

# 1 EVERLY



“She won’t be coming over,” I heard from the doorway of the yoga studio room. The smile on my face dropped off like a ton of bricks.

It’d been only two months of me living in sunny Florida with my estranged father, but it felt like two lifetimes. I met his blue-eyed gaze with my own. The color of them was about the only thing my father had handed down to me. “Carl, seriously?” I whispered.

“Mr. Milton, don’t you think your daughter can make the decision herself?” Wes Bauer rolled up his yoga mat and stood up near me.

“I *can* make that decision myself,” I pointed out, combing a hand through the waves of my hair that had succumbed to the rigorous workout.

My father scoffed, his face turned beet red. “I agreed to you working here at the fitness center for us to build a relationship, Evie. This isn’t the way to do it.”

I sighed, “Can we talk about this later, Carl?”

“We’ll talk now.” He shook his finger at me.

This was why I hadn’t seen him in eighteen years. Carl Milton was truly a baby, an only child that had inherited a fortune from grandparents I had never met. He’d gone on to live a life where no one defied him, leaving my mom and me when I was just six years old because we “weren’t good listeners.”

He’d actually only agreed to have me come work for his fitness center after my mother guilted him into it. She’d said I needed to escape my hometown and start a new life away from the graduate school I’d dropped out of.

She was right, of course. I knew that. I was drowning under a deep sea of pain that I couldn’t swim above. I’d planned to leave and start anew somewhere else, but I’d never wanted it to be here.

Yet, Carl insisted. Said he was going into heart failure, that he should be getting to know his only biological daughter.

I’d given in to the naive hope of the little girl still wanting her father’s love and relocated halfway across the country to Florida two months ago.

*Like an idiot.*

“If you go, I’ll call Declan.” Carl announced, and Wes groaned as he tightened the dark man bun on his head.

“Call me for what?” Declan Hardy’s voice was always strong. Deep. Authoritative enough that it commanded all the attention in the room even as all six foot three of him leaned

casually against the doorframe. With chiseled muscle and a famous, beautiful face, the retired NFL star had not a care in the world—even though he'd intruded on someone's private conversation.

My seething father huffed as he walked over to his business partner. "Evie thinks she's going to a party at this asshole's house again. Please, for my sake and our business, take care of it."

With that, he walked out, leaving me with that word *again* bouncing around in my head.

*Again.* That was the real problem. This wasn't the first time my father had intervened in my dating life. He'd called Declan a month ago and had him *fly in* to retrieve me from Wes's house.

*Fly. Like in an airplane.* And Declan had just gone along with it, knocked on Wes's door, and demanded I leave. That was the world I was living in. To them, I was Carl's precious daughter, breaking a cardinal rule.

Wes chuckled and winked at me before he said, "I'll swing by and pick you up at the end of your shift, Evie." He stalked out of the studio, holding Declan's gaze as he murmured back to me, "Maybe you can stay the night."

My father's business partner flicked his vivid green eyes to me with that comment, capturing my stare and holding it hostage like he owned it. I saw the spark of anger, the question, and the entitlement.

"Everly," he ground out, his voice rumbling so deep in his throat before it emerged that I shivered.

Tension ricocheted off the windows and the mirrors as I stood nonresponsive, the silence engulfing us. I let the quiet stretch on and on, unwilling to give him an iota of the information that I knew he must want. He didn't deserve it nor was he entitled to it. Yet, even still, my whole body practically shook with the need to submit to him, to give up control to him.

Did he have this effect on everyone? So dominating and attractive that he could bend most people to his will? He thought he could just silently lean against a doorframe and make a person to answer a question he hadn't even asked yet.

His jaw ticked up and down, up and down before he dropped the question so casually, I wasn't sure I'd heard him right. "How many times have you slept with him?"

I blinked once. Twice. Three times before the words registered. Anger, hot as molten rock, flowed through my blood as my mouth dropped open at his audacity. "Are you serious?" I breathed out, twisting the towel I held in my hands. Then I wiped it over my face, trying my best not to freak out. With a wet sports bra that had the HEAT logo on it, my curls frizzed out, and only twenty minutes until my next one-on-one training session, I shouldn't have even been entertaining the ridiculous conversation.

And yet, it was technically with my boss.

"Yes, Everly." He pushed off the doorframe and stepped toward me. Hissing my full name like no one else would was another show of him trying to grate on my nerves. I just knew it. And on top of that, he came close to tower over me like he could intimidate me. "How many times did you sleep with that fucker?"

I stood toe-to-toe with him, meeting his gaze right back even if he was a whole head and a half taller than me. My body never reacted in fear the way it should have with him, it got stupid butterflies in my gut instead. I figured everyone got those, though.

Declan Hardy was a global sensation for a reason. It wasn't just that he was an investor in my father's hospitality and fitness empire either. That face, his thick dark hair, those piercing

green eyes that stared into my soul every time he glanced my way. “That *fucker*?” I emphasized his language and lifted an eyebrow as I glared at him.

He shook his head like he wanted to chastise me and waited for me to explain. Yet, I’d learned long ago not to indulge in idle conversation around my personal life.

He breathed out when he realized I intended to stay quiet. “You’re Carl’s *daughter*, Everly.” He said it like I should know better.

I shoved the plush towel into my duffel while grumbling, “I can’t believe he tattled to his partner about where I’m going again.”

Declan pointed at a sleek gold bin. “There are clean towels in the locker room. You can dispose of that one there.”

The luxury this man was accustomed to made me wrinkle my nose. “I’m fine reusing.”

He wiped a hand over his face. “You’re going to make us all go insane.”

“Seriously?” I scoffed. “You barely see me.”

“And yet every time I do, you’re ruffling feathers,” he pointed out.

I tried not to raise my voice as I hiked my duffel bag up onto my shoulder. “If you’re talking about the meeting you couldn’t attend last week, I’d simply requested an empty yoga studio for the Sunville kids in this town to utilize for children’s yoga.”

“I—” He narrowed his eyes. “Your father didn’t say it was for kids.”

Could I roll my eyes at this point or would that have been too disrespectful? Sunville Elementary was an underserved school that was in desperate need of more after-school activities. It was a way for the HEAT Empire to give back to the community. A win-win really. Yet, my father had immediately shut down the idea.

“Had you not skipped the meeting, you would know that, *Mr. Hardy*.”

“Declan,” he corrected, his eyes flashing with irritation. “I’m busy. I train athletes, have shareholder meetings, and—”

“Yes, a skydiving appointment seems like it should take precedence.”

That chiseled jaw ticked fast. Maybe he thought because I was quiet that I would back down, that I would roll over since he was a major shareholder of this elite fitness and hospitality brand. HEAT stood for Hardy Elite All-Access Team and supposedly spanned the nation with resorts, fitness centers, restaurants and more.

My backbone wasn’t impressed and was still very much present when it came to what I’d be doing while I was here. I intended to make an impact where I could even if I didn’t plan to stay forever.

“I’m sure it wasn’t skydiving.”

“Fine. Racing a car.” I shrugged and squeezed the bag’s strap on my shoulder when he dragged his gaze up and down my body like he was measuring me up.

“I’m not going to argue with you, Everly,” he said softly. Still, it somehow felt like he was grinding salt into a wound.

“It’s Evie,” I threw out, knowing it wouldn’t matter.

“Look, have more classes for the kids. I’ll never say no to that.” He scratched the back of his neck, his bicep bunching and showing off a few of the tattoos he had on his upper arm beneath his white T-shirt. “I just had other meetings. If you need to discuss implementing new classes that you know your father is going to disagree with, you should probably make sure I’m available. Do you check the schedule?”

Could I smack the condescension out of his tone or would I lose my job for that? “I’ll make sure to double-check it next time.”

“See that you do. And let’s not get your father’s heart worked up. Wes is probably twice your age. You can’t be seen with that asshole.” He said it offhandedly, like he could slide one extra request in.

I combed a hand through my waves. “Twice my age? Get real, Mr. Hardy,” I sneered his last name since he couldn’t be bothered to listen to my request either. “I’m twenty-four. And just because I’m his daughter doesn’t mean I’m not going to date people I’m interested in.”

He tilted his head, like he needed to study me all of a sudden. Like he was realizing I was more than ten years old. His gaze dragged over me, licking up every curve of my body, and then he shut his eyes tight as if seeing what appealed to another man was painful. It infuriated me that my body even responded to his perusal. “He’s not *just* a guy, Everly. He’s an asshole. Being seen with him is bad for press. You’re a part of HEAT now.”

“Really?” I cocked a hip and lifted an eyebrow, ready for this to be over. “So, there are rules already regarding who I date because of a headline? You’re going to continue to come to his house and drag me out because you’re nervous it might tarnish a brand name? Do you hear how ridiculous that sounds?”

“We barely accepted him into HEAT based on his reputation and how he’s played in the NFL. He plays a dirty game and his fuckboy reputation—”

“I don’t watch football and can make my own judgments on a person. I don’t need the press telling me who to date.” I cut him off, furious that my father’s business partner thought I’d let the media’s story on a person sway me.

I wouldn’t let journalists or the internet paint someone’s story like they had mine once before. In my hometown, I wasn’t trusted, wasn’t looked at as a person, wasn’t given the benefit of the doubt.

“You don’t watch football but you know how to rehab an athlete?” He really hated that I was working in his gym with no credentials when it seemed all his other employees were overqualified.

“I provide stretching techniques, not full rehab.” As he knew. I’d gained client after client for the unique way I handled each of them and there’d not been one complaint since I started. “And I’m going to be late for a one-on-one. So, if we’re done here ...”

I brushed past him, but before I could walk away, his voice rolled over me cold enough to freeze me mid-step. “You didn’t answer my question.”

I turned to look at him. In the middle of this yoga studio, he was a beautiful sight among the mirrors reflecting around him with the backdrop of floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the Atlantic. “What was it?”

“How many times have you fucked him?”

My whole body tightened at how he phrased it this time. My stomach, my throat, my nipples, my sex squeezed and ached in hate but also something more. The visceral reaction I had to this man was dangerous, tempting, and completely wrong.

“That’s absolutely none of your business.” The answer was zero and would probably remain that way. We’d casually gone on a few dates that led to nothing because Wes didn’t cause a reaction in me at all.

“So, you haven’t. That answer changes, Everly, and I’m coming for him.” Declan’s voice was low in warning, like I shouldn’t question him, and I felt the vibration of it shoot through my body, giving me goose bumps everywhere.

I considered giving him the finger as I left him in the studio by himself. But he was my boss.

My off-limits boss I hated and wanted all at the same time.

## 2 EVERLY



A hot shower after my shift didn't help to scald away any of my frustration. Nor did brushing through the tangles of my hair harder than intended.

Putting on my tennis skirt and a coat of lip gloss and mascara before I texted Wes I was on my way over, though, had me feeling much better.

Po and Noah saw me exit the revolving door of the fitness center as they sat on the fountain's edge in the circular drive. "Evie, you coming to Vibe Club with us later?" Po asked.

I pointed toward a small path that led down to. HEAT Health and Fitness sat atop an ocean cliff, providing beautiful views and connecting to their Oceanside Resort. "I'm walking over to Wes's actually."

"See, bro. Everyone's going to Wes's. Let's just go." Noah shoved his friend.

"Goddamn," Po grumbled, combing his big hand through his wavy mess of hair. It look styled but I knew for a fact neither of them cared a bit how they looked. Instead, they both lifted most of the day at the fitness center, ran, took yoga classes, and then they trained on-ice a few times a week. Their lives, even in the off-season, revolved mostly around hockey.

Noah cajoled, "You know puck bunnies are going to Wes's. Let's just go. Plus, Evie will be there."

Po reached for my duffel, then hiked it up onto his shoulder. "Fuck it. We'll walk with you."

I chuckled as we stepped onto the sand and started our trek along the water, waves lapping softly along the way. "Are you both going just to hook up with women?"

"If I say yes, will you think less of me?" Po asked.

Sighing, I stopped to pick up a white shell and grabbed at the pocket of my duffel bag to slide it in. "No, because I already think pretty low of you and your hookup habits."

Po glanced at me collecting the shell. "You realize there're better ones up at the tourist shop than that?"

I shrugged. People stepped all over the shells like they weren't beautiful pieces to be reused and what was the use of buying them when I could have the experience of finding one myself?

A seagull hopped close but jumped back as we stepped toward it. So, I waved at the guys and tried to give him and his flock a wide berth. I made sure to do it every day when jogging to work so as not to scare them off.

"Evie," Po deadpanned, mirth in his dark eyes. "Just go through the gulls. They'll fly away and come right back."

I sighed and fell into step with them all. “They’re different from the blue birds and cardinals back home in Wisconsin. You scare them and they’re gone to another feeder for a whole season.”

“Florida’s filled with seagulls that’ll never leave. You’ll get used to it soon enough,” Noah said as he nudged me on the way up to Wes’s oceanfront property.

Getting used to hanging out with people who owned homes five times the size of my apartment like Wes’s wasn’t going to come easy.

Getting used to everything at HEAT Health and Fitness was near impossible. My mother and I had owned a run-down yoga studio that we charged a five-dollar fee to attend. Here, members paid hundreds of thousands in dues each year. They got access to private clubs, spas, hotels, and red carpet events like they were celebrities.

When I walked into Wes’s house, I saw that many of them were in fact celebrities. Athletes. Moguls. Millionaires, all of them. The kind of people who dressed in their best just to hang out with friends.

Wes met us right away and introduced me to some of his team. Po and Noah draped their arms around women immediately, which would have been impressive if it hadn’t been so gross. Yet, when Wes wandered off once or twice, Noah appeared near me right as I started to wring my hands. “Got you, Evie. Want to go sit by the pool?”

In that first hour, Noah and Po demonstrated their acceptance of me as not simply as a yoga instructor but as a friend. They stayed close while Wes was off hosting, and they didn’t let me out of their sight.

Women and men walked around in bikinis and swim trunks but somehow still managed to look like they belonged.

“I probably should have gone home and changed,” I mentioned to Wes when he came back over, but he shook his head.

“Oh.” He dragged his gaze over me before he hummed, then smirked to himself. “People always want to dress up for shit like this. No worries. One sec. I’ll get you something.”

Po rolled his eyes at Noah. “Bet he brings one of his fucking jerseys.”

They both laughed seconds later when Wes came bounding down his sleek floating stairs carrying a small Cobras jersey and a beer. He held it out to me as Noah teased him. “How many of those you got upstairs? You have every size?”

“Fuck off,” Wes chuckled. “We get a few boxes for fans, dumbass.”

Po grumbled, “More like you bought a few boxes.”

I didn’t want to be rude, so I slid on the fabric and smiled. “Thanks.” But I shook my head at the beer. “I’ll just have water.”

He nodded and skirted around the island’s white marble counter to grab a glass with ice and water. From there, it was like I had a golden ticket. Women tried to engage in conversation with me, men offered me drinks and places to sit, always trying to be accommodating. The jersey seemed to hold a lot of status.

“Evie?” I winced when I heard the high-pitched voice behind me. I actively had been avoiding that voice since the first time I’d been introduced to my stepsister Anastasia. Her blonde hair swung as she walked over from the backyard pool area in her pastel-pink dress that hung loosely enough to show her bikini underneath, and then she hooked her arm into my other stepsister’s arm.

Clara and Anastasia were two years apart in age, and they couldn’t be more different. Clara wore bright florals and had a permanent smile on her face as she called out a soft “Hi,

Evie” before her sister elbowed her.

Noah glanced between us and must have seen my discomfort because he draped an arm around my shoulder and said, “Happy I get to hang with you Milton ladies tonight.”

He probably thought he was defusing tension, but Anastasia practically stomped her pink high heel. “She’s not a Milton, Noah.”

“My mother changed our last name back to her maiden name when my parents divorced.” I explained since Noah looked a bit confused. Clara’s face turned pink, but I wouldn’t feel ashamed for someone else’s rude behavior. I stood tall and sipped a bit of the water before continuing. “Anyway, Carl was gracious enough to let me come stay in the guesthouse for a week, but our families really haven’t mixed since he left when I was six and you both were ...?”

“I was ten and Clara was eight when Carl came into our lives,” Anastasia announced like everyone needed to know. “He’s been a great stepfather.”

I nodded and chewed my lip, trying not to feel any sense of disappointment. Anastasia had made it very clear we’d never be sisters. Nor did she care to get to know me.

Noah, being the laid back guy he was, squeezed my shoulder and lifted his drink. “Well, to Carl bringing us all together then.”

Anastasia eyed us both up, though, and wrinkled her nose when she saw my attire. “Where did you get that?”

“Wes let me borrow it.” I shrugged because it didn’t mean anything to me honestly.

“Make sure you give it back before you leave. We don’t wear Cobra gear,” she ground out before pushing past me. I wasn’t sure if she was actually mad about what I was wearing or the fact that I was being accepted into her circle in the slightest.

I glanced at Clara whose green eyes rolled before she murmured, “I’m sorry about her. She’s in a mood.”

The freckles across her nose had started to peek out from under makeup as she wrinkled it, looking at her sister like she was disgusted with her behavior. I waved it off. “It’s fine. I came straight from work and was underdressed.”

She blinked twice, her fake eyelashes noticeable but still doing a great job of framing her eyes beautifully. She’d inherited her mother’s high cheekbones and tall frame, and I could see how she was appealing to the masses even if she didn’t see it herself. “Not underdressed when you’re in the quarterback’s jersey. Are you two a thing?”

“Not really. Just seeing where things go, but he knows it’s casual.” I played with some of the string bracelets on my wrist, but she was hummed like she disagreed.

“Carl will get over it if you are. He always huffs and puffs first, then deflates after a bit. Anyway, I’m still sorry about Anastasia. She just hasn’t gotten to know you.” She pointed to a plush couch where we could sit and waved Noah off.

“Why should you be sorry?” I shrugged and swirled the ice in the glass while I glanced around for Wes. He was taking a shot with his friends, and a girl was leaning on his arm. It was another indicator that this was casual flirting between us and nothing more.

She sighed. “Because she’s rude, and she’s my sister. So, I should probably teach her some manners.”

“She’s old enough to know.” I pushed the waves out of my face and smiled. “I learned manners like that the first time I listened to *Bambi*.”

“Listened?” Clara tilted her head and her dark red curls fell from her shoulder.

I couldn’t help but smile at the fact that Clara was attempting to talk with me even knowing her sister wouldn’t like it. “My mom was weird about TV and movies. So, I listened on



headphones to them.”

She gave me a once-over. “That makes a lot sense.”

I waited for her to elaborate.

“You do this”—she motioned in front of me—“a lot.” Again, I waited. “You don’t fold in a moment of awkward silence, like you have a much more controlled attention span than we do.”

I laughed at the assessment. “I’m just waiting for you to finish.”

“No. no. It’s really true.”

I glanced at a woman laughing near the pool, reluctant to get in. “I was homeschooled for a long time and not around other people much. Makes me a bit awkward, I guess.” I wasn’t ashamed of that anymore. “I had my mom and a few friends that came to her small yoga studio, but that’s about it.”

“Were you lonely?” Clara whispered, like she shouldn’t be asking.

“Sure. I wanted ...” I sighed. Carl used to send cards of him with his new wife and the children she’d had with her first husband. I’d have those childhood dreams of Christmases together, that I would have sisters, that my mother and their mom would become friends. Yet, I’d overheard my mother asking, heard her agree with my father that maybe it wasn’t such a good idea. I saw Anastasia glance over at us and roll her eyes. “An only child gets lonely sometimes, but I also learned a person can keep themselves company probably better than anyone else can.”

“Clara, get over here!” Anastasia yelled, waving her manicured hand in the air for Clara.

“I see.” Clara leaned in and whispered, “Well, sometimes having Anastasia as a sister can get lonely too.” Before I could pick apart what she’d said, she nudged my shoulder. “Oh, don’t start reading into it, Evie. We’ll talk later. Come to the bakery sometime next week.”

I couldn’t help but smile at the idea until she stood up and gasped. I followed her line of sight. “What?”

“Probably won’t talk later since he’s coming this way.”

I heard whispers, felt the air in the room shift, and like a parting sea, saw how the crowd moved for him.

He towered over most everyone as he paced through the room, straight up to me without looking away. Anastasia murmured something to him, but his laser focus couldn’t be deterred.

“Everly.” Declan breathed my name out sternly as he came toe-to-toe with my running shoes.

Why hadn’t I changed again? Sitting there in my workout gear with one of Wes’s jerseys draped over me now felt a bit ridiculous as he glared down at me. “Yes?”

“Get up. I’m taking you home.”

Commands from a man that didn’t have any authority over me. Couldn’t he see that people were listening, were watching, that he had no claim on me whatsoever?

He’d done this once before, come to Wes’s and told me to leave. It’d been with far less people to witness it though. This was beyond disrespectful. I’d made that clear to him. So crystal clear it was freaking transparent. He might have been business partners with my father, but he wasn’t my dad. We weren’t even friends. We were barely even colleagues.

“Hardy, man, you come to have a good time with the wrong team?” Wes called out from behind the counter. He’d had enough to drink that it seemed he was willing to put all rivalries aside.

“No. I came to take Everly home,” he growled.

An hour. I’d been gone from the gym for an hour. That meant he’d found out and came straight here. No hesitation, no thought of the repercussions. Not one ounce of consideration for

how embarrassing this might be for me.

I stood up and Declan gave me a once-over, his eyes widening before he pinched the bridge of his nose through a grimace. I saw how his cheeks blew out, too, like he needed a couple deep breaths. “His jersey, Everly? Jesus fucking Christ.”

“Mr. Hardy,” I ground out his name. “Thanks for stopping by, but I’ll take an Uber home *if* I leave. But you being here is completely unnecessary,” I whispered angrily, trying to reason with him without everyone hearing.

“You being here when your father forbade it is even more unnecessary.” He folded his arms over his chest.

I grabbed his big elbow and led him to a corner of the house, caring too much that eyes were on us. Then I squared up to him. “Forbade his estranged daughter from going to a house with a guy she’s been seeing? Do you even hear yourself? I’m here just like Clara and Anastasia.” I poked his shoulder, because at this point, everyone was watching us anyway.

“Clara and Anastasia know better than to *date* Wes.” His eyes flashed. “Why can’t you just listen?”

“Listen to you like everyone else does?” I threw out my hands. “What? Because you own HEAT?”

A few people gasped, and Anastasia chose that exact moment to walk up to Declan and wrap her arm in his, her pink saccharine smile condescending as she pointedly said to me, “I know you haven’t lived here long, Evie, but Declan does a lot for all of us.”

“Not me,” Wes chuckled, his drink sloshing in his hand. “Declan, chill. I can get you a glass of whiskey if you’re—”

“I’m not staying.” He stared at me, a fire of determination in his eyes. “We’re leaving.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Oh, I’ll carry you, Drop. Try me.” With a warning tone, he used the nickname he’d come up with the first time he’d met me. I tried my best not to roll my eyes. He knew I hated nicknames other than Evie, and that one associated me with being as small as a raindrop.

All of it was too juvenile, too over-the-top to argue about.

“Wes, can you walk me out?”

“Really?” Wes suddenly sobered like he couldn’t believe I’d leave his party. “I mean, sure. Sure. Let’s go.”

I looped my arm in his and brushed past Declan. Weaving through the people still watching the confrontation was bad enough but walking outside to hear Declan intone “You can give him his jersey back” was nearly my breaking point.

Still, I gripped the sides of it. Causing more of a scene wasn’t worth it. None of this was. Yet, Wes smiled big like he wanted to piss Declan off and announced, “Keep it, Evie. I’ve got more.” Then, he pulled me close and kissed me in front of Declan. It was our first. We’d been strictly friendly before that moment.

His lips tasted of bitter beer and were all wrong. It was like we were playing a game, and Wes simply wanted to win the prize. I stepped back and let him know I’d call him, even though I considered not.

Declan opened the door of a black SUV idling in the driveway.

I gave myself one pass with my anger when I stepped into it and grabbed the door from him, slamming it hard behind me.

He rounded the hood of the car and slid in next to me, while announcing to his driver, “Peter, Everly lives at Carl’s.”

“I don’t,” I corrected. “I moved.”

“Moved?” he questioned but quickly waved it off. “Tell Peter your address so we can get you home.” I turned my gaze on him, waiting for him to at least apologize. He waited too, like he was studying me as I was studying him. “You’re pushing the wrong boundaries, Everly.”

“There shouldn’t be boundaries outside of work with my boss,” I pointed out.

“You were at work when you decided to come to this fucker’s house,” he ground out, his jaw working up and down.

He was angry? *Great*, I thought. *Me too*. “Are you going to apologize?”

“For what?” His nostrils flared as he breathed out.

“For the scene you caused,” I almost screeched, my composure slipping a little as I pointed toward Wes’s house. “For embarrassing me *again*.”

“I don’t really give a fuck what scene I cause. And if that’s embarrassing, don’t go to a dumbass’s house and expect I’m not going to come for you. I’ll come every fucking time, Drop.” He clenched his fists like he was holding onto his fury just as I was.

I almost told him to stop calling me that, but we were barreling toward an explosion if one of us didn’t do the mature thing. I ignored his comment and told the driver where he could find my apartment.

His eyes bulged. “But you’ve been jogging to work.”

“Yes.” I shrugged and played with the edge of the jersey.

“That’s a four-mile run and some of the side streets aren’t great neighborhoods. What are you thinking?”

“Excuse me for enjoying the morning and evening breeze.”

“The damn breeze ...” he grumbled. “When I have you work overtime—”

“I’m capable of taking an Uber. I’m smart about running, not that I should have to be. Female runners are notoriously blamed for other’s behavior. Studies show sixty percent of us have been harassed on runs, yet we’re told to know when to run, to run in groups, to—” I paused, realizing I was rambling and then waved myself off. “It really isn’t that big of a deal.”

“Jesus, is nothing a big deal to you?”

“As opposed to you acting like everything is a big deal and storming into a party to demand I leave?” I pulled my hair back, combing it up to put into a bun, but when I grabbed at my wrist for a hair band, I growled, realizing I’d forgotten to add one to my wrist.

“You shouldn’t be at Wes’s party.”

“Oh, Jesus. Not this again.” I sighed, so tired of him and my father. “I’m trying to see if we’re compatible.”

“You’re not. He’s not your type,” Declan concluded for me.

“That’s not your call.” I blinked slow and tried to calm my frustration. “I’m being reasonable, Mr. Hardy.”

I heard him breathe out like a frustrated bull. “Well, it’s tiring being reasonable,” he shot back.

How did he get by acting out like this? “Is it really that hard to do?”

“Fuck yes,” he bellowed. And then he shut his eyes for a moment. “Your father cares about you, and I care about—” I waited. If he wanted to admit more, I’d let him. “Our brand. About your father’s wishes. He’s done a lot for me. So he expects when you’re working in the gym I manage that you’ll be taken care of.”

My heart sort of crumbled hearing his justification, though I didn’t know why. Declan and I were colleagues, nothing more. “You’re getting heated for no reason. We’re in this situation

because you're an absolute hothead with no one to rein you in."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Tonight's a perfect example. You have no hold on me and shouldn't get to dictate where I go, yet no one questioned your antics at Wes's party. You're the king of this elite empire you've built." I motioned out at the city lights passing us by.

"Right." He nodded. "So you should be listening to me."

"Oh, Mr. Hardy. I'm not part of your empire. I'm a short-term transplant just passing through. I intend to be out of your hair in no time." That was the plan at least.

He narrowed his eyes as the SUV came to a stop in front of my apartment building. "Everly, do me a favor. While you're in my empire, please don't wear that fucking jersey and stop going to his place."

I sighed. "You should learn to not let things bother you so much."

He leaned in. "What's bothersome to you? Because I'd really like you to feel exactly how you make me feel."

### 3 DECLAN



“And how is it that I make you feel?” she whispered.

Everly Belafonte. My business partner’s *only* biological daughter. Although they were estranged, he looked at her like she was a treasure, something so precious that he even thought he could taint her in some way. He’d told me the first time I’d met her that he’d stayed away from her and her mother after he’d realized he could do them no good.

It was a twisted way to parent, yet I couldn’t disagree with him.

Everly was pure and unmarred by the world in a way I couldn’t really articulate. She had waves of curls that framed her face with a braid or two mixed in with the brown and black and blonde that flowed all around in ringlets so wild you wanted to tame them, but then you caught her gaze and saw how calm and focused it was. Sapphire blue and piercing while completely steady like she couldn’t be knocked down no matter how anyone would try. And then she spoke, and the rasp in her voice soothed even though her words grated on my every nerve because they made total sense.

She held my gaze now with a mix of determination and what I think mirrored my lust. I was hooked. Trapped. Captured by the way she bit her bottom lip waiting for my answer.

“How do you make me feel?” I repeated her question back to her, trying to get ahold of myself but knew the fight was futile. I’d danced around her for two damn months and still couldn’t avoid wanting her to myself. “It feels like I have my business partner’s daughter sitting in front of me, riling me up, driving me near madness, and still my adrenaline is pumping, my cock is rock solid, and I’m scrambling to find any reason I shouldn’t be tasting those lips. Why I shouldn’t demand that you come sit on my lap for a minute.”

Her reaction to my words was instant. She looked at my cock and then licked her lips. “Demand? You forget that I’m one person you don’t control, Mr. Hardy.”

I leaned in a fraction more, so my mouth was at her ear, and murmured, “I’m starting to think you’d like me taking control, Everly. There’s a reason I’m the boss, right? A reason you got in the car willingly?”

She wiggled in her seat as we stared at one another like she was considering it, like she needed a release as bad as I did. “And that’s the reason why this can’t happen.” She pointed between us. “Boss and employee. Partner’s daughter. Lavish lifestyle ... and mine not so much.”

“You underestimate how easy it is for me to plow through obstacles.” I leaned close to her neck now, mesmerized at the thought of what her skin would feel like against my lips as I gripped her bare thigh. Smooth, soft, and willing as she spread her legs for me to massage further and further up. “I think we could both enjoy me controlling you for a night.”

She whimpered but rolled her hips when my hand cupped her pussy. She pulled my head closer to her neck and moaned out, “This is wrong, Declan.”

“Not Mr. Hardy anymore? She finally says my name ... But the question is whether you’re using it to get me to stop or keep going.”

Her hands found their way into my hair, like she needed to hold me close as I grazed kisses over her collarbone. “I don’t even like you,” she breathed.

I chuckled. “Oh, but your pussy loves me.” She gasped at my words, but I kept going. “It’s begging for me, babe. And you don’t really know me. I could make you like me.”

She scoffed at my confidence like I was ridiculous, but when my thumb brushed over her clit, she clawed at my shoulders. “You’re a hothead when I’m not at all like that. I think you enjoy a game and an adrenaline rush, Mr. Hardy. I don’t enjoy either of those things.”

I sat back to watch her as I did it again and threaded my other hand through her hair, yanking it so I could tilt her face to be lit perfectly under the city lights. They shined through the window, illuminating the change of her expression as I worked her up toward an orgasm that would unravel the composure she always asserted around me. “I could make you enjoy the game and an adrenaline rush too, Everly.” I didn’t prepare her for my mouth, descending without further warning.

I wanted to catalog how her body responded. How she met me taking what I wanted without apology with her own vigor. How she hung onto my shirt like she relished the moment as much as I was and wasn’t worried about the repercussions for once.

I wanted her lost in what I was doing to her and only stopped long enough to grab her hips and move her onto my lap. With her back against my chest, I wrapped my arm around her waist and went back to working her pussy at the perfect angle. I thrust my cock up, not being able to control feeling her ass against it, and she moaned in pleasure like the outline of it would be enough for her.

Her hips rolled as she grabbed the front seat, but then she immediately froze, and I saw her staring up front. She’d been too lost in what we were doing to remember Peter.

He was on the phone, completely ignoring us. It was his job to do so, but it was a goddamn wake-up call.

This was a woman I didn’t want to fuck and duck nor would it be a good business decision. My mind swirled with the consequences. I needed to make it right. I barked out for Peter to take a walk. He immediately left, but she glanced back at me, her ass shifting on my dick enough that I had to mash my teeth together.

“The moment’s ruined,” she pointed out, pushing her hair to the side, and I caught a whiff of the sweet coconut shampoo she must have used. Her ass wiggled again as she bit her bottom lip and my dick wasn’t giving up after that.

My hand length rubbed right where I wanted it to as I shifted and desire flared in her eyes. “So, let’s make a new moment, Everly. Let the last one go. Let me help.” My hand was still cupping her, but I took that second to slide my fingers under her skirt and panties.

“I don’t let things go,” she breathed out as my fingers explored how wet she was.

“You should, babe,” I hummed close to her ear. “Why worry about a past you can’t change? Just listen to me instead, huh?”

I was asking her to hand over control. Asking for permission before I took.

She hesitated, mulled it over, took her time, all while rolling those hips into my hand before acquiescing. “I’m listening this one time, and if someone sees—”

I didn’t even wait for her to finish. My finger dipped in her fast, and she gasped. “Let me

worry about that. You just focus on this.” I rubbed my thumb over her clit hard, creating a friction she couldn’t ignore. “That’s what’s important now.”

The fear of being seen wasn’t going to guide her orgasm. I was going to make sure of that. I wanted her every worry to be chased away by me this time. She was too composed all the goddamn time; too fucking perfect and pure, and she needed an outlet.

I was the best fucking one.

Not a party.

Not Wes.

Me.

“I want that damn jersey off you now. It shouldn’t ever be his name on your back,” I growled in her ear. “Take. It. Off.”

I indulged her wet pussy so good that she didn’t even hesitate. She whipped it over her head and threw it on the ground while I took in the zip-up tank she’d worn from work underneath.

“I’m doing this one time.” She said it like we needed a damn reminder. “Take over, Declan. And don’t make me regret it.”

“She commands before she hands over control.” I nipped at her sensitive skin near her collarbone, and a smile spread across my face before I said, “I think I’m going to have a hard time only wanting you this once, Everly.”

I grabbed a fistful of her hair then, making her arch against my chest as I devoured her neck and worked her pussy at the same pace my tongue slid against her skin. “Unzip your shirt.”

Her damn HEAT sports bras and tanks always zipped in front, driving me fucking insane. She hesitated.

“Listen, Everly,” I ground out, “or I’ll make you work a lot harder for this orgasm you want so badly.”

She whimpered as I circled her clit much more slowly this time, bucked into my hand like she couldn’t wait, and then did as she was told.

“That’s it. Such a good girl already. Look at those pretty tits.” I stared over her shoulder at them as the one hand I’d had on her hip slid up to work her nipples, pinching and rubbing them back and forth, back and forth just like I did her pussy. Her own hands went into her hair as she arched while I picked up the pace. Then I sucked on her neck while thrusting my fingers to her G-spot over and over, faster and faster until she screamed my name.

Loud, uninhibited, and out of control.

She crumbled back into my chest, her sex spasming again and again around my fingers.

Her losing control for me the way I’d been fantasizing about since the first time I met her had me murmuring my next command, “Come back to my place.”

Her thighs clenched closed on my hand as she whipped around, her eyes still cloudy blue from her first orgasm with me. “There’s no way.”

“Why?” I knew why even as she scooted off me and rearranged her clothing.

“Because this is it.” She wavered between us and then reached for my waistband, but I grabbed her wrist.

“We’re not *just* doing this,” I said. “I’m not fucking you in the back of an SUV, Everly.”

“You got me off back here. What’s the difference?” Her eyes widened and her voice raised one octave. Wrenching her wrist from my grip, she zipped her top back up hurriedly and reached for the jersey on the floor.

“Yeah, foreplay.” I decided this wasn’t going to be the end for us. I needed more of her.

“Before you come home with me.”

She chuckled, slipping the jersey I hated back over her head, and then sobered when she realized I was actually serious. “I can’t ... *we* can’t do that.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Because I’m me. You’re you. You’re a freaking celebrity. I don’t want anything to do with you outside of this car.”

But she’d just had my hand so far up her pussy, she’d screamed my name?

She laughed at what must have been my look of confusion. “Mr. Hardy, not all of us want to be in the spotlight. Not all of us are turned on by the fact that you own this weird HEAT community and are plastered on the front of every magazine in town.”

“And yet here I am with the arousal of your pussy still on my fingertips, babe.”

“Jesus. I can’t with you.” She pulled the handle on the door. “I don’t like the press, Declan. And I hate being seen as less of a human than someone else. I had that in my last relationship—”

I cut her off because that was never going to be her and me. “You dwelling on someone before me?”

She glanced away as a gust of wind whipped by, hiding what she wanted to but not before I saw it, the ghost of a past still haunting her.

“Now I see pain in your eyes and that hesitation. You’re pushing me away because you’re stuck in a past.”

“You have no idea.” She shook her hair back over her shoulders like she could use it as a shield to hide from me.

“I don’t dwell, Drop, and I’m going to make sure you don’t one day either.”

“Stop calling me that.” She slid out of the car and shut the door on what she didn’t want to be.

Yet, I rolled down her window. “Get rid of that fucking jersey, Everly.”

“Let’s not get carried away. It’s a jersey.”

“I had to stare at his name on your back right before you ground your ass against my cock and moaned my name. I won’t let that happen again.”

“Oh, well, it won’t be happening again. So, that solves that,” she said over her shoulder, and I had half a mind to get out of the car and follow her to her apartment. “Good night, Mr. Hardy.”

“Everly,” I yelled after her but she didn’t turn around. “Don’t jog to work. I’m sending a car for you on Monday.”

“Please don’t. I’ll just ignore it.” She waved it away like she was waving us away too.

I swore ten times before I yelled at Peter to get back into the vehicle.

She was already inside by the time I finished cursing out our whole situation. We shouldn’t have indulged. I was quick to temper, and it looked like Everly maintained her composure even after I’d unraveled her.

Still, I was already figuring out a way I could do it again come the very next day.



## 4 DECLAN



Me: It's been two weeks of you ignoring the car I'm sending for you.

Everly: How did you get this number?

Me: You're my employee. I have all your numbers.

Everly: That's not what the employee directory is for.

Me: I can use it how I see fit. Take the ride home from work today.

Everly: I don't need a car when I like to jog. I appreciate the thought though.

She appreciated the thought? I'd appreciate bending her over my knee and spanking her ass for defying me every chance she got. Could I send her that?

The bouncing dots showing she was typing something stopped and started a few times at the bottom of my screen before I got another text.

Everly: I appreciate the extra time in the studio with the kids too. It was nice of you to open self-defense on Tuesdays and yoga on Wednesdays.

She shouldn't have to thank me for that. I wanted HEAT to do more with the community, and Carl knew that. He'd mumbled that he didn't know whether Everly was ready when I brought it up to him the day after Everly confronted me about it.

When I told him she was, he'd smiled big and said, "Okay! I'm glad. See? This is going to work out fine."

Yeah, except I couldn't figure out how to stop thinking about how my dick would feel inside her every chance I got. This 'working out fine' was a long shot with bad aim in the middle of the night.

I glanced up as the elevator doors opened and saw her smiling at a kid at the front desk where she was setting her water bottle down. Wearing a zip-up bra.

It was a damn problem that I couldn't look away.

“You did great today, Grayson.” She high-fived him, and he spun in a circle with his mom standing there before his eyes lit up as he saw me.

“Declan Hardy! No way!” He ran toward me, his chestnut hair flopping fast, and then stuttered to a stop. “Mom! Do we have a football?”

She smiled bright before digging in her bag and whipping out a marker and pigskin like she walked around ready to run into retired NFL players.

“You have fun at class?” I asked, and he nodded vigorously as I signed the ball. “I did the best downward dog ever. And Ms. Everly says if I breathe properly, my emotions won’t get all squiggly sometimes.”

When I finished signing, he gave me a hug and his mother thanked me before they walked out as Piper walked in. I didn’t have a chance to turn around to talk with Everly about taking care of the kids, about how she was making a difference by teaching them how to handle emotions with exercise, how utterly brilliant it was.

I had no chance because my PR exec was a viper of a woman who didn’t care that I wanted to deal with Everly in the least. “You ready to talk?” Piper flipped her bone-straight raven hair and kept walking without scanning in her watch to check in as she walked by the front desk.

Everly ducked her head immediately to look at the tablet instead of us. She really did hate spotlight and attention of any sort. I sighed because I didn’t catch the blue of her eyes or even a small smile from her that I would have liked to see after two weeks of us playing professional.

Piper droned on as she followed me to one of our all-gender locker rooms. My brother had implemented privacy throughout with expansive stalls and private showers so all genders could utilize the shared space. As we wove past the sauna and into my office, I wondered if Everly would text me again.

Could I text her and thank her for being good to the kids? Could I tell her I appreciated her?

“Are you even listening to me?” Piper stopped and crossed her arms over her blouse as I loosened my tie. This was where I normally changed, but when saw her eyes dip before a small smile played on her face, I halted.

*Fuck.*

Piper and I were over. I’d made it pretty clear to her once or twice. Or maybe three times. We’d been on and off for years, but only one girl consumed my mind these days and it wasn’t Piper. This girl had waves cascading down her small back, fire in her blue eyes, and a composure I was sure no one could crack, but I damn well wanted to try.

Even so, Piper stepped up with her expert hands and undid my tie before she started unbuttoning my shirt. “I see now why you’re not listening.”

“No.” I grabbed her hands and stopped her. “I’ve got a lot on my mind, Piper.”

“Okay,” she whispered, “let me clear it for a bit then.”

She’d get on her knees in a second, I knew that. But my dick didn’t even twitch at the thought. “Piper, I said last time was the last time. I meant it.”

She rolled her eyes and scoffed. “Fine. I’m confirming the sponsorship with the shoe company.” Back to business because the woman was better at her job than most, I’d give her that. “HEAT Resorts needs to push the Pacific Coast hotel soon too. You need to talk with your brother about it.” She glanced at her watch. “I’m late for a meeting, but if we’re not dating, you need to consider Anastasia because my bestie will be good for press.”

She left me more irritated than I’d been before, so I changed into gym shorts and T-shirt.

Then my irritation turned to pure rage when I saw Everly across my damn gym bending over to adjust the height of the punching bag.

For Wes.

“Everly.” I tried to keep my voice calm, but I had just arranged schedules so she’d be up front permanently, aside from the children’s classes. She was great at greeting guests and that way guys wouldn’t be staring at her ass all the damn time like he was at that very second.

It was wrong, but I wasn’t above that shit. I saw the way every guy in my gym looked at her. She was in shape, had curves for days, and those fucking deep-blue eyes. So deep, they looked like sapphire sirens that mesmerized you before she pulled you in and devoured your soul.

Plus, she was my partner’s daughter. I was looking out for her. That’s what I’d keep telling myself. And what I told my brother Dom when he asked me what I was doing when he saw me switching the schedule the other day as we went over shareholder business.

No one needed to know about the night in the back of that SUV. Even though I couldn’t forget about it. I’d held her composure, her control, her damn undoing in my hands. She’d given it to me. And ever since, I wasn’t sure I could keep control of myself. I’d made her leave another man’s house. And she wasn’t even mine. Yet.

I could blame Carl for it. He’d called and practically designated me to be her guard dog, but she’d stirred something different in me the moment I’d met her. The girl was beautiful, nice, quiet, and had a take-no-shit attitude. Most of the men at my gym thought she was a catch. I heard the damn whispers.

But I couldn’t figure out if she was fucking with everyone’s minds or just mine. I was convinced that even if she was younger than me and half the guys in the gym, she was smarter than all of us combined.

“What do you need, Mr. Hardy?” She held a hand up to stop Wes from continuing to pummel the bag she was holding and then she wiped the sweat from her forehead, her breath coming fast.

My eyes flicked over her, lingering on the fact that she couldn’t for the life of her wear a T-shirt or a tank top to the gym. Instead, she was in tight yoga leggings and bright-red sports bra, her curves on display so perfectly that I couldn’t look away. At this point, I was considering a new employee dress policy expressly so others wouldn’t stare at her like I was.

Her dark wavy hair was up in a pony, ensuring everyone could admire the slope of her neck too. And I knew her hair was long, could imagine how it fell down her back or that it would have covered the way her chest rose and fell if it cascaded over and in front of her shoulders.

I hated that she did these classes at my gym for our business, showing these guys flexibility and strength when those fuckers weren’t even there for that. Noah didn’t need a damn yoga class for balance in the NHL. He only wanted to stare at her ass.

Much like I did.

*Fuck.*

And if it wasn’t me daydreaming about grabbing her hair or her ass, I imagined running my hands over her bare stomach ... the one that currently glistened under the gym’s lighting, showing off her muscle tone, the small curve of her waist, and how her ass swelled perfectly from it.

“I thought I told you to assist at the front desk.”

“Right. I didn’t have a chance to tell you when you walked away with Piper.” Her cheeks were flushed, and she chewed her lip in an effort to not give anything else away. But I heard the

dip in her voice when she mentioned our names, felt the tension like she might be jealous. She pointed to my front desk where I saw one of my seasoned employees. “Juna took over because Wes needed help sparring so ...” She shrugged and smiled at Wes.

Big man that he was, he stepped in to defend her. “I just needed a little extra motivation today.” He winked at me like I would understand.

Oh, I understood his dumb ass all right. “Motivation?” I chuckled and rubbed my jaw, trying my best to temper my response. To see reason. To act composed like she did all the time.

Everly was an employee. She was my partner’s daughter. She should have been completely off-limits and not at all mine.

Yet, my dick responded every time she was in the room. My mind had started to scream that no one could look at her but me. And my body obviously didn’t react to anyone else at this point. It’d been two weeks since our time in the SUV, and I’d jacked off to her countless times since.

“Declan,” she whispered my first name like she knew something in me was brewing. When her hand grazed my bicep gently, she probably figured it would calm me.

Her touch instead ignited the flames of jealousy that licked through my veins and made me spew the bullshit I said next. “How about I motivate you to get the hell out of my gym before I beat your ass for flirting with my partner’s daughter?”

One of our security guards who meandered around incognito stepped forward. In the NFL and in the empire I’d built, I reigned supreme. No one wanted to come into HEAT Health and Fitness and upset one of the owners. Everyone, even Wes, knew that.

I wouldn’t apologize for it. He should have known his place.

“Bro, you know you’re a legend to me. I still think you could take another Super Bowl if you decide to come back in a year or two.” That fucker knew I was retired and that he was part of the reason for it. “This can’t be that big of an issue that you, me, and Carl can’t look past—”

“It is.” I cut him off. Wes was a snake. Everyone in the NFL knew it. His ass should have been happy he was a HEAT member at all. He knew it too, because he was already backing away, grumbling to Everly that he’d call her later. He didn’t want me sharing his reputation with her, didn’t want me tarnishing what he thought they had.

What he didn’t realize was they were about to have nothing at all.

“Are you a complete imbecile?” Everly ground out, her small hands fisting at her sides as Wes practically ran to the locker room. “We’re seeing each other. You can’t just come over and scare him off.”

“Your dad wants me to.” I shrugged. Damn, her eyes turned a vivid crystal blue when she got mad. “I told you the other night, and I’ll tell you again, he’s not your type.”

“I don’t care what Carl wants,” she spat. “You and my dad aren’t my keepers.”

“Wes is an asshole,” I found myself saying, although I didn’t have to defend my actions to her. Carl Milton had made it clear that Everly was not allowed to date any guy from Wes’s team.

Him and I were partners. The man had lived and breathed by my team. When I’d mentioned that I was thinking about retiring to the press, he’d hunted me down to invest in his hotel and gym empire. That was five years ago and I hadn’t retired then. I’d played four more years while we’d built up the gym and hospitality brand together. In that time, he’d been smart enough to plaster my name on everything.

Hardy Elite All-Access Team. Hardy Hotel. Hardy this, Hardy that. My face everywhere and America went wild.

Carl was a mentor and a friend, and I was going to make sure his daughter wasn't dating someone he didn't want her to. At least, that's the reason I was going with for now.

"How would you even know? You never talk to him here," she pointed out.

"Exactly. Because he plays a dirty game of football, and he's cheated on every single woman he's ever been in a relationship with. He's not your type." I turned and started to walk back to the front desk, but she grabbed my arm and yanked me to turn and continue the conversation.

"Totally my type," she threw back, her poise suddenly slipping.

I leaned in close. "Was he your type when your pussy got wet for me? When you screamed my name, not *his*, after leaving his house the other night?"

Her eyes widened at my question and then narrowed like she was ready to go to war. "Great. So, you're assuming I want a serious relationship? That I'm concerned he cheated on someone before me?" She leaned in and whispered, "Maybe I just want to fuck someone in the locker room once or twice like you and Piper have."

Her sapphire eyes blazed a blue fire now, her jealousy burning to the surface with mine. Two storms brewing to make a damn hurricane. She wanted to goad me; I saw it in how she squared up to me, but she must have realized her mistake. I felt my heart pounding, my body reacting to her, my anger mingling with the desire to be the one to take her back to the locker room and do exactly what she wanted.

She took a step back as I took one forward, and then she spun on a heel, navigating her way to the locker room as she undid that long hair and let it cascade down her back before the doors swung shut behind her.

I swear she was taunting me to come back there, playing a fucking game with my dick that I couldn't win. Everly was the mastermind, and I was the dumb man being led by lust rather than reason.

But I followed her into that locker room, rounding the corner fast, ensuring no one saw me, before I grabbed her by the elbow and shoved her into the first private shower stall I could without saying a damn word.

"What the hell, Declan?" She turned and faced me, tilting her head up to stare at me as I stepped close to her. We'd been pushing each other for too long now. I wanted to taste her, smell her, feel every part of her. I took my time nestling into her neck, and she gasped but angled her head, giving me access to her neck.

She may have wanted to fuck someone else.

She may have been ten years younger than me.

And she may have been my partner's daughter.

But Everly was going to be only *mine* right then and there.

"If you intend to fuck someone in my gym, babe, you can bet your ass it's going to be me."

She shook her head and stammered out, "I wasn't talking about doing *anything with you* in here."

"If you're talking about fucking someone, it better only be me, Drop." I took my time dragging my lips across her neck as I moved my knee between her legs. She immediately whimpered in response to the pressure of my thigh against her pussy, even with the fabric between us.

"We're at work." She stared up at me, and I saw lust in her eyes, saw how she licked her lips.

“And contrary to what I said out there, I don’t fuck at work like some—”

“Piper does my PR. She was giving me an update. Not—”

“It doesn’t matter.” She looked away and one of her hands went to her neck full of necklaces to play with them. She dragged her teeth over her bottom lip and it glistened enough that I had to lower my head to taste it. To taste her.

I took her lips in my mouth, and she opened them immediately, ravaging me like I did her, taking what she wanted from my kiss like she needed it as much as I did.

When my hand brushed over her breast, though, and I felt that nipple pebble, she pushed me back, breathing fast. “We’re at work. My father’s gym. Your gym. I’m barely a part of this community. I don’t want to make waves by sleeping with the king of it. Especially when the king is friends with my father.”

With that, she pushed past me.

I called after her but she didn’t listen.

And she didn’t listen to my text from earlier about taking a car home either.

I didn’t text her about it. I couldn’t. Instead, I tried to let her go, because I knew everything Everly had said was right.

It was just a matter of time before I figured out if we could ignore the pull of being wrong.

## 5 EVERLY



“Carl, I’d rather not talk about it right now,” I blurted out and then patted his shoulder so he could calm down. I’d found it helped him in a weird way, like he was an overzealous puppy that needed a pat on the head every now and then.

“Well, you can’t date him.”

“That’s not really up to you,” I repeated in a matter-of-fact tone, trying not to cause a scene. “You can’t meddle in everything.”

He scoffed as if he was affronted, but we both knew how he was. “So sue me for caring! I held my tongue when you went for coffee and on a few dates, but this is another month in, Evie. He’s not a good man.”

That was a lie. He hadn’t held his tongue at all.

Juna walked by, pulling her arm across her chest in a stretch when she decided to stop and listen. She couldn’t steer away from the gossip magazines, and we were turning into a live one for her viewing pleasure. “How you doing, Mr. Milton?” she asked, knowing full well he was irritated since his cheeks were bright red.

He immediately looked to her for help. “Tell Everly how bad Wes is.”

Juna smiled wide, her purple pixie cut swinging back and forth as she opted to give him hell instead. “Mr. Milton, Wes is sort of hot.” The girl was a breath of fresh air in the stuffy gym. She had a foul mouth and loved to play devil’s advocate, but it’s not what Carl wanted. “I mean, I know he pulled that move last year on Dec—”

“We’re not talking about that. We don’t talk about that at HEAT.” Carl cut her off and then groaned. He waved her off, and she fluttered her fingers before skipping away. Carl turned back to me, “The media has painted the right picture of Wes, and I’m not having you associated with that.”

*Media.* That word. The press and publicity that came with working at HEAT made me cringe. I repressed a small shudder and went through the tablet’s schedule to make sure all our tasks were in order for the day.

“What did Wes do that could be so bad?” I didn’t really believe Wes was it for me, but it was my intention to get out there, to start dating again, to embrace love instead of bitterness.

And to forget about Declan. Mostly that, even though my body couldn’t seem to do so.

“He plays for the other team! That’s all you need to know.” Carl threw up his hands like this was the end all be all.

“The team doesn’t define him,” I pointed out. We were at the front desk bickering, and I knew a client would walk in any second. “We’ve talked about this. Just calm down, okay? We

can discuss it more later when we aren't at work."

"You know I'm your father, right?" His gray eyebrows furrowed together above his glasses. He never trimmed them, but somehow, they suited his boisterous attitude.

"Of course," I nodded, suddenly uncomfortable.

I'd moved out of his guesthouse as fast as I could and hadn't accepted any help financially to get what he felt was a nice apartment. I didn't want to owe Carl any more than I already did.

"I wasn't always there, but I'm still your dad, Evie, and I have a lot of experience behind me." His voice sounded pained.

How could I tell him that he'd gained all that experience without me though? That my childhood had been filled with nights spent hoping I'd get one phone call that wasn't on the holiday. What I would have given for one visit from him for no reason other than he wanted to see me.

I scanned my watch into the system so I could get to the employee login quickly, trying not to dwell. "I know you do, even with Melinda by your side."

He sighed and laughed a little. The man loved acting like his wife was a bit of a burden, and I knew it would ease some of the tension between us. "You're good, Everly. Such a good kid. I only want what's best for you. You understand? And I'm telling you, even if it's the last thing I'll ever do, I'm going to make sure a Cobra isn't in your life. Have you thought about those Hardy brothers? Because—"

"No." I cut him off. He was not going to meddle that hard.

Thankfully, the revolving glass door began to move, and an older woman waltzed in, immediately smiling at my father. I dropped my hand from my hip and tried to shake off his words.

I patted his shoulder one last time and whispered it would all be okay. Carl needed reassurance more than I needed a father now. I'd lived long enough without one to know that I'd survive. Unfortunately, Carl had probably been reassured his whole life. My father came from old money, knew he'd be provided whatever he wanted for the whole of his life.

As the woman spoke to me across the front desk, my father murmured he was going to the sauna. I waved him away and continued to check-in Mrs. Johnson, a nice woman who frequented the gym daily with a vigor I could only hope to possess at her age.

"I'm so thankful to be a part of this gym, Everly." She winked her extra-long black eyelashes at me. "Your dad is doing so well by all of us."

I didn't know about that. I'd been there for three months, working at the most luxurious, beautiful gym on the planet. It had also been the most ludicrous three months too. The technology, the swag, the events they came up with to justify the membership price tag were insane. It was like the adult version of Disney.

"I see you don't have your watch with you today." I held out the fingerprint scanner and she offered her print as if it was normal. "Would you like another HEAT watch for tracking today?"

Her answer should have been "No, I don't need a freaking heart monitor that's the equivalent of a smart watch but engraved with HEAT on it like I was suddenly somebody worthy."

Yet, people truly believed it was a status symbol. They all wanted to be a part of HEAT. She nodded vigorously and then scanned the kiosk next to our marble counter. "Give me a pin, too, would you, dear?"



She grabbed for the gold-and-sapphire emblem with *HEAT* molded there and pinned it to her white collar immediately with a smile on her face. “Now, don’t sell Lucy one when she comes in. I want to have more HEAT gear than her today.” She chuckled at her own joke. “I’ll be at the tennis courts if you want to tell Carl to stop by and say hi. I need to give him a bit of hell again for having me on a wait list for two years even after Declan took over before he accepted me.”

There it was. The underlying truth of why everyone wanted to be a part of HEAT Health and Fitness. They thought Declan might grace them with his presence, like he was a god here amongst mere men.

The sad part of it all was I was starting to want his presence around too.

He hadn’t lingered by the front desk, hadn’t texted me, hadn’t really looked my way since our locker room encounter. He’d stopped by a self-defense class for the kids and even lingered to throw a few balls with them. Yet, he’d only nodded at me like I was any another employee.

Which I was. Which was what I wanted to be. It was for the best.

“Give him all the hell you want, Mrs. Johnson.” I smiled at her.

She chuckled. “Oh, you know I never would. Carl and that goy, Declan, have done so much for all of us. You know Declan had every opportunity right out of college, right?”

I nodded. I was well aware of his story considering my father would drone on and on about how America loved Declan, about how he played both defense and offense in college, how he was first-round draft pick his senior year, how he played for a total of twelve years and could have kept playing.

“Declan made a name for himself, and then, well, you know your father wasn’t doing too hot with everything. I’m his lawyer, you know?” She preened at mentioning that. “I always tell Carl that stamping Declan’s face and last name on everything when he let Declan invest in the business years ago was the smartest move he made, even if he had to dole out some of the shares to Declan’s brothers. Those Hardy brothers are a dream.”

She sighed and I ground my teeth together trying not to think about the man who’d kissed me senseless in the locker room and then had avoided me ever since. He’d been at the gym since seven this morning and had greeted everyone with a hello except me. The only remnant of him in my life now seemed to be that a car still idled in front of my apartment daily and followed me to work, although I tried not to pay any attention.

“You’d know better than me, Mrs. Johnson,” I said because the woman had known my dad for years.

“Oh, right. Right.” She patted my hand with a smile on her face. “But you’re all getting along fine, it seems? I know your father loves you so much, and Declan’s wonderful with everyone right?”

The woman was as nosy as she was gossipy so I stayed quiet.

“Well, even if you’ve only come to live here just recently, you’ll be one of us in no time. Which reminds me, can you go grab him, actually? I need to tell him all the changes he made last week are worked out.”

“Okay.” I tried not to sigh as I waved Juna over so that I could go bring my father back out to the front desk but just as I was rounding the corner, an alarm on my HEAT watch went off.

I took off at a sprint toward the sauna.

## 6 EVERLY



Even in the hot sauna, his body was cold. Lifeless.

Dead.

Carl was dead.

The alarm from a HEAT watch must have alerted the medical staff because people streamed in but nothing registered.

I know I rattled off instructions as I stood there while people moved around me like a swarm of angry bees, furiously trying to protect their queen. In this case, their queen was my dad.

Carl Milton.

Deceased in the sauna.

Someone said it had to be a heart attack. I said someone should administer CPR, pointed at coworkers, gave directions.

None of it mattered. The buzzing and the talking and the screaming of employees all seemed to fade away to silence.

They laid him down to do chest compressions, but he didn't gasp for air. His body remained lifeless in his HEAT shorts and sweat-soaked T-shirt.

I fell to my knees and whispered to wake up. This time I called him Dad, this time tears fell for my father, praying he'd come back. I crumbled as my breath came faster and faster, but no oxygen filled my lungs. It was brutal, ugly, and pathetic the way I wanted it to not be real. We weren't close, but he was family. He'd been my saving grace when my world fell apart months ago.

"What the hell is going on?" The growl from behind me was full of authority, like he owned the place and we were all inconveniencing him. I turned my tear-stained face toward him and found myself face-to-face with Declan. "Everly?" he whispered in confusion.

I saw when he realized. I saw it in the way his face paled as he looked over my shoulder, how his cheeks hollowed. He let out a breath and then barked orders. "Resuscitate him."

"Sir, he's gone. It looks like a heart attack. We've been trying—"

"Try again," Declan cut him off.

There wasn't the pain in his eyes that I felt yet. That would wallop him in another minute. Death knocked like a demon ready to breathe fear, outrage, and shock into our souls first. Then, it stabbed us with that torturous grief.

I sobbed quietly like a wretched child, inconsolable at the loss.

"Get her out of here," Declan commanded. "She shouldn't see this. Call his family. He's

going to need their support—and our support—when he wakes up.”

“He’s not waking up.” I shook my head, trying my best to keep my voice steady as I whispered, “Don’t you see he’s not waking up?”

His greenish eyes searched mine as I stared up at him on my knees. His voice cracked as he said, “We have to try.”

And try he did. Over and over again. I watched as the despair took over his face, like he couldn’t handle this. Because death can’t be handled.

He stood stock-still as the medical staff pronounced my father’s death. Yet, his jaw worked, his hands fisted. I saw him trying to bundle up his emotions while he told everyone to get out.

When you were a part of HEAT, you were family, part of the team. It was in the pamphlet they gave everyone when they joined. Declan believed it here with my father. Him and my dad were father and son in every way that counted, and he’d lost him.

I’d cry, I’d mourn the loss of what could have been with my father, but Declan’s grief would be catastrophic. Even if he didn’t want to admit it.

As I walked out of the sauna to allow for the medical staff to do their job, I knew my life was about to change. The only tie I had to this place was my father. And now he was gone.

I’d be gone soon too.

Or so I thought.

## 7 DECLAN



Carl Milton passed at 8:01 p.m.

Authorities were directed to call his wife.

By about 8:02 p.m., his wife, Melinda, called to ask who was taking over his shares of the company.

I would give the press about ten more minutes until they called with questions. Vultures. Every single one of them. They swooped in on a wounded animal, ready for their feeding frenzy immediately. I may have been wounded, but I wasn't dead, and I would protect our legacy—Carl was my family for all intents and purposes—at all costs. Even if it meant going up against his wife, the press, and the whole damn empire we'd built together.

Carl had given me a place to call home during my years in the NFL. He'd made me believe in myself more than anyone ever had. He'd accepted my father and mother not just as working-class Greek immigrants, but as equals—treated them the way they always should have been. He gave us all purpose and trusted us with his business.

He was family.

And we didn't scavenge on family even when they passed.

I knew I had to call my brothers, figure out the staff, the press release ... knew I had to do a million things.

All the things Carl was good at. He'd been the charmer, the type who could soothe the press, handle the administrative work, and focus on the business when I didn't want to. I played ball, I worked out, I posed for a shot with my Super Bowl ring and smiled at people in my face. I didn't organize things. I didn't want to.

Yet, now, I'd have to.

I'd need to be the man to make everything work, even if I couldn't incite my staff to resuscitate the person we needed most. I couldn't get a heartbeat. I couldn't bring him back.

I prompted them to try more times than I could count before the doctor called it. Then, I snapped at my staff to get out. I heard an announcement not long after that the gym was closed until further notice, that everyone needed to evacuate the premises immediately.

I stood in that hot sauna as they loaded his large body onto the stretcher. As they carted him away, my life changed before me.

It might have been seconds or minutes or hours when I heard her voice so soft behind me. "You're going to overheat, Declan."

The name she never spoke left her lips out of compassion, trying to pull me back from the darkness that was enveloping me.

When I turned, I saw how she bit her lip as she looked at me. Then, she stepped up and wiped at my cheeks, I saw the tears there. Yet, I felt cold, numb, in shock. I blurted out, “Did you close the gym?”

She nodded. “I thought it best given the circumstances.”

Something ugly brewed up inside me. Cold and vicious and hardened from losing the man who’d given most everything to me. “He wouldn’t have wanted us to close down the gym. Not even for a minute.”

“Oh. Well ...” She pulled her hand away and fisted it. “We have to mourn him, and we have to take the right steps. We can’t just drive forward.”

“We’ve always driven forward. It’s Carl’s way, Everly.” It sounded callous coming from my mouth. Yet, the woman hadn’t been here. She hadn’t seen how hard we’d worked for this, how much we put in to get here. “We open first thing tomorrow. It’ll be an all-hands-on-deck situation to deal with his passing. So, make sure to look your best. The press is going to have a field day with this one.”

Her jaw dropped as I started to walk past her. “You can’t be ... Are you even going to take a moment and stop to consider that my *father* has died?”

I dragged a hand over my face and took a deep breath. Carl Milton would have wanted us to play ball. *Always*. The man was all about the legend and empire. “No, because my business partner wouldn’t have wanted me to.”

“You knew him much better than I did, Declan.” She took a breath, and it quivered like she knew what it might be like for me to grieve him. “You can’t bury the pain and loss deep inside like it hasn’t happened. You have to feel the past and—”

“You know that from experience, Everly?” Something shuttered behind her eyes, and she shut down the emotion, closed me off to it like she had the night in the SUV.

When she glanced back at me though, her blue eyes burned with a new fire. She glared at me when I brushed past to close down the sauna. The medical staff was now talking with the police, and we had to deal with press, call lawyers, figure out next steps. We didn’t have time for mourning.

Everly was on my heels. “What are we going to say to everyone who loved him? ‘Mr. Hardy doesn’t care. It’s still time to work?’”

“Everyone employed here will understand. Most of us have been on this team for years, and just because you came in a few months ago—”

“What? I don’t know or care enough? Is that what you were about to say?” She crossed her arms over her chest. “You know what, Mr. Hardy? Fuck you.”

“Good. You’re finally getting it. Feel the anger rather than the sadness and hang on to that pride you have. When the press gets ahold of the news, you’re going to need it.”

She was too pure for this world, too foreign to understand that an empire like this one would crumble and rip you apart if you weren’t careful.

“Everly!” I heard Wes’s voice before I saw him. It grated every nerve. “Jesus, I came as soon as I heard.”

I glanced at my watch. Two hours. Her father had died, and it took her “casual” hookup two whole hours to get here when I know he doesn’t work a nine-to-five.

“You shouldn’t be in our gym right now. It’s closed,” I pointed out.

“Come on, man,” he grumbled as he tucked her in under his arm.

At the same time, she mumbled, “Oh my god.”

Still, she curled into him like he might be able to comfort her. Like his arms would be

enough. “I’m sorry to hear about—”

“You both can go.” I turned away from them as Melinda, Anastasia, and Clara arrived.

“What happened? Who was on the medical staff tonight?” Melinda buzzed in. Her coiffed blonde hair perched and wrapped perfectly in a bun told me she’d gotten ready for the press. Her pantsuit was a black, like she knew she had to mourn, and Anastasia and Clara were dressed the same.

Anastasia—hair as blonde as her mother’s, the perfect face of makeup, and the woman I’d always entertained because she was related to Carl—gripped my arm with tears running down her face. Suddenly, her touch made my skin crawl, like she was poison ivy that I needed to get away from. “I’m going to miss him. I can’t even understand how this happened.”

I couldn’t help but look over my shoulder to see if Everly was still there, if she was going to console her family.

She chewed her cheek with her plump lips pursed before she sighed and pulled Wes with her. She cleared her throat, and instantly Melinda’s and Anastasia’s eyes flew like daggers to her.

“I’m so sorry for your loss. We did everything we could but he ...” Everly’s voice shook as she bravely held Melinda’s eye contact and wrung her hands in front of her bare stomach since she was still in her damn workout clothes.

“Why are you even here?” Melinda spit out the question like an accusation.

“I ... What? I work here.”

“So? You think that affords you the right to be here?” She smoothed one manicured hand over the strands of her bun. “Get employees off the premises, Declan. This is a private family matter now. We need to make sure we handle this correctly with the press for our company.”

“Melinda—” I started.

“Look outside, Declan.” She pointed, and when I did, the swarm in front of the windows around the ambulance and police cars was intense. Photos were being taken, flashes going off I hadn’t previously noticed.

Shock of losing a man as close to you as your father doesn’t hit in the first few minutes. Or maybe it does and that’s what keeps you from crumbling.

None of this was good for Everly. She wasn’t used to it. “Go home, Everly. I’ll make sure we contact you about Carl’s funeral arrangements.”

“If you’re invited,” Melinda added.

Everly’s face paled and then reddened.

“Melinda.” My voice snapped out like a whip getting them in order just as Clara grumbled that Carl was her dad too and not to be so cold while Anastasia elbowed her. “I’m going to say it once so we’re clear. Carl made it known to me the day I met Everly. She’s a part of the HEAT empire, she’s a part of the family. Our family. You treat her that way or you answer to me. You understand?”

Melinda raised her chin and pursed her lips. “We’ll see about that.”

“Mom!” Clara screeched at her mother’s boldness, and they all started bickering, but I was only focused on Everly. She had backed away, shaking her head at me. She held in the tears, refusing to let them fall, refusing to give us an inch of her emotion. The way she didn’t engage, the way she still stood tall, and the way she glanced at me and mouthed “Goodbye” made me want to grab her hand and pull her back to stay.

Carl would have been proud of her.

And I was certifiably in awe with her after that moment. She was strong in a way I didn’t see from other women around here. It made something deep in my gut burn as she walked away

with Wes's hand on the small of her back.

I took a breath and tried to organize the list of things I had to do. The next few days would be brutal.

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-images/svgimg0004.svg-REPLACE\_ME

I did it all. I called our PR company, brought in my assistant, called my brothers, and worked closely with Melinda and her daughters to organize the funeral.

We all lost sleep, mourned his loss, but carried on. I saw her blue eyes at the funeral where she didn't look bothered at all again. She didn't stand next to her stepfamily, but instead sat in the pews of the church with everyone else.

A woman with long dark braids who had the same exact bone structure as Everly sat beside her rubbing her arms as the pastor gave his sermon. Then, they both approached the receiving line at the wake, told the family—and me—they were sorry for our loss, as if they hadn't lost anyone. As if they were strong enough to give sympathy even when they deserved it too.

Everly Belafonte couldn't be bothered with what should have been, it seemed. I knew she should have been afforded a moment at that funeral to break down. She didn't. She should have been afforded a damn moment to commemorate her father, but Melinda took on the whole eulogy with her daughters. Everly didn't bat an eye even.

I wanted to shake her, tell her she deserved it all, that Carl would have wanted her to have something.

But I couldn't. I had to be the king of this empire now.

Two days after the funeral, my brothers and I all got the call. "There's a will reading for Mr. Carl Milton. It's rather unique in that he wanted you and your brothers to attend with Everly first. You will each be read the conditions of the will one by one. I know it's unorthodox, but we'd like you to come in—"

"Just give me the time and the place. I'll be there if that's what Carl wanted."

I'd do anything that old man wanted now that he was gone, I thought.

Well, I thought so at least until I heard what he asked me to do in that damn will.

## 8 EVERLY



“Marry him? I’m not marrying him.” My voice shot out but still shook as I said it. I glanced around at all of them. Mrs. Johnson sat there with a HEAT pin on the lapel of her white jacket with shoulder pads while Declan and I, along with his three brothers sat around the table too.

All four of those Hardy brothers wore black suits and black ties. Tailored perfection, they were a picture with their dark hair, each of them quiet but with varying expressions on their faces.

Dex handled the brand’s security, and he smirked like this was a joke. Dom had sparred with me a few times in the gym, knew me better than the other brothers, and glanced over at me with concern. Dimitri studied Declan, awaiting his response.

I did too. Declan and I had distanced ourselves since the night of Carl’s death, though he had stood up for me with Melinda by saying I was a part of the family.

I wasn’t.

I didn’t belong, and I didn’t know if I even wanted to. I survived the press at the funeral only because my mother and I beelined it out of there as fast as possible. We’d been subjected to scrutiny before and we didn’t want it again.

Yet here I was, being forced into it.

Mrs. Johnson had read the instructions after summoning us all to a large conference room within her legal firm. She’d announced that Declan and I, along with his brothers, were to be read the first stipulations of the will privately. Then everyone else, one by one, would be read theirs. Melinda, Anastasia, Clara, and my mother.

Since Mom had already flown back home after the funeral, she called to tell me she’d just video chat in. “It all seems so formal,” she’d said, pushing her beaded braids away from her face. “You know how I hate all that.”

I assured her it would all be fine. I figured we’d be given nothing. We hadn’t been given anything in the past.

That was before Mrs. Johnson dropped the bomb that exploded in my stomach. I gripped the wooden desk in an effort to stay upright, to endure the shock of it, to breathe through it.

“That is completely your choice, Ms. ...” She hesitated, probably realizing I didn’t go by my father’s last name. “Ms. Belafonte.” She straightened her glasses, then she sighed, and her manicured fingers pulled them off her face to allow them to hang from the beaded string around her neck. “Everly, forgive me if I’m overstepping, but you know I’m a part of the HEAT organization, and I do so appreciate all the service you’ve given me throughout the last few



months. To turn down this opportunity—”

“Mrs. Johnson, this isn’t an opportunity. This is a forced marriage. This is blackmail.” I felt my voice rising, so I took a breath, trying to remain calm.

“Your father wanted what was best for his family and his legacy. A marriage for one year isn’t the end of the world.”

“Can you please read the last paragraph to me one more time?”

“Sure.” She cleared her throat. “Everly and Declan must marry if they would like the shares of my company that give them majority voting rights over the HEAT brand. If they do not, these shares will be donated to StoneArm Real Estate along with voting rights. And, I promise, I know best. I’m not having my daughter end up with a Cobra. Not when my empire is on the line. And not when her name needs to be cleared.”

“He just didn’t want me marrying a Cobra!” I screeched, ignoring the fact that he was trying to clear my name too. I couldn’t even attempt to focus on that.

“Well, that, and you’ve got a bad name, it seems.” Declan narrowed his eyes at me, and my heart beat fast at what I might have to tell him, at what they all might find out.

“Sure it’s no worse than yours,” Dom spoke up through a chuckle.

“Don’t fuck with me right now,” Declan threw back at him.

“I’ve got no name in this town, let’s be honest,” I ground out. “And I don’t want one.” The pencil I was holding snapped in half. There went keeping my composure. I’d tried. I really had. No one could agree to this though. I cleared my throat. “I won’t do it.”

Dom nodded like he agreed with me. “You don’t have to do it, Evie.”

Yet, I saw how Dimitri and Dex glanced at one another. Their careers—their brand—was on the line. This wasn’t a rash decision I should make on my own anymore.

“I think you need to understand all the stipulations,” Mrs. Johnson tried.

I hated to feel like I didn’t care about them, like I was throwing these men to the wolves. Yet, even if I ended up homeless and without a penny of his to my name, I wanted nothing to do with this. “I don’t want anything. I’m sorry, but you can all figure it out without me. I don’t need his money or—”

“He owns your mother’s yoga studio and home. Those will go to Melinda and Anastasia Milton if you don’t agree to the marriage.”

“Shit,” Dex grumbled, and Dom swore too.

“What?” I whispered out. I felt my heart, the way it pounded and then dropped like a hole to hell had opened up and it was falling right down into it. The blood ceased to pump through my veins, my brain stopped working, and my life screeched to a halt. “No. Not her studio. He wouldn’t.”

“Oh, Everly,” Mrs. Johnson tsked, then patted my hand. “He was always a bit too good at business, and he had a knack for meddling as well. But he loved you. He’ll also be compensating you. He set aside a good amount of money for you once this year is through.”

She pointed at an amount on a sheet of paper, and the zeros on it were dizzying.

I glanced over at Declan, ready to lay the blame on anyone. His posture was rigid, hands fisted at on his thighs, jaw hard as stone. He didn’t look at me, not even when there was a long stretch of silence that would have given him the opportunity to. He nodded slow, like he was deciding his own fate, and then that strong jaw worked up and down. Up and down. “I’ll have majority of shares, Mrs. Johnson?”

His words were cold, calculating, and cruel. The man everyone thought was a charmer was actually just as ruthless as my father. He wanted the business, the money, the legacy. He

didn't care that it would ruin me for a year. Didn't care that I didn't agree.

I'd grown up in that house, in that studio. It was all my mother had. And although I moved away from it all, it was the only safe place I had at the end of my time there, the place my mother and I worked so hard for.

"Well, Declan, you'll get majority shares of the gym. Voting rights for the brand, including the hotels, the restaurants, golf courses, everything. I can give you the list but you and your brothers will be set to make the calls you want for the HEAT empire for life. If not, you will forfeit Mr. Milton's shares to StoneArm Real Estate."

"I haven't heard of them," he said, waiting for more information.

Dimitri spoke up finally. "We don't care about any of that shit. If you don't want this, we can rebuild."

"I care, dumbass. We built this brand with Carl for years. I'm not just giving it away."

Dex chuckled like it was all ridiculous. "So what? You can do it again. You're a damn male Kardashian."

Dom loosened up and laughed at that along with Dex.

"Fuck you guys," Declan sighed as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"What? You mad because you piss on something and it turns to gold?" Dex elbowed Dom. "Remember that one commercial he did for the spa, and we thought that shit was going nowhere because he was such a bad actor. Instead, we opened up six more spas attached to resorts that year because of advanced bookings."

"So damn dumb," Dimitri said. He was usually the brother who seemed most concerned about Declan, but he busted out laughing too. "All because you caught a few good balls."

"It wasn't only a few good balls." Declan mashed his teeth together. Then he took a deep breath, like he knew they were trying to rile him. "This isn't a joke, guys."

"We know." Dom sobered. "But it is if we want it to be because you don't have to do shit if you don't want it."

The brothers all nodded, banded together in support of the one who needed it most in the moment.

"I'm not giving this brand away to a random-ass company." He met my gaze suddenly, his eyes blazing green with resolve. "Not if I can help it."

Mrs. Johnson cleared her throat. "StoneArm Real Estate is privately owned and very random. Not much information there. We could dig, but I'm guessing their evading skills will match our researching ones."

"One year?" Declan restated.

Dex smirked at his brother. "You'll be off getting your picture taken half the time anyway. So, not even 365 days. Don't be a whiny bitch about it."

Dimitri elbowed him. "They've got to get fucking married, bro."

"So?" Dex shrugged. "Declan acts like this gym is his baby, and he's got hundreds more across the nation. He believes these resorts and restaurants and all our golf courses and casinos are part of the team. He's going to give that up for one measly year?"

They all glanced at one another. His siblings having an unspoken conversation. About me. About my life. About a whole year of me being attached to their brother.

Then Declan finally spoke up. "Does my whole legal team agree this is the best scenario?"

"Yes." Mrs. Johnson nodded. She glossed over the details and gave us the big-picture information. I didn't need the details. I just needed air, needed time to digest, needed a damn

drink of alcohol. “There are a few other insignificant details that I can have the legal team look over for you.”

She shuffled the papers around, and Declan glared at her. “That just doesn’t sound at all legal.”

“You’d be surprised what a trust and will can help you get away with, honestly.”

Carl. He had always found a way. It’s what I’d seen in the few months I’d spent with him.

She smiled softly like she was a fairy godmother, ready to help both of us. “I promise we will get through this together, okay? You two get married and try it out. Arranged marriages were the norm less than a hundred years ago and still are in some cultures. It’s for the best.”

“Send the papers to my legal team then,” he growled. I got the sense he was perturbed but willing.

“Mr. Hardy!” I finally couldn’t take it anymore, his name leaving my lips fast and loud, full of accusation.

“Yes, Ms. Belafonte?” The way he sneered my name reminded me why this would never work.

“You can’t be serious?” I breathed out.

“Why wouldn’t I be? This is my company. I’m not handing it over because I need to change my marital status for 365 days.”

“I ... I don’t belong here,” I whispered out the words. The walls seemed to shift inward, the air stale with entitlement, the ground too soft for someone who’d lived a different lifestyle. Then I caught his gaze and held it. His were filled with determination, and they must have matched mine. “I do *not* belong here.” This time I said it with a fury I knew wouldn’t serve me well.

*Be calm. Collected. You can’t show anything else.*

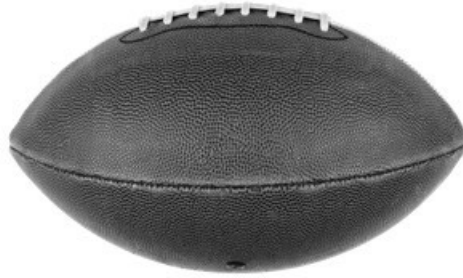
I growled as I pushed the emotions back down and shut my eyes for a second. They wouldn’t take me seriously if I cried now, if I got mad.

“One year and you can belong wherever you want. You need to pack your things and move. Take a few days or a week. But this year, Everly, you belong with me.”

That adrenaline, that same rush I’d felt with him in the SUV, snaked through me at his words.

“Actually”—Mrs. Johnson held up the gold pen she’d been using as a pointer—“this is effective immediately.”

## 9 DECLAN



“Immediately? I can’t go to his place right now.” Everly tried her best to stay composed, but she was unraveling, losing whatever mask she held up to protect her from the world. “I’m not \_\_\_”

“It’s effective immediately.” I cut her off. “We do what it says or we lose the things that matter to us. That’s it. Carl knew how to handle people, Everly, and he’s handling us.”

I don’t know why that realization had me cracking the first smile since we’d lost him. It was like he was giving a solid *fuck you* from the grave, proving his boisterous personality stood the test of mortality. He was still getting what he wanted, even in death.

I hated him for it. But loved him for it too.

“Everly, weren’t you the one who wanted to start your management job right away?” I lifted a brow at her.

She guffawed and wiggled in her pressed black dress. Other than the funeral, I’d never seen her in a dress or professional attire. The tights and sports bras were enough to make my dick stir, but the prim and proper look shouldn’t have gotten as much of a rise out of me, especially when I was missing her father. “Are you enjoying this?”

“Carl was always a stickler about certain terms and such.”

“If you think I’m moving in and marrying you because my father is still having a hissy fit over me dating a rival team’s player, you’re mistaken.”

“Why don’t you let me drive you to my place where we can discuss it further?” I winked at Mrs. Johnson.

Everly rolled her lips between her teeth before she responded with a measured tone. “Don’t wink at her like this is some joke. This is a year of our lives.”

“What’s a year if we’re already working together in the same city? Or are you planning to go back to your hometown?”

There it was. The way she shut down and closed off when I mentioned something she didn’t want to discuss. A whole history and a whole life she wouldn’t bring up.

The first time I’d met her, she’d done the same damn thing.

“No. I’m not going back to my hometown,” she ground out. “You underestimate me. You did that once before and it didn’t work out well for you, or don’t you remember?”

Yeah, I remembered that shit all right.

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-images/svgimg0004.svg-REPLACE\_ME

*Carl’s estranged daughter stood in front of me at HEAT Health and Fitness after being given a tour and meeting my brothers. Everyone had accepted her with open arms except me.*

*She was wringing her hands because she must have realized we didn't hire just anyone at this gym. "I know this is weird. I really will get you a resume, and you can interview me if you'd like."*

*Chewing my cheek, I figured I'd ask her a few questions. "You've taught in a gym before?"*

*She nodded vigorously. "Yes, I like to teach and was taking classes in college. I—"*

*"Did you get a degree?" It was something all of my managers had.*

*"Well, no. But a bachelor's degree isn't going to make or break my skill set. You can get life experience as the equivalent." She squared up with her reasoning, and then narrowed her bright-blue eyes at me. "Did you get a degree in football?"*

*She did know I was voted the NFL's MVP for five consecutive years at one point during my career, right? "I've been playing football since I was five years old."*

*"I've been doing yoga since I was three," she shot back. "Are we hiring people based on a sheet of paper that says they did four years of some schoolwork?"*

*"If you'd interviewed, you'd know that's not the only thing I base my hiring process on. You have experience in yoga. What else?" I countered, because now I was just fucking annoyed. She had to be ten years younger than me, and she was questioning how I hired people?*

*She took her time looking me up and down. "I'm great with kids' yoga too. Don't forget self-defense. I'm happy to teach that too. You're twice my size, but I could easily bring you to your knees."*

*"Wanna bet?" My competitive streak was problematic, I admit. "You can have the yoga instructor job. If you bring me to my knees, I'll give you the self-defense position too."*

*"Great." She smiled wide and it was like I was seeing her for the first time, because that smile alone was capable of bringing a man to his knees. Her eyes scrunched up, her cheekbones rounded, and a pair of dimples showed that made her cute and sexy at the same time.*

*Cute and lethal.*

*She'd wreck a heart or two with it, I was sure. Mine just wouldn't be one of them.*

*She spun on a running shoe heel and beelined to the door. "I already put my duffel in a locker. Saw a few things. The ring in the middle of the gym is a nice touch. Shall we go there so I can earn my place?"*

*"Whoa. Take it down a notch, Rocky," I chuckled out.*

*She turned to tilt her head at me. "Rocky?"*

*"You don't know Rocky?"*

*She scrunched her little nose.*

*Fuck. That solidified it. She was young. Too young. It was like a bucket of ice-cold water was thrown on my overactive dick.*

*"He's the legendary boxer in the movies of the same name!" I pinched the bridge of my nose. "How old are you?"*

*"Oh, I don't think ageism can be part of an interview." She smiled softly. "Plus, it's not an age thing. My mom and I didn't have a TV or go to the movies growing up." She shrugged like it was normal and then continued out the door.*

*"Didn't have a TV?" I almost tripped over myself at her admission.*

*"Are you giving me a tour before or after we get into the wrestling ring?"*

*"Before. You're going to be too tired after." Because her ass wasn't going to knock me to the ground. "Now, you won't be on this floor a lot. Except for management meetings and large*

clients, we barely use it. If you have a question, though, the HR department is down the hall, my office is at the end of it. Although, I'm not in there much."

I pointed to the elevators and pressed the button. Almost immediately, the doors slid open for her to walk in. "I never liked an office anyway."

"Why?"

"My father belonged in one, and my mother and I didn't." The statement wasn't one of pain or animosity. It's like Everly knew where she belonged. Most people tried to claw their way into a group that didn't want them. They tortured themselves to be a part of something they weren't, only to find they would have been happier if they'd found the right fit in the first place. I'd tried it with other sports, other positions, other careers. But Michael Jordan didn't belong in baseball, he belonged in basketball.

We waited quietly in the elevator until the doors opened. I waved her forward so we could walk the premises. A few clients stopped their lifting to walk over and introduce themselves. Everly practically preened. "I'm so excited to get started. It seems you have a wonderful clientele."

"If you say so," I grumbled as I cracked my knuckles, and we went around the other side of the gym to the wrestling ring.

When she got up to it, she dove under the rope so effortlessly, I started to consider whether or not she had some skill. "Want some protective gear?"

"For what? You going to hit me?" She feigned a pout and fluttered her lashes like she was making fun of those she'd seen use that tactic.

"I don't think I'll need to, Everly. You're as small as a raindrop." I grasped the rope so I could crouch between them and walk in.

She narrowed her eyes. "Rainwater can be dangerous. It can flood ... take a life, wash away cars, it can move mountains. A raindrop is small but together, with others, they're a force."

I could tell right then, Everly was going to be a problem. "There's only one of you here in front of me today."

She let a small smile escape before she straightened and widened her stance. "Let's see what you got. Come at me."

I met her gaze, determined, focused, brilliant. It held no fear, like she knew she was capable of more than I'd come at her with.

Something stirred deep within me, something that shouldn't have at all. I enjoyed taking a woman and making her mine, enjoyed ravaging her and controlling her when she wanted it.

I'd come at a woman in just that way before because she'd wanted it, not for her to defend herself.

So, I gave a half-ass effort as I walked toward her, reaching my hand out to grab her arm. She grasped my hand in just the right way and twisted it fast. She swung it over her head and cranked on it so hard that had I not curved my body and fallen to the ground that instant, I'd have a broken wrist. "Jesus Christ, Everly, what the fuck?" I bellowed.

I didn't mean to yell, but it didn't matter. She was beaming down at me, her pearly whites so bright against her lips that I immediately wanted to say sorry for my outburst. "Rule number one—you can't underestimate your opponent and give them the upper hand. It only takes one raindrop to bring you down it seems."

I glanced up in utter disbelief. "You ... You almost broke my arm. I didn't expect you to —"

"Yes, again, underestimating probably isn't a good idea."

*Shit. I knew that. I'd played sports forever and the underdog was always capable of the win, could always gain the upper hand when they were underestimated. Yet, this was different. "You're not even half my size."*

*"I know. It's extremely invigorating to know what the body is capable of."*

*I grumbled, "I guess the job is yours." I snatched my hand out of hers and got up. "When do you want to start, Raindrop?"*

*She wrinkled her nose. "I don't like nicknames. Everyone just calls me Evie. And today if possible. I worked back in my hometown and hate to not be working."*

*"Right, can I ask why you left that hometown of yours?" I was prying, and I knew it. Yet, I needed to know the type of person I was dealing with.*

*Her face fell, she shut off all emotion, and she didn't elaborate. "Sometimes, people just need a change."*

*I had a feeling she was about to change my life in more ways than one.*

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-images/svgimg0004.svg-REPLACE\_ME

Our gazes were at war with one another, like we were both recalling the first time we'd met. "Hard to forget that, Everly. You can take care of yourself in a ring, you can take care of yourself now. Let's work through this, huh? We'll ride out the marriage, and that way the shares won't be given to an anonymous company."

"If we're doing this, I'm not living with you." She almost bared her teeth as she said it, blue eyes burning bright with hatred toward me suddenly.

"I have a guesthouse. Completely detached from my own," I informed her, straightening the suit jacket I was so sick of wearing already.

"Of course you do. Everyone here does." She shut her eyes, frustrated. "I'm not like you all, Mr. Hardy. I can't ... I don't live this lifestyle like Melinda and Anastasia and—"

"Don't include me in the lineup," Dom jumped in, a small smile on his face. She glanced over at him, and I saw how her eyes softened.

"Dom, you know how ridiculous this is," Evie said to my brother. Seeing how they'd become friends, how he could calm her in this moment pissed me off. It pissed me off because I wasn't me.

"It's only a change in location and a license for a year," I reminded her, stopping her from engaging with my brother any further. This was between her and me. "Have your own life. It won't really interfere with mine." She chewed her cheek for a moment, and I knew I had her. "If you can't handle it, I can try to work with Melinda and Anastasia about your mother's yoga studio."

That had her narrowing her eyes. Everly didn't want to ask that woman for anything. I understood why too. She'd been vicious to her since the moment they'd first met. "There will be rules if we do this."

I smiled in triumph. "Of course there will be."

She stood so abruptly the chair flew out from behind her, but I caught it before it hit the ground. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "I need to read over the will again."

"If you agree"—Mrs. Johnson cleared her throat—"there will be further stipulations that can't be read until month three of your marriage."

"What?" we both said in unison.

"It's unconventional, but I assure you, it's nothing you can't handle and—"

"We need to see the documentation."

"Legally, I'm contracted—" She glanced at my legal team. Well, they were also Carl's

legal team. “My hands are tied, Declan.”

I glared at all of them. “You realize I could fire you all.”

“Sure. But we’re the best,” one of them stated. “And you know that. These are his last wishes.”

Was he tearing up? Jesus Christ.

“Fuck,” I swore angrily and glanced at my brothers. “Guys?”

“Your call. Everly’s call. We’ll be behind you the whole way,” Dimitri said, loyal as always.

“Now or never, Declan,” Mrs. Johnson pushed.

“Fine.”

“Fine?” Everly screeched. “Are you insane?”

“You want the damn yoga studio or not? We can always back out at three months.” She had to understand we lost everything if we didn’t.

She took two deep breaths and folded those clean, unmanicured fingers together. Then she pulled at the assortment of necklaces from under the collar of her dress and held them tight. So tight I knew her nails were cutting into her skin as she mumbled, “I’m gonna regret this.”

“Me too,” I grumbled. I met the stares of my brothers. “Don’t tell a fucking soul until I say.”

“One moment, then.” Mrs. Johnson got up and opened the door, and in walked a tall man with gray hair in a black suit. “Meet our ordained minister. I’ll be the witness, and we’ll get you two married off.”

The whirlwind began.

We repeated vows. We made promises that were completely empty. We made commitments we weren’t sure we could keep.

Then, the lawyers put papers in front of us. They explained our prenup would keep our finances and assets completely separate in the case of divorce. We signed. They explained the conditions of the will. We signed.

They pointed to our marriage license.

We signed on the dotted fucking lines.

[READ MORE](#)



