



SILVERBROOK UNIVERSITY

SAPIENTIA ET VERITAS

BOOK ONE

BROKEN RIVALRY

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

R. G. ANGEL

Broken Rivalry

Silverbrook University #1

R.G. Angel

Broken Rivalry – Silverbrook University book 1

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To my romance-loving tribe,

For those who crave a mix of love, laughs, steam, and drama, with just the right touch of hot guys and bold heroines—this one's for you. And when the pages turn as sizzling as your favorite romance scene, just think—that's what she said.

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Playlist



She's the Sunlight - Trading Yesterday

I'll be - Edwin McCain

The Fear you won't fall Joshua Radin

Collide - Howie Day

I do not love you - Ron Pope

May I - Trading Yesterday

I could not ask for more - Edwin McCain

Never say never - The Fray

Touch - Jonny Lang

All of me - John Legend

Let it all go - Birdy Rhodes

We belong Together - Gavin DeGraw

No one's gonna love you - Band of Horses

Prologue



Poppy

Enjoy what you have while you have it because one day, something might come and fuck it all up for you .

Well, that’s not exactly how the quote goes, but it’s exactly how it feels now as I stop my brand-new red Audi convertible—a seventeenth-birthday present—in the driveway. I grip the steering wheel, my heart racing as I take in the scene. The distant chatter of police radios fills the air, punctuated by the occasional door slam. The flashing police lights momentarily blind me, casting eerie blue and red shadows on the mansion’s facade.

An FBI agent, all sharp suit and stern face, strides over. “Miss Lockwood?” he asks. Before I can respond, he’s opening my car door. The implied command is clear: *Get out.*

“What’s going on?” Panic edges my voice. My mind races, trying to find a reason. Could this be about the silly prank I pulled on Ethan Hawthorne? Only some Jell-O in his locker, petty revenge for what he did to my Louboutins. But as I take in the swarm of officers and the gravity on their faces, I realize this is way beyond any high school drama.

“Poppy!” my mother screams, coming out of the house with tears running down her face, ruining her usually perfect

makeup. I can hardly recognize her as she stops in front of me. I'd never seen my mother other than perfectly presentable.

"Poppy!" Mom's voice breaks through my thoughts. She's a mess, mascara streaking her face. "They're taking him. They're taking everything!"

"Taking w—" The rest of the sentence dies on my lips as I see two police officers exit the house with my father walking between them in handcuffs.

"Poppy, calm your mother down! We can't have the neighbors talking. Remember, appearances are everything..." He doesn't finish his sentence as the police officer shoves him not so nicely in the back of the patrol car.

I huff; that's my father in a nutshell—far more worried about what our posh neighbors from Ridge Hill will think of my mother's outburst than the reasons for him being taken away and our house being invaded by the authorities.

"I'll take care of her. I'll go to school and pick up the boys," I shout at him, suspecting he can't hear me from the car that is already going down our paved driveway.

I turn to my mother. "Get in the car, we're go—"

The agent's grip tightens on my car door. "Sorry, but you're not going anywhere in this. Everything in Alan Lockwood's name is now government property."

I square off with him, scowling at his hand on my car as anger bubbles up. "This is my car. You can't just take it!" I add, tapping my foot for good measure.

Very mature, Poppy. I can hear my mother's voice in my head, and she would be telling me off if she was not a crying mess.

"The car, as well as all the assets, are registered to Alan Lockwood and, therefore, are now seized by the US government." I can't believe this is happening. Merely hours ago, I was worried about school assignments, and now, our entire world is collapsing. How did we get here?

I keep on scowling, unmoving from my spot in front of the open car door.

“Please step away from the vehicle,” he adds, his previous calm, almost gentle demeanor taking an exasperated edge.

I look at my mother, her distress now making so much more sense.

“Everything, Poppy, they are taking everything.”

My entire life, as I knew it, is unraveling before my eyes. The world I grew up in. The luxuries I took for granted are all crumbling. I’m left standing in the wreckage, wondering what comes next.

Chapter 1



Poppy

It's hard to believe it's been over two years since that fateful day when everything changed.

My mother stops her beat-up old Honda in front of one of Silverbrook University's apartment buildings at the far end of campus.

I look at her, the neon green and orange of her waitress uniform stark against her tired complexion. The vibrant blonde locks I remember from my childhood have faded, replaced by a muted brown sprinkled with strands of silver.

I purse my lips at the shadows under her eyes, feeling a new wave of guilt settle on my stomach. "Mom"—I hesitate, my voice thick with emotion—"are we sure about this? Is this really the right move for us?" I say as I look at a student and her parents walking up the path, trailing a cart full of boxes to the metal door of the building.

My mother turns off the car and sighs. "Pop..." she starts, her voice as soft as a whisper.

I turn toward her and meet her serious face. "Aren't you going to be late?"

She glances at her watch and shrugs. "I can be a few minutes late. I'm dropping my baby girl off to college."

Something that's long overdue. They are so proud of you." She grins, and my heart aches at all the pride and love I see swimming in her tired eyes. "None more than me, though." She points behind me. "You *deserve* this, Poppy. We'll be fine."

I twist my mouth with uncertainty. "But if I'm here, who's going to help out financially? I can't leave you to shoulder everything." Her smile falters, giving way to a familiar expression of pain and shame that surfaces during discussions of bills or as she accepts the money I earn from working full-time at Pizz-tachio, a local pizza place.

She rests her forefinger on my mouth, silencing my protests. "It was never your job to take care of this family. You've been my rock, my angel girl. We've been over this so many times. James is fourteen and starting high school, and Billy is doing the free after-school activity, and the days I have late shifts, Mrs. O'Leary will keep an eye on them." She sighs again, cupping my cheek. "We all want you to have that. Your brothers won't shut up about coming to stay with you, and you're what? Forty minutes away?" She shrugs. "We'll manage."

"But—"

"Think of it this way. Study, get a good degree and a good job, and then you can get us out of there," she insists.

I bite my lip, torn. Her words make sense, but there's this nagging feeling inside, telling me she's only saying this to make me feel better.

"You *need* to seize this opportunity. *I* need you to do it, Pops. You can't even fathom how horrible it feels to wake up every day knowing how miserably you have failed your children."

My mother didn't fail me; she is not failing me or us. She became a driving force I never suspected she could be. *You don't know how strong you can be until you need to.* And my mother is living proof of that. I remember those nights when she'd come home late from work, exhausted but still finding the energy to cook us dinner. Or the time she sold her favorite

necklace to buy James a new pair of shoes. Her sacrifices were endless.

I inhale slowly, nodding with resolve. “Alright, we’ll find a way. We always do,” I say more to myself than to her.

“We definitely will!” She smiles and glances at her watch again. “Now I really need you to move because I’ll be more than fashionably late.” She kisses my cheek soundly before brushing a stray hair behind my ear, her eyes glistening. “I’m so incredibly proud of you, Poppy.”

I step out, the car door creaking loudly. A few passing students glance my way. Wincing, I slam the door shut. It’s the only way to ensure it stays closed, thanks to that faulty lock. I open the trunk, which contains all of my belongings, and it all fits in a medium-sized rolling suitcase, a sports bag, and my backpack.

I close the trunk and tap on the rear window. “Love you, Mom.”

“Love you too, Pops!”

She starts the car, and I don’t move quickly enough and start coughing at the black smoke coming out of the exhaust.

I watch the car until it disappears around the corner. The campus around me buzzes with energy. Freshmen like me look around, their faces a canvas of excitement tinged with apprehension. The tall oaks lining the pathways provide shade, their leaves rustling lightly in the breeze.

Taking a deep breath, I turn my attention to the apartment building in front of me. This will be my home for the next four years. Well, me and my new roommates Evangeline and Vanessa.

A month ago, during a private induction session, Evangeline, Vanessa, and I found an instant connection. There was an unspoken understanding between us, a shared experience that brought us together. We are the first recipients of the *Phoenix Rising Scholarship* program here at Silverbrook University. It is what they call a second-chance scholarship,

but for us, it's not merely a scholarship; it's a lifeline, a second chance.

I don't know why the girls are here on this program, and they don't know about my family's downfall. Together, we made a pact. No prying, no questions. Whatever secrets we chose to share would remain safely guarded within our trio, a bond of trust in this new chapter of our lives.

I grab the key and fob from the back pocket of my overused skinny jeans and walk into the building. I roll my eyes, seeing the elevator with the out-of-service sign, and am grateful that I have so few things to take with me and climb to the fourth floor.

I barely reach the first floor when a lanky redhead guy exits an apartment.

"Hey there! Do you need help with that?" he says with a warm smile, already extending his hand toward my sports bag.

I tighten my hold on it, meeting his eyes steadily. "No, thank you, I've got it."

He doesn't back down, his fingers brushing against the bag. "Come on, it looks heavy. Let me assist you."

My grip remains firm, and I take a step back, maintaining politeness in my voice. "I said, no thank you."

He raises his hands in surrender, but there's a smirk playing on his lips. "Alright, just trying to be a gentleman."

I lift my chin, a small smile curving my lips. "Appreciated, but not needed. Have a good day."

As I continue my ascent to the apartment, I overhear him muttering something under his breath, but I pay it no mind. A sense of pride swells within me. Poppy Lockwood might have moaned, lamented over her nice shoes, and demanded the elevator be fixed immediately. But I'm not her anymore. I'm Poppy Donovan, and this girl can handle a few stairs—and unwanted advances—on her own.

I reach my floor and find the door unlocked, suggesting that one or both of my roommates have already arrived.

“Poppy?” Evangeline’s deep contralto voice, unmistakable and rich, calls out.

“How did you know?” I ask, turning to see her step out of a room, her face breaking into a broad smile.

I’ve grown fond of Evangeline in the short time I’ve known her. We’re both nineteen, starting our university journey a year later than most. But when I look at Eva, she seems to have the fashion sense of someone decades older. She dresses more like a history professor on tenure than a university freshman. Today, even on moving day, she’s impeccably dressed in a green sleeveless cardigan over a neatly tucked white shirt paired with black dress pants. Her sleek black hair is pulled into a high ponytail, with her only eccentricity being her cat-patterned socks. Her plus-size figure is carried with confidence, making her presence even more pronounced.

“I’m a psychic?” she replies, coming to stand in front of me.

While I’m of average height, Eva is notably shorter. “Nessa won’t be here until tomorrow. You’d know if you were in our WhatsApp group,” she teases.

I rummage through my sports bag, pulling out my basic flip phone. “Not exactly WhatsApp-friendly.”

She laughs. “No worries. We’ll go old school with group texts.” She glances at her brown-and-gold vintage watch, then nods toward the sofa. “They delivered our electronics this morning. I’ve put them on the sofa.”

I leave my bags by the door and walk over to the sofa. I’m not sure about the finances of the other girls, but for me, seeing a brand-new laptop, even a basic one, feels overwhelming.

As I glance around the room, my thoughts drift to Nessa. While Eva exudes vintage charm, Nessa embodies modern gothic allure. Towering over both of us, her long blonde hair often stands out against her all-black attire, giving her an ethereal, almost otherworldly appearance. Her style screams emo goth, from her dark eyeliner to her black combat boots. On the surface, the three of us couldn’t be more different, both

in looks and personality. But from our interactions during the summer selection and induction process, I sense an underlying bond. Despite our differences, or perhaps because of them, I feel we're becoming an inseparable trio.

"Nessa says she doesn't mind which bedroom she gets, and I feel the same," she shrugs, gesturing around the apartment. "So, pick whichever you like."

I shrug in return. Having my own room, a space only for me, feels like a luxury after spending so many nights on the uncomfortable pull-out sofa in our trailer.

"We're either British-level polite or the two most unbothered girls on the planet," Eva observes as I cradle the new laptop box.

"I vote for unbothered," I reply, pointing to the first room next to the bathroom. "I'll take this one."

"Perfect. I'll settle in the other one," she says, pointing to a door on the opposite side of the apartment.

I step into my chosen room. It's simple: a frameless double bed, a built-in wardrobe, a white desk under the window, and a matching chest of drawers.

Closing the door behind me, I take a moment to appreciate the privacy, something I once took for granted. Tears of happiness and relief threaten to spill. Things are looking up. The old Poppy Lockwood might be gone, but Poppy Donovan is ready for a fresh start.

Silverbrook, here I come!

Chapter 2



Poppy

“I think mapping all the routes is smart, especially with this maze of a campus,” I tell Eva, my finger tracing the colorful lines on the map. I am quite lucky with my timetable, having Thursday afternoons and Mondays off. This allows me to maintain a good working schedule at the pizza place. Despite what my mother says, she needs every dollar I can spare.

Eva, with her round glasses and a stack of books always in hand, nods, her eyes scanning her own packed schedule. Where I have five classes, she has seven. “I know. I made the mistake one year at the London—” She stops, a shadow crossing her face as she shakes her head, clearly a memory she doesn’t want to revisit now. “Let’s say that I learned from my mistake.”

With a delicate push, she adjusts her glasses on her nose and halts in the middle of the bustling central square, where students crisscross in every direction, their laughter and chatter creating a lively symphony.

I gaze around at the majestic red brick buildings, their ancient facades adorned with creeping vines, an embrace of greenery against the stark, aged brickwork. The air is filled with the scent of the impending rain and fresh grass. Freshmen

don't officially start classes before Monday, but the other years are already starting, and we can see students going in and out, way too busy with their own agenda to spot the two nerdy girls gaping at the similar-looking buildings. "How much do you bet I'll get confused for the next six months at least?" I turn back toward the way we came from, toward the café where Nessa is waiting for us in the warmth with an iced coffee while listening to her music with her gigantic headphones she's taking everywhere she goes.

"Maybe Nessa has a point," I say, my eyes squinting as I look around the bustling campus, students moving with purpose and excitement. "We could wing it instead of acting like... What was her loving term for us again?"

Eva laughs. "'Overanxious grannies.' And no, she's the lucky one! She only has four classes, and all in the same ultramodern building at the back." She looks down at her schedule again. "Got any classes in Albert Hall?"

"Two."

She nods. "Okay. I've got three. Let's go to this one first, then," she adds, pointing at the first building to the right.

I smile as we walk down the path toward Albert Hall. I can't help but think about how much I missed having friends until I found these girls. It feels so good to be able to have people in my life who didn't know Poppy Lockwood.

In retrospect, I'm not a fan of the girl I had been back then. I had been conceited and spoiled; I had taken everything for granted and often forgot to take pleasure in anything I got.

Now, a leftover pizza at the end of my shift brings me a strange joy, a world apart from my former routine of luxury dining. It's a humbling reality check, a reminder of the life I now lead. Finding shoes or clothes I like in my size at the charity shop sends me over the moon. Paying some bills for my mom or having a little extra cash to buy my brothers something special, like a brand-name candy bar, fills me with happiness.

I breathe out, linking my arm with hers as we enter the building, and she throws me a curious look.

“I’m just glad I met you two,” I say, the warmth of belonging thawing the chill of loneliness that had clung to me for so long. “It...” I twist my mouth, not really knowing how to word it. “It...”

“It makes things so much easier not to have to do it alone,” she continues while flexing her left hand. I don’t think she does it consciously. I can’t help but wonder if it’s due to the thick red scar crossing her palm.

I look up, and suddenly, everything stops. I stay rooted on the floor, keeping my eyes on the laughing boy exiting a room. No, not a boy, a man. And not any man... Ethan Hawthorne, the bane of my high school years and a constant thorn in my side. His father destroyed my family, and his son enjoyed our downfall.

I keep my eyes on him, clinging to the fragile hope that his face will transform into that of a stranger, praying it’s just a vivid nightmare. Eva’s voice becomes a distant murmur, drowned out by the rush in my ears.

He finally turns his head and looks directly at me. His face morphs, his eyebrows shoot up, showing his surprise, and then his mouth turns into a familiar grin as he slowly walks toward me.

My heart pounds against my chest. A frantic drum echoing in the silence of my mind. Why here? Why now? The questions swirl, unbidden and unwelcome.

He looks the same but also so different at the same time. His face has lost the remaining softness of adolescence, giving him a sharp jawline and a hardness that makes him look more like a fighter than the preppy rich boy he really is. His black T-shirt is tight, showing how kind these last two years have been to him. He is so broad and muscular now and is sporting a full arm of tattoos, something I am sure his father doesn’t approve of.

My stomach churns as he stops in front of me.

“Pauper Lockwood.” His words drip with disdain, his lips curling into a sneer.

His words sting, a slap to my face. I clench my jaw, fighting the urge to retaliate with a sharp retort. He called me Pauper far before my family fell from grace. He thought he was being clever by using wordplay. He started it freshman year of high school when my father began working for his. I didn’t really care then, and I don’t care much more now. Because now, it is actually true.

I tighten my hold on Eva’s arm, happy to have her by my side despite feeling her eyes full of questions on the side of my face.

“Cat got your tongue, Pauper? Nothing to say?” He crosses his arms on his chest, flexing his impressive biceps. God, what did he eat for two years?

“What is there to say?” I reply, happy about how steady my voice sounds despite my wild heartbeat and faint nausea.

“Yo, Hawthorne! We need to move. Coach will have your ass if you’re late for practice again.” A blond man with a man bun and impossibly blue eyes wraps his arm around Ethan’s neck and smirks at us. He’s as tall as Ethan and probably even wider... Seriously, what were they feeding them?

“Already preying on freshman meat?” he asks, eyeing me.

“As if!” Ethan and I snort at the same time.

The blond guy’s gaze moves from me to Eva, and his grin fades, replaced by a confused frown. “Julliard?” he whispers, and I feel Eva tense beside me, her arm so tight on mine it almost feels painful.

She looks up, her face hard; she has a fire in her eyes that I am witnessing for the first time, and I think her wildness could rival Nessa.

She pulls at my arm. “Come on, let’s go back.”

I’m more than happy to comply, but before we have a chance to turn around, the blond dude moves, all humor gone, and stands in front of us, preventing any more movement.

“Julliard,” the blond man insists, his voice louder and more demanding this time.

Eva finally meets his eyes, her face a cool mask of indifference.

“Is that supposed to mean something?” Eva’s voice is steady, but I can feel the tremor in her arm, her nerves betraying her calm facade. “Is it some hazing code I’m not familiar with?” She sighs, but I see her hand flexing repeatedly to the side. Her eyes dart around as if searching for an escape from the blond man’s intense scrutiny.

That’s enough to spring me into action and forget the turmoil I feel at seeing Ethan again. My only thought is to get my friend out of here and now.

“It’s probably some jock slang we can’t understand. Whatever the interest is, we’re passing. Please go look for other... fresh meat,” I add before pulling Eva and walking out of the building, feeling Ethan’s eyes on my back.

As we exit the building, the fresh air is a soothing balm, easing the tension that had coiled within me, and I feel Eva’s grip soften.

“We’ll be okay,” I whisper, more to myself, a promise that I intend to keep, come what may.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asks as we make our way back to the café.

“I’d rather not. You?” I offer, already suspecting her answer.

“Not in this lifetime.”

We keep on walking silently for a little while, the previous excitement for a fresh start now annihilated. It’s a huge school, though, and I’m one year behind—I’m sure I can avoid Ethan if I need to. I try and fail to convince myself. *Why is Ethan here? He’s a Harvard legacy!* Silverbrook is way down that list of prestigious universities. Is there a way for me to—

“You’ll lose the scholarship if you transfer,” Eva mutters, answering my unspoken thoughts.

I throw her a surprised look.

“I read the entire terms and conditions when I accepted the offer. The university gets a grant for taking the rejects we are,” she says, the harshness in her voice taking me aback. I am getting used to calm and demure Eva; this version is unfamiliar. “It’s not transferable.”

I purse my lips and nod. “Of course it isn’t.” Why would something go my way, huh?

We walk into the café, and even though Nessa is not at the same table we left her at, we spot her right away. It’s hard to miss her with her silver hair being a deep-purple ombré.

She raises her head, and her scowl morphs into a smile on her bright-red lips as she sees us approaching. She removes her headphones and leans on her seat.

“That went much faster than I expected. I didn’t manage to scare anyone yet. How disappointing,” she adds with a sigh.

I chuckle, some of the tension easing despite the remaining weight on my chest. “No, we decided to follow your example and wing it.”

She narrows her eyes at us and shakes her head. “Maybe *you* can wing it,” she says, pointing a blood-red nail toward me. “But you,” she starts, turning toward Eva, “I don’t think you’ve ever ‘winged’ anything in your life.”

Eva purses her lips, sitting down with a huff. “I do *wing* some stuff,” she replies half-heartedly, and I can’t help but laugh.

“I’m sorry to say I agree with Nessa. You read the terms and conditions of the scholarship!”

Nessa’s grin widened. “Case in point.”

Eva rolls her eyes, mumbling about us being ungrateful. “I’m getting a surprise coffee because I’m *winging it*,” Eva declares with a mock bravado, her attempt to lighten the mood bringing a smile to our faces.

“Wow, living on the edge!” Nessa mutters, and Eva flips her the bird, making the three of us laugh.

I watch her go to the counter to order a “surprise coffee,” which is at the barista’s discretion, and smile once again, grateful to have my girls.

Ethan’s unexpected presence is a blow, a ghost from my past I wasn’t prepared to face. But I am not the Poppy I was before. I have already faced so many unexpected blows, one more will not take me down. I glance at Eva and Nessa, their smiles like shields against the world. With their friendship on top of my resilience, I am ready to confront any challenge head-on, including Ethan Hawthorne.

Chapter 3



Ethan

Poppy Lockwood...

Fuck! Of all the people, it had to be her. Why now? My heart thuds, a heavy beat of unease.

I toss in the tangled sheets, and with a resigned sigh, I swing my legs over the side of the bed, the cold air brushing against my skin.

I run my hands on my face, feeling exhausted and wired up all at once. I groan, looking at the clock. It's only six thirty. Way too early for my ass to be out of bed.

I barely slept for the past two nights since I saw her walk down the hall. I almost thought I was mistaken when our eyes met. She's changed; there's a new hardness in her eyes, a shield that wasn't there before. The memory of her curves, accentuated by the snug fit of her cheerleading uniform, sends a familiar heat coursing through my veins. The vision morphs, her flowing locks now a cropped bob, her voluptuous frame now a delicate silhouette. She is thinner, almost painfully so, and I wonder if she's been swept up in some new fashion trend. Poppy had been all about appearance before her father betrayed mine and paid the price for it.

But it's not only her looks. She stared right at me, ignoring the bait I threw out. Her cold shoulder sends a prickling frustration under my skin, a maddening itch I can't scratch.

After sending Cole away, I searched everywhere for her, but she was nowhere to be found. It almost felt like it had been nothing more than a hallucination if it had not been for Cole and his grumpy ass muttering things about "Juilliard" every so often.

I exhale, resting my arms on my thighs amid the chaos, seeking a moment's peace. The tension in my muscles echoes the turmoil within, a silent groan escaping my lips as I yearn for release from this unexpected entanglement. Today was the first day of practice—the day that Coach enjoyed torturing us to show the freshmen what the team is made of.

I curse her as I stand up, feeling far from nineteen right now. I stretch and wince, hoping that a hot shower will help ease my muscles and maybe an energy drink and a protein bar for breakfast.

I rush downstairs. The air, nippy against my bare skin, makes me regret not grabbing a shirt. I'm clad only in gray sweatpants. The kitchen air is crisp, the metallic scent of stainless steel mingling with the faint lemon aroma of cleaning products. Spotless gray and black marble surfaces gleam, reflecting the faint light. High-tech appliances blend seamlessly into the walls, their polished stainless steel adding to the chill elegance. It's clear a professional team maintains this pristine space, their touch evident in the orderly arrangement of every utensil and gadget. The expansive island stands out with its black marble top, waiting for cooking exploits it will never experience. The only one cooking is Liam, and nobody wants to eat his ultra-healthy, tasteless protein experiments.

I open the smart fridge and grab an extra-large can of energy drink.

The lock turns, a subtle click breaking the silence. I freeze, my hand tightening over the can.

Shit, does it have to be now?!

Liam strides in, his presence filling the space with a commanding ease. Sweat glistens on his forehead, a testament to his morning run. His breaths are even and controlled like the perfect robot he is. He pulls out his earbuds, the cord dangling against the fabric of his fitted workout shirt.

His eyes, sharp and observant, fall on my drink. The corners of his lips tilt downward, a silent judgment passing between us. He doesn't have to say a word; his disapproval is as clear as day.

With a graceful stride, Liam moves to the fridge, his movements fluid and assured. He pulls out a bottle filled with a thick green liquid. "Rough night, Ethan?" he inquires, his British accent adding a touch of elegance to the words. The smoothie bottle uncaps with a hushed pop, and he takes a sip, his face unflinching at the undoubtedly awful taste. His concern seems genuine, but there's a glimmer of amusement dancing in his clear green eyes, a subtle tease that he manages to carry even in the early morning light.

"You can say that," I mutter, somehow preferring he assumes I spent the night partying than tossing and turning, thinking about an infuriating girl.

I observe as he takes a sip of his smoothie, his throat moving with the motion.

He glances at my can again, his eyebrows knitting together. "You understand that stuff's like poison, right? Do you even realize what's in it?" His words are gentle, almost a whisper, yet they carry a weight, a genuine concern masked by the casual tone.

I roll my eyes, the familiar lecture unwelcome in the early morning haze. "Not now, Liam."

"Bull sperm!" Cole pipes, walking down the stairs with a stupid grin on his face, wearing nothing more than his boxer shorts, his morning wood on full display. One thing is clear with Cole: he carries an unapologetic confidence, unbothered by the world's gaze, a trait I find both amusing and perplexing.

“There’s no bull sperm, you asshole, and nobody needs to see your fucking dick so early in the morning.”

“That’s not what your girl said.”

I have no girl to call mine, and usually, the jokes don’t bug me. But today, with Poppy’s face flashing in my mind, it’s different. It’s like her image is poking at a sore spot I was not aware of.

Seizing the moment of silence, I clear the uncertainty from my throat, turning toward Liam. “Are you still sleeping with the secretary of the admissions office?”

He takes a sip, eyeing me with speculation. “Occasionally.”

Liam has one rule: he refuses to sleep with students here, which is not something we would complain about. Liam, with his European charm, his glasses, and his rock star attitude, makes girls fawn over him, and Cole and I are more than happy to collect the dejected girls.

I nod and stop fidgeting as I feel Cole’s eyes on me. I clear my throat. “Can you get some info on Poppy Lockwood for me? I think she’s a transfer or something.” I feel like if I get answers to Poppy Lockwood’s mystery, I can finally let it go. But it’s like a whisper in my head, making me doubt if it’s that simple.

Liam’s eyebrow arches, a skeptical grin on his face. “Why the sudden interest?”

Cole snorts. “Remind me again how you’re not obsessed.” His words, filled with mockery, make me want to prove him wrong.

I flip him off, but my eyes stick to Liam.

Liam looks from me to Cole.

“She’s a girl that got our Ethan’s panties in a bunch,” Cole taunts. “Maybe look into her friend too. Evangeline Sinclair.”

It’s my turn to face him and grin. “It’s funny... She never said her name.”

Cole remains placid.

“What the fuck ever.” Liam throws his hands up in surrender. “I’ll get the info, but you girls better get your asses moving and be ready to go in forty-five minutes because this favor will cost you.” He turns and walks to his bedroom.

Facing Cole, our eyes lock in a silent standoff. We don’t have to say it, but we both feel it—we’re tangled up in the same kind of mess, and mine has got Poppy Lockwood written all over it.



Practice isn’t only a physical drain; it’s a soul-sucking, bone-crushing ordeal. The sun, a merciless ball of fire, glares down as we sprint, tackle, and dribble across the field. The scent of fresh-cut grass, usually a pleasant aroma, now seems to mock our agony. The ball feels like a lead weight, and my legs move as if submerged in molasses. I can almost hear my muscles screaming in protest with every stride.

After what feels like an eternity, the whistle’s shrill cry signals the end. I drag myself to the locker room, each step a Herculean effort. My body is drenched in sweat, my lungs gasping for air as if I’ve been submerged underwater. The thought of collapsing under the warm cascade of the shower, letting the water wash away the fatigue, is the only thing propelling me forward.

But the universe, it seems, has other plans.

Coach barrels into the locker room, his compact frame belying a commanding presence. His hair, graying and closely cropped, matches the stern set of his weathered face. Despite his modest height, his voice booms across the room, his words sharp and authoritative. His belly, a pronounced mound, stands as a jovial contrast to his strict demeanor, gently bouncing with each impassioned word he delivers. The sight might have been comical if his critiques weren’t so biting and his expectations so towering.

“What the hell is wrong with you today?!” Coach’s voice, loud and grating, echoes off the locker room walls. I turn, squinting against the harsh fluorescent lights to see his face, a

ripe tomato in hue, the vein on his neck pulsating like a techno beat.

I slump onto the wooden bench, the cool metal of the locker a slight relief against my back. His tirade continues. A verbal assault that matches the physical one we've just endured on the field. His finger jabs in my direction. "Hawthorne! Did you lose your coordination ability? You were probably the worst midfielder I've ever seen."

I bite back a retort, my lips pressing into a thin line. Even on my worst day, my skills on the field are unmatched, and he knows it. The exaggeration is another tactic in his motivational arsenal.

Peters shakes his head, and I wince, already knowing that the poor freshman will regret this.

"Have something to say, Peters?" Coach turns toward him, his hands on his hips, making his belly even more predominant. "You didn't tell me you were from Europe; if I'd known, I would have reconsidered your place as starting fullback."

Peters frowns, clearly not catching Coach's sarcasm. "I'm from Kansas City."

"Are you sure? Because that defense was like fucking Edam cheese! Holes everywhere."

Peters opens his mouth for whatever stupid reply is about to come out, but the tension is broken by Cole's snort of amusement.

"I think you mean Emmentaler, Coach. Way more holes in that." Cole steps in as the masochist savior he is.

Coach's head whips around, his eyes narrowing on the culprit. "You find that funny, Westbrook, huh?"

Cole, never one to back down from a challenge, meets Coach's gaze head-on. "Oh, come on, Coach, take a breather. It's only the first practice. Give us time."

The locker room plunges into silence, the air thick with anticipation. We stare, a collective holding of breath, as

Coach's face transitions through various shades of the color spectrum, settling on a vibrant purple.

"Time? Is that what you want, Westbrook?" He advances on Cole, his stance aggressive, his finger now a weapon aimed at Cole's chest. "Do you think you understand what gets a team to the top because daddy dearest owns Arsenal?"

He gestures dramatically to the framed photos on the wall, a testament to past victories. "This team was state champion five years running, and it's not by giving anyone *time*."

His glare shifts to Liam, the weight of his disappointment now bestowed on our captain. "You're the captain. Control your own team!"

Liam's eyes meet mine, a silent message transmitted. I'm in for it, and not only from Coach.

As Coach storms out, the tension dissipates, replaced by a mixture of relief and residual anxiety. Cole, undeterred by the confrontation, grins, his humor a balm to our frayed nerves. "Well, that went well, don't you think?"

A chorus of laughter erupts, the sound echoing off the metal lockers, a cathartic release after the storm. I can't help but join in. The absurdity of the situation overshadowing the exhaustion and the looming punishment.

Liam, though, remains stoic, his expression unreadable as he addresses the team. "Alright, let's not give Coach any more reasons to have an aneurysm. We hit the field again in twenty for some extra drills. Let's show him what we're made of."

Groans fill the room, but they are tinged with a renewed determination. We are a team, united in victory and defeat, in grueling practices, and Coach's colorful outbursts. Together, we'll face the challenges, push our limits, and prove our worth, not just to Coach but to ourselves.

And as I finally step under the warm stream of the shower, the water cascading over my aching body, I can't help but smile. Despite the pain, the exhaustion, and the looming extra practice, I wouldn't have it any other way.

As I exit the shower, toweling off, Liam approaches, his expression serious. “Ethan,” he says, his British accent making even the sternest reprimand sound sophisticated, “get your head out of your ass. I don’t care if you need to get your crappy energy drink directly intravenously. You are the best midfield we have, and this was fucking crap! I don’t care what’s happening in your life. The rule is clear: you leave your problems at the door when you step onto this field, and you do not let anything, most of all girl drama, affect your game. If you want that information about Poppy Lockwood, you need to be on your game. No more distractions. Got it?”

I purse my lips, annoyed at being reprimanded as a naughty kid, but fuck, he’s right, and I know it.

I nod, clenching my fist, the image of Poppy seared in my mind. The field is calling, and I’m ready to answer, leaving no room for distractions.

Chapter 4



Poppy

The pizzeria, with its warm, amber lighting and rustic wooden tables, is nearly empty. The hum of the refrigerator is the only sound breaking the silence, so different from the lively bustle during peak hours. I tug at the hem of my bright-blue polyester uniform shirt, its stiffness chafing against my skin, and heave a resigned sigh.

“It’s one slice for three dollars, two for five,” I say, leaning across the counter to the jock standing in front of me.

“Okay, cool, cool,” the tall, dark-haired guy says, looking back up at the board.

I glance at the clock, the minutes dragging on like hours. *Kill me now, please!* I think, feeling the weight of exhaustion pulling me down.

He’s one of the basketball players of Silverbrook, not that I follow the sport, or any sport for that matter, but he’s wearing his varsity jacket.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. University athletes. Still as lost in their own world as ever.

“And what pizzas do you have available for individual slices?”

I purse my lips, my fingers drumming impatiently on the counter as I fight the urge to snap at him. That's what I get for serving a customer so close to the end of my shift. We're eight minutes in and nowhere nearer to his choosing.

We're far away enough from campus for Silverbrook student encounters to be rare, and based on the painful one I'm in the middle of, I'm quite happy that is the case.

I shake my head, exasperation seeping into my voice. "Margherita, pepperoni, and tuna. We've been over this three times already."

He frowns. "Didn't you say double cheese before?"

For a fleeting moment, the image of shoving his face into a pizza slice dances in my mind, worth the risk of being fired. "There was, five minutes ago, but my coworker keeps on serving customers who actually want something." Customer or not, I am done with this.

I reach behind me and untie my apron. "Listen, you clearly don't want anything, and my shift is now over. I'll leave you to it, and if you need anything, Greg here will—"

"No, it's okay, give me two slices of anything and a can of Diet Pepsi. I'll be waiting there." He points at the table far at the back. "Keep the change," he adds quickly, and I'm about to say that we don't do table service during the day, but the fifty-dollar bill stops me.

My eyebrows knit together as I ask, "You want me to keep the change on that?"

He hesitates, his eyes avoiding mine. "Yeah, just bring me the pizza," he mumbles, his voice low and uncertain.

As I stare at the fifty-dollar bill, a mix of emotions swirls within me. The money is a much-needed relief, but the unease about his intentions casts a long shadow over the generous tip. I narrow my eyes, not naive enough to think his amazing tip was for my stellar customer service skills, but I am also desperate enough to want these forty dollars, knowing that half could go in my food jar at the apartment and the other twenty would help fill the cupboard at home.

I look at Greg, and he shrugs. “See what he wants and call if you need me.”

With a heavy sigh, I balance two random pieces of pizza on a plate, the aroma teasing my senses. I grab a cold can of Diet Pepsi, the chill seeping into my palm. Shedding my apron, I approach his secluded table, my steps slow and hesitant.

He gives a casual nod, his hand sweeping away his messy hair as his foot nudges the chair opposite him, sending it screeching backward on the tiled floor. “Why don’t you sit?” His voice carries a hint of eagerness masked by a laid-back tone.

I stand rooted, the chair’s sudden movement echoing in the dim pizzeria. Here we go, I think, my heart sinking. My gaze flicks to the empty chair, its cold metal frame uninviting. I am not completely conceited, but clarity rings in my mind about what I desire and what I vehemently avoid. And a boyfriend, a flirt, or whatever this guy is insinuating definitely does not make the list.

“Listen—”

“Jeff.”

My feet edge backward, creating distance between us. My gaze stays fixed on his, searching for his next move. “Listen, Jeff. Whatever you’re offering, I’m not interested, so thanks for the tip, but no thanks.” I turn around to leave, my steps brisk as I head back to the counter.

“I’m not looking to date you,” he adds, stopping me in my tracks.

I eye him from where I stand, my raised eyebrow a silent prompt for him to go on.

“It’s about sociology.”

Ah, that’s the class I’m sharing with him. “What about sociology?” I take a few steps back toward his table.

He looks at the chair across from him, jerking his chin toward it. “Sit, please. I don’t think I want this conversation to be public.”

The whole hush vibe and visible discomfort are enough for me to take the bait and sit down. “I don’t have long,” I warn him, and it’s the truth. I have to go home, shower, change, and then hope to catch Eva in time for a lift to my mom’s, where I’ll spend the evening looking after my brothers.

He nods. “I see you’re already the professor’s favorite in class. Mrs. Mitchell is a hard-ass, but she’s always pleased with your answers.”

“Okay...” I trail off, confused. “It’s only been two weeks.”

“I’m aware, but...” He rubs his neck before sighing again.

“To the point, please!” I snap. He had used the last of my patience when he played whatever game he was playing at the counter.

He slides a paper across the table, his words brisk. “Complete my assignment. The details are here.”

I lean back in my chair, letting out a surprised huff. “You want me to... What?”

“Do my assignment. I’ll pay you... well.”

I snort in disbelief. “Is that a joke? You don’t even know if I’m good, and why do you even take sociology if you don’t even try?”

I see the muscle in his jaw budge. “No, trust me, it’s no joke. I had to pick one social science class, and sociology is supposed to be the simpler one.” He shakes his head. “I don’t have the time for this.”

And I do? I think sarcastically. “Why me?”

“I think you are smart, and I think you’re desperate enough to do it,” he adds, looking pointedly at the flip phone I hold.

“Listen, thanks for the compliments,” I say with mock appreciation. “But I value my time, and I don’t intend to waste it.”

“I’ll pay you five hundred per assignment.”

Five hundred dollars. This could be a game changer. This is also my monthly salary!

“I might be terrible,” I insist as my mind screams to shut up and take the money.

He shrugs. “Let’s give it a try.”

I pause, my mind racing as I weigh the offer. I barely have any time for myself between classes, work, and my brothers, but at the same time, it is five hundred dollars! I can only imagine how much it would help my mother, and it would help ease some of the guilt I feel at moving out, no matter how much she insisted I do it.

“Fine, but I’m only doing it once for now. If it’s taking too much of my time, we’re done. Deal?”

“Yes! Thank you! Here.” He pulls out five fifty-dollar bills from his wallet and pushes them toward me. “I’ll give you the rest on delivery.”

I nod, feeling like a James Bond villain. The saying that principles are a luxury of the rich never made sense to me until now. A few years ago, I would have laughed it off. Five hundred dollars, not even the price of my latest shoe purchase, but now...

I grab the money, not ready to dwell any more on how ready I am to walk on some of my principles for money.

“Three weeks, same spot. Your assignment will be ready.”

He grins. “I knew you would come around.”

Yep, being poor really truly sucked.



Today is really the day that keeps on giving. After missing my bus and making it back to campus late, I notice Cherry Bomb, which is what Eva affectionately calls her car, is not in the parking lot.

I groan, getting my phone out of my pocket, and start shooting her a text.

“You were not easy to find, *Pauper Donovan*.” Ethan’s voice carries a dash of amusement. He leans casually against

the wall, arms crossed over his chest, a self-assured smirk playing on his lips—a smirk I long to wipe off.

My thumb freezes over my keyboard, and my heart follows suit. Ethan stands by the main door, his dark blue jeans and dark-green Henley accentuating his tall frame. The tattoos on his forearm peek out, a silent reminder of the mystery that surrounds him. Ten days since I saw him, and I had almost managed to convince myself that I would be able to avoid him forever. My breath hitches as I spot him in front of my building. I force my expression into one of indifference, refusing to let him see the surprise flickering in my eyes. No, I will not give him the satisfaction.

“I didn’t realize you were looking for me,” I reply, my voice steady and cold. Inside, my mind whirls, scrambling to figure out his game.

It was always so infuriating how I reacted to him. It was enough for his hazel eyes to be on me, and I was all flustered.

“And if you did?”

I shrug before reaching up to rub my thumb on my locket, something I always do when I am apprehensive and nervous, something I hope he never really noticed. “I would have been trying harder to avoid you.”

He frowns, and I know I hit a nerve. “Avoid me? What am I? The bogeyman?” He scoffs, running his hand through his perfectly styled hair. “I’m not the one who betrayed the trust of my employer.”

Here we go again. The never-ending war of who is to blame in the whole scandal. Except that this is so trivial for me now. I’m not in high school anymore. I couldn’t care less about image and perception.

“So you dug into my life to resurrect old ghosts?” The accusation hangs in the air, a palpable tension between us.

It is not a random encounter, not after he came here calling me “Donovan.” He wants me to know that he knows. “For me to admit my family wronged yours? Fine!” I wave my hands up. “My family is the one to blame, and you are the perfect

lamb. Can we move on now? Good!” I add, giving him my back and walking to the door.

“Why are you a freshman?” he asks as if I’d not just dismissed him.

I turn around. Apparently, he was not done with me.

“How come you’re not at Harvard like Daddy Dearest?” I retort. I, too, am able to pretend I didn’t listen.

He shrugs. “Things change. We need to talk.”

About what? I’d like to ask, but instead say, “I don’t think so. I granted you victory. I can do it in writing if you want. I would rather we go back to what we should have always been. Perfect strangers. I don’t know you, and you don’t know me; how about that?”

“No, that won’t do.”

“We’ve got nothing to say to each other, Ethan Hawthorne. I hate you and everything you represent. Even your name feels like poison on my tongue. Do you understand that?” As I utter the words of hatred, I notice a brief flicker of something in Ethan’s eyes. Is it hurt? Anger? It’s gone before I can decipher it, replaced by the same cool indifference.

His eyes scan the modest surroundings. “Why are you living here?” His question, laced with genuine curiosity, catches me off guard.

I touch the side of my head. Am I having a stroke? It feels like he’s not hearing a word I’m saying.

Despite my clear dismissal, Ethan stands his ground, his gaze unwavering, a stubborn resolve hardening his features. “I’m not leaving until we talk, Poppy.”

My heart beats erratically against my chest, a confusing mix of annoyance and an unwilling curiosity about his sudden appearance and insistence.

Relief washes over me as Nessa appears down the path. Her black-and-purple dress and leather spiked choker stand out, a way of escaping from this uncomfortable encounter.

My eyes lock with Nessa's, a silent plea etched in my gaze. *Escape*, my eyes scream as Ethan's voice continues to drone in the background.

Nessa walks over to stand beside me, even nudging me a little out of the way to stand directly in front of Ethan, eyeing him with her steel-blue eyes. She's far more impressive than me, standing at five foot ten.

"Small prick," she greets him, her voice dripping with disdain. She squares her shoulders, her stance protective and defiant, ready to shield me from Ethan's unwelcome intrusion.

"Morticia," he replies. "The Emo Anonymous meeting is down the road. You better run along."

Nessa straightens up even more. "No thanks, I'm back from the Wiccan store, and I have new voodoo dolls and hexes to try out. Do you want to be my guinea pig?"

"This isn't over, Poppy," Ethan warns, his voice low and menacing. He backs away, his glare lingering on me, a silent promise of a continued argument. He turns and strides down the path, his departure as abrupt as his arrival, leaving behind a trail of unease as he disappears into a shiny black SUV.

Nessa keeps her eyes on the car until he drives away and turns toward me. This is something I love about her. She always concentrates on you when she speaks, her blue eyes staring at your face as if she is trying to hypnotize you.

"Should I hex him?" she asks, eyebrows merging in genuine worry.

I can't help but smile. "Do you know how?"

She exhales, looking down at her phone. "No, not right now, but I'm sure Google can help." Her fingers are already dancing over her phone, ready to search for the most potent hexes.

She looks up and grins.

I laugh earnestly now. "No, he's part of a past I'd rather forget."

"Ah, the past has a way of coming back and hitting you in the face like a shovel when you least expect it."

I wince. “That’s graphic.”

She shrugs. “That’s life.”

Life... I do know how unexpectedly things can change. That realization steers me back to my current predicament. Without Eva, my only option is to take an Uber home. I was a little embarrassed about not being able to do something as basic as ordering transportation.

“Can you—” I stop mid-sentence as I see Eva turn into the parking lot, a wave of relief washing over me at her timely arrival. “Oh!” Sometimes, fate does show a little reprieve. “Sorry, I have to go,” I call as I start running toward Eva’s car. “I’m late!” I add, but she doesn’t reply, and I turn just as I reach Eva’s passenger door and see her disappear into the building.

As I slide into Eva’s car, I glance back at the building, half expecting Ethan to emerge again, his presence like a storm cloud. But the path remains empty, and as Eva drives away, I let the moving scenery blur in my vision.

His sudden appearance, the cold confrontation, and the unresolved tension all hint at a looming complication in my already tangled life. Is there an escape, or am I ensnared in a web of past mistakes and conflict?

Chapter 5



Ethan

As I stare at the game screen, frustration bubbles within me. “This is so stupid!” I huff with irritation, slamming the controller back on the table.

Liam snickers, stretching his arms over his head. “Time for you to admit I’m better than you at FIFA. Move on.”

A surge of self-directed anger rises within me. Poppy is clearly apprehensive, and she’s ready to admit her family is to blame for everything, and yet, it’s not enough. I can feel the heat of my frustration, a burning sensation in my chest that has nothing to do with the game.

Liam, with a playful smirk, says, “Come on, E. Lighten up. It’s only a game, yeah?” His words, though light, do little to dissipate the tension knotting inside me.

I wave my hand dismissively, leaning back on the comfortable leather sofa. The softness of the leather does little to help my tensed muscles.

Liam frowns, his eyebrows knitting together in concern. “Seriously, what crawled into your ass and died?”

“That secretary info is crap. I know almost nothing.” My voice is sharper than I intend, a reflection of my inner turmoil.

Liam rolls his eyes. “Here we go,” he mutters. “I never said she knew everything, but I think that her actual name, address, and schedule were not *nothing*. And why do you care anyway? You can get any girl you want. She’s not even that hot.”

But she is. Poppy is not hot, she’s beautiful... AND hot. The memory of her smile, the way her eyes light up, haunts my thoughts, adding to my frustration. Pushing off the sofa, I stride to the fridge, the cool air hitting my face as I yank it open. I grab a beer, the cold can a brief respite from my simmering irritation. “It has nothing to do with that. She and I have accounts to settle.”

Liam throws me a side look full of disbelief. “Right, if that’s your story. I got you her name and her address, and the rest’s on you.”

“No, not on me. Morticia interrupted,” I bark as I come back to the sofa, sitting back with a huff.

His mouth lifts in a half smile. “Vanessa? The goth one? That one, I won’t lie, is quite fascinating.”

“Too bad you’re not sleeping with students, isn’t it?” I challenge, keeping my eyes on him.

He nods, running his forefinger over his lips. His eyes flicker to my hand and the beer I’m holding. “I thought we said no alcohol the day before the game.”

I roll my eyes. “Thanks, Dad! It’s only beer. I’m not on a bender!”

He shakes his head and looks at his watch. “You know what? Do whatever you want but don’t go around fucking up the game.”

“I won’t.”

“I’m going to shower,” Liam says before standing up. He walks to his room before turning around. “If you want to know everything about her, why don’t you ask your father?”

My father... probably the only person in the world she hates more than she hates me.

“Isn’t he that superpowerful media mogul?” Liam’s words drip with sarcasm, his eyebrows raised in a mocking challenge, pushing me further toward a decision I’m hesitant to make.

“He is.” I don’t want to get into details because no matter what, I’m not overly proud of what transpired junior year between Poppy and me, and once I had discovered how serious the situation was for her, she had transferred God knows where.

The phone in my pocket feels like a lead weight, its presence a nagging reminder of the call I dread to make. Am I desperate enough to call him?

“What is it? Little Ethan is afraid to call Daddy?” His grin widens as my scowl deepens.

Liam doesn’t know, but I’ve made getting on my father’s nerves a national sport since the beginning of my senior year of high school. I think some part of me was angry at him taking Poppy out of the equation. Whatever the result of this equation, it started with the tattoos that almost gave him a coronary, followed by my choice to break tradition and refuse Harvard’s offer, only to pick Silverbrook instead. He’d threatened, but I reminded him that I have a seven-digit trust fund coming directly from my maternal grandfather and didn’t need his money, but he needed his heir.

With reluctance, my thumb hovers over the call button. I keep my eyes on Liam, his grin fueling my defiance as I press the call button, bracing myself for the tedious conversation I am about to have.

The phone rings twice before it’s picked up. “Ethan?” The voice on the other end is as stern and cold as I remember, sending a chill down my spine despite the distance.

“Hey, Dad.” I try to keep my voice steady, unaffected by his tone.

“You missed Sunday dinner. Again. That’s seven in a row.” His voice is filled with disapproval, the familiar tone of criticism making my fingers tighten around the phone.

I roll my eyes, even though he can't see it. "Should be a hint I'm not planning to come, shouldn't it?"

There's a moment of silence from the other end. "Your mother misses you, Ethan."

I can't help the bitter laugh that escapes my lips. "Does she? Or does she just miss the show of the perfect family?"

"Don't start, Ethan." Frustration seeps through his pause. "Ethan, you continue to disappoint. Your choices, your attitude..." He trails off with a sigh. "When will you understand the responsibilities you have?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Liam heading to his bedroom, shaking his head as he closes the door behind him, leaving me alone with the voice on the other end of the line.

I can feel the old anger bubbling up, the same arguments playing out as they always do. "I understand my responsibilities just fine, Dad. They might not align with what you've planned out."

"You think this is a joke?" His voice rises, the edge sharper. "You think you can gallivant around, ignoring your duties, your family?"

I press the phone harder against my ear, my voice low. "I'm not ignoring my duties. I'm living my life. Something you should try sometime."

The line goes silent for a beat, and I think he might have hung up. But then I detect the deep exhale, the sound of resignation. "We'll talk about this later, Ethan. Just... try to remember you're a Hawthorne."

"I'll be at the game tomorrow," he adds abruptly, his voice cold. "I can witness once again why you passed Harvard for a low-class university."

I grit my teeth, frustration boiling within me. "Silverbrook is Ivy League, Dad."

"But it's not Harvard, is it?" he retorts, his voice dripping with disdain.

In my mind, a thought forms, clear and defiant. *If Harvard thrives on men like you, I don't want to go.* But I bite back the words, knowing it will only add fuel to the fire.

The call ends with a click, his final words hanging in the air. I stare at the phone in my hand, the silence now filling the space around me. I didn't ask about Poppy. The timing wasn't right. Slipping the phone back into my pocket, I feel a mix of relief and frustration. The conversation with my father, as always, left a bitter taste in my mouth. Trying to clear my head of his words, I refocus on tomorrow's game. He'll be there in the stands, surveying, judging my every move. But it doesn't matter. I chose Silverbrook for a reason, and I don't regret it. Not for a second.

I chose to be different from him, and that was my first step.

I go to my room and grab my schedule and hers to see how I can "inadvertently" run into her.

"Seriously, man!" The door slams open, and Cole strides in, his trainers thudding against the hardwood floor. He tosses his keys into the bowl by the entrance, their clatter echoing through the room.

I throw him a confused look at the offense on his face. "Okay?"

He shakes his head, his eyes wide with exaggerated disbelief. "Okay?! Okay?! It was better to play FIFA than to come meet me at the gym as planned?" His arms flail in a dramatic gesture, emphasizing his mock outrage.

Fuck, Poppy is really messing up my mind. "You should have called!"

He slaps his forehead dramatically, his face a picture of mock despair. "Oh? Oh! Why didn't I think of that? Oh wait, I did!" He pulls out his phone, waving it in front of my face, the screen lighting up with the log of missed calls.

I check my phone, which is as usual in DND. I finally notice the texts and missed calls I'd not even looked at when I called my father, having way too much on my mind.

His frown deepens as he sees the papers on the counter. “And what are you doing now? Stalking the girl?” He leans over the counter, his eyes scanning the papers with a smirk.

I can’t help but scoff. “Sure, because it was not you I saw driving around her building.”

A questioning look crosses his face, arms folded across his chest. “And how do you know that if you were not there yourself, huh?”

I shrug, trying to play it cool. “I guess you don’t care about Evangeline’s schedule then. Fine.”

Cole’s eyes reduce to slits, a playful suspicion in his gaze. “You don’t have it,” he challenges.

A teasing grin plays on my lips. “Wanna bet?”

“Liam!” he calls out loud, hoping for backup.

“Fine, shut the fuck up!” I bark, pulling the page from under Poppy’s schedule and pushing it toward him on the counter. I am not in the mood for another speech about how sports and friendship come before girl drama.

Cole grabs Eva’s schedule and lets out a low whistle. “Man, she’s got more brains than the both of us combined. And she’s into... medieval poetry? What the hell is that?”

I snort, shaking my head. “Beats me. Maybe she’s into knights and dragons.”

Cole snorts, leaning back on the counter, his laughter filling the room. “Maybe she’s looking for her knight in shining armor. Think I can pull that off?” He strikes a pose, puffing his chest out and placing a hand on his hip.

I roll my eyes. “Very funny. I think you should stick to being the idiotic fuckboy.”

Cole flips me off, his grin unwavering. “What about yours?” He leans closer to look at Poppy’s schedule.

Hearing him call her “mine” does things in my stomach that I hate.

He snickers. “You better forget that one too, brother. She’s studying sociology. She probably knows you’re a common fuckboy too.”

I flip him off, too, my face heating up. “She’s different.”

“What if we work together? Two brains are better than one.”

“Work to what?” I ask, not sure that his intention toward Evangeline is the same as mine for Poppy.

What are your intentions? the voice in my head asks, and I have no idea.

“I’m not certain yet, but one thing I know.” He points a finger at me, a mock serious expression on his face. “No more missing gym sessions for stalking missions. Got it?”

I laugh, nodding. “Got it, Coach.”

He grins, clapping me on the back as he heads toward the door. “Good. Now, let’s go get some real food. I’m starving.”

“Should we ask Liam to join?” I ask, pointing at the door once Liam’s shower stops.

“So he can force kale on me? I swear one more time, and I will completely lose it.”

I laugh. “Yeah, I need junk today.”

As we head out, I can’t help but feel a bit lighter, the burden of the earlier conversation with my father lifting slightly. Cole’s humor and easygoing attitude always have a way of doing that. And for that, I’m grateful.

We step out into the night, and the city lights are bright and vibrant. The cool breeze brushes against my face, a refreshing counterpoint to the heated conversation from earlier. We walk down the street, our laughter mixing with the hum of city life.

“Pizza or burgers?” Cole asks, his eyes scanning the various food joints lining the street.

“Burgers,” I reply, my mouth already watering at the thought.

He nods approvingly. “Good choice, man. Let’s destroy some burgers and forget about the world for a while.”

I couldn’t agree more. The night stretches ahead, filled with the promise of greasy food, good company, and a temporary escape from the chaos of life.

Chapter 6



Poppy

Nessa: *Want to grab pizza?*

Me: *I wish I could, but not tonight. Eva needs me at the library for a project, and then I have a shift.*

A pang of longing tugs at my chest.

Nessa: *Fine, I'll stuff myself alone.*

A light chuckle escapes me, my fingers lingering over the screen for a moment before I slide my phone back into my bag. It has been a week since I last saw Ethan. I wonder if he has genuinely let me go this time. I granted him victory; it is all he ever wanted.

My steps guide me effortlessly to Eva's usual spot in the library, a secluded table that has become our unofficial meeting point. A creature of habit, she always chooses a table near the back, tucked under a small alcove, transforming a public space into our private study ground.

I sit down and turn the book open on the table toward me. *The Canterbury Tales*—Lord, I can't imagine picking this subject willingly. I wait a few more minutes and frown. It's not like Eva to leave her things unattended for so long.

I try to navigate through the maze of unfamiliar sections, looking for Eva. The ominous silence of the library is a little uncomfortable. Even my steps are unnaturally quiet, the soft carpet swallowing the sound. Yet, a drumbeat of anxiety I can't explain resonates within me.

I turn a corner, and my heart stumbles into a breathless halt, an icy dread curling in my stomach. There, amid the deserted shelves, is Cole, cornering Eva. His towering frame looms over her petite form, his face inches from hers, so close in fact that some of his long blond hair has escaped his bun, brushing against her cheek as he speaks in hushed tones.

His blue eyes smolder with an intense blend of frustration and longing as he clearly tries to convince her of something. Eva's eyes are wide, her usual pragmatic demeanor replaced with visible distress. Her hands clutch her books tightly, a shield against his unwanted advances.

I rush forward, my protective instincts kicking in. "Hey, what's going on here?" I demand, my voice slicing through the silence. The sudden interruption startles them, their heads snapping toward me. Cole whirls around, his eyes wide with surprise before he quickly smooths his expression into a casual grin. "We were only talking. It's nothing for you to worry about," he says, his tone too smooth, too rehearsed.

Eva pushes past him, clutching her books to her chest. "It's nothing, Poppy," she insists, her voice trembling a bit. We had agreed not to share our past, but the fear in her eyes speaks volumes.

I nod, pretending to accept her words, but my mind is made up. As I steer Eva away, my thoughts linger on Cole, a looming threat that I silently vow to neutralize.

I wrap my arm around Eva's shoulder, and I throw a last deadly look toward Cole, who does not even register it as his calculating eyes are on Eva's back.

"Eva, we need to talk about—" I begin, my voice laced with concern as we reach the table.

She cuts me off, her voice a firm, unyielding barrier. “Don’t, Poppy.” Her hands, trembling ever so slightly, hastily gather her belongings, shoving them into her messenger bag with a disregard that belies her usually meticulous nature.

“But, Eva.”

She closes her bag and sighs. “We made a deal, and you didn’t want to talk about Ethan. I didn’t press.”

“I know, but—“ I look at her now, seeing determination where I initially saw fear. “I’m not afraid of Ethan. He’s a nuisance at best, a reminder of a past that... hurts. You looked afraid, Eva, and I think under this bravado, you still are,” I add, looking at her tight fist resting on the table.

She follows my eyes and unclenches her fist. “I’m not scared of Cole Westbrook,” she says firmly, pushing her glasses up her nose; a subtle flicker of something undefinable in her eyes betrays her words. “I was not ready. It won’t happen again.”

“Ready for what? Eva—“

She slings her bag over her shoulder. “Do you need me to take you somewhere?” The finality in her voice shows me the subject is closed.

“One more thing. Are you in any kind of danger?”

I think she must see the genuine worry on my face because the hardness of her face softens, and she’s my friend again. “Not anymore.”

Not anymore is not really the answer I want. I wanted a loud and resounding “no.”

My mouth opens, then snaps shut, a silent surrender to the battle before me. Recognizing a lost cause doesn’t mean I can’t wage a silent war in her defense, unbeknownst to her.

“Want me to drop you at work?” I look at my watch now that Eva cut her study session short. I have a couple of hours to kill before work, and I decide to do something I swore I’d never do, but for Eva, I am ready to. I’m going to look for Ethan Hawthorne.

“No, since the study session is canceled, I’ll use this time to work on my own things.”

Her eyes flicker with a speck of suspicion as she nods, an unspoken question lingering in the air between us. “What time are you finishing tonight? I can come pick you up. I’m not a fan of you coming back at night from there.”

I wave my hand. “No worries, I’ll be home late anyway. I’ve got to babysit my brothers, but Mom will give me a ride back later. I’ll manage.”

“Poppy…” she trails off, her eyes searching mine, laden with concern and a silent warning. “Don’t go meddling into something that has nothing to do with you.”

“I won’t go talk to that blond Neanderthal if that’s what you are thinking. You tell me you’re fine, then you’re fine.”

She throws me a last look and nods. “Okay. I’ll see you later then.”

“Yep!” Once we exit the building, I watch her go in the direction of her car, and I take a left down toward the Lions stadium, already dreading my next action.

Realizing Ethan has been looking into me, I start digging for information on him. It’s surprisingly easy to get what I need. Girls are always eager to chat about varsity players, and I’ve secured the soccer team’s training schedule, so I know the best times to wander the campus without bumping into him.

The soccer ground is bathed in the golden glow of the setting sun as I arrive, the players on the field moving in perfect synchronicity as the cheerleaders are working on their routine at the other end of the field.

I linger on the sideline, observing them for a few stolen moments. They move in a sea of bright-blue uniforms, high ponytails dancing joyfully with each coordinated movement, sharply juxtaposed with the turmoil brewing within me. I once again almost subconsciously reach for my own ponytail that is no longer there. I cut my hair short about six months after my family’s downfall. I went from expensive treatments, oil, and bimonthly hairdresser appointments to having to wash my hair

with cheap shampoo. Which caused my beautiful, lustrous hair to become a tangle of unruly waves. I cut it short, and it was much easier to maintain. It is all I see now... practicality. With a sigh, I turn back toward the soccer practice and the screaming coach, trying to find Ethan. Finally, I see him in the middle of the field; his movements are fluid and graceful, a ballet of power and precision, and even with how much I dislike him, I can't help but admit he has a real gift.

Finally, Cole enters the field, stopping the practice as the coach turns all his frustration toward him, and he takes it with complete ease.

Ethan shakes his head, and as he turns toward the bleachers, he spots me, his eyes lighting up as he jogs over, a grin on his face.

"My cheerleader," he teases, his tone light and playful. I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

"You wanted to talk? Let's talk," I say, cutting to the chase. "But one condition: you keep your rapey friend away from my friend," I add, jerking my head toward Cole, who is now on the grass doing push-ups as a punishment.

His smile falters, his brow furrowing in confusion. "Cole is not rapey," he defends, but I cut him off. "I don't care. I'll answer two questions."

He groans quietly, running a hand through his sweat-dampened hair. "Fine, Cole will stay away. Why are you starting university now?" I meet his gaze, my expression steely.

"Because your family took everything from me, and I'm poor."

He narrows his eyes, his nostrils flaring with frustration. "That's a bit vague."

I shrug. "It's my answer. Next question."

He pauses, thinking for a second, detailing my face in a way that makes me quite uncomfortable.

"Why change your name?"

“Because being the daughter of Alan Lockwood, the man forever branded as an embezzler and who met his end in a prison cell”—I pause, swallowing the lump in my throat—“is a cross too heavy to bear,” I admit. Bitterness seeps into each word, an anomaly to my usual composed demeanor.

His eyes widen with surprise. The coach calls his name, but he ignores it.

“I think you’re needed back on the field. Are we good?”

He hesitates before asking, “Why did you vanish from social media? You have not posted since the day before the incident.”

“Incident.” I laugh bitterly. “What a nice way to put it. You asked your two questions, I answered.”

“Hawthorne! Come play soccer and leave your girlfriend!”

“I’m neither his girlfriend nor his friend,” I retort sharply, my words edged with a coldness meant to distance myself from the insinuation.

The coach lets out a hearty laugh, a sound that carries across the field. “At least there’s one girl with a brain in the bunch. Good on ya, lass.”

Ethan looks at me, his eyes filled with emotions I can’t quite decipher.

“Can we call a truce?” he asks quietly. I consider his words, the sincerity in his gaze.

I nod. “Yes, I offered that before. Let’s pretend we’ve never met and go on our merry way.”

“That’s not what I mean,” he protests. “I don’t want to pretend I don’t know you, Poppy.”

Somehow, hearing him calling me Poppy instead of Pauper strikes a chord I hate.

“I think—“

I raise my hand to cut him off. “I don’t associate with athletes.”

He offers a half smile, a seemingly gentle gesture that sends an unsettling ripple through my stomach. “It’s good I’m not an athlete,” he retorts.

I look heavenward and shake my head. “I don’t associate with people who ruined my life.”

“It was not me,” he insists, his voice filled with frustration.

“You enjoyed my downfall,” I accuse, my voice cold. “That’s enough for me. Keep Cole away from Eva, Hawthorne, I mean that.”

He takes a step closer, his hands raised in a gesture of peace. “Poppy, I had nothing to do with what happened to you or your father. I was a kid like you. I swear, I didn’t enjoy your downfall. I didn’t even know what was happening until it was all over.” He extends a hand toward me, an offering of peace and reconciliation. “Why not leave the old rivalry at the door and give friendship a try?”

I stare at his outstretched hand, the heaviness of the decision resting on my shoulders. The past and the present collide in a whirlwind of emotions, the pain and betrayal of the past battling with the possibility of healing and forgiveness in the present. My heart pounding, I gather my courage and make my choice.

I turn and walk away, leaving him standing on the field, his hand still extended. I hope that the chapter of Ethan and Cole is closed, a painful memory to be buried and forgotten, as Eva and I work hard to leave the past where it belongs.

Chapter 7



Ethan

The locker room is a racket of post-practice banter and the musky scent of sweat-soaked jerseys. A tightness forms deep within, thinking about Poppy and her blatant rejection of any potential friendship.

But it's not only friendship you want, is it? It never was. My mind riles me.

My gaze locks with Cole's, his smirk revealing that he knows exactly where my mind is. That reminds me of the promise I made to her and need to uphold if I ever want to earn a little bit of trust.

I approach Cole, my steps deliberate.

"Fuck, Coach was brutal today!" Cole winces, peeling off his damp sock.

"You know the rules—three push-ups for every minute you're late. That's forty minutes today."

He shrugs, a sly grin playing on his lips. "Worth it."

I don't know what exactly happened. I'm sure it has something to do with Poppy's curvy roommate and her request to keep him away from her.

A prick of irritation surfaces. “I need you to keep your distance from Eva.”

Cole scoffs, a spark of defiance in his eyes. “What did you say?”

“I mean it, Cole. Eva’s off-limits,” I insist, my voice steady but firm, trying to convey the seriousness of my words without escalating the tension.

“Is that right?” He leans in, his smirk unwavering. “Fine, I don’t care. But I might ask the curly-haired one out.”

I stiffen, my voice icy. “She’s not into athletes. And Eva isn’t into you.”

His voice is a venomous hiss. “Whatever happens between Eva and me has nothing to do with you.”

My response is instinctive. Protective. “It does when you’re acting like a predator.”

Cole’s head jerks back, the only sign of his surprise.

“What the fuck did you call me?” He reaches out and grips my jersey, and I brace myself for a fight I never thought I’d have with my best friend.

Liam’s voice slices through the tension, his British accent sharp with anger. “Fuck, guys! I have one rule for this team. One rule! We don’t fight over pussy or dick! We just fucking don’t!”

The locker room falls silent, all eyes on us as Liam, the typically composed Brit, looks like an enraged bull.

The only saving grace is that Coach is not here to witness the mess we’re making.

“And, Ethan,” Liam continues, his voice a low growl, “if you think your curly-haired girl isn’t into athletes, think again. Saw her at Pizz-tachio, being all secretive with a basketball player.”

I grit my teeth, frustration coursing through me. “Who?” I demand, my voice a low growl.

Liam shrugs, dismissive. “Not sure, don’t care. Now get your head out of your arse because if you don’t, I swear to God, neither of you will get the captain spot next year. Understand?”

I send a last withering look to Cole before grabbing my towel and toiletries. Cole barks something to the rest of the team and then walks to the shower beside mine, the separation stopping at the waistline. I ignore him as I lather shampoo on my head but notice after a couple of minutes that as players exit the shower, no one takes their place.

“I asked for a few minutes alone with you,” Cole says gruffly, not looking at me.

“A secret rendezvous, naked in the showers. Stop it, people will talk,” I sneer.

“After we fought about pussy like hormonal teenagers?” he scoffs. “I don’t think so.”

I go back to my shower, ignoring him.

He’s silent for a second, then quietly mutters, “I’m not a predator, Ethan. You, of all people, should know that.”

I do know that. I’ve been to tons of parties with the man, parties where half-naked, drunken girls threw themselves at him, and he refused them *because* they were too intoxicated. He has never pressured anyone into anything, never been violent with a girl, even the crazy ex from high school who keeps showing up unannounced.

I look back at him, and Cole’s eyes hold mine, a silent plea lingering in them. I exhale slowly, the anger seeping out with it. But the unease remains, a shadow lurking in the back of my mind.

I sigh. “Then leave her alone, man. Seriously, she is scared.”

Cole grunts. “She’s not scared, she’s... *confused*.”

I stop showering and turn toward him, water still running on me. “Do you hear yourself? She’s *confused*?”

“Just... Just trust me on this, okay? I know what I’m doing, and what if I told you to leave Curly alone? Would you do it?”

He has me there and he knows it. “It’s different,” I reply lamely.

“How?” he challenges.

“Poppy is not scared of me; she loathes me.”

Cole laughs. “God, we’re pathetic.”

I wish I could deny that, but I can’t.

“You’re my best friend, asshole,” he mutters. “I don’t want to fight with you, but...”

My throat tightens as I nod, accepting his unspoken apology. “I know. Just... ease up?”

He nods. “I can try.”

I turn off the water, a silent invitation for the other players to hit the showers, and as I wrap my towel around my waist, Cole proves once again that he knows me by heart.

“Bring me back a Meat Feast from Pizz-tachio,” he calls after me.

I don’t answer. I simply walk to my locker like a man on a mission. Whoever that basketball player is, he’s not going to stand in my way. Not this time. She was the one who got away in high school, and even now, she lingers in my thoughts, an unclaimed desire; the only difference is that I am not a boy anymore, and I am claiming what is mine.



The neon sign of Pizz-tachio flickers as the night starts to fall, casting an erratic glow on the pavement.

Who’s the predator now? I think as Poppy exits the pizzeria, still in her uniform and clutching a pizza box tightly in her hands. My heart’s doing this weird hammering thing as I observe her. Hidden in the shadows of my car. It’s concern, not obsession. It has to be, right?

My stomach twists into a knot, a weird ache that only comes around when I see her.

Who’s the predator now? Cole’s voice chimes in my head.

She's always been untouchable, even back in high school when I'd watch her from afar. But here I am, years later, still trapped in her enigmatic pull, still wanting things from her that I can't quite name.

Poppy glances at her watch, her brow furrowing in evident anxiety, and then dashes across the street to a charity store. I see her through the window as the young man behind the counter hands her a bag. My grip tightens on the steering wheel as she hugs him after looking into the bag. Something hot and unpleasant coils in my stomach. Jealousy? I try to brush aside the notion, but it clings, persistent and unsettling.

The bus arrives, and she boards, her movements hurried. I start the car, following at a distance, my mind a whirlwind of confusion and curiosity with every stop she doesn't get off, and she gets farther down the South side.

She finally gets off at a stop in front of a discount store, holding her bag and pizza box quite precariously as she enters the store.

I park across the street, ready to wait, but right after she walks in, she steps out with another plastic bag, a cheap burner phone in hand, speaking rapidly, her eyes darting around nervously. Her vulnerability pierces through me, and before I know it, I blow my perfect tailing by stepping out of the car and approaching her.

She pales as I stop in front of her, but her recovery is quick, a mask of indifference sliding into place.

"You alright?" My voice tries to play it cool, but there's a waver that I can't control, betraying my calm facade.

"Yes, of course," she replies, but her eyes betray a flicker of something that tugs at my conscience.

I hesitate, then offer, "Maybe I can take you wherever you need to go."

She looks conflicted, her gaze flitting to her watch before she shakes her head. "No thanks."

"It's only a ride, Poppy. We don't even have to talk. Just... let me help?" My voice is softer now, coaxing.

She sighs. A weary sound that seems to echo with world-weariness. Her eyes flick to her watch again, then dart down the road like she's calculating if she can afford to wait.

She gives this reluctant nod, trailing after me to my car, and then she's opening the passenger door, a silent concession that has my spirits soaring. I suppress a triumphant grin as she slides into the passenger seat, instead focusing on the bag on her lap, spotting the yellow tag of discounted food on a birthday cake.

I can't help but grimace. Strawberry and orange cake? Not really a combination I was expecting.

"Where to?" I ask, my voice deliberately casual.

"Home."

I put my blinker on to do a U-turn and go back to college, but she corrects me, a faint blush staining her cheeks.

"No, it's that way." She points forward, and my frown deepens as cold realization dawns.

"But—" I stop, looking at the road ahead. "There's only the trailer park down there."

She doesn't say anything, only stares into nothing, and it hits me like a punch to the gut. This is her life. The struggle, the constant hustle. It's like seeing behind a curtain she never meant to open. She's not only down on her luck; she's been dragged through hell. And me? I've been piling on even more.

The silence in the car is thick, charged with unspoken words and emotions. An apology is on the tip of my tongue, and the urge to offer help swells within me, but the words stick in my throat, held back by the fear of pushing her further away.

She's different, this Poppy in front of me. Her eyes hold stories that the Poppy I knew never had, and I'm left wondering what the hell happened to make them so damn haunted.

This girl in front of me is a fighter; she went to war and came back on top, and while I feel guilt and a hint of renewed

hatred toward my father, I'm also in awe of her, and now more than even I know.

Something inside me clicks, settling with a certainty that's almost frightening. I want Poppy in my life, and I want to be in hers. But damn, I know it's not gonna be as simple as stamping "mine" on her.

Chapter 8



Poppy

I didn't want to accept Ethan's help, but Mom's call caught me off guard. I get it; we need the money, and that's why she's working extra.

I glance at the clock, anxiety knotting my stomach. I'm already thirty minutes late to take over for Mrs. O'Leary with my brothers, and she's not going to be happy about it.

My fingers twitch, and I can almost make out our old arguments in my head. But here he is, offering a ride, offering help. A lump forms in my throat as the bitterness of our past meets the harshness of now.

Ethan's sleek car pulls up, its polished surface glaringly out of place against the backdrop of the worn and weathered trailers. My stomach churns as his eyes, dark and inscrutable, scan the trailer park, taking in the peeling paint and the toys scattered in the dirt yards.

"This is me now," I whisper, avoiding his eyes because I know he'll find the apology I can't voice. "Thanks for the ride," I add, my words rushing out too fast, and I'm quick to exit the car, putting physical distance between us before he can see more than I'd like to show.

His eyes linger on me, a silent question hanging between us. I can feel the weight of his gaze, the unspoken words, but I turn away, shielding my vulnerability behind a mask of indifference.

“Let me help you,” he offers, stepping out. His silhouette, tall and somewhat reassuring against the dimming sky, seems to linger on the edge of my world and his. But his eyes are asking more questions than I’m ready to answer.

I hesitate for a second, staring at his flashy, luxurious SUV and how it’s a sore thumb in a place like this.

His car, all shiny and expensive, looks so out of place here. It’s like a slap in the face, reminding me of everything we don’t have. I feel a weird mix of embarrassment and anger bubbling inside me.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I tell him, though my wavering voice inadvertently shows my concern. “Your car will be broken into in the next hour,” I add, trying to make my voice steady to hide the fact that, despite everything, I care about what happens to him.

He shrugs. “I don’t care.” But there’s something in his eyes, a stubborn set to his jaw, that tells me it’s not the car he’s worried about. It’s like he’s planting his feet in my world, refusing to be pushed out again, even if it’s only temporarily. It’s the same look that he used to have in high school when he was determined to cause mayhem, mostly in my life.

His nonchalance grates on me, a stark reminder of the divide between our worlds: his world, where a car is just a car, and mine, where it represents a lifeline, a means to survive.

I hand him the pizza box with the cake on top and sigh, leading the way through the trailer park.

My trailer, with its peeling blue paint and a single flickering porch light, comes into view, and my steps falter. “You have to leave before Mom gets back. She hates your family even more than I do.”

His brows dip in obvious discontent, but he nods.

I force a smile as I reach the porch, and Mrs. O’Leary, our neighbor, is outside, a cigarette dangling from her fingers.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. O’Leary! I wanted to be here earlier, but with work and all.”

She waves her hands, holding her cigarette, the ash falling in my mother’s planted mini roses. The only thing she has as a hobby.

“It’s alright, shorty, the show ain’t startin’ for another fifteen minutes.” She coughs and wheezes, making me wince. A stern reminder to never touch a cigarette.

She stands up. “Is that him?” she asks, her eyes looking over Ethan with curiosity and approval. But beneath her casual inquiry, there’s a probing, a seeking for gossip or scandal, something to break the monotony of trailer park life.

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes, keeping my expression neutral. Mrs. O’Leary is convinced I left the park and went to university because of a boy. As if I wouldn’t leave for any other reason. So I let her believe it; it is easier that way. “No, it’s not.” There was no boy, but she didn’t believe it when I moved out.

She takes a drag of her cigarette. “Too bad, he is charming.”

“Is Lacie here? You can introduce them,” I reply, gesturing to Ethan, who glares at me.

“No, I’m good,” he mutters.

I shrug. “Your loss. Lacie is great.”

“At spreading her legs!” Mrs. O’Leary barks with disapproval. “Talking about trouble, Lacie saw your James with the junkyard boys.”

My heart sinks. The junkyard boys—bad seeds in the making, vandalizing, stealing. A promise of a future behind bars. “Tell her thank you. I’ll have a word with Viper about it.”

“Viper.” Ethan scoffs. “Who’s stupid enough to be called that?”

“Someone you don’t want to meet in a dark alley. We’re lucky he’s fond of our little Poppy.”

I shoot Ethan a warning glance, silently telling him to keep his mouth shut. He gives me a knowing look but remains silent. Also, Viper is not fond of me; he’s fond of the idea of putting me in his bed, which will never happen.

I thank Mrs. O’Leary and step inside the trailer, Ethan following closely behind. The scent of something sweet and burned wafts through the air. My brothers, James and Billy, are sprawled on the worn-out couch, which used to be my bedroom, their eyes glued to the small, static-filled TV screen.

James, the elder one, turns his head, and his eyes narrow at Ethan. “Who’s this?” His voice is laced with suspicion and a protective edge that makes me wince. He’s too young to be this guarded, but also, at age fourteen, his stupid hormones are acting up.

“I’m—”

“He’s a friend from school. His name is Jeremy,” I lie smoothly. “Gave me a ride is all.”

Ethan mutters something under his breath, but I don’t care as Billy turns toward me, and my heart squeezes with sorrow at the only life my little brother is really experiencing.

The birthday boy jumps up, his eyes lighting up at the sight of the pizza box and cake in Ethan’s hands.

“Did you bring me pizza, Poppy?” he asks, completely ignoring the stranger in our home.

I nod, forcing a smile. “Yeah, bud. You’re turning double digits.

“Let me warm it up in the oven, and then you guys can eat.” I open the pizza box, and James immediately complains. “Billy likes mushrooms, not pineapple!”

I wince. I know that, but I hoped it would be enough to make them happy. I don’t often get picked for the free pizzas that customers don’t pay for or refuse on delivery. It’s based

on job seniority, but today, because of Billy's birthday, they allowed me to take the only big one that was refused.

Billy's eyes light up, a resilient sparkle dancing in them despite the disappointment that must linger there. "It's okay, Poppy. Pizza night!"

I put the pizza in the oven, and I hand him the Lego set from the charity store, my stomach twisting with guilt that it's not the Star Wars one he wanted but an airport set that cost me only ten dollars and is fully complete. "Happy birthday, munchkin!"

"That's for me?" He pulls it out of the bag, his smile not wavering despite the disappointment he must feel.

James scoffs. "What a lousy birthday! He wanted Star Wars, and you got him secondhand shit."

The pain, disappointment, and anger I feel inside are almost too much to bear, and my brother's bitterness cuts even deeper than the rest. And what I hate the most is Ethan witnessing all the ugliness that my life has become.

Tears start to prickle behind my eyes.

Ethan steps in, his voice calm and easy. "Poppy bought the Star Wars one, but she was too late to pick it up. We'll bring it by tomorrow, okay?"

I whirl on him, anger flaring, but he simply meets my gaze, unapologetic. *Why are you torturing me like that?* I try to tell him with my eyes. Now I'll have to find something to sell or get an advance on my salary or ask Jeff... yes, Jeff. I can ask him for an advance on the work I'm doing.

I exhale slowly. Okay, Star Wars is a go. I turn to Billy. "Yes, I'll bring it tomorrow." I press on the *I*, and my stomach growls a little as the smell of pizza starts to spread around the trailer.

"Yay!" Billy jumps around. "I told you, Jamie! I told you Poppy would do it."

"Sure," James crosses his arms on his chest. "Like I'm sure the cake is chocolate," he adds, looking pointedly at the

strawberry and orange cake. The only cake that was left at the store that was remotely birthday-themed and with a good-until date of today.

“Billy, can you go to Mrs. O’Leary’s to borrow matches? I forgot them.”

“Sure, I’ll be right back.”

As soon as I hear the door slam behind him, I grab James’s arm and pull him aside.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I hiss. “Are you getting a kick out of destroying your little brother’s birthday? Do you want everyone to be as miserable as you are?”

“It’s all just... lame, Pops. And you know it.”

Of course, I know it. “It’s the best I can do, James! You want to be a man, that’s right, huh? Then act like one! Help your little brother keep the little joy he has! Of course things suck, but pretend, okay? And I swear to God, if I find out you were with the junkyard boys, I’ll put Viper and his crew on your ass.”

“But—”

“No, fuck no, James! I’m tired. I’m tired of all of this and especially tired of your attitude. You’re acting like a spoiled brat.” I never wanted to slap my brother as much as I do right now.

James’s eyes flash with anger, but there’s a flicker of something else there, too—guilt, maybe. He jerks his arm out of my grip. “You think I don’t know how hard you’re trying, Poppy? You think I don’t see how much you’re giving up for us?”

My anger deflates, replaced by a weary sadness. “James, I’m not giving up anything. You and Billy are everything to me.”

He looks away, his jaw clenched. “Stop pretending everything’s okay, Poppy. It’s not, and it’s not going to be.”

I reach out, placing a gentle hand on his arm. “I know it’s not okay, James. But we have to keep going for Billy. He’s still

a kid; he needs to believe that things can get better.”

James shakes his head, pulling away from me. “And what about what *I* need, Poppy? What about what *you* need?”

I don’t have an answer to that because the truth is, I don’t know what I need anymore. All I know is that I have to keep going for them.

Billy bursts back into the trailer, holding up a box of matches triumphantly. “Got ‘em!”

I force a smile, turning back to him. “Great job, bud. Let’s light these candles and make a wish, yeah?”

Billy nods eagerly, his earlier excitement returning. I get the pizza out of the oven, and to put a little humor in the situation, I light the candles on the pizza. He looks at me, his eyes wide and hopeful. “Are you gonna make a wish too, Poppy?”

I nod, my throat tight. “Yeah, bud. I’m gonna wish for all of us.”

He grins, and for a moment, everything is okay. We’re a family celebrating a birthday, and the rest of the world falls away.

Ethan observes from the doorway, his expression inscrutable. I avoid his gaze, focusing on Billy as he blows out his candles, his face lit up with pure, innocent joy.

And I make a wish. I wish for better days for us, for a way out of this endless struggle. I wish for happiness for my brothers, for a future where they don’t have to fight so hard to survive.

But most of all, I wish for strength. Strength to keep going, to keep fighting, even when it feels impossible.

Because that’s all I can do.

“Do you want some?” James asks, extending me a slice.

Despite the spasms of hunger, I insist, “No, I’ve already eaten. Go ahead without me.”

A sudden beep from my phone startles me, a stark interruption in the midst of our makeshift celebration. It’s a

text from Mom.

Billy opens the Lego box and starts looking at the building instructions with James, who is following my advice and is faking excitement a lot better.

I motion for Ethan to follow me outside, away from the prying eyes of my brothers. Stepping into the cool night air feels like a reprieve from the stifling interior of the trailer.

“You need to leave. My mother is on her way,” I whisper harshly.

Ethan’s gaze softens. His fingers graze my arm, a slow, simmering heat spreading from the point of contact, awakening a flutter of something deeper within me. “Poppy, I can help. Let me help.”

I shake my head, my voice barely audible. “You can’t help with this, Ethan. This is my life now.”

“How are you going to get home? It’s late. I don’t feel comfortable with you taking the bus,” he insists.

“I’m not your responsibility. I never was. I’ve taken the bus more times than I can count, but my mother will be driving me home tonight.”

The determination is back in the set of his jaw, and I know he wants to argue.

“Ethan, *please!*” I press on the word. “You need to leave. I can’t have my mother see you here. She’s been through enough. You agreed,” I add sternly.

He simply nods, releasing my arm and stepping away. “If you ever change your mind, if you ever need anything, I’m here, Poppy.”

Oh yes, the pity of Ethan Hawthorne. That might be even worse than all the contempt he gave me when he called me Pauper.

I nod, unable to trust my voice, and stare as he walks away, his figure gradually disappearing into the darkness.

Once he's gone, I go back inside, where my brothers are happily building the airport. I join them on the floor, pushing aside thoughts of Ethan, of pity, and of Star Wars Lego sets.

My mother arrives twenty minutes later.

"Where is my birthday boy!" she calls as soon as she steps inside the trailer, but her bright smile and cheery tone don't fool me. I can see her weariness and worries in the taut lines of her face, in the dark circles under her eyes, and it makes me hate Ethan's family and my father a little more.

But Ethan is different, isn't he? My heart holds no hate toward him, only a confusing mix of resentment and longing. And that, in itself, feels like the biggest betrayal of all.

"Poppy bought me the Star Wars Lego set!" Billy says, jumping up from the spot on the floor.

"Did you?" Mom asks, ruffling Billy's hair, but her eyes are confused and worried.

I nod, forcing what I hope is a carefree smile. "Yes, it was on sale," I add with a breathy laugh. "Okay, time for cake! Someone needs to go back to campus!"

I cut the cake, only taking a sliver, knowing that Mom will be grateful in the morning to have some left to put in the boys' lunches.

"Do you want me to drive you back?" she asks, already reaching for her purse on the counter.

"No. I'm good." She looks so drained. I can't bear to keep her up one minute more than necessary after the fourteen-hour shift she had today.

"Well, I better go!" I kiss the top of Billy's head, hug James, and give a lingering hug to my mother. "I love you, Mom. You're the best," I whisper in her ear. I know she needs to hear that, and her ragged intake of breath is proving as much.

The bus stop is dimly lit, the flickering streetlight casting long shadows on the pavement. My stomach growls, a harsh reminder of the skipped meals and the hunger that is now a constant companion.

A car pulls up, and my heart skips a beat as Ethan's eyes, dark and intense, meet mine through the open window.

"You lied to me, Poppy," he says, his voice barely above a whisper yet sharp as a knife.

I square my shoulders, refusing to let him see how his words affect me. "This is where I live, Ethan. These are my people."

He opens the car door, a silent invitation. "Humor me."

Reluctantly, I slide into the passenger seat, and he places a brown paper bag on my lap. The scent of warm food wafts up, and my stomach twists painfully.

"What's this?" My voice is steadier than I feel.

"You're hungry," he says as if it is the most obvious thing in the world.

My fingers clench around the bag. "I don't need your pity."

He pulls away from the curb, his gaze fixed on the road ahead. "It's not pity."

We drive in silence, the tension between us palpable as I reluctantly eat the cheeseburger he got me.

"Is this why you're so thin?" His voice is gentle. Concerned. "Because you don't eat enough?"

I glare at him, irritation bubbling up inside me. "What did you think it was? A fashion statement?"

He shakes his head. "It never made sense. You were perfect."

Perfect. The word hangs in the air, heavy and unexpected.

"Thank you for pointing out that I'm not to your taste anymore," I let out mockingly.

"You've always been my tas—" He halts, a sudden vulnerability flickering in his eyes, and I can see him blush as I stare at his profile illuminated by the passing streetlights. "You've been living there for two years?" he asks, abruptly changing the subject.

“No,” I whisper, my throat tight. “We were at the homeless shelter for two weeks.”

He swerves slightly, his eyes flicking to me with surprise and something else... is it pain?

I laugh, a bitter, humorless sound. “What did you think when I said poor? Brenthill?”

He doesn't answer, and I glance out the window at the passing buildings. To be honest, I used to think Brenthill was poor as well. Now? I would be overjoyed to live there.

“I'll go pick up the Legos tomorrow for your little brother,” he says suddenly.

Finishing the burger, I give a dismissive gesture. “You don't even know which one he wants.”

He shrugs. “No, I don't, but I thought we could go together and pick the right one,” he suggests, a hopeful tilt to his words.

My eyes widen in disbelief. “No, absolutely not!”

“Why not?”

“Because your charity won't change our lives, Ethan. And I can't have my brothers getting used to dreams that won't come true again. James... he'll start asking for things I can't give.” I cut myself off, firmly deciding. “No. I will go and buy him the set he wants.”

“With what money?” His voice is gentle, but the question stings. “You can't even afford a proper cake or two pizzas.”

I wince at his words.

“No, Poppy, I didn't mean it like—”

“Enough!” My voice breaks, a sharp edge of desperation cutting through each syllable. “It's fine, and you know what? I'd rather you go back to calling me Pauper. I can sell this. It's fine.” I pull my locket out from under my shirt and clutch it in my hand, its familiar coolness offering no comfort this time.

The Lunar Locket, with its crescent of rose gold and a moonstone glowing subtly like a captive piece of the night sky, has always been my silent comfort that rests against my chest,

a constant reminder of that mysterious morning it had appeared on my doorstep. Tiny stars embedded around the moonstone twinkle with a faint iridescence while a hidden compartment at the back whispers of untold secrets. It's more than jewelry; it's a piece of the past, the only piece of luxury I had managed to keep, and a mystery that has become a part of me.

His expression softens, and he slows the car as we reach my building. "Let me buy it. I was the one who made the mistake. It's the least I can do."

I hesitate, then nod slowly. "Fine, get him the Millennium Falcon, please."

He stops the car, his eyes searching mine. "Poppy..."

"No, there's no discussion about this." I open the car door. "Thank you," I add quickly before stepping out into the night, the locket heavy in my hand, a tangible weight of the past and the choices yet to come. I clench it tighter as if trying to hold on to a feeble control that's slipping through my fingers.

Chapter 9



Ethan

Each piece of Poppy's life that I uncover only seems to deepen the mystery, like a puzzle that grows more complex with every bit I learn. It's chaotic, yet instead of pushing me away, it draws me in, making me want to understand her more, to be a part of her world, even when it's clear I don't belong. And that's why I am at her workplace instead of at my house to play our weekly FIFA tournament. I forfeit the game by not being there, meaning that I'll be the one bankrolling pizza night at the end of the game next week.

I shouldn't be here. I know that. I could've simply left the Lego set at her apartment and avoided this whole scenario. But something in me needed to see her, to be in her space, even if it was uninvited.

She's not behind the counter like I'm expecting her to be but at a table in the back with a basketball player, the same one I suspect Liam saw her with. My fingers curl into fists at my sides, nails digging into my palms as I see them together. Her laughter, light and free, is meant for him and not me and leaves a sour note hanging in the air.

I observe her smile, the way he nudges her playfully, and I find myself wishing that was me. Wishing she'd let me in the way she's let him in. But every interaction between us feels

like there's this invisible barrier, and I'm on the outside looking in. I'm searching for a way to break through.

Poppy turns the pages she was looking at and gives them to him. She looks up, and our eyes lock. Her smile doesn't exactly fade; it sort of stumbles, hesitates, as if she's caught between emotions. Her brows knit together, not quite a frown, more of a perplexed, guarded expression. She says something to the other guy, who looks at me with a matching frown. I raise an eyebrow challengingly. What he has on me in height, I make up in muscle, and despite what I always thought, I'm primitive enough to fight for what's mine.

He shakes his head with a wide smile, and it grates at my nerves more than I thought it could have. He passes by me without even an acknowledgment, but I don't care. My eyes remain on Poppy.

"What are you doing here, Ethan?" she asks, stopping in front of me.

"I brought the gift for your brother," I say, trying to keep my voice casual as I raise the bag. "I thought I'd drop this off. And hey, what time do you finish work? I can wait and give you a ride," I ask, knowing she must be done as she is carrying her backpack.

She hesitates, and I press on, "We could get a better cake, maybe throw another little party for him?"

She chews on her plump bottom lip, and I can't help but let my thoughts navigate into dangerous territory as I imagine what it would be like to kiss her. It's weird, and I try to shove it down, but the image of being close to her, too close, flickers in my mind, uninvited and yet not entirely unwelcome.

"Thanks, but my mom's home. She wouldn't understand you being there."

My smile falters, a strange tightness in my chest as her words settle in; it stings more than I thought it would.

Her fingers tremble as they pull crumpled bills from her pocket. "I need to pay you back," she whispers, her voice heavy with unspoken burdens. Her eyes, swirling with pride

and reluctance, avoid mine yet silently plead for understanding.

My hand acts on its own accord, fingers delicately encircling her wrist. I like... no, I love touching her soft skin, but I'm more focused on the way her pulse jumps under my fingers, a silent testament to her surprise—or is it discomfort?

I keep hold of it despite having stopped her movement. “No need,” I reply, trying to keep the frustration from my voice.

Her frown deepens, and I can't help but notice that she's not trying to break free from my hold. “I don't like being in debt. Please, Ethan. It's more for me than it is for you,” she insists, pushing a loose strand of her short hair behind her ears. “Not after everything that's transpired between our families.”

“I have no need for your money. I have more than enough.”

She purses her lips, and I realize she must take it as a jab, which could not be further from the truth.

“No, Poppy, I...” I pause, releasing her wrist to run a hand through my hair in frustration. “What I'm saying is that money won't help, but I could actually use a favor, and honestly, I'll even be the one owing you one.”

Her eyes narrow with suspicion. “I'm listening,” she says with a certain wariness in her voice.

“Come with me to the varsity ball?” The words tumble out before I can stop them, surprising even me. I've never cared about going with a date before and always preferred the freedom of going stag. But now, looking at her, I realize I don't want to go if she's not there.

Her eyes narrow even more. “I'm not going on a date with you, Ethan.”

A grin stretches across my face, a mask hiding the unexpected sting of her words. I find myself wondering why her refusal bothers me so much. “Why's that?”

She snorts, and it's oddly endearing. “So many reasons, I don't even know where to start.”

“Start with a yes. We can figure the rest out later.”

“No.”

I try to keep my voice steady. Casual. But inside, it feels like something’s cracking. “We’ll go as friends. Honestly, it’s kinda nice not to be fawned over for once. Your... let’s call it ‘dislike,’ it’s refreshing, you know?”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, poor you. It must be so difficult to push away hordes of women.”

My grin widens. “You have no idea.”

“Why me?” she asks, and my pulse quickens as I see her wavering. “You hate me.”

“Hate you? What gave you that idea?”

She shakes her head. “Only years of pranks and mocking.”

“And now I’m not. Come on.” I push a little more. “I’ll take care of the dress, alright?”

In my mind, I add, *I’d buy you a million dresses if it meant you’d say yes.*

She’s steadfast, shaking her head again. “My roommates...”

“I’ll get them dates too. And dresses. What do you say?”

Her eyes narrow again, and I mentally kick myself. Too desperate, Ethan.

She shakes her head again, and I raise my hands in surrender. “Think about it, okay?”

She looks at her watch and sighs. “I have to go. I can’t miss my bus.” She passes me.

“Is that a yes?” I call after her.

“I’ll think about it,” she replies, keeping her back to me.

I linger, watching her retreating figure, a small smile playing on my lips. “I’ll think about it” isn’t a no, and I’ll take it.



The only person who can tell me things about the Lockwoods—or Donovans now—that Poppy doesn’t want to share is my father.

It's the only reason why I'm standing in front of my parents' house on Sunday evening for the tedious dinner I hate to attend.

See what you make me do, Poppy? I think before opening the door.

My footsteps echo in the grand hall, the sound a stark reminder of the emptiness enveloping the opulent space. It feels like walking into one of those museums where you're afraid to breathe too hard in case you break something worth more than your life. The place is decked out with massive marble columns and a chandelier that probably costs more than Poppy's entire trailer. The thought that her entire trailer could neatly fit into this hall lingers in my mind, creating an unsettling feeling in my stomach.

"Mr. Hawthorne. What a pleasure to see you! It has been so long!" Arthur, our majordomo, approaches with a warm, practiced smile.

I manage a semblance of a smile in return. "Yes, apparently, my mother is missing me." Bitterness seeps into my voice despite my best efforts.

If Arthur notices, he doesn't show it. "I was about to announce dinner. I will set a plate for you."

I nod, having timed my arrival to minimize the duration of this familial charade and follow Arthur to the dining room. The room is another display of affluence, with a long, mahogany table set with fine china and silverware, surrounded by high-backed chairs upholstered in rich, dark velvet. The walls are adorned with portraits of stern-looking ancestors, their eyes seeming to follow me disapprovingly as I move.

My parents, impeccably dressed and seated with rigid posture, turn to regard me as I enter.

My mother, tall and slender, her blonde hair cascading in perfect waves down her shoulders, offers a faint smile. Her face, a meticulous canvas crafted by the region's most esteemed plastic surgeon, flickers with a momentary surprise, quickly veiled by years of practiced stoicism. "Ethan, darling,

what a delightful surprise,” she coos, her voice a gentle, rehearsed melody that barely brushes the surface of maternal warmth. Her eyes, however, betray a fleeting vulnerability, a silent whisper of the mother she might have been in a different life.

I don’t take it to heart. My mother has always been like this, emotionally distant and perpetually composed. A perfectly crafted doll, shaped and molded to meet the exacting standards of the man beside her.

I look at my father, who raises his glass of wine to greet me. “The prodigal son returns,” he says, dripping with sarcasm. “I almost forgot what you looked like.”

My jaw tightens, but I manage to keep my expression neutral, offering a tight-lipped smile in return. *No, you can’t have, I think, because, unfortunately, I look just like you.*

My father is tall and athletically built despite his age. His hair, now peppered with gray, and the lines etched into his face are the only discernible differences between us as I compare him to old photographs from his Harvard days. Back then, he was the revered captain of both the polo and fencing teams, a point he never lets me forget, especially given my preference for soccer—a sport he dismissively regards as *proletarian*, as he would say.

I nod in his direction and take a seat, feeling like an intruder in a home that should have been familiar. It’s a common misconception that I idolize my father, aiming to follow in his footsteps. In truth, my every action is a conscious effort to be anything but him.

The first course is served, a rich lobster bisque that wafts a delicate, savory aroma through the room. I find myself pushing the spoon through it absentmindedly, my thoughts still lingering on her.

My father clears his throat, drawing my attention.

“Yes, Father,” I say with a sweet tone that we both know is fake.

His lips purse with disapproval. Provoking him isn't wise, especially since I'm in need of a favor, yet I can't seem to be able to stop myself.

He sips his wine, his gaze piercing through me as he speaks. "A sophomore year at Silverbrook, yet whispers reach me that a major eludes your declaration, Ethan." His voice, a calm yet sternly sharpened blade, slices through the ambient clinks of fine dining.

Here we go. I keep my expression neutral, though frustration starts to bubble into me.

"Options are still on the table, Dad. Exploring possibilities."

His expression becomes one of challenge, a silent confrontation in the air. "I'm not sure what you have to weigh, son. The only acceptable options are business or law, and we both know that."

My grip tightens around the silverware, but I maintain my composure. "I believe it's also important to be adaptable, Father. Rigidity in one's schedule or beliefs can be a downfall."

He simply hums in response, sipping his bisque with a calculating light in his eyes, and I know that he is trying to find a way to force me into a choice he considers the only option.

My mother, meanwhile, remains silent, her eyes flickering between us as she sips her soup, a practiced smile still playing on her lips.

The main course arrives, a perfectly cooked venison, its rich, gamey aroma filling the room, accompanied by an assortment of meticulously prepared vegetables. But the luxurious spread before me does little to appease the growing tension knotting my stomach.

Casually, with an air of nonchalance I don't feel, I set down my silverware and lean back. "Speaking of perspectives, do you know what happened to the Lockwoods after the junior year debacle?"

The reaction is immediate and palpable. My mother's fork clatters against her plate, and she hastily tries to cover her surprise with a cough. My father's posture stiffens, his eyes narrowing marginally as he meets my gaze.

"What do you mean?" His voice is steady, but I catch the briefest flicker of something concealed in his eyes.

I shrug, feigning indifference. "Poppy Lockwood joined Silverbrook, and it got me wondering."

My father shakes his head with an exasperated sigh. "This is what happens when you join a second-class university. You mix with the slum." His eyes harden. "Is she giving you a hard time? Causing trouble? Do you need me to get her transferred?"

"She's not doing anything, and I'm sharing a house with Cole Westbrook and Liam Ashford. I'm hardly *slumming* it."

He waves his hand dismissively. "That would not have happened at Harvard."

"Stay away from the Lockwoods. Those people are bad news," my mother chimes in, and I'm surprised she even has an opinion about anything.

"Yes, listen to your mother. For once, she has something of value to contribute," he adds, and my mother doesn't even flinch or look annoyed at my father's cold snub.

I grit my teeth as my father watches me, a silent understanding passing between us. He knows I'm aware there's more to the story, and I know he's not going to divulge anything willingly.

The rest of the dinner passes in tense silence as I realize that I suffered their company for nothing, and the worst part is that now I put Poppy on my father's radar, and I wonder if my visit is not a huge mistake after all.

My father pushes back his chair, the sound grating against the marble floor, and stands. "Ethan, join me in the office for a drink before you head back to Silverbrook."

I nod, standing and turning to my mother. “Good night, Mother,” I say, placing a perfunctory kiss on her cheek. Her eyes, though cold, flicker with a momentary warmth as she nods a silent goodbye.

I follow my father to his office, a room that always seems to embody his personality—cold, meticulous, and domineering. The walls, lined with shelves of books and awards, seem to close in on me, a physical manifestation of the pressure I always feel in his presence.

He moves to the bar, pouring a small glass of scotch and extending it toward me. I hesitate, eyeing the glass warily. “I’m only nineteen, Father.”

He scoffs, a smirk playing on his lips. “Ethan, I know you’ve been pilfering my liquor since you were sixteen. If you want to be treated like a man, act like one.”

Reluctantly, I take the glass, the amber liquid shimmering under the soft lighting of the room. I take a small sip, feeling the burn of the alcohol, but I keep my face smooth.

My father leans against his desk, regarding me with that calculating gaze that always seems to see too much. “Why the sudden interest in Poppy Lockwood?”

I pause, choosing my words carefully. “They seem to be having a rough time. They’re not their father, and it doesn’t seem fair that they’re suffering for his mistakes.”

He gives a slight tilt of his head, a silent prompt to continue.

I add a half-truth. “I won’t be seeing her again.”

To my surprise, he shakes his head. “Actually, you should. If she wants to see you, why not?”

Suspicion prickles at the back of my mind. “What do you want out of it?” I ask, my voice steady despite the unease coiling in my stomach.

He laughs, a sound devoid of genuine mirth. “Oh, you know me well. There’s a box of documents that Alan had that we never recovered.”

“You want the box.”

“I want the box.”

I nod, a plan already forming in the back of my mind. The box means nothing to me, but if it gives me a reason to be closer to Poppy, to perhaps right some wrongs, I’ll play along. “I’ll get you the box.”

He nods, a semblance of approval flickering in his eyes. “Good. Remember, Ethan, everything in life is transactional. Always ensure you’re getting the better deal.”

I nod, the motion mechanical, as a bitter taste creeps up my throat. His words, laced with perpetual strategy and manipulation, weave a future before me that I’m desperate to unravel. I finish the scotch in one swallow, the burn doing little to dispel the chill that’s settled over me.

Placing the empty glass on his desk, I turn and leave the office, the weight of my father’s expectations heavy on my shoulders. As I step out into the cool night air, I breathe in deeply, trying to shake off the oppressive atmosphere of the house.

In the quiet of the night, I make a silent vow to myself—I will not become my father, and Poppy is a treasure that I feel I’m discovering all over again. Her strength, her defiance against a world that’s been so cruel to her, stands in sharp relief against the compliance I’ve always shown.

The decision is made: I will protect Poppy from becoming collateral in my father’s unending pursuit of power, and I will pursue her whether he approves or not.

Chapter 10



Poppy

A week has passed since Ethan handed me that Lego set for my brother, and he's stubbornly embedded in my thoughts. Every night, as I lie in bed, I wrestle with the images of his kind eyes and gentle demeanor, so different from the bully I knew in school. His sudden shift leaves me navigating through skepticism and gratitude, questioning every look, every gesture. Is it genuine, or is it all only veiled pity? I'd rather face his stupid pranks like he did in high school than become a charity case.

Despite our history of fights and his mocking jabs, I've always had a weird kind of fondness for Ethan. Our verbal spats, strangely enough, were something I looked forward to, a constant in my otherwise chaotic life. That's probably why his harsh words, spoken when I was at my lowest, hurt so much. His cruelty that day was a departure from our usual playful banter.

Dragging myself home from my shift, my mind whirls with thoughts of Ethan and his unexpected invitation to the varsity ball. It's crucial to unravel these tangled emotions, and my roommates are the only ones I can imagine doing that with, without fear of judgment.

“Eva? Nessa?” My voice echoes in the quiet space as I toe off my sneakers and rest my bag on the floor. I deposit my tips into the food jar, a small relief that I don’t need to borrow from the girls this week. Grabbing a bottle of apple juice from the fridge, I call again, “Girls?”

Eva’s door is ajar, and as I peek inside, my eyes lock on a violin resting in an open case. My curiosity piqued, I step closer, eyes scanning the newspaper articles taped inside the case. “*Evangeline Sinclair, the Violin Prodigy,*” one headline reads. I lean in to read more: “*Our town prodigy heading to Juilliard...*”

“What are you doing here?” Eva’s voice, usually so gentle, now sharp and defensive, startles me.

I spin around, hand instinctively clutching my chest. “Eva, I ___”

She frowns, closing the violin case with a snap. “Why are you touching this?”

“I didn’t, I swear.” My hands rise defensively. “The door was open, and the violin was there on the bed.” I try to ease the tension. “I didn’t know you played.”

Her eyes, darting to the closet, then back to me, soften. “That’s fine.” She sighs, placing the case back into her wardrobe. “Need something?”

I blink, the unexpected revelation about Eva momentarily derailing my thoughts. “Yeah, I...” My words trail off as I attempt to regain my composure. “Ethan asked me to the varsity ball.”

Eva’s eyebrows lift slightly, her previous defensiveness fading into curiosity. “Okay... and do you want to go? I thought we hated him,” she adds, trying to ease some of the remaining tension.

Do we? Did we ever? I used to be supremely annoyed with Ethan, yes, but I didn’t hate him, not until my last day of school. I did the walk of shame, searching for friends who now shunned me, and I caught Ethan’s eye, almost pleading. His response? A laugh.

I shrug, my gaze dropping to the floor as I wrestle with the conflicting emotions inside me. “He offered for me to bring my friends too. Said he’d buy us all dresses.”

Eva tilts her head, studying me. “And you’d be more comfortable with that?”

My eyes meet hers, though my focus is inward as I ponder. She remains silent, offering the space I’m working through, a quality of hers I’ve come to value—she knows when to let someone process things alone.

She nods as if she is speaking to herself. “I’ll go,” she says quietly after a moment, her voice gentle but firm.

I blink, surprised. “Really? You know Cole will be there.” And then realization dawns on me. “Oh, Juilliard...” I whisper, and her expression closes off again.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she says quietly, “just like you don’t want to talk about what happened between you and Ethan. The past should stay in the past.”

Before I can respond, a voice interrupts us. “What are you bitches planning?”

We turn to see Vanessa in the doorway, headphones hanging around her neck. I sometimes wonder why she’s always lost in her world of music.

“Ethan wants to take Poppy, and consequently, all of us, to the varsity ball,” Eva explains, her voice steady. “Well, not really. We’ll be with his friends, but he’ll buy us pretty dresses.”

Vanessa snorts, a smirk playing on her lips. “What a boy wouldn’t do to get laid. Can I get the older one?”

I feel my cheeks heat, and I turn away, trying to hide my blush. “It’s not like that,” I mumble, “and the older one is a senior and a Brit, so I doubt it, but are you in?” I turn back toward her when she doesn’t answer, and she stares at me.

“Are you?” I press, looking at her.

“Am I what?”

“Are you in?” I ask, my voice hopeful. *Please say yes*, I silently plead.

She shrugs, nonchalant. “Free dress and a hot Brit? Why not?”

I frown, about to remind her again that I can’t guarantee the hot Brit, but she puts her headphones back on, effectively ending the conversation.

“By the way, your groceries were delivered. I put them on the counter,” she adds before turning and disappearing into her room.

Eva looks at me, a silent question in her eyes. “Did you take money from the food jar?”

Eva and I move toward the kitchen, the scent of fresh produce wafting through the air as we approach the brown bags on the counter. My fingers graze over the items peeking out from the top: ripe tomatoes, fresh bread, and sweet chocolate. All my favorites, all things I haven’t indulged in for a while due to the tight budget.

The sight of the chocolate bar instantly transports me back to a day in high school. I can almost hear the hum of the vending machine and feel the frustration as my favorite chocolate bar dangled, stuck, refusing to drop. I had shaken the machine, desperation evident, when a familiar voice teased from behind, “Need some help there?”

I turned to find Ethan, a smirk playing on his lips. Without waiting for my response, he’d given the machine a nudge, and the chocolate bar had fallen. He’d picked it up, waving it teasingly in front of me. “Finders keepers?”

I remember the playful anger bubbling up, and without a second thought, I’d stomped on his foot. As he yelped in surprise, I snatched the chocolate bar from his hand and sprinted away, his laughter echoing behind me.

Eva’s voice pulls me from the memory. “Poppy, are you okay?”

I nod, fingers lightly tracing the contours of the chocolate bar, but my voice betrays the turmoil inside, coming out as a

mere whisper. “He remembered, Eva.”

Her eyes, understanding and gentle, meet mine. “I know we want a personal vendetta, he’s a rich jock, but perhaps he truly cares. Maybe more than you think.”

I nod, but that’s the problem, isn’t it? Ethan caring means he sees me, really sees me, in all my struggles and vulnerabilities. And his kindness, as beautiful as it is, also serves as a mirror reflecting the sad reality I’m living in.

I pull out the chocolate bar, the wrapper crinkling in my trembling hands. It’s a small luxury, one that I haven’t allowed myself in months. My throat tightens, and I’m torn between the urge to cry and to smile.

Eva steps closer, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. “It’s okay to accept kindness, Poppy. It doesn’t make you weak or pitiable. It makes you human.”

I nod, tears blurring my vision as I unwrap the chocolate. Breaking off a piece, I pop it into my mouth, the rich, sweet flavor mingling with the saltiness of my tears.

Eva wraps an arm around me, and together, we stand there in the glow of the kitchen light, finding comfort in silent companionship.

I close my eyes, trying to shut out the conflicting emotions bubbling within me. I’ve always prided myself on my strength, my ability to stand tall despite the storms that life has thrown my way. But Ethan’s kindness, his pity, threatens to topple the fortress I’ve so carefully built around myself.

I can’t let him see me as weak, as someone to be pitied and taken care of. I won’t be his charity case, his good deed. I need him to see me, really see me—Poppy, the fighter, the survivor, not Poppy, the girl who needs saving.

If Ethan wants me, it needs to be because of anything other than pity because that would be far worse than anything my heart has suffered so far.



My heart pounds as I navigate the unfamiliar hallways of the men's soccer ground, the scent of sweat and disinfectant mingling in the air. The locker room is ahead, and I can hear the muffled sounds of conversation and laughter from the guys inside. My steps falter for a heartbeat, but I steel myself, determined to have this conversation with Ethan.

As I approach, Cole emerges, his smirk instantly igniting a spark of irritation within me. I roll my eyes, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a response.

Ethan appears behind him, his eyes lighting up when they land on me. "We have to stop meeting like this," he begins, a playful lilt in his voice. But as he takes a step closer, something in my stance, perhaps the rigid set of my shoulders or the tight line of my mouth, gives him pause. His smile falters, the twinkle in his eyes dimming a bit as he picks up on the unspoken tension radiating off me. The teasing tone slips away, replaced by a more cautious, gentle one. "Poppy?" he ventures, a question hanging in the air.

I take a deep breath. "You need to stop treating me like a charity case, Ethan. The groceries? It was a nice gesture, but frankly, it's insulting. I'd rather you go back to calling me 'Pauper.'" My voice is steady, but inside, my emotions are a confused turmoil.

He blinks, taken aback. "I didn't mean to—"

Cutting him off, I make my stance clear. "No, I know. But you can't do that. If you want to give friendship a try, I'm happy to, but I won't be your charity project. And if that's why you're asking me to the varsity ball, I've changed my mind."

He steps forward, crowding my space, his dark eyes searching mine with an intensity that makes my skin heat up. "Does that mean you're coming?"

"I—yes. But I'm taking my friends, and you're buying them very expensive dresses."

His grin returns, lighting up his face as if he's won the lottery. He extends his hand, gesturing for my phone.

I give him a questioning look.

He gives a slight shrug. "I'm giving you my number. The ball is in your court."

I jerk my head toward his hands. "Write it down."

He shakes his head. "Fine, if you don't want to give it to me, give me your number then; it's the same for me," he adds, pulling out a brand-new smartphone that I know costs about twice the price of our beat-up Honda.

The thing is, as stupid as it sounds, I don't want him to have my number. I reluctantly retrieve my thirty-five dollar flip phone, feeling a pang of embarrassment. He frowns at it, but after a moment, his expression softens, an understanding, or perhaps a resignation, flickering in his eyes. He doesn't comment, and I'm silently grateful for the unspoken empathy that hangs between us. How could I explain that the first thing Mom and I did was sell our cells to pay the deposit and first month's rent on the trailer?

He inputs his number and tries to call himself to save it in his phone but frowns as the call fails. "Why does the call fail?"

"I didn't say you could have my number, did I?"

His brow furrows, concern etching lines onto his forehead. "Why does the call fail, Poppy?" he asks more insistently.

"No credit. I forgot to add some." It was only a half lie. I didn't have some of the money for a while, but Jeff paid me for the first assignment. I really forgot.

"So, you're going around with no means of communication?"

I try to take the phone from his hand, but he tightens his grip.

"This is not your problem! You're not my boyfriend, Ethan," I retort sharply, and as this attempt to retrieve my phone is met with success, he relents.

Phone back in my pocket, I'm ready to leave, but he's not done yet.

"Is that why you haven't posted on Instagram in two years? Because of the phone?"

I pause, my thoughts scattering like leaves in the wind. Is that the reason? My hand instinctively goes to my pocket, where the phone is safely tucked away. Even if I had a smartphone all this time, what would I post? Smiling selfies while our world crumbled around us? I haven't looked at it in all this time, afraid of the memories it might stir up. The last post was a happy family photo, my father's arm around me, both of us oblivious to the impending doom.

My eyes flicker to Ethan, his gaze steady, waiting. A part of me, a tiny, hidden part, wants to spill everything, to share the burden of the past two years with someone, anyone. But I've built walls, high and sturdy, to keep the world, to keep Ethan at bay.

I can almost see my father's smile. Feel his arm around me. And it's a physical pain. He was my father, despite everything, and now he's gone, buried in an unmarked grave, but his presence lingers, a ghost in my every step.

Pushing the memories away, I lock them back where they belong. "It's not important," I manage to say, though the words are barely a whisper. My eyes, I realize, are glistening with unshed tears, offering Ethan a glimpse into the storm within me.

I hate the gentleness in his face right now. The way his eyes are roaming my face with a scrutiny that is almost scientific.

"Poppy."

"The varsity ball is in two weeks. I'll be in touch soon for the dresses."

I turn to leave, but before I do, I look back at him. "Thank you again for the present for my little brother. It made his day."

His gaze warms. "You're more than welcome. There's not much I—" He sighs, his smile turning almost wistful. "You're welcome," he repeats.

We linger in a quiet, somehow reassuring silence, the world beyond us momentarily forgotten. His eyes, a tender mix of

warmth and melancholy, hold mine, and I get lost, even if it's only a brief, stolen moment in time.

A muted realization sweeps over me, subtly yet unmistakably shifting my emotional equilibrium. I like Ethan Hawthorne. Admitting that to myself might just be the most terrifying thing I've ever done.

But for now, in this pause, I simply nod, murmuring a quiet, "See you later," before I turn away. I leave a sea of unspoken words and potential what-ifs suspended in the space between us.

Chapter II



Ethan

The morning light filters through the blinds, warming the room with its glow. I stand in front of the mirror, adjusting my shirt. Frustration fills me, and I try to shake it off. I wanted it to be only Poppy and me today, a chance to break down the walls she's so expertly built. But I had to settle for a group outing, and the opportunity feels diluted, but it's better than nothing.

I want to spoil her, to show her she's worth the effort. But Poppy's pride, her staunch independence, it's a fortress I'm still figuring out how to breach.

I sigh, loosening another button on my shirt. Blue is her favorite color. It also happens to complement my muscles in a way I know she'll enjoy. It's a small vanity, but one I allow myself.

I've just made my way to the kitchen when footsteps echo behind me, and I turn to see Cole, his hair a tousled mess, a smirk playing on his lips.

"Look at you, all dressed up," he drawls, scratching at his bare chest, eyes raking over my outfit with exaggerated awe.

I roll my eyes. "Your grumpy ass is up before ten. Color me shocked."

He chuckles. “Going on a date?”

“Taking the girls to buy dresses for varsity ball,” I respond, trying to keep the irritation from seeping into my voice.

He raises an eyebrow. “Girls?” He emphasizes the *s*, a teasing lilt in his voice.

“Yeah, these girls only move in groups, it seems. Told Poppy I’d buy dresses for the other two as well.”

Cole disappears into his room, emerging with his black Amex, extending it toward me with a flourish. “For Evangeline’s dress, my good sir.”

I snicker, pushing it back at him. “You do realize we have the same card, right?”

He pushes the card toward me again. “Yes, but I’m her date—I pay for the dress. I am a gentleman, after all.”

I roll my eyes, pushing the card back. “Come on, man, don’t overplay your role. I need you to—”

He slams his hand on the counter, his voice sharp, the playful glint in his eyes now gone. “Buy the fucking dress, Ethan, and move on.”

I whistle. “Okay, Mr. Romance Psycho, I’ll make her buy the most expensive thing there is and have her pick shoes to go with it.”

He nods approvingly. “And get the dress in red; it really suits her,” he adds before retreating to his room, leaving me shaking my head in amused disbelief.

I’m left in a momentary silence, pondering his abrupt mood swings, when suddenly, Liam’s laughter echoes from the living room, pulling me from my thoughts.

I look up to see him leaning against the doorframe of his room. “Now I need to find someone for Morticia.”

“She’s a pretty thing; it shouldn’t be that hard,” he replies with a playful glint in his eyes.

“She’s dangerous.”

“Like a slow loris?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“A what?”

“You know, slow loris.”

I look at him, still not computing.

“Those little guys are about the size of a teddy bear and look like a miniature Ewok, but they’ll bite if they feel threatened, and their bites are laced with a deadly, fast-acting poison.”

“Yeah, something like that,” I muse. “I see... How do you even know this type of shit?”

He pauses, a contemplative expression crossing his features. “I’ll be her date.”

My mouth hangs open, too surprised to say something right away. Liam doesn’t date students, and it’s something he makes abundantly clear to every girl coming on to him at parties, after the game, basically everywhere he goes.

“You don’t have to,” I manage to stammer out.

“I know,” he responds, a secretive, almost mischievous smile playing on his lips before he retreats back to his room.

What on earth is happening today?

With a shake of my head, I grab my keys and head to my car, driving to meet the girls at the mall. My car, spacious and luxurious, seems too empty, and I can’t help but feel a pang of annoyance remembering how Poppy immediately refused my offer to give them a ride.

They spill out of the aged Chevrolet, a cascade of laughter and chatter following them. Leaning against my polished Lexus SUV, I’m struck by their preference for the worn, cramped car over the spacious luxury I had offered.

What wouldn’t she do to limit her time with you? A voice whispers insidiously in my mind, and it stings more than I care to admit.

“Hi,” Poppy greets and my smile forms instinctively when I see her eyes quickly scan me, an appreciative blush on her cheeks.

“You’re beautiful,” I say softly. She waves a dismissive hand, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. I mean it, though. Even clad in skinny jeans and a thick blue cable sweater, she takes my breath away, an effortless allure that she seems blissfully unaware of.

Eva, eyeing me from under her glasses, has eyes that are gentle and curious. She seems too sweet, too gentle for Cole. He’s going to devour her whole.

I look up to catch Nessa’s sarcastic, mocking blue gaze, noting how much she reminds me of Cole.

She smirks, looking somewhat devious. “Small Prick, don’t even dream of treating us like we’re your harem,” she greets, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

I can’t help but laugh. Despite her abrasiveness, I kind of like the girl. “Perish the thought, Morticia,” I retort with a playful smirk, “some of us do have standards, after all.”

She straightens up, and the gracefulness of her movements always takes me by surprise.

“Indeed. We do,” Nessa replies sharply. “I would die if people thought I was with you.”

“At least your complexion would go with your style.”

I see appreciation in her eyes. Yep, that one is really like Cole.

“Here we go,” Poppy mutters, and I turn toward her, extending my arm to her.

“Shall we?”

She casts a brief, contemplative glance at my outstretched arm, a frown knitting her brows together. Then, without a word, she sidesteps me, choosing to walk ahead alone, her steps resolute and hurried.

“Burn!” Nessa snickers and rushes to join Poppy.

I follow them, my steps reverberating in the vastness of the mall.

Eva whispers, her voice a gentle murmur barely reaching my ears amid the mall's ambient noise, "She's been fighting for so long, I don't think she remembers how to lay down her arms, how to surrender even a little."

I glance down at her, surprised to see her there with me. I think it's the first time she's ever spoken to me. "It's fine, I'm a patient man."

She looks up and gives me a bright smile, revealing the gap in her front teeth, and I can understand now the obsession Cole has for the girl. But I also know that he is not good enough for her. Just like I'm not good enough for Poppy, but the big difference is that I know it, and he doesn't.

We walk into the store with evening gowns, and I find a seat. Poppy turns to me, her eyes shining with apprehension and nervousness. "Promise you'll be honest about how they look?" she asks.

"Always," I reply, watching as she disappears into the fitting room.

I watch them going in and out trying on dresses, but the only one I really care about is Poppy. Each time she emerges, there's a subtle tension in her posture, a hesitancy in her gaze, despite the stunning way each dress embraces her. It's a far cry from the self-assured Poppy of our high school days, and the mystery of her change gnaws at me. When she emerges in a royal-blue dress that hugs her figure just right, my heart skips a beat. She looks stunning, and I can't help but get lost in the way the fabric drapes so perfectly over her.

"That color suits you," I can't help but comment.

She gives a half smile. "You think?"

"Absolutely," I affirm.

She clears her throat, and I lean to the side, trying to listen to what she is asking Nessa, who exited her own changing room in a black-and-deep-purple corset dress that frankly looks made for her.

A girl sidles up beside me, her voice a sultry purr. "You're Ethan Hawthorne, aren't you?"

The bubbling frustration reaches the top, and I don't even try to be my charming self. "Indeed, I am," I respond tersely, my gaze barely leaving Poppy for a second.

She smirks. "I wanted to introduce myself. I'm Jenna."

"Nice to meet you, Jenna," I reply, my tone curt.

"I've come to get a dress for the varsity ball. I know one player will definitely ask me out."

I nod absentmindedly, my eyes still locked on Poppy. "Yes, there are a lot of desperate guys out there." I smile as Poppy twirls, checking the dress in the mirror. "I'm sorry, whatever your name, but I'm with my girlfriend," I add, pointing to Poppy, who is now looking at us through the mirror.

My smile widens, both at the elation I feel at using this word when referring to Poppy and for the hint of jealousy I'm sure I see in her eyes as she looks at us.

"Oh, I didn't realize you had a girlfriend."

"Well, I do. Excuse me." I rise deliberately slowly from my seat and make my way toward Poppy, leaving the girl, nameless and insignificant, visibly angry behind me.

I approach Poppy, tenderly wrapping my arms around her waist from behind. My breath hitches as I lean closer, my voice barely a whisper. "You are breathtaking."

She stiffens. "What are you doing?" she hisses, resting her hands on my arms, tightening her fingers, ready to pull them open.

"Just warding off a pest," I whisper, my breath caressing her ear. Her eyes flicker to the scorned girl's scowling reflection in the mirror, and I feel a subtle relaxation in her posture, a quiet acknowledgment of our silent pact.

She traces her fingers along the side of her waist, where once gentle curves used to be more pronounced, with a distant look in her eyes. "Maybe something more flowy would work better now. I don't have many curves to complement this dress," she ponders aloud.

I want to punch myself. It's obvious that my words in the car the other night did some damage, which is as far from what I wanted as possible.

"You've always been perfect to me," I murmur, my lips brushing softly against her cheek, staying a moment longer than necessary.

She looks up, startled, and meets my eyes. Something passes between us, but then her eyes widen. "Oh, the decoy!"

The what? I can't think straight. I can only think of the softness of her skin on my lips and how her short, small frame fits so perfectly in my arms.

Her voice, a gentle whisper against the faint rustle of fabric, breaks through my daydream. "You can let go now; she's gone."

Who is what? I think, still in a daze, but reluctantly open my arms as she twists in them.

She hesitates, her fingers lightly tracing the fabric of the dress. "I'll take this one then if it pleases you," she adds, a subtle vulnerability in her eyes. I nod, my throat tight, and retreat to my chair, her reflection in the mirror hauntingly beautiful in the royal blue.

Poppy's words linger in the air, a subtle electricity that seems to hum between us even as she steps away. I watch her retreat back into the fitting room, the blue fabric of the dress whispering secrets as it slides along her figure.

I hear a snort and turn to Nessa, who rolls her eyes at me before disappearing into her changing room. She crosses her arms, her eyes gleaming with unspoken amusement. "Your subtlety could use some work, you know."

I raise an eyebrow, feigning innocence. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

She snorts, a smirk playing on her lips. "Sure you don't. Remember that Poppy's been through a lot. Don't jerk her around."

I nod, seriousness settling over me. "I wouldn't dream of it."

She studies me for a moment longer before nodding, seemingly satisfied with my sincerity. “Good.”

The girls make their final purchases, Eva choosing a surprisingly expensive, elegant champagne-colored dress and a matching bag, while Nessa opts for the goth-like black-and-purple dress that somehow perfectly complements her sarcastic personality.

As we stroll through the mall, Poppy occasionally steals glances in my direction, her eyes revealing a flicker of wariness before she quickly looks away, maintaining a careful distance between us.

As the girls chat between themselves, taking the direction of the food court, my pace slows until I stop in front of a cell phone shop, looking at the shiny new smartphone in the window.

It would be so easy for me to go in and buy her a phone with a plan and be finally at ease knowing she would not be without credit again, but I also know how much she would hate it and how deeply she would resent me for it.

Joining the girls at the food court, I find Poppy sipping a milkshake while Eva and Nessa are in line for food. “Not hungry?” I inquire, my hand instinctively reaching for my wallet.

Her eyes flash a silent warning as she sips her straw, and my hands lift in a gesture of surrender.

“I can’t stay,” she admits, “I didn’t think it would take so long, and I have a shift.”

Eva and Nessa return, a tray of Chinese food in hand. “Let me drive you to work,” I offer, ensuring the girls can hear.

Eva checks her watch. “Oh! Work. I’ll take you.” She stands briskly.

Poppy’s expression wavers, but I hold my ground, silently confident she will accept my offer rather than inconvenience her roommates. “I have to head back anyway. Practice in a while.”

Her shoulders deflate subtly, signaling my quiet victory. “No, it’s fine. Ethan will take me. Can you take the bag home for me?”

Nessa nods. “No worries. And remember, Small Prick, I know how to hex.”

I laugh. “I’ll be nothing but a gentleman.”

The drive envelops us in silence, a frustrating void where I grapple with understanding our stance. I park in front of the pizza place, and she turns to me, her tone resolute yet tinged with something unspoken. “We can’t be more than this, Ethan. It’s not possible.”

My face remains impassive as I nod, but internally, a smile threatens to surface. Her words, though firm, echo an internal battle. Her conflict is palpable, and I can work with that.

“What time are you off? I’ll pick you up.”

“Did you miss the part where I said it can’t be more?”

“No, I didn’t. But we’re friends, right?”

She hesitates, her eyes searching mine. “More or less... old habits die hard. We used to be rivals for everything.”

I snort. “If only you knew...”

Her voice is soft. Weary. Resonating with me in an unexpected way. “It’s okay. I promised Mom I’d go home, and no matter what you say, it’s a place you’re not welcome.”

I shrug, pretending it’s not a big deal. “Okay, maybe next time.”

She shakes her head. “I keep wondering, *being friends*, you and I... it’s probably a waste of time.”

I turn to her, my eyebrows knitting together in confusion. “What do you mean?”

She looks away, her voice barely audible. “Our families, our history... they will never understand, and I won’t subject my mom to you or your family. We lost everything, Ethan, and we had no one. Trust doesn’t come easy for me. Sorry if I don’t see life the way you do, but I lost my illusions when we fell.

Who is to blame is not even relevant—we can never be anything more. Our fathers’ scandal caused too much pain.”

It stings more than I care to admit, but my resolve hardens. I’m stubborn, and I believe, perhaps naively, that it can work. “Friendship isn’t too much, is it? What do you really have to lose, huh?”

She gives no reply, her silence loud and clear, and quietly, she exits the car.

I let her go, and my mind spirals back, recalling those days, a mix of anger and confusion always bubbling under my surface. My dad had painted Alan Lockwood as the villain of our story, and I swallowed that narrative without a second thought.

One night, after Alan was sent to jail, Poppy’s mom came to our doorstep, tears streaming down her face, a picture of despair. But what did I do? Nothing. I watched as my dad coldly turned her away. I even thought they had it coming for trying to dismantle us.

Does Poppy know about that night? How would her mom feel seeing me with Poppy now? A part of me wants to justify my past self, saying I was only a kid, barely seventeen, and that I couldn’t have done anything. But that’s not entirely true, is it? If I’d really wanted to, I could’ve stood up.

For a fleeting second, I see so much more of my father in me, and a wave of nausea washes over me. The realization that I might carry even a fragment of his deceitful nature is a bitter pill to swallow.

Chapter 12



Poppy

The bathroom fan hums as I fasten my moon locket with trembling fingers, its weight a little comfort that alleviates some of the apprehension I have for tonight. Evangeline's distant music contrasts with my inner turmoil.

Gazing into the mirror, a stranger draped in royal blue stares back, her face adorned with intricate makeup, a ritual I hadn't indulged in for over two years. The locket gleams in the soft light. I grab it in my hand and take a deep breath, still conflicted about meeting Ethan at the ball only minutes before the car is supposed to pick us up.

My mind drifts to last Tuesday, the way Ethan's eyes lingered on me a moment too long, revealing a depth of emotion that both thrilled and terrified me. His touch always a tad too intimate yet undeniably comforting in its warmth. I remember the softness in his voice, how his manner subtly changed in our private moments, and the words we left hanging in the silence as he held me close in that store and how much I loved it.

I sigh. Deep down, I know it isn't simply a friendly meet. The flutter in my chest tells me so. Spending over an hour on my hair and makeup wasn't just for any ordinary date, and certainly not with my heart racing this wildly.

Nessa sweeps into the bathroom, embodying gothic elegance with her eyes smoldering in a perfect smoky hue and lips painted a light purple, harmonizing with the lower half of her cascading hair.

“You seem on edge. What’s got you rattled?” Gracefully, she places her hands on my shoulders, our eyes locking in the mirror’s reflection. Her height allows her to rest her chin atop my head, a familiar gesture that usually brings comfort.

“I don’t know...” It’s half the truth.

A wicked smile plays on her lips. “One word and he becomes a eunuch,” she declares, flaunting her long, pointed black nails with a sinister flourish.

A genuine laugh escapes my lips, a lightness expanding in me as Nessa’s joke dissipates the tight knot of anxiety, if only for an instant. “No headphones tonight,” I tease, my voice a gentle nudge against her armor.

She tilts her head, revealing the tiny earbuds nestled discreetly.

“Alright, let’s get Brainy out there,” Nessa says before exiting the bathroom as the same storm she was coming in.

“What’s going on here?” Nessa’s voice filters through as I near Eva’s room, curiosity threading my steps. “I mean, I’m all supportive of the devil-may-care look, but you may have pushed it a little too far.”

I find Eva lounging on her bed in sweatpants, her hair in a messy bun. “The car’s almost here, right?” I note, spotting snacks and a paused episode of *The Office* on her laptop, but no dress in sight.

“Yep,” she pops the *p* with a carefree flick of her wrist, sending a kernel of popcorn into her mouth. Her eyes, however, betray a flicker of something deeper, a momentary lapse in her nonchalant armor.

Nessa and I exchange a glance, then turn back to Eva.

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry for lying to you, Pops, I really am, but I never planned to come.” She lets out a laugh,

nestling more comfortably in her pile of pillows. “There was never a scenario in which I would have even considered going, but I could see you were dying to go, and I knew I had to pretend for a while.”

“But the dress. Ethan...” My voice trails off, questions unspoken.

She laughs. “I returned it the next day. The extra eight hundred dollars in the food jar? That’s from the dress.”

Nessa exhales dramatically, her attempt to lighten the mood obvious. “Oh, thank God! I was half convinced that one of you sold your body or something. And if so, it was a bargain,” Nessa tries to joke, lightening the dense air around us.

My mind whirls, caught between admiration for her audacity and the guilt at leaving her behind and also the awkwardness when we’ll get there without her.

The buzzer sounds, a timely interruption to the spiraling thoughts. “It’s probably your car,” Eva murmurs, her eyes returning to the screen. “Have fun; seriously, you both need it.”

As we grab our bags, Nessa smirks. “I like this version of Eva. Her craftiness is humbling.”

I nod, but as I descend toward the limo, thoughts of Eva dissolve, replaced by a stampede of broncos in my stomach. Despite my internal denials, tonight unmistakably morphs into a date.

The limo glides through the city, the bright lights from towering skyscrapers casting fleeting shadows inside the plush interior. My fingers dance nervously over the keys of my phone, composing a message to Ethan.

We’ll be there in 10. I hesitate briefly before pressing send, the tiny “sent” notification somehow amplifying the fluttering in my stomach.

Nessa, perceptive as always, shoots me a knowing look, her lips curving into a mischievous grin. “Nervous, Pops?” she teases, her fingers lightly tracing patterns on the back of my hand in a silent offer of comfort.

I offer a half smile, my gaze drifting to the window, where the cityscape blurs into a cascade of lights and shapes. “Just... a lot on my mind,” I admit quietly, the reflection of my anxious expression ghosting back at me through the darkened glass.

The limo slows, pulling up to the opulent facade of the luxury hotel. My heart leaps into my throat as the driver opens the door, the sounds of laughter and distant music wafting into our secluded space. Nessa steps out first, her posture radiating a confidence I desperately wish I could mirror.

Taking a deep breath, I follow, my heels clicking against the cobblestone as we make our way toward the entrance. Ethan, Liam, and Cole stand there, an almost surreal vision of elegance as they look like they escaped from a magazine in their designer tuxedos.

My breath catches in my throat as my eyes lock with Ethan’s, his gaze holding a warmth and intensity that sends shivers down my spine.

He steps forward, extending a hand, but before my hand can touch his, Cole’s sharp voice slices through the moment.

“Where the fuck is Eva?” His eyes, burning with irritation and an undercurrent of something darker, flick between Nessa and me, demanding an answer.

The spell is broken. Ethan’s hand drops back to his side, and I’m abruptly yanked back to reality. “She... uh, she couldn’t make it. She’s sick,” I manage to stammer, the lie bitter and heavy on my tongue.

Cole’s eyes narrow, a storm brewing behind them, but before he can unleash it upon us, Ethan intervenes, his voice calm yet firm. “It’s alright, Cole. Let’s not ruin the evening over this.” He shoots me an apologetic look, the unspoken words hanging heavily between us.

Cole’s jaw tics, and his gaze is concentrated on the glass doors behind us, narrowing every so often as if he were calculating.

He turns abruptly and leaves, his pace rigid.

“What’s up with Small Prick?” Nessa asks with a frown. “I’m sure he only needs to snap his fingers to have ten desperate girls at his feet.”

Amusement dances in Ethan’s eyes. “I thought I was Small Prick.”

Nessa smirks, her gaze shifting to Liam. “You’re all Small Prick, except you. I honestly hope you’re not.” Liam, unfazed and ever the flirt, extends his arm, a devilish grin playing on his lips. “One way to find out.”

A small smile crosses my face as I dismiss the thought.

“Shall we?” Ethan’s voice is soft, his hand extended toward me, an invitation hanging in the air.

My heart stutters, caught on the edge of a precipice. Friends don’t hold hands like this; don’t stand suspended in a moment charged with unspoken promises. But I do it anyway, and as my skin touches his, the way his pupils dilate and my skin burns is anything but friendly, and as we follow Nessa and Liam into the luxurious room, I know one thing... my heart is in far more danger than I predicted.

The grandeur of the room envelops me as I step inside, a breathtaking spectacle of luxury and elegance. Crystal chandeliers cascade from the ceiling, casting a golden glow across the room. Couples twirl gracefully across the dance floor, their laughter intertwining with the gentle melodies of the live orchestra. My breath catches in my throat, momentarily lost in the enchanting scene before me.

Ethan extends his hand, a silent invitation, and I place mine in his, allowing him to lead me onto the dance floor. His fingers are warm against mine, his touch steady and reassuring. We move together, our bodies swaying in harmony to the lilting melody, and if only for an instant, the world fades away, leaving just the two of us.

His eyes, deep and intense, lock onto mine, and I find myself drowning in their depths. Ethan’s fingers brush against my cheek, a gentle caress, as he tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear. Our eyes remain locked, a silent conversation

passing between us, and I feel myself leaning in, drawn to him like a moth to a flame. A playful smile tugs at his lips, lightening the charged atmosphere between us. “You’re stepping on my foot, Poppy,” he whispers, his voice a gentle tease.

My cheeks flush with embarrassment, yet his smile only broadens, his thumb caressing the back of my hand in reassurance. “It’s okay,” he murmurs, “I’ve survived worse.”

As we continue to dance, my gaze drifts across the room, landing on Liam and Nessa. Liam leans down, whispering something into Nessa’s ear. Her eyes widen, and she pulls back sharply, her expression unreadable, before she vanishes into the crowd.

Ethan’s fingers encircle my waist, pulling me closer, and I can’t help but be acutely aware of every point of contact between us. His hand is warm against the small of my back, his fingers exerting the slightest pressure, guiding our movements. The other hand entwines with mine, lifting it delicately in the air. His eyes, a deep, mesmerizing gaze, never leave mine, and it feels as though we are the only two people in the room.

The music, a slow, sultry melody, wraps around us, and our bodies move in sync, a gentle ebb and flow that mirrors the rhythm of our breaths. His proximity is intoxicating, the faint scent of his cologne mingling with the warmth of his skin. My heart flutters wildly, a delicate bird caged by ribs that feel as though they may shatter under the weight of my longing.

Ethan pulls me close, his breath a whisper against my ear that sends shivers down my spine. “Poppy,” he murmurs, “you’re enchanting tonight.”

My breath catches, and I tilt my head up to meet his gaze, finding a depth of emotion that leaves me breathless. His eyes flicker to my lips, and for a heartbeat, time stands still.

He leans in, his lips hovering mere inches from mine, and I can feel the warmth of his breath, the almost kiss lingering in the charged space between us. “I’ve been wanting to do this all

night,” he confesses, his voice a barely audible whisper amid the gentle sway of the music.

My heart hammers as he leans in, our lips almost meeting, and I pull back a fraction, torn between the mistake and the desire.

We continue to move together, the world around us fading into insignificance, and for those few stolen moments, nothing else matters but the two of us, lost in the music and the unspoken words that linger in the air.

Ethan’s voice, gentle and earnest, pulls me back. “Tell me a truth, Poppy.”

I blink, taken aback. “A truth?”

He nods. “Something raw and real. And in return, I’ll do the same.”

I hesitate, then exhale, my gaze dropping to our joined hands. “Sometimes, I think I’ve made peace with what my life has become. But other times, the weight of injustice is so heavy on my chest that I want to scream until my throat hurts and my voice is gone.”

His fingers tighten around mine, yet when I look up, I see the light has dimmed in his eyes. I step back, a pang of regret piercing through me. Perhaps I’ve said too much, or maybe not enough.

Suddenly, the music halts, and an administrator takes the stage, his voice echoing through the now-silent room. My eyes scan the crowd, but Nessa is nowhere to be found, and Liam, off to the side, wears a sour expression.

“I have to go look for my friend,” I murmur, pulling away.

Ethan’s grip on my wrist stops me. “Wait. I didn’t tell you my truth. I... I can’t only be your friend, Poppy. I want to be more, so much more.”

His words hang heavily between us, a silent plea in his eyes. My heart races, conflicting emotions warring within me. I open my mouth, but words fail me, my thoughts a chaotic whirlwind.

His name echoes from the stage. His grip falters, and I withdraw my hand, my heart pounding a rapid beat against my ribs. Without a second thought, I make my exit. Just before leaving the ballroom, I risk a glance back. Ethan's eyes are scanning the crowd, missing my retreat.

Outside, the city's hum is a stark contrast to the ballroom's intensity. I quickly hail a taxi, and as it winds through the streets, Ethan's words and the look in his eyes play on repeat in my mind. I hug my arms around myself, trying to contain the whirlwind of emotions.

The taxi stops at my apartment. I pay, my fingers trembling, and hurry inside. The moment I enter, a golf club narrowly misses my face. Eva, holding it, looks unfazed.

"Really, Eva?" I exclaim, my heart still racing.

She sets the club down. "You're back early. What happened?"

I collapse onto the sofa, the weight of the night pressing down. "He wants more," I murmur, the confession feeling like a betrayal.

Eva's gaze sharpens. "And you?"

I swallow hard, tears threatening. "It's complicated. I want to, but that's the problem."

She sits beside me, her presence grounding. "Tell me everything."

And so I do. I spill everything, from the dance to Ethan's confession to the fear that grips my heart. Eva listens, her expression unchanging, offering a safe harbor in the storm.

Chapter 13



Poppy

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafts through the apartment, mingling with the sizzling sound of eggs in the skillet. I hum to myself, preparing breakfast for me and my roommates. Letting out some of my feelings for Ethan to Eva last night truly helped, and I am starting to wonder if it would not be better for the three of us to let it all out in the safety of our own peculiar group. It is a safe place, and as we are all three recipients of the Phoenix Rising Scholarship, it is clear that fate has not dealt us the best of cards.

I'm hoping that breakfast will put them in a receptive mood because I know we need to talk. I'm curious to know why Eva, my usually composed and well-spoken roommate, gets almost feral when Cole Westbrook is in close proximity. I need to know why Nessa, my flirty, fierce roommate, is always walking around with headphones and why she freaked out and disappeared last night when Liam Ashford gave her a little more attention. And I have to explain to them why, despite my growing feelings for Ethan, I am fighting it so hard.

These past few months spent together already made us a close-knit unit. I think that to keep each other safe and survive the next four years, we need to take it a step further.

I wince, rehearsing the speech in my head, scared that they will think I'm prying instead of trying to help us all.

I open the fridge to retrieve the orange juice.

"Who died?"

I spin around, the carton of juice pressed against my chest, meeting Nessa's sleepy gaze. Her flannel pajamas, adorned with bats, hang loosely on her frame.

"Died? Why would anybody be dead?" I ask, pointing at the counter for her to take a seat.

"Because I think it's the first time in three months that anyone is actually cooking anything."

I turn to see Eva already dressed for the day in a pair of tailored black pants and a green woolen sweater-vest that complements her eyes perfectly.

"Nobody is dead."

"How come you're already ready? It's only eight thirty on a Saturday," Nessa grumbles, taking a seat at the counter with a huff.

"Yes, it's *already* eight thirty."

I clear my throat, and I serve the eggs onto plates, letting the silence stretch a moment longer. The sizzle of the pan fills the room. "About last night"—I pause, hesitating—"I think we need to talk."

Nessa throws me a wary glance before putting some creamer in her coffee. "I'm not sure we need to."

"I think we need to let it out. I—"

A faint shuffle at the door draws my attention, and I turn just in time to see a worn envelope slip through the gap beneath it. My name. *Poppy* is scribbled across the front in a familiar, messy handwriting. My heart skips a beat as I approach, picking it up with cautious fingers.

"Is that a love letter from Hawthorne?" Nessa scoffs.

I trace my name on the envelope, almost too scared to open it.

“I... I can't only be your friend, Poppy. I want to be more, so much more.” Ethan's voice rings in my head, each word a gentle echo that sends my heart into a fluttering mess. I pause, the envelope in my hands suddenly feeling heavier than it should, as I remember his confession.

Is it a love letter? No, Ethan is not cheesy. Is it a note calling me a coward for the way I disappeared last night? Yes, that's far more probable and also really deserved.

“Earth to Poppy.” I blink, my gaze shifting back to the girls, their eyes locked on the envelope in my hands, curiosity painted on their faces.

“You can't leave us hanging,” Nessa presses.

I open the envelope, and a weight is lifted off my chest. It's not a letter full of reproach or a declaration of love. No, it's exactly what I need, and part of me curses him for knowing me so well.

It's a voucher for a rage room with a single yellow Post-it taped on it where he scribbled, *Let it all out*.

I let out a small laugh, holding up the voucher. “It's for a rage room, booked for lunchtime. Can you believe it?” I pause, looking between them. “Are you game?”

Eva cocks her head to the side, contemplative, as Nessa starts to grin.

“Smashing stuff for free?” She snorts. “I'm so in.”

I shake my head and turn to Eva.

She twists her mouth to the side. “I'm not sure...”

“Are you scared to let it all out?” I ask, and honestly, I mean it as a joke, but the sudden seriousness of her face kills the humor in an instant.

“I'm not sure I'll be able to close the box if I do.” Her voice is barely a whisper, a fragile admission hanging in the air. Nessa, ever the comforter, places a hand on her back, rubbing

soothing circles. “That’s exactly why you need to, Eva. Because we’re here to help you close it again.”

Eva’s eyes linger on ours; a silent battle wages behind them before she finally nods, a quiet agreement sealed in the small yet significant gesture. “Okay,” she whispers, “let’s do it.”

The decision is made, and with a collective, albeit shaky, resolve, we find ourselves getting ready for this peculiar experience.

The more that time passes, the more the idea of smashing things excites me. I can already imagine the frustration leaving my body, and by the time it’s time to go, I’m almost bouncing with excitement.

We embark in Eva’s Cherry Bomb, and we navigate through the city streets, the atmosphere charged with anticipation and apprehension. The rage room, inconspicuously nestled between a quaint bookstore and a bustling café, awaits us, its nondescript exterior belying the cathartic chaos that lies within.

As we push open the door, a cacophony of shattering glass and muffled yells greets us, a symphony of unleashed emotions that are somehow oddly welcoming. We exchange tentative glances, each of us silently acknowledging the step we are about to take—not only into the room but into a space where our pent-up frustrations, fears, and pains can freely unravel.

We approach the counter, and a guy with a mohawk smiles at us.

“Poppy Donovan?” I try, not sure if Ethan has used my new name or not. I put the voucher on the counter.

“Yes, perfect. I’m Ted, and I’ll be your team safety officer today. Come with me.”

We follow him silently to a changing room.

He looks down at our feet. “Shoes are fine; no need to change them,” he says before turning around. “Love the combat boots, by the way,” he adds before looking back at Nessa, who ignores his comment.

He shrugs at her obvious disinterest and continues. “You need to wear your safety gear before getting into the room.” He points at the wall where yellow bodysuits are hanging. “You need to put on a combi. They go from XS to XXL. Then”—he points at two big plastic bins—“you need to grab the face protector. We usually encourage the enclosed one, but if you want the visor, it’s up to you, but you will need to wear the glasses as well.”

I glance over at Eva, noticing how her fingers twitch at the mention of the protective gear. Anticipation or anxiety? It’s hard to tell.

“It’s like I’m in an episode of *Breaking Bad*,” Nessa mutters, grabbing a bodysuit from the rack.

The guy laughs. “Yeah, you’re not the first to say that. Okay. You can put your belongings in the lockers and put on the bracelet with the key, and don’t forget to grab heavy-duty gloves on your way out. I’ll wait for you by door three.”

We each step into our respective bodysuits, the material whispering against our skin with every movement. I catch a glimpse of our reflections in the mirror—three women shrouded in yellow, faces partially obscured by visors and masks. We look ready for battle, and in a way, we are. Battling our demons, our pasts, and our pent-up emotions that have been simmering beneath the surface for far too long. With a nod to each other, we step out of the changing room, our steps synchronized, our resolve solidified.

Ted, clipboard in hand, welcomes us with a warm grin, standing confidently in front of the vivid red door. “Perfect, let’s head in. Your team is already inside.”

“Our T—” My voice catches in my throat, words evaporating as the door swings open, revealing Ethan, Liam, and Cole, helmets casually held in their hands, their stances a mix of mischief and anticipation.

“Our team...” My eyes narrow at Ethan, who meets my gaze with a shrug and a smile that’s half guilty, half teasing.

My focus involuntarily homes in on Ethan as he saunters over, standing so close that I can sense the warmth radiating from him. Ted's explanation about the array of destructive weapons available to us becomes a distant hum in the background.

He steps closer, the intensity of his gaze making my heart race. "You're not too angry about us crashing your session, are you?" His voice is gentle, almost hesitant. "I wanted to be here."

"To watch me lose my mind?" I retort, a playful edge to my voice.

"No," he whispers, his breath caressing my skin, "to see you let go and to be here in case you need someone to hold on to afterward."

His words, laden with unspoken promises and a depth of emotion, cause my heart to flutter uncontrollably. I turn to him, our eyes locking, and for a fleeting instant, the world around us fades away.

"Hey, lovebirds, focus!" Ted's voice slices through our bubble, and we break apart, a blush creeping up my cheeks as if we've been caught stealing a moment.

My eyes drift to the others, landing on Cole, who's glaring at the floor, a dark energy swirling around him. A scrape bridges his nose, flanked by two burgeoning shiners beneath his eyes.

Leaning toward Ethan, I nod subtly toward Cole. "Rough practice?"

Ethan shrugs, his eyes following mine. "No clue. He stumbled in late last night. Looks like he broke his nose."

My gaze flickers to Eva, who's eyeing Cole with a challenging stare and a sly, satisfied smile playing on her lips. A wild thought crosses my mind about his nose and her golf club, but it dissipates as quickly as it came—she was home all night, after all.

As Ted concludes his briefing, we each select a weapon, and before we can decide on an order, Eva slams her helmet down

and begins to swing with a wild, unrestrained fury, objects splintering beneath her wrath. Her cries, raw and laced with pain, claw at my soul.

Cole approaches. His expression a carefully crafted mask of concern. “Angel...” His voice is a gentle caress, his hand slowly rising in an attempt to still her.

Angel? My brows knit together in confusion.

Eva’s grip on the bat tightens, her entire body radiating fury. “Don’t touch me,” she snarls, swinging the bat with all her might. It slices through the air, stopping mere inches from him.

His reflexes save him, but the threat lingers in the air, charged and volatile. “Do not touch me. Ever again!”

He growls a low, primal sound that sends shivers down my spine. “I’ll touch you if—”

She swings again, her movements a chaotic dance of fury and despair. My eyes seek Ethan, helpless and pleading.

He steps forward, inserting himself between them. “Chill, bro,” he murmurs, a hand resting on Cole’s chest.

Cole slaps it away, his eyes ablaze with a dark fire. “You don’t tell me what to do with her!” he spits, trying to peer around Ethan at Eva, who now sobs openly.

Nessa encircles Eva with her arms, cautiously lifting her mask.

“No, but I won’t stand by while you scare her,” Ethan counters, his stance solid, protective.

Nessa’s eyes, shadowed with defeat, meet mine. “Take the Cherry Bomb and drive her home,” I tell her. “I’ll be there soon.”

Nessa barely resembles herself as she whispers, “I can’t... I’m not allowed to.”

“Ethan, move, or I swear to God—” Cole’s voice is a venomous hiss through gritted teeth, his demeanor feral.

“Enough!” Liam’s voice slices through the tension, his helmet crashing to the floor with a resounding crack. “Enough of this damn drama. No one needs it.”

He steps forward, his hand caressing Nessa’s shoulder, coaxing her to look at him as Eva’s cries, now heart-wrenching, are muffled against Nessa’s chest.

His expression softens, eyes tender. “Let me take you home,” he whispers.

She glances at me, and I nod reassuringly. “I’ll take care of the car.”

She nods to Liam, and he reaches down to carry Eva out of the room.

The room’s atmosphere is thick with tension; each shattered object is a testament to the raw emotions unleashed. Ethan’s grip on Cole remains firm, his eyes locked onto the other man’s seething gaze. “Let them go, Cole,” he says, his voice a steady, calming force amid the chaos of emotions swirling around us.

Cole’s body trembles with restrained fury, but eventually, he relents, his shoulders slumping in a mixture of frustration and defeat. Ethan cautiously releases him, his eyes never leaving Cole’s face.

Cole turns away, his voice a mere whisper in the distant echoes of destruction from other rooms. “She’s mine,” he says before stepping out.

Ethan and I are left in the room. He turns toward me, his eyes reflecting a storm of emotions—regret, concern, and something deeper, more vulnerable.

“I’m sorry, Poppy,” he whispers, his voice a gentle caress that somehow soothes the chaos inside me. “I truly thought I was helping.”

In that moment, something shifts, a barrier breaking down as I step closer, my heart pounding in my chest. His eyes search mine, a question lingering in their depths, and I find myself drowning in the sincerity I see there.

My hand cradles his cheek, his stubble grazing my palm, and his eyes flutter closed briefly at the contact. When they reopen, the vulnerability has deepened, mingling with a raw, aching need that mirrors my own.

And then we're kissing.

We cross the room and every brush of our hands sends sparks skittering across my skin. His lips, tender yet assertive, become my entire world, and I drown willingly in the sweet urgency of the moment.

My fingers weave into his hair, drawing him impossibly closer, while his hands, gentle yet firm, find the small of my back, anchoring me. The world dissolves, leaving only the feeling of his lips whispering silent promises against mine and the tender caress of his breath mixing with my own.

When we part, a sigh of mingled breaths remains between us. His forehead finds mine, and his voice, a low, husky whisper, sends shivers cascading down my spine.

But as Ethan's lips linger, a sweet, tantalizing promise, the reality of our closeness, the unveiled emotions, crashes over me like a tidal wave. My breath catches, eyes darting away from his, unable to bear the raw vulnerability shimmering in his gaze.

His fingers, still tenderly cradling my face, coax me back, but I'm already retreating, walls hastily rebuilding. "Poppy," he breathes, a plea, a prayer, but I'm spiraling, the intimacy of the moment too stark against the chaos of my thoughts.

I step back, the physical distance a meager attempt to shield my now exposed heart. His hand falls away, the loss of his warmth a stark contrast against the heat of his kiss. My voice, when it comes, is barely a whisper. "I can't, Ethan."

His eyes, a tumultuous sea of confusion and longing, search mine, but I'm already turning away, fleeing from the intensity of what transpired. My feet carry me swiftly out of the room, away from a moment too potent, too real.

This kiss was a mistake, but how could a mistake feel so right, and why is it that I want to do it again?

Chapter 14



Ethan

I royally fucked up. Grabbing the baseball bat Eva discarded, I smash the TV, releasing all my pent-up frustration.

The sound of shattering glass mirrors the chaos inside my head. Each swing of the bat amplifies my regret. I'm haunted by the memory of Poppy's lips, her warmth, and the coldness that followed.

Why did I bring Cole along? Why interfere in her healing? At the ball, she revealed her bottled-up pain, and it haunted me. I wanted to support her, but instead, I complicated things.

The bat connects with a porcelain vase, sending shards flying in all directions. The destruction around me is a mirror of the mess I've made of things. I should've respected her boundaries and given her the space she needed. But no, I had to play the hero, the fixer. And in doing so, I might've pushed her further away.

I can still hear her voice, the tremor in it as she said, "*I can't, Ethan.*" Those words sting more than any physical blow ever could. I thought that moment, that kiss, was the beginning of something beautiful, something real. But now, it seems like the end of a dream I was foolish enough to believe in.

Surrounded by broken objects, I drop the bat, my hands shaking. I sink to the floor, overwhelmed by my mistakes. Closing my eyes, all I see is her confused and hurt expression.

I am good at fixing things, at making things better for people, unless it's Poppy. Why do I always screw things up with her? Like that stupid "Pauper" nickname back in junior year. I thought I was being funny, trying to get her attention. But all I did was hurt her. And then, instead of fixing it, I made it worse.

I think back to how I accidentally gave her the "Pauper" nickname at the beginning of our junior year, and then I was too proud to take it back. I attempted to invite her for a weekend in Aspen, and, misinterpreting her frown while with my friend, I made a foolish remark about showing her what true wealth was, as opposed to being a pauper. That's when my friend blurted out, "Poppy the Pauper," and the name stuck. I was a foolish, self-centered boy feeling rejected—a view she still seems to hold when she looks at me, and my actions today certainly didn't help, intruding on a moment that should have been solely hers.

Running my fingers through my hair, I feel at a loss. I'm desperate for her to see I'm no longer that clueless kid. That I genuinely care about her. But that realization is hard to prove if I repeat past errors.

I don't need to apologize. I need to show her, not only with words but with actions, that I've changed.

I leave the rage room, the door slamming behind me with a finality that echoes my own sentiments. The facilitator, Ted, looks up, his mohawk slightly askew, probably from all the commotion earlier. I pull out my wallet, handing him some extra cash. "For the trouble," I mutter, not meeting his eyes.

He takes the money, nodding. "It's not every day we get that kind of drama," he says, a hint of amusement in his voice. "Hope you sort things out."

I grunt in response, heading to my car. The drive home is a blur, my mind racing with thoughts of Poppy, of the mess I've

made, how I can fix things, and also of Cole. That guy is a ticking time bomb, and I have a sense he is about to explode.

Arriving home, my suspicions are confirmed. I walk in to find him half-drunk, sprawled out in the living room, a bottle of whiskey dangling from his fingers. My anger, which was back to simmering just below the surface, boils over. Without thinking, I kick the chair out from under him, sending him crashing to the floor.

He shoots up, his face contorting in rage. “What’s your problem, Hawthorne?” he barks.

I point at him, my voice thick with anger. “You promised, Cole! You said you’d back off from Eva, that you wouldn’t push her anymore. You gave me your word. Why can’t you leave her alone?”

Struggling to his feet, Cole’s eyes blaze with defiance. “You think you can control everything, Ethan? She’s *not* your concern.”

“She’s Poppy’s friend, and it’s hurting her!” I shoot back. “You promised you’d give her space, let her heal. But you can’t help yourself, can you?”

Cole sneers, taking a defiant swig from his bottle. “Eva and I have history. Something you’ll never understand.”

His voice takes on a bitter edge. “She betrayed me, Ethan. Do you even know what betrayal is?”

I laugh bitterly at Cole’s words and meet his gaze, anger and memories swirling. “I’m a Hawthorne, Cole. I know betrayal all too well.” I pause, the weight of a particular memory pressing down. “Especially when it comes to Poppy.”

Cole smirks, taking another swig from his bottle. “Oh, what did you call her? The pauper, right? What could she possibly have done to you?”

I know he’s trying to bait me, wanting to fight to distract me from what is unveiling now, from his potential moment of weakness.

I take a deep breath, the past rushing back. “Junior year, things were changing between Poppy and me. Despite our silly rivalry, which I admit I started, there was a strange trust. I even started to hope that by the end of the year, we could put everything behind us.”

Cole’s smirk widens, but there’s curiosity in his eyes. “And?”

I clench my fists, the memory’s burden palpable. “Then everything fell apart. My father took me into his library with his lawyer. They told me about Alan Lockwood, about the alleged theft and betrayal. They suspected Poppy and her mother were involved. And I believed them.”

Cole smirks, but it’s devoid of humor. “Looks like the pauper played you.”

My voice carries a note of remorse. “No. *Poppy* was innocent. But by the time I realized it, I had already lashed out. I said, ‘*Now you’ll be living in the slums where you belong... Pauper,*’ and everyone laughed, even her so-called friends. I accused her of betrayal, believed the worst about her, and I’ve regretted it every day since.”

Shame floods through me; at the time she needed comfort and care the most, I gave her disdain and mockery. I can’t blame her for reacting to me the way she is now. Thinking back, I think I deserve even far less than what she’s giving me.

Cole’s smirk fades, replaced by a contemplative look. “You think you understand betrayal because of a high school spat?”

“It wasn’t just a spat, Cole. It was a mistake, one that I’m still paying for. But unlike some,” I say, glancing pointedly at the bottle in his hand, “I’m trying to make amends, not dig myself deeper.”

Cole’s eyes darken, his own regrets flashing through. “We all have our demons, Hawthorne. Some hide them better than others.”

“Well, based on Eva’s reactions, you got your revenge.” Cole’s face contorts in pain.

“I thought I’d moved on. But seeing Eva again... It’s become an obsession.”

“Obsession, Cole? Do you hear yourself? That’s unhealthy.”

“Don’t you think I know that?”

I grab the bottle from his hand and put it on the counter. “Go sleep it off, and once you wake up with the headache of all headaches, I’ll deal with you.”

Cole glares at me, but thankfully, he grumbles something under his breath and sways his way to his bedroom.

As I begin to clean up the mess in the living room, the front door opens to reveal Liam. He stands in the doorway, silently taking in the scene. He tosses his car keys into the bowl by the door, his movements deliberate and controlled, his gaze shifting from me to the half-drunk whiskey bottle on the counter. Methodically, he begins removing his jacket.

“Don’t say anything,” I warn, retrieving the bottle top from under the coffee table.

Liam’s voice is as cool as ice. “Wasn’t planning to.” He starts to head toward his bedroom, but I can’t let him go without knowing.

“How’s Nessa doing?”

He stops, turning slowly. His expression is unreadable, but there’s a hint of steel in his eyes. “How do you think she’s doing, Ethan?” He pauses, letting the weight of his silence fill the room as he crosses his arms, the gesture emphasizing his broad shoulders. “She’s Nessa. She puts on a brave face, but her friend had a breakdown. I picked up some bottles for her at the liquor store.”

I smirk, trying to lighten the mood. “Liam Ashford buying alcohol for someone under twenty-one... What would people say? And you seem to know her quite well.” I don’t miss his unexpected familiarity with Nessa, though. There’s far more there than he would have us believe.

Ignoring my comment, he continues, “It’s funny, though. I advised you to give them space. To not interfere with their

game. Yet, what did you do?”

“Liam, I’m not in the mood for a moral lesson.”

His gaze sharpens, challenging me. “Is that right? And what are you in the mood for? More chaos?”

“It wasn’t supposed to spiral out of control like that.”

His voice rises, a rare show of emotion. “Of course it was! It’s Cole and Eva! Putting them in the same room, especially with weapons, was the stupidest thing you could have done, Ethan. The stupidest!”

I wince, feeling the weight of his words. “Cole promised—”

“Cole is unpredictable even on his best days.” Liam takes a deep breath, visibly trying to control his frustration. “You need to handle this, Ethan. You made this mess; now clean it up.” His voice drips with sarcasm as he adds, “Mr. Fix-it.” With that, he turns on his heel and disappears into his room.

I slump on the couch, staring blankly at the black TV screen. The enormity of today’s mistakes weighs like a ton of bricks on my chest. I can’t shake off the feeling that I’ve pushed Poppy too far this time. She’s fiercely protective of those she loves, and I inadvertently placed her friend in harm’s way. I let out a heavy sigh, rubbing my temples.

The unexpected ping of my phone breaks through my self-loathing. I pick it up, half expecting another rant from Liam or a drunk text from Cole. But it’s from Poppy. My heart races as I read the short message, but it means everything. It’s a glimmer of hope that I’ve not fucked it all up.

I’m up in an instant. This isn’t something to be hashed out over text. I need to see her face to face. I grab my jacket and keys in a rush, the urgency clear. If there’s even a sliver of a chance to make things right, I’m taking it.

Chapter 15



Poppy

Parking in front of the building, I linger in Eva's car longer than necessary. My lips still tingle from the kiss with Ethan, and my hands quiver, overwhelmed by the sensations it stirred inside me. Ethan wasn't my first kiss; high school had seen a number of those. But nothing could have prepared me for that kiss with him.

Resting my forehead on the steering wheel, I draw a deep breath. Soon, I'll have to face Eva, who I anticipate will be heartbroken. Anger toward Ethan bubbles inside me for disrupting our session, even though I know he, like me, was oblivious to the emotional minefield between Eva and Cole. Witnessing their confrontation felt like inadvertently triggering a nuclear explosion.

Straightening in my seat, I resolve that this can't happen again. The only way forward is for Eva to open up to us. If we understand her story, we can be better prepared.

Am I ready to share mine, though? I wince at the thought but nod to myself. If that's what it takes, then yes, I am.

Ascending the stairs with unwavering resolve, I find Eva on the sofa, engrossed in a book, adorned in her typical dress pants and no-nonsense cardigan. Her face is composed, and if

not for the redness of her eyes and nose, I might believe the events of an hour ago were mere figments of my imagination.

“Are you okay...?” My voice trails off as I approach the sofa cautiously, as though fearing I might startle her.

“Uh-huh,” she replies absentmindedly, reaching for a cookie beside her.

I observe her in silence for a few moments, uncertain how to broach the subject given her newfound composure.

It's just pretend; you should know that. You pretend every day.

“Eva...”

The door opens, and Nessa enters, the clinking of glass audible from the bag she carries.

I raise my eyebrows, and she grins, mischief lighting her eyes.

“Ladies,” she announces, “it’s time to get shit-faced and spill secrets.” She places the bag on the counter, extracting bottles.

“How did you even buy this? You’re eighteen,” I question as she turns back toward us.

She shrugs. “The proper Brit helped. He’s twenty-one.”

I find it hard to believe Liam would do that.

“Did he?” I probe.

She shrugs again, turning back to retrieve the mixer and prepare whatever cocktails she has in mind.

“He said that in Europe, you can drink at eighteen. It only took one blow job.”

She turns around, laughing at the shock on our faces.

“God, you’re so gullible! It’s wishful thinking.”

I raise an eyebrow, amused yet intrigued, as she begins to pour the vibrant liquid into glasses.

Nessa balances three glasses in her hands, placing them on the small table before retrieving a mixer brimming with alcohol and setting it amid the glasses.

We each grab a glass, and Nessa, with a twinkle in her eye, raises hers in a toast. “To baring a smidgen of our souls, in the name of better protecting each other.”

The clink of our glasses resonates in the room, and I take a sip, tasting the margarita’s tangy sweetness on my tongue.

“You didn’t skimp on the tequila,” I observe, sensing the liquid fire slide down my throat.

She winks. “I figured some of us might need a bit more liquid courage than others to open up.”

A silence envelops us, punctuated by sips of our drinks and cautious glances, each of us pondering who will break the ice and what will be revealed.

Nessa downs her glass in one go and exhales audibly. “Alright, I’ll kick things off,” she declares, pouring herself another and leaning back with a mischievous grin. “Bet you didn’t know you’ve been living with a deaf girl, did you?” Her grin fades into a more somber expression as she lets the revelation sink in, allowing vulnerability to peek through her usually defiant demeanor.

My glass halts midway to my mouth. “You’re deaf? But...” I gesture toward the headphones.

“The headphones?” She taps them lightly, a small, introspective smile playing on her lips. “They’re a bit of a safety net, I suppose. They help me blend in, avoid the pitying looks and awkward conversations.”

Suddenly, things make sense: her distant look during conversations without eye contact, her occasional unresponsiveness.

“But how—” Eva begins, but Nessa’s eyes, locked onto mine, don’t waver until I glance away, and she follows my gaze. Her awareness of her surroundings is uncanny.

“How?” Eva repeats, her voice a blend of surprise and curiosity.

Nessa turns to her. “How do I manage to pretend? How do I speak that well?”

Eva’s cheeks flush faintly.

Nessa waves her hand, her eyes reflecting a depth of unspoken stories. “I lost my hearing at fourteen. It was a tough pill to swallow, and it changed my life in ways you probably can’t imagine. But I learned to adapt, to find new ways to communicate and connect with the world around me. Meningitis led to an infection, which spread to the cochlea. I’m not ashamed, but I hide it because I don’t want to be defined by it. I don’t want to be the ‘poor deaf girl.’ It’s not who I am.”

I nod, a strange sense of understanding washing over me. “You’re not that to us,” I assure her, moving closer and enveloping her in a gentle, supportive hug. “You’re Nessa, our roommate, our friend, badass extraordinaire, and master hexer.”

She offers a small, genuine smile. “I know. But after losing my hearing, I spiraled, got drunk, stole a car at my sister’s wedding, earned myself a DUI, and, well, here I am. But!” She raises a finger dramatically, “In four months, I can drive again.” She takes a long, deliberate sip. “Who’s next?”

“Okay, my turn,” Eva says, refilling her glass with a bit more resolve in her eyes. “I owe you guys at least this much after the meltdown you witnessed.”

I take her hand while Nessa, ever the comic relief, snorts, “Oh, come on, as far as meltdowns go, that was like a two out of ten. Remind me to tell you about the time I ended up in a tutu at the police station.”

My eyebrow lifts, silently requesting that story for another time.

Eva clears her throat, a little shaky but determined. “Cole Westbrook and I were... from different circles in high school. He was the star athlete, and I, the music geek. Our paths never

really crossed until—” She pauses, sipping her drink for a bit of liquid courage.

My fingers squeeze hers, offering silent encouragement.

She shows us her left hand, a scar boldly interrupting her palm. “I had a full scholarship to Julliard, then the accident occurred.”

Nessa and I exchange a glance, recognizing the pained twist of Eva’s expression at the mention of “accident,” suggesting there’s more to the story. Yet this moment isn’t about prying; it’s about sharing.

“It cut the nerves in my left hand,” she continues, voice barely above a whisper, “and Cole... he played a part in it, whether he meant to or not. It’s a wound that never quite healed, and seeing him again, it’s like ripping off a bandage that was barely holding everything together.” She sighs. “I can’t play the violin like before. Julliard, my dream, it’s gone. I spent a year in rehab trying to fix the damage and figure out a new, unplanned future, and this is why I’m starting one year late. And that’s all I’m going to say about that.” She finishes her drink in one go.

My heart swells, filled with the depth of their shared sorrows and unspoken struggles. And then, it’s my spotlight, my moment to bare a piece of my soul.

“Back then, I was a totally different person,” I start, a bit of sadness sneaking into my voice. “I was a student at Crestwood Heights Academy with Ethan.”

“The school for the elite jerks, right?” Nessa interjects.

I half laugh, half snort, smirking a bit. “Exactly that one. Ethan and I, we’ve never been friends. I’m not sure why... it should have been logical for us to band together, but my father requested me to stay away from him. You know, not to meddle with the son of the boss. And Ethan seemed to dislike me from the first time I met him at his parents’ garden party.”

Eva gives me a side smile. “He doesn’t seem to dislike you now...” She trails off.

I blush a little. “No, he doesn’t, does he?” And that’s a piece of the puzzle that doesn’t fit my idea of the narrative. We became rivals for no real reason. Always wanting to best the other on stupid things and pulling annoying pranks. Like I once put lube on his history paper while I was at his house, he stole my underwear while he was at my house to expose them around school... petty shit that I almost missed sometimes when I was sleeping on the uncomfortable sofa of the trailer or passing through the metal detector of my new high school.

I shake my head, letting go of the memory. “I was wealthy... not Hawthorne wealthy, but wealthy enough to get a brand-new Audi for my seventeenth birthday and walk through school hallways in Louboutins.”

Eva whistles low and slow, an echo of sympathy in the sound.

I wave her pity away, not wanting it to dampen the fire kindling within me. “It was all an illusion, really. My father, the CFO of Hawthorne Enterprises, got entangled in a financial scandal that I suspect—” I halt, shaking my head. I don’t want them to know that I suspect Ethan’s father to be equally guilty but with the wealth and cunning to pin everything on my dad. “We lost it all, ended up in a trailer park, and my father... he took his own life in his cell six months after being sentenced.” A fact that still twists a knife in my gut. I know he was drowning in shame, but I can’t reconcile that with him being ready to abandon us. A part of me suspects Ethan’s father played a role in that too. I drain my glass, the liquid courage soothing my raw nerves, and pour another. “I finished my senior year at public school, and with my grades taking a hit, scholarships were off the table. That’s why I worked full-time last year, and then this opportunity came along.” I shrug, trying to shake off the heaviness of my past.

Nessa leans back, her eyes reflecting sympathy and newfound understanding. “Fuck... We’re quite the band of *Oliver Twist*, aren’t we?”

Eva and I share a giggle, the tension lightening a bit, and I find a small comfort in the humor Nessa always manages to

find, even in the heaviest of moments.

Despite the pain, I experience a sense of relief having shared my truth, and I see it mirrored in them too. They're more at ease, though the alcohol is likely lending a hand in that as well.

"You know what we need now?" Eva asks after a while—her words slurring a little. "Greasy takeout!"

"I second that!" Nessa agrees. "Let's order in," she adds, grabbing her phone from the table.

I glance over at them, seeing Eva's head slumped against the sofa, her eyes barely staying open.

I toy with the phone in my hand, my mind a whirlwind of emotions after the revelations we've all shared. My fingers hover over the keys, contemplating whether to reach out to Ethan or to allow the night to absorb my unspoken words and feelings. *I didn't want to, but damn it, I like you. A lot. This wasn't the plan. Ugh.* I hit send before I can second-guess myself.

No reply comes, and a pang of regret twinges in my soul. But then, the doorbell rings, signaling the arrival of our Chinese food. I stagger slightly as I stand, making my way to the door, but when I open it, it's not the delivery person standing there. It's Ethan, bags of food in hand and a concerned expression on his face.

"Why are you here?"

He steps inside, placing the food on the counter, his eyes scanning the room, landing on the bottles and our two roommates—Eva is now lightly snoring, and Nessa smirks knowingly.

Nessa winks, grabbing a bag of food and retreating with her headphones in place. "We both know I won't hear anything. Have a great night, Poppy... and Small Prick." Her words leave me blushing, my gaze snapping back to Ethan.

"Why are you here?" I repeat, my heart racing.

“Are you drunk?” His voice is low. Intense. And it sends shivers down my spine.

“Not enough to not mean what I say or regret what I do,” I reply, my voice steadier than I expected.

He sighs, his hands cradling my face. “I like you too, Poppy.”

“You came all this way to say that?” My voice is barely above a whisper.

“Yes,” he murmurs, “because if I texted back, I wouldn’t have been able to do this.”

His lips meet mine, and it’s like everything else just vanishes. It’s us, our secrets, and the undeniable connection that pulls us together. We lose ourselves in each other, not going all the way but going far enough that the barriers between us crumble, leaving only raw emotion and unspoken promises in their wake.

His lips are a gentle yet insistent pressure, and my world narrows down to this moment, to the feel of him, the taste of him. My hands, once trembling, now find a sure place on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath them. Ethan pulls back, his eyes searching mine, a question lingering in their depths.

I answer by closing the distance between us again, my actions speaking louder than words ever could. My hands slide up, fingers tangling in his hair, pulling him closer, deeper into the kiss. His response is immediate, a low groan vibrating through him as his arms wrap around me, pulling me flush against him.

We break apart, breathless, foreheads resting together, and for a moment, we simply breathe each other in. His hands, warm and steady, slide down to rest on my hips, thumbs caressing the exposed skin there.

“Poppy?” he whispers, his voice rough with emotion and desire.

“I want this, Ethan,” I say, trying to sound sure of myself. “I know what I’m doing, okay?”

His eyes, dark and intense, lock onto mine, and there's a silent exchange, a promise of what's to come. I take his hand, leading him toward the bedroom, our fingers entwining naturally. The world outside fades away, leaving only the two of us, our shared secrets, and the new path we're forging together.

As the bedroom door clicks shut behind us, Ethan draws me into his chest, his heartbeat a steady, reassuring rhythm against my own erratic pulse. A flutter of nervousness dances in my stomach, heightened by the firm pressure of his arousal against me.

"I want to kiss you everywhere," he murmurs, his voice a sultry whisper as he showers my face with gentle kisses. "And taste every inch of you."

My fingers find the hem of his shirt, pulling it upward to reveal a chest that is both toned and invitingly warm beneath my lips. I press kisses to his skin, each one a silent promise, as I breathe him in. His cologne is a heady mix of bold and subtle notes, a scent that is undeniably irresistibly Ethan. Smoldering cedarwood and spicy black pepper intertwine with a velvety undertone of vanilla, creating an intoxicating blend that is as bold as it is elegantly understated.

I'm totally swept up, losing myself in his scent and how he feels. Each kiss and touch, it's like we're saying everything without speaking, revealing how much we want each other.

He removes his shirt, and as his hand slides under mine, a shiver of anticipation dances across my skin. His touch, a gentle exploration, trails upward until he's cradling my breast over the fabric of my bra. His eyes, dark and questioning, lock onto mine as he squeezes gently, seeking silent permission in the depths of my gaze.

A low moan escapes me, and my arms lift, inviting him to take our moment further.

He lifts my shirt, allowing it to join his on the floor, and his lips embark on a tantalizing journey from my jawline, tracing a path of shivers down my neck. He lingers at my collarbone,

nibbling delicately, eliciting a quiet sigh from me before his lips daringly approach the curve of my breast.

My fingers weave into his hair, my short nails grazing his scalp as I curl my fingers into a fist, silently pleading for the sweet torture of his devilish lips to continue. His movements, slow and deliberate, become an exquisite agony, and I find myself lost in the sensation, in the slow build of desire that he masterfully orchestrates.

He catches my nipple through the thin material of the bra, and I arch my back, losing myself in the sensation of his hot mouth.

He pushes me toward the bed, and before my back touches the mattress, he unhooks my bra.

I don't even have time to comment on his dexterity before his mouth closes around my naked breast, his tongue swirling around my hard nipple.

"Oh, Ethan..." My voice is a whisper, but it's thick with the pleasure coursing through me.

His response is a low, husky murmur. "Poppy, hearing you say my name like that... I want that every single time."

I close my eyes as he starts making his way down my body with his mouth, grazing with his teeth or licking my burning skin, making me whimper and beg for something unknown.

His lips reach the waistband of my jeans, and he looks up, once again asking for permission.

My heart is in my throat, apprehension smothering the gentle buzz of alcohol, but I nod anyway.

He kisses my lower stomach again and starts to unbutton my jeans slowly. I raise my hips before even realizing it.

He lets out a scoff, brushing his nose back and forth on my panties. "Patience. I've waited too long not to enjoy every second of this."

I'm far too gone, my lower belly squeezing painfully as the mere thought of his tongue on my pussy makes me dampen

my panties. Far too gone to ask what he means by waiting that long.

He pulls my jeans down and kisses my hip bone. “So long,” he whispers against it and kisses it again.

“Raise your hips,” he commands.

I obey without a second thought, and I’m much too lost in his touch to care when he pulls both my jeans and bright-pink cotton panties off, leaving me bare in front of him. My wet and swollen flesh is stark proof of my need for him.

He rests his strong hands on my hips and kisses my inner thigh, his stubble scratching at the sensitive skin, making me wetter. He kisses the inside of my other thigh, eliciting from me a mewling sound.

I reach blindly for him, and as my finger finds his soft locks, he licks my slit with a slow, strong lap until he reaches my throbbing clit and sucks it in his mouth.

I shout his name, arching my back at the overwhelming, almost painful pleasure his tongue is giving me. He repeats the slow torture, and all I can do is grip his hair to the point of pain, but he does not complain. He keeps on lapping at me, drinking like a greedy man, letting out moans against my clit, which causes the pleasure to build like an electrical current at the base of my spine. I didn’t think it was possible for anything to feel this good, and my fingers have never brought me half the pleasure his tongue is giving me.

As I sense my orgasm building more and more, his tongue becomes faster, his suction of my clit harder as if his actions are directed by my moans, and maybe they are.

Suddenly, his hands dig deeper into my skin, and he enters me with his tongue, prompting a cry of his name as my back arches, lifting away from the bed.

I fall back on the bed, breathless, seeing stars at the side of my vision. As I catch my breath, he stands up, his hair ruffled by my fingers, and his lips are red and glistening with my pleasure.

He lets his eyes graze my naked body as I slowly come down from the orgasm he gave me.

“You look stunning after an orgasm.” He grins playfully. “I should give you one daily.”

A breathy laugh escapes me. “If you must.” I look at him, and my eyes stop at the bulge in his pants.

“It’s hardly fair, you know. You get to see me naked. I need to see you too.”

He keeps his eyes locked with mine as he undoes his jeans and pulls them down with his boxers.

I let my eyes trail down, and my breath catches in my throat, my eyes growing wide at his hard cock.

A pure cocky grin full of pride appears on his face.

“I will fight Nessa to the death next time she calls you Small Prick,” I declare, a playful yet serious tone in my voice.

He chuckles. A light, amused sound. “I’m glad to have you on my team.”

I sit up, my eyes locked with his cock, and reach for him, my fingers brushing against his hard stomach.

He captures my hands, bringing them to his lips for a soft, lingering kiss. “We’re not going to have sex tonight, Poppy. I know you’re not too drunk, but I’d much rather do it when you’re fully sober.”

My fingers curl around his hard length, pulling him closer, not quite ready to let the moment end. “I want to taste you too. Just...” My cheeks warm, and my eyes flicker down to his erection before meeting his gaze again. “Just tell me what to do.”

He inhales sharply, his frame closing the distance between us. “Do as you feel,” his voice drops to a deeper, huskier tone, his eyes hooded yet ablaze with a restrained intensity.

I look back down at his cock, and without thinking, I lean forward and lick the drop of precum pearling at the top.

He hisses, and I take it as encouragement. I wrap my tongue around the tip as he slides his hand into my hair. I take him a bit more into my mouth and look up as I suck on him, feeling the weight on my tongue.

He grabs my hand and wraps it at the base of his cock. His hand over mine, he guides our hands, stroking the velvety softness as I continue to suck on the head of his cock. He lets go, and I continue to slide my hand, my saliva allowing the friction and glide of it into my mouth. Ethan caresses my hair and pushes his hips forward tentatively. My eyes meet his, and I open my mouth wider, taking more of him in my mouth, sucking harder.

Struggling to keep my balance with the action, I rest my other hand on his hard ass and maintain a smooth, steady rhythm, pulling back to below the head and then taking him into my mouth as deep as I can without gagging, encouraged by the almost animalistic sounds coming from his mouth.

“Poppy, princess. Oh God, your mouth is perfect,” he groans.

I press my tongue up on the underside of his shaft and apply a little bit of suction, enough to make my cheeks hollow on the upstroke.

I increase the pace as his fingers cradle the back of my head, his hip movements becoming more erratic.

“Princess,” he groans. “Princess, I’m going to come. If you don’t stop now—”

I want him to come in my mouth, and as his cock swells slightly, getting even harder in my mouth, a loud grunt laced with my name erupts from him as the first shot hits the back of my throat. I swallow it all and delicately let go of his softening cock.

He gazes at me, his expression inscrutable, then gently wraps his hand around my throat, pausing briefly as he guides me down onto the bed, enveloping me in a deep, passionate kiss.

Once our kiss breaks, Ethan subtly shifts, reaching for the comforter before aligning himself behind me. His arm, a blend of strength and tenderness, encircles me, drawing me into a close, warm embrace. Our naked bodies find a natural fit together, curving into one another. His breath, a gentle and steady warmth, caresses the back of my neck, its rhythmic whisper coaxing me toward sleep.

I lie here, sensing the gentle beat of his heart against my back. Closing my eyes, I'm enveloped in safety and peace, more than I've known in a long time.

As I drift into sleep, securely cradled in Ethan's arms, a single, lingering thought flits through my mind: Is this serenity a mere fleeting moment, or will this assurance persist in the hard morning light?

Chapter 16



Ethan

The morning sun filters through the curtains, casting a bluish glow over the room. I'm still on cloud nine, the memories of last night with Poppy fresh and vivid in my mind. Every fiber of my being wants to stay wrapped up in her warm sheets, to bask in the afterglow a little longer. The feeling of her soft skin against mine is a blissful torture. My hand hovers over her arm, wanting to caress her, kiss her, taste her again until she calls my name in complete rapture like she did last night. My hard dick hardens even more, and I wince.

No, now it's not the time. I'm already late for soccer, and if I judge by the darker hues under Poppy's eyes, she needs restful sleep.

Reluctantly, I pull myself out of bed, and as I dress quickly, she shifts in the bed, the cover pulling down, revealing one of her small, perky breasts.

I stay at the bottom of her bed, staring at her like a pervert, mesmerized by her pink nipple and the slight redness on her milky skin that I know is caused by the chaffing of my stubble. I let my eyes wander down to her pussy that is unfortunately covered by her duvet.

Are her inner thighs chaffed too? Is her sweet pussy still swollen and glistening from the pleasure I gave her last night?

My fingers twitch at my side with the desire to pull the bedding down and wake her up with an orgasm, sleep and soccer be damned.

My dick twitches again as if it's begging me to go through with all my lurid thoughts.

I shake my head. No, I have to go now, and we can always explore her pleasure again later.

If she still wants you, my little voice calls as I exit the bedroom.

I softly close the door behind me, still floating on that blissful cloud from the night spent with Poppy. Looking up, I find Eva at the kitchen counter, munching on cereal and scrolling through her phone.

She's dressed impeccably, a far cry from the disheveled, drunk version of her I'd seen last night. She barely gives me a glance, her focus seemingly entirely on whatever she's looking at on her phone.

I'm nearly out the door, my mind already on the soccer field, but Eva's voice cuts through the morning's calm. "Hurt her, and I'll make you pay."

My steps falter, and I swivel around, a brow quirked in disbelief. "Excuse me?" Her words, unexpected and fierce, throw me off balance. This isn't the Eva I thought I knew.

She looks up, eyes hard and serious, and it's a bit unnerving. It's a stark contrast to Nessa's fiery but ultimately harmless warnings. Eva's words carry weight, a promise that Nessa's lacks.

"You heard me," she repeats, her voice steady and sure. "I might not look like much of a threat, but hurt her, and I swear to God you'll live to regret it."

I stand there, a silent observer of this unexpected side of Eva, and a part of me pities Cole. He has no idea what he's up against.

"Eva," I begin cautiously, "Poppy's worried about you. Is there a reason she should be?"

She doesn't look up, but I sense a change in the air, a tension that wasn't there before.

"I know Cole can be a bit... overwhelming," I continue, "but he's not a bad guy."

Her eyes flicker up to meet mine, a guarded expression in them. "There are many facets to a person, Ethan. Don't be quick to judge someone based on your limited interactions."

I raise an eyebrow, a retort ready. "Same to you. Don't judge me based on your experiences with jocks."

She gives me a chilling smile, uncharacteristic enough to send a shiver down my spine. "I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, Ethan Hawthorne. That's why you're walking out of here, not limping. But understand this"—her voice drops, a serious undertone to her words—"I won't give you a second chance with her."

I nod, accepting her warning, but then she mutters something under her breath, something that sounds like, "Never again will I let one of *you* destroy one of *us*."

I freeze, my hand on the door handle, and turn back to her. "What was that?"

She looks up, her eyes flashing with emotions—pain, anger, regret. For an instant, she looks like she's going to deny it, but then she sighs. "Just... be good to her, Ethan. That's all I'm asking."

And with that, she turns back to her phone, effectively dismissing me. But her words linger, echoing in my mind as I step out into the morning light and make my way to the car.

What did she mean by "one of you" and "one of us?" And how does Cole fit into her past? What if my brother-in-arms, my goofy best friend, is none other than a monster in her story?

The uneasy feeling gnaws at me, clashing with everything I know about Cole. But Eva's eyes hold a dark kind of pain that's hard to ignore. It's like there's a puzzle in front of me, but I can't see the whole picture, missing pieces hidden in her guarded gaze.

The stadium looms ahead, and despite being fifteen minutes late, I find myself taking a cold shower to try and shift my mind from the memories of pleasure to the game ahead. I can't exactly step onto the pitch with a very evident physical reminder of last night.

After enduring what might be the coldest shower known to man, enough to numb not only my arousal but practically all my extremities, I change into my gear and hustle onto the field. My teammates are already deep into their individual techniques, having finished the warm-up.

“Hawthorne!” Coach bellows the second my cleats hit the grass. “Taking a page out of Westbrook’s playbook, are we? Don’t!”

“Come on, Coach!” Cole protests, “I was on time today! Ethan’s the one who got laid last night!”

I shoot him a glare and a well-aimed middle finger.

“Warm up, then join the midfield training. They look lost without their number ten, don’t they?” Coach orders, ignoring Cole’s commentary.

“But Coach, what about the penalty for lateness?” Brooks chimes in, and I send a glare his way as I start my warm-up runs.

“Brooks, when you can actually defend our goal, then we’ll talk!” Coach shouts back, then turns his attention to the team. “Move it, everyone! We’ve got West Hill next week, and we need to be ready!”

As I start my warm-up, the tension in my muscles begins to ease, and my mind gradually shifts from Poppy to the game ahead. The field, the shouts of my teammates, and the rhythmic thuds of the ball against cleats become my world. I can’t help the smirk that plays on my lips, even as Brooks sends a few more grumbles my way. The banter, the camaraderie, it’s all part of the game—our game. As I slide into the familiar routine of passes and plays, the memories of

last night weave themselves into every move, a sweet secret that fuels my energy on the field.

The whistle blows, signaling the end of practice, and I'm both physically spent and mentally charged. My muscles ache, sweat clings to every inch of my skin, but my heart... it's light, fluttering in a way that makes me feel like a fool, and yet... as I make my way off the field, my thoughts drift back to Poppy, and a warmth that has nothing to do with the rigorous training spreads through me.

Cole jogs up beside me, a knowing grin plastered across his face. "Ethan, no moping today, huh? What's got you chipper after a killer session like that?"

I roll my eyes but can't suppress the smirk that tugs at my lips. "Nothing that concerns you, Westbrook."

He nudges me with his elbow, the smirk never leaving his face. "Oh, come on! Don't tell me it's nothing when you've got that goofy grin on your face even after Coach rode our asses without lube."

I grimace, but before I can retort, Liam joins us, slinging an arm around each of our shoulders. "I have to agree with Cole here. You're unusually upbeat today, Hawthorne. Did Poppy give you the keys to the kingdom last night?"

Cole makes a gagging sound, his grin widening. "'Keys to the kingdom'? Really, Liam? What Grandpa Ashford here wants to know is if Curly showed you her pussy."

My cheeks heat up, and I shrug off Liam's arm, trying to play it cool. "Why does everything have to be about Poppy?"

"Because we've never seen you smile like this unless it involves her," Liam points out, not buying my nonchalant act for a second.

I shake my head, attempting to steer the conversation back to safer waters. "Can we focus on the upcoming match and not my love life?"

But Cole and Liam exchange a knowing look, their smirks turning into full-blown laughter. "No can do, Ethan," Cole

manages to get out through his guffaws. “Seeing Mr. Stoic all lovestruck and mushy is too good to pass up.”

“Wait until you guys fall head over heels for someone. I’m going to have a field day.”

Cole scoffs, feigning confidence. “Not gonna happen, bro. I’m immune to such afflictions.”

I flip them both off, but they only laugh harder. “You guys are the worst,” I mutter, though I can’t help but join in their laughter.

“She totally gave him the keys, alright,” Cole adds mockingly as I turn to leave. “All. Night. Long.”

The locker room is filled with the usual post-practice banter, but my mind is miles away, caught between the memory of last night and the anticipation of doing it again and again. My fingers hover over the phone, debating whether to call or text Poppy. The thought of hearing her voice is tempting, but the fear of coming off too eager holds me back.

I shove the phone back into my locker, deciding to give it a few more minutes of thought while I shower and change. The hot water does little to ease the tension in my muscles; each drop a reminder of the decision awaiting me outside the stall.

As I’m getting dressed, Liam approaches, his expression stern. “Look, I know you’re all lovey-dovey right now, but you’re not skipping out on the new recruits’ additional training.”

I raise my hands defensively. “I won’t. Promise. Just gotta run home first and grab some stuff for my international relations class. I’ll be back on time.”

Cole chimes in, smirking, “Sure, ‘international relations.’ Is that what we’re calling it now?”

I roll my eyes, shoving him playfully. “Shut it, Cole.”

Liam shakes his head, a trace of a smile betraying his serious demeanor. “Be there, Ethan.”

I nod. “I will.”

The crisp air hits me as I step outside, making my way to the car, and I pull out my phone again, resolved to ask Poppy out on a proper date. But before I can act, the phone vibrates in my hand, and a familiar name flashes across the screen. My stomach tightens.

“Dad,” I answer, my voice steady despite the anxiety curling in my gut.

“Ethan.” His voice is smooth, too smooth, and I brace myself for what’s coming. “I saw the photos of you and the Lockwood girl at the ball. Seems like things are progressing well.”

I grind my teeth, forcing a lightness into my voice that isn’t genuine. “It’s going well, Dad.”

He chuckles, a sound that sends shivers down my spine. “She doesn’t seem to have much of a backbone, does she? A bit too easy, perhaps?”

My hands clench into fists, but I manage to keep my voice even. “She’s not like that.”

He ignores my defense, continuing on as if I hadn’t spoken. “Do you have the box yet?”

“Earning trust takes time,” I reply, my grip on the phone tightening.

He scoffs. “She’s almost ripe, Ethan. Take her to the cabin, fuck her stupid to get me what I need.”

Anger boils inside me, but I swallow it down, masking it with a laugh. “You always have a way with words, Dad.”

He doesn’t respond to my sarcasm, simply waiting for my agreement. And though it kills a part of me to play into his hands, I do it anyway because keeping Poppy safe from him is all that matters.

“Alright, Dad. I’ll take her to the cabin.”

The line goes dead, and I’m left standing there, phone in hand, with a mix of anger and determination simmering within me. I won’t let him hurt her, I vow silently. No matter what lies I have to tell.

And as I slide into the driver's seat, my resolve hardens. I will protect Poppy, even if it means playing the villain in my father's twisted game. But how do you protect someone from a threat they don't know exists? How do I keep her safe without revealing the truth?

I grip the steering wheel, my mind racing between Poppy's tender smiles and my father's cold demands. It's like I'm stuck between two worlds. One where genuine happiness could exist—that's Poppy's world. And then there's the other, dark and twisted by manipulation and control—that's my father's domain.

Poppy's already been through hell because of my father and our name. He didn't have to ruin them; it was only a sick game to him. But I won't let him win this round. Seeing her, being with her, it's a gut punch every time I think about my initial mission here. I'll fix my father's wrongs, even if it means becoming a bit of a villain in her eyes and hiding the truth from her, only for a bit. I'll shield her from my father's chaos, no matter what.

My first move is to secure her family's situation, extracting their fate from my father's sphere of power. It begins with getting them out of that trailer park.

Chapter 17



Poppy

The scent of freshly baked pizza wafts around me, a comforting familiarity amid the whirlwind of emotions that have become my constant companions. A part of me still hums, alive and tingling from the night with Ethan and the mind-blowing orgasm he gave me. Flashes of his naked body and the feel of his lips on my flesh flicker through my mind, a secret smile playing on my lips as I navigate through the pizzeria.

A pang of loneliness echoes through me as I remember waking up alone, the sheets beside me cold. But regret? Not even a little. Ethan gave me a night of passion, of connection, something I hadn't realized I'd been craving until it was right there, offered on a silver platter.

My phone vibrates in my apron pocket, jolting me back to reality.

Last night was amazing. I didn't want to leave, but I had practice. Have dinner with me tomorrow night, please.

My stomach flips with excitement, but it's quickly dampened by a nagging guilt. I'm not doing anything wrong, am I? But if that's true, why haven't I told my mom about Ethan?

Memories flood back, reminding me of the pain his family caused mine. My mom. Struggling to keep us afloat, her eyes embodying determination laced with despair. It's a stark contrast to the fluttering in my chest when I think of Ethan. My heart insists this is right, that Ethan isn't his family. But my mind, ever the protector, urges caution.

I shake my head, trying to dispel the memories and focus on the here and now. On Ethan and the way he makes me feel. Alive. Wanted. Seen. And for now, that's enough.

I would love to. See you tomorrow.

I send the text, my heart fluttering, and then slide the phone into my pocket, trying to keep my mind on the pizza dough beneath my fingers instead of the butterflies in my stomach. The rest of the shift passes in a blur, my thoughts constantly drifting back to Ethan, to his text, to tomorrow, and what it could potentially mean for our blossoming yet confusing relationship.

When my shift finally ends, I practically bolt out of the pizzeria, my mind racing ahead to the evening to come. The anticipation is a sweet, tingling sensation that follows me all the way home, making everything seem brighter. More vibrant. It's the kind of excitement I have not experienced for a while, far too worried about helping Mom get food on the table and keep a roof over our heads. But money is a little bit better, especially with the monthly payment from Jeff to help with homework.

My mom wanted me to come to university to be the carefree young woman I deserved to be, and I didn't think it was possible until now, mainly because of the most unlikely man—my former rival—Ethan.

Back at home, I find the girls lounging in the living room. I take a deep breath, trying to sound casual. "I've got a date with Ethan tomorrow. I think... it might be *the* night."

Eva raises an eyebrow, resting the novel she is reading on her chest. "Wasn't it last night?"

Nessa grins. “I heard you scream his name last night, and I’m deaf.”

My face turns bright red, and my mouth hangs open, making her burst into laughter.

“Oh God, that’s priceless!” she says, wiping her tears of laughter. “Eva told me.”

I glare at them, but it lacks heat.

Eva sits up and rests her book on the table before patting the spot beside her. “Remember, Poppy, don’t mistake pleasure and lust for love. Just because he can make you climax doesn’t mean he’s a good man.”

Nessa snorts, “Wow, Eva. Didn’t expect that from you. You look like a stuck-up history professor who’s somehow trapped in a college student’s body. But that bitterness? I’m here for it.”

Eva smirks and rolls her eyes. “I’ve been around a cock before, Nessa.”

Nessa grins. “Speaking of cocks, remember, even if Ethan’s is impressive if the hips have no game, it’s a waste of a hammer.”

I blush again, remembering his manhood in my hand, in my mouth. “How would you even know that Ethan is impressive?”

Nessa leans forward, her mischievous grin widening. “Your blush says it all, and the guy transpires big dick energy.”

I frown. “Why do you call him Small Prick then?”

She scoffs, waving her hand dismissively. “I would never call an actual small prick that. It would be cruel.”

I laugh and shake my head. I love the banter and how they have managed in a few minutes to ease my anxiety.

“Oh, one sec!” Nessa dashes off to her room, returning with a pack of condoms. “Here.” She drops the box on my lap. “Safety first, Poppy. Some guys would do anything to go bare.”

Eva deepens her voice, mimicking a macho tone. “I love being inside you without protection, babe. Don’t worry, I’m safe.” We all burst into laughter, the tension in the room dissipating even further.

Nessa winks. “Always be prepared.”

Eva adds, “And always trust your instincts. If something feels off, it probably is.”

I nod, taking in their advice. “Thanks, guys. I’m... nervous, you know?”

Nessa pats my hand. “It’s natural. But whatever you did yesterday pleased you, right?”

I nod. “More than pleased,” I admit.

Eva nods in agreement. “Then it’s a good start. Share your thoughts with him. If he’s the right guy, he’ll listen.”

Their words reassure me. Ethan, no matter our history, is a good guy. He was patient, caring, and loving yesterday, and I want to stop overthinking it now and do as I please for once.



The next evening, I stand in front of my mirror, my eyes tracing over the simple black dress that falls above my knees. It’s nothing fancy, a basic piece I found at a charity shop—something I bought for the scholarship interview process and a far cry from the designer dresses I used to wear. But it’s all I have, and neither Eva nor Nessa’s wardrobes offer any alternatives since we’re all different sizes.

My fingers trace the fabric, memories of a different time, a different Poppy, flickering in my mind. I used to be that girl, draped in luxury, every piece of clothing a statement of wealth and status. Now, this simple, cheap dress is my reality, and there’s a part of me that fears Ethan will see the change too starkly tonight.

Taking a deep breath, I try to steady the fluttering in my chest. Ethan has been nothing but kind and understanding thus far. He’s seen where I live, he knows the compromises I have to make daily, and still, he looks at me like I’m something

precious. I saw it last night; it was plain in his face. The awe... as if he was the luckiest man on earth. I know that, and it makes my stomach flutter, but the fear of being seen as less, especially in the eyes of someone who knew me during my “better days,” clings tightly.

I apply a light coat of lipstick, trying to push away the nagging insecurity. My hand unconsciously goes to the locket around my neck, the only piece of real value I still own. It’s more than just jewelry; it’s a piece of my past, a reminder of who I used to be and who I’ve become.

I give myself a final once-over in the mirror, take a deep breath, and decide to embrace the evening, no matter what it may bring. After all, if Ethan and I are going to have any kind of future, he’s going to see all sides of me, not the polished, put-together version I used to be. And I have to trust that he’ll see beyond the Target dresses and charity shop finds to the real me underneath.

With one last steadying breath, I grab my bag and my coat and head out, ready to face whatever the evening with Ethan brings.

My heart skips a beat as I see him, dressed impeccably in his designer pants and cashmere coat, leaning against his SUV. I tighten my used coat around me and stop a couple of steps in front of him.

He straightens up as I approach, his eyes lighting up in a way that makes my stomach do somersaults. “You look beautiful,” he says sincerely.

I wave him off. “Stop being nice.”

He steps closer and rests his forefinger under my chin, tilting my chin up to meet his eyes. “We both know I’m not nice.”

“You’re nicer than you think,” I reply, my voice barely above a whisper.

He smiles. A soft, genuine expression. “Let’s keep that between us.” He extends an Osiria rose toward me.

My breath catches in my throat. “Oh! It’s my favorite.”

“Is it?” His smile widens, taking on a mysteriously playful edge. “How lucky for me.”

Memories flood back to high school, to birthdays where I’d find an Osiria rose in my locker. My heart pounds as I look at him, the question on the tip of my tongue. “You didn’t—”

He interrupts, “What?” His eyes are innocent, but there’s a twinkle in them that betrays his nonchalance.

I shake my head, choosing to let the past stay in the past for now. “Nothing. It’s lovely. Thank you.” I bring the rose to my nose and smell it. “Where are you taking me?”

“*Chez Jacques*,” he says, extending his hand to take mine.

I take a rapid step back and another. I forgot for a minute the circles Ethan still navigated, circles that even if my manners could help me blend in, my actual life could not.

“Poppy?” Ethan takes a step toward me, and my hand tightens around the rose.

I remember the kind of people who go to Jacques, and they are unkind and rude to lower-class people going for dinner there. Hell! I even joined in with the mockery on occasion.

Karma sure has a way of teaching you a lesson.

I shake my head and take another step back. “This was a mistake.”

“No, Poppy, please.” He grabs my wrist, his eyes looking sad, almost pleading. “I wanted to impress you. I don’t care where we go. Anywhere.”

I stand there, frozen, as Ethan holds my wrist, his eyes pleading for understanding, for a chance. My mind races, grappling with the stark contrast between our worlds. I’m not the same Poppy I was back in high school, and the life I lead now is worlds apart from his.

He speaks softly, his voice barely above a whisper. “We can go wherever you want, Poppy.”

I hesitate, then slowly nod.

“There’s a place I like. It’s a diner called Josie’s Diner. It’s a modest place, nothing like *Chez Jacques*, but it’s the best meal I’ve had in the past two years.”

It was a gift from my mom’s colleagues at the trucker diner where she works, a generous gesture for her fortieth birthday.

“It’s perfect.” He lets go of my wrist and intertwines our fingers. “Come on, beautiful. Our date awaits.”

As we drive, I can’t help but steal glances at Ethan. He seems unfazed by the change in plans, his profile calm and composed under the streetlights. But beneath that composed exterior, is he judging me? Comparing this Poppy to the girl he once knew?

We pull up to Josie’s, its warm, inviting glow a far cry from the chilly evening outside. Ethan steps out and walks over to my side, opening the door for me with a gentle smile. It’s a simple gesture, yet it sends my heart into a flutter.

The inside of Josie’s is a comforting blend of homely and nostalgic. The walls are adorned with vintage posters and little trinkets from the past, each item telling a story of its own. The checkered floor and red leather booths give it a classic diner vibe, while the soft, mellow tunes from a jukebox in the corner add a soothing ambience. The air is filled with the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee, sizzling bacon, and the sweet scent of maple syrup. It’s a place that, despite its simplicity, holds a certain charm, a refuge from the complexities of the outside world.

Ethan pulls out a chair for me, and as I sit down, a pang of guilt washes over me. He’s trying so hard to make me comfortable, to fit into my world, and here I am, drowning in insecurities and doubts.

A waitress, her smile as warm as the ambience, presents us with menus. We scan them in silence, and I find myself lost in thoughts of Ethan’s perception of this humble place.

“I have to say I like this place more than Jacques,” he says, putting the menu on the table as if he were answering my unspoken thoughts.

I regard him with a blend of skepticism and curiosity, to which he chuckles, hands raised in playful surrender. “I swear! *Chez Jacques* is not my scene; it’s way too pretentious. I’m more at home in the sports bar on Canal Street.”

I sigh, relaxing a little. We order the burger special with sodas, and I find solace in the ease that Ethan exudes in this unassuming place.

“Are you coming to the game next week?” His question, casual yet laden with unspoken implications, catches me off guard.

“I’m not sure. Why?” I reply, a bit thrown off by the casual question.

He shrugs. A subtle vulnerability reveals itself in the way his fingers absentmindedly trace patterns on the tabletop. “I don’t know. It’s something people do when they are—” His gaze lifts toward the heavens as if seeking the right words. “I’m really good at soccer, you know?”

I can’t help but smile a little, my chest warming at the clumsy way he’s trying to speak. I like this Ethan. The lack of perfection and usual smooth talking. This version is far more endearing and similar to me.

“Do you mean that’s what girlfriends do?” Even if I say it with lightness in my tone, my heart starts racing. I’d never imagined myself as being Ethan’s girlfriend, and we’re only one fooling-around session in. It’s a little too early to call this a burgeoning relationship.

Except that’s not true. It’s a secret I’ve kept to myself, one I might never confess, but my first glimpse of Ethan at his parents’ garden party had me spellbound. There he was, looking as broody and mysterious as a twelve-year-old could, and I felt an instant crush. He stood among his entourage, and as our eyes met, I daydreamed about him being my first kiss. But then my father intervened, yanking me aside. He warned me sternly to steer clear of the boss’s son, saying he couldn’t afford teen drama jeopardizing his job and threatening to cancel my art camp if I disobeyed. For the rest of the event, I feigned indifference, even as I sensed his gaze following me.

We both started at Crestwood Heights at the end of the summer, and the silly crush died right there as the teasing and hazing started. However, it was not in my nature to bow down, and we escalated it, making it a competition in every area of our lives until my life imploded. Now, here we are, sitting like longtime friends and potentially so much more, and I'm not sure how to fully settle into this new narrative.

"Isn't it?" His voice, gentle and probing, pulls me from my memories.

I realize I've zoned out, lost in thought, and I shake my head marginally. "Sorry, what? Oh!" Our burgers had arrived, and I hadn't even noticed.

He tilts his head, curious. "Where did you go just now?"

I laugh nervously. "Only thinking about the past."

He nods, looking a bit uneasy. "I hope it wasn't all bad."

I pick up a fry and take a bite. "No, it wasn't bad."

His eyes linger on me, stopping on my lips, and a shiver of anticipation runs through me. "I was asking if being seen as my girlfriend would be that bad and if it has anything to do with Jeff."

"Jeff?" I ask, confused.

He gives me a knowing look, and it clicks.

"Oh, Jeff!" I shake my head, dispelling the implication. "No, Jeff and I, it's nothing like that."

A mischievous grin dances on his lips, and my stomach performs an excited flip. "Good! I was wondering if I had to revert to my high school days and chase off suitors."

I snort, amused yet slightly indignant. "I didn't have any suitors in high school."

"I know." His grin widens, devilishly charming. "I was quite good at my job."

Suspicion narrows my eyes, yet I can't quell the heartbeats in my chest. "What do you mean?"

“Locker room talk. I told one guy you had herpes and gonorrhea, and it spread metaphorically just as fast.” He bites into his burger with an air of nonchalance.

My mouth falls open in shock. “You didn’t!”

He chews slowly, his eyes teasing. “Not my proudest moment, but”—he shrugs—“it did the trick.”

We finish dinner, sharing a few more stories and a lot more laughs. The comfort between us grows, and by the time we leave Josie’s, the earlier awkwardness has dissipated, replaced by a warm familiarity.

Ethan holds the car door open for me, and once we’re both inside, he turns toward me, a hint of nervousness in his eyes that I haven’t seen before.

“I’ll take you home,” he begins, his voice shaky. “Am I welcome to join you?”

I hesitate, then shake my head. “No.”

His face falls, disappointment clouding his features, but I reach over, placing my hand over his. “I think I would rather you take me to your home,” I say quietly.

He looks at me, his eyes searching mine, ensuring we’re on the same page. “Are you sure, Poppy?” His voice is gentle. Caring. Giving me every opportunity to change my mind.

My heart races, but my answer is firm. “Yes, I am.”

He lifts my hand, pressing a soft kiss to the back of it, his eyes never leaving mine. Then, with a nod, he starts the car, and we drive away from Josie’s, heading toward a new chapter together.

Chapter 18



Ethan

My heart is racing, beating wildly as I drive us to my place. Poppy agreed to come home with me, and every second that passes, I half expect her to change her mind. I linger a bit too long at the traffic light before turning left toward my house, stealing a glance at her. Her face is a mixture of resolve and desire that mirrors my own internal commotion.

Silently, I send up a thank-you to any deity that might be listening when I pull into my driveway and spot the absence of Cole's and Liam's cars. I'm not in the mood to deal with their antics or Cole's crude innuendos that might make my girl uncomfortable.

My girl...

I turn off the car and turn toward her, meeting her eyes. She smiles, and something warm and solid settles inside me.

Yes, Poppy Lockwood might not have been for me, but Poppy Donovan... definitely is.

"It's quite a big house," she murmurs, her eyes scanning the structure in front of us.

I shrug, trying to appear nonchalant. The house, with its red brick and modern touches like bold windows and a sleek balcony, is a blend of classic and contemporary. Inside, cozy

hardwood floors mesh with high-tech amenities, creating a vibe that respects the old while flirting with the new. It's one of the reasons I had my father buy it for me and why the boys wanted to move in.

"Trust me, when you share it with Cole Westbrook and his larger-than-life personality, it doesn't feel that big at all," I say, trying to lighten the mood, wanting to erase any unease from her face.

I want her to be comfortable here, in my space, in my home... in my life. Because I'm already suspecting that letting her go won't be an option for me.

We step inside, and I watch her take in the surroundings, her eyes flickering with an unreadable emotion. I'm suddenly acutely aware of every detail of the place, wondering what she thinks, hoping she finds it... acceptable?

But as she turns to me, her smile tender and genuine, I realize that all the worry, all the insecurity, is unfounded. Because Poppy isn't here for the house, or the lifestyle, or any of the superficial things.

She's here for me. And I'm here for her. And that's all that really matters.

I take her coat and hang it on the rack as she steps out of her shoes, padding lightly on the freshly cleaned hardwood floor. A glimpse of her cute toes, painted pink through her sheer tights, sends an unexpected jolt through me, making my cock twitch.

Get a grip, idiot, or you'll come in your fucking pants before you even get her to the bedroom. Cole's voice echoes mockingly in my head, oddly grounding me.

I clear my throat, moving behind the kitchen counter. "Do you want something to drink?"

She shakes her head, her eyes still exploring the living space. "Where's your bedroom?" Her voice is soft, not flirtatious, but genuine, even though I'm hoping that once we step into the bedroom, we won't be leaving until morning.

My cock twitches again, I am already losing control of my body.

“My bedroom is upstairs, Cole’s too,” I manage to say, pointing upward. “Liam is there,” I add, gesturing down the hall beside the wall, which has the gigantic TV mounted on it and the electric fireplace below.

She nods, moving toward the stairs with an ease that pleases me.

“First door on the right,” I call after her. “Trust me, you don’t want to go into Cole’s room.”

Her giggle, though somehow breathless, tightens something in my chest. Despite her bravado, she’s as nervous as I am.

“I’ll be right there!” I call after her, quickly texting the guys, threatening them with various bodily injuries if they dare disrupt my night with Poppy. Then, grabbing two bottles of water—anticipating that we will need lots of hydration if the night goes as I’ve fantasized—I follow her upstairs.

I find her in the middle of my room, with her back to me as she is looking at some of the trophies I have received.

“It looks a lot like your bedroom at home,” she says as she takes a step to the side, keeping her back to me.

I frown. “How do you know how my bedroom looks at home?”

She turns her head to the side. “How do you think your science project mysteriously failed?”

I laugh and go stand behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist and kissing the back of her neck, making her shiver.

Her skin is warm under my lips, an irresistible sensation that sends a shiver down my spine. “You were always a troublemaker, weren’t you?” I whisper, my breath caressing her neck, eliciting a wanting sigh from her.

She leans back into me, her body melding into mine, and there’s a playful lilt to her voice when she responds, “Only where you were concerned, Ethan.”

My hands glide up from her hips, tracing the curve of her waist, and she shudders at my touch. “Is that so?” My voice is a low murmur, heavy with the unspoken desire between us.

She turns in my arms, her eyes meeting mine with a vulnerability that takes me aback. “Yes,” she whispers, her fingers lightly tracing the line of my jaw.

I lean down, capturing her lips with mine, and the world falls away. It’s only us, Poppy and Ethan, finding each other again after all these years. The kiss deepens, becoming more urgent, more desperate, as if we’re trying to make up for lost time.

Finally pulling apart, breathless and dazed, she rests her forehead against mine. “Ethan,” she whispers, “This is... I’ve never done that before.”

My heart swells at her words, and I cup her face in my hands. “We don’t have to do anything you’re not sure you want to do.”

We stand there for what feels like an eternity, locked in each other’s gaze, until she finally breaks the silence. “Ethan, I want this. I want us.”

My heart races, the thumping loud in my ears as I take in her words, her vulnerability, her trust. “Poppy,” I whisper, my voice thick with emotion, “I want this too, more than you can imagine. But I want you to be sure, completely sure.”

Her eyes, a deep, enchanting brown, search mine as if seeking assurance in my sincerity. “I am sure.” She reaches into the pocket of her dress and retrieves a condom. “I came prepared.”

A low chuckle rumbles in my throat as my fingers trace the curve of her cheek, the softness of her skin sending shivers down my spine. “I promise to make this as special for you as it is for me.”

My hands, steady yet trembling with anticipation, cradle hers, holding the small packet between us like a sacred pact. Her eyes, pools of vulnerability and trust, never leave mine as

I lean in, our foreheads touching in a silent moment of understanding.

“Poppy,” I breathe, my voice barely a whisper, “I’ve dreamed of this.”

My heart beats wildly in my chest as I take the condom from her, our fingers brushing in a spark of electricity. I pull her close, our bodies aligning in a perfect combination of desire and emotion. Our lips meet, gently at first, then with a growing urgency that speaks of pent-up longing and passion.

Hooking my finger under her chin, my breath catches in my throat as her eyes meet mine. Those liquid brown eyes, the color of good, dark rum, and just as dangerous. As our lips reconnect, something sizzles through my body, and I can’t hold back any longer. I push her against the wall. Intoxicated by the taste of her, the way she moans in my mouth.

I reach for the hem of her dress and pull it off in one movement, my cock completely hard now at seeing her flushed and breathing hard in nothing more than her simple black cotton and lace bra and panties set.

I let my eyes trail down her legs, still covered by the stupid tights, and there’s a need in me, something animalistic that is telling me to rip them to shreds and access the taste of her faster.

I lick my lips in anticipation; I crave her taste again. I grab her by the waist, spin her around, and walk backward until we reach my bed, and I lean down until she’s lying there.

My heart swells a little despite the overwhelming need for the woman lying on my bed. Poppy is here, in my space, on my bed, wanting me almost as much as I want her.

I kiss down her neck, savoring the softness of her skin, tasting the soap and something distinctly her, a scent that has always driven me wild beyond the luxury oils and designer perfumes she once wore.

A breathless moan escapes her pouty mouth, her fingers slipping through my hair. Completely unaware, she is guiding

my kisses where she needs me most, and I am all too happy to taste where she's leading me.

I pull down her tights a little and lick her belly button, earning a little moan. God, she is so sensitive... The thought of how she might react when I'm deep inside her, to the point where we're indistinguishable from one another, is intoxicating.

Precum begins to form, and I redirect my thoughts to her pleasure because I know that if I keep on thinking of how it will feel once I'm buried inside her, I will come in my pants.

I keep on pulling down her tights until I'm kneeling on the floor and throw them beside her dress. Our eyes meet as I shed my shirt, and it's gratifying to see her gaze roam over my chest, her lips parting. My gaze stays on her as I bring her foot up to my lips and kiss the arch. I rest her foot on my shoulder and repeat the process with the other foot.

The air in the room sizzles with electricity. Her body jerks as I grab her thighs and spread her legs. I lick my lips as I see her dampened panties. My girl is ripe for me.

I slide down her underwear, and she reaches behind her back, wordlessly removing her bra and seeing her perfect breasts begging for my tongue almost derails me from my mission.

I refocus my attention on the pink, glistening flesh in front of me. A part of my goddess I never thought I would be lucky enough to kiss and taste. My tongue flicks over her skin like a predator tasting his prey.

I go up her toned legs slowly, alternating between kissing and licking.

She lets out a gentle whimper, raising her hips, and I look up at her.

Her eyes are half-closed, and she is biting her lip as her grip tightens on my gray comforter. I can hear her suck in air, trying to breathe.

"Breathe, beautiful." I nibble at the sensitive skin of her knee. "I still have a long way to go."

The quietest “Oh God” escapes her. So soft and breathy, I almost miss it.

She reaches down and grips my hair. “Ethan, Ethan, please,” she begs breathlessly.

Her flesh is swollen, wetter than before; the anticipation and memory of my tongue on her is probably as vivid for her as it is for me.

She quivers as my fingers brush her wetness, and a cry escapes when I press my thumb on her hard clit.

I adjust my position, placing my head between her legs, my nose nearly touching her wetness, her intoxicating scent almost sending me over the edge. I slide my tongue out and taste her for the first time tonight. Her body shivers. My body trembles as it registers the taste of her. The taste I will never get enough of.

I look up toward her face, and I see her eyes closed tightly. Her mouth is moving, but no words are coming out.

I take another controlled lap, and then, as she is tightening her legs around my head, my control breaks. My tongue probes deeper, trying to drink the arousal her body is giving me. I flick my tongue over her clit lightly, and I can sense her body jump.

She moans, calling my name, and it is almost as much of an aphrodisiac as her sweet taste and light heat. I give long laps down over that dripping slit. I capture a tender lip in my mouth and run my tongue over the soft edge.

She moans again, and I realize as my cock leaks more precum that if I don't make her come now, I won't last until I get inside of her.

Slipping my tongue inside her and curling it up a bit, she starts to moan louder. Her hands are aimless, one on my head, the other grabbing a handful of the comforter.

Her breathing quickens. “Ethan!” she screams, and I press my face against her harder, trying to get my tongue a little deeper, alternating between nibbling on those lips and taking her clit in my mouth.

The muscles of her legs tense, pressing in around my head as her climax rises. Short gasps of air she inhales ring around me as I continue to devour her harder. Watching from above her smooth mound, her chest rising higher and higher as she has yet to exhale. Her fingers are clenched around the comforter, desperate to fall over the precipice, her body shaking. I take my cue and dive harder.

“Oh, Ethan! Oh, Ethan! Oh fuck. Oh sh—” She lets out a cry as her back arches, and she comes in an amazing explosion of pleasure.

I am sure the whole house heard her, and I feel like a superhero right now. Nothing matters more to me than my girl’s pleasure.

Her legs fall from my shoulders as if she’s boneless, and I can’t help but smile, knowing I’m the one who’s satisfied her to the point of total relaxation.

I stand up and look at her spread legs and her pussy waiting for my cock. I let my eyes trail up to meet her half-hooded eyes.

“I want you, Ethan Hawthorne,” she lets out breathlessly.

My heart squeezes with a deep tenderness in the middle of the lust-fueled moment.

“Not more than I want you, Poppy Donovan,” I reply, and she gives me a half smile.

She lets her eyes trail down as I unbuckle my belt and unbutton my pants, taking them down with my underwear, revealing my raging hard-on to her.

“We don’t have to do it if you’re not sure,” I tell her again despite my aching cock screaming for me to shut up and sink into the heaven in front of my eyes.

She shakes her head, reaching her hand toward me. “I’m sure.”

I reach for the condom she brought and open it, sliding it on my length as I keep my eyes locked with hers.

I kneel on the bed and crawl over her, placing the head of my cock against her hot flesh. I'm nervous, even more nervous than I had been the first time I had sex. I want... No, I need Poppy to enjoy it. I need her to want to be with me. I don't want to cause any further pain for her. Never again.

I kiss her deeply, slipping the tip in. I feel my muscles tense with the Herculean control it takes not to sink into her heat.

"I don't want to hurt you," I admit, my voice strained with effort as I slip another inch inside of her.

She cups my jaw. "It's okay. I will be okay," she murmurs.

I know I don't have Cole's massive dick—something I'm particularly happy with today, but I'm still above average, and I want Poppy to enjoy my seven inches.

I lean back down to her and softly bite her bottom lip as I slip in slowly, inch by inch. Suddenly, she tenses. I reach the breaking point, and as my tongue grazes the captured flesh of her soft lip, I move my hips in one sharp movement, fully seated inside her.

She takes a sharp intake of breath, her body tenses under mine, and I stop moving, stop breathing, and let go of her lip, rearing my head back a bit to look at her face.

Her eyes are closed tightly.

"I'm sorry, I—" *I what?*

She opens her eyes and stares at me silently. I want to beg her to talk, and I'm about to. But when she runs her fingers along my cheek, her eyes full of awe and tenderness, I relax a little.

"It's perfect," she whispers, tracing my face again.

"It *is* perfect," I confirm, giving a shallow thrust.

I keep my eyes on hers as I move slowly in and out of her, almost reverently. Her walls are tight around me, and I truly feel I could die a happy man.

I start moving a little faster, lengthening my strokes, and she raises her hips, meeting my hip movement.

My breath catches in my throat as she runs her hands down my back, grabbing my ass before hooking her right leg over my hip.

“Ethan, oh, that feels so good.” Her voice is a breathy murmur against my ear.

I grit my teeth, burying my face in her neck as my balls tighten. My thrusts turn erratic, and I know that I am only mere seconds from coming.

I curse myself. It’s too fast, I want to enjoy her body more, but all the pent-up desire, the tightness of her pussy, and her little whimpers of pleasure are too much, and I just hope that I will get another chance tonight to show her my endurance.

I hiss as she flexes her walls around my cock.

I lick her neck. “I’m about to come,” I grunt against her skin. “Touch yourself, beautiful. I want us—” I groan, and she reaches between our bodies while the only thought in my mind is trying not to succumb to the intense pleasure she’s giving me.

Suddenly, her hold around my hips tightens as her walls grip my length almost painfully, and I let go, calling her name as we come together, and the world around me fades away, leaving only the two of us, bound by feelings that had endured despite all the issues piling up on us.

In the quiet aftermath, as we lie entwined, our breaths mingling in the dim light of the room, I press a light kiss to her forehead. “Poppy,” I murmur, “thank you for trusting me.”

She nestles closer, her response a happy murmur. “Thank you for being you.”

The night fades into a peaceful sleep, our bodies wrapped around each other, and for the first time in a long time, I sense complete peace. Because this was not just sex; this was love. I made love to this woman and I intend to continue doing it until my last breath.



The peaceful cocoon of the morning is violently punctured by the insistent vibration of a phone. We're a tangle of limbs and sheets, and every fiber of my being rebels against the idea of letting her go. But I do, reluctantly.

“Hello?” Poppy’s voice is a sleepy murmur.

Her body tenses, immediately alert. “Mom, is everything okay?” Her voice is a mix of concern and grogginess.

She slips out of bed, the phone cradled awkwardly between her shoulder and ear, frantically searching for her clothes. I do the same because whatever is happening, it’s my problem too. It’s her and I now. It always was, but now it’s even more real.

“Yes, no problem. I’ll call Eva.” Her voice is steady, but her eyes betray her worry.

“What’s going on?” I ask, but she’s already dialing another number, ignoring my question.

She speaks into the phone. “Hey. Mom’s car broke down on the way to Billy’s camp, and she has an important interview. Can I borrow Cherry Bomb? Just for a few hours.”

Her shoulders slump at Eva’s response. Without hesitation, I snatch the phone from her, “It’s okay, I’ll take her,” I assure Eva and hang up.

I scoop up my keys from the discarded pants on the floor. “Let’s go.”

She shakes her head, rooted to the spot in the middle of my room, a storm of emotions whirling in her eyes. “I can’t go with you. Mom won’t understand. I... I don’t even understand.” Her voice is a fragile whisper, teetering on the edge of tears.

My heart breaks; the sting of rejection is sharp and unexpected, especially after the intimacy we shared.

I toss her my car keys. “Go. Deal with this. I’ll get a ride to the stadium with Liam or Cole.”

She hesitates, her hand closing around the keys, but her feet remain planted. “I can’t do that,” she whispers.

“Poppy”—my voice is gentle but firm—“take the damn car.”

She nods, a silent tear escaping as she turns away. “I’ll bring it back soon.”

Before she can leave, I pull her back, sealing a promise with a passionate kiss. “I’ll see you tonight, right?”

“Yes,” she breathes, and then she’s gone, leaving a void in her wake.

In the kitchen, the boys are already there, smirks plastered across their faces.

“Damn, Ethan, are you that bad in bed that she’s making a run for it?” Liam quips, his face deadpan.

I roll my eyes. “You’re hilarious, Ashford.”

Cole sips his coffee, leaning against the counter, his eyes gleaming with trouble. “Nah, that’s not it. The walls are thin, and let’s just say, the lady seemed quite... satisfied,” he teases.

I want to glare at him, but I can’t help but grin. I’m proud to have given Poppy pleasure.

“I know the walls are thin, Cole. I used to hear your ho ass all last year,” I retort, heading to the coffee machine and making myself a double espresso.

“Well, not at all this year yet. Are you broken down there?” I mock, keeping my eyes on his crotch.

Cole hisses, and I suspect what broke his player streak is Eva.

Liam snickers. “You want to have the ‘what are we?’ conversation, don’t you? Is that why she ran?”

“Shut the fuck up,” I snap, but I feel my face redden. Because what happened this morning, the complete rejection of my presence in her life, doesn’t predict anything good. I know I need to give her time. It’s all new for her, and no matter what she says, she’s not sure if she can trust me yet or not.

“Oh God, you do!” Liam gasps as Cole steps closer, tilting his head to the side, feigning deep listening.

I nudge him out of the way. “What the fuck are you doing, man?”

“I’m sure if I listen close enough, I can hear your vagina grow.”

We all burst into laughter, the camaraderie between us a welcome distraction from the whirlwind of emotions inside me.

Cole, still chuckling, claps me on the back. “But seriously, man, you look like you’ve seen a ghost. Everything okay?”

Liam nods, his expression turning serious. “Yeah, you were all smiles coming down the stairs, and now you look like you’re about to head into battle.”

I run a hand through my hair, sighing. “I don’t know, guys. Everything was perfect, and then it wasn’t. She got a call and just... panicked. I offered to help, but she pushed me away.”

Cole gives me a questioning look. “Pushed you away, how?”

“Like she didn’t want me involved in her life,” I admit. The words taste bitter in my mouth.

Liam leans against the counter, crossing his arms. “Maybe she needs some space, man. It was a big night for both of you, right?”

“Yeah,” I mumble, my mind replaying every moment, every touch from the night before.

Cole pats my shoulder. “Give her time, Ethan. If she feels for you even a fraction of what you feel for her, she’ll come around, and I’m sure your magic cock can lure her back.”

I snort, but I really appreciate their support, even though the worry doesn’t leave me. Poppy is under my skin, in my veins, and I can’t just switch it off. I can only hope that whatever is happening, she knows I’m here for her, no matter what.

Chapter 19



Poppy

E than's car purrs beneath me, its smooth vibrations at odds with the rough gravel of the country road. The noise of the city's morning rush—a blend of honking horns, distant sirens, and the murmur of countless conversations—gradually replaced by the quiet desolation of rurality, where the only sound is the occasional chirping of a distant bird.

My mother and little brother, stranded beside their smoking vehicle, come into view, and I can't suppress the pang of sympathy that strikes me.

As I pull up beside them, honking lightly, Billy's eyes, identical to our father's, light up with that childlike wonder he's managed to retain despite our hardships while Mom's eyebrows knit together, forming a silent inquiry.

"Poppy, whose car is this?" Mom's voice holds a note of caution.

"It's a friend's, Mom. Don't worry about it," I reply, trying to sound casual.

"You've never mentioned this friend before," she probes, her eyes scanning the luxurious interior.

Billy, blissfully unaware of the undercurrent of tension, bounds into the back seat, his small fingers leaving smudges

on the immaculate windows as he gawks at the world outside. “This car is so cool!” His voice, filled with genuine awe, breaks through the awkward silence. “It’s like Batman’s car!”

Mom settles into the passenger seat, her expression a complex mix of questions and unspoken words. “It’s too late for camp today,” she murmurs, glancing at her watch with a resigned sigh. “And my interview...” Her voice trails off, lost amid the worries clouding her eyes.

A flurry of questions whirls in my mind. Why hadn’t she mentioned this interview? What else was she keeping from me? But then, wasn’t I doing the same with the car?

“Don’t worry about Billy,” I assure her, glancing in the rearview mirror to meet my brother’s excited eyes. “I’ll take him to have breakfast with me. What do you say, munchkin?”

His face lights up at the prospect. “Can we go to the Pancake Palace?”

I nod, a smile playing on my lips, and turn my attention back to Mom. “Where’s your interview? I’ll drop you off, and you can call me when you’re done, okay?”

She hesitates, then quietly provides the address in the business district. As I drive toward the location, the silence in the car is punctuated by Billy’s excited chatter from the back seat, easing the tension.

Mom’s eyes scan the interior, taking in the plush leather seats and polished wood dashboard.

She reaches out, her fingers lightly grazing the dashboard. “Is this real wood?” Her fingers tremble as they graze the surface, a significant departure from her usual composed demeanor. I notice her clutching a neatly folded piece of paper—probably her résumé. She opens it briefly, scanning the contents one last time, then takes a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves.

I glance her way, and she looks in the side mirror, trying to straighten her hair.

I mollify a little at the previous cautions she harbors toward the car. I can’t blame her for being cautious, and I can see how

much she needs this win.

“You’re beautiful today, Mom. Very professional,” I tell her with a smile.

She straightens her navy polyester suit jacket that is a little too big for her, but all in all, it looks quite polished for something I know she got at the surplus stock shop near the park.

“Really?” She runs her hand over her pencil skirt. “I was not sure it’s...” She shakes her head with a little sigh.

“You’re the prettiest mom ever!”

“She’s the most beautiful mom in the whole world!”

Mom chuckles, but I see her throat bob as she swallows past the overwhelming emotions. I recognize it because I’m the same. I remember a cold winter night when our heater broke. Mom, determined and resourceful, wrapped us in layers of blankets and told stories until morning, turning a moment of despair into one of warmth and love. It was in moments like those that she taught me resilience. In our previous life of luxury, women were seen as soft. Unprepared for the world. Yet, faced with adversity, we learned not to sink, but we learned to swim against the current. We built walls, sometimes so high that even we couldn’t scale them, but they were our protection, our fortress. She’s proven that she’s a fighter, that she possesses a fire that nobody knew she had. The same fire she’s passed on to me. The same fire that tells the world we might bend, but we’ll never break.

As the towering glass building comes into view, she leans closer, her voice barely above a whisper, laden with desperation. “I need this, Pops.” Her eyes, normally full of resolve, now carry a touch of vulnerability. I think back to her first job hunt after my father’s imprisonment. She’d come home from a job interview, her spirit crushed by a dismissive interviewer. She’d picked herself up then, and I know she can do it again.

I take her hand, feeling the roughness of her skin from her hard work, and give it a reassuring squeeze. “You’ve always

been the strongest person I know,” I whisper back, hoping my words bolster her confidence.

She smiles at me and turns toward my brother. “Be good for Pops, okay?”

“Always.” He gives a wide, angelic smile that makes us both laugh, easing some of the tension.

Mom turns back toward me and takes a deep breath. “I’ll text you when I’m done.”

I nod. “You’ve got this, Mom.”

As she steps out, Billy’s voice rings out, “You’re perfect, Mom!” She hesitates, a smile touching her lips, then ascends the stairs with newfound confidence.

Once Mom disappears in the building, I look at Billy in the rearview mirror. “Ready for pancakes?”

He rolls his eyes at me. “When am I not ready for pancakes?”

With a light-hearted giggle, I navigate Ethan’s car through the bustling morning streets.

“Are we keeping the car, Pops? It’s so nice!”

“Bil—”

“Maybe Mom can borrow it sometimes? It will be cool to go to school with it.”

It would stand out, given that hardly any parents at Billy’s school have cars.

“No, munchkin, it’s my friend’s car. I have to give it back to him.”

“Oh.” He seems pensive for a minute, and I hope he’s dropped the subject, but I’m not that lucky. “Is that Jeremy?”

“Jeremy?”

“Your friend from my birthday!”

“Oh!” I forgot what bogus name I’d given Ethan. “Yes, it’s his car.”

“I like him.”

I snort as I park in the nearly empty parking lot of the breakfast place. “Of course you do. He got you Star Wars stuff.”

Billy shoots me a cheeky grin, his laughter echoing as he dashes toward the blue-and-white diner.

I can’t help but laugh, too, despite all the emotions of this morning. His innocent laughter and wide-eyed wonder always remind me of the pure joy he brings into my life, and as I told Ethan, I would bleed to try and protect him from the darkness that taints this world.

We take the corner booth, allowing me to keep my eyes on Ethan’s car—no matter what, it looks a little out of place in this neighborhood. As Billy asks the waitress way too many questions about potential flavor combinations, I can’t help but stress about Mom’s interview, and my thoughts drift back to the smoking car. How will she even take care of that? How will she get it towed and fixed?

I glance at my phone and wince. I know what I should do, but my pride and my fear of perception are screaming to find another solution.

I hesitate for a split second, then type out a message to Ethan. *Hey, are you busy?* The moment I hit send, anxiety flutters in my stomach.

It’s not for you, Poppy, it’s for your family. Swallow your pride and ask for help.

“I’ll get the Pancake Royal, Pops. Is that okay?”

I raise my eyebrow with a little smile. “Are you sure you can eat all that, buddy?”

He pats his stomach. “Watch me!”

I laugh and nod. “Fine. Just a coffee for me, please,” I tell the waitress, extending the menu back to her.

He lowers his voice, concern evident in his eyes. “Is it too expensive, Pops? We can share if you want.”

A lump forms in my throat and my eyes sting with unshed tears as Billy's words sink in.

"What? No, of course not! I had breakfast at Eth— Jeremy's house before taking the car." My phone buzzes with Ethan's incoming call, a timely distraction from the weight of my thoughts.

"Hey. I'm lacing up for practice. What's going on?"

I catch Billy's eye, pointing to my phone and mouthing, "I'll be back," then step outside for some privacy.

"I didn't mean to disturb your practice. I... needed-I-We can talk later. I—"

"Take a breath. I always have time for you. What do you need?"

His voice wraps around me like a comforting blanket, each word spoken with patience and care. It warms my heart, and I find myself smiling despite everything.

"My mom's car is dead, and it needs towing and fixing, but money is a bit—"

"I'll take care of it. Where's the car?"

"I promise I'll pay you back," I add quickly, "it's just that getting the money out all—"

"Poppy," he interrupts, voice firm yet gentle. "Remember, we're in this together. Where's the car?"

"Well, no, it's not because we slept together that you owe me anything. Ethan, I don't want you to think that I had an ulterior motive. It's just..." I bite my lip, suddenly self-conscious of the concerned glances from passersby as I pace back and forth in front of the diner's windows.

"Where's the car, beautiful?" His tone is calm, almost soothing, and I cave, giving him the location of the car.

"Nothing extravagant, Ethan!" I warn him, realizing I should have said that before giving him the address. "I can't have her come home to a new car."

Ethan doesn't reply, and I understand I was spot on.

“Ethan...” I trail off. “I swear you do something like that, and you and I, we’re... we won’t be doing stuff anytime soon.”

“By ‘stuff,’ are you referring to your orgasms? *Multiple* orgasms?”

Heat rushes to my cheeks, and I shift uncomfortably. “Y-yes that. And you won’t have yours either.”

He sighs. “Fine, just fixing.”

“Thank you.”

“For you, always. No thanks needed, beautiful.”

“I’ll bring you the car as soon as possible.”

“I don’t need it. Use it and do what you need. Okay, I have to go. Talk to you later.”

Ethan’s voice fades as I end the call, the screen of my phone dimming. I take a moment, leaning against the diner’s brick wall, letting the weight of our conversation sink in. The cool morning air is a sharp contrast to the warmth inside, and I can see the fogged-up windows of the diner, a testament to the bustling activity within.

Pushing off the wall, I reenter the diner. The bell above the door jingles faintly, and I’m immediately hit with the comforting aroma of freshly brewed coffee and sizzling bacon. I make my way back to our booth, sliding into the seat opposite Billy. He’s almost done with his Pancake Royal, a triumphant grin on his face as he tackles the last few bites with gusto.

“You weren’t kidding about being hungry,” I tease, reaching over to ruffle his hair.

He swats my hand away playfully, his mouth too full to retort. Just as he’s about to claim victory over his breakfast, my phone buzzes again. I pick it up to see Mom’s name flashing on the screen.

Taking a deep breath, I answer the call. “Hey, Mom,” my voice wavers, betraying the hope I’m trying to hide. “How did it go?”

Billy, syrup still clinging to the corners of his mouth, stops midchew, his gaze locked onto mine. The significance of the moment hangs between us, the diner's ambient noise fading into the background.

There's a brief pause on the other end before Mom speaks, her voice cautious. "I think... it went okay. The interviewer seemed impressed, but you never know with these things."

"You've always been great at what you do, Mom. I'm sure they saw that," I reassure her.

"Can you come pick me up?"

A wave of relief washes over me. "Of course. We're wrapping up here. Billy's almost done with his mountain of pancakes."

Billy pipes up, his voice filled with excitement, "I told you I could eat it all, Pops! Mom, you should've seen it. It was huge!"

Mom laughs. "I bet it was. I can't wait to hear all about it. See you soon."

The drive to pick up Mom is a quiet one. The earlier tension has been replaced by a thick cloud of anticipation. Every traffic light and stop sign feels like an unnecessary delay, prolonging the moment of truth.

When we finally pull up to the towering glass building, Mom is waiting outside. She slides into the passenger seat, her face giving nothing away. I throw her a questioning look, searching for any hint of how the interview went. She offers a small, enigmatic smile in return, then turns her attention to Billy.

"Tell me all about these legendary pancakes," she says, her voice light, but I can detect the underlying fatigue.

Billy, ever the chatterbox, launches into a detailed account of his breakfast adventure, complete with animated hand gestures. "And then, Mom, I had this huge dollop of whipped cream on top! It was epic!"

Mom laughs, her worries momentarily forgotten. “Sounds like quite the feast.”

Once we reach the trailer park, she instructs Billy, “Go on up, sweetie. You can play video games for an hour, okay?”

Billy’s eyes light up, and he dashes toward the entrance, leaving Mom and me alone.

She takes a deep breath, turning to face me, her eyes searching mine. “Poppy, about the interview...”

“Why didn’t you tell me, Mom?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Her eyes hold a faraway look. “I didn’t want to give you false hope, Poppy. But Sarah Miller from the agency called two days ago. The job as a fundraising administrator... it’s perfect for me.” She turns to me, her eyes shimmering, hope and apprehension intermingling in their depths. “They’re offering a position with an option to relocate. We could get an extra three hundred dollars a month or a three-bedroom house in Brenthill. We could finally leave this place behind, Poppy.”

“Brenthill? That’s a big change, Mom. When will you find out?” *Brenthill*. The name alone evokes images of green meadows, good schools, and a fresh start.

“It would be a fresh start, good schools for the boys,” she replies, wringing her hands. “I should find out in a couple of days.”

“It lasted a while. That’s usually a good sign, right?” I try to offer some comfort.

She gives a half smile. “I don’t want to get my hopes up too high, but with that salary... it could change everything for us.”

I nod, taking her hand in mine. “About the car. It’s being taken care of. You’ll get it back in working order in a day or so.”

Her eyes narrow, her gaze sharp. “This morning, when I called, were you with your boyfriend?”

I frown, taken aback. “Who?”

She smirks. “Your brothers mentioned a boy... Jeremy?”

My cheeks flush, betraying me. “It’s complicated, Mom.”

She chuckles. “Isn’t it always? Is this his car?” Her eyes scan the plush interior of the luxurious vehicle.

I wince, nodding. “Yeah, it is.”

“Rich boy, huh?” she teases, but there’s a trace of genuine concern in her eyes.

“You don’t like them, I know, but...” I trail off. *But what, Poppy?* This is even worse. He’s the son of the man who destroyed our life. “He makes me happy, Mom. And it’s not about the money or the car. It’s... him. The way he listens, the way he understands.”

She leans in, her voice gentle. “I don’t have a problem with wealthy people, Poppy. If this young man makes you happy, then I’m happy for you. Just remember to be careful. Money can be intoxicating, and it’s easy to lose oneself in its allure.”

She reaches across the seat and pulls me into a hug. I sink into it, craving my mother’s love. As we pull apart, Mom plants a gentle kiss on my forehead, her eyes filled with hope tempered by weariness. “Take care, Poppy,” she whispers.

I watch her retreating figure, the weight of our shared burdens evident in her every step, as she heads back to the trailer. Closing my eyes, I send a silent prayer to the universe. *Please, let Mom get this job. After all she’s been through, she deserves a break, a bit of the luck that’s been eluding us for such a long time.*

Starting the car, the engine purrs to life, and I navigate my way back to campus, and my thoughts drift to Ethan.

The thought of seeing him, with his comforting embrace and understanding gaze, fills me with a mix of anticipation and anxiety.

A pang of realization hits me as I recognize the depth of my feelings for Ethan. I am far more attached to him than I ever wanted to be, and it scares me to know that despite my best

efforts, I have fully opened up to him and given him the power to hurt me.

All I can do now is trust in the bond we're forming and hope that he'll never betray my vulnerable heart.

Chapter 20



Ethan

The stadium is alive with energy, the anticipation palpable. For most, today's game is a matter of pride, a chance to prove themselves. For me, it's personal. Sure, we could afford to lose and still make it to the playoffs, but that's not how I play. Especially not today.

The noise of the crowd is a constant backdrop, but my focus narrows to a specific section: the family and friends' stands. Poppy is there, looking radiant and relaxed, her eyes scanning the field. Beside her, Vanessa and Eva chat animatedly. Eva's attendance is a surprise. She's not one for sports, but her presence today speaks volumes about her bond with Poppy.

I can't help but feel a twinge of disappointment as I spot the sweater she's wearing. I had left a jersey with my number in her room, a silent hope that she'd wear it. But Poppy's always been unpredictable, and I respect her for it. Still, the fact that she's here after our night together means more than any jersey ever could.

Stretching my legs, I feel a burst of energy. Last night was my second time making love to her, and the intimacy, the connection, was unlike anything I've ever experienced. Waking up with her in my arms was pure bliss, and it's given me a boost of confidence for today's game.

“Maybe you should stop daydreaming about your girl and focus on warming up,” Liam’s voice cuts through my reverie, a hint of amusement in his tone.

I roll my eyes, smirking. “Worry about your own game, Captain.”

Cole chimes in, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Yes, *Ethan*. Listen to the wise words of our captain.”

I shoot him a playful glare. “Don’t worry, with Poppy here, I’ll be on top of my game. Though I’m already perfection, there’s not much room for improvement.”

Liam snorts, shaking his head. “Your ego, man.”

Cole smirks. “Your ego’s almost as big as my cock.”

I scoff, “At least my girl’s here willingly. Yours, on the other hand...”

Cole’s expression hardens briefly, but then he sighs. “She’s... stubborn. I’m ready to forgive the past, but she’s not ready to let go. But she will. She’ll come around.”

I nod, understanding his frustration. Relationships are complicated, and each has its own set of challenges. But today, on the field, we’re a team. And nothing will stand in our way.

The whistle blows, signaling the start of the game. I take a deep breath, pushing all thoughts aside. It’s game time, and I’m ready to give it my all. For the team, for the win, and for the girl in the stands who’s captured my heart.

As the game progresses, each goal, each save, pushes us closer to victory. I look at her every time the team scores, and she cheers like her heart is on the field with me, and I hope that part of it really is.

She disappears for a few minutes during the second half, but she’s back soon, and her smile is radiant.

When the final whistle blows, signaling our crushing win, the euphoria is overwhelming. But amid the team’s celebration, my eyes seek out Poppy. Her face is lit up with genuine joy, and it amplifies my own happiness tenfold.

Without a second thought, I break away from my teammates and sprint toward her. She looks up, her beautiful eyes wide with surprise, perhaps not expecting such a public display. But before she can utter a word, I vault over the barrier separating us, closing the distance in mere moments.

“Eth—”

Cutting her off, I wrap my arms around her, pulling her close, and our lips meet in a passionate kiss. It’s a statement, a proclamation to everyone around that she’s mine. It’s as close to being “official” as I think she’ll allow it to be.

Pulling back, I’m met with her flushed face, her breath coming in short gasps. “I’m going to hit the showers. Mind waiting for me by the locker room?” I ask, trying to sound casual but failing miserably.

She glances briefly at Nessa and Eva, who are both grinning knowingly, then nods. “Sure, I’ll be there.”

Bounding back to the pitch, I feel invincible, as if I’m floating on air. My teammates’ cheers and playful jabs only add to my high.

“Whipped much?” Cole teases as I rejoin them in the locker room.

“Just marking my territory,” I retort with a smirk.

Liam chimes in, “Man, you’ve got it bad. Never thought I’d see the day.”

I let out an amused huff, rolling my eyes. “Neither did I, but here we are.”

After a quick shower and change, my anticipation grows. Exiting the locker room, my heart rate spikes when I spot her.

She’s engrossed in her phone, but the moment she senses my presence, she looks up, her lips curving into a soft smile. The dim lighting of the corridor casts a gentle glow on her face, making her look even more beautiful.

“Hey,” I greet, my voice low, the adrenaline from the game still coursing through my veins.

“Hey yourself,” she replies, her voice teasing. “Quite the show you put on out there.”

I give a self-deprecating smile, rubbing the back of my neck. “Well, I had to make sure my number one fan was impressed.”

Her smile turns sly, her interest clearly piqued. “Oh, I’m your number one fan now?”

“Always have been,” I reply without hesitation, taking a step closer to her. “You only need to admit it to yourself.”

She laughs, a melodious sound that warms my heart. “You’re something else.”

I grin, closing the distance between us. “Only for you.”

I take her hand, interlacing our fingers, and I’m glad she’s not resisting or tensing. It seems to feel as natural for her as it does for me, and it gives me hope for what I’m about to propose.

But before I can voice my thoughts, she beats me to it. “My mom got a new job.”

We’re almost at the players’ parking lot when I respond, perhaps too eagerly, “The administrative position?”

She stiffens, and I instantly regret my words. Her gaze sharpens, suspicion evident. “How did you know about that?”

Caught off guard, I confess, “I might have... facilitated the interview.”

Her face twists, anger clashing with disbelief. “You did what?!” She jerks her hand out of mine, and I try to grab it back, but she storms out of the stadium in the frigid fall wind.

“I wanted to help,” I defend, following close behind her, but I can see her walls going up, the distance growing between us.

She swirls around. “What then? You *pity* me?” she spits out, her voice dripping with disdain. She looks skyward and throws her hands up in surrender. “I knew it! Of course I did. It was just too perfect. *You* were too perfect.”

I feel a surge of frustration. “It’s not about pity, Poppy! Why can’t you see that?”

She takes a step back, her eyes glistening. “As long as you pity me, Ethan, there’s no future for us.”

My anger matches hers. “Maybe there’s no future because you don’t intend to give us one! You’re ashamed of what you feel for me. I’m your dirty little secret; admit it!”

“At least I have genuine feelings for you. You... you pity me,” she retorts, voice breaking.

“No, I don’t!” I shout, my patience snapping. “Damn it, Poppy! I love you. It’s not pity! It’s love! I fucking love you like a madman, and I have the power to make your life a little easier. Why won’t you let me?”

“Do you really not see it?” She wraps her coat tighter around herself. “It makes me feel *cheap*, Ethan. It makes me feel like one of those dolls we used to mock at your garden parties. What did you call them, ‘cheap counterfeit rich whores’?”

I wince. “They are not you. God, you are the polar opposite, fighting so hard to do everything alone that I wonder if you would even accept a helping hand if you were drowning. The thing is, I love you enough to jump into the shark-infested water to save you against your will. Don’t think it’s for you then; see it as helping your mother and brothers. You’re not living there anymore.”

I’m attuned enough to her to catch a slight relaxation in her posture, a sign that my argument is sinking in. “She never did anything wrong, your mother. Don’t you think she deserves some luck?”

She relaxes a little more, letting go of the strong hold she had on her coat. “Wow, now I’m not only drowning, but there are sharks too?” she asks with a frown. Moving forward with a tentative smile, I breathe a little easier now that the crisis is defused, at least for the moment.

“For you, I would.” I raise my hand, brushing her cheek with the back of it, almost expecting her to move her face away.

She keeps her eyes on my face. I'm not sure what she is looking for, but she must find it because she exhales and takes a step toward me, resting her forehead against my chest.

I don't miss that she didn't acknowledge or reciprocate my feelings. It stings. I can't lie, but I also understand. I'm not sure she's even there yet. We've just reconnected three months ago, and even if my feelings for her have developed over a six-year period, hers might be very new.

"Thank you. She really needed a win."

I rest my hand against her neck and press a kiss on her hair. "You never need to thank me, beautiful, and I can assure you if she got it, it's because she's capable."

I kiss her head again. Taking a deep breath, I ask, "Would you come with me for the weekend before the break to the cabin? Just the two of us. I think we need to work out what we are and what we want to be."

She pulls back and chews on her bottom lip, her gaze thoughtful. "Why the cabin?"

"It's secluded, peaceful. Away from all this." I gesture around, indicating the school, the crowd, the world that often feels like it's pressing in on us. "I think we need that. Time away to just... be."

She nods slowly. "Okay. But promise me something."

"Anything."

"No more secrets. No more trying to 'help' without telling me."

I nod, relief flooding me. "Promise."

The weight on my chest lifts somehow. We have a lot to figure out, but for now, this is a start. With a newfound sense of purpose, I walk her to the car, opening the passenger door for her. She slides in gracefully, and I can't help but steal a glance at her before heading to the driver's side.

As I start the car, the stadium lights begin to recede in the rearview mirror, their glow gradually fading. The energy of the game, the cheers, and the adrenaline all become distant

memories. The drive envelops us in a comfortable silence, punctuated only by the soft hum of the engine. Yet, beneath that calm, there's a palpable tension, a silent acknowledgment of the unresolved emotions and the revelations of the evening.

“Poppy?” I start, my voice hesitant.

She glances over, her eyebrows raised in question. “Yeah?”

I inhale deeply for composure before I speak. “Would it be okay if I... stayed over tonight? I've noticed my sleep is better with you around. It's like... everything falls into place with you beside me.”

She seems taken aback by my admission, her eyes searching mine. Then she nods slowly. “I'd like that. But first, we should grab some takeout. And remember, you have to get enough for my roommates too. It's an unwritten rule.”

I chuckle. “Alright, what are you in the mood for?”

“Chinese?” she suggests with a hopeful smile.

“Sounds perfect.”

We pull into a nearby Chinese restaurant, and I'm overwhelmed by the array of options. “How much is ‘enough’?” I ask, bemused.

She laughs. “Just get a variety. They're not picky.”

Taking her word for it, I order an assortment of dishes, probably enough to feed my boys too. Inviting them over would have been cool, trying to mix our friendship groups, but putting Eva and Cole in the same room would be nuclear.

Back at her apartment, the delicious aroma of the food fills the apartment. Her roommates, Nessa and Eva, are already in the living room, their eyes lighting up at the sight of the feast.

“Wow, Ethan, trying to bribe us?” Nessa teases, eyeing the food.

Eva giggles. “Or maybe he's making sure we're well fed before he whisks Poppy away to play doctor in her bedroom.”

Poppy rolls her eyes, a playful smirk on her lips. “Joke's on you. We're staying right here for the evening.”

I can't help but laugh, the banter lightening the mood. We settle down in the living room, plates piled high with food. The TV plays in the background, some sitcom that I'm not familiar with. But honestly, I couldn't care less about what's on the screen. With Poppy curled up beside me, her head resting on my shoulder, I'm in my own little world.

The hours fly by, and the room is filled with laughter and light-hearted conversation. Every now and then, I catch Poppy's roommates throwing us knowing glances, their smiles teasing. But for the most part, it's a normal evening, a group of friends hanging out and enjoying each other's company.

As the night wears on, the room grows quiet, the only sound the soft hum of the TV. One by one, Nessa and Eva excuse themselves, leaving Poppy and me alone.

Nessa being Nessa. "Don't forget protection!" she shouts before closing the door behind her.

Poppy shifts, her fingers tracing patterns on my arm. "Thank you," she murmurs.

"For what?"

"For tonight. For being here. For... everything."

I turn to face her, my fingers brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Always," I whisper.

She smiles, her eyes shining with unspoken emotions. Slowly, she stands up, extending her hand to me. "Come on," she says, her voice barely above a whisper.

My heart rate accelerates, anticipation building. Taking her hand, I let her lead me toward her bedroom. The night may be drawing to a close, but for us, the real journey is only beginning.

Chapter 21



Poppy

It is still dark outside when the alarm's shrill tone pierces the quiet, and I groan, not ready to face the day. Behind me, Ethan stirs, his warm breath tickling the back of my neck. He tightens his hold around my waist, pulling me closer.

"No, more sleep," he mumbles, his voice thick with drowsiness.

I smile, pressing my back into his chest. "I wish, but my mom could only borrow the moving van up until ten."

The move has been a whirlwind. Mom got the keys to the rental house when she signed her contract on Tuesday, and she's been in a frenzy to get everything in order. She even managed to switch my brothers' schools, starting after the break. It's a new chapter for all of us, and I'm so excited, especially seeing the light back in my mother's eyes.

"You stay in bed," I whisper, extricating myself from his embrace. I slip into his en suite, taking a moment to appreciate the familiarity that's developed over the past couple of weeks. My presence is evident, from the shampoo and shower gel in the shower to the toothbrush next to his. It's at odds with the uncertainty that sometimes clouds our relationship.

After a quick shower, I wrap a towel around myself and head back to the bedroom. Ethan's no longer in bed.

I dress quickly with clothes that have now made their way into a drawer that is now mine.

I open the bedroom door and hear the clinking of dishes from the kitchen and follow the sound. He's setting a plate on the counter, the aroma of scrambled eggs and toast filling the air. Despite his sleepy protests, Ethan always has a way of putting me before himself. It's one of the things I love about him.

"For me?" I ask, genuinely surprised.

"Of course," he replies with a smile, "You'll need energy for the move. Though, you know, you could've asked your boyfriend to help."

His tone is light, but there's an underlying hurt. I sigh, realizing that this is one of the many issues we need to address. "It's a quick move, Ethan. We don't have much. The van's not even that big, barely larger than your SUV."

He nods, turning back to the fridge. The silence between us is heavy, and I can't help but think about the growing chasm in our relationship. It's not about the move or the van; it's about the unspoken feelings, the insecurities, the secrets, and the fear of vulnerability.

The upcoming weekend away feels more crucial than ever. We need that time, away from the world, to figure things out. To decide where we stand and where we're headed.

Finishing breakfast, I start to gather my things. "I can walk to the bus stop," I tell him, but he's already grabbing his keys.

"It's cold," he argues, a hint of protectiveness in his voice.

The drive to the bus stop is short, but the silence is deafening. We both seem lost in our thoughts, the weight of our unspoken words pressing down on us.

As he pulls up to the curb, I turn to him, searching for the right words. "Ethan," I begin, but then any potential words die on my lips.

He looks at me, his hazel eyes intense. “It will be fine.” But for once, I’m not even sure he believes it.

I nod. My throat tight with emotion. “I know. We... we need to figure things out.”

He reaches out, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “We will,” he promises.

I smile, leaning in to give him a quick kiss. “I’ll see you later?”

He nods, his grip on the steering wheel tightening. “Of course.”

I step out of the car, and he stays there a couple of minutes, looking at me before shaking his head a little. I’m not certain what he was trying to convince himself of, and I’m not sure I would like it.

The hum of Ethan’s car engine fades, and I’m left standing at the bus stop, the day’s events weighing on me. Drawing in a breath to center myself for the task ahead, the familiar path to the trailer park stretches out before me, a route I’ve walked countless times. But today, it feels different, charged with the promise of change.

Reaching the trailer park, the usual racket greets me—kids playing, neighbors chatting, the rhythm of life continuing unabated. But amid the everyday hustle and bustle, my family stands out. Mom’s directing operations while Billy and James dart around, gathering our few belongings. It’s a stark reminder of our humble life, and I jump in, helping to load everything into the van and car. We might not have much, but we have each other, and as weird as it sounds, it seems that when we lost everything, we found each other.

With everything packed, we set off. I drive the car with Billy beside me, chattering away while Mom and James lead in the van. The journey from South End to Brenthill feels like traveling between two worlds. The grimy, graffiti-covered buildings of the city gradually give way to Brenthill’s picturesque residential estates. The transformation is striking,

and I can't help but marvel at the well-manicured lawns and varied houses.

Pulling up outside our new home, my breath catches. It's a quaint two-story house, painted white with contrasting blue shutters. A small lawn stretches out in front, bordered by a white picket fence. It might not be the most lavish house on the block, but there's an inviting warmth to it.

As I step into the new house, a rush of emotions washes over me. The walls, freshly painted and devoid of the wear and tear of time, seem to promise a fresh start. I run my fingers along the smooth surface, feeling the stark contrast to the dented and faded walls of our old trailer. Memories of the past two winters in that poorly insulated space come flooding back—nights spent huddled under layers of blankets, the constant battle with the tiny, unreliable radiators that always seemed to fail when the cold became unbearable. The thought of another winter in that trailer had been a looming dread, but now, the spacious rooms of this house promise warmth and comfort. I can already imagine us, the family, gathered in the living room, the heat from a reliable heating system wrapping around us like a protective cocoon. Yet, amid the relief and gratitude, there's a twinge of anxiety. This house, with its promise of stability, also comes with secrets and lies. My mother earned the job, but I can't help but remember Ethan has played a part in it. Did he also play a part in us getting this house? Was the job really coming with a rental?

As I ascend the stairs to the first floor, I remind myself that this house is a blessing. I should be grateful, embrace what I have, and stop second-guessing.

I wander through the three bedrooms, each with its own charm. But it's the attic that truly captures my imagination. It's a large space filled with potential. I can already hear Billy and James, their voices echoing up from below, animatedly discussing their plans for it.

“That could be your room, Poppy, if you ever decide to come back home,” Mom's voice floats up to me, tinged with hope.

I pause, memories from merely a few months ago flooding back. The thought of moving back in had been tempting then. But now? Everything's changed. My life has taken on a new direction, filled with friends, college, and Ethan. Standing in what could be my room, the morning sun filtering through the window, it all becomes clear. I am in love with Ethan Hawthorne.

My introspection is interrupted by the playful bickering of Billy and James over the attic.

"Why should Poppy get it? I have a lot of Legos!" Billy argues, his voice rising in indignation.

"So? If she doesn't, I will get it. I'm the oldest boy and the man of the house! I'm fourteen," James retorts, puffing out his chest in a show of mock maturity.

"You're not a man! You cried during that movie last week. Men don't cry!" Billy shoots back, his face reddening.

"The dog died at the end!" James exclaims defensively.

Billy's eyes widen, filling with tears. "He died?!"

Mom quickly intervenes, pulling Billy into a comforting embrace. "No, he didn't. He went to live on a farm with his siblings. James, tell your brother the truth."

I nudge James, encouraging him to make amends. "Come on, bro. If you're the man of the house, be the bigger person."

James huffs, a sound of reluctant admission. "I lied, Billy. The dog didn't die."

Billy pulls away from Mom, his tear-streaked face searching James's for confirmation. "Really?"

"Yeah, really. I only wanted to be mean," James admits, looking genuinely remorseful.

Billy snuffles, wiping away his tears with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "That was *really* mean."

I try to lighten the mood. "How about we turn the attic into a shared space? One side for Legos, the other for video games. We can even add a pull-out sofa for my visits."

Mom gives me a knowing look, understanding the underlying message: I won't be moving back. But for now, there are more pressing matters. "Let's finish unpacking. Jared will be here soon to collect the truck."

"I still can't believe how fast everything is happening."

Mom nods with a small smile. "Life has a way of surprising us when we least expect it."

As the boys race downstairs, their earlier disagreement forgotten, Mom lingers, giving me a long, contemplative look filled with a mother's intuition and concern. I brace myself, sensing that a difficult conversation is on the horizon.

We move to the kitchen, unpacking boxes and arranging dishes. The rhythm of the task provides a temporary distraction, but the tension remains. Finally, she breaks the silence. "Poppy, now that we're settling in, why don't you invite your boyfriend over for dinner? I'd love to meet him."

I nearly drop the glass I'm holding. "What?"

"Jeremy, isn't it? I was half expecting him to show up today to help with the move."

My heart sinks. The lie I've been giving feels like a stone in my stomach. "He did offer, Mom. But I told him we could manage. We've been self-sufficient for a while, haven't we?"

She pauses, her hands stilling on a box. "Is it us, Poppy? Are you ashamed of me?"

The hurt in her voice is noticeable, and I rush to her, my eyes stinging with tears. "Never, Mom. I could never be ashamed of you. You're my rock, my hero."

She turns to face me, her eyes searching mine. "Then what is it? Why the secrecy? You're clearly involved quite deeply with that young man. I—" She shakes her head.

I swallow hard, struggling to find the words. "It's not you who I'm worried about. It's... him. What if you don't approve?"

Her eyebrows dip as she cocks her head to the side in bewilderment. "I know I've not been the most accepting

before, and honestly, most of my opinions at the time were to fit in. I don't care what he looks like, sweetheart."

I shake my head. "No, it's not that."

She takes a deep breath. "Is he committed to someone else?"

I grimace. "No, no, it's only us."

She nods, resting her hand on her chest with a relieved sigh. "Does he treat you well?"

A smile tugs at my lips. "Yes, he's quite adorable actually. So kind that I have a hard time seeing what he sees in me."

"Ah, I see. He's smart." She smiles. "You know, being rich is not a problem; it's the drive behind it. With your father, I was as much to blame. I saw all the signs. I knew money, power, and social standing would always come before me and his family, and in truth, I wanted to climb the ladder enough to forgo all of it." She smiles and caresses my cheek. "But you're wiser than I was. I know you see past all these things."

"It's complicated."

She gives a little laugh. "Everything worth living for usually is. Do you love this young man?"

I nod, tears blurring my vision. "I love him, Mom."

Her face lights up. "Does he love you?"

"I think he does."

"Then I love him already! Everything else is secondary. Poppy, you've been so devoted to helping us these past two years, working endlessly to keep us going. You've given up a lot, your own happiness included. I've always wanted you to find someone who would bring joy to your life, who would make you feel cherished."

I blink back tears. "I never saw it as a sacrifice, Mom. We're family."

She reaches out, holding my face carefully. "I know, darling. And I'm deeply grateful. But seeing you with someone, it's a relief. It means you're finally allowing yourself to live, to love."

But as comforting as her words are, a nagging doubt remains. She doesn't know the whole truth. No, it can't be, not when she ignores the most important fact of all—whose blood is running in my boyfriend's veins.

I hug her tightly. "Thank you, Mom."

"Oh, I'm thrilled, Poppy!" She beams, tightening her hold around me. "Everything is finally working out for us."

"Yes, it's amazing, Mom!" And I mean that even if I know I will end up breaking someone's heart soon enough. I'm not sure if it's hers, Ethan's, or ultimately mine.

Chapter 22



Poppy

The cabin stands tall and imposing, nestled amid the thick forest. Its wooden exterior, though rustic, exudes an air of luxury. Large windows offer glimpses of the opulence inside—plush sofas, a roaring fireplace, and state-of-the-art amenities. It's a world away from my life now, but it feels like a painful reminder of the past.

I stop on the path to look back at the car. Maybe it would be better to go back for now.

Ethan notices my hesitation and takes my hand, leading me inside. The warmth of the cabin envelops us, and I'm struck by its grandeur. Every detail, from the intricate chandeliers to the plush carpets, speaks of wealth and sophistication.

"This is not where your parents used to do the Christmas party," I say, sitting in front of the fireplace that had already been lit up, probably by their caregiver.

"No, it's mine."

I turn toward him, thinking he's joking, but he looks serious as he presses the button to bring the blinds down as the dusk is setting to give us privacy from prying eyes, which I don't expect to be many in the remote location we're in.

We are only forty-five minutes from town, but it feels like the complete wilderness.

“Yours? Was it like a graduation present?” I mean it as a joke, but it comes out with a bite, and I’m not really impressed with myself for this. I know I have a lot of unresolved issues with wealth and what used to be my life, but I can’t take it out on Ethan.

He turns toward me, not missing the edge in my voice. Of course he doesn’t. Ethan is so attuned to me that it’s humbling and scary at the same time.

However, he remains calm, his face happy and serene as he walks past our bags by the door and sits beside me on the comfortable white leather sofa.

“No, this house has nothing to do with the Hawthornes. As you may know, my mother comes from money as well.”

I nod. His mother is a Walton, and I heard gossip that she was actually wealthier than his father when they got married.

He shrugs. “My grandfather never liked my father much, but he loved me. I’m wealthy independently of my father, and I thought you needed to know that.”

“I don’t care about your money.” Because I really don’t, and truth be told, I often think that it would make my life much easier if he were a regular guy.

I admire his face as he cradles my cheek, and I smile. Yes, if he weren’t Ethan Hawthorne, I would have already introduced him to my mom. I think she would love him, I really do, but I’m not sure it’s possible with the stigma he carries.

He leans in and kisses me, his lips moving on mine before I open my mouth, granting him entrance. He rests his hands on my hips and pulls me forward until I’m lying on top of him, and he kisses me lazily as if we have all the time in the world, and this weekend, we do. I don’t have a shift for a few days, and in the spur of the moment, we decided to come here on Thursday instead of Saturday. Four days for Ethan and I to be together.

I break the kiss and look down at him and his smile. Lord, he seems so happy, and my heart flutters knowing I'm the one who is doing that.

I've decided. I will tell him that I love him this weekend, but I will also need to be honest with him about my inability to involve him in my life, at least for the foreseeable future.

Will you ever be able to? Or are you only lying to yourself, wasting both of your time?

He brings his hand up and brushes the crease between my eyebrows with his thumb. "What are you thinking that hard about? Are you not happy to be here with me?"

I shake my head, dispelling the cloud of thoughts. "It's not that. I'm... overwhelmed. This place, us, my family's new life, everything."

He studies me, his hazel eyes searching mine. "You know, let's focus on us, on this moment. These four days of relaxing, talking... enjoying each other's company, and seeing how many orgasms we can give each other."

I laugh, touched by his understanding. "I'd like that. But first, how about I make us some dinner?"

A playful smirk crosses his face. "You? Cook?"

I feign indignation. "Hey, I can cook! Sort of."

His laughter, warm and infectious, fills the space. "Alright, chef. What's on the menu?" he asks, sitting up and pulling me up with him.

I think for a moment. "It's a surprise."

He nods in approval. "Sounds perfect. I'll go put our bags away and take a quick shower."

I watch him pick up the bags, his movements graceful and sure. As he disappears upstairs, I take a moment to explore the cabin. The living room flows seamlessly into a dining area and, beyond that, a majestic kitchen. It's a dream, with gleaming marble countertops, state-of-the-art appliances, and cabinets stocked with every possible ingredient.

I start by rummaging through the cabinets, gathering ingredients for the pasta. As I set to work, I lose myself in the rhythm of cooking, the familiar motions soothing my nerves.

I'm so engrossed that I don't hear Ethan approach until he's right behind me, his arms wrapping around my waist. I startle, then relax into his embrace. He rests his chin on my shoulder, watching as I stir the sauce.

"That smells amazing," he murmurs, placing a soft kiss on my neck.

I smile, tilting my head to give him better access. "Wait till you taste it."

His response, a soft laugh against my skin, carries a hint of mischief. "I can't wait even if I'd much rather taste something else," he adds suggestively.

I press back against him, feeling his growing desire. "That's dessert," I tease.

He growls, nipping at my ear. "Vixen," he murmurs. I laugh, the playful tension between us palpable.

We continue in a comfortable silence, the only sounds being the sizzle of the pan and our synchronized breathing. The domesticity of the moment feels intimate, making me wonder if this could be a glimpse into our future.

"This is truly delicious," he compliments, taking another forkful of spaghetti.

"You can tell," I respond with a light-hearted tone. "I really got into cooking after we moved to the trailer. It's become something I love."

He smirks. "Showing off your wifey skills, are you?"

I offer a half smile, his comment dimming my mood a little. Even if marriage isn't on my mind right now, it's disheartening to think that our relationship will never have that potential.

"Any plans for the break?" I ask, changing the subject.

He looks momentarily surprised but goes along. "Nothing set in stone. Why? What's on your mind?"

“Just some work to catch up on. I used to do a side job for Jeff,” I explain, waving my hand dismissively. “So, I’m behind on some assignments and readings.”

His gaze sharpens. “What about your roommates?”

“Eva’s visiting her dad, and Nessa’s heading to her sister’s in New York,” I explain, pausing as I see his grin broadening.

“You’ll be alone then? How about having a live-in boyfriend for a couple of weeks?”

“Why don’t we see how this weekend pans out first?” I suggest, my tone light but the underlying seriousness evident.

He smirks. “Is that a challenge? I promise to make this weekend so memorable you’ll want me around permanently.”

I shake my head, amused, and move to do the dishes. As I navigate the kitchen, he suddenly blocks my path, his body pressing close to mine, trapping me between him and the cool marble counter.

A gasp escapes my lips, my body reacting instantly to his proximity. The contrasting sensations of his warmth and the cold counter send a shiver down my spine. His hands slide down to my hips, pulling me even closer.

“Ethan,” I breathe out, my voice shaky.

He chuckles, the sound deep and husky. “You said it was for dessert, didn’t you?”

I nod, unable to form words. He tilts my head, capturing my lips in a searing kiss. His tongue explores my mouth, the taste of him intoxicating. I moan into the kiss, my hands gripping his shoulders for support.

He breaks the kiss, his lips trailing down my neck, leaving a trail of fiery kisses. “You taste even better than the pasta,” he murmurs against my skin.

I laugh breathlessly, feeling the tension between us. “You’re insatiable.”

He grins, his eyes dark with desire. “Only for you.”

The intensity of his gaze makes my heart race. I've never felt this way with anyone before. The connection between us is undeniable, and as much as I try to fight it, I can't help but get lost in him.

He places his hand on my back, guiding me to lean over the counter. I'm suddenly grateful for the sweatshirt I'm wearing.

"Ethan..." I murmur.

"Shhhh, let me enjoy dessert in peace," he whispers close to my ear.

I smile, resting my cheek on the cool marble, which feels divine on my burning skin, and close my eyes, allowing myself to simply be in the moment with him.

He lifts the back of my sweatshirt and starts kissing down my spine until he reaches the waistband of my leggings, and then, in one brisk movement, both my leggings and underwear are pulled down.

I feel the cool air on my heated flesh. I turn my head a little more and open my eyes to see him standing there, his eyes riveted to the most private part of me, probably seeing how wet and ready for him I already am.

I don't care that he sees my desire for him because I see the same in his eyes and the way he licks his lips as he keeps his eyes on my pussy.

"And now I feast," he says with a voice so deep I barely recognize him, and he disappears from view.

I gasp as he grabs my thighs, spreading them and burying his face between my legs, really devouring me. He is not the man who previously gave me gentle, probing licks. No, my Ethan now is nothing more than an animal, licking, nibbling, sucking and penetrating. I see stars as my moans transform into cries as I shout his name between gasping breaths. His strong hands tighten around my legs, stopping any movements as my legs start to quiver with the orgasm he is giving me.

"God, Ethan!" I shout as I come, and he keeps on licking until I'm starting to feel my limbs again.

The echoes of my pleasure still linger in the room, leaving my throat raw. Now, the only sounds are our ragged breaths, punctuated by the unmistakable noise of his belt unbuckling and the zipper descending. Anticipation sends shivers down my spine; we've never explored this position before, and I'm eager to experience every new sensation with him. Moments later, a condom wrapper flutters past my face, landing at the counter's edge, and I feel him rub the head against my wetness and enter me slowly.

A long moan escapes me as I feel so full in this position. He groans when he is fully seated inside of me.

He grips my hips and starts thrusting, his movements hard and fast, possessing me and branding me with his dick as he did with his mouth minutes before. He is claiming me like that, our moans and grunts mixing with the erotic sound of flesh hitting flesh.

I let out a cry as he accelerates the pace.

"Mine," he groans as his thrusts turn erratic, and he leans over me, licking my neck and letting go of one of my hips to start caressing my clit.

"Yes, yes, yours," I confirm, tightening my walls around his length the way he likes it, and as he comes, he presses harder on my clit, making me come in his wake.

After our intense moment, Ethan's touch becomes gentle, almost reverent. He carefully pulls up my leggings, his fingers brushing my skin with a tenderness that sends shivers down my spine. Without a word, he lifts me into his arms, carrying me as if I weigh nothing. The sensation is both exhilarating and comforting.

He sets me down on the bed in what I assume is the main bedroom. "Wait for me," he murmurs, his voice husky, and then he's gone, disappearing into the adjoining bathroom. I take the opportunity to look around. The room is sleek and modern, with a distinctly masculine edge. Charcoals and grays dominate the palette, with occasional bursts of color from a piece of artwork or a decorative pillow. The large windows

offer a breathtaking view of the surrounding woods, making the room feel both expansive and intimate.

The sound of running water pulls me from my thoughts. When Ethan returns, there's a softness in his eyes that I haven't seen before. He guides me to the bathroom, where a Jacuzzi-sized bathtub awaits, filled with steaming water that carries the relaxing scent of lavender.

With the utmost care, he begins to undress me, his movements slow and deliberate. "You're so beautiful," he whispers, and I can't help but blush. He lifts me effortlessly, lowering me into the warm embrace of the water. The heat envelops me, melting away any residual tension. Ethan quickly sheds his own clothes and joins me, the water shifting around us. He pulls me close, his arms wrapping around me in a protective embrace.

I lean back against him, feeling the steady rhythm of his heart. The world outside fades, leaving the two of us in this intimate bubble. Taking a deep breath, I turn to face him, searching his eyes. "Ethan," I begin, my voice shaky, "there's something important I have to tell you."

He brushes a strand of hair behind my ear, his touch featherlight. "What is it?"

Gathering my courage, I confess, "I love you, Ethan. I love you."

His eyes, always so expressive, widen in surprise. After a moment that feels like an eternity, a smile breaks across his face. "Poppy," he says, his voice thick with emotion, "I've been waiting to hear those words. I love you too, more than you could ever know."

I lean into him, resting my head on his shoulder. "I've felt this way for a while," I admit, "but I was scared. Things are complicated."

He nods, understanding in his eyes. "I know, but we'll face whatever comes together."

He stands, water cascading off him, and extends his hand to help me out of the tub. We wrap ourselves in plush towels, the

soft fabric absorbing the remaining moisture on our skin.

Ethan leads me back to the bedroom, the dim lighting casting a warm glow over everything. He pulls back the covers, inviting me in. I slide between the sheets, the cool fabric a sharp contrast to the warmth of the bath. He joins me, pulling me close. Our bodies entwined, finding a comfortable rhythm together.

Ethan traces patterns on my skin, his touch gentle and soothing. “This weekend,” he begins, his voice tender, “I want to show you how much you mean to me.”

I turn to face him, my heart swelling with emotion. “You already have.”

He smiles, pulling me closer. “There’s much more I want to share with you.”

I rest my head on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. “I’m looking forward to it.”

We drift off to sleep, wrapped in each other’s arms, the promise of a new day and new memories to be made. But as much as I want to lose myself in this blissful bubble, the secrets I’m keeping cast a shadow over this moment. I know I can’t keep running from the truth, but for now, I want to savor this moment, this slice of happiness with Ethan.

Chapter 23



Poppy

The warmth of the bed envelops me, but a sudden jolt of anxiety pulls me from my dreams. Ethan's side of the bed is empty, but the lingering heat tells me he hasn't been gone long. I fumble on the nightstand to find my phone and blink at the harsh light, 6:02 a.m.

Pushing the covers aside, I slip out of bed, feeling the room's cool embrace. I glance back, half tempted to dive back into the warmth, but concern for Ethan nudges me forward. He's not one for early mornings, especially not here. I pull on Ethan's discarded Henley from the floor, its length just right, reaching midhigh. My footsteps are soft against the plush carpet as I make my way out.

The house is nearly silent, but a distant murmur of voices draws me in. Curiosity guides me to the office door.

"...I told you, Dad, I'll get her father's box soon." Ethan's voice, laced with tension, reaches my ears.

"The box... Why, Ethan?" I whisper to myself.

There's a pause, during which I can only imagine his father's response.

"And what? Look, I'm at the cabin like you wanted. But Poppy doesn't know anything about it, and I want it to stay

that way.”

My heart races, my hands trembling, as I try to make sense of the fragments of their conversation. *That* box. The one filled with documents that could potentially still take Fitzgerald Hawthorne down. The box my father had whispered about during one of my visits to him in prison. The same box he’d cleverly hidden in a train station locker. Just hearing Ethan talk about it makes my stomach churn.

Over time, I’ve pieced together the events leading up to my father’s incarceration. He’d been suspected of an embezzlement scheme—a white-collar crime, and in a desperate move, he went to the authorities with information about his boss, Fitzgerald Hawthorne. But Hawthorne was always one step ahead, cunning and prepared. He managed to shift all the blame onto my father, making him the scapegoat.

I retrieved that box and kept it, even when my mother begged me to get rid of it. I couldn’t. I was fueled by a burning desire for revenge, wanting to drag the Hawthorne name through the mud, even if it meant going down with it.

But life happened. My immediate concerns shifted to survival, and my burning anger toward the Hawthornes simmered down, though it never truly went away. It was replaced by a deep-seated resentment toward my father, who I saw as nothing more than a weakling. I held on to the box, even if I wasn’t entirely sure why. But now, with Ethan’s words reverberating in my mind, the suppressed anger and sense of injustice return with a vengeance. I’m filled with emotions: anger at my father for dragging me back into this mess, disdain for Fitzgerald Hawthorne, a sense of betrayal from Ethan, and a deep self-loathing for letting myself fall for the enemy.

Silly, silly girl, a mocking voice taunts in my head. *When something seems too good to be true, it usually is.*

Before I can ponder further, I hear Ethan say goodbye to his father. Panicking, I retreat, rushing back to the bedroom. I dive under the covers, feigning sleep, my heart pounding loudly in my chest.

Moments later, the bedroom door opens, and I feel the bed dip as Ethan slides in beside me. He pulls me close, his arm wrapping around my waist. I stiffen, every muscle in my body taut. I hate how comforting his touch feels, especially now that I know he's nothing more than a liar.

The apple never falls far from the tree.

"Poppy?" he murmurs, his breath warm against my neck. "Are you awake?"

I don't respond, forcing my breathing to remain even.

He sighs, pressing a gentle kiss to my temple. "I love you," he whispers, but I can't bring myself to reply.

The hours seem endless, and when I'm convinced he's in a deep slumber, I free myself from his grasp and begin to dress.

"I can't believe I trusted you," I mutter to myself, glancing at his sleeping form.

Ethan stirs, his voice thick with sleep. "Hey, where are you off to?"

I curse inwardly. I'd hoped to be halfway back to town before he even noticed I was gone.

"I'm heading home," I say, avoiding his eyes. "School's been canceled, and I have to take care of my brothers."

He sits up, rubbing his eyes. "What?" He reaches for his phone. "Stay here. I'll find a nanny service. They can get there faster than we can."

I shake my head. "I can't leave them with a stranger. Eva can pick me up; her car's fixed."

He starts to protest but then exhales heavily, the reality of our situation dawning on him. "Can't Eva stay with your brothers?" he asks as I move to the bathroom to pack my toiletries.

"She has to leave by lunch," I reply, my mind racing for more excuses.

His frown deepens, sensing my evasion as I put my toiletry bag in my bag and zip it shut. "Did something happen? Are

you not coming back? Did I do something wrong?"

I want to confront him, to tell him he'll never touch me again. But fear holds me back. What if he tries to keep me here, spinning more lies? I thought I knew Ethan, but now I see how cunning he truly is.

He made me believe he loved me. My stomach squeezes painfully at the mere thought.

I muster a smile, though it feels hollow. "No, everything's okay. I have a lot on my mind. This trip was a mistake."

He reaches out, grabbing my wrist gently. "Poppy, talk to me."

I pull away, my voice firm. "I have to go, Ethan."

He looks defeated but finally agrees. "Let me drive you back, at least."

I nod, not having any excuse not to agree to that, and frankly, I feel bad for asking Eva to drive her tiny city car all the way up here.

The drive is tense, filled with a heavy silence. As we near town, I catch him signaling a turn.

"You've been quiet. Everything okay?"

I nod absentmindedly. "Only thinking... Where are you heading?"

"To Brenthill." He throws me a glance. "Shouldn't I be dropping you at your mom's?"

"I've got to swing by my place," I say, gesturing to my bags. "I have things to pick up." *Could you be more evasive?*

He gives me a skeptical look, clearly not buying my excuse. But I'm done playing his game.

"I'll wait for you then," he insists.

"No, I'll go with Eva. Go enjoy your weekend, Ethan."

I see his nostrils flare with irritation. "We need to talk, Poppy. I won't let things end like this."

Don't worry, Ethan Hawthorne. You will get your precious box, and then there'll be no more reason for you to lie.

I force a smile, though it doesn't reach my eyes. "Of course, we'll talk tonight."

It seems to pacify him as he pulls up to my building, his gaze intense. "I love you, Poppy."

I inhale deeply, struggling to keep my emotions in check. "Goodbye, Ethan."

I grab my bags and hurry inside, not daring to look back. All I want is a shower to wash away his touch, his scent. I need to rebuild the walls around my heart, stronger than ever.

And after that? It's time to confront Fitzgerald Hawthorne.



"Are you sure you want to do this?" Eva asks, her voice filled with concern. We're parked outside the towering glass building of Hawthorne Enterprises. Memories of my father working here come flooding back. I know the building's ins and outs, especially how to get to the director's floor without being noticed. The real challenge is whether Hawthorne Senior will see me.

I tap the box on my lap, determination burning in my eyes. "He'll see me," I say out loud, responding to my own concerns.

Eva's fingers drum anxiously on the steering wheel. "Poppy, maybe it's better to talk to Ethan first. Clear things up."

I shake my head. "This is between his father and me."

She hesitates. "Do you want me to come with you?"

I smile, touched by her offer. "No, this is something I need to do alone. To close the circle."

Eva gives me a worried look before looking at the building again. "Just... be careful, okay?"

I nod, taking a deep breath as I open the car door. The cold air hits me, but I barely feel it. My focus is on the looming glass building in front of me: Hawthorne Enterprises. A place

that once held fond memories of my father, now tainted with betrayal and deceit.

The revolving doors whisk me into the opulent lobby. Polished marble floors reflect the golden chandeliers above, and the hum of conversations fills the air. Businessmen and women, all dressed in sharp suits, move with purpose, their polished shoes clicking against the floor.

I approach the elevators, and as I press the call button, a security guard from behind the counter calls after me.

“Miss, do you have an appointment?”

The doors open, and I step in.

“Miss!” he calls again, standing up.

“I don’t need one,” I reply, pressing the button for the director’s floor. As the doors close, I take a moment to gather my thoughts, the weight of the box in my hands serving as a constant reminder of my mission.

You can do this, Poppy. You can do this.

The elevator dings, announcing my arrival. I step out into a plush waiting area, where a young secretary sits behind a sleek desk, typing away on her computer. She looks up as I approach, her perfectly manicured eyebrows rising in question.

“Can I help you?” she asks, her tone polite but distant.

“I’m here to see Fitzgerald Hawthorne,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

She chuckles, clearly amused. “Do you have an appointment?”

“No,” I reply, “but I think he’ll want to see me.” I pause for dramatic effect. “Tell him Poppy Lockwood is here.”

Her laughter stops abruptly, replaced by a look of surprise. She picks up the phone, dialing a number. “Mr. Hawthorne, there’s a young woman here to see you. She says her name is Poppy Lockwood.”

There’s a brief pause, during which I can’t hear his response. But by the change in the secretary’s demeanor, I can

tell it's significant. "Yes, sir," she says, hanging up.

She looks at me, her previous amusement replaced with a mix of curiosity and respect. "Mr. Hawthorne will see you now. Go right in."

I nod, pushing open the heavy wooden doors to Fitzgerald Hawthorne's office. The room is vast, with floor-to-ceiling windows offering a panoramic view of the city. Behind a mahogany desk sits the man himself, his sharp eyes studying me intently.

"Miss Lockwood... or Donovan now," he greets, his voice oozing a saccharine tone. "You've grown up. Not the little girl I remember."

"Time has a way of doing that," I say sarcastically.

"To what do I owe this unexpected visit?"

Without another word, I set the box on his desk, the worn cardboard rough against my fingertips. "Enough with the charades, Hawthorne. This is what you had your son chasing after."

He leans in, eyes darting to the box. A momentary uncertainty flashes across his face, but it's swiftly overshadowed by a shrewd gleam. "How... convenient."

I follow his pointing finger to a nondescript gray box on a nearby bookshelf. "That," he informs, "prevents unauthorized recordings in this room."

Ah, ever so careful... I snort. "You don't have to worry about that. I'm done."

"With?"

"Everything." *Your son included.*

He looks at the box again. "What do you want for it?"

"For you to leave us alone."

His smirk is infuriating. "And how did Ethan persuade you to this point?"

The insinuation behind his words stings. “He didn’t. Unlike my father, I know when I’m outmatched.” The realization dawns on me, a cold pit forming in my stomach. Was this all a setup? The job for my mother, the house... Was it all merely leverage?

“Actually, I would like a few things.”

He leans back on his chair. “I’m listening, but you lost your advantage, didn’t you?” He rests his hand on the box. “I have the box now.”

“You do,” I confirm, “but you kept telling the media during my father’s trial that you are a man of principles.”

“I am.”

“Prove it.”

His eyes narrow just a fraction. “What do you want?”

“I want you to leave my family alone. Please don’t take the job from my mother or the house. Don’t do that to her.”

If I didn’t know any better, I would also say I saw some empathy in his face, but I do know better.

He nods sharply. “You have my word, but while we’re playing the honesty game. I’ll tell you a few things.”

Of course he thinks “honesty” is a game.

“Even if I wanted to destroy your new life, I couldn’t.”

I tense, somehow knowing I won’t like what he is about to say.

He smiles. “Your mother’s new job? It’s at Ethan’s company, well... the one he inherited from his grandfather. And the house?” He shrugs. “The deed is in your name.”

Disbelief washes over me. “He bought *me* a house?” The enormity of that truth begins to settle in.

Hawthorne merely shrugs, amusement shining in his eyes. “Seems so.”

I steel myself, meeting his gaze. “Ethan doesn’t owe me a house. But you owe us. Pay him back.”

He raises an eyebrow but nods in agreement. “Very well.”

As I turn to leave, he adds, “For the record, had your father come to me first, shown loyalty, instead of going to the authorities, I would’ve protected him.”

I pause at the door, my hand resting on the handle. “That’s in the past. It doesn’t matter.”

“To me, it does,” he counters. “And I played no part in your father’s downfall.”

I face him once more, determination in my voice. “One more thing. Keep Ethan away from me.”

He scoffs, “That’s a tall order. The boy’s got a mind of his own.”

I can’t help but think, does he really? But I dismiss the thought. “You know, Ethan always sought your approval. You’ve been too hard on him. Maybe try showing you care once in a while.”

A smirk curls his lips, his expression one of wry amusement. “I raised Ethan to be a leader. I couldn’t coddle him. He needed to toughen up. You have seen yourself that at this level, it is sharks leading sharks. I could not raise a soft, naive man.”

“You ended up raising a calculating manipulator,” I let out.

“And yet you are here pleading for his well-being.” He raises an eyebrow. “Careful, Miss Donovan. One might think you have feelings for my son.”

“I used to,” I retort, my voice barely above a whisper. “You’ve always found ways, Mr. Hawthorne. I’m sure you can figure this one out.”

He sighs, rubbing his temples. “I can try for a week, maybe two. But it won’t change the endgame.”

Those weeks are all I need—time to rebuild, to prepare myself for whatever comes next, and to hide the hurt.

“It’s my problem to deal with. I’d say thanks, but...”

I laugh, more out of disbelief than amusement. But his serious look stops me. “I’m sure you think that’s a compliment, but it doesn’t feel like one.” Taking a deep breath, I ask, “Can I trust you on this?”

He thinks for an instant, then nods. “I’ll do what I can.”

With that, I leave the office, ready to focus on myself and the new chapter I’m about to start.

Chapter 24



Ethan

*E*mergency situation. I'll be back on Monday. Let's talk then. I text her, but I can't confirm if she's seen it due to her outdated phone. But deep down, I sense she won't respond.

I'm not fooled by her "school" excuse. I know Poppy. Pushing her now would be a mistake. Something's spooked her, and I'm betting it's the intimacy we've shared, the ease with which we've slipped into each other's lives, and the implications of what that means. She confessed her love for me, a monumental step I sensed she wasn't ready to take.

I have no qualms about making her mine publicly; I already have in many ways, but soon she'll have to reciprocate. She can't run around forever, and I will not remain her dirty little secret. I want a future with her, not a vague promise of a maybe.

I groan, rubbing my temples. I can almost hear Cole's teasing voice, mocking me for admitting such vulnerabilities.

When my father called me this afternoon telling me that FIFA finally granted me a meeting to discuss my project and that it was tomorrow or nothing, I saw it as a sign. A chance to give Poppy the space she might need, even if it's tearing me apart.

I sink into the jet's plush seat. The cabin's ambience is serene, with the engine humming and the faint glow of overhead lights highlighting the luxury within. But even this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity can't distract me from thoughts of her.

She's hesitant, and I get it. It's far easier for me to claim her than it will be for her to admit to the world, to her mother, that she's in love with me because no matter what—her mother will only see one thing—I'm a Hawthorne, and yet Poppy saw above all this and fell in love with me.

A grin spreads across my face. She loves me. I can see it in her eyes.

A hushed voice breaks through my thoughts. The hostess stands beside me, a tray of champagne and small appetizers in hand. "A congratulatory gesture from your father," she explains.

Suspicion clouds my mind. This isn't like him. He's probably buttering me up for that damned box. His obsession with it is growing, even resorting to midnight calls. I won't betray Poppy or hand over the box. Maybe I'll tell him she destroyed it.

Part of me also wonders what could be so damaging, and maybe I should play karmic revenge and help take down my father.

No, even I'm not cunning enough to pull that one off, I silently refute.

Try admitting that you don't want your name tarnished. My conscience bites, and I feel a little shame.

Maybe I can make amends another way. Maybe once Poppy and I are married—I freeze with the glass halfway to my lips.

Where did that thought come from? Poppy ran away from me because admitting she loves me is too much, and I'm thinking about putting my ring on her finger.

I'm getting as delusional as Cole.

I can't help but laugh at the thought, earning a wary look from the hostess. *Time, Ethan, she needs time. You've loved her for six years, and she's barely loved you for six weeks.*

I pull the cover over me and pop a low-dose sleeping pill. It's a tactic I've used before to ensure I'm alert upon landing and to fend off the inevitable jet lag from such a brief trip. The hum of the plane's engines lulls me into a restless sleep.

Waking up to the voice of the pilot, I immediately check my phone, hoping for a message from Poppy. Nothing. The empty screen amplifies my anxiety. I'm tempted to send another message, but I resist the urge as the plane begins its descent.

As the plane touches down, a sleek luxury car is already waiting for me on the tarmac. I descend the stairs, and the driver holds the door open for me. The car's plush interior does little to comfort my agitated mind. As we drive through Zurich, it is unfurled below as the car weaves through its streets. The city is a blend of modern and historical elements, with sleek glass buildings reflecting the sky, standing shoulder to shoulder with centuries-old stone structures. The Limmat River flows serenely, its banks dotted with locals enjoying the day, while the distant snow-capped peaks of the Alps stand as silent sentinels. But it is all blurred into the background, my thoughts consumed by the proposal and Poppy.

Sunlight reflects off the FIFA headquarters' modern facade. Inside, flags and iconic soccer photographs adorn the vast lobby. The murmur of conversations in multiple languages fills the air, a testament to the global nature of the sport.

Upon reaching the reception doors, a short, portly man greets me with a firm handshake. "Mr. Hawthorne, welcome. We've arranged your stay at The Grand Hotel, a five-star palace. We can review the slides for Monday's meeting with the FIFA representative there."

I frown. "There must be some mistake. I'm flying back today."

He looks genuinely confused and hands me an agenda. "This was approved by Fitzgerald Hawthorne," he says,

pointing to the week-long schedule filled with meetings, including some with Premier League team leaders.

I scan the document, my heart rate quickening. This isn't what I agreed to. I had planned a quick trip, not an entire week away from Poppy. I force a smile, not wanting to show my growing anger. "Is there an office I can use momentarily?"

He nods, leading me to a spacious room with a large desk and a view of the city. The room is bathed in gentle natural light filtering through the large windows, offering a panoramic view of Zurich. A massive oak desk sits in the center, its surface gleaming. Bookshelves line the walls, filled with trophies, footballs, and framed photos of iconic moments in soccer history. The room exudes power and prestige.

As soon as the door closes behind me, I sit and dial my father's number. It rings twice before he answers.

"Ethan," his voice oozes a mock innocence that sets my teeth on edge.

"What's your game, Dad?" My voice is sharp, edged with frustration.

"Just ensuring you make the most of this opportunity."

"This isn't what we discussed. I told you I'd be back today."

"You need to build relationships, Ethan. This is how business is done."

"I had other plans," I snap, my mind flashing to Poppy.

"You always do," he retorts. "But sometimes, you need to prioritize."

I exhale, trying to rein in my anger. "You could've informed me."

"And risk you declining? I know you too well."

I clench my fist, anger bubbling. "I'll find a way back."

"How? You don't have access to the plane if I don't want you to, and let me guess, I'm pretty sure your passport is still in the safe there."

I tighten my hand in a tight fist. “Watch me!”

My father sighs. “She had... conditions, Ethan. Conditions that involve you.”

“Who?” I ask breathlessly, already knowing the answer but hoping against hope that I’m wrong.

“Poppy Donovan.”

“You’re lying.” But my tone lacks vehemence because I felt from the moment I woke up that something was wrong with Poppy. I just didn’t know how bad it was.

There’s a pause, and I can almost picture my father’s smug expression. “She came to my office, Ethan. Brought that damned box I’ve been chasing. Said she wanted to close the chapter. To move on. And she made me promise to keep you away.”

I feel like the wind has been knocked out of me. “Why would she do that? She hates you.” That’s just one of his antics to mess with my head, I realize.

“Yes, she does, but she knew I was her only option.”

“You are trying to break us up. You never approved of her.”

“Quite the contrary, actually,” he replies with satisfaction in his voice. “As I told you, she brought me the box and knew she was outmatched. She is smart; I’m not that opposed.”

“No!” I hang up, frustration mounting. I dial Poppy, but deep down, I sense she won’t answer. And she doesn’t. “Poppy, it’s me,” I start, then halt. Pouring my heart out on voice mail feels futile. “Seems you’re occupied. We’ll talk later.”

I put the phone back on the table and glare at it. My father’s right; without my passport, I can’t go anywhere, and even if I go to the US embassy, it will take the better part of a week to get a new one anyway.

I slam my fist down, battling a surge of emotions. My father’s deception, Poppy’s silence—it’s overwhelming. Without my passport, I’m trapped. And the realization that

Poppy might've overheard my conversation with my father dawns on me. She thinks I've betrayed her.

A knock interrupts my thoughts. The man from earlier peers in, clearly puzzled. I gesture for him to wait a moment, then dial Cole. "Need your jet. Now."

He groans, "Dude, it's early. And why?"

"I need you to send your jet to get me in Switzerland."

"In Switz—" I hear him grunt, probably standing up. "What the hell are you doing there?"

"The project with FIFA is moving along."

"That's awesome, man!" His voice has lost a little of its sleepiness.

"Yes, no..." I pause, feeling the urgency. "I need to leave now."

Cole chuckles. "You're loaded. Rent one."

I glower at the wall and at the foolishness of leaving all my papers in the plane's safe. "You need your ID for that, and mine is in my father's jet."

"Okay, I know I'm only waking up, but bro, you don't make any sense."

I roll my eyes, not in the mood to retell the whole story that's probably a lie. "My father—" I stop myself, frustration bubbling. "He's pulling one on me, forcing me to stay here, and I'm worried about Poppy. She's not answering her phone."

I hear Cole rumbling around in the kitchen and the unmistakable sound of the espresso machine being turned on. "You know, there are ways to stay connected, even when she's not answering. Ever thought of installing spy software?"

"I..." I hesitate, searching for the right words. "You didn't actually do that, did you?"

"No?"

"Cole! That's creepy, dude. You remember the predator behavior we discussed?"

He snorts. “My girl, my problem.” Then, a bit resigned, he adds, “And for the plane, even if I want to help you, I can’t. I’m still in deep shit for the Ibiza party bus of last year. I’m not allowed to take the plane more than twice this year because my father seems to think I need to be less impulsive.” He snorts again. “I only have one trip left, and I’m keeping it in case of an emergency.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “This *is* an emergency, Cole!”

“Nope. I mean an emergency with Eva being stubborn for much longer.”

I want to tell him that it’s kidnapping, but I don’t think he would even care. My phone beeps with a text from my father.

I didn’t lie. And there’s a video file attached.

“I have to go, Cole... Let me know if she’s okay?”

“Ah, now you’re okay with me keeping tabs on Eva?”

“‘*Interested,*’ that’s how I’ll put it,” I tell him sarcastically, but I’m way too eager for info to tell him off again.

I hang up and open the video file, and my breath catches in my throat. Poppy is there, standing in my father’s office, asking him to keep me away from her.

I bury my face in my hands, feeling the weight of our unspoken words and unresolved feelings. The knock jolts me back to reality. *Alright, Poppy, you win. I’ll give you this space. But in a week, I’m coming back for you.*



The week stretches on, seemingly endless. Each morning, I’m determined to keep up my professional facade. Yet, as the hours pass, my true emotions threaten to surface. Each presentation, every handshake, every nod of approval from dignitaries, feels like I’m on stage, performing a role that’s becoming increasingly difficult to play.

By the third day, my connection to Poppy—my lifeline, albeit through Cole—frays and then snaps. Eva’s abrupt departure, likely a desperate bid to escape Cole’s relentless

shadow, has him hot on her heels. And just like that, my indirect link to Poppy is severed, leaving me feeling more isolated than ever.

Two days later, my fingers tremble as I dial her number, my heart racing with each ring. I break my promise, dialing her number repeatedly. Four calls. No answer. Then, a text notification. But it's not her. It's from Liam, the last person I expected to intervene.

Poppy's okay. Nessa says back off. You're not helping.

I stare at the message, disbelief clouding my thoughts. Since when does Liam play mediator? And what's his connection to Nessa?

Is she okay? I type back.

She's breathing, comes his terse reply.

My jaw tightens, the muscles working as I try to contain my frustration. *Not helpful, Ashford.*

Not trying to be. Focus on your goal.

Thanks, Dad, I shoot back, sarcasm dripping from each word.

You're welcome, he retorts.

"I'll make you pay for that, asshole," I murmur, already plotting a suitable revenge for Liam's unwelcome interference. But my plotting is cut short. The door to the conference room swings open, signaling the commencement of my final meeting. Arsenal. A meeting with the club owned by Cole's father. This should be a slam dunk, but given the roller coaster of this week, I'm taking nothing for granted.

The final meeting at the FIFA headquarters is a blur of handshakes, nods, and polite smiles.

Stepping out of the stately building, the aftermath of the past week's negotiations settles on my shoulders. The cityscape of Zurich offers a brief distraction as I make my way back to the hotel.

Restlessness grips me the next morning. With the FIFA decision hours away, my real anticipation is for the flight home and confronting my turmoil, my mistakes, and my Poppy.

And when the call finally comes, the voice on the other end delivering a resounding “yes,” a wave of elation washes over me. But it’s short-lived.

A cold, sinking feeling settles in my stomach, the room suddenly feeling too big, too empty. This victory, this monumental step in what I hope will be a diversification of my future business, feels hollow. Because there’s no one to share it with. No Cole to crack a joke, no Liam to offer a sarcastic comment and, most importantly, no Poppy to share in my joy and see the pride in her big brown eyes.

I sink into the plush armchair, grabbing the program’s brochure I’d left on the coffee table. The glossy pages showcase what is to be the pinnacle of soccer training in the US. The Elite Intensive Soccer Program—a four-week summer camp where the crème de la crème, the top twenty-two players from across the nation, train with the world’s best. It’s more than a training camp; it’s a crucible, a place where legends are forged and a place where sponsors will flood, and I will be able to diversify the company my grandmother left me and finally branch out in soccer and sports in general.

I recall my father’s mocking gaze and snicker when I first unveiled my plans after inheriting my grandfather’s empire. He told me I’d put the whole thing in the ground before I was twenty-five, and I’m now in perfect shape to show him how wrong he is, not only about my business sense but about life in general.

This sports division is my dream. My vision. And this program is basically setting me up for gold. But in this moment of triumph, the absence of Poppy’s comforting presence is a stark reminder of the game I tried to play against my father to protect her.

Bracing myself, I dial my father’s number. It rings twice before he picks up.

“Ethan,” he says with that familiar condescending tone.

“I’ve secured the deal with FIFA,” I say bluntly.

There’s a pause on the other end, and then he says, “Congratulations. I knew you could do it.”

I scoff, “No, you didn’t. You always believed I’d fail.”

His smirk is low and mirthless. “Did I? Perhaps I only said that to ensure you had the fire, the drive to prove me wrong. I’ve always known that nothing motivates you more than that.”

I grind my teeth, trying to keep my temper in check. “That might’ve been true once, but things change.”

“Ah, Miss Donovan,” he says, drawing out the words.

I tense, every muscle in my body going rigid. “I’ll be taking the plane now.”

“It’s waiting for you,” he replies smoothly. “I’m nothing if not a man of my word.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “That’s debatable.”

There’s a brief silence, and then he says, “You’ve achieved a lot, Ethan. But remember, life isn’t only about business deals and proving others wrong. Sometimes, it’s about the choices we make and the people we choose to have by our side.”

His words, strangely introspective for him, catch me off guard. “Is that advice or a warning?”

“Take it as you will,” he says with a smidge of mystery.

I hang up, the weight of our conversation pressing down on me. The thought of facing Poppy again sends a mix of anticipation and dread coursing through my veins. With nothing in my way, how will I mend our rift? The uncertainty weighs heavily on me.

Chapter 25



Poppy

The living room is dimly lit, the dim glow from my laptop screen illuminating the room. I scroll through various university and college websites, my heart heavy with the weight of the decision I am considering. The idea of transferring feels like a desperate attempt to escape the looming shadow of Ethan. But the worst part? I miss him. Terribly.

I hate myself for it. How can I miss someone who's caused so much turmoil in my life? Someone who's lied and manipulated me, making me believe that my luck has really turned? And yet I do because, deep down, I know it isn't only about him. I knew from the first moment I let him in that it was not possible, and yet, I let my love for him grow. But he stomped on that love, which I always knew he would.

With a heavy sigh, I dismiss the hopeful tab and click on another university link. The reality hits hard; without my scholarship, I can't simply up and leave. And the last thing I want is to owe anything more to Fitzgerald Hawthorne.

He kept his promise. But with Ethan's absence stretching for almost two weeks, it's clear he went above and beyond his words.

It probably serves his interests as much as mine, I think bitterly. It would be mortifying for his son to bring the daughter of his disgraced employee to the Christmas party.

Yet, despite the silence I think I want, I find myself glancing at my phone. Ethan's calls and messages were incessant at first, each one a painful reminder. But then Eva left, and I felt even more isolated. Nessa, ever the protective friend, stepped in, becoming the rock I desperately needed. And now, as the days drag on, my phone remains eerily silent. Six days and counting.

This silence, this distance, it's what I had asked for, isn't it? Then why does every silent moment, every unlit notification, hurt even more than before? I huff, leaning back on the sofa. Staring blankly at the ceiling. The shadows seem to dance mockingly, echoing my inner chaos.

Get a grip, Poppy Donovan, I mentally scold myself. *He's just a guy.* But even as I try to convince myself, deep down, I know it's not that simple. Ethan Hawthorne isn't just any guy. He's the one who challenged me, the one who betrayed me, and the one I can't seem to forget, no matter how hard I try.

The front door creaks open, and Nessa walks in, her face lighting up when she sees me sitting in the living room instead of being locked up in my bedroom. Behind her is Eva, looking much more peaceful, her trip clearly having done her good.

"Poppy!" Eva exclaims. She rushes over, and instantly, we're wrapped in a tight embrace.

Pulling back, I smile. "Welcome back, Eva. How is your father doing?"

She shrugs but keeps my hand in hers. "He's okay. He met someone, but he was worried about telling me." She rolls her eyes. "Mom died four years ago. I'm happy he's finding love again."

I pull her into another hug. I love how gentle and selfless she is.

"What's that?" Nessa asks, her voice dripping with suspicion.

I glance up to see her squinting at my laptop screen, a frown on her face.

“I’m... exploring some options,” I reply when she looks at me, trying to sound nonchalant.

Eva pauses, her eyes also scanning the screen as if trying to grasp the gravity of what she’s seeing. “Transferring? Are you serious, Poppy?”

I nod, biting my lip. “Thought about it. Maybe a fresh start?”

Nessa throws her hands up dramatically. “Oh no, not the runaway tactic! Classic Poppy move.”

Eva grins, nudging me. “She’s got a point.”

I roll my eyes but can’t suppress a smile. “I seem to remember someone running home to avoid a certain someone named Cole?”

Eva gasps, feigning shock. “How dare you bring that up!”

And not to let Nessa get away unscathed, I turn back to her. “And someone else avoiding her sister’s place because of... reasons.”

Nessa rolls her eyes and throws herself into the armchair across the sofa.

We all burst into laughter, the tension in the room dissipating a little.

After a moment, I slump back onto the sofa, feeling lighter. “Okay, okay, I get it. No running.” *I don’t have the option, anyway.*

Eva, ever the voice of reason, says, “Look, if you’re hurting, maybe you should talk to him. Get some closure.”

Nessa, with a mischievous glint in her eye, leans forward. “Or, hear me out; we could totally go and slash his tires. Maybe leave a little ‘remember me’ on his precious car. I’ve got a couple of screwdrivers that would work perfectly.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “You’re insane.”

Eva nods in agreement. “Definitely an option, but before we embark on a life of crime...”

Nessa interrupts, waving her hand dismissively, “Been there, done that. It’s overrated.”

Eva cocks her head. “Good to know. Still, maybe let’s start with talking?”

The room fills with laughter again, the warmth and camaraderie of the moment wrapping around me like a comforting blanket. With these two by my side, I feel much better. I won’t run. I’ll face this challenge head-on, like every other obstacle that’s come my way.

The night wraps around me, and as I slide under the covers, the weight on my chest feels a tad lighter. Sleep comes quickly, pulling me into a familiar dream, a place where memories and desires intertwine. The familiar scent of his cologne, a blend of wood and a trace of spice wraps around me, making the dream feel almost tangible. I can sense him, the warmth of his body, the rhythm of his breathing, as if he’s right there beside me.

A sudden cold draft interrupts the dream, and I’m jolted awake. The room is bathed in the silvery glow from the streetlights outside. I feel a shift in the bed, a presence. My heart skips a beat, then races as I turn to find Ethan. There he is, his features softened by the dim light, his eyes deep pools of emotion, searching, always searching, for something in mine.

“What are you doing here? You need to leave,” I whisper, my voice trembling. How conflicting it is to have him there in the bed with me.

He looks at me, his eyes filling with pain. “Staying away isn’t working, Poppy. I’m taking a page from Cole’s playbook.”

“You need to leave,” I insist, but my resolve wavers as he moves closer, the warmth of his body almost magnetic. It breaks my heart to have him here, but the familiarity of his body soothes the pain he has caused himself.

“Just let me stay for tonight, please,” he pleads, his voice raw with emotion. “I can’t sleep without you, Poppy. I can’t stop thinking about you. I need some sleep for my training tomorrow.”

I hesitate, torn between the fresh pain that this night will bring and the pull of giving in to the bliss his presence brings me against all logic. “Just for tonight,” I finally whisper, too tired to fight the longing I feel.

He pulls me close, his breath warm against my ear. “It’s you,” he murmurs. “It has always been you.” And within a minute, his breathing evens out. He must be truly exhausted.

I don’t think I can fall asleep, not with the way my heart beats in an insane rhythm because he is here. But I close my eyes and bask in his warmth, his alluring scent that both hurts and appeases me and before I know it... I fall asleep.

The night passes in a blur, and the next thing I know, the first rays of dawn are filtering through the curtains. I carefully extricate myself from Ethan’s embrace and tiptoe into the living room.

Eva is already up, a cup of coffee in hand. She glances up as I enter, her gaze flicking to the bedroom door and then back to me. Her eyes widen as she notices the massive pair of trainers by the door.

“Are we not broken up?” she asks, looking back at me.

I exhale, running a hand through my hair. “We are, but... it’s complicated.”

“Isn’t it always?” Eva remarks, a hint of amusement in her eyes. She fills another cup of coffee and pushes it toward me.

I grab the cup and lean over the counter. “I love him, Eva,” I admit, looking down at the black coffee, the weight of the confession pressing down on me. “But I don’t want to. There’s too much history.”

“Between you two?” she asks, her brow furrowing.

I hesitate, searching for the right words. “You know the story.”

She nods slowly. “I do, but it’s your father and his father, and that’s not *your* story.”

I swallow hard, understanding what she is getting at. “Before, it was all just stupid petty rivalry pranks. He never truly wronged me, not until recently. But the things he did, the words I overheard... He lied, Eva.” I take a shaky breath, the weight of betrayal heavy in my chest. “He made me believe in a love that perhaps never existed.”

Eva takes a moment, her gaze thoughtful, before responding. “Love is... complicated. I’m no expert, and heaven knows I’ve had my share of heartbreaks. But, Poppy”—she pauses, choosing her words carefully—“when he looks at you, I can’t help but watch him.” She grimaces. “The way I say it sounds wrong, but...” She shakes her head. “What I mean is, you see the most in people when they’re caught off guard, and that’s when I observe him. His gaze holds nothing but adoration for you. It’s the kind of look you expect from a man that would go to war for you; it’s...” She snorts, blushing a little. “Frankly, it’s Darcy-esque.”

“Darcy-esque? Is that even a word?”

She waves her hand. “If it’s not, it should be, but you know what I mean.”

“What about the box, though?”

She takes a sip of coffee, looking at me silently. “Did *he* ask you for the box? Did he try to get to the box?”

I purse my lips but don’t answer.

Eva sips her coffee, her gaze steady on mine. “Maybe, just maybe, you weren’t the one he was trying to manipulate.” The words hang in the air, and for a moment, everything seems to stand still as I process the possibility.

“Who w—” I stop. *His father! Is Ethan on my side? Did he pick me?*

Trying to smother any kindling hope, I tell myself. “No, I... it’s only been a few months. It’s better to let it die. There is too much bad blood. Too much history. I can’t go around flaunting a Hawthorne to my family. My mother went through enough.”

Eva's eyes turn sad, and she reaches out to squeeze my hand. "And so did you, Poppy. You deserve happiness, whatever that looks like for you."

I nod, tears pricking my eyes. Without another word, I rush to the bathroom, needing a moment to collect myself. The hot water of the shower does little to wash away the confusion and pain.

Once I am dressed and ready to go, I stand at the doorway, torn. Part of me yearns to stay, to face him, to confront the potential revelations that could change everything. But another part, the part that's been hurt and betrayed, urges me to flee. And in that moment of weakness, I choose escape, not yet ready to face the reality of our entangled emotions.



The weight of the day presses heavily on my shoulders as I enter my apartment late in the evening. I remove my shoes and sigh, leaning against the door. I'm somehow glad the girls are not here tonight. I'm really not in the mood to talk.

Cleaning my mother's house and the shift at work had been a welcome distraction, but now, as I'm alone with my thoughts, the reality of my situation with Ethan looms large in my mind. I've expected to hear from him all day, but there's been nothing. Radio silence. Is it a good thing?

I walk into my bedroom, and before I can react, the door swings closed to reveal Ethan. His intense gaze locks onto mine, and without a word, he turns the lock with a faint click. The finality of the sound sends a shiver down my spine.

My eyes dart to a sports bag on the floor, my confusion evident. "What's this bag?"

"My overnight bag," he replies, his voice low and husky.

"We said one night," I counter, my voice tainted with apprehension.

Ethan steps closer, the intensity in his eyes unwavering. "One night won't be enough. I can't get enough of you."

My heart races. “I gave the box to your father. You don’t have to play this game anymore.”

His face softens, and he takes a deep breath. “Poppy, I never cared about the box. All I ever wanted... was you.”

I take a step back, disbelief evident in my eyes. “We were always at each other’s throats in high school. How can I believe that?”

He breathes out, running a hand through his hair. “Yes, because it was the only way you’d notice me. All I ever wanted was to be on your team, but you seemed to acknowledge me only when I was aggravating you. It became our thing because I wanted to be in your world, even if it was through anger.”

My eyes widen, my mind racing. “You’re making that up.”

He shakes his head, his gaze never leaving mine. “I love your locket,” he murmurs.

I instinctively touch the delicate piece of jewelry around my neck, my confusion deepening. “What?”

He points to the pattern on the locket. “The pattern of shiny stars. One, four and three, right?”

I open the locket, my fingers trembling. To my astonishment, he’s right. “How did you...?”

“One-four-three,” he whispers, his voice thick with emotion. “It means ‘I love you’ in Morse code.”

My heart skips a beat. “You gave it to me?”

He nods, hope and vulnerability shining in his eyes. “It wasn’t from your dad. It was from me.”

I blink back tears, my emotions a whirlwind. “But why?”

Ethan takes a shaky breath. “I want to be with you, even if it means being your dirty little secret. As heart-wrenching as it is for me, I’d rather have you on your terms than not have you at all.”

Without another word, I close the distance between us. Our lips meet, and the world fades away. The kiss is deep,

passionate, and all-consuming. His tongue brushes against mine, teasing and exploring, while my teeth graze his plush lower lip, eliciting a moan from him. The taste of him, the feel of his lips moving against mine, sends a rush of heat throughout my body. Every touch, every sensation is magnified, and I lose myself in the intensity of the moment.

After our lips part, I murmur the words he's been craving to hear: "I love you."

His eyes light up, and he tenderly holds my face between his hands. He studies me, searching for something deep within my eyes before a heartfelt smile graces his lips.

"Poppy, I've loved you like a madman since the day you walked into that garden party in that blue dress you despised. I was smitten, and it infuriated me that you seemed to overlook me. From the moment I stole your ice cream to catch your gaze, I've been irrevocably yours."

Before I can respond, he captures my lips with his, his tongue exploring my mouth with an intensity that speaks of pent-up longing and desire.

We make our way to the bed, shedding our clothes. As we come together, he loves me with a reverence that leaves me breathless, showing me with every touch, kiss, and whispered word the depth of his feelings. In this intimate moment, I realize that our love is something worth fighting for, and I can't let past shadows cloud our future.

Ethan belongs to me, and I to him. The world will have to come to terms with that.

Chapter 26



Ethan

I wait, every second stretching out. Her whispered “I love you” still hanging in the air, but what does it mean? The ambiguity of it all leaves me in turmoil. Did she mean to get back together? Was it a response to my own vulnerable admission? Does she actually intend to keep me a secret?

My mind drifts back to my return from Switzerland. I was filled with restless energy, a need to see her, to be near her. But when I caught a glimpse of her at the bus stop by the pizza place, lost in her thoughts and visibly hurting, I stayed in my car. Seeing her from afar was enough, at least for a while. But it wasn't right. Something was missing in my life. It felt like I couldn't breathe quite right, and the nights were even worse. I could feel her, smell her, and the few hours I managed to sleep were filled with nightmares of me losing her over and over again.

Then, it was time to get back into a routine, and still, I wasn't functioning right. During practice, my reflexes were slow and my shots off target. Every time the ball came my way, my vision blurred, and my legs felt like lead to the point that Coach had stopped shouting at me and was wondering if I needed medical attention.

One evening, the door to my room swung open abruptly. Cole and Liam stood there, their expressions a mix of concern and determination. “Intervention time,” they declared, bursting into my room. Their sudden appearance jolted me from my thoughts.

Cole leaned in, his voice low. “You think giving her space is helping? Look at yourself, man.”

Liam shot Cole a disapproving look. “I don’t like your methods, but Nessa’s been talking. Poppy’s not doing any better.”

Cole gave him a side look, and I knew that we would have to approach this Nessa subject soon enough.

Cole threw a set of keys on the bed. “The keys to her place,” is all he said.

It was Liam’s turn to throw him a wary look. “Cole...” he all but sighed.

Cole shrugged. “You and lover boy have your ways; I have mine.” He pointed at the keys on my bed. “You love her? Make her listen.”

Desperation and sleepless nights had worn me thin. Cole’s words, though rash, held a glimmer of hope. Maybe, just maybe, it was worth the risk, and contrary to all I thought, it worked. It was terrifying to bare my soul this way, to admit my vulnerabilities, and even if she only reciprocated in half words, it was enough for now.

I had slipped out early this morning, leaving her wrapped in the sheets of our shared warmth. But I couldn’t leave without a gesture, a hope. I grabbed the jersey with my number and left it on the bed with a note asking her to come to the game and wear my jersey if she felt like it. It’s a bit cliché, I admit, but the thought of her draped in my colors, my name emblazoned on her back, is too enticing.

“How are we feeling today?” Coach asks, trying to sound nonchalant, his eyes focused on the other side of the field where our ultimate rivals, the *Kings of Miltown*, are performing their stretching.

I stretch, feeling the pull of my muscles. “I’m ready, Coach. Number ten won’t let you down.”

He looks down at me for a second, mutters something under his breath about players’ hormones, and walks back to talk to his assistant coach.

I turn toward the guys who are stretching a few steps from me now, and they give me knowing smiles.

It’s the last game of the season before the playoffs in Vegas. I hope she will come with me.

The energy in the stadium is electric. Every shout, every cheer, it’s like a pulse driving me forward. The grass beneath my cleats feels familiar, grounding me. The opposing team is fierce, their determination evident in their aggressive plays and shouts. But there’s a distraction: Poppy. She’s in the stands, wearing my jersey. It’s not merely a piece of fabric; it’s a statement. And it fuels me.

We’re nearing the end, and the tension’s thick. The ball finds its way to me, and for a split second, everything slows down. The goal’s in sight, the challenge clear. I take the shot, and it’s like the world erupts. The crowd’s roar is deafening, but amid the chaos, there’s clarity. I need to get to her.

Breaking from the team’s ecstatic huddle, I make a beeline for her. She’s radiant, eyes shining with pride and something deeper.

I spread my arms wide, an unspoken invitation. There’s a heartbeat where time seems to stop, and then she’s rushing toward me. The world blurs as she leaps into my arms, her legs wrapped around my waist. Despite the exhaustion and sore muscles, I tighten my hold around her, lifting her off the ground.

“You were incredible,” she breathes, her face inches from mine, her breath warm against my lips. She pulls back, her nose wrinkling in playful distaste. “But you’re all sweaty and smelly.”

“All because of you,” I reply, nodding to my jersey she’s wearing. The scent of her, mixed with the earthy aroma of the

field, is intoxicating. “Seeing you in that gave me an edge.” I raise an eyebrow, teasing her. “Last I checked, you kind of liked me sweaty.”

She blushes, her eyes darting to my lips before meeting my gaze again. Without another word, she leans in and kisses me, soft and sweet yet filled with a passion that speaks of longing and reunion. The world fades away, and it’s only the two of us.

She wrinkles her nose playfully. “Clean up, superstar. I’ll be here when you’re done.”

I brush a strand of hair behind her ear. “Gamma’s throwing a party to celebrate the win. Think you’d like to join?”

Her eyes light up. “Of course.”

I can’t help but beam at her response. “Great! I’ll be quick,” I promise, already eager to rejoin her side. As I head toward the locker room, I hear my teammates still chanting in victory, their voices echoing my own joy.

In the dim locker room, with steam rising from the showers and the scent of sweat and antiseptic in the air, Cole’s voice cuts through. “She’s wearing your jersey,” he remarks, smirking as we towel dry after our showers.

I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face, but I choose not to indulge him with a response.

Cole drapes a towel around his neck, a smirk playing on his lips. “So my method works.”

I roll my eyes, shaking my head, but my grin betrays me, revealing how right he might be.

“Yo, Ashford!” Cole calls out to Liam, who’s already dressed and deep in conversation with Peters.

Liam glances our way, a puzzled expression on his face, clearly unaware of our previous discussion.

Cole, ever the dramatic, points to his bare chest, puffing it out with pride. “I’m a fucking Casanova!” he shouts, ensuring everyone in the vicinity hears him. Liam raises an eyebrow, clearly amused. “I fixed him and Curly! I’m a fucking Casanova.”

Liam chuckles, shaking his head. “You played matchmaker, Cole. That’s more Cyrano than Casanova.”

Cole looks momentarily confused, but then shrugs it off, too pleased with himself to care about the distinction.

“To be fair, you’re both,” I add as Cole reaches for the Henley in his locker.

I frown at the unfamiliar tattoo on his rib cage. Among his collection of ink, this one stands out. It’s still red, slightly raised, and looks fresh compared to the others.

“New tattoo?” I ask, pointing to the vivid design.

He glances down, and I spot a brief shadow crossing his face, though he maintains his signature grin. “A drunken mistake,” he replies, his voice carrying some regret as he quickly pulls on his shirt. But the design seems too detailed, too personal to be a mere drunken decision. It depicts a beautifully detailed violin from which musical notes flow, constructing a bridge. Beneath it, the words “Angel’s memories” are etched in an elegant script.

I sense there’s a deeper story behind it, but I also know him well enough to understand when not to push. Besides, my focus is outside, where she awaits. I need to cherish every moment with her while I can.

I quickly finish dressing, my thoughts already on Poppy. Leaving the locker room, I jog to the exit, and I spot her waiting by my car. She looks up, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “My friends will be waiting for us at the Gamma party,” she says, her voice tender and inviting. “But I thought I could use a little alone time with the star athlete first.”

I don’t wait, don’t think. In two strides, I’m there, pressing her against the cool metal of my car, the soft glow of streetlights casting shadows around us. I lean down, capturing her lips with mine. The world fades away, and it’s just the two of us. When we finally break apart, both breathless, I give her a playful smirk, brushing her cheek with the back of my hand.

“Ready to go?”

She nods, still a bit dazed from the kiss. “Always.”

We make our way to the car. The night is young, and whatever it holds, we'll face it together.



The roar of the crowd from the game still echoes in my ears, mingling with the distant thump of music as I guide Poppy toward the after-party. I've never been one for raucous celebrations, but tonight, the air feels different, alive with energy.

Behind us, her friends, Nessa and Eva, keep up a lively banter. Their laughter and chatter are infectious, adding to the night's exhilaration. As we step into the Gamma house, the atmosphere envelops us—a cacophony of laughter, the thumping beat of music, and the unmistakable buzz of victory. Holding Poppy's hand, I feel invincible. What more could I want?

Commitment, a voice in my head whispers as Cole and Liam ambush us.

Liam steps forward, a mock-serious expression on his face. "Poppy Donovan, now that you're with our boy, we've got some ground rules to discuss."

My heart stalls. I'm ready to defend her from their teasing, but she surprises me with her response.

She turns toward me with a bright smile. "It's only fair. Now that I'm his girl, you need to make sure I'm in the loop with the rules," she teases.

Cole grins, bumping my shoulder. "See? She gets it."

The way she referred to herself as "my girl" sends my heart racing. I have half a mind to put her over my shoulder and carry her into an empty room to make love to her for hours.

Cole winks at Poppy. "Now that you're with Ethan, know he's not a morning person. A... special wake-up call might be in order."

She blushes, playfully swatting Cole. "I'll remember that."

I clench my fists, shooting Cole the deadliest glare I can muster, which he ignores completely. I guess she needs to get used to Cole's crude ways because I intend to have her around as much as possible.

Poppy gestures to Nessa and Eva, her tone playful. "But if I'm getting the third degree, shouldn't my girls have a word with you two?"

Cole smirks, his gaze lingering on Eva. "That sounds like a challenge I'm up for."

Eva flips him off, and he laughs.

Liam flashes a series of hand signs, and Nessa's face lights up in response. I'm left wondering what secret language they've got going on.

Peters, his voice slurred from the drinks, gets in my face. "Man, that goal! Legendary! Makes me wanna give you a big, sloppy kiss."

I laugh, pushing Peters away. "Too slow, buddy. I'm off the market."

"For real?"

"For real," Poppy replies, wrapping herself around me.

Peters looks down at her with a frown, and I'm about to tell him to chill the fuck out when he grins. "Dude, that's dope! So many more girls for me!"

She giggles, and I wrap my arm around her, keeping her against my chest. I want to hear her laugh all the time.

Cole leans in, whispering conspiratorially to Poppy, "Rule number one, Donovan, if you spend the night, you're on breakfast duty."

She leans into me and tilts her head, feigning surprise. "Oh, is that in the official rule book?"

"Uh-huh, and you may have to cook us dinner as well."

I slap him on the back of the head. "You do your own cooking, lazy ass." I look down at my beautiful girl and run my finger along her jawline. She looks up, and I brush my lips

against hers. Cole and Liam groan and disappear into the crowd.

I turn to Eva and Nessa, my voice playful. “Mind if I steal her for the night?”

Nessa gives Poppy a knowing look. “Seeing how she looks at you? It’s not only recommended, it’s essential.”

I draw her into a dance, holding her tight. I know I’m not in rhythm. We are slow dancing to something that is not fitting, but I don’t care; I want to keep her in my arms. I can feel the heat of her body, the rhythm of her heartbeat. Every touch, every glance sparks with intensity.

She wraps her arms around my neck. “It’s not going to work like that, you know.”

My breath catches, and for a split second, everything seems to freeze. I pull her close, our foreheads touching. “Poppy, I’m not letting you slip away.”

She bites her lip, hesitating. “I hope so. Especially since James’s birthday is next weekend. Mom’s planning a party at the house... the one you bought for us.” Her eyes search mine with gratitude and a shred of reproach.

I want to look sheepish, but I’m not, not even a little. I shrug. “Real estate is a good investment; everyone knows that.”

“Yes, when it’s bought in your name!”

You and I will share a name in the future; trust me on that, beautiful. I shrug again.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me.” I kiss her before she can say anything else. “What were you saying for James’s birthday? Do you need me to pull some magic?”

Her smile is sweet and so loving that my heart aches. “No, I want you to come with me. You are not my dirty little secret, Ethan Hawthorne. You are my boyfriend.”

A lump forms in my throat, and I blink rapidly, fighting the unexpected surge of emotion. I lean down, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead, letting the simple gesture convey what words can't. "It would be my absolute honor, Poppy Donovan."

"Do we have to stay here?" she asks, her eyes hinting at other intentions. She bites her lip, her voice dropping to a sultry whisper. "How about we head to your place? I remember a certain... skill you have that I'd like to revisit."

Heat surges through me, my pulse racing, making it hard to keep my voice steady. "You don't have to ask twice." I get us out of the house at full speed, trailing a giggling Poppy behind me.

My laughter intertwines with hers, my chest heaving, emotions swirling—from joy to relief to anticipation.

As we leave, the night frigid against our heated skin, I can't help but think that with Poppy by my side, every moment feels like a victory. The future, with all its uncertainties, seems brighter, filled with endless possibilities.

Chapter 27



Poppy

I take a deep breath, trying to calm the anxiety bubbling up as I stare at my reflection in the living room mirror. James’s birthday isn’t just another party—It’s the first event worth celebrating since we got out of our extreme poverty. I can’t help but wonder if inviting Ethan was too impulsive. Maybe a quieter introduction, like a simple dinner, would’ve been better.

My fingers fidget with the hem of my shirt, second-guessing my choice of outfit for the third time. I want to look effortlessly put together, but every option feels like a potential misstep.

Eva strides into the living room, her eyebrow arching. “Everything alright?”

I attempt a nod, falter, and then shake my head, ending with a shrug. My emotions are a tangled mess.

She laughs quietly, her eyes warm. “Words might help, you know. What’s on your mind?”

I lower my voice, almost to a whisper. “Do you think I’m making a mistake? Maybe I should’ve given Mom a heads-up about Ethan.”

Eva leans against the counter, her thoughtful gaze fixed on me. “Maybe,” she concedes, “but seeing you two together will make all the difference. The way you light up around him, the way he looks at you... it’s undeniable. His last name, his background, none of that matters when you see the love between you two.”

I smile weakly, taking comfort in her words. “Thanks, Eva. I... I want everything to go smoothly.”

She steps closer, giving me a reassuring hug. “It will. Just be yourself and let Ethan be himself. The rest will fall into place. Your mother loves you, and all she wants is for you to be happy, and Ethan fits the bill.”

A soft chime from my phone interrupts our conversation. It’s a text from Ethan: *Downstairs. Ready when you are.*

I grab my purse, taking one last look in the mirror. “Here goes nothing.”

Eva’s fingers press gently into my arm, the warmth of her touch grounding me. The faint scent of her lavender perfume wafts by, calming my nerves. “You got this,” she whispers, her voice a gentle balm to my anxiety.

Stepping outside, the cool air hits me, but it’s Ethan’s nervous form leaning against his car that captures my attention. Our eyes lock, and for a heartbeat, everything else blurs.

I force a smile and walk to him, giving him a brief kiss. He rests his hands on my shoulders and runs them up and down my arms.

“You look beautiful.”

My smile turns a little more relaxed as I dismiss his predictability. “You always say that.”

“It’s because it’s always true, even if I’m partial. I like you best when you wear nothing at all.” He rests his warm hand on my neck, and the contact makes me shiver. Will this feeling ever go away? I’ve always thought that with familiarity, the intense reaction to his touch, his smell, and his beautiful,

dimpled smile would lessen, but it seems to be firmly anchored in my body.

“You look extra dashing, too.” I rest my hand on his blue dress shirt that is peeking through his open coat. “Very respectable.”

He chuckles. “That’s the vibe I’m going for. Took me over an hour to find the perfect outfit, and I almost gave myself a nosebleed.”

He moves from his position against the car and opens the door for me before taking my hand and helping me in, my gentleman.

“You’re teasing,” I accuse, watching as he slides into the driver’s seat. Without missing a beat, he cranks up the heat, knowing how easily I get cold.

This simple little gesture shows me how much he cares, how attuned he is to my needs.

“I swear I’m not! I kept interrupting the guys, asking for their opinions with each outfit change. I only stopped when Liam threatened to burn all my clothes.”

“That’s mean,” I say, but I can’t hide the laughter in my voice.

He throws me a fake, annoyed look before concentrating on his driving again. “I don’t need your mother to know I wish to ravish you every hour of the day. I need to make a good first impression.”

I can hear the weight of that statement in his voice, the pressure he’s putting on himself. It’s not only about today; it’s about every moment that will follow, every judgment and expectation. We both know it’s not his first time meeting my mother, but it’s the first time after everything that happened. It’s the first time after the name Hawthorne became a curse in our family, and most importantly, it is the first time as the man I love.

We drive in comfortable silence, the familiar hum of the car and the faint music from the radio filling the space between us.

Every so often, his hand brushes against mine, sending a jolt of electricity through me.

As the Brenthill signs come into view, he hesitates. “You know, sometimes I overthink, trying to fix things that aren’t broken.”

I turn a little in my seat, throwing him a questioning look.

“I love you, remember that,” he says with a sheepish smile before pointing at the back seat.

I turn around, and my eyes widen in disbelief. The back seat is a sea of colorful packages, bouquets of flowers in various shades, and boxes of chocolates. For a split second, I’m speechless, trying to process the sheer volume of gifts.

“Ethan... what on earth?” I manage to say, my voice a mix of amusement and astonishment. I reach out to touch a bouquet, the delicate petals brushing against my fingers. I had thought the scent of roses, lilies, and other flowers I couldn’t identify in the car was some overpowering new car scent product.

He shifts uncomfortably in his seat, looking almost sheepish.

He rubs his neck, his voice laced with exasperation. “I told you I panicked! I went to the toy store for the game console James wanted, then saw Legos for Billy. It’s not his birthday, so I compensated with more games for James. I might have gone a bit overboard.”

“A bit?” I tease, picking up a box of chocolates and shaking it playfully. “You’ve practically bought out the entire store! And what about the flowers and the chocolate? There must be like ten different kinds in there.”

His cheeks taint pink, and my heart melts in my chest. I can’t resist him when he is self-conscious.

He grimaces, rubbing the back of his neck. “I... I wanted to make a good impression. I went out to get your mom flowers, but I wasn’t sure which kind she’d like. The florist suggested a bunch, and I ended up buying them all. Then, on the way to your place, it hit me—what if she prefers chocolates? So I

stopped at Teuscher's and..." He throws his hands up in exasperation. "I just couldn't make up my mind, and one thing led to another..."

"This is madness..." I whisper, still in awe.

"I know," he groans, resting his forehead on the steering wheel.

The view of my six-foot-one man like that is more than endearing, and my heart expands so much in my chest it's almost painful.

I can't help but laugh. The sound light and genuine. "You're unbelievable," I say, but there's warmth in my voice. "But it's one of the things I love about you. Your heart is always in the right place, even if you do tend to go over the top sometimes."

He grins, looking relieved. "You're not mad?"

I caress his hair. "It's adorable. Insane, but adorable."

He keeps his forehead on the steering wheel but turns a little to look at me.

"Really?"

I smile, and this time, there's no apprehension. "Really. I love you, Ethan, truly. You don't need all of this. I don't want my brothers to like you for your money."

He gives me his rueful grin that makes my heart beat a little faster. "As long as you don't like me for it, I don't care."

I lean in and kiss his cheek. "No, I *love* you in spite of it," I huff. "Come on, I see my mother looking at us from the kitchen window. Time to go."

Ethan straightens and looks at the window, directly at my mother, who I'm not sure can see him with the way the sun is hitting the car.

Draped across the front door is a bright banner that reads, "Happy Birthday, James!" in bold, colorful letters. Balloons in various shades of blue, presumably James's favorite color, are tied to the fence posts, bobbing in the breeze.

The pathway leading to the front door is lined with potted plants, their vibrant hues adding to the festive atmosphere. I can hear faint laughter and chatter from inside, indicating that the guests have already started to arrive.

He whistles beside me, clearly impressed. “Your mom’s gone all out, hasn’t she?”

I nod, a smile playing on my lips. “She always does when it comes to family. It’s her way of showing love.”

He glances at the house, a thoughtful frown on his face. “What if she rejects me? What does it mean for us?”

Ah, he asked the million-dollar question. The one I am dreading to have to answer, but I know the answer.

He turns toward me when I remain silent.

“It means that it will be us against the world because she will need to get used to you. You’re not going anywhere.”

He jerks in surprise, and his frown morphs into an expression of such joy. Damn, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Ethan this happy... ever!

He grabs my face in his hands and kisses me hard. “You and me against the world.”

“You and me against the world,” I affirm, pausing to gather my thoughts. “Come on. Time to go.”

I tell Ethan to settle for the bouquet of pink, white, and yellow roses, hydrangeas, gerbera daisies, carnations, a medium box of chocolate, and, of course, the game console for James.

“But what about everything else?” he asks urgently as he closes the car.

“We’ll take the flowers to the retirement home down the street, and chocolate lasts a long time. As for the Legos, you can give them to Billy for Christmas or whenever.”

Ethan grins and grabs my hand. I think he really likes when I include him in future plans, and honestly, so do I.

I grip Ethan's hand, and by the time we reach the door, my anxiety is so high I can't seem to breathe quite right.

I hesitate for a second in front of the door.

"Pop—" Ethan starts, but he's interrupted by the door opening.

"Poppy, Ethan, here you are!" My mother's eyes light up as she sees us, her arms opening wide in a welcoming gesture. She quickly pulls us into a warm embrace, her concern evident. "Come on, quick, it's too cold out there!" She hurries us inside, her fingers brushing against my cheek in a motherly manner as she closes the door behind us.

I follow her lead, still processing her warm reception of Ethan. It has to be a dream; Mom wouldn't react like that in Ethan's presence.

"Look at you!" Mom says, staring at Ethan, her smile still on her face and the joy seemingly genuine. "You're a man now."

"I... well, yes. Thank you, Mrs. Donovan. You look wonderful."

She waves him off, but she really does, though. The few weeks in this house changed everything. She has stable hours and a stable salary. She's putting weight on like I am; her dark circles are gone, and her skin is no longer gray.

"These are for you," he stammers, probably as taken aback as I am, as he extends the flowers and the chocolate toward her.

"Oh, these are stunning!" She brings the flowers to her nose and inhales their fragrance. "Take off your coats and come with me to the kitchen. I need to put them in water."

Ethan throws me a confused look as we take off our coats, and I shrug.

"I don't know," I mouth to him.

We follow her into the kitchen, which smells of freshly baked cookies.

“Sit down, please. Do you want something to drink?”

“No, I’m fine, Mrs. Donovan.”

“Please, call me Julia.”

What the actual hell?!

“The boys and their friends are in the attic, playing with the old gaming console. But judging by that big package in your hand, I think James might be getting the new one he’s been wanting so badly,” she says with a wink to Ethan.

He grins, holding up the package. “Mind if I surprise him?”

“Of course I don’t. That’s very generous of you, Ethan. I bet the boys will be excited.”

“Yes, I would like that.” He looks at me as he stands up, and I smile and understand that he wants us to be alone for a while.

“Just follow the shouting, and you’ll find them,” Mom advises.

Before Ethan can make his way to the attic, Billy, wearing his favorite Batman mask, comes barreling down the stairs. He stops dead in his tracks upon seeing Ethan, pointing dramatically. “Batman!”

Ethan chuckles, bending down. “Hey there, Batman. Keeping the city safe?”

Billy nods vigorously, his eyes wide behind the mask. “But it’s a secret. Don’t tell anyone!”

“Your secret’s safe with me.” Ethan winks, tapping the side of his nose. “I’m coming up to see your brother.”

“Wait, we need food!” Billy runs into the kitchen and grabs a plate full of cookies.

Watching the exchange, warmth spreads through me. Ethan’s effort to connect with my family, especially the younger ones, means the world to me.

After a few minutes, I hear James’s excited shout from the attic, followed by a chorus of cheers. I can’t help but smile,

imagining the look on my little brother's face when he saw the new console.

Mom shakes her head and turns toward me. Once again, I expect her to frown or cry or something, but she keeps her genuine smile on.

She pours the tea, and the familiar aroma of elderflower fills the room, bringing back memories. "I remember how much you love this one," she says, her voice gentle.

I take a moment, watching her every move, searching for any sign of her true feelings. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"About what?" she asks, walking back to the kitchen island.

"Ethan. You're not surprised."

She leans in, her eyes piercing mine with a knowing look. "You've been in love with that boy for years!" she declares, her eyebrows raised in a mix of amusement and affirmation.

I straighten up in my chair, my hands gripping the edge of the table. "Absolutely not! I-I hated him." My voice rises defensively, my eyes darting away from hers, unable to hold her knowing gaze.

She throws me a side look and comes back with a tray of tea. "Nobody talks that much about a boy they hate, Pops. No one."

"I..." I sigh, leaning back on my chair. "You're not angry? He's the son of..." I stop talking as if his name alone would cause her pain.

"Oh, trust me, I know very well who his father is, but that boy is not his father, and..." She taps her finger on the table. "It's easier to blame it all on Ethan's father than the man I used to love." She smiles. "Love is love, Poppy. Never be ashamed of who you love."

"You knew it was him from the start, didn't you?"

She nods, sipping her tea.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I should have been honest with you. Why didn’t you say anything?”

She shrugs. “Your brother told me. Billy was too young, but even though we never took James to the parties, he knew what Ethan looked like. And why didn’t I tell you?” She sips her tea. “It was not for me to tell you; you needed to come to it on your own.”

As relief washes over me, I feel my eyes start to prickle with tears. “I was scared, Mom. So scared to let you down, scared to disappoint you, but I love him so much. I tried to stay away. I really did.”

“Oh, my sweet girl! You could never disappoint me. Never!” Her eyes are shining with tears now. “You are my greatest achievement. You are brave and when we lost everything, you could have left us in our mess and found someone to help you, but you stayed, you worked, and you’ve put your life on hold for us, Poppy. It is far more than anyone else would have done.”

I lean to the side and hug her. “Oh, Mom, thank you! It would have broken my heart if I had to choose.”

She strokes my hair, her fingers soothing. “You’ll never have to choose, my love. Family is about understanding and acceptance. We’ve been through hell, and we’ve come out stronger. Ethan is a part of your life, and we’ll embrace him as we do all those who matter to our loved ones.”

The sound of footsteps interrupts our moment. Ethan appears in the doorway, a sheepish grin on his face. “The boys have officially kicked me out. Apparently, I’m not ‘cool’ enough to understand their gaming strategies.”

Mom grins, wiping away a stray tear from her eye. “Well, in that case, you can join us for some tea and cookies.”

Ethan’s eyes light up at the mention of cookies. “I never say no to cookies.”

We all settle around the kitchen table, the aroma of freshly baked cookies filling the air. As we chat and laugh, I can’t help but feel a warmth spread through me. The sight of my mother

and Ethan, two of the most important people in my life, getting along so effortlessly is a dream come true.

Ethan reaches over, squeezing my hand under the table. I squeeze back, our fingers intertwining. It's a simple gesture, but it speaks volumes. We're in this together, and with the love and support of our newly built family, there's nothing we can't overcome.

The rest of the day passes in a blur of laughter, stories, birthday cakes, and presents. As the afternoon draws to a close and guests begin to leave, I feel a profound sense of gratitude. Life has thrown its fair share of challenges our way, but moments like these remind me of the beauty and resilience of love.

As we step outside, Ethan pulls me close, his voice a soft murmur. "Thank you for believing in us and letting me be part of your family."

I lean into him, our fingers laced. "Always." Together, I know we're ready for whatever comes next.

Epilogue



Ethan

Six months later

“And you’re dead!” I declare, triumphantly placing the remote on the floor.

James scowls. “I’m only fifteen.”

“That doesn’t change the rules. No mercy, remember?” I tease.

“I’m telling Pops.”

I raise an eyebrow, smirking. “Running to her? Very mature, James.”

His grin is swift. “She’d definitely give you a hard time for this, wouldn’t she?”

“Possibly,” I admit, thinking of Poppy’s playful chides. “But making up afterward? Totally worth it.”

He makes a gagging sound.

“You know what? I’ll take you to the house next week, and you can play Cole at FIFA. You’ll see how satisfying it is to make a grown man cry.”

James’s eyes light up, and it makes me happy. The kid pretends to be all cool without a care in the world, but I know

he loves to spend time with me and the boys, and I really like how the team adopted him.

He's my little brother, too, now, just like adorable Billy. I meant what I said to Poppy: Her family is my family, and one day, I hope not too far in the future, I will make all that official.

I lean back on the worn-out sofa and look at my watch.

"Missing my sister?" he taunts.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

He frowns again, not happy that his tease didn't land.

You wait, little brother. Wait until you find the one, and then we'll talk.

The door opens downstairs, and within a few seconds, I hear footsteps coming up the stairs, and Billy bursts into the room.

"What do you think?" He turns around, pointing at his head.

"Love the new haircut, bud; it looks so cool," I reply, standing up and giving him a high five.

"You can't see a difference," James grumbles.

I throw him a warning look and Billy pouts.

"You're totally jealous," Billy tells James.

"Totally," I mouth to him with a wink.

"Mom wants you downstairs," he tells me.

I nod and go downstairs to find Julia in the kitchen.

Hi, future mother-in-law, I think as I grin.

"Ethan! I'm sorry I'm late. But here..." She pushes a cookie toward me. "I kept one hidden from the hungry mouths."

"You're the best!" I sit on a stool at the counter. I love this woman. She's so far from the standoffish wife she was the few times I saw her before. She's kind, accepting, and so loving. She's treating me like a son with a warmth my mother never gave me and all that despite being Fitzgerald Hawthorne's son. I don't want to take Poppy home, and I am pretty sure she's

not keen either. Forgiving me for our past is one thing, but I don't see her, nor would I want her to forgive my father.

She winks at me.

"Pops is late too, but she should be here soon. She has the car. Do you want me to text her to bring back dinner?"

"No, tonight we're going out as a family, all five of us. My treat."

I don't think she knows how it makes me feel when she considers me as a member of her family.

"I got a promotion."

"Oh, Julia, this is amazing!" I get out of my seat and pull her into a hug.

"Yes, and at least I got this one all on my own," she adds once we break the hug, and she throws me a knowing look.

I freeze, and she laughs.

"I'm not mad, Ethan. I'm grateful."

"Don't be; you are obviously more than qualified. I should be thanking you for working that well for my company, but Poppy didn't know," I say quickly. "She didn't find out until after you got the job, and she wasn't happy I interfered."

"She's proud, my daughter. She's having a hard time accepting help, but I'm relieved she has you to rely on."

"Always," I reply seriously. "She's the one for me, you know."

She pats my hand. "I know."

I lean on the counter and shake my head. "Is there anything you don't know?"

She shrugs. "Probably—like I don't know you are thinking about moving in together in September."

"How—" I stop, biting my tongue. "We're in the talking stage, and we're not sure if we want to stay in the house I own or buy something else."

Julia laughs. “Don’t worry, take your time, and I’ll act surprised, I promise.”

“But you don’t mind?”

She ponders that for a minute. “No, when you know, you know, and she’s clearly as in love with you as you are with her. I’m happy for you.”

Even if I know it, I’m happy to hear about Poppy’s love for me.

The sound of a car pulling into the driveway reaches my ears, and a sense of anticipation builds in me. Within a couple of minutes, the front door swings open, revealing Poppy in all her radiant glory. Her hair is mussed from the wind, and her face lights up when she sees me. She strides in, the worries of her day melting away, and with no hesitation, she wraps her arms around me, her lips finding mine in a sweet, familiar kiss. It’s short, but it carries all the love and longing of the day spent apart.

“Missed me?” she whispers against my lips.

“Always,” I reply, brushing a stray strand of hair from her face.

Julia clears her throat playfully, reminding us of her presence. Poppy turns to her, her face glowing. “Mom, tell me you didn’t spoil him with your cookies again.”

Julia chuckles, waving the empty cookie plate. “Just one. As a reward.”

But before Poppy can playfully chide her mother, Julia’s face lights up, and she says, “Speaking of rewards, I have some news.”

Poppy’s brows knit in curiosity. “What’s up?”

Julia takes a deep breath, her eyes shining. “I got a promotion today.”

Poppy’s eyes widen in delight. “Mom! That’s amazing!” She rushes over, enveloping her mother in a tight hug, both of them laughing joyfully. Their bond is evident, and it warms my heart to see it.

“Boys!” Poppy calls out, “get down here. We’ve got some celebrating to do.”

James and Billy thunder down the stairs, the latter still sporting his new haircut, and join in the group hug. This family, full of warmth and love, is everything I ever wanted. And they’ve accepted me as one of their own.

As we all gather our things, preparing to head out for our celebratory dinner, I take a moment to reflect. This family, Poppy’s family, is now my family too. It’s a bond I never expected but one I cherish deeply. Every laugh, every shared memory, every little moment—it all means the world to me.

I look at Poppy, her eyes shining with happiness, and it reinforces my resolve. I will move heaven and earth to ensure their happiness and well-being. They’ve given me a home, a place to belong, and I’ll do whatever it takes to protect and nurture this newfound family.

As we head out, hand in hand, I realize that the future, though uncertain, is filled with promise. And with Poppy by my side and her family behind us, there’s nothing we can’t face together.

Epilogue



Poppy

Three years have flown by, and I'm hardly the same person anymore. As morning sunlight filters through our apartment's curtains, illuminating the space Ethan and I call home, I take a moment to reflect. My mirror's reflection showcases a changed woman. My hair, once short and stressed, now flows in shiny waves down my back. My chosen graduation dress accentuates the curves I've joyously regained, a testament to healthier and happier times.

Ethan's voice disrupts my musings. "Pops! Hurry up, or we'll be late!"

Chuckling, I adjust my dress one last time. "Ethan, we've still got an hour until graduation. Relax!" Today, I'll graduate at the top of my class in social studies, on my path to becoming a social worker. And while Ethan, my multimillionaire boyfriend, might live in a world of corporate mergers and acquisitions, he's been my biggest cheerleader.

My Ethan, having graduated last year, is now part of the prestigious corporation his grandfather once headed, and he's been pioneering innovative approaches in their sports divisions. I'm proud of the man I love, and I am so proud to stand beside him.

I smile, holding the locket in my hand. That piece of jewelry holds as much significance for me today as it did back then, albeit for many different reasons. It's a representation of Ethan, the man I love.

His reply is muffled from below. "There's something I'm anxious to do before that. We're hopping on a flight right after the ceremony for the wedding. Trust me, what I've planned isn't something you do on a friend's big day."

"God, you're anal about schedules sometimes, I swear," I mutter as I exit our bedroom, but my mild irritation evaporates the instant I step into our living room. The apartment's familiar space is transformed by the warm golden glow of countless candles, their flickering light reflecting off rose petals that seem to blanket every surface. It's enchantingly beautiful, like something out of a dream.

"Poppy Donovan," he starts, his voice shaky but resolute, "from the moment I met you, my world shifted. We've faced countless challenges, but we've grown together, and we have built a life I could never have imagined without you. You've been my anchor, my joy, and the love of my life. I can't imagine a day without you by my side. I've pictured this moment countless times, playing out various scenarios in my head. Sometimes, you were in pajamas; other times, in the middle of our workout session. But I knew that today was the day. Because you did it, my love, yet another achievement. From the highs to the lows, through thick and thin, you've been my constant. I can't imagine a day without your laughter, your love, or even your occasional eye roll. Will you make me the luckiest man alive and marry me?"

A laugh escapes me, a watery giggle, as tears pool in my eyes. I take a moment, absorbing the reality of what's unfolding before me. The twinkling lights, the fragrant roses, and most importantly, Ethan, on one knee, vulnerable and hopeful, holding a princess-cut diamond ring between his fingers.

"Oh, Ethan," I begin, my voice thick with emotion. "You once said we met by fate, but every moment after that has been our own choice. You've offered me strength in my moments of

weakness, you've brought laughter to the edge of my tears, and you've been the unwavering rock amid all my storms."

I reach out, brushing a stray strand of hair from his forehead, my eyes locked onto his. "Seeing you grow, witnessing your passion, your drive, and your undeniable love for those around you... I've never been prouder to be a part of someone's life. I stand here today in awe of the man you've become. And the thought of standing beside you for the rest of our lives, facing challenges, celebrating victories, and simply living fills me with so much joy."

Drawing a deep breath, my lips curl into a smile. "Yes, Ethan Hawthorne, with all my heart, yes! I would be incredibly proud to become your wife."

His smile could light up the room even without the candles. Slipping the ring onto my finger, he pulls me into a tight embrace, lifting me off the ground as I wrap my legs around him.

"You have no idea how much this means to me," he murmurs into my ear.

"I have a slight idea," I quip, drawing away to meet his eyes. "But you are right. We absolutely couldn't have done this during the wedding. We would've been kicked out on the spot."

Ethan chuckles. "Especially with all the TV stations that are going to be there. Can you imagine the headlines? 'Hawthorne steals the show and proposes during friends' televised wedding!' We'd be blacklisted from every event in the foreseeable future."

I laugh, nuzzling into his neck. "Well, in that case, I guess it's good you're so impatient."

He pulls back, feigning shock. "Impatient? Me? I'll have you know, Miss Donovan, that I've been plotting this proposal for months! I have been driving your mother crazy. I think she was days away from proposing on my behalf."

"Ah, that's why you've been acting all weird, you two," I tease.

He grins, pressing a quick kiss to my lips. “All worth it to see that look on your face.”

Rolling my eyes but with a smile firmly in place, I add, “Remember, we’ve got a plane to catch, and I refuse to miss our friends’ big day, especially with the world watching.”

“Don’t worry,” he whispers, his lips brushing against mine, “we have all the time in the world.”

And we do. Our journey is only beginning, and what started as fate’s cruel trick turned out to be its greatest blessing.

Whatever awaits, we face it together. Because we’re not simply two people who happened to fall in love; we’re soul mates, destined for each other by the stars themselves.

Ethan and I?

We’re forever.

Want to see what Poppy and Ethan got up to in the chalet? [Click here to see the steamy NSFW artwork!](#)

Are you ready to discover *Cole & Eva*? Their story is coming on March 13th in **Broken Hearts!** Preorder it now by [clicking here!](#)

Broken Hearts - Silverbrook U #2



Blurb

Eva

Cole Westbrook was the architect of my firsts – my first kiss, my first love, my first heartbreak, and my first regret. After a life-altering tragedy, I painstakingly pieced myself back together.

The vulnerable girl who fell for Cole is gone, replaced by someone stronger and determined not to let him shatter her world again. Yet, resisting Cole's tempestuous pull proves more challenging than I ever imagined. He's a force of nature, equally captivating and destructive on his best and worst days.

Cole

Eva believes she can outrun her feelings and our past. She's wrong and should know better. She's my one true love, and I'm not about to let her slip through my fingers again.

I've always been relentless, whether it's on the sports field or in chasing my dreams, and I play for keeps. Eva's no exception. My obsession might be intense, my need to protect her might seem over the top, but it's all because she is mine. I'm ready to do whatever it takes, bend every rule, break down every barrier she puts up, to make her see we're meant to be together.

In a tale of passion rekindled and hearts reborn, Eva and Cole navigate the treacherous waters of their past to forge a future. Set against the backdrop of Silverbrook University, their story is a testament to the enduring power of love and the beauty of second chances.

Acknowledgements

Hey everyone!

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Cheers to all of you!

R.G Angel

About R.G. Angel



On top of being an International Bestselling Author, I'm a trained lawyer, world traveller, coffee addict and cheese aficionado.

When I'm not busy doing all my lawyerly mayhem or writing Contemporary Romance with heart, heat and a little darkness, alpha heroes and strong heroines and because I'm living in rainy (yet beautiful) Britain, I mostly enjoy indoor activities such as reading, watching TV, playing with my crazy puppies.

I hope my stories will make you dream and will bring you as much joy as they brought me by writing them.

If you want to know any of the latest news join my reader group [R.G.'s Angels](#) on Facebook or subscribe to my [newsletter](#)!

Keep calm and read on!

R.G. Angel