



the
PERFECT
GAME

J. STERLING

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DEDICATION

This book is for every guy who has
ever loved a sport ...

and for each girl who has

ever loved that guy .

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ONE

“Cassie, are you almost ready?” my roommate, Melissa, yelled down the hall.

“Just give me one sec! I’m almost done,” I shouted.

I ran my fingers one last time through my stick-straight blonde hair, trying in vain to give it the appearance of volume or thickness. One final coat of mascara on my eyelashes and I’d be all set. The purple strappy top I was wearing really brought out the green in my eyes.

“Perfect,” I muttered to my reflection, admiring the way my low-cut jeans hugged the curves of my butt.

“If you’re so perfect, then let’s go!”

“Good God, woman. It’s not like we’re heading to the prom.” I walked out of the bedroom and down the hall toward my stressed-out best friend. “It’s just a party. There is no *late* at a frat party, you know?” I leaned into the door frame, determined not to hurry.

“All the good guys will be taken.” Melissa stuck her bottom lip out in the pout that she had perfected, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“This is a frat party, Meli. There are no good guys.”

“I hate you.” She frowned, twirling her shoulder-length wavy brown hair around her finger.

I smiled. “Good. Let’s go.”

I tossed my arm around my pint-sized friend and headed out the front door, locking it behind us. I had known Melissa since high school. She moved here right after we graduated, while I was forced to attend community college. “You have to take the same courses the first two years anyway. It’s much cheaper,” my mom had insisted. So I stayed close to home, while Melissa’s parents happily paid for all her expenses at Fullton State.

After two years of general education, I applied to three universities in Southern California and was accepted at all of them. I knew immediately which one I wanted to transfer to. Not only was my best friend at Fullton, but it also had one of the best photo communications programs in the state, with an award-winning student magazine and newspaper. And since my major was photography, the choice was easy.

Melissa’s parents insisted on getting an apartment for us to share and refused to let my parents pay for any of it. We weren’t poor, but we didn’t have an overabundance of cash the way Meli’s parents did. They told my folks that college tuition was expensive enough without all the extras and then they paid our rent a year in advance, including the summer. I remember my dad *promising* to pay them back during one of the many pre-moving discussions, and my eyes met Melissa’s with an all-knowing glance that the repayment would never really come to fruition.

Her parents had always been overly generous when it came to me. But then again, they were privy to the many times my dad had promised me something and then not delivered. On more than one occasion, Melissa’s mom’s was the shoulder I cried on and whose ears I vented my disappointments and frustrations to. I intended to start paying them back as soon as I graduated and opened my own photography business.

The night air was warm on my exposed skin as we walked the five blocks toward the fraternity house. “That top looks fierce on you,” Melissa complimented me with a slight smile.

“It’s cute, right?” I smiled, looking down at the formfitting top hugging my curves and accentuating my tiny waist. “You look as hot as ever.” I winked before slapping her black-skirt-covered ass.

Melissa was truly beautiful. Her dark brown hair contrasted with the blue of her eyes, making

hard to look away from her at times. She honestly looked like she belonged on the cover of a magazine, with her stunning figure and flawless features. We were total opposites, what with my five-foot-eight-inch frame and disproportionate body shape. I used to joke and say that God put me together like a Mr. Potato Head toy. One piece for my butt, one for my waist, one for my boobs...all a mismatch of sizes.

But it worked on me.

And I worked it.

The sound of hip-hop music filled the air. "Ooooh, I love this song! Let's dance!" I grabbed Melissa's hand and dragged her along, jogging closer to the source of the music.

"You always want to dance." Melissa rolled her eyes. I'd smack those perfect blue eyes right off her face if I didn't love her so damn much.

"Well, I'm a good dancer. And this butt of mine—oh, you know what it does." I started shaking my hips in the crowded driveway of the fraternity house.

"Oh, no. Please stop."

I laughed and slowed down my booty-shaking when I noticed the number of eyes ogling me. I hate being gawked at. *I know, I know. I'm a fucking hypocrite.* I scanned the crowd before suddenly stopping on the most delicious pair of chocolate-brown eyes watching me. The fact that the eyes belonged to one of the hottest faces I'd ever seen was merely a bonus. He ran his fingers through his black hair before resting them against his tanned, scruffy face. He smiled lazily at me and I felt my stomach flip.

Stupid stomach.

"No. Tell me you are not looking at him, Cassie." Melissa stepped in front of me, breaking the eye contact.

"Hey, move." But every direction I craned my neck, she blocked me with her annoying face.

"No freaking way. Don't you know who that is?" She threw her hand in front of my eyes before swatting it away.

"Obviously not, or we'd be dating." I hopped up to steal a peek over her head.

"Jack Carter doesn't *date*. He sleeps with girls and all their friends." Melissa's mouth curled with disgust.

"So that's the infamous Jack Carter, huh?" I was intrigued. This guy's name was all over the school papers and online.

Melissa threw an arm over my shoulder. "The one and only."

"Is he really as good as they say?" Jack would be eligible for the Major League Baseball draft after the season ended. Everyone said he'd get drafted within the first five rounds. And apparently that's a pretty big deal.

"His ego certainly thinks so."

"Typical." If there's one thing I know, it's athletes. They're all the same. Superstitious, cocky, insecure egomaniacs. Yes, I realize the words are contradictory, but most are somewhat normal guys. They just hide behind a hundred-foot-tall brick wall, built entirely on ego. Plus, they don't know any better. They've been baseball players their whole lives; they don't know how to be anything else.

"What is it with you and assholes, Cass? Jack Carter's a world class jerk and you need to stay away from him."

"Hey!" I stomped my foot and firmly placed my hand against my hip. "The question isn't, 'What is it with *me* and assholes.' It's more like, 'What is it with most guys *being* assholes?'"

"Valid point. But still. You already know up front this guy's a player, so why bother? You'll only end up hurt."

"Not if I hurt him first," I mumbled under my breath.

“Trust me, you won’t. Jack Carter doesn’t get hurt by girls. Promise me you’ll stay away from him.” Melissa pinned me with a glare to let me know she was serious.

“I promise I’ll stay away from him.” I batted my eyelashes, my tone of voice insincere.

“Ugh! Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Melissa pushed her way through the crowd and I watched Jack stopped her before she passed him. He reached an arm out for her and she moved it away, her foot tapping against the ground the way she always did when she was irritated. He turned to eye me and she matched his gaze before gesturing wildly and shaking her head no. A wide smile crossed his face as Melissa threw her arms up in the air before storming inside the front door.

Jack walked, no, make that *sauntered*, over to where I stood. His black cargo shorts and tight-fitting gray baseball t-shirt did a number on his body. The definition of his arm muscles rippled against the fabric, accentuating his well-defined shoulders on his six-foot frame as his arms swayed. He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes at me like I was some tiny, helpless creature who didn’t have a clue it was about to get eaten alive by the most beautiful, albeit dangerous, creature in the jungle.

I almost felt violated.

Dirty.

Like I needed a shower to scrub that look off my body.

It wasn’t until he got close enough that I could read the writing on his shirt. It said, “No Glove No Love” with a picture of a catcher’s mitt in the middle.

What a Pig. Yes, with a capital P.

Two can play this game.

Defenses up.

“So you’re Melissa’s roommate?” The words came out smooth like butter, his voice deep and sexy.

“You’re a genius,” I said, going for my most uninterested tone.

“Hey now, don’t be mean. I just wanted to meet you.” He looked me in the eyes with a focused, unbreakable stare. “You have beautiful eyes.”

“Nice shirt.” I gave him a disgusted once-over, trying to cover the fact that I wanted to laugh. It was clever, but I’d be damned if I would admit that to a guy like him.

He looked down and smirked. “Ah, you like that? I think it’s a pretty responsible message I’m sending out, don’t you?”

I said nothing, questioning whether anything that came out of this guy’s mouth was genuine or not.

“What? Cat got your tongue? You don’t believe in safe sex?”

Was this guy for real? “What do you want?” My lips pursed together, making my tone harsher than I had intended.

“I told you, I wanted to meet you. I’m Jack Carter.” He reached out his hand and I looked at it, my arms firmly crossed against my stomach.

“I know who you are.” I pretended not to care. He was beautiful. And he was charming. And a marauding, whoring pig. *God, what is wrong with me?*

“So you’ve heard of me, huh, Kitten?”

My lips suddenly felt like they were filled with lead as they turned downward in disgust. “You do not just call me ‘Kitten.’ Do I look like a stripper to you?”

He looked me up and down and then did it again. “Well, now that you mention it.”

“You’re an asshole.” I pushed past him to walk away, but he grabbed me.

I tore my arm from his grip. “It costs fifty cents every time you touch me. Don’t do it again.”

“Oh, so you’re not a stripper, you’re a whore?”

“Oh, so you’re not only an asshole, you’re a piece of shit,” I responded as I stomped away.

“I like you,” he shouted at my back.

“So you’re dumb, too,” I tossed over my shoulder with a glare. “I’ll add it to the list of your marauding, whoring, pig.”

redeeming qualities.”

I heard him laugh before I entered the house to search for Melissa. I finally found her in the backyard, drinking something out of a red plastic cup and talking to a group of people I didn't recognize. I appeared at her side before she realized I was there.

“Oh my God, Cass, what did he say to you?” She ushered me toward an empty clearing in the yard.

I grabbed a drink for myself off a nearby table and rolled my eyes. “Nothing. He’s a jackass.”

“I told you.” She smirked and shrugged her shoulders. “Well, he’s clearly gotten over you already. Look.”

She pointed toward an open window where Jack was attached at the lips to a scantily clad blond. One of his hands gripped her backside, while the other pulled at the back of her head. I shook my head in disgust at his public display of man whoredom.

“And then what? He’ll just never talk to her again?” I asked, trying to figure him out.

Melissa turned to eye me, curiosity lurking behind those baby blues. “No. They’ll talk. I mean unless she gets all pissed off at him for...being him. But he won’t ever hook up with her again. He never hooks up with the same girl twice.”

“And the girls...they know this?” I was shocked. *Seriously, do these girls have no self-esteem?*

“They know.”

“Pathetic.” I frowned and looked back at Jack just in time to see him leading the girl away by the hand, a smile plastered all over her perfect little face.

And that was my first introduction to Jack Carter.

Jack fucking Carter.

The next big thing in the world of baseball. Word has it he throws somewhere between ninety-three and ninety-four miles per hour when he’s on the mound. That’s fast. *Real fast*. Especially for a lefty. And you can’t teach speed. You either have the ability to throw that fast or you don’t.

And apparently he had it.

On and off the baseball field.

Two days later I walked into the student union, scanning the area between the bowling lanes and the bar for Melissa. Everyone on campus seemed to congregate there since it’s where the lone pizza restaurant was located. When it came to college and college students, pizza seemed to be on everyone’s diet menu.

She spotted me and waved her tanned arms frantically above her head. Melissa looked like a lunatic and it made me laugh out loud. I waved back, then grabbed a tray and bought my lunch before weaving my way through a crowd of other students toward her table.

“Kitten.”

The deep, sultry voice stopped me in my tracks as my smile faded. I turned toward the source of the voice with revulsion. “You know, I don’t even like cats.” I lifted one brow and fixed Jack with a fierce stare.

He fiddled with his baseball cap before putting it back on his head and tucking his dark hair underneath. I felt almost mesmerized as he ran his fingers absentmindedly across the white stitching of our school’s initials. I found myself noticing the way his dark blue shirt fit snugly against the muscles in his arms and shoulders. I hated how good-looking he was.

“Actually, I didn’t know. But I’m glad I do.” He smiled and I swear part of my heart melted right then and there at the sight of his dimples.

I totally suck.

I tried to walk toward Melissa, who eyed me with piqued curiosity, but he stood his stupid gorgeous body in my path. I quickly moved to the right, but he hopped to his left to block me. I took another step to the left and he quickly moved too.

“What do you want, Jack?” I said, the anger in my voice taking us both by surprise.

“Are you always this hostile?” His smile told me he was teasing, before forcing his dimples to reappear and my body to flush with heat.

“Only to guys like you.”

“So tell me, Kitten, what’s *a guy like me?*”

“Not worth my time.” I shoved my tray into his gut and when he let out an *ooof*, I scurried past him trying not to spill my soda.

“You’ll come around,” he shouted.

“I wouldn’t hold your breath.”

I rushed to our table, throwing down my tray of food.

“Nice scene.” Melissa’s eyes were huge as she fought a grin.

“Huh?”

“Look around.” She waved an arm, gesturing toward the crowd.

I glanced around the bar and the other tables. All eyes were either on me or Jack. *Great.* The last thing I wanted was the entire school thinking I was Jack Carter’s latest conquest.

“Is he always that obnoxious?” I ripped the top off my raspberry yogurt.

“I don’t know, Cass. I’ve never seen him act that way before if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I don’t know what I’m asking.” Irritated and annoyed, I scanned the room for Jack’s face. He sat at a table surrounded by giddy girls, tossing their hair, pawing his muscles, and laughing obnoxiously whatever he said. His eyes briefly met mine before I turned away, and I felt my heart beat a little faster.

“Jesus. How have I never noticed this spectacle before?” I wondered out loud.

Melissa chuckled. “I honestly don’t know. Happens every day.”

“Those girls have no shame. I’m almost embarrassed for them.”

“You know they all want to be the one he actually falls for.” Melissa sounded sympathetic as she removed the crust from her slice of cheese pizza.

“Good luck with that, ladies!” I gave the gawking girls a fake salute, then turned my attention back to attacking my yogurt.

Curiosity got the best of me when I heard shouts and the sound of slapping high-fives. I looked back to Jack’s table to see a boy about Jack’s height and build sitting down next to him. “Who’s that?” I asked Melissa, nosy in spite of myself.

“The one who just sat down? That’s Dean…Jack’s little brother. He’s a freshman.”

“How the hell do you know that? You’re like a freaking college directory,” I teased.

“He’s in one of my classes.”

“Wait,” I said, putting one hand up in the air. “How do you have a class with a freshman?”

“I still have a couple of lower-level classes to take and he’s in one of them. He’s really sweet. Not like Jack at all,” Melissa added with a smile and a faraway look in her eyes.

“Oh my God, you like him!”

“I do not!” Melissa whispered defensively. “I barely even know him! I’m just saying he’s nothing like his brother, is all.”

“Okay, calm down. Jeez. It’s okay to like Jack Carter’s little brother.” I glanced back at Dean

admiring his smile, but noting the lack of dimples his brother wore so well. "He is cute." I poked his shoulder.

"He is, right?" She eyed him from a distance.

"At least you like the good one." I smiled, turning back to see the brothers throwing their arms around each other's necks.

"As if I'd like the other one! Jack's disgusting." She pretended to stick a finger down her throat and made gagging noises.

"So you keep saying," I said, taking another spoonful of yogurt.

"I swear to God, Cassie. If you end up falling for his shit, I don't want to hear it. I've watched him the last two years before you got here. I'm telling you, he's the ultimate playboy." She silenced her rant with a quick chomp at her banana.

"I hear you. Okay? Steer clear of Jack Carter. It shouldn't be that hard, considering I don't want to go anywhere near him."

We both smiled, momentarily satisfied with my promise.

TWO

The sun warmed my body the moment I stepped out of the three-story Communications & Art Building. A gentle breeze swept across my face as I observed my fellow students. Some rushed to get to class, while others fought for sunny areas on the lawn. I smiled as I passed a long-haired kid playing the guitar. He played under the same tree every day, and I started to wonder if he was a student at all or if he just liked being on the large, sprawling campus.

I passed by the university bookstore and shops, making a mental note to pick up two scantrons for my upcoming tests. Herds of people milled in and out of the student union entrance as I walked in. My eyes immediately fell on Jack and his harem of fans. I couldn't get over how I'd never noticed him before, but now it was all I saw. He flexed his muscles for a couple of girls who screamed when they grabbed on to his bicep. I heard him say, "Hold on," as he lifted them into the air. I frowned with disgust as he demonstrated his pitching motion in slow speed, much to the delight of the squealing girls.

"He is such an attention whore." I slammed my body down in the seat across from Melissa.

"Then stop paying attention to him."

"It's sort of hard not to when he's always creating a spectacle." I waved my arms toward the gaggle of girls following his every move.

"Hi, Melissa." A deep voice interrupted my Jack-bashing.

"Oh...hi, Dean," Melissa responded, her voice all soft and sweet. I shot a quick glance at her under my eyelashes, and smiled to myself.

"Would you mind if I sat with you?" Dean smiled when he asked and kept his hazel eyes locked on Melissa's.

"No. We're much better company than your brother's table anyway," she teased, poking him in the ribs.

He glanced in Jack's direction, shaking his head. "It just gets old sometimes, you know?" He placed a slice of pizza on the table and sat down.

"Hi, I'm Dean." He stretched his hand across the table.

"I'm Cassie. I'm Melissa's roommate." I grabbed his hand and squeezed.

"It's nice to—"

"Dean! What are you doing over here?" Jack's sultry voice echoed throughout the student union and I felt my stomach lurch. I lifted my gaze to find him staring at me, so I pinched my lips together hoping my annoyance would be loud and clear.

"Oh, Kitten. I see you've met my little brother." Jack winked before placing his hand on Dean's shoulder and squeezing.

"Thank God he seems nothing like you. I might actually be able to tolerate him." I tilted my head and smiled sharply before taking a bite of my turkey sandwich. I noticed Melissa and Jack sharing an amused glance, and I wanted to kick Melissa under the table. The last time I did that it left an ugly bruise on her shin and she didn't speak to me for days, so I restrained myself.

"You need me to work some of that aggression out of you?" Jack offered with a sexy smile.

My mouth was full, but I didn't let that stop me. "I'd rather eat dirt."

"I almost want to see that." Jack chuckled and one dimple appeared on his cheek.

"You would. Go torture someone else," I begged, nibbling at my sandwich before looking away.

"But I like torturing you." He grinned and moved to sit next to me.

“Uh, no!” I shouted before throwing my bag right where he was about to plop his perfect little ass. He stopped short and stood back up.

“Why so angry, Kitten?”

“Why so annoying, jackass?” I mimicked his tone.

I had just taken a bite of my pickle when Jack’s warm breath in my ear stopped my chewing. “You’ll come around. You’ll see. You can’t resist me forever.”

I suddenly had the urge to spit my half-chewed food all over his arrogant face. The thought of doing it made me laugh, and I accidentally inhaled a little of what I was chewing. As I choked and struggled to swallow, he walked away smiling.

“Sorry about my brother. He isn’t really a jerk.” Dean smiled as he defended his brother, his head cocked to one side with sincerity.

I coughed to clear my throat and picked up a napkin. “He just plays one on TV?”

“Something like that. Don’t take him too seriously. He’s just having fun with you.”

I half smiled. “But I’m not having fun.”

“But you are. And he knows it,” Dean added, his expression a mixture of confidence and knowing.

I didn’t respond to Dean’s accusation, not wanting to prove him right...or wrong. I took a healthy bite of my sandwich when Jack walked back over to our table. Caught with a mouth full of food again, I couldn’t speak, so I simply narrowed my eyes and glared at him.

He shoved a napkin into my hand and walked away without saying a word. I started to unfold it before reading *#23 on the field, #1 in your heart*, followed by some numbers written in black ink. I quickly crumpled it up and threw it in my bag.

“What was that?” Melissa interrupted the thoughts swirling around in my head.

I swallowed. “His phone number, I think. I didn’t really look at it.”

“He gave you his number?” Dean’s face appeared puzzled.

“I think. Maybe I’m wrong. I’ll look at it later.” I was suddenly embarrassed at the assumption that Jack had given me his number, when maybe it wasn’t Jack’s number at all.

Melissa turned toward Dean. “What’s with the face?”

“He doesn’t give out his phone number. There’s no point with him.” Dean’s gaze darted from my face to Jack’s, turning his head to scrutinize his brother, now sitting several tables away.

“He has a cell phone, right?” Melissa asked, her head bobbing.

“Yeah...?” Dean responded, dragging out the word like a question.

“I’m just saying, caller ID!” She rolled her eyes.

“His number is private. It doesn’t show up.”

“Really? Who does that?” Melissa’s face crinkled.

“Someone who had to change his phone number fifteen times in high school because it never stopped ringing, or pinging with text messages.”

“*Fifteen times?*” I asked, far louder than I intended. I ducked my head as several people sitting nearby stared at me with curiosity.

“It might have been more, but it was insane. The girls would post his number online and then his voice mail would fill up within a day. And then they’d all start calling my phone looking for him when he didn’t answer.”

“Holy shit, that’s bananas!” Melissa laughed at the insanity.

“That’s why it’s weird that he’d give you his number. He doesn’t give anyone his number.” Dean shook his head.

“Well, like I said, I could be wrong,” I quickly recanted.

Melissa gestured toward my bag. “Then get it out and read it now.”

Heat spread throughout my cheeks and down my neck to my chest. “No. Not in the freaking student

union while he's right over there, thanks. Later."

I rose from the table, grabbed my bag and my trash, and walked nonchalantly past Jack and his pack of groupies. I heard the sound of female voices whining when Jack pulled himself away to jog over and catch up with me.

"I expect you to call me, Kitten."

"I'm sure you expect a lot of things," I said rudely, refusing to look at him as his stride slowed and he let me walk away.

"Come to my game tonight!" he shouted when I opened the glass doors.

I turned toward him before walking out. "I don't think so."

"Don't you want to see me pitch?" He raised an eyebrow, his voice cocky.

I tilted my head, holding the door open with one arm. "I saw you pitching earlier. In slow motion, remember? I think I got the gist."

The glass door closed behind me with a loud bang and I walked to my next class, wondering how long I'd be able to resist him.

I opened the door to our two-bedroom apartment, the smell of this morning's bacon still lingering in the air. Mail and schoolwork were strewn across the top of our table, and I added my backpack to the mess.

Melissa sat watching TV on our L-shaped couch while eating a bowl full of cottage cheese and green grapes. I smiled at her odd food combination and headed straight into the kitchen, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge and some chips from the cupboard.

I took a sip of the water, letting the cool moisture replenish my dehydrated body.

"So, we're going to the baseball game tonight," she informed me, and the water in my mouth sprayed out all over the carpet.

"Shit." I laughed and grabbed a towel before bending down to soak up the mess. "You might be, but I'm staying here."

"Cassie, the whole school goes to the baseball games. It's like the state of Texas and high school football." Her head tilted as I looked up from my carpet cleaning, my eyes clearly confused. "Friday Night Lights, hello? Ugh, don't you watch *any* TV?"

I chuckled at her frustration with me as she continued. "Anyway, everyone goes. Especially when Jack's pitching. It's sort of a spectacle, really."

"How so?" I asked, tossing the wet towel into the sink before leaning my shoulder against the wall.

She glanced up toward the ceiling and pursed her lips together. Then she looked back at me, draping her body over the side of the couch. "Well, a ton of scouts are there for starters. And reporters from all the local newspapers and TV stations. You just have to see it. Even if you only go to one game, Cassie, it has to be one when Jack's pitching. Plus, you can take some really cool pictures for that *Tu* magazine, or whatever it's called."

My eyebrows lifted at the thought of photographing the school's new stadium and fans. "It's called *Trunk*," I corrected, referring to the university's student-run magazine. "And someone is already assigned to the baseball team. But I do need to work on my night photography." I pulled away from the wall and glanced at my camera bag, mulling the idea over.

"And you can work on your action shots too," she added with a sly smirk.

I rolled my eyes. "Three hours ago you hated this guy, and now you're like his biggest fan. What gives?"

"Excuse me!" Her voice was animated as she held up one finger. "Jack Carter the guy sucks and"

should be avoided at all costs. Jack Carter the baseball player is totally amazeballs and should be observed whenever possible. You see the difference?"

I laughed at her insane logic. "They're both the same guy. Just want to put that out there before we agree to go."

Her eyes lit up as a grin spread across her face. "You'll see. So you'll go with me then?"

I released a breath and closed my eyes. "Yes. I'll go with you," I promised, doing my best to sound disappointed.

Her squeals of delight filled the air and I couldn't shake the feeling of anticipation welling within me. I didn't want to be excited to see Jack in his element...but I was. But I'd be damned if I was going to admit it.

THREE

Our apartment was only a few blocks from campus, so we walked everywhere we could. In the grand scheme of things, it was much easier than dealing with the parking situation. There were too many cars and never enough spaces. Not to mention the fact that the price of a semester parking pass cost more than my first camera. This is partly why my parents refused to let me bring my car to school. So I sit at school, car-less. And my car sits at home, driver-less.

The lights of the stadium caught my eye before anything else did. The tall fixtures beamed in every direction, giving the school the appearance that it was lit up from the inside out. I stopped quickly and dropped to my knees, unwinding the camera's thick black strap from around my wrist. I removed the lens cap and tucked it into the back pocket of my jeans. Melissa, used to my photographing ways, had already noticed my absence and silently waited for me.

I brought the viewfinder to my right eye and closed the left, as strands of my hair dangled in my line of vision. I let out an aggravated breath before gently placing my camera on the ground between my feet and twirling my long blonde mane into a knot at the back of my head. With my hair firmly out of my eyes, I angled the lens to show only the top of the baseball stadium, with the lights and the illuminated sky as the focal point. I manually adjusted the focus and the shutter speed before pressing the shutter release button and hearing the familiar *click* sound I'd grown to love. Satisfied with the preview on the screen, I stood up and walked over to Melissa.

"Good shot?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "We'll see," I said, reaching in my back pocket to fish out the lens cap.

I was still learning how to use my new digital camera. I'd saved for two full years to buy and hoarding every bit of Christmas and birthday money from relatives and doing small photography jobs for local businesses and high school seniors. Oftentimes I thought the picture on the camera's small preview screen looked gorgeous, only to find out it was blurry or nowhere near as pretty once it was full-sized on my computer monitor. But I was learning.

We walked side by side toward the stadium's entrance. Melissa wasn't joking when she said it was a spectacle. The line to get in exceeded the length of the field and spilled out into the parking lot. We took our place at the end and I removed my lens cap once again, mesmerized by the sea of orange and dark blue that engulfed us. Everyone was decked out in our school colors, some wearing movie baseball jerseys with players' names on the back. I laughed to myself at the sheer number of "Carters 23" shirts I saw and couldn't resist photographing a few.

"Cassie, come on! You can do that once we sit!" Melissa urged, scanning the seat numbers on our tickets.

I followed obediently behind her. "Don't most of the students sit in the bleachers?" I pointed toward left field.

"Depends on what you're trying to see." Melissa batted her long black eyelashes.

"Oh no. What have you done?" My legs began to tremble as I watched Melissa lead me all the way down the stairs to the front row, closest to the field.

She turned around, grinning from ear to ear. "Here we are," she announced before plopping down and looking left into the team's dugout.

I turned my head as well and realized we were practically in the freaking dugout. I leaned toward Melissa, almost knocking some poor guy's drink in his lap. "Sorry," I said quickly before squattening next to her. "I am *not* sitting here!"

“Yes, you are. These are our seats and the game’s sold out.” She smiled innocently and patted the empty seat next to her.

I scowled. “At least switch seats with me then. I don’t want to be the one closest to their dugout.”

“Fine,” she said before hopping up and flipping her hair.

I begrudgingly sat and slinked down into my seat, trying to conceal myself behind Melissa’s thin frame. “I didn’t want Jack to know I was here. Now there’s no way he won’t see me.”

“This isn’t about you. You’re thinking too much.” She sloughed me off with a wave of her hand.

“You better be right.” I sighed, wondering how long I had to stay. I avoided looking anywhere near the team’s dugout, afraid of who might be looking back at me, when Melissa called me on it.

“He won’t see you, Cass. You can look in there. Hell, you can even photograph the dugout. He won’t know,” she informed me, her face serious.

“How is that even possible?” I gave Melissa my best *duh* look.

“Because Jack’s all business out here. He doesn’t look in the stands. Ever. And I mean, ever. Last year this girl took her freaking top off and screamed Jack’s name like a lunatic the entire time he was up to bat. He didn’t move a muscle to look in her direction. I could light your ass on fire and he wouldn’t even know.”

I laughed super loud. “Please don’t test that theory.”

“Look around, Cassie. I’m pretty sure this is the one thing in life he takes seriously.” Melissa leaned back into her seat, taking a sip of the soda she’d just bought from a roaming vendor.

I scanned the crowd and noticed that we were surrounded by what appeared to be major league scouts. Each carried their own radar gun to measure the speed of Jack’s pitches, and notepads to write everything down. There was a forest of television and press cameras lined up on tripods behind home plate. It was the closest thing to a media circus I’d ever seen. And I currently held my own professional-sized camera, which definitely helped us fit in with all the madness.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Fullton Field!” The announcer’s voice filled the air, as the cheers slowly died down in volume.

“Here to sing the national anthem is our very own Fullton State student, Laura Malloy!” Cheers reenergized the atmosphere as Laura smiled nervously before closing her eyes tightly and singing the opening words in perfect pitch.

I instinctively grabbed my camera and adjusted the lens, focusing on the emotions of her face, and snapped multiple pictures. When she finished, I watched as she walked toward the players lined up along the third base line and smiled hopefully at Jack. I secretly loved it when he didn’t acknowledge her.

“We have a sold-out crowd tonight, folks, and we all know why! Taking the mound against our rivals from Florida is the one and only Jack Carter!” The announcer enunciated Jack’s name like he was the savior of the free world, like he’d cured cancer, or delivered rainbows to colorless skies everywhere.

No, I take it back.

He said Jack’s name like Jack was a *hero*.

And I guess in a way he was. He brought media attention to the school and recognition to the baseball program. That attention translated into revenue for the school and top baseball prospects wanted to play here. Jack was this university’s very own marketing machine.

The school worshipped him. It wasn’t just the girls on campus who wanted to be around him, it was *everyone*. I never realized the extent of his popularity before tonight.

“Now taking the field, *your* Fullton State Outlaws!” The announcer’s voice paused before continuing. “And now taking the mound, Jack Car-terrrrr!” He dragged out Jack’s last name, just like the wrestling announcers on TV.

The stadium erupted with ear-piercing shouts, howls, cheers, and screams. I looked at Melissa's shock clearly written all over my face, and she laughed, having witnessed this all before.

Jack walked confidently toward the dirt mound, his white-and-blue pinstriped sliding pants hugging his body in all the right places. I watched as his thigh muscles contracted against his pants with each step he took, and admired how good his butt looked in his uniform. His upper body was unfortunately hidden underneath a loose-fitting dark blue jersey with orange and white lettering.

His face looked different, more focused. This wasn't the playful guy from the student union anymore. This was the confident, serious baseball player.

"What'cha smiling at?" Melissa's voice cut through my inner dialogue.

I quickly dropped the smile I didn't know I was wearing. "Nothing," I snapped, and looked away, embarrassed.

"It's irritating how good he looks in his uniform, right?"

I jerked my head back toward her. "Seriously. Why does he have to be so hot?"

"Cause he's a jerk. Jerks are always hot," Melissa reminded me with a nod.

Jack stood on top of the pitcher's mound, his left cleat kicking at the dirt in front of him. He placed his toes on the white rubber, dropped his glove hand to his knee, and gripped the ball with his left. His eyes focused solely on his catcher squatting sixty feet away. With a brief nod he leaned back, his body performing a motion so fluid and smooth it looked like it was made for him.

When his left hand released the ball, it flew by at a speed so quick I could barely make out anything but a white blur. The sound of the ball impacting against the catcher's mitt was so loud it echoed against the backstop. The batter stepped out from the batter's box and looked nervously at his coach before stepping back in. Two more pitches screamed by and that was out number one of the night.

"Strike three! You're out!" the umpire shouted enthusiastically and the crowd cheered wildly.

The scouts in the stands huddled together, comparing the red "97 94" digital readout on their radar gun screens.

"Holy shit, that was ninety-seven four miles an hour," I said out loud, my mouth slightly open.

"I told you he's good."

I focused my camera on the pitching mound, with Jack's feet and the bottom of his glove dangling in the viewfinder. *Click*. Then I moved the lens up to view his bare left hand, gripping the baseball between three fingers, the red-stitched seam barely visible. *Click*. He brought his glove up to his face and all features except his brown eyes disappeared behind it. *Click*. His face twisted as he released the powerful pitch, his eyes never leaving their target. *Click*. Sweaty dark hair briefly saw light as Jack removed his cap and wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve. *Click*.

When the inning ended, I watched Jack jog off the field and into the dugout, never once looking in the stands. He instantly reappeared, a dark blue helmet on his head, two bats in hand. He swung the bats around like a windmill, stretching his shoulders. And when he bent over to stretch his hamstring, girlish screams filled the air, along with flashes of light.

"You've got to be kidding me." I shook my head, looking around at the people taking pictures.

"Spectacle," was all Melissa said with a laugh.

Jack stepped around home plate and into the batter's box, his demeanor completely relaxed. Since he was left-handed, the front of him was in full view, as opposed to the back of all the right-handed hitters. I started to grab my camera, but then shoved it back on my lap instead. I had enough pictures of Jack for one night.

The opposing pitcher went through his motion and as he released the ball, Jack took a small step forward before his hips twisted with his swing. The ping of the ball against the metal bat quickly disappeared amidst all the cheering. Jack easily rounded first base and picked up speed as he raced toward second. The outfielder fired the ball at the shortstop as Jack slid headfirst into the bag, a cloud

of dust encircling him.

~~“Safe!” The umpire shouted his call, his arms outstretched on either side of his body.~~

Jack planted both feet on top of the dusty base and brushed the dirt off his chest before dipping down the belt of his pants and allowing clumps of dirt to fall out. I was completely turned on.

I suck, I suck, I suck.

I overheard one scout ask another, “What did you clock him to first?” Referring to Jack’s base running speed from home plate to first base.

The other scout glanced at his stopwatch. “Four point one.” The first scout nodded his head in agreement and scribbled down more notes.

The photographer in me couldn’t hold out any longer. I zoomed in on Jack’s hands, now covered in batting gloves as he stepped away from second base with three long strides. *Click*. The dark of his eyes, now shadowed from his helmet, gave him an almost ominous appearance. *Click*.

“Gonna make a Jack photo album for yourself later?” Melissa flicked a finger at my shoulder as she teased me.

“You’re the one who said I needed to work on my action shots!” I whisper-shouted.

“I didn’t say they all had to be of Jack.”

“Shit.” I snapped the lens cap on and quickly flipped the power button into the Off position, where it stayed for the remainder of the game.

When it finally ended, Jack had pitched all nine innings and only gave up one run and three hits. The final score was eight to one, us. I grabbed my camera and shoved it into my purse before looking back at the team celebrating on the field. The coach pulled Jack aside and escorted him over to the press area where he was besieged by reporters, scouts, and fans.

Jack glanced up from the field and directly into my eyes. That single look stopped me in my tracks and I was slammed into by the man walking behind me. Jack smiled and turned his attention back toward the cameras and journalists.

FOUR

I strolled through the tree-lined campus, following the cement pathway that would eventually lead me to the *Trunk* offices. I'd joined the award-winning student-run magazine at the insistence of my visual communications professor. Even though I was required to take writing classes with my major, my focus was on the visual reporting side of things. I yearned to improve my craft, bringing life-changing visuals to accompanying articles.

I spotted the one-story brick building up ahead. All the newer buildings on campus were constructed with red and white brick, while the original buildings were large white stucco structures. It never made sense to me why they wouldn't at least attempt to match the newer buildings with the old ones.

I pulled the tinted glass door open and a gush of air conditioning greeted my face. I moved my sunglasses on top of my head, pulling my long hair back with them as I rounded the corner.

"Hey, Dani," I said as I entered, not wanting to startle Danielle, who squinted at the computer before she looked up.

"Hey, Cassie, come look at this." She waved me over, her expression still tight. I peered around her puffy brown ponytail and over her shoulder at the photograph on the screen. "I need this picture to have more expression. It's not giving me what I want. What am I missing?"

I looked at the eight-year-old boy standing in front of spilled water buckets, his expression sorrowful. "First of all, I don't think it should be in black and white. The details get lost in this photo. May I?" I pointed at the seat she occupied.

"Please." She jumped up from the seat as we switched positions.

I reopened the original picture in the photo editing software and manipulated the colors before pointing to the screen. "Look at the dirty rug hanging behind him. I barely noticed it in black and white. The cracks in the buckets, and the rubble at his feet," I paused, "were all lost before. This picture needs to be in color. This picture *deserves* to be in color."

Her hands clapped together behind my head before she squeezed my shoulders. "You're such a fucking genius. I love you."

I smiled, my eyes glued to the screen. "Thanks."

"So what's up?" Dani smiled, the tension creases between her eyes easing up as she relaxed.

"I just stopped by to work on some photos I took of last night's game. I thought you might want to use them for the feature you're running on Jack Carter."

"Tell me you're not one of..." she hesitated, "*them*."

"One of...*what*?" I asked, my eyebrows furrowing.

"One of the hundreds of girls on campus in love with all things Jack Carter." She rolled her eyes and let out a sigh.

I guffawed. "Uh, no. I can't stand the guy."

"Well that's a first," she admitted with a laugh. "We have a million pictures of Jack, but in all honesty, I'd love to see anything you shot."

"Thanks, Dani." I sat up a little straighter and smiled, unable to quell the little rise of pride welling up inside me.

"Now that you saved me from killing myself over this photo, I need to eat. See you later and thank you again." She tossed her purse strap over her shoulder, catching the ends of her ponytail in it before cursing and tugging the strands free.

It took longer than I expected to edit the photos from last night, but I had to admit they were good. They were better than good, actually. My stomach rumbled and I wondered if Melissa was still on campus. I sent her a quick text to which she responded, "Still here. In the SU."

I wrote back, "I have class in a few, but I'm on my way," before inserting the memory card into my camera and shoving it into my backpack. I passed some girls and pretended not to notice when they pointed and whispered Jack's name.

Irritated, I took a detour through campus, pleased when I noticed the pathway was virtually vacant. I shook my head while I walked, annoyed that Jack's antics had made me the focus of attention I didn't want.

I threw open the heavy glass door and heard the sound of bowling pins crashing. Craning my neck to see the bowler, I smiled when I recognized the guy from my digital foundations class. Quick bursts of light alerted me that he wasn't bowling for fun and I watched another kid from class taking pictures of him.

I diverted my attention and looked around the sparse crowd for Melissa's face. She tilted her head and stuck out her tongue, catching my eye, before I strolled over to where she and Dean were sitting. I flung my pack on the table before plopping down.

"Thought you weren't coming to my game?" Jack slid his body into the seat next to mine, his tone sounding a bit arrogant.

"My roommate threatened to set me on fire if I didn't." I kept my voice cool and avoided his eyes, scooting my body away from his.

"Well, at least now I know how to get you to go out with me."

"I'm not going out with you," I said, turning my head away from him.

"At least give me your number then?"

"No thanks."

"Why not?"

"'Cause I don't want to." I breathed out, still irritated about the way other girls acted around him. He just kept eating at me, which was a good thing, because it helped me resist Jack. *God help me.*

"Aw, come on, Kitten."

"Stop calling me that!" I rose from the table, grabbing my things. "I'll see you later," I announced, my attention solely focused on Melissa.

I flung my pack across my shoulder and slipped hastily out a side door. Dropping my sunglasses over my eyes, I headed toward the tall Communications & Arts Building.

"Kitten! Kitten, wait up!"

I looked back to see Jack racing to catch me, and everyone's attention drawn toward us.

"For the last time, my name isn't Kitten." Hiking my bag strap a little higher on my shoulder, I sped up my pace.

"I know! But you've never told me your real name," he said, slightly out of breath.

I let out a quick sigh. "Cassie."

"It's really nice to meet you, Cassie." He said my name all syrupy sweet and his brown eyes danced. It was easy to see why girls threw themselves at him.

"I'd say it's nice to meet you too, but I haven't decided yet."

He laughed. A real, hearty laugh and I had to stop myself from doing the same. "Anything I can do to help sway your decision?" He scratched his hair, his bicep flexing.

"I highly doubt that."

"Let me take you out, Cass." He said it so honestly, I almost believed he genuinely wanted to.

"No." I stood firm, my tone flat.

"Why not?"

“I enjoy my dates to be disease-free.”

Score one for Cassie.

Take that, Jack Carter.

“As do I,” he quipped confidently before giving a head nod to a passing teammate.

Now it was my turn to laugh. “Right. I’ve heard you’re not really particular about who you date.”

“Well you heard wrong, then.”

“Oh, that’s right. Actually, I heard you don’t *date* at all. You just sleep with any girl who bats her fake eyelashes in your direction.”

“I really need to meet your sources.”

He followed me into the white stucco building. When I reached my classroom door, I turned to him and said, “See ya, Carter,” as I headed down the stairs to my regular seat.

“Are you going to be this hostile on our date?” he shouted into the packed room.

All heads turned my direction, curiosity overwhelming them. I swallowed the lump in my throat and willed my cheeks to not turn red. *Yeah, like that’s going to work.*

Pausing on the stairs, I pivoted and glared at Jack. “Who said I was going on a date with you?”

“Don’t make me beg, Kitten.” I shot him an irritated glare as the classroom filled with whispers and sounds of shock. “Don’t make me beg in front of all these people. It’s embarrassing.”

“I’ll go out with you, Jack,” a busty blonde shouted, poking her shellacked face out from behind her seat.

“Perfect! I’m sure you two will have a great time together.” I dropped into my seat and slinked lower, wishing for the power to become invisible.

My eyes closed and I took a few deep breaths before warm whispers interrupted my attempt to relax. “I don’t want to go out with her, Kitten. I want to go out with you.” His breath tingled against my neck, causing the small hairs to prickle with excitement and sending goose bumps shooting down my arm.

“What are you doing? Get out of here,” I whispered, my tough facade cracking.

Honestly, I’m surprised it lasted this long.

“Promise me you’ll think about it.” His voice lowered with insistence, then he gave my shoulder a gentle squeeze.

“Promise you I’ll think about going out with the school’s biggest player? Oh sure, I’ll think about it.” *Seriously?*

“Promise me,” he insisted.

Either he was actually sincere, or he was a really good bullshit artist and I was completely buying into it. I took one deep breath. I turned my head to the left and looked him dead in the eyes. “Fine, *promise* I’ll think about it. Will you go away now?”

A wide grin emerged and his gorgeous dimples appeared, torturing me with their adorable sex appeal. He stood up without another word and walked out of the classroom. I sat in silence, trying to hear anything other than the sound of my heart banging like wild bongo drums in my ears.

I’m pathetic.

When class ended, I walked outside to find Jack surrounded by a group of giggling girls. His eyes met mine and he broke from the circle, running to catch up. “Stalk much?” I said between breaths.

“It’s not stalking when you enjoy it,” he teased, overconfidence oozing from every perfect pore.

Half of me wanted to punch his gorgeous face, and the other half wanted to make out with it. “I bet you say that to all the girls.” I rolled my eyes.

“I don’t have to say that to all the girls. You’re the only one who gives me crap for things like *breathing*.”

I rolled my eyes.

Again.

“Well, you’re an annoying breather.”

“You’re an annoying eye-roller,” he fired back.

“What?” I stopped walking and turned toward his smug face, causing the pack of girls following me to stop as well.

“You shouldn’t roll your eyes like that. Didn’t your parents ever tell you it wasn’t good for you?” He shoved a hand into his front pocket as girls walked by, begging for his attention. I had his complete interest, whether I wanted it or not.

“My parents said a lot of things,” I responded defensively.

“Oh, I get it now.” His voice was as sweet as Southern iced tea. “Daddy issues.”

“How does any girl stand you?” He made me so mad I wanted to smack his smarmy face, but I just stood there frozen as the wind breezed through my hair.

“It’s the dimples.” Jack actually delivered the line seriously, pointing at the indent on his cheek before breaking into a big smile.

I couldn’t take the banter any more. “At least you’re humble,” I said, before willing my legs to move.

“Just let me take you out. One date,” he shouted at my retreating frame. “And if you hate it and you have a horrible time, you never have to go out with me again.”

I stopped walking and turned to face him. “So that’s it? Just one date and you’ll go away forever?” I laughed, actually considering the idea.

We were making a scene again as girls whispered and guys waited to observe if Jack Carter would actually get shot down.

“Just one date.” He held up one finger in front of my face before involving the crowd. “Help me out here, guys.” He turned to face the gawkers. “Tell her to go out with me one time. What can it hurt?”

The crowd roared with encouragement, and I heard shouts like, “Awwww, go out with him!” and “It’s just one date! Do it!”

I shook my head and rolled my eyes. “Fine. Just *one*.” Loud cheers erupted at my response. You’d think I’d just accepted a marriage proposal the way those idiots were carrying on.

What had I just gotten myself into?

FIVE

“I cannot believe I agreed to this,” I said, burying my face in my hands.

Melissa plopped down next to me on the floor of my bedroom. “This is a bad idea. You should probably call him and cancel.”

I lifted my head and let out a deep sigh. “He’d never leave me alone then!”

She nodded. “You’re right. Oh my God, you have to go.”

I pulled myself up and studied my face in my bedroom mirror. “Maybe it won’t be so bad?” I wondered as I brushed powder across my face.

“Or maybe it will?” Melissa bit her bottom lip, her face contorted in thought.

“What are you thinking?”

Melissa grinned mischievously. “If the date is horrible then he’ll go away, right?”

“That’s what he said,” I responded reluctantly.

“Well, then all you have to do is be a crappy date! You know, like what’s-her-face in *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days!*”

I leaned away from her, pondering her suggestion while I dropped the brush and picked up my mascara.

“Oh my God! You little slut! You want to have a good date with him. You love him and want to have ten thousand of his little baseball babies! Cassie!!!”

“Where do you come up with this stuff?” I asked through my laughter.

“Movies. They have the best lines.” Melissa’s eyes twinkled, matching the huge grin on her face.

The doorbell rang and my laughter caught in my throat. *Shit.* I wasn’t ready for this. My deer-in-the-headlights look grabbed Melissa’s attention. “I’ll go let him in and keep him occupied until you’re ready.”

I sighed. “Thank you.”

I could hear the sound of our front door creaking open as his friendly voice reverberated down the hall and into my room, causing me to shake nervously. Gripping the fine liner brush tightly with my trembling hand, I finished lining my lips and brushed a soft seashell-colored gloss on top. I smacked my lips together once, then puckered to make sure the gloss was evenly spread.

Before I left my room, I did a quick squat in front of the mirror. I watched as my low-rise jeans went even lower, revealing far too much of my pink underwear. I pulled my black tank top down around my waist and bent over again. My jeans still pulled low in the back, but my top stayed firm.

I rounded the corner and heard Jack’s voice stop abruptly when he caught sight of me. “You look adorable, Kitten.” His voice practically purred.

“That’s it, I’m not going.” I threw my hands up in the air and turned back toward the hall.

He stopped me with his laughing response. “I’m sorry, Cass. I won’t call you that anymore.”

“I’m not sure you can help it.” I eyed him narrowly.

“I might slip up a time or two, but can you really blame me?” He shoved his hands into the pockets of his black and white shorts and then batted his thick eyelashes at me.

“Yes. Don’t call me Kitten. It’s annoying and it makes me hate you.”

“Is she always this argumentative?” he asked Melissa through a one-dimpled smirk.

She smiled coyly at him. “Not usually. You must be special.”

Oh my God! She turned into complete mush in two seconds! Traitor!

I shot Melissa a shocked and horrified glare and turned to see Jack smiling as if he had won the tournament.

prize at the fair.

“Don’t give me that look,” I threatened through gritted teeth.

“What?” He shrugged his strong, broad shoulders. “You think I’m special. It’s cool.”

I couldn’t resist rolling my eyes at him. “The only type of special I think you are is *e-special* irritating. Like a rash.”

He let out a quick huff. “Come on, Kit...er, Cassie. Let’s go. It was nice to meet you, Melissa.” He grabbed her little five-foot-two-inch frame and squeezed until she giggled wildly.

Traitorous bitch.

“See you later, Meli.” I shook my head and mouthed, “I can’t believe you!” at her. She waved me away and blew me a kiss.

Jack led me in the direction of his car. Since I had no idea which one was his, I followed blindly one step behind. He walked over to the passenger side of a vintage white Ford Bronco covered with dents, scratches, and chipped paint.

“Are you sure this thing’s legal on the streets?” I asked, eyeing the giant, oversized tires and lack of a roof.

His eyebrows pinched together. “You scared?”

“Are you high?” I squinted toward him. “No, really, do you do drugs ’cause I don’t date guys who do drugs.”

He turned the key and the door unlatched with a pop and squeaked open. Then he took me by the hand and gently helped me up into the seat, placing his hand firmly on my rear.

“Hands off the ass, Carter,” I snapped.

“I was just helping you up. Honest.” He feigned innocence as he closed the door behind me. “You sure you’re not scared?”

“I’m not scared. This car just looks like something that belongs on a sand dune or in a monster truck rally or a repair shop.” I glanced down, noticing the silver-dollar-sized hole in the floor.

“Is it the tires?” he asked sincerely.

“They are massive.”

“Just like my—”

“I swear to God,” I quickly interrupted and turned away.

“What?” He laughed. “I was going to say *heart*. The tires are as big as my heart.” He patted his chest for emphasis.

“You mean as big as the hole in your chest where your heart’s supposed to be?” The verbal jab dropped out of my mouth before I could stop it.

“Ouch. Can we at least wait until dinner before you decide I’m heartless?”

“If you insist.”

“I do.” His brown eyes softened and he grabbed the wheel, put the key in the ignition, and turned it. The engine rumbled to life and my seat vibrated under me. I strapped the old seatbelt around my body and gave Jack a wary glance.

“You are scared,” he said with concern.

I shook my head defiantly. “I’m fine, just go.” I gestured toward the road.

He removed his hand from the stick shift and placed it on my leg. I winced in response.

“What did I tell you about the touching?” I asked, giving him a sideways glance.

“Fifty cents. Don’t worry, I got it covered.” One dimple greeted me before quickly disappearing. “You sure you’re okay?”

I nodded as he put the car in drive and it rocked forward as he gassed it.

“Shit.” He muttered under his breath.

“What is it?” Suddenly I was concerned for our well-being. We were going to tip over from the

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