phone.

"Oh, hey. Sorry, I'm just in the middle of studying. I wasn't really paying attention when I picked up
—" she trails off and I know she’s deep in thought. The image of her bent over textbooks, a pencil in her mouth, that concentrated look in her eye instantly makes my dick go from zero to raring to go in two seconds flat. I begin to stroke myself through my pants. I’m
aware I’m a very sick man.

"Oh yeah? Let me come over and help you study..." I begin to pretend to heavy breathe through the phone.

"You are a sick man." Yeah, she knows me.

"And you love it. Come on, let me come over. Its summer! Loosen up with me."
"I hear your naughty smile through the phone. And I would smack you if I wasn't so intrigued about you coming over."

"So that's a yes?" I silently pray.

"Yes. Come over, you pushy jock." Immediately coming to my feet, I put Minka on speaker and
throw the phone on my dresser.

"I'm going to choose to ignore that now and act on my feelings when I get over there." Pulling the t-shirt I pluck out of my laundry pile over my head, I sniff once. Yeah, new deodorant application needed stat.
"Ok, I'll see you when you get here." She hangs up, cutting me off from any more dirty comments I could, and probably would have, made.

I don new shorts with my college logo on them, and check my teeth in the mirror for any lunch left behind. Pulling on my
socks and sneakers, I grab my wallet and keys, almost tripping over my feet trying to scramble down the stairs.

"Woah, caro, where is the fire?" Mama stops in the hallway, carrying a tall vase of freshly cut flowers.

"I'm going over to Minka's, I'll be home later."
I stoop to kiss her on the cheek. My heart is beating full blast, as if pulling my chest to the car and one step closer to Minka.

"Ah, young love. You better invite her for dinner tomorrow!" she yells at me as I run out the door.
It probably takes about fifteen minutes to get across town to Minka's place. I get there in five flat.

Good thing dad was the local celebrity, and speeding by an Axel was excused. Bad thing that I was dating the Police Chief's daughter. He
would have totally arrested me on the spot.

I walk around to the backyard per Minka's text instructions she'd sent over before I'd left my own house.

And my studying fantasy is even better than I could have imagined.

Minka sat tucked into a
chair pulled into the patio table, books surrounding her on every side. Her dark, wild hair was piled on top of her head, making her look like some Grecian goddess. Her face was makeup free, as it usually was. For some reason, I now thought every girl I'd ever considered pretty
with that dirt slopped on their face was unattractive. But it’s what she’s wearing that utterly slays me.

Her red bikini peaks out from the gauzy white cover-up thing girls were always wearing. If it was meant to cover them, why was it see-through?
Not that I was complaining at this particular moment.

I can make out the swells of her tits, bulging but contained in the tiny scraps of fabric. Her tight stomach is visible, with the bottoms she wears riding low on her sexy hips.

Bounding over in three
strides, I scoop her up.

"Ohmygod Owen! You scared me! What, did you do like 85 coming over here?!"

I cut the rest of her interrogation off, shoving my tongue in her mouth. This girl makes me feel like a savage. I can’t behave myself when it came to
her.

After looping my tongue with her's, rendering us both breathless by the time I pull away, I speak. "If I had known that this was how you were studying, I would have done 100. Jesus, Minka."

I push her away a bit so
I can take a mental picture of her dressed like this. That one was definitely going in the spank bank for later use.

She blushes, pushing at my shoulder. "Enough gawking jeez."

She is so fucking cute when she was shy. She walks me over to the
lounger on the opposite end of the patio and scoots against the back of it while I take a seat on the end. I reach for her hand, running my other hand up and down her calf. Just touching her makes my world better.

"How's studying going?"
She has both eyes closed, head tilted up into the sun, basking in the rays. I feel like the blood in my body is moving too fast. I can hear it whooshing in my ears.

"It was good, but boring. I'm glad you came over."

"Me too, I missed you."
That earns me an eye open and a bright smile from her.

"Really?" She asks as if she doesn’t quite believe me.

"Yeah. These past two months have been great. Getting to know you."

"I feel the same." Back to shy, coy Minka.
I take a deep breathe, preparing myself for the commitment bomb I’m about to drop on her. "So, my parents want you to come over for dinner tomorrow."

That earns me a two eye open and a jaw drop. "Your parents know about me?"
What? Girls were so weird. "Of course they know about you. That's what happens when you like someone. When you really like them. Your friends and dad know about me, right?"

"Well...yeah...but that's because they saw you with me."
What did that mean?
"So if they hadn't seen me, you would have what? Kept me a secret?" The fact that the thought had crossed her mind kind of stung.

"I'm not saying that...its just...with my past, I like to keep things a bit more private."
Okay, I got that she'd been wounded. "You have to know that I'd never hurt you. I want to do the opposite in fact. I want you to meet my parents. Isn't that like, magic words to a girl?"

"I guess you got stuck with the a-typical girl of the bunch." She frowns,
and I grab her chin to pull her face level with mine. "Isn't it a bit too fast to be meeting your parents anyway?"

"I don't think so. They're curious about my girl."

She sits back in surprise. "Your girl?"

"Yeah...you, crazy. The
girl I've been spending all of my time with. The girl I'd like to be able to call mine if she'd let me. If she'd stop being so damn stubborn."

I move closer to her on the lounger, so that she is almost sitting in my lap. I wrap my arms around her to pull her closer to me.
"Say you'll be my girlfriend." I whisper, searching her eyes for some kind of positive answer.

"Owen..." she sighs, her dazzling eyes a mixture of caution and question.

"You'll be at college, I still have another year left here, who knows where I'll be
after that—"

I cut her off, trying to calm any nerves she had about making this official. "I'm only forty five minutes away. We will make it work, I can come here and you can drive to me some weekends. We don't have to outline everything now, but I just
know that here, at school, hell wherever I am, there will not be another girl as amazing as you. I really want to give us a shot."

She’s silent for a minute or two, that sexy contemplative look marking her face. Finally, I couldn't take it.

Leaning forward, I
framed her beautiful face with my hands, their size dwarfing her petite features. I stroke my thumb across her high cheekbones, and watch her lean into the caress. Moving my lips to hers, I swipe them softly once, twice. I coax her lips with mine, until we were
kissing slowly and softly, moving our mouths in tandem.

I was trying to pour all of my feelings of hope into her. Come on, say yes.

"This is not fair. You're cheating." She groans as I swoop in for another languid kiss.

She moves her hands to
my pecs, pulling on my shirt to move me closer. I am practically drowning in her fragrant smell, lilac with a touch of sunscreen. My hands move down her back as I pull her over to straddle me. I can feel her hot flesh through the gauzy material, and her scrap of bikini is doing
nothing to conceal the wetness pooling from her core.

   God, she is so wet I feel it through my shorts. My dick is so hard it feels painful pushed between us.

   "Say you'll be my girlfriend." I grip her smooth, curvy hips,
grinding her clit and ass up and down on my erection, giving us both the friction we desire.

A small moan bursts from her lips. "Fine," she croaks.

"What was that?" I lick the small, sensitive spot behind her left ear, and my dick twitches at her sharp
intake of breath.

"Yes. I'll be your girlfriend." Minka is mewling at me now, pawing at my shirt to get it over my head.

I wrap her legs around my waist and stand, carrying her into her house. I suck and bite her neck as we go, her body
barely hanging onto mine. I take us down a hallway, only to discover we'd ended up near the garage.

"Other direction," she half-giggles, half-whines because of how ready she is.

I head across the sprawling ranch, nearly running now I need to be
inside her so badly. Meanwhile, the little vixen is raking her fingers through my hair and sucking on the spot on my neck that made my balls draw up in anticipation. Sensations are skittering down my body, zeroing in on the head of my cock. Finally, finding her
room, I march in and all but throw her on the bed. "You drive me insane."

I am fully aware I’m probably looking at her like a lunatic right now, but the way her face is flushed and her hair mussed up from my fingers, I have to strain to get my dick under control.
I was seconds away from coming.

She squirms on the bed, not even able to talk, just telling me with her body what she wants. Frantically, I pull her tiny bottoms off, revealing her bare, wet pussy.

My dick twitches hard. This isn’t going to last
long.

I dive down onto the bed and between her luscious, tan thighs. I can see her arousal, slick and dripping from her slit. I could die like this and have no regrets.

I take the first tentative taste, gauging her response. I haven’t tasted
her up until this point, and am now wondering why I’ve waited so long.

Minka makes a long, satisfied moan and I think I might faint I’m so close to exploding. Trying to keep my release at bay, I suck and nip at her clit, her scent driving me nuts all the while.
I have to dig my fingers into her thighs to keep her from squirming.

"Owen, I need you. Now."

She doesn’t have to tell me twice. I whip my shirt off and fumble to kick my shoes and pants off, followed by my boxers.

I wince when my dick
hits the air. It's so hot and heavy that the cool breeze coming in through the windows stings my flesh.

"Condoms?" I can barely speak I am so ready to be buried inside her. Shit, I can't believe I'd forgotten them again.

Minka smirks through her hazy eyes and opens
her bedside drawer, throwing the small box at me. "At least one of us is prepared, Axel."

I tear at the box, not caring where the extra condoms fly as I grab one and rip at the foil. Rolling the little rubber circle onto my dick, I scoot her over to the other side of the bed
and lie flat on my back. "Get on top of me."

Her eyes widen, not expecting my request. I know she’s never done it this way, and I can’t wait to teach my girl just how much better sex can get.

Hesitantly, she straddles me, lifting her hips up until the head of
my cock is just poking at her wet entrance.

"Wait." I reach up, dragging the gauzy film of a dress off and out of the way. Then I reach behind her, untying the little bikini top until the triangles gap at her breasts. I pull that over her head and marvel when her
amazing rack springs free. I drag one finger over her taut nipple.

She gives a whimper, and I gently position her so that my cock nudges at her swollen lips. Placing her hands on my chest, she slowly lowers herself onto me.

I hold my breath, and
probably popped a few blood vessels in various parts of my body, trying not to come. As she slides down me, her tight pussy grips me like a fist.

"Fuck, you're so tight, babe." The room is too hot, I can already feel sweat sprouting onto my forehead while trying to
keep my orgasm at bay.

Minka's moans are coming out harsh and lilted now, and when she sinks all the way down onto me, she lets out a whoosh of a breath.

"I'm so...full this way. I don't think I can take it." She looks drunk with arousal, her fingers
digging into my chest as she rocks to feel the motion of me inside her.

"Shit!" Even that small movement almost sends me shooting my load up into her.

"I'm so close Owen. Tell me what to do." She nearly cries as she says it.

Gripping her hips
tighter, I forcefully drag her up, and then slam her back down onto me. I can feel the semen leaking from my head. I couldn't go much longer.

"Was that ok?"

She nods imperceptibly, her dilated eyes telling me that she needs the release as much
as I do.

"I'm so close too, baby. Move for me. For us."

And she does. With me gripping her hips and her fingernails digging into my skin, we move together. Pumping and retreating, gasping and moaning.

I was impaling her from below, each time she
sat back down on me, she took me all the way to the balls.

"Yes, oh god, Owen..." I know she’s about to reach her orgasm.

"Come for me. You're mine. Let me hear you."

I see the shudder that starts from the tips of her ears and snakes down her
body, her gorgeous curves rolling with it. When it hits her core, she stops moving, her eyes locking intensely on mine for a split second. And then she’s throwing her head back, her guttural moans shooting a beam of lust straight to my balls. Watching her face,
completely relaxed with pure bliss, makes me go off like a trigger.

I jut and buck my hips up into her tight heat in a disjointed fashion, just trying to bury myself as deep inside of her as I can get. She leans over, completely sated. When her tight buds brand the
flesh of my chest with their heat, I go off like a cannon. A harsh shout works its way through me, and I can feel the pure fucking liquid pleasure work its way out of my dick. I pump my hips until I’m too tired to ride it out any longer, and even then I want to do it all over again.
Minka lays on my chest, both of us a little sweaty and a lot exhausted. I know she has to be bone tired; its the first time she’s ever done that and damn, had she ridden the shit out of me.

I know I should pull out, tuck her into my chest and let her nap for a little,
but I am too selfish. Even after I’ve fucked her like the world is ending, I can feel the little bastard harden inside her tight, wet, perfect pussy.

I run my hand over her hair, trailing more than a few curls that have fallen out of her bun. I trace the velvety curves of her back
until I hear her breathing even out, and I know she is probably close to sleep.

“We should mmmm get...uhh.” Her grumbling is adorable, and satisfying. I’d fucked the smartass remarks right out of her.

Fuck, now I was thinking about fucking her mouth, and I really needed
to calm down.

“We should put clothes on before the chief gets home.”

That has me moving. I shoot up, whipping off my condom and trying to find a tissue to hide it in my pocket. I yank my boxers of the floor, putting one leg through and almost face-
planting in my haste to pull them up my body.

Minka giggles, laying gloriously naked in the middle of her bed. “Are you that scared of him?”

“Babe, have you seen that guy? He would rip my nutsack off if he knew I was having sex with his daughter.”
Her dad really is scary. Scarier than my dad, which is saying something.

Getting up lazily, she begins to cross the room and pulls an outfit out of her dresser. I can’t help but stare as she bends over to put the blue lacy underwear on.

Focus, Axel.
I pull the rest of my clothes on, and then cross the room to wrap my arms around a fully clothed Minka. I pull her close, inhaling the smell of sex on her.

“Say you’ll come over tomorrow night.” I plant a kiss on her lips.

“Okay. I’ll come.”
I’d never brought a girl home before. With Allison, I always went to her house. And I secretly knew mom would never approve.

Now? I was so goddamned happy I’d waited.
MINKA
Owen insisted on picking me up, so here I am, in his passenger seat rubbing my sweaty hands down the black lace circle skate I’d bought specifically for tonight’s dinner.

I’d been fidgeting the whole car ride, something I think Owen noticed after the sixth or so pass down
my skirt, because he reaches across the console and tugs my hand into his lap.

“Will you calm down? They are going to love you.”

His smile does nothing to calm my nerves. I am naturally jumpy around just him, now adding his
family and the pressure of that into the mix? I was bound to become catatonic by the end of the night.

Not to mention that I was now his girlfriend. And he was my boyfriend. For someone who had never had an official boyfriend, I was unusually calm. Not that I had ever
anticipated this was where we would end up. But when Owen asked me to be his, it just felt natural. I’d never felt this sort of rightness that had settled into my soul in the last 24 hours.

After we’d had that round of mind blowing, world shattering sex in my
bed, *in my bed* (I’d never be able to sleep the same in it again), he’d cuddled up with me on the couch and watched episodes of *House Hunters* while we ate ice cream. The whole thing was so domestic that I felt my inner future-housewife heart melting at the cuteness.
I had never been this person. I usually attacked any man who came within 20 feet of me. I shielded myself with my bitch armor. But Owen had broken through and peeled away the pieces, worming his way into my heart and lodging there.

And surprisingly, I
didn’t want to dig him out. Ever.

I’d paired the mid-length black lace skirt with a fancier white satin t-shirt blouse, pearl studs and sparkly gold flats. I’d taken the time to smooth out my curls with the straightener I owned, and took extra care with my
makeup, lengthening my eyelashes and making sure my lips were a pretty shade of maroon. The color matched my skin well.

We drive up to a large wrought iron gate, and Owen stops the car to punch in a code on the keypad. They swing open slowly, and he pushes the
car through. The driveway winds up and up, until we coast onto a plateau and the house comes into view.

“Wow.” I hadn’t meant to say that out loud, but the Axel’s house... damn. I’d seen some great houses, what with the millionaire kids I went to school with. But this was something
altogether.

You had to call Owen’s house a compound, there was no other word to describe it.

Just from the driveway alone I could see the ginormous main house, with its tuscan feel and sloping roofs covering beautiful wrought iron
balconies. Next to that, on the sloping lawn, I could see tennis courts to the left, flanked by what I could only guess was a state of the art pitching/batting cage.

On the other side of the house, connected by what looked like a thin hallway, was a five-car garage.
“Its obnoxious, right?” Owen sighs.

“Actually, I think the design is beautiful.” His eyes crinkle happily at my assessment.

It was then that I realized he might be just as nervous as I was. “I’m really happy to be here with you.” I squeeze his
hand and see his tense shoulders relax.

The car circled the drive, and then stopped, my door parallel to the giant wooden double doors. I stared at them, a bit frightened to move but a bit aware that I’d look weird if I stayed strapped into the car. I felt Owen
squeeze my hand one last time. "Now or never." He smiles at me.

This was a huge step, but I was ready.

I unbuckle as he swings his own door open, running around to my side to help me out of the high truck. He was probably hoping I’d flash him or
something.

Not that I didn’t want to shed my clothes with him right now. He looked so sexy tonight.

His shimmering brown locks were slicked back in that way that made him look like a European model, his face a dark shade of brown from all
the time he’d been spending outside lately. Blue khaki slacks stretched around his muscular thighs, and perfect ass, and he’d tucked an off-white golf polo into them. Owen had completed his outfit with those preppy summer loafers all the guys around
here wore.
  He looked good enough to eat.
  Taking my hand securely in his, he laces our fingers until my palm molds into his big, calloused hand. I take a deep breathe, preparing for what, I don’t know.
  He leads us up the
steps, winks once, and pushes open the beautifully crafted front door.

I step into the biggest foyer I’ve ever seen. And its decked out in all marble.

I’m rendered speechless for a second. After seeing Owen’s beach
house, I shouldn’t be that surprised, but his real home was a work of art. Seriously, this was like a museum.

The ceilings sloped and dipped so that the entire open concept first floor just felt larger than life. The color scheme was much like the beach house,
neutral and chic, but this was obviously a classier design. Mirror surfaced reflected the perfect light fixtures strung about, fresh flowers sat in extremely expensive looking vases, and everything about his home screamed class and money.

I had never felt more
out of sorts in my life. My nose is hit with a spicy, delicious smell, and Owen tugs me wordlessly toward what I can only assume is the kitchen as the smell grows stronger. He shrugs and laughs quietly, seeing the look of shock on my face.

I smack his shoulder. "I
mean, I knew you were rich, but really?”

“I told you before, my parents are rich.” he whispers, swatting my butt since I’d stopped walking.

Cresting the small set of steps in front of us, we end up in the kitchen, which is, of course, fit for a
restaurant staff of twenty. At the stove stands the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen. And I don’t mean that she was probably the most gorgeous, she actually was.

"Caro! Oh my gosh, I am so excited that you are both here! You must be
Minka!"

This woman, who I can only assume is Owen's mother, although I don't know how since she looks more youthful than me, bounds over gracefully. She wraps her arms around me, and I'm overwhelmed by the unexpected hug. But it's
oddly nice, being in a mother's embrace, even if its not my own.

She holds me back at arms length. "Caro, you didn't tell me how beautiful she was. You're a very lucky man to have this gorgeous girl willing to put up with you."

I laugh at her chiding
of Owen. "Yeah...caro, is it? Not singing my praises, huh?"

His mother's eyes twinkle. "And she's funny too. Caro means my dear. Portuguese is my first language."

Owen gives a half-hearted sigh, faking his annoyance. "Minka, this is
my mother, Raquel. And yes, mama, she is very beautiful. But her smart mouth gets the best of her at times." He winks at me, a wolfish grin on his face. My stomach flutters and its totally not nerves from this dinner any longer. "Carlllll!" She yells, turning away to pop
something in the oven. Is it bad that I'm surprised she is cooking? If I lived in a house like this I wouldn't even bathe myself. I'd hire someone to do it.

"What's for dinner, ma?" Owen wanders over, popping something that looks like a pastry in his mouth.
"Hey!" She swats at him. "No dessert before dinner. We're having Moqueca."

"Yes!" I glance at Owen, a question in my eye. "Fish stew, it's kind of like Brazilian jambalaya. But with coconut milk and spices. You'll love it, mom's recipe is bangin'."
Movement out of the corner of my eye catches my attention, and I turned around. My breath catches in my throat.

Standing in front of me is an older version of Owen. Damn. Owen is going to be just as sexy when he is older.

"Minka, this is my dad,
Carl." Owen cuts the tension.

"Hi." Its all I could say. Owen's dad is seriously hot.

"Nice to meet you. Finally nice to see how Owen's been spending all of his time..."

"Dad." Owen snaps, raring for a fight. I see
their talk hadn't quite set in yet.

"Don't worry son, just expressing my appreciation that this young lady has been keeping you out of trouble this summer." He directs at me, "His baseball has really improved since you came along."
Owen shakes his head, but at least he's smiling. I have never been in the presence of three more good looking people in my life. No amount of new clothes had prepared me for this. I didn't fit into Owen's life. If I hadn't felt it before, I certainly did now. It was like a mortal
standing next to Zeus and his family.

"Sit, sit, let's eat in the kitchen. We don't have to be so fancy, I want to get to know you, Minka."

Raquel ushered us all away from the large kitchen area and over to the breakfast nook. Which was ten times fancier than
any room in my house. So there was that.

Taking a seat next to Owen and across from Carl, I placed my sweaty hands in my lap. I'd never had a boyfriend, much less met his parents. Or went over anyone's house for dinner except my friends.

"So Minka, senior year,
right? Big times ahead! What do you think you want to do after high school?" Raquel studies me warmly, waiting for my answer. She was so nice. I'd always assumed beautiful people had ice where their hearts were supposed to be. Or maybe that was only Allison
Renner and her band of groupies.

"Yep. I plan to go to college. I want to become a nurse." Owen squeezes my hand under the table, filling me with a bit more courage.

"That's wonderful! I always thought medicine would be such an
interesting profession. Me, I was only able to become a dumb model." She flicks her beautiful mane of hair over her shoulder. I'd become a model too if I looked like that.

"Mom, don't put yourself down like that. You were one of the best in the world."
"Ah yes, caro, but I only mean that what Minka wants to do is admirable. Only the best people in life sacrifice their time and energy to help others."

She smiles at me knowingly, and I can’t help the wave of happiness that floods my chest. His
mother has only known me a few minutes and yet it feels like we’ve been here for hours. She knows how to make someone feel welcome, and appreciated. I think I fell in love with her at that moment.

Raquel got up to take the food out and serve it into bowls, and a semi-
awkward silence settled over the table. Now I saw why Carl was with Raquel. She lit up the room, could hold any conversation, make anyone feel welcome. She was his Owen.

"So...uh, Minka, where do you think you'll look for school?"
I feel my cheeks pink at Carl's question.

"Well..." I cough, unable to hide the coming embarrassment. "I actually have loved Grover since I took a tour there last summer. And the five-year nursing program is amazing."

Owen's head snaps
around to look at me, a bright smile on his face. He looks like he wants to hug me and tease me all at the same time.

"Really?" Carl says at the exact same time Raquel yells over, "How wonderful!"

"We do have a great biology program...and
several other stellar selling points..." That wolfish smile is back on Owen's face.

My face turns beet red.
"Oh lay off the poor girl, caro. You're embarrassing her." Raquel swats at his head as she sets the last bowl down in front of her husband and
slides into her seat.

The meal looks delicious. Besides the fish stew, she'd prepared a summer salad and these bread and cheese balls Owen called Pão de queijo. And then proceeded to stuff five in his mouth.

Taking my first hesitant bite, the spicy flavors melt
onto my tongue. "Oh my god." I spoon another spoonful into my mouth. "This is the best thing I've ever tasted."

They all laugh jovially at me.

"My wife's cooking is second to none." Carl heaves spoonfuls of stew into his mouth. I don't
think Owen had come up for air since she set the food out.

We made small talk as we ate, if Owen was looking forward to going back to school, where Carl and Raquel were thinking about traveling. I learned that they had properties in Italy, Greece, Africa, and
of course Brazil.

From the outside, their life looked like a fairytale. But I preferred the view right here from the kitchen table, where I knew the flaws and imperfections under the surface. It was more special that way.

I thought for the zillionth time how badly
I'd misjudged Owen.

After dessert, Raquel insisted we sit out on the back deck and watch the fireflies. She even offered me some wine after the men had gone out to set up the cushions on the patio furniture.

“I’m not legal Mrs. Axel…”
“Oh none of this nonsense, Mrs. Axel. Please call me Raquel. Or mama.” She winked, looking so much like her charming son. “In my country, we don’t treat young adults like babies. Not like here. Under my roof, you are legal.”

Still not knowing how
to respond, I shuffle my feet.

“*It must have been tough to grow up without your mother.*”

I snap my eyes to her’s, shocked that she knows such a personal fact about me.

“*Did Owen...?*”

“*No, sweet girl, no. We*
motherless recognize it in each other.” She smiles sadly, conspiratorially.

“’You lost your mother?”

“When I was nine years old. I always wondered what would be worse; losing her after her, or never getting to know her.
Its a shit draw anyway you get it, though.”

I nod, suddenly overcome with sadness.

“Ay, I don’t say this to make you sad. I just want you to know, you can always talk to me. Especially if that bonehead out there screws up!” She smiles, clearly trying to
cheer me up. “We are friends now. In each other’s life. And I have a feeling we will be seeing a lot of each other.”

Glancing out to the porch where Owen is actually laughing in the presence of his father, while they sling cushions on the chairs together, I
have a feeling she’s right. Not only was I in too deep now with Owen, but his family was pulling at my heartstrings too.
Who the fuck knew that when we first got invited to a college party, it would be through Minka. If you'd told me that a year ago, hell, three months ago, I'd have cracked up."

Kels is examining her nails in the backseat.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, bitch." I direct
Chlo to take a left at the light as we entered campus. Thank you, Google Maps.

"I didn't mean it like that. I just didn't think in a million years you would have a boyfriend...I didn't mean that like that either. I mean to say, boys are dicks. Who are only good
for one thing. Dicks."

"You should really just close your mouth now."
Chlo quips at her, pulling slowly through the winding campus drive, flanked with rows of beautiful tall trees on each side.

Grover University was the school to get into in
Virginia. It was the school period for most Mitchum kids. Presidents, CEOs, celebrities and athletes had graced the hallowed halls and gone on to pursue and achieve impossible dreams. It was picturesque, everything you envisioned when you thought storybook college
campus. The grass was emerald green, dotted with hundred year old trees and beautiful floral landscaping. The buildings looked more like colonial castles than places that housed classrooms.

The Greek Life was notorious, Chloe's dream, not mine, and the entire
campus sat on a stunning, turquoise lake, complete with an outer two-mile-long-ring that students ran around. Not only did their theater and dance school feed right into some of the most prestigious dance companies in the world, but their five-year nursing program was unrivaled.
Chloe and I had been dreaming about attending together for years. We planned to get together in the next few weeks and fill out our applications simultaneously, hoping it would give us double the luck.

"You both should really suck your drool back in
before we hit the bleachers." Kels didn't plan to go to college, never had. After high school, she was headed for Zimbabwe. Or Tunisia. Or wherever her heart desired and there were animals in need. But it didn't mean I couldn't hear the jealous tone as she scolded Chloe and I.
I would feel the same way if they were headed into the future, together, without me.

"We love you, badass."
I smack a kiss in her direction, and her megawatt smile returns.

Ever since Owen had heard his school was my top choice, he’d been
nagging at me to come. It only took half a week for me to relent, agreeing to come see his first pre-season game and spend the night. I mostly came because I was obsessed with Grover. Or because it meant an adult-free night away with my hot-as-sin boyfriend. Either or.
Chloe pulls up outside the athletic complex, parks, and we make our way to the field. My stomach starts to do little somersaults. This was the first time I'd actually seen Owen play, had actually been invited. Sure, I had snuck to a couple of his high school games,
admiring the various members of the team. Or cowering when Chloe and Kelsey catcalled them. But I'd never been there in official girlfriend capacity. I'd never been anywhere in official girlfriend capacity, with anyone. This was new and exciting, and also a bit
terrifying.

I just hoped they won. I didn’t know what Owen was like after a loss. And I didn’t want that to ruin our weekend.

Climbing the bleachers, I see that we are on the early side, and we pick a great spot right smack dab in the middle.
"Mmm, I can't wait to see Miles in those tight baseball pants, it's been too long." Chlo is practically licking her chops. She is chomping at the bit to get him alone at the party tonight.

I'm chomping at the bit to get Owen alone. Finally out of Mitchum, on our
own, in his college dorm room. Just thinking about it makes me tingle in the places only he knows how to ignite.

"Look at Minka's face. She is definitely thinking about someone else in those tight pants." Kels winks at me, and I feel a wicked burn start to flood
my cheeks.

Ever since I'd confessed that we'd had sex at the beach, they were all over me for details. But I wasn't like them, I couldn't do that thing where I described my sex life in all its glorious and dirty detail. At least not yet. I didn't know if I ever could.
Or if I'd want to. What happened between Owen and I in those intimate moments was sacrosanct. I didn't want to tell anyone about it for fear of tarnishing it.

"Shut up." I swat at her and fan my face as the first of the Grover players run out onto the field. For the
next fifteen minutes, we watch them warm up, stretching this muscle or that, practicing throwing and catching with one and other. I couldn't see Owen anywhere, but then remembered he would be in the bullpen, warming up his throwing arm with the pitching coach.
The bleachers begin to fill with the sounds of flip-flops echoing on the metallic benches. About ten minutes before the game, I see Raquel and Carter take a seat with the rest of the parents in the section to the right of us. I don’t know if I should go down and say hello.
I watch as Raquel swivels her head, searching the crowd, and then locks eyes with me. She waves emphatically, giving me a thumbs up. I wave back, trying to mimic that I'd talk to her after the game.

"Who is that?" Chlo nods in Raquel's direction.
"Owen's mom." I shrug, feeling a burst of happiness inside. I was cool with my boyfriend's mom. This really wasn't my life.

"Are you kidding me? She looks like an exotic princess." They both kept staring at her, it was hard not to.
"Well, supermodel, but yes, she's insanely gorgeous."

My attention moved to the field when the announcer began rattling off the lineups, and the players ran out of their respective dugouts to stand on the base lines for the National Anthem. Of
course Owen, the pitcher, was last. When he ran out, I felt my mouth go dry.

He looked drop dead gorgeous on a bad day. In uniform? I suddenly needed to go to the restroom and fan myself somewhere else.

He found me in the stands, flashing that
devilish smile of his and taking off his hat so that his golden brown locks shimmer in the midday sun. Even though my hand is over my heart for The Star Spangled Banner, I can't keep my eyes off him. My boyfriend.

It only gets worse when he takes the mound and I
can see the muscled globes of his ass in those tight white baseball pants. Chloe was right.

Someone starts a "Let's go Tigers!" chant as Owen starts to wave off the first pitches his catcher suggests. It dies down when he becomes stock still, winding up and
hurling the ball in the direction of home plate. "Strike!" The batter didn't even have time to swing before the thud of the ball against the leather glove rings out into the stadium.

Owen shuts them down with a 1-2-3 outing, and the team heads back
into the dugout to suit up for batting.

Owen is deeper into the lineup, I learn from someone behind us, while Miles bats cleanup. That means he is fourth in line, the position reserved for the best hitter on the team.

As he steps to the plate, Chlo whistles loudly
through her fingers. "Hit a homer #22!"

Kels and I stare at her, shaking our heads at her enthusiasm.

"What? He'll learn to love me." She smiles.

Miles swings at the first pitch, getting a bit of it but sending it soaring up behind him into foul
territory. He shakes his head, an intense, almost scary look on his face. Owen has told me about how bad his moods have been lately, but I'm definitely seeing it firsthand here.

The other team's pitcher decides on a knuckle ball, even I know
what that looks like, but chooses wrong. Miles swings, hitting the ball squarely in the middle, sending it flying high past the infield and out over the scoreboard on the back wall for a home run. He drives in his two teammates on base, and rounds slowly for home.
with a scowl on his face. So much for being happy go lucky Farris.

The game continues on at that pace for the next five or so innings. Owen continues to dominate, only letting a handful of hits but no runs slip past him. Miles racks his run count up to four, nearing
his single game record of six. Kels makes not one, but two trips to the concession stand, once for hotdogs and the next for ice cream. My best friend, the queen of food, who gains absolutely no weight and never works out. I hate her.

Finally at the top of the
seventh, Owen is taken out. He's done a mighty fine job, says someone else behind me, but the coach wants to rest his arm. No sense in over-using him before the season even starts.

The Tigers wrap the rest of the game up tidily, with Miles hitting three
more home runs, topping his previous record. He should be smiling to the moon, but instead just nods at the praise he's getting from all sides and walks to his car, driving away quickly. Funny, I didn't see any of his family approach him.

I feel a set of big strong
arms lift me up from behind, and I giggle, ecstatic that Owen is finally within arms length of me. Its pathetic, but I do feel better the instant he touches me. Even if I wasn't in a particularly bad mood to begin with.

"Put that pretty girl down, stop embarrassing
her and come give your mother a kiss." Raquel says from somewhere over my shoulder. My feet are planted back down on the grass, and Owen wheels me around. I get a glimpse of his perfectly tanned face before he swipes my mouth in a quick kiss. Then, turning to his
mother, he plants a chaste kiss on her cheek.

"Mom, you're making me look bad!" He pretends to whine. He shakes hands with his father, who tells him he pitched a great game. Owen looks uncomfortable, I think he still doesn't know what to do with this new-found
praise.

    I make the round of introductions between my friends and Owen's parents.

    "You're Chloe Trabucco? I knew I recognized you! I saw you dance The Nutcracker at last year's Christmas pageant. Honey, you're
spectacular!"

Blushing, Chloe answers. "Oh I did okay..."

"Excuse her, she doesn't realize that God literally put her on this earth to dance ballet." I smile in her direction, saving her from herself. Chloe is nothing if not modest. She was
always way too hard on herself when it came to dance.

"Thanks for coming you guys, you didn't have to do that." Owen interrupts us, clearly trying to get his parents out of here so we can go back to his house. 

"Ay, caro, we get
Parents are uncool and you have a party to get to. We love you." His mom gives him a knowing smile, ruffling his hair a bit.

We hug, and both of his parents tell me how nice it was to see me. I feel included, and its a bit addicting.
"Ride with me, babe. Chloe can follow, right?"

"Sureeee, just no road head, love birds. I don't need to see that." Kels laughs as she skips to the car.

"Ew, you're so sick." I feel my face heat.

"Not that I wouldn't be up for it—" Owen trails off
when I give him the stink eye.

I climb into his car, and don't even get my butt firmly planted in the seat when he yanks me towards him and sear my lips with a kiss. He doesn't let me up, and I don't want to go anywhere. His teeth nip at my lips, his tongue
explores every crevice of my mouth.

"You don't know how fired up I was to know you were watching in the stands..." He smashes his lips down onto mine again, fire scorching through my veins and lighting me up. Owen reaches for the hem of my shirt, something I'm
more than ready to let him do as we sit in the front seat of his car in broad daylight.

And then a horn starts to go off behind us.

Breaking the kiss, fighting for a normal breath, I turn around to see Chlo and Kels fake making out in their car.
"Assholes" I mutter, but make Owen button his seat belt and reverse out of the parking lot.

The drive over to his house, which he shares with Miles and two other baseball players, is short. Its located right off campus in a neighborhood that screams college party
houses.

We pull into the gravel driveway, Chlo and Kels coming to a loud stop beside us. Pop music is blaring out of her BMW, causing the boys in the house to file out onto the raised front porch.

"What is that?" A gruff looking guy in nothing but
a towel says, surveying us from above. Tattoos cover his pale, muscled flesh.

"Hey guys, this is Minka. And her friends." Kels and Chlo don't even bother saying anything after Owen does. They’re too mesmerized by the mirage of hot men standing on the porch
above us.

Miles, still in his tight white baseball pants, jersey nowhere in sight, looks pissed. "Turn that fucking shit down. And who invited princess to stay here? Hope your beamer doesn't get too scratched up at the party tonight."

With that, he marches back
into the house, slamming the cheap looking front door behind him.

Chlo looks hurt, especially since its Miles who yelled at her. "Don't worry about him sweetheart. I like that pop shit just fine," The last guy on the porch looks more like a linebacker than a
baseball player. He is huge, and not just in the height arena. The beard that covers his face would be, if I had to guess, his attempt to hide the fuller portion of his chin, and his belly pushes at the front of his shirt as he leans over the railing to take a good look at us.
"Come on up," Owen encourages us, scooping all three of our bags from Chlo's trunk with no struggle. My heart may have swooned a bit at that.

We walk into his house, and immediately wrinkle our noses.

"I know, I'm sorry about the smell. The house
hasn't really been aired out all summer, and four boys live here so...

I tune Owen out, something I usually never do, to take in the meager house. Not that its rundown, but it just looks exactly like he's said. Like four guys live here. The walls are white, with no
adornments but the odd beer sign here or there, and a life size poster or two of what I'm guessing are their favorite baseball players. Dishes crowd the sink, and I don't want to know if they're only from this weekend, or have been there for months since school ended.
Liquor and beer cases line the counter, evidence of the party about to ensue. A large grey sectional accented by two wood end tables and a matching coffee table are the only furniture in the living room, besides a gigantic TV mounted to the opposite wall. A large
dining room table sits in the open space between the kitchen and the living room, stacked high with papers and take-out menus.

"So this is college. Glad I'm not going..."Kels says sarcastically.

The big burly linebacker laughs. Its more
of a boom.

Owen introduces us to him, Clint, and his other roommate, Parker, who is grumpily eating a bowl of cereal at the dining room table.

"You two can take the fifth bedroom, I have an air mattress you can sleep on." Owen gestures them
down the hall.

"Why do you have a fifth bedroom?" Chlo asks.

"We were supposed to have a new guy coming into the team, coach asked us to include him. But he never showed up." Owen shrugs, nudging the door open with his shoulder.

"Good, as long as no
one like, died in here." Kels says, no hint of joking in her tone. Chlo and I exchange a look of ridiculousness.

The room was like the rest of the house, white walls, builder's model normal. At least it smelled ok. He set their bags on the floor.
"Party starts in an hour."

Chlo makes a mad dash to her stuff. "An hour! You better have outlets in here, Axel. A girl needs to do her hair!"

I giggle, but the sound is cut off when Owen picks me up and carries me out of the room. "Hey! I need
to get ready too!"
"Get a room you two!"
Kels calls out.

"That's my plan!" Owen shouts back. "You look good enough to eat, and no one needs to do that but me," he says quieter, for only my ears.

I was going to protest more, but the words eating
and me come out of his mouth and my head goes straight to the gutter.

He pushes open his door, at the opposite end of the house, and the room goes by in a flash of light as he deposits me on the bed.

The room is Owen, simple but clean. His
mother's chic touch is missing, but he still has a massive king bed that takes up most of the room, with a matching dresser and TV stand. Hanging over his bed, framed, is his high school jersey.

He comes down on top of me, placing himself at the apex of my thighs. I
feel him, hard and pulsing, through his uniform, and everything in me liquefies. He pins his hands down beside my head, I am so aware of him that I can practically feel the coiling of his arm muscles as he gyrates against me. I seek his tongue in his mouth, sucking on it and
pulling it back to mine. His hands tickle up my ribcage, pushing the tank top I have on high enough so that he can slip one hand into the cup of my bra. Reaching down, I cup his package through his pants, stroking my thumb up and down the rigid length.
"Hey guys, come watch! Axel is giving a free porn show in his room!"

Clint’s sarcastic yelling snaps me out of Owen's seduction. I sit up quickly, almost smacking my forehead against his, and yank my top down. Owen bounds to door, slamming it shut and muttering
"fucking dick," before coming back to sit beside me.

"Sorry, babe. Guys and all...."

"Its ok." I tenderly touch his face. I wish we could just spend tonight locked in here. But Owen wants me on his arm as his girlfriend at a college
party, and I can't pass up that opportunity. I need to see how things are going to work. If they can work. Not that I'll be able to let him go even if I know they can't. "I'm going to get ready with the girls. Go shower, you stink."

He sighs and flops on the bed, his dick still
painfully hard in his pants. "You're a tease. I expect you to repay this debt later..."

"You can count on it." I kiss him quick enough so that he can't pull me back down, and turn to leave the room.
A glass goes flying across the room, smashing and breaking against the stark white wall, brown liquid sloshing down it in a dripping pattern.

"Told you I could hit the bullseye!" The drunk girl stumbles a bit on her sky-high heels, wrapping her arms around her
friends shoulders and noisily kissing her cheeks.

"Bet you won't makeout..." A very drunk, and definitely high Farris eggs the two on, leering over them at his epic height.

The girls look at each other, back at Miles, and then dive tongues first into
each other's faces. Farris flashes a grin, tugging on their hands to lead them back to his room across from Owen's. Yuck.

Is this how college parties are?

I'm used to high school parties, where everyone knows everyone, or knows of everyone anyway. This
is a whole different ballgame. Excuse the terrible metaphor.

The girls all stand in mile-high heels, teetering in their little skirts and dresses. I overheard one girl talking about how long it took her to put in extensions, and another fluttering her can’t-be-real
lashes at the boy grinding on her butt to the beat of the music.

There was no way I could compete with this. I looked better than normal, I thought, in my skinny white jeans and dark blue crop top. Yes, Kels has gotten me into one. I had gold wedge sandals on
that made me a few inches taller. Owen had almost dragged me back to his room when he’d seen me. But now? I had no clue where he was.

My friends looked like they had found Narnia. They were beyond wasted at this point, the clock about to hit 10 p.m. They
had been ruling on the pong table for a while now; for a ballerina and a hippie they had surprisingly perfect accuracy.

I was nursing my second drink as I walked over.

“MINKS!” Chloe practically hangs from my
neck as she jumps on me. I think its supposed to be a hug.

“Hi love.” I pat her head, laughing at her clearly intoxicated state. Someone yells for her to take her turn. Without so much as a glance at the cups, she chucks the ball over her shoulder. And
“Ohhhh!” Her and Kels yell simultaneously as they chest bumped like football bros. My two best friends, the jocks.

“Where is lover boy?” Kels, a little less drunk then Chlo eyes me suspiciously.

“Miles has been
ignoring me all night. I think he hooked up with some skank!" Chloe whines. I wasn’t about to fess up that it might have been two skanks.

Kels rolls her eyes, sticking the straw of her drink in her mouth. “Not your lover boy, idiot. Owen.”
“I don’t know…” I trail off, swiveling my head around the party like I’d been doing for the last hour. I seriously had no idea where he was. “I’m going to go find him.”

Surveying the house one last time, I know he wasn’t anywhere in here. Making my way to the
back deck, I run into Clint.

“Hey, Owen’s girl.” He grins at my scowl. While I liked being Owen’s girlfriend, I had my own identity. “I know, Minka. Anyways...is your friend, the pretty, short one, single?”

Kelsey? I eye him. She would never, ever go for
him. Not to say Kels was shallow, but Parker was definitely more her type. If she ever considered guys for more than sex. Which she didn’t.

“Kelsey, yeah she is. But that’s of her own doing. Word of advice? Don’t try it. She doesn’t do boyfriends. Or boy friends
for that matter.”

He doesn’t look phased by my words at all. “Yeah, thanks.”

Uh oh, I think I just added fuel to his fire rather than unlighting that match. At least I’d warned him.

I walked to the railing, sipping my beer slowly as
I peered over the yard. I couldn’t bring myself to drink more. I wanted to be fully aware for whatever Owen had planned for me later.

The lawn is riddled with red cups, cigarette butts and the same brand of scantily clad girls clinging to beefed up jocks.
I guess I can't call them that anymore, since my boyfriend is one of those jocks.

Yelling from a folding table on the lawn catches my attention, and when I turn to see what the fuss is about, I'm greeted by the sight of said boyfriend, enthusiastically hugging a
blonde in the tightest mini-dress I've ever seen.

My heart plummets into my stomach and feels like it might burn a whole through my abdomen. I tell myself to calm down, that it might just be a friendly game, but I can't seem to push the knot of emotion back down my
throat.

Frozen to the deck, I watched for what seems like an eternity. Owen is playing flip cup, wedged in between the blonde and a redhead with the biggest boobs I've ever seen. They look unnatural against her tiny waist, which then leads me to wonder if they
are, in fact, fake.

I feel my pulse zipping a mile a minute at my neck. Every time one of these girls places a hand on Owen, his lower back, his shoulder, and leans their body into his, he accepts it. He never politely pushes them off. Between that and the way
he's chugging beer and high-fiving his baseball buddies, I've seen enough.

This isn't my world. I feel an errant tear drip onto the hand, which has gone ghostly white, clutching my beer bottle. I knew from the start that I didn't belong in his galaxy, let alone his college
campus. He's everyone's favorite guy, that person that would always stand out while simultaneously fitting in, no matter where he was.

I was born to blend in. And I'd always preferred it like that. Until he decided to come into my life and fuck that all up.
I thought he saw me, really saw me. Past all of the walls, and the hurt, and the bullshit, he had made it seem like he wanted me, the odd girl out. But maybe it was all for the chase. Wasn't it always how these guys were?

Trying to suck in deep
calming breaths, I managed to get a hold on the nausea working its way up my throat. I stole one last glance towards the lawn, Owen's bright smile laughing at something going on inside the group. I stumbled down the side steps, working my way to the front lawn.
Where do I go now? I don't want to stay in Owen's room, much less be here.

I could camp out in the fifth bedroom, but I feared being trampled on by an overly horny couple looking for the closest room.

So, I chucked my bottle in the yard and started
I wasn't familiar with this street, but I'd paid attention on the drive and knew campus was only about a block or two up. The night was warm, the humid Virginia air clung to my skin as I walked slowly along. Sticking my hands in my pockets and
keeping alert for bumps in the night, my mind drifted back to the house.

He hadn't looked for me in an hour. Tears pooled in the bottom of my sockets, my cheeks burning with the sting of being ignored.

Did I care if he didn't do it on purpose? No. I
knew he probably hadn't meant it, but it stung so much more because he really could just that easily forget about me.

Mostly it stung because I didn't go a second of the day without him in my head.

I'd fallen, deeply. It was exactly the kind of thing
I'd swore I'd never do. Especially with a guy like Owen.

Just when I'd decided to let myself shine, to stop hiding in the humiliation of my past, that's when he'd decided to pounce. I never even had a chance. There I was empowering myself, chanting the girl
power mantra through my head, and I'd let myself get caught by the first handsome jock who'd smiled my way.

I'm about to campus now, and I know where I'm headed at this point. The circle of benches surrounding the Founder's Statue.
I've only ever been here once, on a campus tour with Chlo last summer, but that circle always seemed like somewhere to sit and think. A hub for knowledge. How college of me.

Campus is all but dead, for one its summer and for two, the only people who
are here are four beers deep and not stepping foot on campus.

I revel in the silence, admiring the way the lights cast shadows between the old brick buildings. The air smells like fresh grass, and fireflies light up the space around me.
Just as I tilt my head back onto the bench, I hear flip flops slapping along the paved walkways.

I shoot up, suddenly extremely aware that I'm alone on a deserted campus at night. But my heart stops beating when I see who's running towards me.
Owen.

"Are you ok?" He's shouting, his face is flushed, from what I can't tell, the beer or the running. "I had no idea where you were! Jesus, babe, don't walk off like that. You scared the fucking shit out of me."

I sit back down,
disappointed that he thinks he's being some kind of hero in finding me. "Go back to your party, Owen."

"What?" He looks confused as he nears, bending over feet from where I sit to catch his breath.

"I said go back to your
party. Blonde bombshell and big tits are probably missing you by now."
Okay, that sounded really high school, but in my defense I'm still in high school.

"What are you talking about? What's wrong with you?" He eyes me, sweaty from his sprint over here.
And damnit, it sucks how sexy he looks right now.

"You shouldn't have brought me here. Especially if you were going to ignore me the whole time." I let a bit of my anger slip away from me, biting out my response.

"Ignoring you? I was
with you the whole time..."

He trails off, clearly filling in the holes in his memory. His face contorts from a confused grimace to one of sympathy and apology. "Baby I..."

"Go back to your party, Owen. I'm fine here." I don't want to talk to him. I don't want to look at him.
I'm seconds away from crying unreasonably and don't want him to see that.

"I didn't mean to, ignore you. I wasn't ignoring you, really...I just...shit, I'm sorry, Minka."

He places his hand on my shoulder and I shrug away from his touch.
"You won't let me touch you? Really?" Owen sits down next to me, dropping his head into his hands. "Tell me what you want me to do? I'm sorry, babe."

I can feel my lip quivering, knowing tears will spill the second I open my mouth. I feel dramatic,
but know how much his actions hurt me and use that to fuel my answer. "I told you about my past. I told you how I'd been hurt. I was really excited to come here with you. And then I see that....after you don't do more than kiss me and then disappear for an hour.
It hurt." My voice comes out unnaturally high and squeaky, hoarse with the unshed tears I'm trying to keep in my eyes.

Owen stands, running his hands through his hair violently. "Fuck. I'm such an idiot. I'm sorry babe, I didn't think. I saw my friends again, and got into
the party and the game. Its no excuse. There is no excuse."

A sob escapes me. I don't know why I'm breaking down, but it feels like I've been waiting for this. The other shoe to drop.

"You're this perfect person, everyone wants to
include you. I have never been that way. And I don't mind it, being the outsider. But I thought you wanted to be on the outside with me too."

He kneeled in front of me, the fireflies lighting up around us, making his blue eyes sparkle.

"You're not on the
outside. You're right where you are supposed to be. You can be wherever you want. That's what I love about you. You don't need those people's validation. And as we both saw tonight, apparently I still do. I'm an idiot, Minka. I should have never left your side. I don't even
need those people there. I would be fine living in a four-by-four room with you for the rest of my life. You're all I see. I'm so fucking sorry."

I sniffle, watching as he almost pulls his hair out by the roots. I want to believe him, to move past this stupid situation.
"Tell me what will make this better...I need you to believe me. I am a cocky, arrogant jock who needs people to worship him. I'm a self-obsessed asshole, I don't deserve you. Anything, I'll say anything."

His humor is what breaks me. Its what had
gotten me from the beginning. "Well, you are probably right about that last one, you don't deserve me. But I guess I'm here anyway—" I trail off, wiping the corners of my eyes.

He stares at me, a dead serious expression on his face. "You're right. I don't."
I don't know how the hell its possible that I get you, but I thank my lucky stars everyday that you picked me."

    Tentatively, he reaches out, checking to see if I'll allow him to touch me. When I don't bite his hand off, he rests it on my cheek. Just that skin to skin
contact has us both sighing.

This, being with him, is going to destroy me someday. I know it. But I can’t fight it even if I try.

I see his hair flop over into one eye right before he presses his warm lips to mine. The kiss is aching and so sweetly-tender, it
almost has me crying again at how heart-shattering it is.

"I don't know if I picked you as much as I couldn't avoid falling epically." I breathe, still nose to nose with Owen.

"Come back with me. Share my bed. I want to show you all the ways I
need to make it up to you." He takes my hand, and I let him. Like a moth to the flame, I'm totally conscience of walking into the fire.
I run my hand through Minka's silky brown hair, fanning the locks across the pillow in the early morning light that cuts diagonal lines of orange into my sheets. And once again, I thank my fucking lucky ass stars that she chooses to be here with me.
I really fucked up with the party at my campus house. Like a total jocktard, I assumed my girl would be fine with letting me wander off to do asinine shit with my buddies until I decided to go to bed with her. I was high off the win, pumped about the season and being
back with boys, and I forgot what it was like to be in a relationship.

Scratch that, I'd never been in a real relationship before, one that wasn't just for show.

I'd left her on her own, and I was so fucking stupid and sorry for that. When I'd realized my
mistake, it felt like I'd been shot in the chest. I couldn't get control of my heartbeat or breathing, staring up at her hoping to God she wasn't about to end things.

I'd only known her two months, but in that time she'd imprinted herself on my heart. She'd become my rock in the storm that
was my life at times. I needed her. Way more than she'd ever need me. That's why I'd been making it up to her for the past two weeks.

Lucky for me, mom and dad decided on a last minute trip to our house in Sicily, leaving the house virtually empty for the
month.

    I'd had Minka naked and under me for about a week and a half, trying to atone for my sins.

    I was proving myself the way I knew how. In orgasms, food and movie marathons. We'd spent the last 10 days locked in my house, only venturing out
for takeout food and the odd change of clothes for Minka.

Since August hit, her pre-college courses were over, and she told the Chief she'd be with Chloe a lot the next few weeks. So far he hadn't asked where she was. And I was shaking in my boots,
waiting for that man to come to my door with his gun.

I knew I had fucked up at Grover, and badly. I still saw the apprehension in her eyes, whether it was in between a Netflix episode or over dinner. Anytime that happened, I kissed her.
Not that I also hadn't verbally apologized. Many times. I'd said sorry more times than I could count. Because I truly was.

Minka stirs in my arms, he lashes fluttering at the side of my neck. I have her pulled into my chest, so close I can feel the heat coming off of her amazing
I can't help but skim my hand over the arch of her smooth back, cupping her perfect ass cheek when my hand makes it there.

I've spent the past two weeks worshiping her body. Studying her responses.

I’ve learned that when I
press my lips to that certain spot on the inside of her thigh, she convulses, like her body can’t take the intense sensation.

And when I whisper dirty words into her ears as I stroke gently into her, her entire body blushes. My shy girl. But I also feel her soak my cock, my way
of knowing just how much that turns her on.

Or that when I kiss her so thoroughly and completely, our lips molding into one and others, I can feel my heart escaping from my chest to go join hers. Because she owns it now.

I didn't want to wait
any longer for her to wake up. Even though we'd been up until the early hours of the morning, and it was still only eight o'clock, I want her again.

Pulling her closer, I grind my dick against her bare stomach and light up her neck with warm, wet open-mouthed kisses.

"Go back to bed. You're a sex fiend..."she sighs, not doing a thing to move away from my ministrations.

I’ve been meaning to ask her about an idea I'd
been having. I know it will help clean up my mistake at Grover. Minka loves to pretend she’s a hard, ball-busting woman, but I knew better. She’s a romantic at heart. This would clear my name.

"So I've been thinking..." I get down to her eye level. "I want to
take you to the fair next week."

   Her closed eyes fly open suddenly, warmth and admiration flowing out of them. "You want to...take me...to the Freeboro Fair?"

   "Yes." I smile, knowing this would be her reaction. The Freeboro Fair was
the end of summer festival held by the county. Growing up, it was the place to take your girlfriend or boyfriend, to show off your relationship. I knew it was probably a corny date idea, but it was romantic if nothing else.

"So, you'll be my date? To the carnival?" She tries
to clarify.

"No, I'm going to be your fair slave, you can drag me around on a leash..." I break off when she flicks my abs. "Yes, I want to take you, Minka Braxton, my gorgeous girlfriend, to the fair."

"Ok." She breathes, smiling shyly and
blushing. It was getting me harder.

"Good. Now let's talk about the date I want to have right now." I flip her over, slithering down her body while we smile at each other.
25

MINKA
Owen runs around to my side of the car, exaggerating as he opens my door and sweeps his hand out to the side like a car model. I roll my eyes but take his outstretched hand, all the while little butterflies exploding onto the side of my stomach lining.
“Your wish is my command, my queen.” He bows before taking my hand, lacing his fingers through mine.

“This won’t be half as much fun if you’re embarrassing me. You’re supposed to be my carnival slave for the night.” I pout and swat at
him, but can’t help the huge grin blooming across my face.

“Baby, I’ll be your slave any night of the week.” He winks good-naturedly, but I can see the obvious heat in his eyes. “Although, being a carni might be weirdly kinky...”

“I’m going to vomit.”
From behind us, I hear Farris grumbling.

I’d suggested a double date of sorts and had asked Chloe to come. She hadn’t been able to break through Miles’ newly tough exterior yet, and Owen seemed genuinely worried about his friend. Miles had been in a
major slump after the breakup, and it seemed that slump would continue. The back seat had been completely silent almost the entire ride over, and it wasn’t for Chloe’s lack of trying. Miles wouldn’t even look at her, much less indulge her in any kind of conversation. I
felt kind of bad for strapping Chlo with the grump all night, especially since I knew how she felt about him.

But I’d sacrificed much more for her in the past. Plus, this was my night to live out the original high school fantasy. Owen Axel, my boyfriend, was taking
me to the Freeboro Fair. Freeboro County housed Mitchum and four other towns, and every year in late August they got together to throw a big carnival smack dab in the middle of the town lines. The fair had gotten more popular in our minds as we’d grown up; starting in
middle school, if you had a boyfriend, you’d come to the fair together to show off, ride the ferris wheel, and generally just be “in love.”

I knew it was a dumb tradition, but I’d never had someone take me to the fair. Much less someone I loved. Although I hadn’t
told Owen I loved him yet. Even though I’d come so far from where I had been at the beginning of the summer, really where I had been for the past two years, I couldn’t take that last leap.

Saying I loved him scared the crap of out me. What if he didn’t say it
Sure, my head was getting away from me. Amped up, cliched expectations about my first boyfriend-girlfriend experience at the fair were making me turn into Chlo, my hopeless romantic best friend.

“Ok, so what should
we do first?” Chlo was trying even harder than usual to be peppy, and I cringed inside at how awful this night was probably going to be for her.

“Who cares? This is lame, can we go now?” Miles grumbles, kicking dirt around with his shoe.
Epic cringe.

“No way man, we are escorting these two beautiful ladies around the fair! Now kick your sorry ass into gear and ask your lady if she wants to take a whirl on the ferris wheel.”

Owen massages Miles’ shoulders as if he was a boxer, getting ready to go
into battle. Chlo shot me a death look.

“That sounds like a great idea!” I burst, way too enthusiastically, trying to cajole all of the party members involved. Chlo just rolls her eyes at me, but both she and Miles relent.

As we make our way
over to the line at the bottom of the big turning wheel, Owen slings his arms around my shoulders. It was a move I’d seen a hundred times from a hundred couples, but I’d never truly known what it meant to be at home in another person’s arms until him.
And the fact that he and I were together, at the Freeboro Fair? My heart was nearly exploding. The past couple of months just didn’t feel like my life. I’d lost all confidence in myself sophomore year, and Owen had been the one to restore it. He’d shown me the way, and
also showed me that not everything is as it seems. While three years ago I would have laughed in your face and told you to fuck off if you told me I’d be dating Owen, I’d completely misjudged him. We squished into the two-seater, which was not easy when you have a 200
pound demi-god next to you, and belted ourselves in, with Chloe and Miles taking to seat behind us. As the car begins to climb, Owen wraps me in his arms, whispering in my ear.

“You look so beautiful tonight, you know that?” I blush at his unexpected
words. Of course Owen was a charmer, but I think he knew what tonight meant to me. Ever since our weekend at Grover, he was trying extra hard to bestow all kinds of confidence and compliments on me. His whole support mission had really started
when I’d confessed my sophomore year scandal at the beach though. Ok, so I hadn’t explicitly told him about Gregory, but I knew he understood. You couldn’t live in this town and not have heard about what had gone down my sophomore year.

“I could get used to this
slave thing.” I rib him, not wanting to take the compliment.

“Hey, don’t do that.” He says seriously. How he knew me already, what I thought, how I felt, I’d never know. “You are amazing. Don’t shy away from me.” I lean into him and kiss him gently, a
wordless thank you. “I am the luckiest guy alive right now. Its a great night, I’m on top of this rickety piece of shit ride with the most amazing girl on earth, and later, I get ice cream.”

I laugh at his assessment of what constituted lucky, he was seriously a child trapped
in a grown man’s body. A seriously fine grown man. But I can’t deny that I feel insanely lucky in this moment too. “And maybe, if you’re even luckier, you’ll have another sweet treat when you take me home.”

I don’t know what had come over me. He made
me crave his touch, his look. Yep, that look, the one he was pinning me with intensely right now.

Looking over, I can see his wide, mischievous smile under the moonlight. Suddenly, we stop moving, suspended in air three cars from the top. The car swings lightly, just
enough to put me on edge. But my heart pounding in its cage for an entirely different reason puts me on edge even more.

Owen turns to me, puts a hand on my face and looks me in the eyes. He stays like this for a beat, and then another. In the distance, I can hear the
tinkling music of the carousel. My hands are sweating in my lap, I’m trying to stay still, capture this moment and burn it onto my brain for eternity. This is it....

And then he angles his head, swoops down, and kisses me.

His mouth melds with
mine, his tongue dancing past my teeth and tangling in an exotic rhythm with my own.

Don’t get me wrong, it was a great kiss. A fantastic kiss. A kiss that melted my heart and made my ears ring. But it wasn’t those three little words. I don’t know why I’d
expected them tonight, we’d only been seeing each other for a little less than three months.

I guess I thought he could feel the same insane, soul-binding connection I did. That when he looked at me, we had the shared knowledge that we were put on this earth, in this
god forsaken southern hellhole, to find each other.

Why was I twisting myself up over this? We had plenty of time to explore our relationship.

Except we didn’t. Owen went back to school in two days. We hadn’t discussed the specifics of what would happen
between us. I was panicking. Ever since the party debacle, I needed a confirmation, whether it was those three little words or just a verbal commitment that he was mine for always, no matter how far apart we were.

Our ride comes to an end shortly after, and we
fulfill all of the other cliche things on the “teenagers go to the fair” list.

Chloe wanted to do bumper cars, which was actually one of the only things Miles seemed to take pleasure in. I think it was because he got to ram into people at high speeds. Owen insisted on
showing off his “mad basketball skills” for us and ended up winning me a little stuffed bear. Before I could drag everyone over to the cotton candy booth, Farris disappeared to god knew where. Poor Chlo.

“Its a fair ritual and I will not leave here before my stomach is filled with
pink sparkly fluff.” I whine as Owen protests my choice of dessert.

“Cotton candy is literally pretty air. There is no substance. Wouldn’t you rather have something good, like funnel cake?” He puts his best puppy dog face on, but I’m not budging.
“YO! Axel, what’s good man?!”

That voice.

I turn, knowing that when I do, the world will bottom out.

Keep it together, it can’t be him. You can’t remember his voice.

But then I see Owen hug him. Gregory. Right
there, embracing my boyfriend in front of me.

It feels like I am simultaneously being punched in the stomach and stabbed in the heart. My fingers stop working. My senses go haywire, my vocal chords all but freeze up.

They were standing
two feet in front of me, chumming it up like old buddies.

“...want to introduce you to my girlfriend. Hey, babe...come here, I want you to meet someone.” He motions towards me, waving with a giant grin on his face.

Chloe stands there, a
somber, fearful expression on her face, waiting for my cue. Were we bolting, playing it cool? Did I need anything?

Only a time machine to take me away from this moment.

Gregory turns his head towards me, away from the conversation he’s
having with Owen. The moment his eyes lock onto mine, he stares in disbelief for just a moment. Then, the jerk has the nerve to look over my head, as if Owen wasn’t talking about me.

I can’t move. Chloe is looking at me, Owen holding out his hand, and
all I could do was stare into the venomous eyes of the boy who had shattered my world three years ago. When Gregory finally realizes I must be the girlfriend Owen is referring to, he leers at me. Gregory openly assesses my body, his beady little eyes roaming over my
curves. I involuntarily cringe at the memory of his hands on me, and cold sweat begins to trickle between my breasts and down my neck. I thought I might bend over and spill the contents of my stomach into over the dirt.

“Babe?” Owen’s voice breaks me out of my terror
“I want to go home.” I declare, standing stoically in my place, not having moved any closer toward their conversation.

“What? Come meet my friend Greg,” he looks at me, annoyance marring his aqua eyes.

He was annoyed with
me? I’d told him my deepest, darkest, most personal secret. I had shared my shame with him, and he stood there, bro-pounding the asshole who’d stolen my virginity? Taken it from me under false pretenses only to throw it back in my face. “I want to go home.”
My brain isn’t working fast enough. It was the only coherent thought I could voice.

“Minka, what? Come here, and then I’ll take you home.” He moves closer to where I am rooted into the ground. “You’re being kind of rude, this isn’t like you…” he whispers for
only my ears.

His words feel like a slap, so much that I flinch backwards. Owen catches my arm, yanking me back towards him before I have the chance to trip over myself and land in the mud. He looks at me like I’ve come down with the plague. “What is wrong,
babe?”

He really isn’t comprehending why my senses are shutting down? Why I can’t stand to breathe the same air as this creep. Unable to bear the sight of what was transpiring anymore, I turn on my heel and begin to walk off, not stopping
when I hear Owen start to call my name.

I feel an arm snake around my waist, and lean in as I feel Chloe start to support my weight while we increase our pace. She knows, without me even needing to say it, that I needed to be as far away from him as possible.
“Just breathe, I’m getting you out of here.” Chloe instructs, punching the keypad on her phone. It feel like every breathe I take in is searing my lungs, flaying me open from the inside out. I was shaking so violently that I almost couldn’t walk. Finally we hit the
parking lot with Owen hot on our heels.

“Are you ok?! What the hell was that, Minka? Do you need to go to the hospital?” He looks bewildered, and mad.

After I’d disclosed everything about my past, after we’d had sex, I thought he would have
understood. I thought he would have known about everything that went down. But apparently he was more trapped in his popular bubble than I had originally thought. He hadn’t been paying any attention to me when we were in school together. How had I ever expected
him to understand the gravity of what went down?

Pulling him away from where Chlo would hear us, I knew I needed to tell him the whole truth. My voice shaking, and tears pooling in my eyes, I forged on.

“Remember how I told you about my past when
we were at the beach? About the bet and how awful high school has been for me? I told you that it was a certain guy who had led me on.” I look down at my fingers, pulling at them to avoid spilling the truth. I didn’t want to say his name. The whole thing was just too painful for me
to even talk about, let alone remember.

“Yeah, I remember. And I told you I didn’t care about any of that. That you’re beautiful and smart and you shouldn’t let what idiotic things other people choose to do or say affect you.”

It was so easy for him
to take that mentality.

“I know that. But…..the guy.” I stall, twisting my fingers and biting down so hard on my lip that I thought I might draw blood. “It was Gregory.”

Owen looks honestly stunned. Questions fill his eyes, and I know he was thinking it over in his
head, rolling the idea around like a marble, trying to place the events I’d described to him onto his friend.

“No, it couldn’t be, Greg is a great guy.”

My stomach drops to my feet. My throat goes dry and it feels like he’s slapped all of the air out of
me. He thought I was lying?

“You don’t believe me?” I can hear the unshed tears clogging my whispered question.

“I just...Babe I’ve known Greg forever. I really think you’re mistaken. He’s an awesome dude, he
wouldn’t do something like that. Maybe you didn’t get the entire story…”

My head is spinning and I can’t feel my limbs. I can only tell that I’m crying from the wetness spilling from my cheeks and chin onto my collar bone as I stand there motionless.
And there it was, clear as day. The blatant difference between us. He was in, and I was out. He would always put his cherished people, the popular crowd, over me. That’s how this always worked. Their word was stronger than mine. There was no use fighting the
inevitable.

"I have to go home." I glance around, looking for Chloe. I see Kelsey’s green Jeep pull up and know Chloe has called her. I could kiss them for being so great if I didn’t feel like my heart had just been carved out of my chest. I will my numb feet to move
towards them and away from Owen.

“Hey, wait a minute! I can take you. Minka, what the fuck?!” Owen grabs my arm, looking incredulous, as if he hadn’t just ripped my heart from its cavity and stomped on it. Its hard to even look at him. I wanted to tell him that I
loved him. How the hell had I ended up here again? I’d overlooked all of the warning signs, the bells and whistles telling me I was walking into a trap. I had to get out of there.

Facing him, I deliver the blow that I know will wreck and preserve me all at once. “Owen, we
shouldn’t see each other anymore. Please don’t call me.” I hope he can hear the robotic sentences coming from my mouth. I’m sure my octave is even reaching a hair breadth over a whisper. I was trying so hard to force the syllables past the lump in my throat. Big salty tears leak from
my eyes as Chloe grabs my waist, supporting me once again over to the car.

“MINKA! What are you doing? Can we talk about this? What the hell is happening…..” I see Owen’s pleading eyes boring holes into me as Chloe loads me into the car. He plunges his hands
into his hair out of frustration and moves angrily towards the car.

Pulling at the now locked door, he shouts at the side of my face through the glass, “Minka! You’re seriously mad about me talking to Greg? You have got to be wrong! Come out here and talk to me, god
“damnit.” He pulls a few more times at the locked door handle and pounds his fist into the window.

I strain my body and will it to keep facing forward. I can’t look at him or I will dissolve into a puddle of tears. My body feels like it's being sucked into the earth; my ears are
filled with a whoooshing sound and my stomach and heart keep doing that dipping thing like I’m on a roller coaster. I’m not shocked to find I might be sick in the back of Kelsey’s car.

I feel the engine of her Jeep come to life under my body, and know that this is
the last time I will see Owen if I can help it. As she slowly pulls out of the gravel parking lot, I turn my body to glimpse him one last time.

Out the back window, he’s jogging now to keep up with Kelsey, who is laying her foot on the gas. I see his mouth shouting my
name as he runs faster, waving his arms in exasperated movements. Tears leak down my face. I should have never gotten involved with him. I should have kept my walls up.

The farther we get, the more he slows down, until I watch him stop dead. I
can just make out the pained expression he wears, and I feel the same hurt marring my own features.

I watch Owen for as long as I can make him out, until he disappears in the cloud of dust the tires kick up in their wake.
It's funny. Well it isn't actually funny. But in a way it is.

It's funny how history has a way of repeating itself.

I'd told myself from day one of meeting Owen that I wouldn't give in. Then I told myself I could be with him, but I
wouldn’t get hurt. Then I told myself I wouldn’t fall. And after I’d fallen, I’d told myself that he would never let me down.

You almost have to laugh. Almost. But that would require you to stop crying.

A knock sounds on my door, the place I had
scarcely left in five days. Ever since Owen left.

I look up from Jane Eyre as my dad enters the room. He was home for dinner almost nightly now. At least one relationship in my life was looking up.

"Are you...are you ok? You seem down this week. And your eyes...they're
red. Like you've been crying." He joins me where I lay on my stomach in the middle of my bed.

I haven't completely filled him in on the implosion that was my relationship with Owen yet. I haven't even wanted to process it, let alone go through the uncomfortable
conversation of explaining it to my dad. But I guess here we were.

    "Owen and I....we ended things."

    "That little prick..."

    "Dad!" I’m surprised by his sudden curse. Usually my dad is a ball of pent up temper, but he keeps a good lid on it.
"What? I told that little asshole if he hurt you I'd break his neck. And now I'm going to have to go do that." He makes a motion as if he was about to spring from my bed.

"Dad, stop it. You don't have to kill anyone on my behalf." He looks at me as if I was crazy to assume
anything else. "Plus, I'm not angry. I'm just sad."

I look down at my book as another tear drops.

"Oh come on, don't cry sweetheart. Any guy who makes my daughter this upset is really not worth it anyway. He's an idiot."

He pats my back like I remember him doing
sometimes when I was a little girl. It helps ease the pain a bit, but the bite of reality still sinks deep.

I was telling him the truth. I wasn't angry, because deep inside I knew something like this would eventually happen. I knew I was Icarus, flying too close to the sun. I was
bound to disintegrate into ashes.

I was just sad. So very sad. I always thought when they talked about broken hearts it was all bullshit. But now I knew, you could actually ache in the middle of your chest so badly that all you wanted was whatever would ease
that pressure.

I understand the addicts now. Because as much as I hated myself, and Owen for what I'd let him to do to me, the only thing I wanted was him. He was the only thing that would alleviate this hurt.

"I know he is. But I’m a bigger one. For getting
involved with someone like him in the first place.”

“Someone like him?”

My dad wears a puzzled look.

“You know, popular. Cool. Bright, and gifted, and athletic. Someone everyone looks up to and reveres. Someone who lights up every single
I thumb at the pages of the book. For as far as I’d come in my self confidence, part of me was always going to be that naive, wall flower sophomore who didn’t believe in herself.

“Who said you weren’t someone like that? Because
from what I see, you are all of those things and more.” Dad pushes me over so that I sit up, face to face with him. “I’m not sure who along the way convinced you that your worth was less than anyone else’s, but they were dead wrong. You are the best kind of person,
Minka. You are considerate and intelligent, beautiful, you have the wittiest sense of humor. And let me let you in on a little secret. You don’t just light up a room, you burn so bright that even the solar system is jealous.”

I brush away the tears that are again dripping
down my face. I don’t know how many years I’ve waited for someone to say these things to me. And I realize I haven’t even known that I’ve needed them.

“Don’t you dare let anyone make you feel inferior again, ever in your life. You are perfect,
exactly the way you are. Exactly the way your mother and I made you.”

He pulls me into his chest, where I collapse in sobs. I cry for my mother, for not being able to grow up with her and hear her wisdom. I cry for the years I’d wasted doubting myself and hiding from
the world. And I cry for
the love that I couldn’t
seem to make go away, no
matter how hard I tried.

But as I surfaced from
wallowing in the pit of my
grief, I felt something else.

Beneath all of the
sadness and heartbreak, I
felt empowered. I was
finally sure of myself. Sure
of my worth. And I wasn’t letting anyone strip me of that again.

The first three days of school had passed without consequence. There wasn’t anything taped to my locker, no one harassed me with dirty notes in class,
and I even got to eat lunch peacefully with Kels. That was, until today. I’m unwrapping my roast beef on wheat when I hear her. Allison Renner. She’s two tables away from me, surrounded by her posse of popular-bots, drinking a green juice and filing her nails. Someone
really needed to tell her this was high school in North Carolina.

"So then, I heard that he took her down to the Banks just to bang her where no one could see. How pathetic is that? I mean how desperate can one person be..."

Kels saw me freeze,
listening to the entire conversation. "You want me to go over there and teach that store a lesson?"

It was a sweet offer, but I was done having people fight my battles for me. "Nah, I think it's high time I said something to her, don't you?"

And with that I get up,
smoothe out my favorite teal button down dress, and head right for the girl I'd let control my image for way too long.

"Hi Allison." I stand over her where she sits, waiting for her to acknowledge me.

She looks up, an expression of disgust
clouding her perfect features. "Oh...hi...um, Maggie, is it?"

Typical. "You know my name is Minka. Do you know how I know that? It might be the fact that you haven't been able to keep it out of your mouth for the last half hour."

Her body recoils as if
I’ve struck her. Two of her followers gasp in shock. I’ve never, and to my knowledge no person has ever, approached her in such a manner.

"Excuse me? Who do you think you are?" At this point, her voice begins to reach dog-whistle level decibels, and our
classmates begin to stare.

"I'm the girl you've tormented for the last year and a half. The girl you bullied until she was just a shell of her former self. Well, that stops today. You can't hurt me anymore. I am stronger than any petty high school bullshit you have to throw at me."
I look up to see the entire lunch room hanging on my every word. No one has ever done anything like this. That was me, trendsetter. Peeking at Kels, she gives me a thumbs up, and then slices her thumb across her neck. "Finish her," she mouths. Lovely.
"I actually feel sorry for you, Allison. Sorry that you feel so badly about yourself that you need to bloody and bruise others to make yourself feel better. I feel sorry that you feel the need to create drama because you don't have interests and hobbies in your life that you love.
But I especially feel sorry for you because you're going to be *that* girl, the one who peaked in high school. That girl who looks back ten years from now and sees that she wasted her time here with petty shit instead of learning and creating memories with great friends. So yes, I feel
damn sorry for you. But do me a favor and leave me alone from now on."

With that, I spin on my heel and walk calmly back to my table. I don’t need to see her reaction, it was enough just to spit those words in her face.

"My heart is beating so fast." I whisper to Kels as I
take a seat back at our table.

"Boo, you just became a living legend." she sports a smug smile.

Looking up, the entire cafeteria seems to be swinging their gazes between Allison and I.

Glancing at Allison, her entire table is still frozen in
place. Then, as if something snaps inside of her, she screeches and leaps up from the table.

"Ughhhhhhh!" She flips her silky blonde hair over her shoulder and runs for the exit of the lunchroom. 

"You are my hero." I turn to see Bethany Coolidge staring at me in
awe. Bethany had endured Allison's wrath far longer than I. It was in that moment that I realized my little diatribe might have done more for my peers than I'd anticipated.

The bell rings. Thank god, I need to get out of here. People had started giving me curious looks.
like they might come over and talk to me. God, no. I might not want to be a pariah, but I definitely did not want to be the center of attention. I'd accomplished my mission and now it was time to leave.

"I need to stop by my locker before Physics." I sling my backpack over
my shoulder and make my way toward the South hallway that leads down to the student parking lot and athletic fields.
I throw my baseball bag in the corner of our apartment living room that also houses the massive pile of shoes, and throw my hat on one of the hooks above it. The place is a dump ever since we’ve moved back in, not that it was ever really clean. Our apartment was good for
one thing. Partying.

Which was one thing I hadn’t feel like doing any of recently.

I walk into our spacious kitchen and crack open the fridge. Leftover chicken wrap, I didn't know how old that was. Moldy spaghetti, something else that
smelled suspicious. Jesus, I really did live with a bunch of cave men. I spot eggs. I can do something with those.

Pulling them out, I begin to crack them into the pan. A huge after-practice omelet sounds good.

I hear the front door
slam as I place the carton back into the fridge. Farris walks in, noisily heading for the fridge. He pulls out a beer, cracks it open and takes a huge swig. Its a sight I’m disappointedly all too familiar with these days.

"Isn't it a little early man?" Glancing at the
clock, it was only noon. We'd had a mid-morning Thursday practice, no one on the team had classes today as a scheduling fix. All I wanted was to eat and get back into bed.

"What're you, my old man? I’ve already been up for like five hours, anything goes. Plus, its
only the second week of school. I have to catch up for all that lost time I spent fucking sober, taking Olivia on dates and shit last semester."

Yeah, he still wasn't over that.

"Whatever, bro. Its your liver. And education." I flip one side of my
omelet. Well, there was still something I knew how to do well.

It had been almost two weeks since Minka left me, literally, in her dust. I had no fucking clue what I'd done. I had gone by her house. Called her. Texted her. I almost decided to wait outside her house for
her to go for a run, but then thought she might flip and call her fucking Police Chief father on me. After that, I'd resigned myself. I didn't need to chase after a dramatic chick. I didn't put up with crazy.

But that didn't mean I didn't love crazy. Because I
I loved Minka. I love her. For the past two weeks, it felt like I'd been in an autopsy. My chest was cracked open from the inside, and my heart was a dead husk just taking up space in there.

I'd almost told her too, when I'd taken her to the fair, up on that Ferris
Wheel. But I thought it was too soon. With her past and all, I thought it might freak her out.

And then she had freaked out. She'd gone fucking nuclear as I was trying to show her off, introduce her to my buddy Gregory.

"You still being a little
bitch about your breakup, buddy? Get over it, we all screw and get screwed by these chicks."

"Don't talk about her like that." I immediately snap at Farris.

"I don't understand why you're still defending her." He plops onto the couch as I make my way
over to the table. Our apartment is open concept, everything just flows right into everything else. Farris had picked it because you could play beer pong in the dining room while watching TV.

"I don't understand fucking anything about this. I don't know what
happened. One minute I was making out with her on top of the Ferris Wheel, the next I'm trying to introduce her to Gregory......"

"Gregory Stamkos? Fuck, that dude is the worst."

"Huh?" I'd never realized Farris even knew
who he was.

"I mean, I have been known to be a classless asshole sometimes, and I love one night stands, but the girls always know what they're signing up for."

"Wait, what are you talking about? Backup."

My fork has now dropped
carelessly onto the plate, my appetite all but vanished. What was he talking about?

"Dude, you never heard the story about what that asshat and his friends did our senior year?" Miles finishes his beer and crushes the can, tossing it into the growing pile next
to the pile of shoes. We had to make a chore list or something.

"No?" My stomach starts to turn as if it subconsciously knows whatever he tells me next is not going to be good.

"Jesus, you really didn't do anything that year but bang Allison, did you? The
whole school, shit the whole town heard about this. Well, him and some of those dickhead juniors made a bet at the beginning of the year. They all picked out one sophomore girl, and whoever could get their sophomore to sleep with them first won the bet."
Nausea begins to roll up into my throat at this point. "Well, Gregory, he led this girl on so bad. He took her on dates around town, held her hand at school, brought her to parties. Meanwhile, like the entire school knew exactly what was going on. So after winter formal, he
brings her to one of Hinkley's parties, and convinces her to lose her virginity to him in one of the upstairs bedrooms. He wins the bet. The next day he dumps her in front of the whole school by pinning the underwear she'd worn, special for him, to her locker. Fucking
prick. I shoulda knocked his teeth in then."

My stomach is at the bottom of my feet. I can feel myself drenched in a cold sweat, but I’m locked in this position. I can’t move. I can barely breathe. I feel like I might blow chunks any second now, but the unshed tears in my
eyes are causing me to blink so rapidly that I can’t think much about anything else.

He fucking used her.
He took her most cherished gift, stole it, and then threw her away like a filthy groupie.

Her threw away my beautiful, passionate,
smart, breathtaking girl. Gregory ruined Minka. I don’t even realize I’ve picked up the plate until it smashes into the wall next to the front door.

“What the fuck?” Miles scrambles up off the couch like someone just came into our apartment spraying bullets. Looking
around with panicked eyes, he zeroes in on me.

“Axel, what the fuck are you doing?”

I don’t think I’ll be able to speak past the bile rising in my throat and sheer fury in my veins, but I manage to. “It was her.”

“What was her….ohhhhhhh. Fuck. Oh,
shit. Jesus. Minka. That sophomore was Minka.” He runs his hands through his hair as if he’s just playing this new scenario out in his head. “Dude, I swear I didn’t know it was her.”

That I believe. “I know. I would castrate you for not telling me if you knew
it was her."

Fuck. What the fuck do I do now? Then it dawns on me. I didn’t believe her.

“I didn’t…..I didn’t believe her.” My voice feels like shards of glass coming out of my windpipe.

I grab the closest thing, my glass of OJ, and throw
it at the wall. A bright yellowish-orange stain coats the white paint, glass pieces clattering to the floor.

“Ok! Enough throwing.” Farris moves over to me cautiously, as if I might pull a ninja move on him at any moment.

He maneuvers my
body down onto the couch. I think I must still be in shock, because I can’t seem to move myself.

“Now, start from the beginning.” Miles stares at me like I have three heads.

“At the fair. Gregory showed up. I wanted to introduce her as my girlfriend. Show how
proud I was. When she saw him, she freaked out. She froze, and then broke into a run towards the parking lot.” My voice sounded hoarse as I recounted that night. Fuck, I was such an idiot. “She’d told me this story when we took her to the beach. About how sophomore
year she’d been led on by this guy, and he’d humiliated her in front of the whole school. She didn’t go into all of the specifics. And apparently I had my fucking head up my ass that year that I didn’t put two and two together. When I caught up with her in the parking
lot, she told me the guy was Greg.”

I had to pause. My omelet was coming back up. I thought I’d lose it all over the coffee table.

“And….I. Fuck. I told her it couldn’t have been him. I told her she’d made a mistake.”

I ball my hands into
fists. I want to punch myself in the fucking balls right now.

“You should have seen her goddamn face.” She’d looked at me like I’d ripped the stars from the skies. I’d put that look there. I could kill myself.

She’d told me to protect her heart. That she
couldn’t take it if something like that happened again. And I’d ripped the organ from her chest and all but stomped on it. I was a fucking dick.

“I have to go.” All of a sudden I can’t move my feet fast enough. Keys, I needed my keys. And my license. And a fucking
miracle.

“Woah, woah, woah. You can't leave now. What’re you gonna say to her, man? I am just considering your balls here.”

That one made me stop in my tracks. “Just how often do you consider my balls?”
“Fuck off, bro. I meant cause she will definitely kick them once she sees you. Plus, she’s in school right now. How are you going to talk your way in there?”

I wasn’t worried about that. I had those secretaries wrapped around my finger since day one of freshman
year. It was Minka I was worried about.

“"I’m not sure how I’ll get her to talk to me, but I have an hour and fifteen minutes to think up a plan.”

Farris started to put on his shoes.

“Why’re you getting dressed?”
“Dude, if you’re going to get your ass beat by a girl, I have to be there to see it.”
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MINKA
Right as I turn the corner, I feel the air shift.

"Yo Axel! What's up man, what're you doing here?" I hear a hulking football bro from my grade shout from further down the hallway.

I stop in my tracks. Standing twenty feet away is Owen. Tall, lean,
outfitted in his baseball uniform. His sexiness makes my knees go weak. Seriously, I have to brace the wall.

Kels stops, noticing I’m not next to her, turning back to see me no longer moving.

"Minka, what are you...." Following my line
of sight, she gives a low noise of understanding. "What the hell is dickhead doing here? I'm going to go kick him in the family jewels."

I feel the adrenaline rush through my body the moment he locks his eyes on mine. It hits me like a tidal wave. Two weeks
since I’ve seen him and he can still turn my stomach into knots and make me instantly lust for him.

He starts to run from me, all eyes in the hallway moving back and forth between us. Three dings sound over the school speakers, signaling that there is only a minute left.
before the next period starts.

“We have to go.” I turn on my heel, speed-walking back the way we’d come. My classroom was the other way, but at this point I’d scale Everest to get away from Owen.

Too bad he was an almost-professional
As soon as Kels and I hit the tile in the lunchroom, he’s grabbing my elbow.

“Minka, wait. Please….please listen to me. Give me a minute.”

Kels looks like she’s about two seconds from punching him in the nose.
“I need to go to class. Please leave me alone.” I pull out of his grasp, going to turn again. He’s on my movements as if he can read my mind. The minute I turn, he throws himself in front of me.

Grabbing my hands, he crunches his body down so he can look me in the face.
Since I’m avoiding eye contact at all costs, it’s the best he can do.

“\textquote I know that you were telling the truth about Gregory. I’m an unbelievable, unmitigated ass. You must allow me to tell you just how stupid I’ve been. And how much I love you.”
My ears are ringing. My stomach and heart have joined each other in a pile of goop at my feet. Did he just say I was right? The only people who have ever said out loud, in the open that what I’d said about Gregory was true were Chloe and Kelsey. It felt like a dam of relief and
pent up frustration was breaking open in my chest. And was he quoting Mr. Darcy? Only Owen. Only he knew the most simple way to blast straight through my walls. And had he said he loved me? Two weeks ago I would have been jumping around in giddy
middle-school-girl circles hearing him say that. Now it brought confusion, and sadness.

And worst of all, hope. I broke the hypnotizing stare Owen had me in to search for Kels. Maybe she’d give me one of her men suck speeches and I’d be able to walk away.
Because right now, I don’t think I could do it on my own.

Instead, I lifted my head to see almost 200 people at a dead stop, silently watching this go down.

“Alright people, this isn’t soap opera hour. Get your nosey asses to class.
You’re all going to be late!” Kels’ demand sent people scuttling away, remembering they had class in less than 30 seconds. “You stay, I’ll tell Petri you’re going to be late. He won’t mind.”

So much for her telling me to be strong.

“I can’t be late for AP
bio.” I say to no one in particular, because Kels is already halfway up the stairs to the science wing.

Owen grabs my hands again, leading me over to a lunch table, pulling me down to sit. Our knees brush together and I shudder. I can’t help my body’s physical reaction to
being so close to him.

"I’m sorry. I’m so goddamn sorry, Minka. I know there is nothing that I can say or do to make up for what I’ve done. But I can’t be away from you. When Miles told me…told me what he’d done to you sophomore year….I swear I almost got in my car to
drive to where he was and kill him. I could kill him with my bare hands.” Owen chokes out the words, as if they are physically hurting him.

“You didn’t believe me. You chose him.” My voice sounds extremely small inside my ears.

“And for that I will
never forgive myself. And I don’t expect you to either. I chose what was safe. What was familiar. It’s what I’ve been doing my whole life, Minka. Choosing the path that people put me on, the one people expect me to follow. I’m an idiot. I don’t care about that shit
anymore. The only thing I care about is you. I want to fit into your world, no matter what that means. We can paint ourselves orange and walk around town in overalls for all I care. But I’d be happy, because I was with you. Without you, I have no world.”
I let his words soak into my brain, hearing what he was saying but not really being able to process it. I’d missed him. So much that it hurt. And to have him sitting in front of me, saying these things I’d always wanted him to say, I felt the tiny castle walls around my heart.
crumbling with each word.

“\[I \text{ love you. I am in love with you. I know I can’t re-do the past, but please. Baby, if you….if you give me one last chance, I promise I will do everything I can to prove that my life means nothing without you in it.}\]

I feel a tear drip down
my cheek, and when Owen reaches out to brush it away, I audibly sigh into his hand. Just his touch makes my whole world better.

“...I don’t know. You promised not to hurt me, and now...” I can’t keep up with the mixed emotions flying through
my head. I want him back more than anything else in the world, but my self-preservation is waging a mean battle.

“I know...I know. And I’m so sorry. I’ll never be able to say that enough. But just give me a shot. Let me show you what us, together, could be like.
Because without you, my life means nothing. I am nothing.”

I close my eyes, trying to soothe my shaking hands. “I’ve missed you so much. Sitting here with you, I’ve dreamed about this every night for weeks. Hearing you say you love me, I’ve wanted that for so...
long. But you lost my trust, Owen…”

“And I want to gain it back. I will try forever. I’ll drive up here every single day. I will bring you cheesesteaks and pickles, with white chocolate and Lost for dessert. I’ll put corny hip-hop covers on YouTube dedicated to you.
I’ll do anything.”

I smile tearily, unable to contain it after his silly diatribe. “I’m not sure…”

“You don’t have to be sure now. Go to class. I’ll be waiting in the parking lot after you finish, waiting to begin proving it to you. Just say you’ll meet me.”

I weigh the options in
my head. It's safer to put those walls back up, not expose myself to pain, or love, or all of the scary emotions that came with them. But Owen, he had shown me that stepping up to the plate was worth it. And who cared if you struck out a time or two? It only matters if you get
back out there and swing at the challenges life throws you.

“Okay. I’ll meet you.”
EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER
I lean my back against the old brick building, admiring the rays shining through the tall oaks that dot campus.

The weather is perfect, high temps and sunshine with no humidity in the air, which was weird for a September in Virginia. Students begin to trickle
into the quad, those whose teachers called class just a minute or two early.

I hear the doors swing open just beside me, and pull my Tigers hat lower down on my head. Sticking my hands in my pockets, I wait.

Guys and girls pour out of the exit, clad in their
Grover University gear, flip flops, yoga pants and basketball shorts. This might be a prestigious college, but we all still dressed like bums for class.

I see a long, curly ponytail swoosh a few feet in front of me, the head it belongs to turning to
search for someone in the crowd.

“Hey freshman!” I yell. She turns around, an annoyed smile gracing those perfect lips. I walk straight for her and don’t waste a minute fusing my lips to hers in a kiss that is probably not decent for public consumption.
She tastes like berries and home. Minka. The best taste in the world.

“Ew, junior boys are so creepy.” She teases, but by the breathlessness in her voice I know I’ve affected her.

“Well, this junior boy loves you. I love you so much.”
“And I love you.” Minka smiles up at me, her small body enveloped in my arms.

It still makes my heart do a funny lurch inside my chest when I hear her say that. I hadn’t heard it until about four months after I’d ambushed her in the lunchroom. When she said
it to me then I thought I’d damn near have a stroke.

Those four months hadn’t been easy, for either of us. She was snippy and distrustful at first, not unlike our initial meeting when I’d tried to win her over. And I was so hard on myself for how I’d hurt her, I had a dark period
there for a minute. But we got through it, me driving to Mitchum any chance I got to see her, and her slowly giving on the reins. When she’d gotten into Grover, and subsequently accepted, I gave her an extra special accepted students tour. A large portion of the tour
featured my bedroom. I’d like to think she was more than satisfied with the benefits package.

“So, I have a little celebration planned to commemorate your first week of classes being over…”

“Owen, have you really been that bored? Lucky
you, no classes on Friday.”

“Would it be weird to say I’ve been counting down the minutes until you got out of class?”

“No, its actually very sweet.”

I wrap her locks around my fingers as I direct her towards my truck in the parking lot.
“Good. We’re having a small get together, Chloe is invited, of course, as another one-week freshman.”

“Oh, great. Miles is going to kill you ha!”

Miles and Chloe had been beefing ever since the carnival. I didn’t know why. I did know that he
was still not acting like himself almost a year later. “Whatever he can suck it up. And another surprise...”

I unlock the doors to my car, and out jumps Kelsey.

“Oh MY GOD! Owen...what...Kels!?" Minka looks at me, her
eyes wide with glee and shock.

Kelsey is leaving for a year-long trip to Africa in two days. The girls had thought they’d said their goodbyes last week before they’d come to school, but I had other plans.

“What are you doing here!?” Minka was yelling
now, the excitement coming through in her voice.

“\textquote I had to come to your first weekend of college parties! Come on, who do you think I am. Plus, Clint would have killed me if I didn’t show my face before I left.\textquote ”

Kelsey and Clint had
become close over the last year, with Minka coming up a few times and me taking my buddies home some weekends. The way he looked at her though, I knew he wanted to be way more than friends.

Minka pushes up on her toes and gives me a sloppy, enthusiastic kiss
before slinging her arm around Kelsey, talk of what they were going to wear already going on.

I stand back and admire my girl. My beautiful, smart, brave girl. She’s faced so much and come out to beat it into submission. I was in awe of her everyday.
It seemed like my existence up until I met her only depended on the next win. The next time I could mark that W. But I didn’t need that validation anymore. I’d won her heart, and she had mine. Everything after that was just balls and strikes.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carrie Aarons lives with her soon-to-be husband in an apartment they are constantly outgrowing. Nine times out of ten, she can be found
with her head in a book. The other one, she’s most likely devouring sushi.

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