

A romantic photograph of a man with a beard and dark hair, wearing a blue button-down shirt, kissing a woman with long brown hair on the cheek. The woman is smiling broadly and looking towards the camera. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light, suggesting an outdoor setting like a beach or a park.

A *Swanson*  
*Ridge* NOVEL

The  
*Perfect Deal*

JACOB PARKER

# **THE PERFECT DEAL**

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A SWANSON RIDGE NOVEL #2

JACOB PARKER

STAR KEY PRESS

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**FIND JACOB PARKER**

*Jacob Parker*

<https://jacobparkerbooks.com/>

## DESCRIPTION



### **He's forbidden fruit.**

My brother's best friend—the one guy I'm not allowed to date, no matter what.

But here's the deal, it's deeper than that.

More complicated.

Because we've been in love with each other since middle school.

My brother has never seen what's obvious to everyone else.

Especially us.

But now that my brother is marrying my best friend, why shouldn't I finally get to be with the guy I want to be with?

I should be able to tell the world I'm madly in love with the boy next door.

But what if I'm wrong, and he doesn't actually love me back?

**It would be his loss, because he and I? We're the Perfect Deal.**



## Introduction



Hey! I'm missing you over here in my Insiders Group.

Where you at?!?

Come grab your spot and let's connect.

Also, you get a FREE novel for joining. Trust me, you DON'T want to miss it!

See you on the inside...

[Join my insiders HERE!](#)



## JOSHUA

**T**he stairs creaked as I walked down to the kitchen to fix a cup of coffee. I needed to get that fixed, but then, it didn't really bother me. Living in this house, the house that I'd grown up in, I'd gotten used to it over the years. Even though my parents weren't living here anymore and I'd completely redecorated, this house was filled with so many memories that I would take the squeaks and creaks as long as I kept having amazing neighbors and these fantastic views of the quaint neighborhood.

In the kitchen, I grabbed my favorite morning blend pod and set a mug under the dispenser. I'd showered and gotten dressed in a daze. I knew I needed to stop staying up so damn late, but lately, I'd been having trouble sleeping.

The fact that tonight was the annual neighborhood barbeque probably had something to do with that. Sure, it would be nice to see the whole gang. Even the people who had moved away from Swanson Ridge usually came back for the event we'd been attending since we were kids. More than that, I knew one person in particular was bound to be there—Liberty Johnson.

Letting out a sigh, I took my cup of coffee and poured some creamer in, then put the bottle back in the fridge before I disposed of the spent cartridge and determined whether or not I was in the mood for breakfast. My stomach growled, so I decided to fix a couple of pieces of toast. Anything more than that probably wouldn't work right on an unsettled tummy.

Normally, I would be working today, even though it was the weekend, because that was part of what being the owner of a major sports complex entailed. Not only did I have several locations to keep track of, but we also

had other considerations as well. Like the camps we put on every summer. Now that the kids were out of school, it was that time of year again, and while I was excited, I was also a bit anxious about that. I had so much going on in the next few months, I wasn't sure how I'd get it all done.

My phone chirped in my pocket, and I pulled it out to see a text from my best friend, Landon Johnson. Liberty's older brother. He was asking what I was up to. I hadn't spoken to him in person in quite some time, so I texted him back that I would just head over there to speak to him. I'd be lying if I didn't secretly hope that Liberty would be there. She was living with Landon at the moment. But I also thought it would be nicer to have the conversation with him in person. Otherwise, what was the point of being neighbors?

I finished off my toast and headed out the door. The sun shone brightly, and a slight breeze blew the flower petals from the shrubs my mom had planted around the front of the house years ago. It was going to be a lovely day. The sweltering heat of a Nashville summer was still a few weeks off, though the temperature would probably climb to the mid-eighties today. I could handle that. Growing up an athlete, I was used to being outside most of the summer.

It only took a couple of minutes for me to walk over to Landon's house. He had purchased his childhood home from his parents when they relocated to Hawaii a couple of years ago. Like me, he never wanted to leave Swanson Ridge. Thinking of one of the reasons why, I glanced across the street at the Briar house and chuckled. Looked like Johnny and Laila needed to trim back their shrubbery again. I remembered Landon's father throwing a fit about living across the street from the hippies, but Landon had been in love with Poppy since we were kids. When she'd admitted she loved him, too, he'd never been happier.

Sighing, I tried to push the thought out of my head because of the pangs of jealousy it always sent circulating through me. I wanted that. Not with just anyone, but with Poppy's best friend. Liberty—my best friend's little sister.

"She's forbidden," I reminded myself in a whisper before I walked into Landon's kitchen. "Hello?" I called out. He was walking in from the adjoining dining room, an empty plate in his hands. "No eggs and bacon for me?" I joked.

"Well, if you would've gotten here a little earlier, I would've made you some," he said with a laugh. "How's it going?"

"Good." I watched him rinse his plate off and stick it in the dishwasher

before he grabbed himself a refill of coffee, and the two of us headed into the living room. “Just thinking about all of the shit I’ve got to get done this summer.”

“You’re telling me.” Landon sipped his coffee and sank down into a chair. I took a spot on the couch. “The wedding will be here before I know it.”

A smile slipped into place as I watched happiness glow from his face. I’d never seen the man as happy as he was now that he was officially together with Poppy. “How are you feeling about all that?” I asked. “Anything the best man can do to help?”

“I can’t wait,” he admitted. “We’re taking that trip to Bali with the Robertsons a few days before the wedding, which makes me a little nervous, but we’ve got plenty of time to make sure everything is ready before then, right? I’ll definitely be calling on my best man if I need something.”

“I was a little surprised when you and Poppy decided to go on that trip,” I admitted. “Going on a vacation right before the wedding is a little different than the way most people do it. But I’m sure it’ll all work out. You guys have huge families who are willing to help out, and all of your friends will rally around you.”

“Yeah, except you guys will be on the trip with us, so I’ll have to rely on the people staying behind to handle anything that needs attention back here—like my parents. No thanks,” he said, shaking his head.

“Your mom is fully capable of doing anything you need to be done,” I reminded him. His father hadn’t approved of Poppy for the longest time, but since he found out his mother knew Poppy and thought she was amazing, and Poppy had proven to him that she was incredible, he’d become much more accepting of her. I wasn’t personally worried about either of his parents trying to sabotage the wedding, but I could see why it would weigh on his mind.

“That’s true. Mom did offer to come to town a bit before the wedding. I’m sure we’ll work it all out. What about you? Are you ready for camp?”

Immediately, my smile widened. “Yeah, I’m always ready for it,” I told him. “I can’t wait to work with the kids. A lot of the athletes that came last year are scheduled to be back. It’s always so great to see how they’ve grown over the course of a year. So many of them have improved their techniques. They’re bigger and stronger than the year before, and their passion for their sport of choice has increased. It’s amazing to see those kinds of

transformations.”

Landon nodded and took another sip of his coffee. “That’s got to be so rewarding for you and the other staff members.”

“It really is,” I told him, setting my cup down on the coffee table as it was almost empty now. “And then there are all the new kids who are attending for the first time. We love seeing all the new faces.”

“Is it tough on those kids, being away from their parents for the first time?” Landon asked.

“Yeah, sometimes. That’s why it’s so important for us to have the best camp counselors and coaches there with us. The right people make the transition so much easier.” I thought over the staff that would be working with me this summer, picturing their faces in my mind. Most of them were great people who always did an amazing job. Only one stuck out as a potential problem, but I knew the rest of us would make sure everything went smoothly.

“I wish I could still go to camp,” Landon said with a chuckle. “I loved playing sports with you when we were growing up.”

I thought back to one particular day in the park when Landon was giving me a hard time about my throwing ability—just to show off in front of Poppy—and I laughed. “Yep. I do miss getting to play ball with you, but at least we get to go to the gym together every once in a while.”

We shared a laugh, but the moment I heard the creak of the stairs behind me, I caught my breath. I turned around to see Liberty bouncing down the steps wearing a T-shirt and cut-off shorts. Her hair was back in a ponytail, making her look even younger and spunkier than usual.

Inhaling deeply, I did my best to hide my reaction from Landon. If he had any idea how attracted I was to his younger sister, he’d flip his lid. Ever since that asshole college friend of his had gone after Liberty and broken her heart, Landon had made it abundantly clear that his sister was off limits. It didn’t matter to Landon that I’d had feelings for Liberty ever since we were in middle school. Nor did it matter that I was the guy she’d called when she’d gotten wasted at a party when she was in college and needed someone she trusted to get her home safely with no judgment.

Pulling myself away from her that night had been nearly impossible. She’d been drunk and going on about how amazing I was. I’d wanted so badly to kiss her, to stay with her, but it wouldn’t have been right for any of us.

Now, I found myself avoiding her gaze as she greeted me. “I didn’t know you were here, Joshua,” she said with a bright smile. “How are you?”

“Good. Good. I’m doing good,” I stammered, turning back around to face the door and wishing I could barrel through it. I had no trouble speaking to Liberty when it was just the two of us together, but with Landon there, things quickly became complicated.

“Cool.” She came in and wrapped her arms loosely around me before she sat down a few feet from me on the couch. The hug had my body electrified, and it took every ounce of willpower I had to keep my eyes off her thighs. “Are you going to the barbecue tonight at the Robertsons’ house?”

“Yeah, sure. Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I told her. “Are you going to be there?” It was a stupid question. Of course, she was going.

“You know it,” Liberty said. “I can’t wait to catch up with everyone. This summer is going to be amazing.”

“Do you have a lot planned?” I tried to take a leisurely tone with her since I was aware Landon thought I just considered her to be a kid sister myself, though my true feelings were far from it.

“Not really.” She grimaced and folded her arms. “Just work.”

“And our trip,” Landon piped in. We both knew that Liberty didn’t really like working for her family company because what she was doing for Landon wasn’t her passion. Liberty had studied photography in college and then had gone to California to try to make a living with it, but that hadn’t worked out, so she’d moved back here. While I wished that she was able to do what she loved, I was glad she’d come home to her family.

Home to me.

“Well,” I said, slapping my hand down on my leg. “I’m sure it’ll be a great time. As long as we’re all there.”

Liberty smiled. “I’m sure we will.”





## LIBERTY

The sound of Joshua's voice coming from downstairs had caused me to take more time than usual to get ready than I normally would have. It was nice to hear him, but it was even better to see him sitting there talking to my brother in the living room. I tried to act nonchalant as I hugged him, but I just loved touching him. With a casual tone, I sat there, asking them about their plans for the evening. After all, if Landon had a hunch that there was something going on between us, he'd lose his mind, and that was the last thing I needed.

I could tell I was making Joshua nervous. He wouldn't look directly at me, and he was having a hard time holding the conversation, even though we were talking about our friends and families from all the years we'd spent growing up on Swanson Ridge.

"I just can't wait to eat some of that famous Robertson barbecue," I said as my phone vibrated in my pocket.

"No doubt," Joshua said, running a hand through his hair and still not meeting my eyes. "It's the best barbecue in Tennessee."

I smiled but didn't look directly at him. It was pretty clear he was struggling to think of anything to say. Glancing down at my phone, I saw that the text was from Poppy. I'd planned to go over to help her work on her parents' front yard. It was a great way to kick off the summer, and I wanted a chance to talk to her before the barbecue anyway. "Well, I am going to head across the street to chat with Poppy," I said, hopping up from the couch. "Any messages, big brother?" I teased.

Landon pulled out his phone. "Nope. If I have something to say to my

beautiful fiancée, I'll send her a text. Thank you, little sister." He grinned at me, and I shook my head as I walked to the door.

"Okay, but you know there's something to be said for the old-fashioned way of courting the woman you love." I turned then and looked at Joshua. His face turned red as he dropped his eyes to the floor. I glanced at Landon and saw him arching an eyebrow at me, but it had nothing to do with Joshua. He just thought I was being weird.

"See you later, sis," Landon called, shaking his head.

"See you. Bye, Joshua." I waited for him to look back up at me. The weight of his gaze made a smile form on my face.

"See you at the barbecue," he said, the hint of a grin touching his lips.

"Looking forward to it." I walked out the door before I could say more, but the smile didn't fade. I knew that I'd have a better chance of seeing Joshua at the barbecue when Landon would be socializing. There'd be a ton of people there to distract my older brother so that Joshua and I could at least steal a few minutes to ourselves.

Across the street, I could see Poppy sitting on her knees, a spade in one hand and a pair of shears in the other. She was humming to herself as she worked on trying to tame back some of the out of control plants that were threatening to take over the yard. Her parents, Laila and Johnny, loved nature and didn't like to do much to prevent it from doing whatever it chose, once their plants of choice were inserted into the ground. My father had complained about it for years, but no one seemed to care much now. Poppy had asked me to come over and help her, though, because her parents had been traveling a lot recently, and things were getting particularly wild out there.

"Good morning," I called, dropping down to sit next to her. "How are you, bride-to-be?"

Poppy turned and grinned at me. "I'm good. How are you?" Her eyes widened. "Wait—you look particularly happy today. Did you see Joshua?"

"See, now this is why you're my best friend. You know me so well." My face was beginning to ache from smiling so much. "Yes, he came over to speak to your fiancé this morning."

"Oh, well, do tell." Poppy put her tools down and turned to face me, an excited expression on her face.

I shook my head. "There's not too much to tell. We just talked about the barbecue for a few minutes, that's all. And then I had to leave before Landon

caught a clue that there might be something going on between his little sister and his best friend.” I sighed, wishing I could go back in time and never date Landon’s friend Grady Beck. He ended up being a total asshole, and after he broke my heart, Landon warned me and all of his friends that I was completely off limits. It wasn’t fair. I hated it because I’d had feelings for Joshua long before I even knew Grady existed, but it didn’t matter. Landon had put us all on notice.

Poppy gave me a sympathetic look. She knew the struggles Joshua and I sometimes went through to have a conversation in front of my brother. I knew she’d tried a time or two to mention to Landon that it might not be such a horrible thing if Joshua and I got together, but he always grumbled or shrugged it off, refusing to see what was right before his face. “Well, at least you got to see him. You’ll see more of him at the barbecue tonight, right?”

Warmth spread through my chest just thinking about the prospect. “I sure hope so.”

“I’ll be there to help distract Landon,” she promised me, patting my hand. “How did that photography technique you were telling me about the other day work out? Did you get to try it?”

“Oh, it’s great.” Feeling excitement bubble up inside of me, I grabbed a spade off the ground and began to work on the plants as we talked. Otherwise, I’d be of no use to Poppy whatsoever. I loved talking about photography. “I set up that filter the way I’d read about it online and took some stills. I loved the way it changed the light. Sure, I can do that in editing, but I think it gives a different look to everything when you can set the shot up that way to begin with, you know?”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Poppy said, moving over a bit to work on another shrub. I had no idea what it was, but it smelled divine. Large purple flowers poked out all over the shaggy green branches. “I’d love to see the pictures sometime.”

“Sure. Maybe you can come over later this week and look at them. I thought about putting some of them on my phone, but it kind of ruins the effect. I mean, it defeats the purpose to take sophisticated pictures with an expensive camera and then put them on a phone to look at them.” I finished pulling out the weed I’d found and picked up my spade again, though I wasn’t quite sure what I was supposed to be doing with it.

“That’s true. Although I’d probably get a pretty good idea of what it looked like from your phone. I’d love to come and look at them, though. I’m

sure I'll be over at some point." She smiled at me and cut back a large portion of the bush she was working on.

"I'm going to try something else as soon as I get a chance. I found a photo with an interesting angle that I want to work with." My mind began to run wild as I thought about all the different pictures I wanted to take and techniques I wanted to try.

Poppy sighed, drawing me out of my thoughts. "Don't you wish you could just do that? All the time?"

I looked at her, wide-eyed, for a moment before I nodded. "Yeah, of course. I mean, you remember that was the whole point in us moving to California to begin with. You were going to give your art a real try, and I was going to be a photographer. Things just didn't work out that way for us." I cleared my throat, trying not to let my emotions get the best of me, but it was difficult. We'd both had such high hopes when we left Tennessee and drove halfway across the country. I'd left before her, giving up on photography for a while so that I could help my brother transition to taking over the family drop-shipping business, and while I still got to take photographs for marketing purposes sometimes, it was nothing like what I really wanted to do.

Poppy was working as an artist now, thanks to my brother's connections. She'd worked in the office for a while, but now her art was shipped out all over the world through his partnerships. She was doing really well, establishing a name for herself. It was inspiring.

And sometimes it made me a little jealous. I really wanted to be in a situation where I was excited to go to work every day because I was doing something I loved. My family was wealthy, so I could potentially quit working at the company for a while and focus on my photography, but I didn't want to stress Landon out before the wedding. He was very particular about how he did things, and it took him a while to train and trust people. If I walked away from the business now, he'd have a panic attack.

"Did you finally get the wedding photographer situation straightened out?" I asked, happy to change the subject.

"We did," Poppy said. "We still have a lot to plan, but we're getting there. I can't believe how fast time is flying by. The wedding is going to be here before we know it. I can't wait to take that trip with all of you and relax for a while."

I smiled and nodded, but in the back of my head, I thought she was a little

crazy for taking a trip right before the wedding, even if it was an all-inclusive trip from our mutual friends, the Robertsons. Poppy had never been a traditionalist. Not that they weren't planning a honeymoon, too. It was probably driving my brother crazy that he was going to be away from work for so long.

"Well, I guess you're lucky you have such a wonderful maid of honor to help you," I said with a wink.

Poppy laughed. "That's true. And Landon has a pretty awesome best man, too. Between the two of you, I think we'll be just fine. Of course, the fact that you are my maid of honor and Joshua is the best man means that the two of you will have plenty of opportunities to spend more time together." She winked at me.

I felt a flutter deep in my stomach. "True. As long as you don't mind keeping my brother busy so he doesn't notice." I rolled my eyes, thinking of how ridiculous Landon could be.

"Of course! What are friends for?" Poppy said, and we both giggled manically. "You know, now that I'm marrying your brother, we're even more than friends. We're about to be sisters—finally." She wrapped her arm around me, and I hugged her back.

"Legally, that's true. But if you ask me, we've always been sisters, Poppy." I grinned up at her, and she held me even tighter.

"That's so true, Liberty. I've always known that you were meant to be my sister. I just can't wait until we are family in every sense of the word." Poppy blinked back tears, and I found myself choking up, too.

"All right," I said, wiggling away from her and dabbing at my eyes. "Enough is enough, girl. Let's get back to work, or we'll be late to the barbecue!"

"Never!" she said, and we both laughed again as we turned back to the hedges with a vengeance.



## JOSHUA

**M**usic played over the speakers on the back porch of the Robertsons' house. They were hosting the annual barbecue this year. We took turns hosting it these days, though it had been at my house for many years. I would've loved to be the one hosting it again this year, but Luke Robertson was the one who was taking us all to Bali in a few weeks, and he wanted an opportunity to get us all together at his place so we could all catch up and ask any questions we might have before we fully planned the trip.

In a sea of smiling faces, I recognized every single one. I waved and chatted with people as I walked between them, slowly making my way to the cooler that held the drinks. I greeted Luke's dad, said hi to a couple of members of the Smith family, and chatted with the youngest Nguyen brother. I couldn't help but scan the crowd looking for Liberty. I didn't see her anywhere, which made my heart sink slightly, but then, I didn't see Landon yet either. I did tend to get to places early, whereas it usually took Liberty at least a little longer to get around. I never minded that about her. She always looked so cute.

"Joshua?"

Luke's voice had me blinking a few times as I realized I'd slipped deep into my thoughts of Liberty. I'd completely lost track of reality for a few moments as I imagined her walking across the yard toward me, looking as gorgeous as ever. I wondered if she'd still be wearing those shorts from this morning.

"Oh, hey, Luke," I managed, extending my hand. He shook it. "How's it going? This is a great party."

“Thanks, man,” he said, releasing my hand and smiling humbly. “So far, everyone seems to be having a good time. We’ve got plenty of meat on the grill. Should be ready soon. I think Mom has some games she wanted everyone to play. Music sound good to you?” He looked up at one of the speakers hanging nearby.

“Yeah, it’s great. This playlist is right up my alley.” We were listening to alternative rock from the mid-90s at the moment, which was great. It reminded me of traveling to sporting events with my dad when I was younger. He always had Nirvana or Stone Temple Pilots playing on the radio. Said it reminded him of when he was a kid.

Luke’s face lit up at the compliment. “Thank you. I appreciate it.” He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. “You excited about the trip to Bali?”

“Absolutely,” I told him with enthusiasm. “I can’t believe you’re flying us all down there. It’s very generous of you.”

His face flushed slightly. “Oh, well, my family owns the resort, so that’s not that big of a deal. We just wanted everyone on Swanson Ridge Street to know how much we appreciate them, you know?”

“That’s awesome,” I said with a nod. “Makes me want to take everyone to a baseball game or something.” It had never even occurred to me to invite everyone on the street to something like that, but now that the Robertsons had started the tradition, maybe I should carry it on.

“That would be so much fun,” Luke said, shoving his hands down into his pockets. He was usually a pretty quiet guy. In fact, this might be the most we had said to each other in years. Not because I didn’t like him. He just usually kept to himself. “What else do you have planned for this summer?”

“Oh, well, I’m attending a few camps for the young athletes I work with,” I explained to him. “I’m so lucky I have such an amazing job. I absolutely love what I do.” Just talking about it got me so excited for the upcoming camps.

“I think it’s great, all the stuff you do for kids,” Luke said with a nod. “And the sports complex is exceptional. I was just there last week.”

“Thank you so much.” I always found myself starting to get embarrassed when talking about how successful my businesses had become. I was proud of it, but like Luke, I did get a little modest from time to time.

“Anything else happening this summer?” Luke asked me.

I thought about it for a moment before I shrugged. “Of course, I’ve got



some best man duties I've got to take care of for Landon's upcoming wedding."

"Right," Luke said with a soft chuckle. "The timing on our Bali trip isn't ideal for them, but it worked out for so many other people, we decided to go with it."

"I'm sure they'll make it work," I said, hoping to sound reassuring. I had my questions about that as well. While it would be Luke's friends from the neighborhood going on the trip, he helped operate the resort company with his grandfather and father, so he had other people who had to approve his booking.

We chatted for a few more minutes before Luke's dad shouted at him to come say hello to someone. I patted him on the back and continued on my way to grab that beer. As I pulled it out of the cooler, I looked up to see Landon and Poppy coming in, hand in hand. Lots of people rushed over to greet them and congratulate them on their upcoming wedding. I smiled and found a seat on a nearby couch, but I couldn't help but look for Liberty. A nervous tension tightened in my stomach just thinking about her. Where was she?

She didn't like to be around me when Landon was hanging out. I understood why. Still, I was hoping we'd get a chance to talk to one another at some point this evening. Even if I just had to stare at her from across the yard, that would be better than nothing.

Landon wandered over and sat down next to me. "How's it going?" he asked, opening his beer.

"Fine. Nice party so far." I wanted to ask him if his sister was there yet, but that wouldn't be a good idea.

"Definitely. Saw you talking to Luke. He did a nice job of putting this together." Landon nodded in the direction of our host.

"For sure. He seems to be coming out of his shell a little bit," I noted.

"Good. He's had a rough time since Max passed away." Landon shook his head and took another drink of his beer.

I couldn't agree more. Luke had been best friends with another guy that grew up on our street, but when Max died in an accident when we were younger, he sort of started keeping to himself. The rest of us tried to encourage him and make him feel part of the group, but he never seemed to fully recover. Maybe now he was finally starting to tear down the walls he'd built up around himself.

“Landon, come tell Mrs. Robertson about your tux,” Poppy called, waving her fiancé over.

With a sigh he did his best to hide, Landon pushed himself up off the couch and told me, “See you later,” before heading over to Poppy’s side.

I chuckled under my breath, watching him go, but secretly, I was a little jealous. He’d been in love with Poppy for all those years, and now the two of them were finally getting married. I only wished that I had something like that.

I had the girl, just not the relationship.

With everyone busy talking, I decided to get up and have a look around. It was possible that Liberty had come in through the gate and I just didn’t see her. The Robertsons had a large yard with lots of different areas, so there was a chance that she was here somewhere.

The scent of her strawberry perfume wafted through the air, hitting me in the nose before I rounded the corner and she came into view. I paused, admiring her beauty. Behind her, the sun was starting to go down, sending out rays of pink and gold that caught the highlights in her hair and made me stand there, catching my breath, trying to regain control of my emotions before I approached her.

Her back was to me, and she was rocking back and forth, slowly, the old swing we used to play on as kids creaking as it moved. With my heart in my throat, I walked over and sank down next to her in another swing.

Liberty smiled, not even lifting her eyes at first as she whispered, “You found me.”

“Did you want to be alone?” I asked, hoping I hadn’t offended her by assuming she’d want to see me.

Turning to face me, she smiled brightly. “No, I’d never pass up the opportunity to spend some time with you, Joshua.”

Her words warmed my heart. I felt exactly the same way, though the moments we had to spend together were always few and far between. I wanted to reach over and take her hand. Actually, I wanted to pull her chin to me and place a kiss on those luscious pink lips. Instead, I just returned the smile, giving her a moment to let me know why she was alone—if she wanted to.

Liberty took a deep breath and turned to look straight ahead. “Do you ever wonder what the hell you’re doing with your life?”

Caught off guard, I paused for a moment to consider her question.

“Personally? Or professionally?” I had to know.

“Either one,” she said with a shrug. “I meant professionally, I guess, but just in general, too.”

I could’ve told her I wondered about my personal life every day. Why didn’t I try to do something to convince Landon that I wasn’t like Grady, that he could trust me with his sister? But since she’d been talking about something else I said, “I guess I’m lucky to have a job I love.”

“Yeah, you really are,” she said with a nod. “Today, I was talking to Poppy about some new photography techniques I’ve been trying out, and I just can’t stop thinking about how badly I wish that was my life. I’m only ever truly myself when I’m behind the camera, you know?”

With a nod, I smiled reassuringly at her. I absolutely understood what she meant. “I get what you mean, Liberty. I can’t imagine what my life would be like if I had to wait for my free time to focus on sports.”

“Right?” she asked, and we completely understood one another, as usual. “I love the beginning of summer barbecue. It’s one of my favorite events of the year. I’m sure I’ll get myself together here in a minute, but I just needed a moment of self-pity.”

“How about self-reflection?” I corrected.

She sucked in a deep breath and nodded. “Sure. That’s another way to put it. I’m just thinking about how tomorrow I’m going to have to go right back to my office job.”

I could see the pain in her eyes as she spoke, and my heart began to ache. I wanted to take everything that was wrong in her world and fix it. “Don’t worry, Liberty. I’ll figure out a way to get you a photography opportunity as soon as possible.”

Her eyes widened slightly as she stared into my face. “How?”

A laugh slipped between my lips. “What’s the matter? Don’t you trust me?” I truly had no idea. We did employ some photographers for our events, but I’d been working with the same ones for years, since before Liberty came back from California. Still, I’d have to figure something out.

“I trust you,” she said, and then, she stuck her little finger up into the air, the way we used to when we were younger. “Pinky swear?”

Looping my bigger finger around hers, I didn’t hesitate to give it a shake. “Pinky swear.”



## LIBERTY

**M**y heart fluttered in my chest as Joshua and I made our way back over to join the others. I knew I was taking a gamble, allowing my brother to see the two of us together, but I didn't care at the moment. After all, everyone at the party had been friends since we were kids, so there was a good chance that we were just hanging out together because we were pals, not because the two of us had secretly been crushing on one another for years.

At least, I felt like that was the case despite the fact that Joshua had never come right out and admitted to me that he had feelings for me. I knew in my heart, though, that I made him happy the same way that he made me happy.

Joshua handed me a beer, and I popped it open as we immersed ourselves in conversation with some of the other people who lived on our street. I did my best to listen and stay involved in the conversation, but in my mind, I was going back over the conversation I'd had with Joshua earlier.

I hadn't meant to let my thoughts about working in the office and not having a photography job get me so far off course. I'd been taking a few moments to myself to try to regain my focus before I joined the party, but of course, he sought me out, and if I hadn't told him what was going on, he would've continued to attempt to pry it out of me. That was just how he was, always concerned about other people. That was probably why he was so good at working with kids.

The fact that he'd promised me he'd help me find a photography job both warmed my heart and excited me in a way I didn't even want to acknowledge. He was just being nice, I knew that. While I was sure he

probably would like to help me find my dream job, it wasn't his responsibility to do so, and it was silly of me to get my hopes up, thinking he might actually do it. No one in my family had ever tried to help me with that sort of goal, even though everyone knew how much it meant to me, and we certainly had the money to invest in a photography company of some sort.

I shook my head to clear my mind and took a sip of my beer, trying to focus on what my friends were saying. Joshua smelled so good, like the woods after the rain. With every breath I took, I found myself leaning closer to him, but then, I caught sight of Landon across the yard and backed away. Part of me wanted to go demand that my brother let this whole "none of my friends can date my sister" business go, but now wasn't the time. I needed to try to be nice to my brother since he was about to get married and had a lot going on.

Still, it wasn't fair that Joshua and I were being punished for the stupid shit that had gone down with Grady. That was years ago. And Grady had never been a good person. I'd only fallen for him because Joshua was away at a different college, dating other women, and I wanted to get some attention to possibly make him see what he was missing out on.

I had fallen for Grady eventually. He was one of those smooth talkers who knew exactly what to say. When he'd dumped me and told me he'd found someone else to fuck and didn't need me anymore, I'd been devastated. Not that I'd been in love with him or anything, but he'd been the first guy I'd ever slept with, and I felt like a fool giving myself away to someone who turned out to be a total asshole.

"Are you okay?" Joshua whispered, leading me slightly away from our mutual friends.

"I'm good," I said with a smile. We'd been talking for hours, mingling with the others, making laps around the backyard, and eating all kinds of delicious food. I had been especially drawn to the chocolate chip cookies and had already eaten three when I found myself reaching for another. "Just a little overly stimulated," I admitted.

"Yeah, me too," he said. "Looks like some people are starting to go home, though. If you're ready to go, I'm more than happy to walk you home."

I arched an eyebrow at him. "Don't you think that's a little risky?" I asked, knowing he'd get exactly what I was talking about.

With a shrug, Joshua said, "We both have to walk back that way. Our

houses are practically right next to one another. Why not walk together?”

My mouth dropped open, and I was about to tell him okay, but a hand clamped down on my shoulder firmly. I looked over to see Joshua startled and realized he'd just experienced the same thing.

It was my brother, of course. “Hey, you two,” Landon said. Thankfully his tone was lighthearted and happy. “You about ready to head home?”

It was almost as if he had overheard us and wanted to make sure that we didn't go home together. “Uh, yeah,” I stammered. “I was just saying I thought it might be time to head back to the house.” I met Joshua's eyes, and we both shrugged.

“Cool,” Landon said. “Poppy and I were just chatting and wondered if you'd wanna come over to our house to play board games.” He was talking to Joshua now, not me—I lived there, after all.

Joshua still looked a little confused, but his head was rocking back and forth. “Yeah. That sounds fun,” he managed.

I couldn't help the small smile that pulled up the corners of my mouth. Obviously, I wanted him to go back to our house with us and spend an hour or two—or three—sitting around with us. With me.

“Awesome. Let's go ahead and tell everyone goodbye and head home.” Landon clapped Joshua on the shoulder before he headed over to find Luke.

Seeing Poppy a few feet away, telling Luke's mother goodbye, I said, “I'll go over with Poppy if you want to follow my brother.”

Joshua nodded, grinning at me. “I think this is one of the best ideas your brother has ever had.”

I didn't want anyone to see just how excited I was that I'd get to spend more time with Joshua, so I agreed quickly and spun away, feeling my cheeks heat up. I rushed to Poppy's side and joined in telling everyone we were headed out.

Once we'd thanked our hosts and told everyone we'd see them later, Poppy and I headed for the gate closest to our homes. I glanced behind us to see Landon and Joshua walking in our direction. “Thanks for this,” I whispered to my best friend.

Poppy giggled. “It was actually Landon's idea. I mean, to go play board games. I think he's tired of hearing some of the other guys talking about picking up chicks.”

“I guess he is past that time in his life.” The guys caught up with us, so I couldn't comment more, but I had an idea that Poppy had suggested that he

only invite Joshua and me to come along.

The four of us walked along the sidewalk down Swanson Ridge Street toward our home. Poppy and Landon took the lead with Joshua and I hanging back. While all four of us joined in the conversation about the barbecue and how much fun it had been to catch up with all of our friends from the neighborhood, I found my mind wandering again. My brother and Poppy were so cute together, holding hands and doting on one another. I wanted that for Joshua and me. My fingertips itched to stretch over and reach for his arm. I knew I couldn't do that, though. Landon would go berserk, and I didn't need that sort of drama in my life at the moment.

Eventually, we reached the house and walked inside, heading to the game room, which was off the living room now that my father's billiards room was no longer a necessity. Landon had done some remodeling and moved the pool table upstairs so that we could have an area near the backyard to entertain, and I thought this worked a lot better. When Poppy moved in, I wondered what other changes might be made. But then, I was still in the process of building my own house, so it didn't much matter to me, as long as they were happy.

"We could play Life," Landon said, opening the cabinet and peering inside.

"I don't exactly feel like I'm winning at that right now," I mumbled.

Poppy squeezed my hand, and Joshua gave me a sympathetic look, but Landon didn't seem to hear me.

"Or Jenga?" My brother turned and looked at us.

"How about Monopoly?" Poppy suggested.

"That sounds good to me," Joshua chimed in right away.

"Oh, but that takes so long," Landon pointed out.

Poppy sighed. "Do you have someplace you have to be tomorrow, baby?"

He opened his mouth and closed it again before saying, "No, I guess not. But we always argue about the rules of Monopoly. The Briar house rules are so confusing."

"They're not confusing!" Poppy's eyes widened as if Landon had just said something egregious. "They're efficient, designed to prevent the game from going on forever and ever."

I cleared my throat and tapped her foot with mine, hoping she'd get what I was trying to say without me having to open my mouth. Making the game shorter really wasn't our objective here, was it?



“However,” Poppy said, all defensiveness leaving her voice, “I am more than willing to accept that in this particular game we will be following the Johnson house rules.”

“What’s the difference?” Joshua asked, clearly dumbfounded by their discussion. I had played Monopoly with the two of them only once before, but I did remember there being a heated debate about the rules.

“We play by the rules that come in the box,” Landon explained, “whereas the Briars have some strange mystical rules they’ve made up over the years that Poppy seems to think is the ‘right’ way to play.”

“Hey, I said we’d follow your rules,” Poppy said, glaring at Landon. He grinned at her.

“Basically, Poppy is used to being able to put houses and hotels on properties before she owns the entire collection,” I explained. “And they put a buttload of money in the kitty to begin with.”

“The kitty?” Joshua arched an eyebrow.

“The center of the board. The cash you get when you land on the Free Parking square,” I told him.

He nodded, and for a moment I wondered if he’d ever even played Monopoly before in his life. “All right then.” He clapped his hands together. “Let’s just play, and I’ll figure it out as we go.”

“Sounds good,” Poppy agreed.

Then, at the same time, Joshua and I said, “I’ll be the dog.”

We both stared at one another and smiled.

“You can be the dog,” he told me.

“No, it’s okay. I’ll be the iron.” I waved him off.

Landon was setting up the board and lifted his head to look at me oddly. “You’ve never said someone else can be the dog ever in your entire life, Liberty.”

Swallowing hard, I shrugged. “Guess I’m growing up.” I got up abruptly. “Anyone want a beer?”

Everyone did, so I rushed off to the kitchen to get them, thinking I needed to be careful or else I was going to let my brother in on a secret he didn’t want to know about.

When I returned with our drinks, it was my turn to roll to see who got to go first. I rolled double sixes, and everyone cheered. I tried not to look at Joshua as I took the iron and began my move around the board, but it was hard.

This was fun. This was family. The four of us, together, playing games, laughing, and having a good time. I never wanted the night to end.



## JOSHUA

**M**onday morning, I still had a smile on my face when I walked into the sports complex. We'd stayed up way too late playing Monopoly the other night after the barbecue, but it was worth it to be groggy and have to sleep in the next morning because I got to spend so much time with Liberty. I was glad that Landon had insisted we not follow Poppy's rules because it kept the game going longer. Ultimately, Poppy had been the winner and she did a victory dance while she declared she could win no matter whose rules she played by.

A chuckle rumbled in my throat as I walked into my office at the back of the complex. I set my briefcase down and dropped my gym bag on the floor. I was the owner and CEO of the company, but I was still very hands-on. I loved to come in and work with the kids, as well as to check on my staff and see how things were going. I trusted the people that worked for me, for the most part, but that didn't mean that I shouldn't bring myself to work every day and continue to invest in my company.

Sitting down at my desk, I opened my laptop and looked at my schedule, going over everything I had to do in my head. I saw a few emails I needed to answer before I went out to check on what was going on in the different areas of the complex. I'd heard the squeak of rubber on the basketball court as I walked in and knew there was already a game going on there. I'd love to join in if I had a few moments before I went to teach my soccer clinic. That would take up most of my morning, and then I'd switch over to swimming. For the most part, my summers were full of working with kids who didn't usually get to come in during the school year, though some of them hit the pool for an

hour or two before school. Those were the truly dedicated ones who were training to be Olympic athletes one day.

A knock on my open door pulled my eyes away from my computer screen. I caught my breath as it registered who it was that needed my attention and fought against showing my true feelings.

“Hey there, Josh,” Karrie said as she walked through the door. She was wearing a skirt and blouse, along with some heels that would probably sink right into the turf if she were on a football field. No matter how many times I reminded her that we dressed casually here, she insisted on wearing something more appropriate for her last job in corporate sales. She’d been here a little over a year, but I’d gotten a pretty good impression of exactly who she was right off the bat, what she could do, and I wasn’t wrong. My father had insisted I give her a management position, thanks to him being friends with her father, so that was how she was functioning now—sort of.

“Hi, Karrie,” I said, not bothering to remind her that I preferred to be called Joshua by pretty much every human on the planet. “How are you this morning?”

She sank into a chair across from me, pressing a loose strand of bright red hair behind her ear. The rest of her hair was pulled up into a very professional bun with only that one piece that had come loose giving her problems. “Well, we’ve got an issue. I’m afraid it’s terrible news, and nothing can be done to fix it.”

My eyes widened as my mind went through all of the scenarios of what could possibly have happened. “Is everyone okay?” I imagined the basketball net crashing down on a child’s head or an accidental drowning. My lifeguards were good, but accidents happened.

“Everyone is fine,” she said. “It’s Bill.” She stopped talking and slowly shook her head.

Rapidly, my mind went over all of the employees who worked at the complex, and I came up short. I couldn’t think of a single Bill. Then, I went through the students. Nope, no one came to mind. “Who?”

“Bill. The photographer,” she said, looking at me like I should be ashamed of myself for not knowing who she was talking about.

Puzzled, I thought of the photographers we had on retainer that went to camp with us every year. “Oh, you mean Will?”

“Yes, him,” she said, not bothering to admit that she’d misspoken. Twice. “He can’t come this year. He said something about his wife falling down the

stairs and breaking her tail. And breaking some bones.”

“Her tailbone?” I felt like I was on some sort of a game show where the other contestant was only allowed to say certain words, but I had to guess what they were talking about.

“Sure. So he has to stay home and take care of the stairs,” Karrie explained.

“Or take care of her, maybe?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Either way, we don’t have a photographer for camp now. So I guess we’ll just have to cancel the whole thing.” She stood up like she was about to go do just that, her bottom lip protruding like a child.

I shook my head. “No, Karrie. We’re not going to cancel camp just because we don’t have a photographer,” I assured her. “We have hundreds of kids ready to go, and we’ve already rented out the facilities. Just because we don’t have one of our photographers, that doesn’t shut the whole thing down.”

“It doesn’t?” She sat back down, her face beaming as she smiled at me. “Oh, good. Because I’m looking forward to going with you.”

I raised an eyebrow and stared at her a moment, thinking maybe she meant the general you and not you as in me, but she didn’t specify. I was so confused by the entire conversation it took me much too long to get to the obvious solution to the problem.

“Of course!” I finally exclaimed, slapping my forehead. “Don’t worry about it, Karrie. I’ve got it all figured out.”

“Really? Already? Don’t you need to post a social media message to try to track a photographer down?”

“Is that what people do these days?” I was baffled and shook my head again to clear it. “No, I know a photographer. I’ll have one booked by morning.”

“Oh, you know one? Great!” She clapped her hands and got up out of the chair. “Let me know when you have their name so I can get a new T-shirt printed.”

“Right. Thanks, Karrie,” I said dismissively, wondering why the T-shirt was so important.

“You bet. We only have a few days, you know? We leave next week, and that T-shirt will take time to order.” She started walking to the door but paused halfway there to turn and look over her shoulder, smiling at me.

“I’ll keep you posted,” I assured her. Once she left, I took a deep breath and ran a hand through my hair. How stupid was I that I hadn’t immediately remembered I knew a photographer? Karrie was messing with my head. Knew one? I’d been in love with one practically my whole life.

Pulling out my phone, I sent Liberty a quick text, asking her to call me when she got a chance. Then, I headed out to see if any of my kids for soccer clinic had arrived yet.

I wasn’t shocked at all to see that Robby and Axel were already there. Those two kids were on the fast track to becoming professionals one day. They were kicking the ball around on the inside field, laughing and having fun, complimenting each other on their technique. Though they played for rival teams during the school year, they could both appreciate each other’s talent, and I tried to teach all of my students to be good sports above all else.

“Hey, Coach Joshua,” Axel called as he handed the ball off to Robby. “How’s it going?”

“I’m good, boys. Kick that ball over here,” I insisted.

Robby dribbled a little with his feet before sending it my way. I caught it with my knee and bounced it up into the air several times before using my head to pass it back to Axel. He did a few tricks and then took it across the field to the goal. Robby tried to get in front of him to block it, but he managed to get the ball into the net before Robby could block it. All three of us laughed.

“Nice shot, man,” Robby told him, grasping his hand.

“Thanks. You almost got it,” Axel said humbly.

That was what I loved about working with kids. Hearing them compliment one another and share words of encouragement really warmed my heart.

Within a half hour, the rest of the kids arrived, and it was time for us to start our clinic. I had three of my other staff members with me, helping lead different skill sections while I supervised everything, hopping in to correct technique or share pointers with kids who needed a little more attention.

Coach Valin was a retired soccer player from Mexico who had been working with me for about five years. He was the best at teaching the kids how to sneak the ball into the goal in what appeared to be impossible situations. Coach Myra had been an all-pro in college. She graduated two years ago and came to work with me right away. The kids loved her because she was so funny but also knew how to speak their language. Then there was

Coach Peter, who was Russian and looked scary, but he was really a teddy bear underneath it all. He'd been an Olympic athlete back in the day, though he was my father's age.

When the clinic was over, it was time for me to go to the pool to work with the swimmers, but as the kids were walking out, I stood by the door and shook their hands, telling them I'd see them all tomorrow. "Have a good night, Robby," I told the teen.

He squeezed my hand extra hard. "Thanks, Coach. This is the coolest clinic we've had yet."

I smiled, so glad for the accolade, and thanked him. By the time I got to the pool, I was grinning from ear to ear.

In the changing room, I quickly put on my swim trunks and headed out to see how it was going. I could've stayed out of the water and just supervised. After all, I had another coach working with these kids, but I knew I'd want to jump in and do a lap or two. I'd been working with a young man named Quincy on his technique, and we had more work to do.

Coach Sam stood near the side of the pool, clapping his hands as he encouraged the kids to keep pushing, but when he saw me walk in, he came over. "Hey, Quincy's mom is here."

Arching an eyebrow, I said, "No parents allowed inside the clinic," I reminded him.

"She insisted she speak with you." He shrugged and went back to cheering on the kids.

With a sigh, I glanced around and spotted the woman leaning on the wall near the exit that led to the parking lot. She was a tiny thing, maybe four-foot-ten, with bleached blonde hair, wearing tight jean shorts and a tank top.

Not knowing what to expect, I walked toward her. "Hi. You're Quincy's mother?"

"Hi there yourself, Coach," she said, reaching out and resting a hand on my bare arm. I wanted to pull away, but my feet were frozen. Batting her eyelashes at me, she said, "I just wanted to thank you in person for everything you're doing for my Quincy. It's not easy being a single mother, and he's really taken to you. I can see why." She smiled at me seductively, but I wasn't sure I followed her logic. She thought I was attractive, so it made sense her son would also like me?

"It's my pleasure to work with him," I said, taking a step back.

She came right at me. "Well, if you ever want to talk about how my son is



performing, say, over dinner, just let me know.” She made a sort of growling sound in the back of her throat—or was it a purr? I wasn’t sure, but I knew I needed to get away from her.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ve gotta go.” I hooked a thumb over my shoulder and backed away quickly, reminding myself there was a pool back there somewhere. “Quincy will be done in a couple of hours.”

She replied, “I’ll be waiting.”

I didn’t know if she meant it for me or Quincy, but when she walked out the door, I was relieved.

Turning around, I took a deep breath and noticed Sam laughing at me. I glared at him and headed over, ready to forget about that and start working with the kids.

As I passed him, Sam said, “You’re gonna have to start wearing a scuba suit to practice.”

I gave him a dirty look, but he wasn’t wrong. A shiver went down my spine as I thought of the way she was looking at my bare chest, like I was a piece of meat. “Thank god I didn’t wear a Speedo,” I muttered and then leaped into the pool.



## LIBERTY

**M**y eyes focused on the desk across from mine. At the moment, it was empty. Even though Landon had hired someone to take Poppy's place when she stopped being his assistant and started creating artwork for the company instead, that person didn't sit where Poppy used to. Occasionally, my best friend did pop into the office to work on a few things, and she needed a place to sit, so Landon kept her desk for her. Mandy, the woman who took Poppy's place as Landon's assistant, was a little older and kept to herself. Her desk was around the corner, closer to Landon's office, which essentially left me in the large room with an empty desk and my thoughts.

And work to do.

Sighing, I went back to it. I'd been working on the same problem all morning, and it really wasn't something I cared about. One of our clients didn't like his marketing slogan. Somehow, that had become assigned to me to fix, even though I felt like it really shouldn't be my concern. I'd spent hours trying to come up with something more suitable, something the angsty old man might approve of. So far, I'd been spinning my wheels and getting next to nowhere.

After lunch, I decided to go down to the café in the bottom of our building and get a pick-me-up. I'd already had a latte at breakfast, but I could feel an afternoon drag setting in and knew I was going to have to do something to get my mind back on track.

The line was relatively short, thankfully, because I didn't have a whole lot of time to spend on this errand. I waited my turn, and when I stepped up to

the counter, Henry, the sweet old man who ran the café, smiled widely at me. “Well, good afternoon, Miss Liberty,” he said with a chuckle. “How are you? It’s been a couple of hours since I saw you.”

I felt my cheeks heating up since it hadn’t been all that long. “I know. I need something to keep me awake while I figure out how to write a slogan.” I rolled my eyes, realizing I was being too open about my life with a nice fellow I didn’t know all that well.

“Sounds like you need some more caffeine,” he agreed. “Your afternoon usual?”

“Yes, please.” I gave him a thankful grin and fished my credit card out of my wallet. A few moments later, he was back with my drink and a little paper bag. “What’s that?”

“Oh, I figured you could use a snack, too.” At the cash register, he rang up only my iced coffee and gave me the total.

“But Henry, you forgot the snack,” I reminded him.

He shrugged. “It’s on me. For one of my favorite customers.”

Blushing again, I shook my head slowly. “You really didn’t have to do that.” He had a way of always making me feel important, and I appreciated that, though I’d always just assumed he was that way with everyone. Maybe not, if I really was one of his favorite customers. I paid for my drink and found some ones in my wallet to drop into the tip jar. “Have a good afternoon, Henry,” I told him as I grabbed my items and walked away.

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning,” he called, chuckling again.

Feeling a lot better, I made my way back upstairs to my desk, sipping my coffee and nibbling on the chocolate chip cookie Henry had given me. They had some of the best cookies I’d ever eaten, and I wondered why I didn’t get one every single time I went down.

Sitting down in my chair, I pulled my phone out to check my messages really quickly, realizing I hadn’t done so all day, and almost spilled my coffee. I had a text from Joshua asking me to call him!

My heart began to hammer in my chest as I thought about what he could possibly want. Thoughts of the fun we’d had the other night playing Monopoly came back to me, making me smile as I hastily dialed his number. It had been difficult being so close to him and having to pretend like he was just another brother to me, but Landon hadn’t caught on to anything yet.

The phone rang several times, and I began to panic. What if Joshua was with one of his teams now and couldn’t answer? He could even be in the pool

or in the shower. If I had to wait too long to speak to him, I would obsess over it the whole time.

“Hello, there.” His voice filled my ear, and a smile took over my face. “How’s my favorite woman in the world?”

Giggling like a teenager, I felt my face catch fire. “Stop,” I whispered to him. “How do you know Landon’s not at my desk?”

“Oh, well, I guess I just trust you not to call me with him standing there,” he replied, which made sense.

“Still, he could’ve been calling you to tell you I got hit by a bus or something.” I was reaching now, but giving him a hard time was always fun.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Joshua said. “If you got hit by a bus, your phone would be smashed. He’d have to use his phone to call me.”

I shook my head, not sure how to respond to that. “I see that you’re very concerned about my fake accident.”

“Oh, stop, Libby,” he said, using the nickname he only said when no one else was around. It sent a thrill shooting down my spine to hear it from his lips. “Besides, I’m calling with some amazing news.”

I took a deep breath and held it for a second, wondering what it might be. I didn’t want to get my hopes up, but Joshua was pretty good at coming through when he said he was going to do something, and he’d told me he was going to help me get a photography job. Could this be about that?

“What’s going on?” I asked, literally crossing my fingers.

“How would you like to come to camp with us next week?” he asked, and I felt my heart drop. What was he talking about? Why would I want to do that?

“Um, why? I’m a little old for that, aren’t I?” I asked, trying not to let my disappointment show in my voice.

Joshua laughed. “One of our photographers can’t make it. I was hoping you could take his place. I’ll assign you to one of the girls’ cabins, along with another counselor. It’s not the most luxurious accommodations, but it’s a lot of fun. You’ll get to meet all the kids and take their pictures for us. The photos go on our website, and the kids get to take some of them home for their parents so they can see what they were up to.”

My mouth dropped open the moment he mentioned photography, and I stayed that way, slightly frozen, while he continued to talk. He had to call my name a couple of times before I regained my ability to speak.

“Yes, Joshua. Of course, I’d love to do that,” I finally managed to get out.

Of course, the camp part didn't sound all that fun. It had been a long time since I stayed in a camp bunkhouse. But I would make it work. I was excited to meet some of the kids he was always talking about. "That sounds amazing."

"That's great." I could hear the cheerfulness in his voice as he spoke. "I'll text you the information so you know when we're leaving and all that. Of course, I'll leave it to you to tell your boss."

A bit of the joy I'd been feeling evaporated as I realized I would have to talk to Landon about this. I'd need someone to take over my job for me for a few weeks. If I'd planned to take a vacation, that would be one thing. Whenever someone was out on a planned trip, we covered their work easily enough, but we weren't prepared for this.

I glanced at my computer screen and was instantly reminded of the awful assignment I'd been working on all morning. I would've done just about anything to not have to do work on this ever again. And the idea that I could hand it off to someone else to actually be able to take pictures made me want to leap out of my chair and go speak to Landon immediately—with hardly any fear of pissing my brother off.

Taking one more bite of my cookie, I headed to my brother's office and was pleasantly surprised to see his door was open and no one was in there with him. Most of the time, he was so busy that I had to wait for at least an hour to squeeze inside.

"Hey, sis, what's up?" Landon called, spinning around from facing his computer so that he was looking at me.

I strolled in and sat across from him. "I have some amazing news," I said, hoping to get him on board with how great this was for me before I gave him the bad news about having to take a few weeks off.

Landon's eyebrows lifted. "Uh, okay. What's that?"

Unable to control myself, I blurted out, "I'm going to camp to take pictures of the kids! Can you believe it?"

A smile shifted onto my brother's face, but I could see he was still confused. "Oh, wow. That sounds interesting. But what exactly are you talking about, Liberty?"

I had said it all so fast, I wasn't even sure of the words that came out of my mouth. "Well, Joshua and I were talking yesterday, and he said he'd help me find a photography job. It turns out that one of the photographers can't go to camp for some reason. The timing is perfect. This will give me an

opportunity to work on something I absolutely love, and I'll be able to help out your best friend." I needed to turn this around so that he realized it wasn't just for me but for Joshua as well.

Landon understood now. He began to nod slowly. "Okay. Sure. Yeah, I think that sounds fair. The only worry I have is who we will get to do your work here."

I swallowed hard, not sure how to answer that. After a few moments of thinking about it, I said, "We could hire a temp."

"A temp? Do you think that a temp can do as good a job as you can?" he asked me. I could see him teetering on the edge, trying to decide whether or not we could make this work.

"Why not? It's not like I love my work here, Landon. Some temps are really good at their jobs, you know?"

"I guess," he said, mulling that over. "But you'll have to get them in here and train them. I'll need to approve it."

"Yes, I can do that." I decided to let my enthusiasm carry me right through his decision. Hopping up, I clapped my hands together. "Oh, thank you so much, Landon. You're the best big brother a girl could have." I ran around the desk and hugged him. It took him a moment to hug me back, but when he did, I knew I was golden.

"All right, Liberty. Keep me posted on the progress," he said.

"I will," I told him, smiling as I headed back to my desk. Instead of working on the ridiculous slogan, I was about to start trying to find a temp.

The idea that I would get to spend my summer with just my camera and Joshua made me giddy with excitement. Back at my desk, I sent Poppy a quick text. "Can't wait to tell you what I'm going to do this summer!" Then, I fired off a text to Joshua, "I'm all in!"





## JOSHUA

**G**olfing was one sport I didn't usually feel confident in. That was probably because it took more skill than muscle. And a lot of practice, which I didn't usually have time for. But when Landon called and asked me to meet him and some of the other neighborhood guys out on the golf course a few miles from our homes, I switched around my schedule so I could be there. I'd had so much fun hanging out with them at the barbecue, but I'd also been distracted by Liberty. This would give me a chance to hang out with some of the guys I hadn't gotten to.

On my way to the course, I stopped by my parents' new house, which wasn't far from my own, and picked up my brother William. I would've gone in and said hello to the folks, who'd been out of town and missed the barbecue, but they weren't home at the moment either. Ever since my parents had bought this empty lot and built their dream house, they'd been preoccupied with all sorts of things, including decorating the house, traveling, and visiting friends who had moved out of the neighborhood. My mom had always been one who loved going on different trips. They'd both retired a couple years back, but it seemed like they were busier now than ever.

I pulled into the driveway and sent William a text. He shot out of the house a few moments later, empty-handed except for his phone. Puzzled, I waited for him to get into my truck before I asked, "Where are your clubs?"

"Good morning to you, too," he said sarcastically. "Luke is going to let me borrow a set of his. I don't have my own."

"Oh." I backed out of the drive and headed toward the golf course. "I guess you should ask Santa for some for Christmas." Since William and the

rest of my siblings were younger than me, I'd spent years trying to make sure I didn't spoil that for them.

Now, of course, he was way too old for that. Laughing, he said, "Can you imagine Mom trying to pick out golf clubs?"

"No," I admitted, sharing in the chuckle. "Send her a link."

We chatted as we made the short trip to the golf course. When I pulled into a spot, I saw Luke and Landon standing nearby talking. William and I hopped out and headed over to join them. "Who are we waiting on?" William asked after we all greeted one another.

"Austin and Arlo are on their way," Landon replied.

"Why didn't you just give them a ride?" I asked. They were Poppy's younger brothers who lived across the street from Landon.

He shrugged. "I asked them if they wanted to drive together, but Arlo said they were going to get breakfast first."

That made sense to me. "We could go ahead and get the carts going," I recommended.

"I'll help," Luke volunteered, and the two of us went off to get the carts while the others waited for the Briar brothers.

About ten minutes later, we were all there, and our golf bags were loaded onto a couple of carts. Landon drove one, and Luke drove the other as we headed out to the first hole. It was early enough in the morning that the sun wasn't blazing down on us yet, but we all knew it would be hot later, so we wanted to play through as quickly as we could while still enjoying the day.

I watched as Luke nearly hit a hole-in-one at the first hole, followed by Landon getting super close as well. When it was my turn, I pulled the ball to the left, barely avoiding a sand trap.

"Damn, brother." William laughed, getting ready to take his first shot. "That was pretty awful."

Embarrassed, I ran a hand through my hair. "Guess I'm a little rusty."

"I take it golf isn't one of the sports you teach the kids at the complex?" Arlo joked, making everyone laugh.

I wanted to say something smart in return, but instead, I said, "Actually, no. It's not. It's been a while since I've been out here. But I'll get better."

"Joshua's a quick learner," Landon said, stepping up for me. "He'll straighten it out."

I looked at my best friend appreciatively. I remembered a time when he would have been the one making fun of me, not sticking up for me. The other

guys were being good-natured about it, too. They just needed a good laugh, and at the moment, I was the one providing it.

By the fourth hole, I had myself together and was able to get the ball within five feet of the hole with just a couple of shots. I was still losing, but I was gaining on Austin, who was in second to last place. I'd be able to pull myself out of this bottomless pit eventually.

We were about halfway through when Landon caught up to me for the first time in the day when we actually had a chance to talk to one another. "So, Liberty told me about the job opportunity you offered her," he began.

I raised an eyebrow, not sure how to respond to that. I didn't know exactly what she'd told him or how he'd reacted to it because I hadn't seen her since the phone call. I'd wanted to speak to her again, but we'd both been relatively busy. I knew she was having to find someone to replace her in the office.

"Yeah, that's right," I said hesitantly. "My photographer had an emergency in his family. His wife fell down the stairs and cracked her tailbone." I'd spoken to him and found out what had happened. His poor wife was going to be out of commission for a few weeks at least.

"I'm glad that Liberty is able to help you out," he said. Landon had his hands pushed down deep into the pockets of his khaki shorts, rocking back and forth slightly as he continued. "I'm not sure if you giving her this chance has anything to do with the fact that she's my sister, but I know it means a lot to her."

My eyes widened as I considered what he was saying. Was Landon implying I might've only given Liberty this opportunity because he was my best friend? It sure sounded that way, and I wasn't sure how I felt about that. After all, he couldn't know that the main reason I wanted her there was because I had feelings for her.

That wasn't the only reason, though, of course, so I decided to launch into that. "Oh, no. That's not why. I mean, I'm always happy to help out a friend. Or a family member of a friend. But in this case, I know how talented Liberty is at photography. I've seen some of her work, and I know she'll do a great job. Besides that, her personality is perfect for working with these kids, especially the ones who've never been away from home before. It can be a little frightening for them, and they need someone like Liberty, who is so easy to talk to and always seeks people out to comfort them." Just thinking about her warm smile made me melt a little on the inside.

Landon nodded. "That's true. You definitely know my sister well, Joshua. She's got a heart of gold. So I really do appreciate you giving her this job, no matter the reason." He clapped me on the arm and smiled.

"I appreciate you letting her come. I would've been in quite the pickle if you hadn't let her find a replacement to take over her job so she could come along to camp." We moved ahead a little as the last of our group prepared to take his shot.

Letting out a sigh, Landon said, "You know, Liberty hasn't been shy about letting me know that she doesn't really like working for me. It's not because I'm not an amazing boss," he joked, and I laughed. "But she wants to be a full-time photographer. It'll be hard to replace her at the company because she works so hard. I don't have to supervise her, and I know she'll get her job done. But I'm going to have to accept the fact that she won't be there forever. In fact, I wouldn't be shocked if she never came back at all after this, assuming she likes it as much as she thinks she will."

"I'm sure she won't leave you hanging," I reassured him, but I thought about what it would be like if Liberty and I could work together full-time. That would be amazing. It had been working together that had been the final push Landon and Poppy needed to realize how much they loved one another.

I didn't have any doubt that Liberty and I had feelings for one another. For us, there were other problems. And the main one was standing right next to me.

"Just make sure you don't let any of those other male camp counselors hit on her, okay? Keep my sister safe." He punched me playfully in the arm, but I winced.

"I'll watch out for her," I said. Did that happen to include me? I supposed it probably did.

Landon and I headed over to the golf cart and prepared to move to the next hole, and I did my best to be present, to interact with the others, especially Luke, who was finally beginning to open up. In the back of my mind, though, I couldn't help but think about Liberty. I was looking forward to a few weeks with her, away from her brother's scrutinizing eye.

We finished the course, with Luke winning hands-down, which was no surprise, and then headed inside the country club for some lunch. While we ate, some of the other guys gave Austin a hard time for coming in last, but I defended him. "Golf is a sport you have to practice at to stay good at it, and Austin's a busy kid. He's just finished his sophomore year in college, after

all, and that takes a lot of attention.”

Austin gave me a grateful look. “That’s right. It takes a lot of attention to date all those hot chicks.”

We all laughed at that, but the mention of women shifted the conversation. First, we talked about Landon’s upcoming nuptials, and he answered some questions about the decorations that he didn’t really seem to know that much about.

Then, Arlo said, “What about you, Joshua? I don’t see a lot of unknown vehicles parked across the street. Are you seeing anyone?”

My mouth dried up, and my palms went sweaty. “Uh, no,” I finally managed before picking up my drink and guzzling it. “Nope. Not at the moment.”

“If he doesn’t find someone soon, Mom is going to start pestering him to death. She doesn’t mention it much to him, but she is really hoping for grandkids soon,” William said, snickering.

The table erupted in chuckles, and then the conversation shifted to whether or not Landon and Poppy would be having kids. I tried to stay focused, but my mind was still on Liberty.

Later, after I dropped William off at my parents’ house, I went home and walked into my living room, collapsing on the couch. With my eyes closed, I could hear the sounds of my siblings in the house, ghosts of them, from all the years we’d spent here as a family.

I wanted that someday, to have this house, or whatever house we lived in, to be filled with laughter and fun. I missed living with my family, but I was also ready for a new one. I let my mind wander, imagining what it would be like if Liberty were my wife. Coming home to her would be amazing. Just thinking about it made me feel all cozy inside.

I had to figure out a way to let Landon know that I didn’t think of his little sister like she was a sibling, that she was special to me in ways he wouldn’t like at first. Eventually, he’d learn to accept it, wouldn’t he?

I hoped I didn’t have to choose between them because that would be the toughest decision I ever had to make.



## LIBERTY

Poppy sat across from me at one of our favorite restaurants, munching on her vegan brunch, which was some sort of tofu scramble. It looked good, but I didn't think it could possibly taste as good as my breakfast tacos. While Poppy did eat some meat products these days, such as eggs and milk, she often went with full plant-based when she could, and this restaurant, Sunnyside Café, was able to accommodate that for her, so she was trying a new dish and loving it.

"It tastes just like scrambled eggs," she assured me, taking another bite. "Are you sure you don't want to try it?"

"No, that's okay," I told her. "I honestly don't know how I'm going to manage to finish all of this."

Poppy's fork clattered against her plate. "Wait—Liberty isn't scarfing her food down and licking the plate. My god, what in the world is the matter with you?" she asked me, a true look of concern on her face.

Laughing, I shook my head at her and took a sip of my tea. "Nothing. I'm just a little nervous about this situation with Joshua, that's all." I could hardly say his name without blushing. I'd already talked to Poppy about camp the other day, when Joshua had first asked me to be his new photographer, but we hadn't spoken about it in detail. These days, it was difficult to keep Poppy focused on anything other than the wedding. Not that I blamed her. I would be excited if I was marrying my childhood sweetheart as well. Feeling a pang in my heart, I tried to remind myself that it might happen for me as well—someday.

"It sounds like an amazing professional opportunity," Poppy said. "I'm

super happy for you about that. But then, it also seems like a great chance for you and Joshua to get to spend some time together and not have to worry about Landon catching you.” She sighed, shaking her head. “I don’t know what his deal is. Every time I try to hint to him that the two of you would be great together, he seems blind to the fact that Joshua doesn’t think of you as a kid sister.”

“I know,” I admitted, wrinkling my nose. “I’ve never said anything to Landon about it because I know he’d be furious, and I don’t want to drive anything between him and his best friend, but this is getting old. You’re right. Maybe without Landon hovering, Joshua and I will finally have an opportunity to chat and see if we could ever make us work.”

Poppy took a sip of her water. “Joshua has always been such a good friend to Landon. It’s too bad he can’t see that Landon isn’t doing him any favors by using the excuse of your ex to keep everyone away from you, including him. I love Landon, but sometimes he can be so stubborn.”

“And selfish,” I muttered before catching her eyes to see if she was upset by that.

“You’re not wrong,” Poppy said with a shrug. “So, I say, go for it. After all, Landon is your brother. He’s not in charge of your life.”

“You’re really encouraging me to do something that could make your fiancé absolutely crazy right before your wedding day?” I couldn’t believe my ears.

With a laugh, Poppy said, “He’ll get over it. He might be my fiancé, but he’s not in charge of my life, and he’s certainly not in charge of yours. He loves both of you so much. Whatever happens, he’ll come around. He can’t keep putting boundaries on your life.”

“Ha! Try telling him that,” I said, and we both laughed. She was right, though. Both Joshua and I cared so much about Landon. We didn’t want to hurt him, but we were modifying our own truths to protect his feelings, and that just wasn’t right. Still, I didn’t want to make a big deal out of what was going on right before the wedding when that wasn’t necessary. We could always wait until after the happy couple returned from their honeymoon to make Landon’s life a living hell.

“By the way, Landon and I have decided to do something crazy,” Poppy said with a grin. “I told him not to tell you because I wanted to tell you myself. Did he let it slip?”

Shocked, I stared at her for a moment, trying to figure out what it could



be. “My god, are you eloping?” I blurted, my eyes as wide as saucers.

“No!” Poppy exclaimed, laughing hysterically. “Are you kidding? After all the planning that has gone into this wedding? There’s no way in hell we won’t be getting married as scheduled. No, we are taking all of you on a trip to Florida—the entire wedding party—just to get away for a few days. It’s our gift to you for being in the wedding party. Isn’t that amazing?”

Again, I had no words as I fought to process what she’d just said. It didn’t seem to make any sense to me. “Wait,” I began. “When?”

“Between your camp sessions with Joshua. It was the only time that fit the schedule,” she said as if it was no big deal that we were going on two trips this summer, and she was getting married, all within a few weeks of one another.

“Okay,” I said, knowing it sounded like a question. “That’s—fun.” I wasn’t sure how else to put it. “What brought that on?”

“Well, a couple of things,” she began. “We know we’ll all be going to Bali with Luke and his family, but the whole neighborhood will be there, so it won’t be as intimate. We were afraid we wouldn’t get to spend as much time with our close friends. And then there’s this beach I really want to do wedding photos on. I know it seems silly since our wedding isn’t at the beach, but I’ve always loved those romantic beach photos, so I bought a simpler white gown, and I got a photographer. I’ve got simpler versions of the same maid of honor dress for you and the bridesmaids as well.” She shrugged. “Do you think it’s dumb?”

“No, I don’t think it’s dumb,” I told her quickly. “I think that all sounds very romantic. I would love to come. Thank you for doing this for us.” I reached over and squeezed her hand. While I did think it was a lot, I was glad to be able to go to the beach with my best friend and the other people in the wedding party. It didn’t hurt that I knew Joshua would be there.

I just thought it was a lot. That meant we had one less week to get things done here, and with all of us already planning to go to Bali right before the wedding, if something went wrong, we wouldn’t really have much time to fix it.

That just meant we needed to make sure that nothing went wrong.

After we finished our brunch, we headed out to a nearby florist that grew their own flowers. Of course, Poppy wanted her wedding flowers to be completely organic, wild and free, and it was my job to help her pick the right ones to match the wedding colors and gowns, all of that sort of thing. I didn’t

mind at all because I loved spending time with her, but I knew her taste in flowers was way different than mine. I'd be more of a sounding board and yes-woman in this situation than I would be there to offer my opinion. That was quite all right with me.

After several minutes of wandering around, seeing what they had to offer, Poppy stopped in front of a large pot full of wild orchids. "These are gorgeous," she said, gently fingering one of the blooms. "I'm afraid they wouldn't match the dresses, though."

"I do love that purple color," I said, "but I think you're right."

"What about all white flowers?" she asked. "Would that look silly?"

"I don't think anything you do will look silly," I assured her. "Although you could do something with that saying Grandma Eleanor said to you, you know, the one about being a sunflower and not a rose?"

"Oh, that would be wonderful," Poppy said, squeezing my arm. "There are some beautiful antique roses over there, and of course, they have a ton of sunflowers because they take such little care."

We headed over to look at those particular flowers, and while we were discussing options, a middle-aged woman with a kind smile walked over to us. "Hello there. Can I help you two ladies with anything?"

Poppy smiled and began to tell the woman what she had in mind for her wedding flowers. Mary, as her name tag read, listened attentively and gave Poppy several suggestions. We followed her around for a few minutes, looking at different combinations of flowers, and then Mary went to get an iPad so she could take some notes. She came back and wrote down everything Poppy said about the different flowers, her wedding date, how many bouquets and other arrangements she needed. The woman was very thorough, and I was impressed with her. She even went over different sorts of bouquet holders and ribbons.

While the two of them were talking, I began to tune them out. Not on purpose, but I knew that Poppy had something specific in mind, and as long as I was capable of nodding and smiling, this would all be handled without much help from me.

Instead, I began to think about Joshua. That wasn't anything new. I spent a great deal of time picturing his handsome face in my mind, thinking about his warm green eyes and how that dimple formed on his left cheek whenever he smiled. I bit down on my bottom lip, trying not to seem too distracted, but god if he wasn't unbelievably hot. I wanted more than anything to have the

opportunity to find out whether or not we could make it as a couple.

As much as I loved helping Poppy and my brother with their wedding plans, the bottom line was, I wanted to know what it was like to be in their situation for myself, not just planning a wedding. I wanted to know what it was like to be in love with someone and to know that he loved you, too, more than anything. I'd dated guys before, but Grady had been the only other guy I'd thought I might actually be catching feelings for, and that had ended in disaster. What was it like to truly be in love with someone who thought you hung the moon?

I knew Joshua had feelings for me, too, but at the moment, he wouldn't dare express them. He didn't want to hurt Landon, and I could respect that. But we weren't a couple of kids anymore. We had to get on with our lives. I truly hoped that meant we could find a way to be together, but if it didn't, we couldn't just continue to dance around one another forever. Eventually, we would either have to have the courage to move forward together, or we'd have to have the strength to determine this was never going to be.

The idea of that made me want to cry, but I couldn't just burst into tears in the middle of a flower shop. With a brave face, I commented on how lovely the sunflower Poppy was holding looked in the sunlight and kept a smile plastered to my face. In my heart, I knew the truth. This summer was going to be the make-or-break moment for Joshua and me.

I prayed with all my might that we'd figure out a way to make it work. If we didn't, I had no idea how I'd ever recover.



## JOSHUA

**N**ervous excitement bubbled inside of me as I prepared to walk into the office conference room. The staff meeting before we left for camp the next day was about to get underway, and I couldn't wait. This was always one of my favorite days of the year, but knowing that Liberty was going to be joining us today—and for the next two weeks—made it even more special than before.

I'd just finished double-checking that the catered lunch was on time and was about to head to the conference room when there was a light knock on my door.

My stomach plummeted, and my heart started to pound in my chest. What if it was Liberty, and she'd gotten here early just to say hello to me? "Y-yeah?" I called out, hoping to see her smiling face in a matter of seconds.

The door opened, and I did see a female smiling face hovering there, but it wasn't Liberty. Karrie stuck her head in, a huge grin on her face. "Good morning, Josh," she exclaimed as she came into my office. "How are you today?"

I tried not to show my disappointment. It wasn't Karrie's fault that she wasn't Liberty, after all. I stood, gathering the items I needed to take with me to the meeting. "I'm good, Karrie, thanks. How are you?"

"Wonderful. I am looking forward to hearing about camp. Everyone's in the conference room, ready to go," she told me, making me feel like I was late.

Checking the time on my phone, I saw I still had four minutes. "That's unusual," I muttered. "There's always one or two that are running behind."

“Well, I went ahead and gathered everyone up.” She shrugged. “I am a manager, after all. I figured I should get everyone moving. There is one slacker, though.” She rolled her eyes. “That new photographer you hired hasn’t dragged herself in here yet.” Shaking her head, she *tsked* her tongue. “I guess she just doesn’t know how we do things around here yet. I hate it when people are late.”

Feeling offended on Liberty’s behalf, I did my best to keep my irritation hidden. Karrie had no idea that Liberty and I were friends—or whatever Liberty and I were. “Oh, I’m sure she won’t be late. She’s got a couple of minutes.”

“You never know. Some people just aren’t as efficient as our staff. Anywho, everyone is ready.” She reached over and put her hand on my shoulder. “I can’t wait to hear your presentation.”

Karrie’s eyes lingered on mine as she gave me a sly smile. An uncomfortable feeling washed over me. Why was her hand on my shoulder? I cleared my throat and pulled away so she finally released me. “Thanks, Karrie,” I managed. “Let’s head inside.”

As I walked down the hallway, Karrie’s clacking heels right behind me, I tried to get myself back on track. I’d been so excited for this meeting, and now, I felt like Karrie had ruined it.

The moment I walked into the conference room, everything changed, though. A sea of happy, excited faces greeted me. It was great to see that everyone was as thrilled about the upcoming camp season as I was.

“Good morning, everyone,” I greeted them as Karrie took her seat. I left the conference room door open because Liberty wasn’t there yet. “I hope you’re all having a great day.”

A few people answered that they were, the others smiling and nodding. I took my time getting the presentation ready, and when I was about to start, Liberty slid in through the door. “Sorry I’m a little late,” she said. “I wasn’t sure where the conference room was.”

“Hi, Liberty.” My eyes locked on her face, and I couldn’t have cared less if she’d shown up three hours past the start time. “No problem. Why don’t you take a seat right there by Myra, and we’ll get started.”

Myra, one of my soccer coaches, patted the chair next to her with a welcoming smile, and Liberty sat down. I did see Karrie rolling her eyes, but I ignored her. I needed to speak to the receptionist later and remind her to escort guests to the appropriate room. Not everyone knew the building like

those of us who worked here every day.

“All right everyone, let’s get started,” I began, starting my presentation with a picture from last year that showed some of our students kicking around a soccer ball. “As you know, our first two-week session of camp starts tomorrow, and I’m very excited about everything we have planned for everyone. This year’s camp theme is, ‘Together Makes a Team Work,’ so we’ll be focusing on sportsmanship and comradery while we are helping our athletes develop their skills.”

A few people murmured about how much they liked the theme, so I let them speak before I continued, switching up the photos as I went. The pictures we were using from last year weren’t bad. Will and the other photographer, Michael, had done a nice job, but I couldn’t wait to see the pictures Liberty would take this year.

“I do want to remind all of you that some of these kids are leaving home for the first time. While we do have quite a few athletes who are returning for their second, third, or even fourth year, a lot of these kiddos have never attended sports camp. In fact, many of them haven’t ever been at camp at all. Remember, we are partnering with the inner-city youth association to bring fifteen underprivileged students with us this time around, so these athletes may have no experience being away from their families. We’ll want to make sure we do everything we can to make them feel comfortable.”

One of the coaches, Sam, raised his hand. I acknowledged him, and he said, “Are the kids allowed to have their phones with them?”

I shook my head. “No, we’ve decided that didn’t work out very well last year. We had too many kids who were breaking the rules and scrolling social media when they were supposed to be participating in various activities. We’ve gone back to our previous policy of no phones allowed.” I heard a soft groan from some of the staff and reminded them, “You’re allowed to have your own phones,” which got a chuckle. “But please don’t have them out during activities. I’d prefer you limit your time on your phone to the evenings when you’re in your bunks, and those of you who are also serving as counselors and will be sleeping in the same areas as the kids, please wait until the children are sleeping before you pull them out. Kids these days are used to having access to their phone all the time, so it may be hard on some of them to give that up.”

Another hand went up, and I acknowledged Reggie. “Where do the kids go to call home?”

“There are a few phones we’ll let them use. There’s one in the office next to the cafeteria, one in the nurse’s office, and one in the large bunkhouse in the counselor’s office. The kids can use them to call home after lunch or in the evenings. We don’t have a schedule or anything, so we’ll just do first come, first served, but if you see a kiddo who’s in crisis mode, super upset, please feel free to pull them from the activity and chat with them. If they’re obviously homesick, escort them to the nurse’s station, and help them call their parents.”

Everyone nodded in understanding, and a few people wrote that down.

“Just remember, regardless of what your role at camp is, whether you’re a counselor, a coach, or support staff,” my eyes went to Liberty, and she smiled at me, “the kids come first. I want everyone to participate in the activities as much as possible. Get to know the kids. Focus on meeting their needs and building relationships with them, and that makes everything else come easier. Kids don’t care what you know until they know that you care about them.”

“How profound,” Karrie muttered, shaking her head, giving me a look like she was in awe of my wisdom.

I arched an eyebrow, not sure how to respond to that. Clearing my throat, I continued with the presentation. We went over the logistics, everyone’s assignments, a map of the facilities, our schedule, and lots of other important details before I spent several minutes answering questions. Finally, it was time for lunch. I got a text from the receptionist that the food had arrived just in time.

I had it brought in and set up buffet style, with the food on the sideboard where we usually kept water and other amenities for our guests. The staff was eager to dig into the tacos and other Mexican food, so I let them all go first, watching them pile their plates high and reclaim their seats at the table.

When I got in line, it was right behind Liberty. She had been lingering toward the back as well, watching the others go first. I had ordered plenty of food, so there was no reason to think we might run out. I was about to say something to her when Karrie, who was in front of her, said, “So it looks like the two of us will be assigned to the same bunkhouse.”

I couldn’t read her voice, but after the way she’d spoken about Liberty earlier, I wished this hadn’t been the case. I’d told Myra, who was handling the room assignments, to plug Liberty in somewhere so she’d have a bed and could get to know the kids better. I wished now I would’ve handled it myself.

Liberty was always polite. “Oh, really? That’s great. I’m Liberty, by the



way.”

“I know,” Karrie said a little rudely. “Karrie.”

“Nice to meet you.” Liberty cleared her throat and moved down the table, piling some nachos onto her plate. “Have you been to camp before?”

“Yes, I went last year,” my manager told her. “It was so much fun. I’m glad I get to be with the same girls this year.”

“I can’t wait to meet them,” Liberty gushed as we finished making our plates. She turned and looked at me, and I could tell she was trying to feel out whether or not I thought Karrie was cool. I gave her a reassuring smile, but I wasn’t so sure about that myself.

During lunch, a few people asked Liberty about her background, and she mentioned that her brother was my best friend. Several people knew Landon because he came to work out at our facilities so frequently. In fact, I was scheduled to meet him there later in the day. It seemed that Liberty was getting along well with everyone, which was no surprise to me.

After lunch, I walked Liberty out. “Going to the office?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “I’m done for the day. Gonna go home and pack.”

I nodded. “I’m so glad you were able to take this job.”

She turned to look at me, her lips parted slightly. I found myself leaning down toward her, waiting for her to say something intimate.

Before she got a word out, we heard Landon’s booming voice. “Fancy meeting you here, sis. You wanna come to the gym with us?”

I looked up to see Luke and Landon walking through the door, gym bags in hand, and my entire body deflated.

“Nope,” Liberty told them. “That’s all you. But you guys have fun.” She patted my arm, sending electricity screaming through my body. “See you tomorrow, Joshua.”

“Bye, Liberty.” It took everything within me not to watch her walk away. “Hey, guys. Glad you could come.” I pasted a smile on my face and greeted my best friend and Luke, whom I’d also invited.

“Thanks for having us,” Landon said, and Luke echoed his sentiments. As we walked back to the facilities, Landon said, “Do I need to go scare the shit out of your other coaches to make sure they know to leave my baby sister alone?”

“Nope,” I assured him. “I’ll take care of it. She’s in good hands.”

“She’d better be,” Landon replied. “Or else someone’s going to pay.”

I took a deep breath, wondering if there was any way he could make an

exception to that rule—for me.



## LIBERTY

**T**he moment my alarm went off the next morning, I hopped out of bed, a huge smile on my face. Today was the day! I was going to camp for the first time in a really long time. While I was excited to get to take pictures of all the kids, as well as getting to know all of the young people, most of all, I was excited to get to spend time with Joshua out of my brother's shadow.

I'd packed the night before, but as I took a quick shower and went about getting ready, I went over everything I would need for the next two weeks in my mind. I needed to remember to grab my phone charger off my nightstand and shove it in my bag, but other than that, I was pretty sure I had everything.

Out of the shower, I finished my makeup and put my hair up in a ponytail. I figured I should dress for the summer heat, though it hadn't quite reached the scorching Tennessee highs this early in the season. It was coming, though. Every day, it seemed to get a little hotter. I was wearing shorts that almost reached my knees for modesty's sake around the kids, and a T-shirt, though I was pretty sure Joshua had shirts for all of us that he'd hand out when we got there. I couldn't wait to feel like part of the team, especially when he was our leader.

I was definitely wide awake and ready to go, but I decided to stop for an iced coffee on my way to the sporting complex where we'd be getting on the bus. One never knew when they might need a little mid-morning pick-me-up, and we'd be on the bus headed to the campsite for a couple of hours. All those chatty children would certainly share their enthusiasm with me, but I wanted to be energetic enough to keep up with them.

I pulled into the parking lot and sat in my car for a moment, watching the kids saying goodbye to their parents as they loaded up on the bus. The vehicle was not what I'd envisioned, though I should've known better. In my mind, we'd be traveling on a school bus. I had no idea since my parents had driven me to camp and dropped me off directly when I went as a teenager. But this was no school bus. It looked like one of those chartered buses that seniors traveled all over the country in, or maybe something a professional sports team might go to away games on. Joshua's company emblem was on the side, and it looked incredibly expensive and professional.

Giggling as I scolded myself for ever thinking Joshua wouldn't go all out for his kids, I got out of my car and grabbed my suitcase and my other bags. I made sure my vehicle was locked and then headed over toward the commotion. The bus driver was greeting the students and loading their suitcases beneath the bus. When he saw me, he said, "Hello there, young lady. How are you today?"

Confused, I said, "I'm fine, sir, thank you. How are you?" Did he think I was a student?

"Your parents didn't bring you, dear?" the older gentleman asked. "Did they sign all your permission forms?"

"Oh, I'm the new photographer," I corrected him with a smile. I knew I looked young for my age, but it was quite flattering that he thought I might be one of the students.

He stood up straight and looked at me for a moment. "No kidding? Well, I'll be." Offering his hand, he said, "I'm Henry. I drive the bus."

Shaking his hand, I said, "Liberty. Nice to meet you."

"Welcome to the team, Miss Liberty. Would you like all of your bags stored down here?" He gestured at my suitcase and overnight bag.

"I'll keep my camera bag with me," I told him, taking that and my purse and giving him my other two bags. "But the rest you can store."

"Sounds good, dear. I'll take good care of them." He chuckled, and I thanked him before heading toward the door.

Karrie was standing outside with a clipboard, collecting packets from each student as they checked in. I decided not to bother her since she looked busy, and I really wasn't sure what to think of her. She'd seemed nice enough the day before, but I couldn't really tell if she liked me.

Several young people were hugging their parents, trying to look brave, as they said their goodbyes. A few of them looked annoyed, like they just

wanted to go already. I skirted past them, smiling politely, and headed up the steps to the bus. My eyes roamed the space, and when I saw Joshua, my grin widened. A group of kids was standing near his spot close to the front of the bus, all of them smiling as they chatted. I thought it was great that he got along so well with his students, but I was silently praying none of them liked him well enough to want to sit next to him.

Joshua looked up and saw me. Our eyes locked, and his smile brightened. “Hi, Liberty.”

“Hello,” I said as the crowd dissipated so I could reach him. “How are you?”

“Great. It’s so nice to see you. Did you get your bags put under the bus?” he asked as he scooted toward the window.

“I did—except these two.” I looked at the seating situation. I really wanted to keep my camera with me.

“Those will fit under the seat,” he said, taking my camera bag and situating it under the seat next to him. He paused and looked up at me. “Do you want to sit with me?” His cheeks turned slightly pink as if he were a little embarrassed that he hadn’t asked.

“Duh,” I replied, making him laugh. A relieved sigh exited his lips as he finished placing my bags. “Here we are.”

The two of us sat down, but we didn’t put on our seatbelts just yet in case someone needed Joshua. “How is it going so far?” I asked.

“Great. Most of the kids are here already. Karrie’s getting them checked in, and we should be able to leave soon. All the staff have arrived except Sam. He sent me a text a few minutes ago that he is stuck in traffic, but he should be here soon.”

I nodded, not sure who Sam was. I’d met a lot of people at the meeting, and everyone had been pretty nice, but I wasn’t so great with names.

“Cool,” I said, feeling a little nervous now that I was so close to him and away from Landon. I opened my mouth to say something else, but a couple of boys came from behind us, interjecting themselves into the conversation.

“Coach Joshua, is this your girlfriend?” one of them asked, a crooked grin on his face as he hooked a thumb in my direction.

My eyes enlarged, and my mouth fell open as I waited for Joshua to answer. He didn’t get a word out before the other boy asked, “The really pretty one you’re always talking about?”

Turning to Joshua, I wondered if he’d actually been talking about me to

the kids at all, but I was pretty sure he wouldn't actually refer to me as his girlfriend. It's not like I was. Still, as I stared at his rapidly reddening face, I couldn't help but smirk. It was clear he was quite uncomfortable.

"Very funny Axel," he said, shaking his head. "Knock it off, you goober."

"So she's not your girlfriend?" the other boy asked, waggling his eyebrows at me.

"No, she's not my girlfriend. This is Miss Liberty. She's one of our photographers this year, Robby," he explained to the boy.

"Cool, cool," the second boy, Robby, said as he stared at me. "Can she be my girlfriend?"

"All right you two." Joshua stood, giving the boys a slight shove. "Go back to your seats, will you?"

They both laughed and took a few steps back to wherever they were sitting, but as they went, Axel said, "Welcome to the team, Miss Liberty. Seriously, though, Coach talks about you all the time."

"Thank you," I said, not sure how else to respond. Once they were gone, I turned to Joshua with both eyebrows raised, waiting for him to explain.

"They, uh, are good kids. Usually. I promise. Two great soccer players. Just being silly boys." He was stammering slightly, obviously embarrassed.

I nodded, not wanting to make him explain further. If what they were saying was true, and he did speak about me to his students, I thought that was pretty amazing, but I knew he never would've called me his girlfriend, and I also knew kids could do some silly things.

An older, muscular man climbed the steps looking a little frazzled, and Joshua stood to speak to him. I gathered this was Sam, so I gave them a moment. As they talked about how bad the traffic had been for the older man, I looked around the bus. Nostalgia washed over me as the scent of sunscreen and a mingling of other scents hit my nose. The kids were dressed in bright colors, the girls' hair pulled back in ponytails and braids. Everyone was smiling and chatting with their friends. Some of them had earbuds in, but the bus was on, and a popular song was playing over the speakers. The excitement was palpable. It was clear these kids were excited about camp, and we were going to have a great couple of weeks. I couldn't wait to get going.

Joshua assured Sam not to worry about almost being late and returned to his seat. Sam smiled down at me as he began to walk by, and I said, "Nice to see you again, Sam," happy to put a name and a face together.

“You, too,” he said, leaving out my name. I almost laughed, thinking he probably didn’t remember it and hadn’t benefited from Joshua mentioning it. That was okay. There’d be plenty of time for me to get to know everyone.

Glancing out the window, I saw the line was gone now. I heard the clank of the doors closing and knew Henry was finished with the luggage. Another thrill waved through my body. I felt like I was on a roller coaster, waiting for the first drop.

“Are you ready to go?” Joshua asked me.

“So ready,” I told him, reaching for my seatbelt.

Just then, Karrie approached, stopping short and looking from me to Joshua and back again before she turned to him and said, “Oh.” She cleared her throat and then said, “Well, I got everyone checked in.”

“Thanks, Karrie. Everyone is here?” Joshua reached for the clipboard, and she handed it over.

“Yes, Josh. Everyone’s here.” Her eyes lingered on me again before she added, “Everyone is on time today.” She gave me a curt smile and then returned her attention to Joshua. “Guess I’ll find a seat somewhere else.”

“Thank you, Karrie.” If Joshua caught on to what she was implying, he ignored it, but I felt bad. Had she been expecting to sit here? Maybe she’d been sitting here before she went out to do her duties.

As Karrie headed to another row, Joshua put the clipboard in the back of the seat in front of us, and Henry got on the bus, giving Joshua a thumbs-up. Joshua returned the signal, and we were on our way. As soon as we pulled out, a cheer went up throughout the bus.

I couldn’t help but smile, letting the strange exchange with Karrie go. The two of us would be in a cabin together, so maybe we’d get to know and like each other better then. For now, I turned my attention to Joshua. Thinking of his speech yesterday and how all the kids gravitated toward him, I couldn’t help one thought that came to my mind—he was going to be a great dad one day.





## JOSHUA

Ordinarily, the trip from the sports complex to camp seemed to take forever, but sitting next to Liberty and chatting about everything and nothing at all made time fly by, and before I knew it, we had arrived at our campsite. Situated out in the woods, a little over an hour from the bustling city of Nashville, it was hard to believe that we were so close to all of that chaos. Out here, in the rolling hills, with a forest of tall trees and all of nature's creatures around us, the city seemed to be a million miles away.

As much as I would've liked to keep talking to Liberty for the rest of my life, now that we were at camp, I had to switch into boss mode and make sure that everyone was taken care of. I'd already designated Karrie with the task of checking the kids into the correct cabins, and she was pretty good at tasks like that, but I still had to make sure that everything went smoothly.

We also had meetings scheduled for this first day. I'd give everyone a chance to get settled, but then, I needed to set the tone for the next two weeks, which was a lot of emotional stress. I was used to it by now, having run the camp for so many years, but with Liberty here, I was nervous for reasons I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Standing, I said, "Well, here we go."

I thought I saw a disappointed look cross her face as Liberty asked, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Nope, just start snapping photos," I assured her with a smile. I squeezed past her as Karrie got out of her seat and began barking orders. Meanwhile, Henry, our bus driver, had turned the bus off and was out unloading the students' bags from beneath.

Our second bus had pulled in to park as well. We had a lot of students this year, which was great. I couldn't wait to start having fun with all of the student-athletes.

"All right, kids!" Karrie shouted in a voice that somehow reminded me of fingernails on a chalkboard. "Listen up!"

I got off the bus and went to talk to Myra, who had been in charge of the kids on the other bus. She was off now, speaking to the bus driver, while one of my other coaches was kindly reminding the students that their room assignments were on the sticker they'd been given at check-in. "How was the ride?" I asked Myra.

"Great. The kids are so excited," she said, smiling up at me. "We'll get the kids situated, and then our staff meeting is at eleven, right?"

"That's right," I told her with a nod. "Second meeting is at 11:30." I'd split the group of counselors in half for the initial meetings so that the kids would never be unattended. "I'll meet you guys at the amphitheater."

"Sounds good, boss. We've got it under control." She returned her attention to the kids that were coming off the bus, and I could see that she did.

Turning around, I saw kids coming off my bus as well. Karrie was standing near the bottom of the stairs, checking tags and shouting directions to the kids who were hurriedly grabbing their bags and then heading off in whichever direction she had steered them toward. It wasn't as calm and polite as the other bus, but the kids seemed okay with it as they rushed off in groups, smiling and laughing.

Already, Liberty was taking pictures. I watched her for a few seconds as she dropped down on one knee and snapped a few photos of the kids. Immediately, a smile formed on my face. She was so beautiful, and I was so glad that she was here.

"Boss?" Sam said, coming up behind me and startling me. I spun around, wondering if he'd seen me gawking at Liberty, my eyes wide. If he noticed, he said nothing, "There's an AC issue in bunk six, my bunk. I've got maintenance on it."

"Great," I muttered. We'd just arrived and there was already an issue. "What do they think the problem is?"

"Not sure yet, but we'll get it straightened out. Hell, when I was a kid, there was no AC at camp." Coach Sam shrugged like it was no big deal if the kids couldn't cool off. He did have a point, though. Even though I wasn't his

age, I had endured camp with no AC as well when I was younger.

“Keep me posted.” I patted him on the arm and headed over to grab my own bags. I’d need to get them to my cabin before the meeting started.

When I approached the bus, Karrie was talking to Liberty. “Our building is that one over there,” she said, pointing. “I’ll take you over and introduce you to the girls.”

“Oh, great. Thank you.” Liberty had her bags and was walking alongside Karrie. “You know them all?”

“Most of them,” Karrie said with a nod. “I was here last year. We may have a few new girls, but for the most part, I recognized the names on our roster.”

“That’s awesome,” Liberty was saying. She turned and smiled at me before she headed off. “I’m so excited to meet all of them.”

With everyone headed to their cabins, I went back to the bus. “Thanks a lot, Henry,” I told him as I went back to my seat to grab my carry-on bag. He had set my other bags off to the side. “I appreciate all that you do.”

“Of course, Mr. Joshua,” he said with a friendly smile. “Taking your kids to camp is a highlight of the summer for me. I’ll be back in a couple of weeks to pick everyone up.”

“See you then.” I gave him a little wave as I disembarked, ready to get the session started.

Making my way to my cabin, which was off by itself a bit, the smallest but only private cabin, I listened to the sound of excited kids calling to one another, laughing, and already having a great time. I hoped it stayed that way for everyone. Kids this age could get into drama sometimes, I was well aware. With girls and boys attending at the same time, the chances of that were even greater. But most of the time our camp sessions turned out great.

I punched in the door code to my cabin and swung the door open. A musty smell, mixed with the scent of Pine-Sol, greeted me. I took a deep breath and released it. The place was clean, it had just been closed up for so long it would take a while for the scent to dissipate.

Bringing my luggage in, I set it in the closet and had a quick look around. A rush of memories came back to me as I gazed at the sitting area, the kitchenette, and the king-sized bed. Off to one side was a bathroom with a shower. The entire space wasn’t much bigger than my bedroom back home, but it was a nice place to escape from the stress of the world—and the stress of camp. There’d been a time when I also served as a camp counselor while I

was here. It helped me to get to know the kids better. But I found it was more difficult for the kiddos. For one thing, people had a tendency to wake me up at all hours of the night to tell me about “emergency” situations, such as the AC going out. That disturbed everyone sleeping in my cabin. It also made some kids feel inferior to the ones staying in the cabin with me. Staying by myself had turned out to be a better decision, though I did miss the late-night bonding with the kids.

Once I had my belongings situated in the cabin, I headed out to my first of two staff meetings. I’d gone over all of this with them in the office, but once we were on site, a lot of questions crept up that they hadn’t thought about before we actually arrived.

As I started the meeting, I could hear the kids down on the sand by the beach where the other set of coaches had them entertained playing sand volleyball while I spoke to these grownups. They’d switch out in a few minutes, and then we’d all go down to talk to the kids.

The first thing I asked when the meeting started was, “Sam, how’s the air-conditioning?”

“Maintenance got it working already,” he said with a nod.

I smiled at him, glad to hear it, and then launched into the meeting. “I just wanted to make sure everyone got situated. Do we have any problems we need to resolve?” I looked around and saw everyone shaking their heads. That was a good sign. “You all have your schedules. Any questions about that?”

A few staff members had questions about where we had moved a few activities from last year, but the meeting was relatively short. When we were all settled, I sent them out and waited for the second group to arrive.

Karrie led the way, her chipper voice hitting my ear before I could even see her over the rise in the land between the amphitheater and the beach. “I’m just saying, they need to be more careful about kicking up sand,” she was saying. Who she was talking to, and what about, I wasn’t sure, but there was no response, and that made me think that someone knew better than to argue with her.

Myra walked beside her, rolling her eyes. I stifled a smile and welcomed them in. “How’s it going?”

Most of the coaches and other staff members said, “Good,” or nodded, but Karrie’s hand shot up. I acknowledged her, and she took a deep breath.

“Is there a way to keep the kids from kicking up so much sand while they

are playing volleyball?” She ran a hand through her hair. “I think I have sand inside of my skull.”

“Um, you mean on the beach volleyball court?” I clarified.

She nodded. “That’s right.”

“Not that I’m aware of,” I said with a shrug. “Maybe just back up a little?”

She let out a sigh. “But then I won’t be able to properly supervise them.”

I cleared my throat, thinking this might be a precursor to a big problem—and I didn’t mean with the sand. “I’ll look into it.”

I finished the meeting as quickly as possible, just ready to get things rolling. Once we were finished, all of us walked down to the sand volleyball court. Coach Sam blew his whistle to get the kids’ attention, and they all settled on the sand to listen to me.

“Good morning, everyone!” I couldn’t help but smile, I was so glad to be launching the next session of camp.

The kids answered with enthusiasm. My eyes roamed across their faces, but I wasn’t just looking at them. As was always my habit when Liberty was around, I was looking for her, too. I found her squatting off to the side, clicking pictures on her camera. She took one of me before quickly moving her lens off toward the students.

Warmth spread throughout my chest as I wondered if it was a good one. I shook my head slightly to clear it before I began to tell the kiddos the plan for the day. “As you know, we are ready to launch things today. While you’re at camp, you’ll get to try a whole bunch of different sports, including volleyball, baseball, swimming, tennis, basketball, flag football, and soccer. We’ll practice each sport for two to three days before we have a tournament. Your team is your cabin, so get to know one another. Remember, we’re here to improve our athletic skills but also to work on sportsmanship. At the end of camp, we won’t just be crowning a cabin as champs for how well they do at the competitions, we’ll also be selecting a winner for best attitude.”

The kids cheered again. Their happiness fueled my enthusiasm as I went about explaining everything to them. When my eyes locked on Liberty again, I couldn’t help but think about how amazing it was that she was here.

This was going to be the best summer ever.



## LIBERTY

The first day of camp was exhausting, but also very rewarding. I was already getting to know the kids, especially the ones in my cabin. By the time I walked into the cafeteria that evening, I was famished and ready to eat a horse.

Stepping inside the room, I paused for a moment, taking a deep breath. Immediately, I knew we were having tacos for dinner. The scent was unmistakable. A smile fell across my face as my stomach began to growl.

“Probably not a good idea to stop walking right in the middle of the entrance.” Karrie’s voice sounded behind me, startling me out of my daze.

“Sorry,” I muttered, stepping aside. Technically, I hadn’t been right in the middle of the doorway, but I didn’t want to debate with her. I’d gotten the impression earlier that my co-counselor was a bit of a control freak, and I didn’t see the point in getting into it with her.

She chortled and moved on, herding a bunch of the girls with her like they were toddlers. “Go and fix your plates and have a seat at our table,” she said as if they’d never been to a cafeteria before.

I’d found out at lunch that we always sat with our cabins for meals. That would’ve been fine with me if I didn’t wish I could be sitting with Joshua. He took turns sitting at each table for every meal, I’d heard, and I’d calculated that he wouldn’t be sitting at our table for a while. I saw him standing across the room with some of the male coaches, and a smile lit my face. Even though he wasn’t looking at me and probably didn’t even know I was there, the fact that we were in the same space together made me happy.

Tacos also made me happy. Following my stomach, I headed over to the



taco bar and quickly began to load up my plate. I fixed myself three hard shell tacos and three soft tacos, equally splitting the chicken and hamburger and loading all of them with all kinds of toppings before I grabbed a glass of sweet tea with my other hand and headed off to the table.

Setting my plate down at an empty space, I looked around for the desserts. We'd had cookies for lunch. I saw a selection of pie and rushed off to grab a piece of cherry before the kids devoured it.

When I got back and settled down between two of the girls I'd met earlier, Monique and Shayla, Karrie was just sitting down across from me. "Oh, my," she said under her breath. "I guess someone worked up quite an appetite."

I'd just bitten into a crunchy taco and wasn't sure what she was talking about until I glanced over at her plate and saw only two soft tacos, one of which seemed to be completely empty and the other barely had chicken and lettuce in it.

I finished chewing and wiped my mouth on a napkin before I said, "Me? Yeah, I sure did."

Laughing, Monique said, "Camp is tiring." She had four tacos on her plate, so even though it wasn't quite the same amount as I'd grabbed, she didn't seem to be holding back either.

"I suppose that's true," Karrie said, then added, "although I'd think the students would be burning more calories than the staff."

Having nothing to say to that, I took another bite of my taco, thinking it was going to be a long two weeks of putting up with Karrie's snarky attitude. But then, we'd all just arrived. Maybe she just wasn't so good at breaking the ice. I'd try to give her more time.

"Girls, you're being a little loud," Karrie told the girls at the other end of the table, motioning for them to shush by holding a finger to her lips.

I couldn't help but turn to Monique with raised eyebrows. It might not have been appropriate, but the girl giggled and looked away. Karrie heard her laugh, and her head whipped around. Afraid I'd get her in trouble, I said, "Something one of the boys at the table over there did," pointing with my head in the general direction of the closest boys' table.

Karen—I mean Karrie—turned around quickly and looked, making me snicker, along with Monique and Shayla. It seemed Karrie took her job very seriously, which could be a good thing. As long as she didn't go after Joshua, anything else would be minor.

After dinner, we headed back to the cabin. I walked at the front of the pack, chatting with the girls, letting them go at their own pace, while Karrie ran along behind, telling the slower girls to hurry up, herding us all along. I could tell a few of the girls were getting annoyed with her mother-hen attitude, but none of us said anything to one another about it. Soon enough, all of us arrived back at the cabin without a single chick lost.

The girls took some time to unpack their belongings, something they hadn't had time to do earlier. My bed was near the door, across from Karrie's, and I had my own dresser. Unfortunately, there was no counselor bathroom, so we'd be sharing the same facilities as the girls. There were three shower stalls and two toilets alongside a couple of sinks. That was it for twelve girls and us two counselors to share. I wasn't used to this. Even though I had a ton of siblings, I'd always had my own bathroom.

As I put my clothing away, I wondered if Joshua had to share a bathroom with anyone. My understanding was that he had his own cabin over by the cafeteria building. Lucky duck.

With my stuff put away, I walked through the area, checking to see if the girls needed anything. Karrie was sitting on her bed, making notes in a notebook and checking schedules. I wasn't sure what she was preparing for. I thought everything was pretty cut and dried for tomorrow, but what did I know?

I overheard two of the girls on a top bunk talking and found myself pausing to listen in. "If you like him, you should say something. It's been, like, four years."

"I know, but it's not that simple. Chase is Marco's best friend. I can't just expect my brother to be cool with that."

"Oh, boy," I muttered aloud, and both of the girls turned to look down at me. I hadn't meant to interject myself into their conversation, but when they saw it was me, they both smiled. "Boy trouble?"

"Hey, Coach Liberty," one of the girls with long dark hair said. "Yeah, something like that." She'd been the one lamenting a moment ago. "It's so complicated."

"It's not that complicated," the other girl, a blonde with curly hair and bright green eyes, told me. "Elizabeth is in love with her brother's best friend."

Elizabeth picked up her pillow and swung it at her, hitting her in the middle, though it didn't seem to hurt.

“Well, it’s true,” the blonde said.

“I understand,” I told them with a nod. “Mind if I join you?”

Both girls looked surprised, but Elizabeth answered. “Sure,” and scooted over on her bunk.

I kicked off my shoes and headed up the ladder at the end of the bed, finding a spot on her comforter and crossing my legs. “Well, Elizabeth, lay it on me. What’s the guy’s name?”

“Chase,” she said with a sigh. The look in her eyes made me think this kid must be something pretty special. “I’ve been in love with him forever. Since I was twelve.”

I would’ve laughed if I didn’t remember how long four years felt like when one was their age. “That is a long time.”

“And she won’t say anything to him because her brother, Marco, has made it clear that his little sister is off limits to everyone,” the other girl explained.

Before I could ask her what her name was, Elizabeth said, “Tessa thinks I should let Chase know how I feel, but I don’t want to cause trouble between him and my brother.”

“I totally understand,” I said with a nod. “Big brothers can be tough, but if your brother is anything like mine, he loves you enough to get over it. Maybe you should try talking to him first.” Here I was giving advice I couldn’t take myself.

“That sounds like a great idea,” Tessa said. “Tell Marco he should trust his friend not to be a douche.”

“I don’t know.” Elizabeth rested her head on her fist, propped up on her knee. “Maybe. I could think about it.”

“I would give it some thought. You never know. If Chase feels the same way about you, it’ll be worth it,” I told her.

“Oh, he definitely does,” Tessa said.

“You don’t know that,” Elizabeth shot back, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

Already, I was beginning to feel a connection to these kids. They were amazing. I just loved talking to them. I had a feeling I’d leave camp with a lot more than photographs. I was creating memories and friendships that would last forever.

“Oh, my gosh, Shayla!” I heard someone proclaim. “Why are you wearing my hat?”

I glanced down to see Shayla parading around with a swim cap on, though not appropriately, as well as someone's sunglasses, and a pair of socks tossed around her neck. I began to laugh so hard, I almost fell out of the bed.

"What? You don't like my outfit?" Shayla asked, feigning offense.

"I think you look fabulous," another girl said, and they all started laughing.

"What's going on?" Karrie's voice cut through the laughter. "What are you doing?"

I saw the girls' expressions freeze as they prepared to get in trouble, but I couldn't let Karrie ruin their fun.

"Wait!" I said, hopping down from the bed. "Let me get my camera."

"Seriously?" Shayla asked, smiling. "You're going to take my picture? Wearing this?"

"Yeah," I assured her, grabbing my camera out of its bag. "Why not? Anyone else wanna dress up?"

A flurry of activity erupted around the room as the girls began to grab whatever they had that was picture worthy—from the fancy to the absurd. One by one, they paraded down the center of the room, sashaying and being ridiculous. I took their pictures, all of us laughing until our stomachs hurt. Karrie sat on her bed, a stern look on her face, but she said nothing.

After some silliness, Monique shouted, "My turn, my turn!"

I looked up to see her wearing a pair of khaki shorts and a polo, a baseball cap tucked down over her ears, and her hands shoved down deep into her pockets.

"God, Mo!" Shayla shouted. "You look just like Coach Joshua."

Deepening her voice, Monique said, "Thank you so much, Shayla. I'm so glad that you're here at camp with us. It's going to be a great summer."

Her impression was spot on. I would've recognized him anywhere. "We've gotta get some pictures of this." I began to take her picture as she continued to prance around the room, pretending to be Joshua. My sides almost split, I laughed so hard.

Later, after Karrie declared lights out, I lay in my bed, staring at the ceiling, thinking about how much fun the first day had been. The room was quiet—except for the sound of Karrie snoring. How could such a small person be so loud?

Tossing and turning, I tried putting the pillow over my head, but it didn't

help. I'd noticed a lot of the girls putting in earplugs, and now I knew why. At this rate, I'd be lucky if I got any sleep at all.

Lying there, I couldn't help but think about Joshua. I might look like a wreck tomorrow, but at least I'd get to see him in his element. I couldn't wait to see what day two of camp brought, even if I was exhausted.



## JOSHUA

The sound of my alarm going off had me rolling over with a smile on my face. I was used to waking up happy at camp, but the first thought that entered my mind was that Liberty was there with me. No matter what happened, it was going to be a good day.

I took a quick shower and got dressed in khaki shorts and a polo, making sure I had a hat and sunglasses. I didn't want to get too hot. I'd slathered sunscreen on in places the sun would never see when I'd gotten out of the shower, but I packed a can of the spray-on kind to take with me. The nurse, Helen, was great and would spend half the day walking around reminding the kids to reapply. The counselors were great at making sure no one left the cabin without spraying themselves, too.

Already, I could see the sun beginning to climb above the trees, and it was going to be a scorcher. I'd have to make sure the kids took plenty of water breaks. We had plenty of stations where they could refill water bottles or grab a cup to throw over their heads, and some of the staff were assigned to make sure the water stayed cool, so we should be in good shape.

With a whistle around my neck and my water bottle in hand, I headed to the cafeteria for breakfast. The scent of bacon, eggs, and biscuits greeted me at the door. I paused for a moment to breathe it in.

"Good morning, Josh." Karrie's voice behind me almost had me leaping out of my skin. "How are you today?"

I moved out from in front of the door, not wanting to keep her girls from coming in. "Good, Karrie. How are you?"

"Slept like a baby," she said with a giggle. "Doesn't breakfast smell

amazing?” She took a deep breath and batted her eyelashes.

“Yep, sure does. Think I’ll go fix a plate.” I wanted to get away from her because she was acting a little weird, but then I remembered that Liberty was assigned to the same cabin as her, so I stopped for a moment, watching the girls come in and get in line.

Liberty came in last, barely picking up her feet as she came in. She was as gorgeous as ever with her hair pulled up under a hat, wearing a sundress with Capri-length leggings under it, but I could tell that something was wrong.

“Good morning,” I said as I walked over to her, hearing the concern in my own voice. “Are you all right?”

Liberty yawned and held up what appeared to be an empty coffee mug. “Nothing a little caffeine won’t fix. You know, you should consider putting coffee machines in the cabins for the counselors. I could barely roll out of bed this morning. I think I got approximately forty-five minutes’ worth of sleep.”

“Really?” I was shocked. Most of the time, everyone fell asleep pretty quickly on the first day of camp because they were so worn out from all of the activity. “Coffee machines are a good idea, but then, the kids might drink it and be bouncing off the walls until two o’clock in the morning.”

“Not in our cabin,” she said. “Stepping out of line is a serious infraction.” She rolled her eyes, and I puzzled over what she could be alluding to, but I wasn’t sure. “I’m going to hop in line. I’m famished.”

I moved toward the breakfast line with her, still glad she was here even if she was struggling. “I think you’ll sleep better tonight. We’ll keep the kids so busy with the basketball tournament you’ll fall asleep the moment your head hits the pillow.”

“I sure hope so,” she said, piling eggs and bacon onto her plate. One thing I loved about Liberty was that she didn’t eat like a bird. She wasn’t one of those girls who pretended like she could survive off a piece of lettuce and a carrot every six months.

When we reached the end of the service line, I realized I had to go the other direction. “I’m eating breakfast with Sam’s group today,” I explained.

Nodding, she looked up at me and smiled. “I’ll see you out there.”

“Have a good one.” I didn’t want to walk away from her, but I hoped I’d get to see her throughout the day. Having her here was a slight distraction, but it was worth it. Her smile made everything better.

After breakfast, we all headed over to the basketball courts. We had four



full-length courts to practice on. The concrete was heating up already, so I let the kids sit beneath the shade of some nearby trees as I went over everything with them. Liberty's camera clicking in the distance was a reassuring sound as I started to speak to the crowd.

"All right, kids," I began, standing with my back to the basketball courts. "Today starts day one of basketball practice. Since so many of you play basketball in school, we will only need two days of practice for this particular sport. On Thursday, we'll start the tournament. For this one, we'll have a girls' winner and a boys' winner, and then those two teams will face off against each other to crown a grand champion. Now fellas, don't let the girls fool you. We've got some ladies here who can sink threes with the best of them, so if you think you're faster or can jump higher, you're in for a reality check real soon. Since there are twelve teams and only eight baskets, you'll rotate through practice stations where you'll be practicing ball-handling skills, passing, and defensive stances as well as running shooting drills once it's your team's turn to get under the basket. We'll practice for three hours before lunch, which will be a picnic under these trees, and then get back at it for another four hours before we head in for showers with dinner at six. Any questions?"

No one raised a hand, which didn't surprise me. Most of these kids had gone through this before, and those who hadn't caught on quickly or just followed their teammates.

"All right. Coaches, you have your rotation schedule, so let's get to it." I clapped my hands together, and the coaches began to move, calling their groups to go along with them.

Karrie wasn't a coach, and neither were a few of the other staff counselors, so I had extra coaches that stayed in other cabins come over and direct those teams during the actual athletic training. Some of the cabins only had one coach/counselor, like Sam's, while others had two, so it all always worked out. Coach Rachel called over Bear House, which was Karrie and Liberty's group, and the girls got up and followed her to the third court. Karrie followed along, shouting at the girls to be sure to take their water bottles with them. Liberty was off snapping pictures of everyone, along with our other camp photographer.

Once practice was underway, I was busier than ever, making sure to go from group to group and check on everyone. If I saw an athlete struggling with a move, I headed over to give them some pointers. If I saw someone

having an emotional hard time, I provided some inspiration or sent them off to the nurse's station to call home. Whatever it was the kids needed, I was there for them.

Axel and Robby weren't just good at soccer. They were great at every sport they played. They happened to be on the same team, from Fox House, and as I watched them practice, I had a feeling they were going to win the boys' tournament for sure. On the other side of things, Bear House was killing it. I thought Rabbit House might have a chance, but with the way that Monique could sink three-pointers almost every time she shot, they would be hard to beat.

All the while that I was making my rounds with the kids, I was watching Liberty out of the corner of my eye. She was really getting in there, doing whatever she needed to in order to get the best pictures. The other photographer spent a lot of time hanging out in the shade, which was what I was used to from all of the people I hired to take pictures, but she was really a part of this. I saw her laughing and joking around with the kids, even running over to refill water bottles so the kids didn't have to. It was amazing to see her interact with them.

And they seemed to really like her, too. I watched them joke around with her, laughing and smiling. It was like she had always been meant to be here.

Every once in a while, she'd turn to look at me, and our eyes would meet. It was a wonderful feeling of warmth that radiated from wherever she was, filling me right up. Being able to do this with her was awesome. I only wished we were officially doing it together. But then, I always felt that way about our lives. We were always together but never together.

The cafeteria staff brought sack lunches out for everyone in big coolers. I went over to supervise, making sure we had everything we needed and that the kids had easy access to whichever kind of sandwich they preferred between the three choices of ham and cheese, turkey and cheese, or bologna and cheese. When the kids came over, I hopped out of the way. They were all starving. Thank goodness there were enough sandwiches for everyone to have two. The bags contained chips, a piece of fruit, and a cookie as well.

With a ham sandwich bag in hand, I had a seat near Fox House and struck up a conversation with Axel and Robby. "Your jump shot is on point," I told Axel. "Just be careful when you land not to drift off to the left. You need to stay square to the basket or you're going to pull your shot."

"I've been telling you that, bruh," Robby said, hitting him with the back

of his hand.

“It’s a bad habit,” Axel admitted. The two of them continued to chat about it as I saw Liberty walking by with her lunch.

“Hey, come join us,” I told her, stopping her in her tracks.

She looked at Axel and Robby and said, “I don’t know. Aren’t these the two kids that were teasing us yesterday on the bus?”

Robby grinned mischievously. “We’ll be nice, Miss Liberty. Besides, you should tell Coach Joshua what you noticed about my free throws today.”

“What’s that?” I asked, not sure what they were talking about.

She sank down next to me on the grass and began to open her lunch bag. “Oh, it’s kind of interesting. When Robby spins the ball backward before he shoots, he makes it, but when he spins it forward, it bounces against the rim and falls out. Every time.”

I looked at Robby, eyebrows raised, and he nodded. “It’s true.”

“Weird. Well, I guess you know your new technique then, huh?” I was impressed that Liberty picked up on that while she was busy running around taking photos. But then, she had always been athletic. It was one of the things that I loved about her—one of the many things.

“You should be a coach,” Axel suggested. “You might be too nice, though.”

“Aren’t the coaches nice?” Liberty asked, a concerned look on her face.

Shrugging, Axel said, “They’re all cool. Everything they say is out of love and concern, but you’ve got a way of speaking that makes it seem like we’re friends, not that you’re gonna bean me in the head with a basketball if I don’t straighten up.”

“Well, I can try to be sterner,” she said with a laugh, “but I can’t make any promises.”

“Nope,” I told her. “You need to stay just the way you are.” She looked at me and grinned, and I looked away, not wanting to give these two boys more fuel for their fire.

But they were right. There was definitely something going on between Liberty and me, and it had been that way for years. Maybe it was finally time to take it to the next level.



## LIBERTY

**F**or not being an athlete, I sure was dripping with sweat by the time I hauled myself back into the cabin to take a shower and get ready for dinner. It was exhausting, chasing the kids around, trying to get the perfect shot, but it was also so rewarding. I'd gotten to know so many of the student-athletes already, on just the first full day of camp, and I was super excited about everything that was to come.

I had to wait until the girls were done in the showers before getting my turn. When we'd walked in, Karrie had been sitting on her bed, reading a book, dressed in a different outfit than the one she'd been wearing all day, looking fresh as a daisy. I hadn't even seen her leave the basketball court, but then, she wasn't a coach, so maybe it was okay for her not to be out there.

As the girls headed to the showers, she shouted after them, "You have a schedule right there by the door. Your shower assignments are highlighted in yellow. Please stick to the schedule so we can all get through this quickly and not be late to dinner."

The girls went over and glanced at the schedule she'd made before conferring together to come up with their own schedule, I figured. They knew one another better than Karrie did and could figure it out for themselves. I didn't even need any hot water at this point. I just wanted to rinse off so I could put on something that didn't smell like an old gym sock.

I rummaged through my clothes and found a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, laying them out on the bed, as well as a new pair of underwear and a bra that wasn't soaked in sweat. As I was doing so, Karrie said, "You know, you might want to come back here before them from now on. You can get your

shower in while they're still out there.”

I turned and looked at her. “I have to take the pictures.”

She shrugged. “Most of the photographers don't spend the whole day taking pictures. As long as you get a few shots each day, what difference does it make?”

I wanted to tell her it made a huge difference, that Joshua had selected me to do a job, and I wanted to do my best, but I saw no point in arguing with her, so I let it go.

When the girls were all done with their showers, mother hen rounded them all up and took them over to the cafeteria while I finally had my turn in the shower. I was grateful to have a few moments of solitude but didn't want to take too long. I was famished after all.

By the time I walked into the cafeteria, everyone else was already chowing down on spaghetti. I fixed a plate, heaping a ton of meatballs on top of my spaghetti with red sauce, and grabbed two breadsticks before heading to the table to set that down and then go get my tea and a huge slice of chocolate cake.

The moment I sat down next to Elizabeth, Karrie looked in my direction. I'd purposely put some space between us, but that didn't prevent her from gawking. “You're going to eat all of that?”

“You're right,” I said, looking my food over. “I'm going to go grab another breadstick.” I flashed her a fake smile and then got up again to do just that while the girls sitting around us snickered.

When I came back, Karrie was deep into a conversation with the girls next to her about how it was proper to let a young man ask a girl out instead of her making the first move. I didn't quite agree with her on that one, but I didn't care to interject myself into the conversation.

Instead, I focused on eating. I was starving, and I didn't really care how I looked to anyone else shoveling the spaghetti into my face. I was going to eat it as fast as humanly possible. Joshua was all the way on the other side of the room chatting with another group of girls, so there was no one there I was trying to impress. Besides, he'd seen me eat like a starving dog lots of times before.

I'd just finished my cake when Joshua walked to a stage at the front of the room. He tapped a microphone a few times to get our attention, and the room went quiet. “Thanks for your attention, kids. I wanted to let you all know that, in order to properly celebrate our first day of activities, there will be a

bonfire tonight in the village circle. We'll have s'mores, and we'll all have an opportunity to get to know each other better. I'll see you there in an hour." He waved as everyone cheered.

Excitement bubbled up inside of me. I was probably just as enthralled about this as the kids. A few of the girls sitting near me were talking about how this was a chance to finally talk to a couple of cute boys, and I felt the same way. I'd get a chance to speak to Joshua, and I couldn't wait.

I heard a loud sigh and turned my head. Karrie was staring at her clipboard, shaking her head. "This wasn't on the schedule."

Choking on a laugh, I sipped my tea, wondering if she'd be mad if lights out was a bit later than usual.

We went back to the cabin for a few minutes to get ready, and I helped a few of the girls pick out new clothes to change into. By the time we were all ready to go, the sun was beginning to dip below the trees. It wouldn't be down for another hour or so, but twilight was settling in, and with the sky alight with pinks, oranges, and golds, I was feeling a bit romantic.

That feeling intensified when I saw Joshua standing near a massive bonfire. I'd seen some large campfires in my day, but never anything like this. Some of the logs were taller than he was. I was certain it had been set up with the utmost care to keep the kids safe, so I was impressed with how much trouble the staff had gone to in order to make sure everyone had a fun time.

Our eyes locked, and a soft smile fell into place across his handsome face. We'd had similar exchanges throughout the day. Never much of an acknowledgment, always just a knowing grin. It made me feel all warm inside, but I didn't go over to him because he was clearly engaged with a few of the male coaches. Instead, I wandered along with a group of the girls from our cabin who were clearly trying to get away from Karrie.

That sounded like the perfect game plan to me. One of the girls, Tessa, reached over and grabbed my wrist. "Come on, Miss Liberty. Come with us to make s'mores."

"Sounds yummy to me." We picked up the pace and headed over to one of the s'more-making stations to grab everything we needed.

Behind us, Karrie called out, "Be careful now, girls. That fire is very hot!"

"As most fires are," I muttered. Tessa, Elizabeth, and the other girls giggled, and my cheeks turned red. I hadn't meant to say that aloud. "Sorry."

Elizabeth shook her head. "We're used to her after having her as a

counselor last year, but it's funny that you're so opposite to her."

"You're going to make an awesome mom one day, Miss Liberty," a tall brunette named Rhiannon told me.

I felt my cheeks flush and wondered if Joshua had seen me with the kids and felt the same. I thanked her for her kind words and headed over to the giant bonfire with the girls to make our s'mores.

Listening to the girls giggle and talk about how cute some of the boys were and including me in their conversation made me feel like I was one of them, even though I really was supposed to be there as more of a chaperone than one of the gang, but it was great sitting with them and hearing them talk about guys and their lives outside of camp as if I were just one of them.

Once we made our s'mores, we took a seat on a bench carved from an old tree. The marshmallow on mine was perfect, with a crisp outer shell and ooey-goey on the inside. The chocolate was perfectly melted as well, and the graham cracker was nice and crunchy.

"What about you, Miss Liberty?" Tessa asked me, drawing my attention back to the group and away from my treat. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Not at the moment," I said, licking some marshmallow off my lip. I hoped I got it all.

"Really?" Rhiannon seemed shocked. "But you're so pretty."

Grinning at her, I said, "Thank you. I don't think being pretty has much to do with it, though. Finding the right guy can sometimes take a while, no matter what a person looks like."

"Well, I bet you'll find the right guy soon," Elizabeth told me. "And when you do, the two of you will be in love forever."

I opened my mouth to thank her as well, but before I got the chance, I heard a familiar voice calling my name from behind me. "Liberty? Can you come here for a second?"

I turned to see Joshua smiling at me. "Sure." Popping the last bite of s'more into my mouth, I told the girls I'd be back and walked toward him.

He looked amazing standing there in the light of the enormous fire. The glow from the flames caught the lighter strands of his hair, giving him an ethereal look. I approached him with a smile on my face, hoping we'd get a few moments to chat.

"Wanna go for a walk?" he asked me with a sheepish smile.

"I'd love to," I told him, wishing I could reach for his hand. The two of us began to walk toward the woods near the edge of the bonfire.



We didn't make it too far before I heard Karrie shout, "Liberty! Where are you going? We have to stay with the girls."

My mouth dropped open as I prepared to say something, but it was Joshua who replied. "They'll be fine for a few minutes, Karrie. Thanks." He then took me gently by the elbow and led me on as we heard Karrie "humph."

I wasn't sure what to think of her, but Joshua chuckled under his breath and shook his head. "She tends to get a little bossy sometimes."

"She is a manager, right?" I asked, trying to be positive.

"That's right." He led me down a trail that wound through the trees. "Are you having fun so far? The girls really seem to like you." He slid his hand down my arm and interlaced his fingers with mine. It felt so nice to be able to hold his hand and not worry about what anyone thought or who was watching.

"I'm having a blast," I assured him. "I love working with the kids. The girls are great. Staying in a cabin is kind of fun, at least with all the girls, and I love spending time with you."

He stopped, turning to face me. With the fading sun setting behind him filtering through the trees, everything had a mystical gleam to it. "You like being around me?"

I nodded, my breath caught in my throat. It took me a moment to work the words out, but when they did, it exposed everything to him. "Just because my brother forbids us from being together, that doesn't mean I don't want you."

Joshua smiled at me and then said, "You've got a little marshmallow on your lip." Immediately, I sucked my lip into my mouth, trying to work it off, but then he said, "Let me," and his mouth was on mine.

My toes curled as I pushed up off the ground to meet him, my knees growing weak as my head began to swim.



## JOSHUA

Liberty tasted even better than I always assumed she would, and it had nothing to do with the tiny speck of marshmallow on her lip. She tasted like the most delicious thing I've ever eaten and the most refreshing, cool, crisp water a man could ever hope to drink after walking in a desert for over a decade. That was how long I had been dreaming of this moment, of actually kissing this girl without fear of anyone sneaking up on us.

But the moment that thought registered in my mind, that we were sneaking around behind my best friend's back, I pulled away, leaving Liberty standing there panting, her eyes wide, and her mouth still agape.

I took a deep breath and took another step back. "I'm so sorry, Liberty," I murmured. "I shouldn't have—" I stopped myself, not sure what else there was to say.

Color flooded her cheeks, and it had nothing to do with the sunset behind me. "No, it's okay," she said with a shrug. "We should, uh, probably get back to the bonfire."

"Yeah, we probably should." I cleared my throat, wishing there was some way for me to both hang onto the memory of what had transpired between us and still not feel this sickening feeling that I'd just betrayed my best friend.

We walked back the way we had come, Liberty leading the way, neither of us saying anything. I hated the awkwardness between us now. In some ways, it would've been better if I hadn't kissed her at all, but I found it hard to regret my actions when everything about it had been so perfect.

Back at the bonfire, the kids were laughing and having fun. I saw some mingling between the girls and boys and didn't know if I should shut it down

or let them enjoy their time together. It was always a concern for us that we had both sexes at camp at the same time, but most of these kids were the types who didn't need to be watched nonstop to keep in line with our rules about the type of behavior I'd just partaken in myself. Still, with the feeling of Liberty's lips seared into mine, I wanted to make sure I kept an eye on the students so none of them were up to any funny business.

Excusing myself from Liberty, I walked away, and she rejoined the girls who she'd been hanging out with before. I heard one of them excitedly ask what I'd wanted, and Liberty said, "We were just discussing the types of pictures I should be taking tomorrow."

The girl seemed to buy it, and they returned to their conversation about basketball shoes.

On the other side of the fire, I struck up a conversation with Sam and Myra, but I wasn't really listening to a damn word my coaches had to say. No, my thoughts were on the beautiful girl across the way and how empty I felt inside knowing I'd never be in a position to claim her as mine. None of it was fair, and I hated it for us both.

Once the sun went down, I saw several yawns from the kids. It was getting late, and they had to get up early. I was just about to tell them to go back to their cabins and have a good night when Karrie appeared in front of me, a tight-lipped smile on her face. "Josh, don't you think it's time we sent the kids to bed? It's late."

"Uh, yeah," I told her. "I was just about to do that."

She cocked her head to the side, like she didn't believe me. "Okay," she said. "I'll go start gathering my girls up." She trotted off, and I tried not to shake my head at her. The woman had control issues.

I made an announcement, letting the campers know they needed to get to bed. I wished them all goodnight and waited for them all to make their way back to their cabins before I headed to my own.

I couldn't get Liberty off my mind, though. Even after a quick shower and a check of my emails, I found myself lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, thinking of her. Eventually, I nodded off to sleep, and within a few seconds of the beginning of my dream, I knew there was no way this was reality, but I went with it.

We were at camp, but all of the kids were off somewhere else. Liberty and I were down by the lake, and she was wearing a skimpy string bikini. It showed off her magnificent, athletic body. From her tiny waist to her flat

stomach, very little was left to the imagination. I sat on a beach chair, reclining in the sun, watching her climb out of the water, droplets of water dripping from her glistening body.

“You should come into the water with me. It’s so warm,” Liberty said as she walked toward me, looking like a supermodel as she swayed her hips.

“The view from here is spectacular,” I told her.

She didn’t stop when she reached my chair. Instead, she straddled it, creeping her way up the length and then dropping down onto my lap. Immediately, I hardened beneath her. Noticing, she began to rub herself back and forth along my shaft. “Do you like that?”

My hands slid up her wet sides to her breasts, my thumbs finding her nipples beneath the taut fabric of her bikini. “I like you.”

Liberty lowered her head to kiss me, and then suddenly we were both naked. I wasted no time pushing inside of her. I could feel her tighten around me as we began to buck wildly, up and down, giving the beach chair a run for its money. I continued to play with her nipples, which were amazing now that I could see them. It was difficult to release her luscious lips, but I managed so that I could flick my tongue against her hardened peak. She began to cry out, begging me for more. “Don’t stop, Joshua. Fuck me harder,” she begged, her head falling backward as she climaxed.

I felt myself beginning to orgasm as well. I wanted nothing more than to come at the same time as this beautiful woman I’d spent all these years chasing, but just as I hit my apex, the sound of my alarm going off had my eyes flying open and my arm flailing to stop the noise.

Lying on my back in my bed, I tried my best to catch my breath, feeling like my lungs were on fire. “Oh, god,” I mumbled, dragging a hand down my face. Even though I’d known I was dreaming, it had all felt so real. How was I going to face Liberty after a dream like that?

More importantly, how was I going to go another day without actually fucking her? After a dream like that, it was going to be impossible to look at her and not think about how good she’d felt, or how amazing she’d tasted. No, this was going to be even more difficult than sneaking around behind Landon’s back had been.

It took me a few minutes to get out of bed. When I did, I made my way to my shower, thinking I should probably keep the water pretty cold, but I didn’t. Instead, I jerked off in the shower, my mind on Liberty’s amazing body while my hand did what I wouldn’t allow her to do. In the end, it was

probably better to get it out of my system before I had to see her face to face.

At breakfast, I did my best not to make things seem awkward. I waved hello to her from across the room before fixing my plate, piling it high with bacon and scrambled eggs, and then finding a seat at one of the tables far away from her. I'd have to talk to her at some point today so it didn't seem weird, but at the moment, I had no idea what to say.

"We on for this afternoon?" one of my coaches, Pete, asked as I prepared to take my tray up to the window.

"As far as I know," I told him. "I'll double-check with Myra, but she said she'd get the slides and other inflatables up before we're done with basketball practice."

"Cool," Pete said, extending his fist for me to bump. "This is always one of the most fun experiences we have at camp."

"I agree," I told him, heading over to check with Myra. She confirmed she had a team to help her get our surprise set up while the rest of us were at basketball practice.

Out on the courts, the sun glared down on us, and it was even hotter than it had been the day before. Thankfully, we didn't have a full day of this planned. After lunch, I let the kids work off what they'd eaten for about an hour and then blew my whistle.

"All right, kids. I feel like we've gotten enough basketball for one day." I could see anticipation lighting up the faces of several of the kids who'd been here the year before and knew this announcement would come out of nowhere—eventually. It was a little earlier than it had been in previous camps, but on a hot day like this, it was perfect. "This afternoon, we'll be having our annual lakeside waterslide party!"

A cheer went up among most of the kids. The newbies all looked confused, as did Liberty. I smiled at her, and she grinned back, but she didn't know what I was talking about. "Go get your swimsuits on, and let's meet at the lake in one hour."

With that, I sent the kids off. The ones that knew what was up filled in the others. Their excited chatter made me smile.

I headed off to get my swim trunks on, deciding to wear a swim shirt as well in order to keep from getting burned. Reaching the lake before the kids, I checked over everything Myra had done. Of course, it was perfect. "I've got plenty of people assigned to lifeguard duty as well," she told me. "We've got six staff members who are also certified lifeguards."

“You’re the best,” I told her, giving her a high five.

A few minutes later, the first kids arrived. I turned on some music over the loudspeakers, and they took off running for the slides and other inflatables. The lake was always fun, but with these extra amenities, the kids were going to have a blast. We had a shaved-ice truck on the way as well, so they’d get to have a treat before we went in and got ready for dinner, which would be a little later today.

Once the party was underway, I spied Liberty taking pictures over by the gnarliest of the slides. She was laughing, watching the kids pop up into the air before plummeting into the lake. I couldn’t wait to see those pictures. They were sure to be stellar.

“Hey.” I waited for her to acknowledge me, which she did with a smile. “How’s it going?”

“Great,” she said. “Did you see Elizabeth’s hair when she came down? It shot out around her. That’s gonna be a great shot.”

“Awesome,” I said, having not seen it. “Listen, I don’t want things to be weird between us, but I do want to say I’m sorry if I crossed a line last night. It’s just hard, what with Landon and all.” He’d made me promise never to make a move on her, but I’d done it anyway.

Liberty shrugged. “No, it’s okay. I mean, he’s my brother, so of course I feel it too. It’s a heavy burden to bear.” She laughed a little and shook her head. “No worries.”

“Good.” I wanted to hug her or at least pat her arm, but instead, I just gave her an awkward smile and walked away, cursing Landon under my breath as I went. I couldn’t be loyal to my best friend and still have the girl I wanted—so what the hell was I going to do?





## LIBERTY

Sitting on my bed in the cabin, I tried to focus on the photos I was editing. I'd taken so many great pictures of the kids, it was hard to choose which ones to edit and which ones to discard, for now. I never deleted any of the photos I took unless they were blurry or had a photobomb of some sort in the background. I never knew when I might want to use those pictures for something. But I couldn't possibly edit all of them, so I had been choosing ten or twenty per day to edit when I got a chance.

Looking through the pictures from basketball practice, I had some great ones of the girls in my group. There was one of Tessa sinking a layup and another one of Elizabeth setting an amazing pick for Rhiannon. I had to try to be fair and include kids from other cabins, too, but I could use only pictures from these kiddos, and Joshua would have all the pictures he needed for his social media and website.

Thinking of him, my mind went back to the kiss we'd shared in the woods the night before. That same feeling that I couldn't suck in a full breath had me gasping for air. That kiss had been a long time coming, and I'd enjoyed it, even though it didn't last that long, and there was no reason to think it would be repeated any time soon, sadly.

Without thinking, I pulled up a picture I'd taken of Joshua the first day when he was speaking to the crowd about how much fun we were all going to have at camp. It was a candid photo, and he was in his element. I loved the look on his face, the way he stood confidently in front of a crowd. He was unbelievably handsome, and his body looked so great, his outfit showing off his strong arms and muscular calves.

“He’s so photogenic.”

I jumped, almost closing my laptop out of fear because I had no idea who it was that had snuck up on me when I was in another world. Looking up, I saw Karrie standing behind me, a dreamy look on her face. My eyebrows shot up as I tried to assess what was happening.

“Doesn’t he look great?” she continued, that soft smile on her face. “I bet he didn’t even know you were taking his picture.”

Pausing, I tried to figure out how to respond. Did Karrie have feelings for Joshua? It seemed pretty evident at the moment that she did, just based on her expression. How had I not noticed this before? Would Joshua ever consider dating an employee? I hoped not because I didn’t want to share him with anyone.

That thought almost made me laugh out loud. How could I share something I didn’t have? “Uh, yeah, he looks great,” I agreed. “I don’t think he knew, but I was taking photos of everyone.” I flipped through to some of the other pictures I’d taken that day, and Karrie quickly lost interest and went away.

With a deep breath, I went back to what I’d been doing, but in the back of my mind, the question was there. What was going on with Karrie and Joshua?

The next day was the basketball tournament. There were plenty of opportunities for me to get in there and take action shots of the kids as they squared off against one another. The girls were playing their tournament on one court while the boys were playing on the other, so at first, I split my time between the two of them, running back and forth to be sure to get photos of every team. I was getting almost as tired as the kids, but I loved it. The athletes were all so excited, cheering each other on and showing great sportsmanship.

After lunch, it was time for the championship games. The girls’ final and the boys’ final would happen at the same time, so I’d have to be quick to get pictures of both games. My girls were in the final, squaring off against Rabbit House, and I really wanted to watch the Bears, but I had to get some good photos of Fox House and Porcupine House in the boys’ as well.

After the first half of the boys’ game was over, I figured I had enough and went to watch the girls. It was a close game, but in the fourth quarter, my girls started to pull ahead. Monique sank two three-pointers in a row before Tessa stole the ball and took it down for a quick layup. I couldn’t help but smile, though I tried not to cheer out loud because I was trying so hard to be

impartial. In the end, my girls beat the Rabbits by six points.

The girls gathered together in one giant group hug. Karrie rushed over to get in the middle of it, along with their coach. Elizabeth looked over at me and waved me over, so I went, too.

“We did it, Miss Liberty!” Monique said with a glowing smile.

“I’m so proud of all of you!” I told her, giving her an individual hug once everyone let go. Every girl wanted a hug from me, and even though they were sweaty, I happily wrapped my arms around each of them.

“Who are we playing next?” Tessa wanted to know.

I turned and looked over at the boys’ side and saw Fox House rejoicing as well. “I think you have your answer.”

“Oh, crap,” Rhiannon whispered under her breath. “They’re gonna kill us.”

“Nah, we can handle them.” Monique stuck her fist out, and Rhiannon reluctantly bumped it. “Gotta have faith, girl.”

“Besides, we’ve already won our way into the ice cream pool party,” Tessa added. “So let’s just have fun.”

“There’s an ice cream pool party?” I asked. “That sounds like so much fun!”

“Yep, the two girls’ teams from the final and the two boys’ teams get to go to a pool party after dinner, and we get as much ice cream as we can eat,” Elizabeth explained to me.

“Oh, well, that seems like the real prize. Just go out there and have fun. I mean, I’d love it if you kicked those boys’ as—” I swallowed hard, cutting myself off from swearing in front of the kids. “Butts, but still, if you don’t win, it’s not a big deal. You still get ice cream and swimming.”

“And hot boys in swim trunks,” Tessa added, waggling her eyebrows. That made all of us giggle, except for Karrie, who cleared her throat to get Tessa’s attention and then shook her head. Tessa turned back to me and pressed her lips together, and I shrugged. They were teenagers. Of course, they were going to be checking each other out.

The winning teams had a chance to rest for a few minutes. I made sure my girls all had enough water and brought them anything they needed. By the time the last game started, they seemed pumped and ready to go.

The game started off as expected with the boys quickly jumping out to a big lead. However, my girls didn’t give up, and before long, they’d cut that lead in half. Robby and Axel were getting a little cocky, trying to do trick

passes, but Rhiannon was fast, as was Tessa, and those two girls managed to steal the ball a few times. I thought Coach Sam was going to blow a gasket as he reminded his team from the sideline that they had to protect the ball.

In the final quarter, Tessa stole the ball from Axel and sprinted down the court. Robby managed to catch up to her, getting in front of her. Tessa threw a no-look pass over her shoulder to Monique at the three-point line, and she sank it from the top of the key. The entire camp exploded in cheers. Even the boys sitting on the bench for Fox House began to cheer. The boys were still ahead by five with less than two minutes to go, but the girls weren't ready to give up.

The boys inbounded the ball, and Rhiannon appeared out of nowhere, stealing the ball from one of the boys whose name I didn't know. Again, she was off to the races. Robby reached in to try to knock it away from her, but he fouled her, and Rhiannon hit the floor hard. The crowd went quiet as we all held our breath, waiting to see if she was okay.

Joshua was the first one to get to the girl who was lying on the floor, holding her knee. "Nurse!" he shouted.

I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth, praying Rhiannon was okay. The nurse ran over, carrying her black bag. I caught Joshua's eyes, and he nodded, trying to tell me Rhiannon was going to be okay. A few moments later, he helped her to her feet. She had a large bandage on her shin, and some tears glistened in her eyes, but she was okay.

The ref determined Rhiannon had been in the process of raising the ball for a layup when she was fouled, so the girl took her place at the free-throw line. She sank the first shot, bringing the boys' lead to four. She sank the second shot as well, and now they were only losing by three.

Again, the boys threw the ball in, and the girls did everything they could to try to get it back. The boys seemed content to just run out the clock, passing the ball around, not giving the girls a chance to get it. But one of the boys threw the ball just a bit off, and Monique flew in and cut him off, grabbing it out of the air and heading down the court as fast as she could.

With two seconds left on the clock, Monique fired a shot from the half-court line. There was no way she could make it from there—could she?

The ball hit the rim, bounced three times, and went in.

It was a tie—the game was tied. Everyone began to cheer, and I realized then that there would be no overtime. We had co-champions.

I rushed in along with everyone else to hug the girls and congratulate

them. They might not have won, but they hadn't lost either, and I was so very proud of all of them.

Later that afternoon, I found myself with my feet in the pool, watching the girls swim around, chatting to one another and the occasional boy. Rhiannon was sitting on a pool chair when Robby came over and handed her an ice cream cone. He sat down on the chair next to her, and a smile crept onto my face just watching them.

"I think he feels bad for taking her out," Joshua said, sitting down next to me.

My heart skipped a beat as I caught sight of him in his swimming trunks. "I think they like one another," I told him.

"Really?" His eyebrows arched as he looked at the pair. "Well, yeah, maybe." He cleared his throat and shrugged. "By the way, you look really cute in that bathing suit."

I felt my face heating up. "Thank you so much," I told him. "You look pretty nice yourself." He shrugged but grinned at me. "It was so much fun watching the tournament."

"Yeah, I love watching the kids compete. They're such good sports about everything, always cheering, even for the competition."

"You've done a great job of teaching them that," I said. "You and your team."

"Thanks. It's a huge priority for us. You know—"

Before Joshua could finish, Karrie plopped herself down on his other side. "What are you two chatting about?" she asked. "Did you see Rhiannon and Robby? Do you think I should go break them up?"

"They're just talking," Joshua said. "It's cute."

"Oh, yeah. It's so cute." Karrie's tone completely changed as soon as Joshua gave the conversation a thumbs-up.

I sucked in a deep breath and held it, knowing now that my suspicions from yesterday were definitely true.

Karrie liked Joshua.



## JOSHUA

**W**hy the hell had Karrie come over and plunked herself down next to me as soon as Liberty and I had started talking? This always seemed to be my luck. The moment I had the opportunity to talk to her, someone came over and interfered. Whether it was Landon or Karrie or some rando I didn't even know, I hardly ever got a chance to talk to her alone.

Now, here we were out in the middle of the woods away from everyone we both knew and we were still being interrupted.

“Didn't the basketball tournament go great?” Karrie asked. “I thought the kids had so much fun. They're so good at throwing the basketball into the basket. Some of them were so good at bouncing the ball, too.”

As an athlete, listening to her talk about basketball in such simplistic terms made me want to push her into the pool and run away. Instead, I said, “Yes, the kids did great.”

I turned and looked at Liberty as she brushed her hair off her shoulder and shifted uncomfortably. I had a feeling she was about to get up and walk away from me, and I wouldn't be able to handle that. I wanted to keep her right here with me for as long as possible, even though the bathing suit she was wearing reminded me of the dream I had the night before.

Her hand brushed against mine as she adjusted on the deck of the pool. The electricity between us sizzled, and I found myself catching my breath. Visions from my dream the night before came back to me. I could almost feel her skin on mine, her thighs gripping my hips as I slid deep inside of her.

“Josh?” Karrie said, sounding concerned. “Are you okay? You're turning a little red.”

“I’m fine.” Even though I didn’t want to, I got up, abandoning Liberty the same way I had a hundred times over the years. “I just need to go get a drink.” With one more glance at Liberty, giving her an apologetic smile, I headed to the far end of the pool where there was a snack shack. Mostly, the staff members working there were busy handing out ice cream to the kids, but they had drinks as well. Unfortunately, none of them were the adult kind. I could really use a beer right about now. But I didn’t allow any kind of alcohol on the camp premises. There was too much risk of the kids getting a hold of it, and while most of them were good kids who would never even consider drinking before they turned twenty-one, I couldn’t risk it.

“How are you doing, boss?” Sam asked from behind the counter. “Need an ice cream sandwich?”

“No, just a lemonade, please,” I said, trying not to sigh.

“Everything okay?” Sam asked as one of the other staff members turned around to make my drink.

“Yeah, everything is fine. The kids seem to be having fun.” It was too bad that not all the kids could be here, but the pool wasn’t really big enough for that, so we had to break the kids up into groups in order for them to enjoy the pool. But with any luck, all of the cabins would win a tournament so that they got to participate in the pool party before camp was over. That was my hope anyway.

With my lemonade in hand, I turned to find a new place to hang out, hoping I could get away from Karrie but still find a way to talk to Liberty. Seeing that Liberty was in the pool now with some of the girls, I decided to find an open chair and sit for a few moments. Karrie was also talking to the girls, but more in a scolding way than just interacting with them the way that Liberty was.

Sinking down on the plastic chair, I took a deep breath and a sip of my drink. The tartness mixed with the sweetness perked me up a little. My eyes roamed over the kids in the pool. Most of them were laughing and having fun. A few looked like they were hanging out on the fringes, observing, kind of like I was right now. There wasn’t necessarily anything wrong with that. One thing I always did at camp was try to make sure everyone had a friend so everyone felt included. I’d always been popular and had a lot of friends, but I’d also been taught at a young age to watch for the kids who were not in that situation and to seek them out and make sure they had someone to eat lunch with.



Liberty was playing Marco Polo with the girls, which made me smile. She had a way of blending right in and making friends with everyone. The kids loved her right from the beginning, and I couldn't blame them. Seeing her glide around the pool in her bathing suit left me breathless. Once again, visions from the dream I'd had came back to me. Liberty was by far the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. I could hardly keep my eyes off her.

I was jolted out of my thoughts by the sound of Karrie's voice as she yelled, "No roughhousing!" at a couple of boys who were splashing one another. Immediately, the kids stopped and swam away to the other end of the pool away from her.

Sighing, I watched Karrie walk over to a group of coaches and join in their conversation. I hoped she had lost track of me. The last thing I wanted was for her to follow me around the pool. She'd been acting a little weird lately, and I had no idea why. Most of the time at work, we only talked about what was happening at the sports complex. I didn't know that much about her outside of the fact that she was highly organized and meticulous. She also didn't know much about sports, I realized. She'd reminded me of that tonight.

Karrie wasn't the sort of person I ever would've hired if I'd been given a choice. But my father had talked me into it as a favor to a friend, so here she was. In some ways, she was a good hire because she thought differently than everyone else. Sometimes, her questions helped the rest of us to see our own faulty thinking. However, most of the time, she just didn't have any clue what was happening, and it was up to the rest of us to explain it to her—or ignore her as I had earlier.

My focus shifted back to Liberty. She was gliding through the water with some of the girls from her cabin now, and they tried to avoid whoever it was playing the part of Marco. Was that how it went? I hadn't played that game in ages. Maybe in some ways, I was a bit like Karrie myself. I chuckled, shaking my head. No, this wasn't a sport.

Liberty was wearing a one-piece, modest bathing suit, but that didn't prevent me from noticing how great her body looked. Dream aside, I'd seen her in a bikini before. When we were younger, she used to wear them to pool parties in the neighborhood. It had been so difficult for me then to see her walking around in something so skimpy and just pretend like I didn't notice, like I was practically her brother, like Landon.

When we'd gone to Hawaii last year so that I could help her brother and father open a new office there, I'd had the chance to steal her away from

Landon's watchful eye for a bit. He'd been so distracted by Poppy in a bathing suit on the beach, he'd momentarily forgotten that he'd brought along his sister and his best friend. Damn, that had been quite the trip. If Mr. Johnson hadn't ruined it all at dinner shortly after our excursion to the beach, who knew what might've happened? Landon and Poppy might've been so focused on one another, I might've had the chance to confirm for Liberty what we both already knew.

God, I wanted her so fucking bad.

I couldn't keep thinking this way. Not at camp. Not at all. Landon was my best friend. If I betrayed his trust, what kind of a person would that make me? It was bad enough that I'd kissed her at the bonfire. Now, I was thinking of doing other things, seductive things, things that would cross all the lines I'd promised to maintain with her older brother. How could I ever do that in good conscience?

I couldn't. I had to find a way to just step back from the situation and leave Liberty be. By this point in my life, that seemed impossible. I wanted her more than anything, yet, I was constantly telling myself it couldn't happen.

Coach Sam walked out of the snack shack and over to the side of the pool, a whistle between his lips. A shrill shriek filled the air as he blew through the device. "All right, kiddos. It's time to get out and go to your cabins. Great job on the court today. We'll see you all tomorrow. Get some rest."

Ordinarily, I'd stick around and make sure that everyone got back to their rooms safely. I'd do fist bumps and high-fives, congratulating the kids on their stellar performances again, and I'd make sure the staff had everything taken care of at the pool.

Not tonight. The last thing I wanted was to sit here and watch Liberty innocently gather up her girls and walk back to their cabin with them, walking away from me yet again, through no fault of her own.

Getting up from my chair, I grabbed a towel and tossed the rest of my lemonade into the trash before I bolted for the nearest gate, heading back to my cabin at a quick pace. Behind me, I heard Karrie's voice distinctly as she shouted at her girls to make a line. Everyone else trusted the kids to walk in a group to their cabin, but Karrie wanted them in a line like elementary students? I shook my head, wondering if she was going to make Liberty line up, too.

Once I was about halfway to my cabin, I slowed down a little. I'd put a great deal of distance between myself and the students. My cabin was off by itself, which was one of the reasons why it was my cabin and not still a place the kids could sleep. We had remodeled it, but there were still a few bunk beds in an adjoining room in case we ever needed the overflow. I hoped that never happened because I really liked sleeping in there without the distraction of students and other adults. It was the only time I had to myself to decompress and plan. While some folks might say it wasn't fair for me to have my own room, I needed it. Camp was a lot of pressure for me. Being in charge of everyone's safety and making sure they had fun didn't come without consequences.

"Hey, where are you running off to?" a voice said not far behind me. I recognized it immediately, and my breath caught in my throat as I slowly turned around.

I was almost to my cabin door. Maybe I could've pretended not to hear and dart inside, but I didn't. Instead, I slowly turned to face her.

Moonlight caught the blonde streaks in Liberty's hair as she inched closer to me, her skin still wet from the pool. She hadn't bothered to grab a towel like me, and her body looked amazing. I wanted to run to her, to take her in my arms, and carry her inside my private cabin to finally show her exactly how much I cared for her.

Instead, I stood there, breathless, waiting to see why she was here.



## LIBERTY

**W**hat the hell was I doing?

I didn't know. Normally, I would never be so bold as to chase a guy down, dressed in a swimsuit, still wet from a dip in the pool. But this was different. This wasn't just any old guy. It was Joshua—and he'd kissed me in the woods near where we were standing so recently my lips could still feel his warmth. I might've been acting recklessly, putting myself into a situation where things could heat up between us, but at the moment, I didn't care. The thought of Karrie moving in on him made me paranoid. I was tired of standing in the shadows pretending like I didn't care who Joshua was with. I wanted him for myself.

And even if that meant we could only steal kisses from one another beneath the moonlight from time to time for a while as we navigated what to do about my brother, it was better to let him know than to continue to hide the fact that I wanted him desperately.

"Liberty?" I heard the surprise in his voice as he turned to address me. "What are you doing here?"

I shrugged, feeling a bit self-conscious all of a sudden. What if I put myself out there, and he wasn't interested? "We're both still in our bathing suits. All the kids are in their cabins. Would you like to go for a dip in the lake?"

His eyes widened as he looked off in the direction of the large body of water. All of the slides and other inflatables had been taken down after the lakeside party, so it was just a placid sheet of glass in the distance, but it was beautiful with the stars reflecting off the surface. "I don't know."

It was understandable to me why he wouldn't want to go. This was his camp. He was in charge here. A good night's rest, a level head, all of those things were important. Yet, I found myself refusing to walk away. "Come on. You know you want to, Joshy." I grinned at him, the childhood nickname I'd given him whenever I was trying to convince him to do something we were probably going to get in trouble for sliding off my tongue.

"Joshy?" He snickered, shaking his head. "You haven't called me that in years."

"I haven't tried to get you to live on the wild side for years, either," I reminded him. Stepping forward, I extended my hand. "No one's gonna know." Another line I'd used on him when I wanted him to break a family rule.

He sighed heavily, but then his warm fingers wrapped around me, and giggles exploded from me as I took off running toward the lake, dragging him at first until he started to laugh as well, and then we were both running, two kids sneaking out, evading their parents' watchful eyes.

It only took a few moments for us to reach the lake. We stopped on the dock, our toes on the edge of the wood, our hands still intertwined, as we looked out over the still water.

"It's beautiful," I murmured, taking it all in. The trees on the perimeter swayed slightly in a breeze that barely rippled the surface of the water.

"Yeah. Beautiful." When I turned to look at Joshua, he wasn't even looking at the lake. He was staring at me.

He was saying that I was beautiful. My stomach contracted, and the urge to push up on my tiptoes and kiss him was overwhelming. A vision of my brother's face filled my mind's eye, so rather than doing that, I did the exact opposite.

Giving Joshua a little shove, I watched him plummet into the water. "Hey!" he shouted just as he disappeared beneath the surface. I couldn't help but laugh as I backed up a few steps and took off running, tucking my knees to my chest and dropping into the lake next to where he'd resurfaced. My cannonball sent a splash over the dock, hitting Joshua in the face so that when I came back up, he was wiping water from his face.

Both of us laughed as we hovered near one another, treading water. I knew a few areas that were more shallow, but both of us were capable of treading water for a long period of time without much effort, so we just hung out there for a few moments, enjoying the sounds of the insects and night

creatures calling to one another.

Then, another noise hit my ears, and I couldn't believe how unbelievably loud it truly was. "Do you hear that?" I asked him, my eyes bulging from my skull.

"What? The frogs?"

"No, that noise that sounds like a fucking freight train," I said. "It's a low rumble off in the distance. If you're super quiet, you can hear it."

Joshua scrunched up his face and inclined his head back toward the cabins. At first, I could tell he wasn't picking up on it. But then, recognition sank in, and I could see confusion shift his expression. "What the hell is that?"

"You don't know?" I groaned and flopped onto my back, doing a few back strokes out into the lake in a failed attempt to get away from the sound. He came along with me. "It's Karrie. She snores like a dying buffalo."

"What?" Joshua was laughing, but when I pulled up, leaning forward to start treading water again, he could see that I was serious. "That obnoxious noise coming from all the way over there is Karrie snoring?"

"Yes. This is why I've been so tired all the time. A lot of the girls have earplugs, but I didn't bring any. I wish I had a white noise machine, or a fucking fan or something. It's utterly ridiculous how loud she is." I knew I was complaining, and he would likely feel bad for not being aware of the situation and fixing it, but I wasn't blaming him.

"Damn. If you would've told me it was one of the big guys, like Coach Sam, I would've believed it, but it's hard to imagine little Karrie making that noise." He shook his head in disbelief.

I didn't like the way he called her "little Karrie." What was that supposed to mean? Why was he checking out her size?

I was being ridiculous, I knew. "I'm positive it's her. The same noises have kept me up the last few nights."

Joshua nodded, and I could tell he believed me then. "Well, I have a few empty bunks in my cabin still if you want to stay in there. Can't be any worse."

Staring at him for a moment, I tried to make sure I was understanding what he was saying. Did Joshua just invite me to stay in his cabin? Yes, yes he did. Even though he had mentioned me staying in another bed, he'd still invited me to come back to "his place" with him. How could I say no to that?

"Cool," I said. "I think that would be great. Thank you."

“Sure. I think I have an extra toothbrush, and you could borrow a T-shirt of mine to sleep in.” He was being so nonchalant about the whole thing, like Landon wouldn’t freak out if he knew that the idea had even been proposed.

But it wasn’t like he was asking me to sleep with him. Just to sleep in the same cabin with him. Because I had a problem. I had to keep that straight in my head.

Nevertheless, in the back of my mind, the running narrative suddenly became that I would be spending the night with Joshua—alone. That seemed like a win to me.

“Thank you, Joshua,” I said, placing my hand on his arm under the water. “I really appreciate it.”

“No problem. And maybe we can find you some earplugs. I bet the nurse probably has something like that.” He smiled reassuringly at me, and I realized that meant this was going to be a one-and-done. It wasn’t as if I could excuse myself from the cabin with the girls and just bunk with him for the rest of the time at camp.

I’d better make the most of the time we had together.

“It’s getting late,” Joshua said after a few more minutes of us floating around. “Maybe we should hit the showers and then go back to the cabin.”

He was right. As much as I would’ve liked to stay out there with him for the rest of the night, he had a lot of things to do the next day, and I needed to be there to take the photos.

We swam over to the shore and hauled ourselves out of the lake. Showers were located on the beach where we could rinse the lake water off. We made use of them, though neither of us had a towel. I’d never grabbed one after the pool, and Joshua had dropped his back at the cabin when I pulled him toward the lake.

We walked in near silence back to his cabin, our hands near one another but never really touching. When we got back to his cabin, he offered me a towel and a T-shirt with his favorite band from high school on the front. I thanked him and headed into the bathroom to put it on, noting I had no underwear. I wondered if that had occurred to him.

Walking back out in only the shirt that hit mid thigh, I saw that Joshua was sitting on the edge of his bed in only his boxers. He’d pointed out the room that had the bunkbeds in it, and I was about to go there.

Our eyes met, and I found myself biting down on my bottom lip. This was it, wasn’t it? The opportunity I’d been waiting for my whole life. We



were alone. My brother was a couple of hours away. No one was there to stop us except for ourselves. Sure, I might embarrass the hell out of myself if I tried something and Joshua rejected me, but he wanted me as badly as I wanted him—didn't he?

It was fucking time to find out.

Rather than going to the bed he'd told me I should sleep in, I made my way across the cold tile floor to him, refusing to allow myself the opportunity to think. He looked up, surprised, his lips parting as he began to ask me what I was doing. I didn't answer, though. Instead, I dropped down on top of him, my knees on either side of his hips, my tongue plunging between his parted lips as my arms wrapped around him.

Joshua gasped in surprise, but the moment my mouth was on his, that was it. There was no hesitation, no attempt to be reasonable. His hands slid up my back, pulling the T-shirt along with them so that my bare skin nestled against his rapidly growing cock. Only the thin fabric of his boxers separated us.

Everything unfolded in a blur. How many times had I dreamed of this moment? Had I fantasized about him taking me? In my imagination, it was never quite like this, but once the two of us began to move together, working to remove our clothing, I knew everything about this was going to be far better than my wildest dreams.

Joshua grabbed hold of the hem of the borrowed shirt, lifting it. I released his lips so he could pull it out of the way. I was completely bare to him and didn't mind at all. His eyes roamed my body first before his hands settled beneath my breasts, his thumbs rubbing my aching nipples. I found his lips again, and then he flipped us over so that I was lying on my back on his bed with him over top of me. His warm lips singed my neck, moving down my body as wetness pooled between my thighs.

Whatever happened next, I was there for it. It was finally happening. Joshua was mine, and no one could take him away.



JOSHUA

**M**y mind was in a haze as my mouth moved over Liberty's body. Gone were all of our inhibitions, all of the worry that Landon might walk in and kill both of us—well, me anyway—at any moment.

As soon as she'd sat on my lap and kissed me, I knew what was going to unfold. I could no longer push her away—I didn't want to.

Now, she was naked on my bed, her body glowing in the streams of moonlight filtering in through the high windows. I was lost to the world as I took a nipple in my mouth, sucking and running my tongue over the hardened peak. I couldn't think about anything other than how much I wanted her. My cock twitched in my boxers, begging to be unleashed. I could no longer deny myself what I had been craving for more years than I could count.

Knowing that Liberty was on birth control and had been for years, I didn't worry about any sort of protection. Instead, I slid my hand down her flat belly, my fingers drawn to the warmth between her legs like a magnet. Two fingers slid easily between her folds. She was dripping for me, clearly ready to take all that I had for her. A soft moan filled the air as I pushed inside of her, both of us beginning to pant with longing.

As difficult as it was to pull my fingers from her, I did so quickly and then removed my boxers. If even an inkling of rational thought seeped into my mind, I wouldn't be able to go through with this. I needed to act now, or it was never going to happen.

With my cock lined up at her entryway, I looked down and met her eyes. With a pleading look on her face, Liberty wrapped her hands around my back, pressing down. She wanted me every bit as much as I wanted her, and I

wasn't going to disappoint her again. Leaning down, I brushed a kiss across her lips and then pushed inside her. She cried out, and an appreciative grunt rumbled in my chest.

She felt so good. In all the years I'd been thinking about what it would be like to finally make love to this woman, I'd never imagined she could feel so perfect. We began to move together in a perfect rhythm, as if our bodies had always known how to fit together.

I couldn't get enough of how she felt, how her body glistened in the light of the moon, the soft noises she made, the movement of her hands sliding across my back. I took it all in, searing every touch into my memory. When we finally reached our climax, it was together. She wrapped her legs around my waist, and I sped up my thrusting, relishing the feel of her muscles as they spasmed around my shaft. Her moans became louder as I grunted and groaned, and then, I came undone inside her, losing all control of my body with the final burst.

My head on her shoulder, I sank down, completely spent. Liberty wrapped me up in a tight embrace. I wanted to tell her how I felt at that moment, how important she was to me, how I'd been in love with her for as long as I could remember, but I knew if I opened my mouth at all, only a whimper of emotion would come out. So I lay there, still, soaking in the feeling of her all around me.

Exhausted from a long day and overcome with my own feelings, I felt myself beginning to drift off. I barely noticed when Liberty squirmed from beneath me to resituate the both of us under the blankets. I felt her hand on my back as I fell into a comfortable sleep, no longer worried about anything, including the fact that I'd just broken my best friend's trust in a way I could never re-earn.

What seemed like only a few moments later, a soft glow began to emanate beyond my eyelids. I turned over, pulling a pillow over my head as I fought the light of day. But when I realized it was morning, another realization hit me as well.

"Holy fuck," I whispered, my hand shooting out across the bed as my eyes flew open. I'd slept with Liberty.

My palm met only cold mattress. No Liberty. Sitting up, I looked around the cabin for her, wondering if maybe she'd gone back to the bunks in the other room. I'd been asleep so soundly, I had no idea if she'd slept with me or if she'd left in the middle of the night.

“Liberty?” I called out, but I heard nothing. I noticed the shirt I’d loaned her folded neatly and set on the top of my dresser. Clearly, she’d left. That was a relief because no one needed to know she’d been here at all. I only hoped she’d been able to sneak back into her cabin without anyone noticing. Karrie was likely asleep all night, the way she was snoring, and if the girls had in earplugs to try to drown that noise out, they might not have noticed Liberty coming back in either.

Dragging a hand down my face, I contemplated what had happened. What I had done. I was in really deep shit at this point. If Landon found out about this, he’d kill me. Ever since the situation with Grady, he’d made it very clear that his sister was off limits. That hadn’t stopped me from taking her, though.

It wasn’t as if Liberty didn’t want me just as badly. I’d always known that the feelings I had for her were mutual, that she wished things were different so that we could be together. But Landon was her brother. He wasn’t going to murder her for sleeping with me the way he’d want my head for having sex with his little sister. No matter what happened, they would always be siblings. I was the one who’d betrayed his friend.

With those thoughts in my head, I quieted my alarm just as it went off and headed to the shower. It was bad enough that I’d kissed her the other night. This was unthinkable. Under the lukewarm water I hoped would jar some sense into my idiotic head, I recommitted myself to being a better friend. I just needed to stay away from Liberty. If I’d never indulged myself in allowing her to get so close to me in the first place, we wouldn’t be in this situation to begin with.

At breakfast, I did my best to keep the same smile in place I always had. I was tired from staying up so late, and my head throbbed from the stress all of this had placed upon my shoulders, but I had a camp to run, and I needed to be there for the kids.

With a plate of pancakes and a glass of milk, I found a seat at one of the girls’ tables furthest away from Bear House. I hadn’t even glanced over to see if Liberty was there, though I knew she was. I could always feel it when she was nearby. I prayed she’d feel the same way I did and would stay away from me today. She had to understand the gravity of what we’d done.

“We’re starting soccer today, right, Coach Joshua?” a girl named Kenna asked me, snapping my thoughts back to reality.

“That’s right,” I told her with a forced smile. “Are you excited?”

“I am,” she said with a sharp nod. “I can’t wait to get out there.”

“You’re going to do great,” I said with confidence. She was one of the kids that played soccer for her high school team, and I was excited to see what she’d learned recently. “Are you still working on that backheel pass?”

“I’ve been practicing,” she said with a nod. “It’s harder than a forward pass, for sure, but I’ve been using the technique you showed me last year, and it’s been helping.”

“Great to hear. I knew you would get it,” I encouraged her. A few other girls hopped into the conversation, and before long, my mind was back on sports, where it should have always been.

After breakfast, we led the kids out to the soccer field, and I gave them a speech about how the soccer practice and tournament were going to go. We had more soccer fields than basketball courts, so every team would get to practice with a goal for the next couple of days before we started the tournament. As I spoke, I heard the clicking of a camera in the background and did my best not to look in that direction. It was too painful to even see her face.

We were about halfway through the morning session the first time Liberty tried to talk to me. Her voice was cheerful as she approached. “The girls are doing great today,” she said with a big grin.

Quickly, I mumbled a response and stepped away, not meeting her eyes. I felt like a total douche, but she had to understand I couldn’t just suddenly forget everything her brother had told me. It’s not like the fact that we’d had sex changed the situation. It didn’t. She was still forbidden.

“Joshua?” Her voice sounded meek, and I knew I’d hurt her, but I needed to find a way to walk away from her and not let the pang in my heart distract me.

At lunch, she grabbed a bag with a sandwich and settled onto the ground with the same group of boys I was sitting with. Immediately, one of the kids started asking questions about her camera, which gave me the opportunity to excuse myself. I felt Liberty’s eyes boring through me as I went over to pretend to have something important to say to Coach Sam.

Later that afternoon, before we went in for dinner, she tried one more time. This question was at least about the game. “What does offsides mean in soccer again?” she asked.

Immediately, I started to answer her. It was just second nature for me to do so. After all, coaching was my life. “It just means that a player—” I stopped, meeting her eyes. I could see hope behind her irises as she

practically begged me just to stop being an ass and talk to her.

I couldn't do it. If I allowed myself to drop back into that realm of familiarity, I was just setting myself up to be sucked back into her world, and if I did that, Landon would literally kill me.

Liberty waited for me to continue, but I only shook my head, saying, "You should ask Myra. She can explain it better than I can." With that, I turned around and walked away from her, the irritated grunt I heard from her stabbing me through the heart.

It wasn't enough to make me slow my pace or turn around and face her. I knew I was being a dick. I knew she would think that I had just used her for sex and now I was ignoring her. I hoped that I could get through to her that this was for the best, but I didn't have those words to explain the situation to her right then. Hopefully, in a day or two, I'd be able to speak to her again, and then I could let her know that I cared too much for her and her brother to let any of this happen.

We'd danced around one another for over a decade. Why not continue the dance? As long as no one got hurt in the end except for me, that was all that mattered.





## LIBERTY

The sound of Karrie's snoring was so loud, I thought I saw the ceiling tiles shaking. Perhaps it was just the exhaustion from lying here awake for so many nights in a row that had me hallucinating, but every time she sucked in a breath, they seemed to bow in, and every time she released it, they bowed out again.

Irritated beyond belief, I angrily rolled over and shoved the pillow over my head. I hadn't bothered to ask the nurse for earplugs. If I was honest with myself, it wasn't just the snoring that was keeping me awake.

It had been nearly a week since Joshua and I had finally shared the night I'd only dreamed of before then. Everything about it had been perfect. The feel of his skin on mine, the way he tasted, how it felt to have him buried deep inside me. I'd never wanted it to end. When we were finished and he'd fallen asleep, I'd curled up and gone to sleep, too.

But then, I'd woken up in the middle of the night and realized I had to get back to the cabin before the sun got up so that no one saw me. I'd put my damp swimsuit back on, wrapped a towel around me, and walked back to Bear House. Thankfully, no one had noticed, and I'd been able to go into the bathroom and put my pajamas on.

Of course, I hadn't been able to sleep then because of the snoring, but I'd been okay with that. Lying on my back that night, I'd been thinking of Joshua. I'd finally let my mind go to places I'd never dared think about before. I saw us as a couple, holding hands at family picnics, going out on dates, sometimes even with Poppy and Landon. Sure, my brother would be upset at first, but once he realized how much Joshua and I really loved one

another, he'd come around.

Now, lying here listening to the sound of an entire forest being sawed down, I wiped a tear from my eye. How could I be so naïve? I'd actually thought things would be different since we'd slept together. Had that kiss in the woods taught me nothing? Joshua had avoided me at first then, and this was even worse. I'd never felt so abandoned and alone as I did when he refused to speak to me after we'd had sex. At the time, I'd been under the impression we were making love, but he was just fucking me. God, were all men exactly alike? I'd thought for sure he was different, but all signs were pointing to that not being the case at all.

I couldn't take it anymore. Camp would be over in just a few days, and while there was still the flag football tournament left, I was done. *Done* done. With a new resolve, I decided on a plan and finally found a way to shut out the noise in my head and in my ears long enough to get a couple of hours of sleep.

The next morning, I waited until Joshua was in the middle of a conversation with Sam and Myra before inserting myself into it. He couldn't run off to speak to someone else if I cornered him while he was already doing just that.

"Excuse me, Coach Joshua," I said, ignoring the fact that he was in the middle of a statement. "Can I speak to you for a moment please?"

"Uh, just a minute, Liberty," he said dismissively. "We are talking about something important."

"It's okay," Myra said, probably recognizing another woman's desperation. "We'll catch up with you later. Besides, I've gotta go make sure Silas stops picking up the quarterbacks and dropping them onto the ground." She rolled her eyes, patted my shoulder, and motioned for Sam to come with her, which he did.

"But we weren't done," Joshua called after them, clearly wanting to do anything he could to prevent me from getting a chance to speak to him.

"It's all right," I told him, folding my arms over my camera strap. "This'll just take a moment."

I could see the fear and shame in his eyes when he finally looked at me. "What's up, Liberty?"

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm leaving," I told him. "I've gotten enough pictures of everything in this first session to give you anything you need for your website and social media. I'll finish editing what I have and get

it to you. If there's anything else you need, I can get it during the next session. If I come back."

His eyebrows raised. "If?"

I shrugged, refusing to let the tears stinging the backs of my eyes fall. "I mean, I can get a cold shoulder anywhere, Joshua. There are a buttload of other guys out there who can ignore me just as well as you can, so why would I need to stick around here just to be ignored and treated as if I don't matter?"

His mouth dropped open, and I could see him struggling to form a complete thought so that a sentence could come out through that gaping hole in his head, but all he managed was, "Liberty, come on."

I put up a hand, not willing to listen to whatever excuses he had to offer me. "Save it. Maybe I'll see you back home. Or maybe I won't. Either way, my ride is already on the way. I'm going to go tell the girls goodbye, and I'll catch you later. Or not." With that, I spun on my heel and walked away from him.

He didn't come after me, which made my heart sink even more. The truth of the matter was I hadn't called Landon to come and get me yet. I was hoping Joshua would chase me down and tell me that he was sorry for being an asshole, that I mattered more to him than anything else. Instead, I got a long walk across the football fields to where my girls were stationed.

They were in the middle of a drill when I reached them, so I waited a few minutes for them to take a water break before I broke the news to them. "Hey, girls, something's come up, and I've got to go home now."

"What?" Rhiannon practically screamed. "No, you can't."

"We're not done yet," Monique reminded me. "How are you going to know if we won the tournament?"

"We'll miss you too much," Elizabeth lamented.

My bottom lip protruding, I said, "Oh, I'm going to miss you guys, too. I know it's a shame, but there's not much I can do about it. But hey, we'll keep in touch. You all know my Insta handle, right? Once you're home and have your phones, give me a follow."

Though they were all still clearly upset, the girls nodded. "Do you think we'll ever see you again?" Tessa asked me.

Smiling, I assured her, "Yeah, I think so. I mean, things in life have a way of working out the way they're supposed to, and we're friends now. We'll definitely see each other again." I gave each of the girls a hug before waving at Karrie, who said nothing, only watched. Then I headed out to my cabin.

With a deep breath, I pushed inside the room for the last time and quickly started throwing my things into my suitcase with one hand as I dialed my brother with the other. He answered almost immediately. “Liberty? What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“Relax, Landon,” I said, chuckling. “Everything is fine. Good grief. I’m at a youth sports camp, not trudging up the side of Mount Everest.”

“Well, it’s been over a week, and you hadn’t called once,” he reminded me. “I was beginning to think you’d drowned in the lake, and Joshua hadn’t gotten up the nerve to tell me yet.”

I laughed louder. “Don’t be silly. We’ve just been busy. And it’s not like you’ve called me either, big brother.”

“True, but I was hoping you’d call me. I didn’t want to interrupt anything. How’s it going?”

“That’s the thing,” I told him with a deep sigh. “I was hoping you could come and get me.” I sank down onto my bed, trying my best to fight all of the emotions I had bubbling to the surface.

“And you’re trying to tell me nothing’s wrong?” He was obviously concerned again, and I couldn’t blame him. It wasn’t like me to just bail.

“Yeah. It’s fine. I’m just homesick, and I have a ton of editing to do. It’ll be easier to do that away from here. Besides, the other counselor in my bunk snores like a lumberjack. I haven’t had a decent night’s sleep the whole time I’ve been here. I just want to sleep in my own bed for a change.” I let out an exhausted groan, and I knew I wouldn’t have to say anything else.

“All right. No problem. I can leave right now. I’ll text you when I get there. I have no idea how to actually navigate through that camp to wherever the hell you’re located.”

“Thank you, Landon. I’ll find you,” I assured him. I knew how to get out to the gate, and that was where I planned on meeting him. There was no reason for Landon to try to find Joshua to check in. That would be a disaster.

Hanging up, I returned my efforts to packing. I had over an hour to kill before he arrived, assuming he was at the office and not at home. I took my time rolling my clothes to make sure everything fit into my suitcase. When I picked up the bathing suit I’d worn to the pool party, my heart sank. Why did men have to be such pigs sometimes?

With my bags packed, I headed out, figuring it was better to stand out by the gate for a while than risk having to say goodbye to the girls again—or seeing Joshua. I didn’t want to have to keep explaining why I was leaving. I

just wanted to go.

A bench beneath a shade tree greeted me on the other side of the gate that kept the kids in and the world out. With my phone in my hand, I tried to distract myself with a mindless game until the sound of my brother's vehicle had me lifting my head.

He hopped out to help me put my stuff in the back, and then we both climbed inside and headed home. It didn't take long for the interrogation to start again. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," I told him. "I've been outside in the heat with a bunch of teenagers for days, and I'm just exhausted."

Landon grumbled. "No one tried anything, did they? If one of those coaches so much as put a finger on you—"

"No," I told him. "Nothing like that."

He didn't believe me. "It wasn't Joshua, was it? If he tried anything, I'll kill him."

"Sadly not," I told him, snickering. "Your best friend is true to you beyond anything else."

Landon's forehead knitted together. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Waving him off, I turned my attention out the window. "Nothing. It doesn't matter. It never has. Everything is fine, big brother. Just take me home."

He sighed and let the questioning go.

I knew I was going to have to change my attitude if I didn't want another inquisition to begin in a minute, so I forced myself to ask, "How's work?"

That got him to start talking about the office. I nodded along, pretending to pay attention, but my thoughts were elsewhere.

What would happen if I just told Landon the truth, just blurted it out? "I had sex with Joshua!"

No, I could never do that. He could never know the truth. It would kill him. Besides, at this point, what difference did it make?

It was never going to happen again. No matter how much I loved him.



JOSHUA

She was gone.

I'd really fucked up this time, quite literally, and I had no idea what to do about any of it. Without Liberty around, I felt a vast void in the middle of my chest. Every breath I took felt labored, like I was inhaling underwater.

Standing outside on a flag football field, doing my best to keep a smile plastered to my face, I tried to focus on the practices unfolding around me, but it was nearly impossible. Every time the other photographer's camera clicked, I found myself turning my head, hoping Liberty had reappeared. It was stupid—it was my fault the girl was gone, and she wasn't just going to come back into my life like nothing had happened.

If she even came back at all, I'd be a lucky man. She'd said she'd be back for the second session. Why had she left to begin with? Why couldn't we have just sat down and talked it through? I could've apologized for letting things go too far, and then, we could've gone back to the way it had been for as long as I could remember. Flirting, spending time with one another, but knowing we couldn't possibly ever be together. After all, it was her stupid brother who made it this way.

But he wasn't just a stupid brother to her. He was also my best friend. Images of Landon's disappointed, furious face from when he'd found out about how Grady had used Liberty flooded my mind. I couldn't bear to see him look at me that way, like he couldn't believe I would do something so underhanded and mean.

Granted, I hadn't slept with Liberty for the same reasons that Grady had.

That douchebag had done it just to be mean, just because he wanted a piece of ass. I genuinely had feelings for Liberty. In fact, most days, I would go so far as to say that I loved her, but none of that would matter to Landon.

Whatever happened between Liberty and me, I had to make sure that Landon didn't find out. He'd kill me, and I'd deserve it. While he might be upset at his sister for a little bit, it wouldn't be the earth-shattering end-of-an-era relationship killer that it would be for me. If she told him, I wouldn't even make it into my house before he jumped out of the bushes and killed me. He might not even wait until I got home. I decided I'd better be careful at camp, walking around alone. I could see him standing in that little alcove on my porch, jumping out of the shadows and—

Pain gripped the right side of my face and my head went snapping back. I raised a hand to defend myself, expecting another blow, but then I realized it wasn't Landon's fist that had caused the sting in my cheekbone. It was a fucking football.

"Sorry, Coach Joshua!" Axel came running over. "I shouted, 'Heads up!' but I guess you didn't hear me."

I looked down at the teenage boy, trying to decide whether or not to shout at him to be more careful, and then decided to just let it go. He probably did shout at me to warn me that I was about to get smacked in the face with a flying object, and I just didn't notice. Picking up the ball, I tossed it back to him and fixed my smile. "It's fine, buddy. Accidents happen."

"Robby threw it five feet over my head." He shook his head. "Ever since he's been talking to that girl, he can't concentrate anymore."

Fighting the urge to snicker, I told him, "Cut him some slack. It's the end of the session, and we're all tired."

He nodded and trotted back to the field, but I heard him shouting, "Get your head in the game, man!" to his friend as he went. So much for cutting Robby some slack.

Later that evening, I made my way to the cafeteria sporting a big red welt on my face. It didn't hurt anymore, but every time I noticed it in a reflective surface, it just brought my thoughts of Liberty back to the forefront of my mind. How in the hell was I going to smooth this over with her? She was obviously mad.

I knew what she wanted. She wanted a relationship with me. And I wanted that, too, but it wasn't something I could give her, not right now, not when Landon was in the middle of planning his wedding and would



obviously want to pound me.

Trying my best to think about something else, I walked into the cafeteria where everyone was chatting and having a good time. Before I even went to the line to get my food, I looked to see which table I would be sitting at tonight. I'd sat with Porcupine House for breakfast which meant tonight I'd be sitting with Bear House.

I stifled the curse that came to my tongue. I wasn't sure if it was better that I'd be sitting with Liberty's group of girls after she'd already left, or if it would've been better to have eaten with them while she was still here. All I knew was I was in for an evening of thinking about her. But then, that would probably be the case anyway.

With three slices of pepperoni pizza on my plate, along with a small salad and a glass of tea, I headed over, sitting down across from Karrie.

"Oh, no!" she said, reaching over and patting my cheek where the red mark was. "What happened to you?"

I jerked away, the pain returning with her touch. "I got hit with a football. I'm fine."

Karrie shook her head. "That's too bad. These kids really do need to be more careful."

Shrugging, I leaned back away from her hand, so she finally pulled it away from me. Something about having her touch my face unnerved me even more than I already was. "It was an accident."

"Yeah, Robby said he felt really bad about it," Rhiannon offered from her spot just a few seats down from me.

Now, I felt even worse about the entire situation. I should've been tuned in to what the kids were doing so that it wouldn't have happened. "It wasn't his fault."

"Sure it was," Monique chimed in, a sing-song quality to her voice. "If lover boy would've been looking at his receiver and not you, the ball would've never sailed so high."

I opened my mouth to interject, but Rhiannon was laughing, her face turning red. "Oh, stop. It's not like that."

"Isn't it though?" Tessa asked, and all of the girls started giggling.

But then Elizabeth asked me a pointed question. "Is Miss Liberty ever coming back? She told us goodbye the day she left, but we all miss her."

Shaking my head, I said, "She won't be back this session. She had some important matters to attend to." I took a bite of my pizza, but it tasted like

sawdust. I could hardly chew it.

“That’s too bad. She was so much fun,” Tessa said. “Do you think she’ll be back for the next session?”

“She says she will be.” I tried to infuse my words with a positive vibe, but I was sure it didn’t hide the fact that I was nervous. What if she never came back? What if she moved back to California?

“Miss Liberty really helped me with a personal situation,” Elizabeth explained. “I think she’s given me the courage to do something I never would’ve been able to do on my own.” Her face was brighter with every word she spoke, which made me wonder what she was referring to, but I didn’t ask. I was sure it was something the girls wanted to keep to themselves.

I wasn’t surprised that Liberty was instrumental in helping these girls with their problems. That was just the sort of person she was. Caring. Kind. Considerate.

*Gone. She’s also gone. And I don’t deserve to ever have her back, either.*

“I’m so happy to hear that,” I said, managing to swallow down the pizza. Practically guzzling my tea, I contemplated whether or not to try another bite. I knew it wasn’t the cook’s fault. The pizza was fine. It was good even. I was just having a hard time with my mouth these days.

“I’m sorry you girls are disappointed in having me as a counselor,” Karrie said, not sounding sorry at all. Instead, she sounded annoyed, and like she was fishing for compliments.

“Oh, we like you, too, Miss Karrie,” Elizabeth offered, that glow fading as she realized she’d accidentally offended the other woman. “It was nice having you both.” Some of the other girls nodded, but it was obvious that none of them liked Karrie the way that they liked Liberty. How could they? Karrie couldn’t hold a candle to Liberty in any way.

I shifted the conversation to sports, asking the girls about their favorite ones. We made light conversation until dinner finally finished. There was another activity for the group that night, a glow party, with dancing, but I decided not to go. I let Sam know I had a headache and asked him to be in charge. He said, “That’s what happens when you get beamed in the face with a football.” I fake laughed and then rushed off to my cabin.

Being alone in my room didn’t make me feel any better. In fact, in a lot of ways, it made it worse. I tried to lose myself in a movie on my laptop, but my thoughts kept straying back to Liberty. I had to find a way to clear the air

with her and get back to where we were. Even if I never had a chance to be with her, at least that way she'd be in my life.

My eyes were tracing over the bed we'd made love on, and I felt myself beginning to harden just thinking about her, images of her body and memories of how she'd felt taking over.

When my phone rang and I saw I had a FaceTime call from Landon, all of the blood ran right out of the places it had been collecting in. This was it. This was the conversation I'd been dreading for years. He was going to reach through the phone and kill me.

I contemplated not answering. After all, I was supposed to be outside with the kids right now, dancing and having fun. But if I put it off, I'd just be worried about it for later. Reluctantly, I answered the call. "Hey, Landon. How are you?" I decided to go with innocence, for now.

"Hello, Joshua. I'm good. How are you?" He smiled at me, and I suddenly realized Liberty hadn't told him anything.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. "Fine."

"Whoa—looks like you took one to the face today. Did you get in a fight?"

Absently, I rubbed my cheek. "Not yet."

"Huh?" He was obviously confused.

I laughed. "Wayward football. What's going on?"

His eyebrows furrowed. "I was just calling to talk to you about the trip we've got planned, but you don't quite seem yourself. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Just super tired. We're almost done with this session, so I'm looking forward to heading home for a while, getting to sleep in my own bed. That sort of thing."

His head rocked back and forth, but he didn't seem to believe me. "Liberty said she was just tired, too. I hope you guys aren't coming down with something."

"Yeah, I hope not either. But what's up with the trip?" I wanted to steer him back to the reason he'd called so that I could quickly get off the phone with him and go back to being miserable—alone.

"Oh, yeah. Just wanted to go over an itinerary. But you know, man, if you ever need to talk to me about anything, I'm here for you, right?"

"Yeah, of course, I know that." I took a deep breath and tried again to shrug it off. "Seriously, I'm just tired. What have you and Poppy got planned for us?"

He stared at me a moment longer before picking up a sheet of paper to read off what they'd talked about. I did my best to listen and put in my two cents, but in the back of my mind, all I could think about was Liberty.



## LIBERTY

**F**or the first few days that I was back from camp, I practically locked myself in my room. I told Landon that I was just overly tired and needed to rest, but that wasn't true. Every time I thought of Joshua, a huge ache formed in my heart, radiating down to the pit of my stomach. I couldn't even function because of the agony I was in. Finally, the two of us had been together, and then he'd had to go and ruin it. I didn't understand, and I wasn't sure I ever would.

The last day of camp rolled around, and I knew he'd be back. Most of the time, when Joshua got back from camp, he disappeared for a few days, probably getting some rest. I understood now why he would need to do that. Camp wasn't just physically draining, it was also emotionally and mentally challenging. Having to be a parent to all of those kids at the same time was hard.

Now was the time for me to get out of the house if I was going to do so without running into him. While I still felt miserable, I knew some sunshine would do me some good. Pushing through the challenge of actually doing something normal, I picked up my phone and sent Poppy a text. "Do you want to go shopping and have some lunch?"

She answered immediately. "You're alive!"

I laughed, knowing she was probably just giving me some space. There was no way my brother hadn't mentioned to her that I was back. "Yes, I'm alive. I've been exhausted, but I'm ready to get out into the world again."

"You know I'm down, girl. I'm sure you want to drive so you won't be seen in my van. I'll be over soon."

“Sounds good.” I laughed. While my brother was embarrassed by Poppy’s hippy-flavored van, it really didn’t bother me that much. What did bother me was her driving. I was much happier knowing I’d be behind the steering wheel of my own vehicle, thank you very much.

With renewed vigor, I hopped out of bed and headed to the shower to get ready. It was already a warm day, even though it was still morning, so I decided to wear a sundress. I took my time getting ready, showering, drying and styling my hair, and putting on my makeup. I was sure Poppy would get hung up downstairs with my brother when she arrived anyway. It never took her as long to get ready to go anywhere as it took me, but then she would’ve factored that in.

When I was finally ready, I bounced down the stairs to see her sitting in the kitchen, talking to Landon about wedding stuff. “Good morning,” I greeted.

Poppy got up and rushed toward me, wrapping me in a hug. “Hey! It’s so great to see you.”

“Thanks. Are you ready to go?”

Landon got up and walked over, a smirk on his face. “Don’t be out too late, girls. It’s a school night.” He winked at me, and I could tell he was glad to see me out of my room. Then, he kissed Poppy, and we headed out.

An hour later, we were strolling between shops at the strip mall, trying to decide where to eat when Poppy said, “Are you ever going to tell me what happened at camp to make you come back so early?”

I froze in place, not sure how to respond to that. She was my best friend. She knew me better than anyone. So, of course, she knew I wouldn’t just come back from camp for no reason. “Um, it’s complicated,” I told her.

“Well, let’s go to the Mexican restaurant and get some tacos and a margarita, and you can tell me all about it.” She gave me an encouraging smile, and I decided that was a good plan. One drink a few hours before I had to drive home wouldn’t be a problem, after all, and I could use a few dozen tacos.

Once we had our chips and guac, as well as our drinks, I told my best friend everything. I started with how amazing it was to finally be with Joshua away from Landon’s watchful eye. Then, I told her about that kiss in the woods, and how he’d come and apologized the next day. I told her I was pretty sure that was it, that nothing else was going to happen. But then I’d gotten brave and invited him to go swimming. Her face had lit up with that,

and I knew she could tell what was coming.

“Then, once we were back in his cabin, I put on the T-shirt he offered me, and I walked straight to his bed and kissed him.” Letting out a deep breath, I thought about how magical that entire situation had been. I wasn’t one to go into a lot of detail about my sex life, but I could feel my face heating up speaking of it now.

“Did you... you know?” she asked me, her hands clasped beneath her chin.

“Yeah, we did.” I looked down and then picked up my glass, practically chugging my margarita.

“Finally!” Poppy exclaimed. “I can’t believe it. After all this time, you finally had sex with—”

“Poppy!” My eyes wide, I cut her off, looking around the restaurant. “This isn’t that big of a town.”

“Sorry, sorry,” she said, her face flaming red again, this time from embarrassment. “I’m just happy for you.”

“Don’t be,” I told her. I couldn’t help the fully depressed sigh that came out of my mouth, and even before I started my explanation, I could tell by my best friend’s expression she could fill in the blanks. “The next day, he wouldn’t even look at me, let alone talk to me.”

Tears stung the backs of my eyes as I thought about how heartbroken I’d been, how heartbroken I still was.

“Oh, Liberty.” Poppy reached across the table and took my hand, squeezing it. “I’m so sorry. I’m sure he had a reason. It had to be a stupid one, but he had to have something going on in his head to make him act that way. Did he finally come around?”

I shook my head. “Nope. That’s why I ended up coming home early. I just couldn’t bear to be around him while he was acting like that anymore. I mean, he treated me like garbage, like I was just some chick he’d picked up in a bar, fucked, and then hoped he’d never have to see again, but it turns out I happen to work at the same place as him.” I dragged my free hand through my hair and fought back the tears that were still threatening to fall.

Poppy slowly shook her head, trying to come up with something to say to make me feel better. When she finally spoke, it was from a place of knowing the entire situation. “Liberty, he has to just be scared. You know how Joshua feels about Landon. He’s probably afraid he’s ruined everything with his best friend. If he thought he could just be with you without hurting Landon’s



feelings, he'd do it. Now, he's gone against what he promised Landon he would never do, and he just doesn't know how to deal with it."

I knew what she was saying was accurate. It all made sense, but that didn't make it easier to accept. "I just wish he could choose me, you know? I don't want to hurt Landon either, but we are adults. Landon might be mad for a few days, but he will get over it."

"I know he will," Poppy agreed. "But it is almost time for our wedding. Maybe Joshua is just afraid of the timing."

Choking on a laugh, I said, "Nah. He's just running away from me because it's easier that way."

"Give it some time, Lib," she said, squeezing my hand. "Joshua cares very deeply for you. I can see it whenever the two of you are together. Let him work it out a little bit, and I'm sure he'll see that he can't live without you."

Reluctantly, I nodded, removing my hand so I could finish off my drink. I wanted to tell her that she was right, but I wasn't so sure. If Joshua really did care so deeply for me, how could he shatter my heart so effortlessly?

Later that evening, we were back at my house, watching a movie. It had been Poppy's night to choose, and when she selected the rom-com *Don't Tell My Brother I'm Into His Best Friend*, I hadn't been enthused.

Granted, it was a good movie. Jane Larson was great in it, so funny and enchanting. We'd watched it together several times over the years, but it made my heart ache to see Jane's character running around with the best friend, the dreamy Stone Mason.

The sound of the front door closing almost made me spill my popcorn. I'd thought Landon was out for the night, but there he was, strolling into the living room and plopping down onto the couch between us. At least he was alone. If he had Joshua with him, I might've had to fake a frantic bout of diarrhea and rush out of the room.

"Hey, baby." Poppy welcomed him in with a kiss on the cheek. "You've seen this before, haven't you?"

"Oh, this is the one where the guy stabs his best friend in the back by screwing his sister, isn't it?" he asked, a sarcastic smile on his face.

I tried to burrow my way into the couch, but it wasn't working.

"No, it's not." Poppy slugged him playfully in the arm. "You know how much those two love one another. And the brother comes around in the end."

"Because he's a pussy." Landon was messing with her. I could tell by the

crooked grin on his face, but he also meant it to a degree.

Poppy shook her head. “Well, I love this movie. I think it’s so cute how everyone else can see how those two are madly in love, and the brother just keeps missing it.”

My eyes widened as I tried to get her attention around my brother, but my best friend refused to look at me.

“I don’t know,” Landon said. “But Jane Larson is hot, so maybe I’ll watch it.” This time, when Poppy hit him, it was hard enough for him to yelp. Still, he laughed. “You know I’m just teasing, baby.” He turned to her, and they kissed.

Why was it that he was allowed to marry my best friend, but I couldn’t date his?

When Poppy pulled away, she said, “I think it’s a good movie. Everyone deserves to be with the one they love.”

Finally, her eyes flickered to me, and I managed to mouth, “Stop it!”

Poppy giggled under her breath and turned back to the television. Thankfully, she let it go. I knew she was just trying to help me out, planting those little seeds in Landon’s head that it wouldn’t be the end of the world if Joshua and I were together, but it didn’t make any difference now.

Joshua had made it pretty clear at camp that he didn’t want to have anything to do with me now. Whether it was because he truly had only been out to see if he could get me in bed, or he’d changed his mind, I couldn’t say, but it was a nonissue. Landon couldn’t find out that Joshua and I had feelings for one another when we didn’t. He couldn’t find out that his best friend and his little sister were sneaking around behind his back if they weren’t.

Feeling my emotions bubble back up again, I returned my attention to the television, reminding myself it was just a romantic comedy—not reality.

After all, this movie had a happily ever after, and I wasn’t holding my breath for that.



## JOSHUA

**M**y house seemed unbelievably empty when I returned from camp. The first night, it was hard to get used to the silence. Even though I had my own cabin at camp, I could still hear the kids through the windows. The sounds of the forest were much different than the noise of an occasional car passing through the neighborhood or a dog barking in the distance. I was home, but it felt off.

Nevertheless, I was exhausted in more ways than one and knew I needed the time off to catch my breath and get ready for all of the other events that were happening this summer. Not only did I have another session of camp to attend, but we had two trips and a wedding to look forward to. Most of the time, trips with our rowdy bunch meant little sleep, lots of drinking, potential hangovers, and a lot of fun.

Wandering around my house, I tried to determine how to spend my second night at home. I'd spent most of the day dusting and doing routine chores that still needed to be done even though I hadn't been home for two weeks. The house had a musty smell to it that could only be chased out with the fresh scent of lemon from my mother's favorite cleaners. When that was all done, I needed something else to keep my mind occupied.

If I allowed myself even the smallest pause to contemplate what had happened at camp, I would slip into a pit, feeling sorry for myself and agonizing over the fact that I'd screwed everything up with Liberty. No, it was best to keep my mind on other topics.

So, I did what I usually did when I was bored. I pulled out my cell phone and called Landon. It took him a moment to answer, but when he did, he

sounded chipper, which told me Liberty still hadn't revealed to her brother what had happened at camp. "What's up, bro?" Landon asked, and I could hear the smile in his voice. "You finally home?"

"I am," I told him. "Got in yesterday. Not much going on here. Kind of bored," I admitted.

"Oh, so you only call me when you're bored," he teased. "Well, we could go down to Tucker's and shoot some pool, toss back a few beers."

That was exactly what I'd been hoping for. "Yeah, that sounds good. We haven't done that for a while." It had been at least a month since we went down to the local bar to have some guy time. Hanging out with Landon and some of the other guys was exactly what I needed in order to get through this week off before the adventures began again, starting with his spur-of-the-moment bachelor/bachelorette trip next weekend. I still couldn't believe they'd decided this was a good idea, getting everyone together for two days this close to the wedding, and right before Luke's family took us on a vacation to Bali. But there was no sense trying to talk Landon and Poppy out of it, and I had to go. I was the best man, after all, for now. That might change if he found out what I did with his sister.

"What do you think about inviting Luke?" I suggested, thoughts of the upcoming trip making me wonder what the other guy had been up to. "He was fun when we were golfing."

"Sure, that sounds good," Landon agreed. "I'll give him a call. Meet you there at eight?"

"I'll see you then." Hanging up, I headed upstairs to take a shower and change clothes. It wasn't like I was trying to impress anyone, but at the same time, we lived in a small town, and one never knew when they might run into someone interesting.

Standing under the warm water, I didn't dare hope that I'd see Liberty tonight. As much as I wanted to volunteer to pick Landon up in the hopes that she might be there, I knew that was silly. She was probably off with Poppy doing something fun anyway. If she was back at work at the drop-shipping business, she could be so exhausted that she didn't even want to leave her bed. It was so much easier to do a job one loved, and Liberty hated her work at the family business, which was why it had meant so much to her and to me that I could get her the photography job she'd been wanting for years.

And now, I'd stolen that away from her.

With a sigh, I finished rinsing off and got out of the shower, grabbing a

towel, trying not to let my mind go back to how it had felt to have her hands on my body. I'd screwed everything up, and I had no idea how I was going to fix it.

She was more than welcome to come back to camp for session two, though. I hoped she knew that. It would be another opportunity for her to work as a photographer. She'd have more pictures for her portfolio, and she could add another line to her resume stating she'd worked two sessions. I'd be happy to give her a glowing recommendation to any potential employers, and I'd recommend her to anyone looking for a photographer or anyone who asked who took the pictures on my website. In fact, I'd even add a line on the front of the site to let people know who had taken the photos with a link to her website—if she had one. I should probably find out if she did or not.

My mind was still going over everything that had transpired as I finished getting dressed and headed to the garage. It only took about ten minutes for me to arrive at Tucker's, and I was early. I hadn't even glanced at the clock once I'd hung up with Landon. Wandering inside, I nodded hello to a few folks I recognized, went to the bar to grab a pitcher and three glasses, and found a table near the window.

A few people were shooting pool in the back, but there was a table open. I sat down, poured myself a beer, and waited. It wouldn't be long before the other two arrived, but it was nice to have a few moments to myself, even if I was trapped in my own head.

I saw a girl with hair the same color as Liberty's shooting pool with a friend, the two of them laughing, and my heart caught in my chest. I knew it wasn't her. She didn't laugh the same way, and Liberty would've never worn the outfit she had on. Still, for a moment, I imagined it was her, that she would come over and say hello to me, maybe touch my arm.

God, I fucking missed her so much already, and it had only been a few days.

"You all right, man?" Luke's voice had my head whipping around. "You seem a little lost."

"Hey, how are you?" I grabbed his hand and we half-hugged. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just tired from camp."

He arched an eyebrow, telling me he wasn't sure about that, as he took a seat. I scooted the pitcher of beer over to him, and he poured a glass. "How was it? Are you creating the next Michael Jordan? Or Tom Brady?"

"I like to think so." I snickered, knowing I sounded cocky, but I didn't

care. I took a great deal of pride in my company, and we'd already produced some successful college and pro athletes in just the few years we'd been around, so I didn't hesitate to say I thought there was a chance we could help build an athlete who could rival the GOATs of their respective sports.

Luke and I chatted for a few moments about how camp had gone. Landon wandered in at exactly eight on the nose, which didn't surprise me. We slapped each other on the back and dropped into our normal conversation. Not seeing my best friend for a couple of weeks still seemed weird even though it happened during camp every year.

When we got up to go shoot pool, Landon stopped in his tracks, his eyes locked in the distance, before he said, "God, I thought that was my sister at first."

My stomach twisted into a knot. I didn't have to turn around to know he was staring at the same girl I'd seen before. "Oh, yeah?"

"What's Liberty up to tonight?" Luke asked casually as he broke. Balls scattered all over the table, a few sinking into the holes. I was really going to have to concentrate in order to keep from getting my ass handed to me when it was my turn. For the first game, Luke and Landon were playing each other, and I'd play the winner, which worked out in my favor. Maybe by the time I had to shoot, I'd have my head on straight.

"She's at home," he said. "I think camp wore her out. She said she had a great time getting to know all the kids, but she's exhausted." His eyes met my gaze, and I nodded.

"Camp will do that to you." I tried my best to sound nonchalant.

"It's great she enjoyed her time there, though," Luke noted, scratching and relinquishing his turn to Landon. "Is she going back for the second session with you, Joshua?"

"With me?" Suddenly, my stomach was flipping over, and I felt very defensive. "She's not going with me. I mean, I'll be there, and she'll be there, and we got there on a bus, but she's just there to work. She's not with me."

Both of them were staring at me like I was a lunatic. Luke calmly said, "I just meant, is she going to take pictures at the second camp session this summer?"

"Right." I took a deep breath and reminded myself I needed to chill the fuck out. "I'm not sure."

"She says she is," Landon said, knocking two balls into two different pockets with one shot. "She has been acting a little weird, though. I hope it's

not that she doesn't really like photography as much as she thought she did."

"Nah, it's not that," I supplied, certain of little else in the world except that fact. "Camp is just rough. You're away from your family and friends for a while. She was surrounded by strangers, and I was so busy we didn't get to talk much." That last part might've been a lie, but it was a necessary one.

"I don't know." Landon missed a shot and let Luke take over. "I feel bad for her. Now that I have Poppy, I feel like she's alone a lot. Her brother and her best friend are always together." He shook his head. "Maybe I need to back off a little and give her some more freedom. Ever since that situation with Grady, I've kind of been lording over her, trying to manage who she dates and who she doesn't. I think it might be making her afraid to date anyone at all."

"Has she dated anyone since she broke up with him?" Luke asked. For a moment, my hackles were raised as I considered why he was asking. Was he interested? But it seemed pretty evident by his tone he was just participating in the conversation.

"Not really," Landon admitted. "A couple of guys I didn't know well and ended up running off." He ran a hand through his hair. "Shit, sometimes I guess I act more like her father than her big brother. She's a grown-ass woman and can make her own decisions, right?"

He was looking at me, and I didn't know what to do. My heart was telling me to agree with him, but my mind asked, *What if this is a trap?* I shrugged, nodded, and finally said, "Whatever you think, man."

"Poppy thinks I should back off." Landon looked away, twisting his pool stick into the carpet, deep in thought.

Poppy was right. But then, I wasn't going to say that either. I decided to keep my trap closed. If Liberty wanted to tell him what had happened between us, I wouldn't deny it, but I wasn't going to dig my own grave either.





## LIBERTY

“Then, you just let the client know the status of their help ticket,” I said to the woman who we’d just hired to take over for me while I was away for so many weeks this summer. Constance wasn’t the same person who’d been covering while I was away at camp. That woman had said the job wasn’t for her and quit, and I couldn’t blame her. At least she’d stuck it out until I returned a few days ago. But with Landon, Poppy, and me being away for much of the summer, it was imperative that we had other people to cover our jobs. Constance had been working here as an assistant for a while. Landon decided she would be a great person to take over for me while I was gone. He had some of the other higher-up execs handling his workload. No one could really replace Poppy, since she was our artist, but she’d managed to get ahead on all of the orders that needed filling, so she’d be good to go as well.

Constance stared at me, a blank look on her face, as she said, “That’s it? That’s all I have to do?”

“That’s all you have to do,” I assured her with a weak smile.

Her eyebrows knotted together. “But I always thought your job was so hard.”

I cleared my throat, not exactly sure how to respond to that. “Well, it’s an important job. It’s not usually difficult, though sometimes the clients can make it harder than it has to be. They can be difficult.”

Unimpressed, she continued to stare at me, which made me wonder if maybe Landon could’ve hired someone else to do my job a long time ago. He only trusted certain people to interact with our clients, and I was one of those

people, but maybe that gave me a false sense of importance.

“I take pictures, too,” I noted. “That’s important.”

One of Constance’s eyes narrowed in scrutiny. Again, she seemed to disagree. “I’ve got it, Liberty. I can handle it.” She gave me a reassuring smile, and I realized she did have it.

“Landon asked me to observe for a little while, so I’ll just stand back and let you do your thing.”

She nodded, obviously not wanting to have me standing over her shoulder all day, but I wasn’t going to go against what the boss had to say.

Within a few minutes, it became clear to me that Constance could manage. I continued to stand there for another hour before I wandered off, heading into Landon’s office. He’d asked me to help him sort out a few files this afternoon, and now was as good as ever.

“Hey, how’s it going?” He didn’t look up from his computer screen as I entered.

“Constance is doing great,” I assured him. “What do you need me to do?”

“Can you take a look at these files and see who you think should handle them while I’m gone? Also, I’ve got a meeting at three, so I’m going to duck out. You’ll be here all afternoon?” He looked at me then, checking to make sure I nodded.

“I will be,” I assured him. “Where are you going?”

“Drinks with a potential client.” He scrunched up his nose. I knew he never really liked that sort of thing, but it was necessary to continue to grow the company. “Poppy and I drove in together today, so I’ll take an Uber over to the restaurant, and then she’ll pick me up. I’ll see you at home. Just make sure those get reassigned and keep an eye on Constance. She can be overly confident.”

I chuckled under my breath. We both knew my job wasn’t that hard. “All right,” I assured him. Carrying the files, I went out to Poppy’s old desk and had a seat, figuring I could work on them there while also “keeping an eye” on Constance.

It didn’t take me too long to get the files sorted and delivered to the execs who would be handling them in Landon’s absence. After that, I wandered back to Poppy’s desk and started fiddling around with my photographs from camp. I’d gotten most of them edited and sent to Joshua’s company, but I had a few more I wanted to look at. Even though this had nothing to do with my actual job at the drop-shipping company, it was something to do to keep me

from going nuts. Besides, Landon was gone for the day.

With no fires to put out, I waited until everyone else went home, almost exactly at five. Then, I walked through the office one more time and headed home. I wasn't quite as tired as I had been when I'd first returned from camp, but I hadn't been sleeping well. Obviously, I knew why. Lying awake at night thinking about Joshua was nothing new to me, but being tormented by visions of his body melding with mine only to have him rip away from me was something I still hadn't gotten used to.

It took me a little longer to drive home than normal. Traffic was bad, and I was content to sit in slow lanes contemplating life rather than putting in the effort to go around. By the time I got home, I was dragging. Thoughts of grabbing a sandwich and going upstairs to watch Netflix and chill by myself were tempting.

But when I walked into the living room, I was greeted by three smiling faces. Two of them were genuine, the other apprehensive. "There she is," Poppy said cheerfully. "We were just discussing whether or not we should send out a search party."

I checked the time and noted it was about thirty minutes later than I usually got home. "Traffic wasn't so fabulous today," I muttered. Then, my eyes landed on Joshua's face, and my breath caught in my throat. What the hell was he doing here?

He wasn't looking directly at me. Not at my face anyway. His eyes were hovering around my shoes, maybe my knees. On the inside, I felt myself beginning to crumble. I wanted to yell at him to get the fuck out of my house, to leave, and never come back. But I couldn't do that. Not only would that be an obvious sign to my brother that something had gone on that shouldn't have, it would've been really stupid of me. It wasn't as if I didn't know all along that I'd have to see Joshua again. We were both in my brother's wedding after all. I was just sort of hoping it wouldn't be so soon or so sudden.

"We are going to go out for dinner," Poppy said, hopping off the couch.

I gave her a look that said, "Why didn't you warn me?" without saying a word at all, so she continued.

"Landon and I just decided we needed some help planning the upcoming wedding party trip, and since Joshua had already come over to talk to Landon, we thought it would be great to invite the two of you to go along with us. Four heads are better than one, after all." She flashed that dazzling

smile at me, and I found it impossible to be mad at her, even though I kind of wanted to strangle her.

Joshua quietly said, "They've promised 'all you care to eat' tacos. Who can argue with that?"

I looked at him for a moment, trying to read his angle. Was he here because my brother insisted, and he was trapped? Like I felt? Or was he here because he wanted to see me?

Clearing my throat, I reminded my best friend, "We just had tacos and margaritas on our last adventure."

"I know," she said, narrowing one eye. "But since when does Liberty Johnson think there's such a thing as too many tacos?"

Sighing, I shook my head. She had me there. "Since never."

"Great, then let's go." Landon pulled himself up off the couch, and we headed out to his vehicle. The moment we saw his truck in the driveway, Joshua shouted, "Shotgun!" Poppy and I turned to look at him, her mouth falling open, and he shrugged. "Poppy, everyone knows the rules of shotgun. If you wanted to sit in the front with your man, you should've said something."

She chuckled and took my arm, and I was re-reminded of why she was my best friend. "It's fine. We'll sit in the back and snicker at the two of you where you can't see us."

Landon laughed and went around to get into the driver's side, and the rest of us piled in as well. I was grateful that Poppy didn't protest. Sitting in the back seat with Joshua right now would be incredibly awkward, even if Landon's truck was big enough for me to hug the door and not even have to breathe the same air as him.

We went to a different Mexican restaurant, but still a good one. By the time our chips and salsa hit the table, the uncomfortableness between Joshua and me was beginning to dissipate some, at least enough that I was no longer worried that my brother would realize something was going on. I wasn't okay with the way Joshua had treated me, but I was open to playing nice, at least for now.

Over dinner, we discussed what we should do on our quick trip to the beach. "I don't care what we do as long as there's a lot of drinks and a lot of sun," Poppy proclaimed, picking up her third taco. I was already on my fourth, and I'd lost count of how many the boys had scarfed down.

"We're staying in a great rental house," Landon told us. "Wait until you

see it. The rooms are huge, and almost all of the bedrooms have a view of the beach.”

“Score,” I chimed in, taking a sip of my drink. I didn’t have to worry about driving home, so I could drink as much as I wanted to. “Please don’t put me with a snorer.” I turned and looked at Joshua, and he snickered. For a moment, we shared a laugh before I remembered I was angry at him and pulled my eyes away.

“I take it that’s an inside joke?” Poppy asked.

“The woman I shared a cabin with snored like a fucking freight train,” I explained. “It was awful.”

“It’s no wonder you were exhausted when you came home,” my brother noted.

“For sure.” Again, I found myself looking at Joshua. He said nothing, which was probably for the best, but just knowing I could meet his gaze again gave me hope that we could figure this out. I had missed him, and I didn’t want to be without him anymore, even if he had been a jerk.

It was dark when we left the restaurant. We’d only just stepped outside when Poppy shouted, “Shotgun!” She turned and laughed in Joshua’s face, and he shook his head. Then, my friend met my eyes, and I nodded. I could handle sitting in the back seat with the man who’d stolen and broken my heart now.

The ride home wasn’t long, and there wasn’t much conversation. The two love birds in front of us sat near one another, holding hands, as a romance song played on the radio. Jealousy blossomed in my heart, but then, I was also happy for them.

When I felt Joshua’s hand graze mine, at first, I thought it was an accident. But then, his fingers didn’t move away, and I realized he wanted to hold my hand. I glanced over at him, and in his eyes, I could see that he was missing me just as much as I’d been missing him.

Sliding my fingers between his, I felt warmth seeping into my hand, climbing up my arm, soothing my soul, and filling my heart. Damn, as much as I wanted to stay mad at him, it was impossible. He still had some explaining to do, but it was clear to me now that what had transpired between us wasn’t just special to me.

It meant something to him, too.



## JOSHUA

Sounds of kids laughing mingled with the squeak of rubber off the basketball court as Coach Sam blew his whistle, calling a foul. I stuck my head in the door, a smile on my face, as I saw a group of familiar kids working on fundamentals. Even after spending so much time with the kiddos at camp, I was still happy to see them. Axel waved at me, and I waved back, right before Robby stole the ball from him and took off toward the basket, getting a shout from his friend.

I was still chuckling when I reached my office. With my mind on the trip to West Palm Beach in a few days, it was nice to have the distraction of the younger athletes running around. I wouldn't be spending a lot of time with them today because there was so much I needed to do to prepare for the next session of camp before I left for the long weekend.

I sat down behind my desk and pulled up the list I'd made the day before to keep myself organized. I had so many little things to check off before I went home today in order to keep myself on track for the rest of the week that I had to make a list to keep from forgetting anything. As it was, I thought I might've left a few items off.

Only a few moments after I started reading through the list, there was a knock on my door, and it came flying open. Karrie poked her head in, a big grin on her face, "Hey there, Josh! Got a minute?"

Biting back a sarcastic question about why bother to knock if you're just going to force your way in, I plastered a polite smile on my face. "Sure, Karrie. What's up?"

She trotted in and sat down across from me. I noted her skirt was fairly



short, and the shoes she had on would've never worked for anyone who was going to be working with kids. Sometimes I wished that my father hadn't made me hire her, but there was nothing I could do about it now.

"I just wanted to talk to you about the new basketballs Sam wants me to order. He says we need both sizes, but it seems really expensive to get big ones and little ones, so I decided to just order the small ones. That'll save us a ton of money." She smiled proudly, like she'd come up with a way to save my company from the brink of bankruptcy.

"We need both sizes, Karrie." I reminded myself that I was talking to someone who'd never played a sport in her life. "You need to order them both."

Her bottom lip protruding, she asked, "But why? We don't use different-sized baskets, right?"

"The smaller ones are for the girls, and the larger ones are for the boys. The boys have bigger hands, and while they could use the smaller ones, that's true, their school teams will be using the bigger ones for games. They need to practice with the right-sized ball."

Karrie's eyes doubled in size. "That's discrimination. Those teams need to be sued!"

I wasn't sure what that even meant. "That's just how it is, Karrie. It's not a big deal. It's not discrimination so much as it is accommodation. We're fine on the budget, so go ahead and order them, and please just get the coaches what they need from now on, okay?" I shouldn't have to waste my time telling her to do her job.

I could tell she was upset. I'd deflated her balloon. She thought she was doing me a favor, something I'd be happy about, but I'd had to correct her instead. "Fine," she said with a huff, crossing her arms. "So how are you? Do you have any plans for this weekend?"

My mouth dropped open as I contemplated whether or not to tell her the truth. Most of the other staff members knew about my trip, but I hadn't mentioned it to her, and most of the other staff members didn't speak to her. Not because they didn't like her. At least, I didn't think that was why. It was more because she was the only one who wasn't a coach—besides the receptionists, secretaries, and other office workers. Karrie was a manager but not a coach, and that was strange for this company.

I decided there was no reason to be too specific. "I'm going to hang out with my friend Landon," I told her, hoping that was enough.

“Oh, is he the one that’s getting married?” she asked, unfolding her arms and leaning forward in her chair, her eyes wide.

“Yep, that’s him.” Why was she still here? I had too much to do.

“That’s great. Is he nice?”

I stared at her, reminding myself to be nice, before I said, “Yep. He is my best friend.” Before she could ask another question, I said, “Karrie, I’ve got a lot of work to do right now. Maybe we can catch up later?”

“Right. Sorry. Maybe we can eat lunch together?” She batted her eyelashes at me like there was something stuck in her eye.

I’d planned on eating a sandwich in the breakroom anyway, so I told her, “Sure. See you later.” Again, I pressed a smile to my lips, and when she bounced out of her chair, beaming, I wondered if I’d said something other than what I’d intended to say.

Once she was gone, I let out a deep breath and returned my attention to my list. I checked off the first few items in no time at all, and then I came to the fourth one, something I might’ve been able to address the night before, but I’d been afraid to.

Dinner with Liberty had been great. I’d missed her so much, and even though it was clear she was mad at me when she first saw me sitting on her brother’s couch, by the end of the night, she’d come around.

I still felt bad about the entire situation. Being away from her made my body physically hurt, particularly my heart. But I couldn’t do anything about our situation for now. All I could do was go back to what we’d been doing for years, stealing moments with one another behind his back, and relish the memories of what it had been like to finally claim her if only for a few minutes.

Picking up my phone, I contemplated calling her. I didn’t think she was ready for that yet, so I sent her a text instead. “Are you planning on coming back to camp for session two? A lot of the same kids will be there, and they were asking about you. They hope you will be there.”

It was foolish for me to want to sit there and stare at my phone until she responded. My list wasn’t getting any smaller while I waited. After a few seconds, I set it aside and went to the fifth item on my list, but when my phone buzzed, I nearly fell out of my chair trying to scoop it up.

The text wasn’t from Liberty. It was from my brother, William. All it said was, “Bro night? Your place?”

With my heart pounding in my chest, I shook my head. Of course, I was

always down to spend the evening with my brothers. William, Jacob, and Elijah were all younger than me, and I hadn't seen much of them this summer. William was around a lot more than the other two. Without hesitating, I typed back, "Sounds great," and hit send, beginning to feel slightly calmer. I knew he wouldn't ask a bunch of questions about what we'd eat and who would bring the drinks, etc. In fact, I probably wouldn't hear from him again. He'd just show up, the other two in tow.

That was cool, though. I could use some time with just my brothers.

I went back to my tasks and had just settled into a rhythm when I realized my phone was buzzing again. I'd forgotten that I was on the edge of my seat waiting for Liberty until it registered that it could be her. Once again, my hands were shaking as I reached for it.

"That depends. Do I have to room with Snory McSnorison?"

I laughed aloud as I answered. "Officially? Yes. You'll be in the same cabin with her. But realistically, I mean, I might be able to pull a few strings and find you another cabin to sleep in." I might be crossing a line I couldn't circle back on if she assumed that meant she could sleep in my bed, but there were other bunks in my room, after all.

Landon had spoken the other night about how he needed to relax. Maybe he would. I decided to just go with the flow and see what happened.

"I'm still thinking about it," she said. "But officially? Probably."

That response made me smile. Everything was better when Liberty was around.

Later that evening, my brothers and I were sitting around, eating pizza, drinking beer, and shooting the breeze. Elijah kept talking about a girl he'd met recently, and William was lamenting a woman he'd ended up breaking up with when she went off to college in another state. I tried to keep my mouth shut when it came to affairs of the heart. I had a feeling all of my brothers knew who I was in love with. After all, we'd lived together growing up, and they could see me pining for Liberty from afar as well as everyone else. Everyone except for Landon, apparently.

"How was camp?" Jacob asked me. "Anything exciting happen?"

I knew my face was turning red as I started to avoid his question. "For the most part, it was the same as usual," I replied with a shrug.

Bending down to pick up another slice of cheese, Elijah said, "Didn't Liberty Johnson go with you this time? To take pictures?"

"That's right," I said. "She was there."

My brothers exchanged knowing grins. “And?” William asked. “How was that?”

“It was great. She’s an amazing photographer, and the kids loved her.” I tried to play it down, but I didn’t think my acting was believable.

“You didn’t get yourself into any trouble?” Jacob probed. “I mean, did anything happen Landon would want to murder you over if he knew about it?”

All of us laughed, and I couldn’t help but give him a sheepish look. “I may have gotten myself into a situation of sorts.”

That made them laugh even harder, and even though it really wasn’t funny to me, I laughed, too.

“What are you assholes laughing about?” Our sister, Hannah, entered the room, a scowl on her face as she settled her fists on her hips.

“Hannah Banana!” Jacob jumped up first to hug her. “What are you doing here?”

“Mom and Dad said you guys were having a bro night without me! So of course, I had to come over,” she said as she took turns hugging the rest of our siblings.

I hopped up and went over to give her a tight squeeze. “Come on in, little sister. Sorry. We would’ve invited you, but we thought we might drive you nuts with all the belching and farting.”

Rather than answering, she picked up William’s beer, chugged it, and let out a big belch, making us all laugh. “Now, what did I miss?” She sat down, grabbed a slice of pepperoni, and ripped into it.

“We were just talking about how Joshua took Liberty Johnson to camp with him,” Elijah said, waggling his eyebrows.

Hannah laughed wickedly. “Tell me everything.”

Shaking my head, I tried to assure all of them that it wasn’t a big deal, but they knew me. I could talk more freely to my siblings than anyone else, so I probably said more than I should have, but at the end of the day, having the freedom to talk about the girl I loved was good for my soul, so I took advantage of it. By the time they left, as I cleaned up the mess, I knew I had to do something different. I couldn’t be without her.



## LIBERTY

“Well, hello there, sister,” a familiar voice greeted me as I walked in the front door. Even though I knew Sophia was coming to visit Landon and me, excitement bubbled over as I dropped my purse by the door and sprinted across the living room to wrap my arms around her.

“You’re here!” I exclaimed, hugging her so tightly she could barely breathe, let alone talk. “I can’t believe you’re finally home.” I kissed her cheek and finally let her go.

Sophia stumbled back a few steps, shaking her head. “Good grief, sis. Are you trying to kill me?” She laughed. “I’m here, and I’m happy to see you, too. I can’t wait to hear all about camp.” Her smile was devilish as I knew what she was thinking.

Immediately, I felt my cheeks flame. So far, I’d been able to dodge my sister’s questions because they’d come through text, but now that we were face to face, I wouldn’t be able to be so evasive. I’d have to tell her what happened.

Not that I minded confiding in my younger sister. Besides Poppy, she was my go-to girl, the one I talked to about everything. In fact, not telling her what had happened at camp had been difficult. I’d wanted to call her up and spill my guts to her the way I always had in the past.

This was a little more complicated, though, since Joshua and I had actually slept together. It wasn’t exactly the type of conversation I liked to have over the phone. I needed to be able to read her expression to know whether or not I was going too far with everything I was telling her. After all, we were sisters, so talking about sex could be a little weird if it was too

much. Also, I needed to be able to gauge her true reaction. Sophia was never one to hold back, but sometimes she actually went to the extreme with her comments, and I'd need to see her face to know if she thought I'd completely lost my mind.

"Where's Landon?" she asked, still holding on to my arms.

"I left the office a little early because I knew you'd be here. He should be home soon, although he mentioned something about some client calling right before he left. I think he's afraid something is going to go wrong while we are away at the beach." I tried not to roll my eyes. My brother was controlling about more than just my love life. "What do you want for dinner?"

"Are you kidding? I've been away for months. I'm dying for a sushi coma." Sophia let go of me only to strike a dramatic pose with the back of one hand resting on her forehead.

Laughter spilled out of me as I shook my head at her and grabbed my phone out of my back pocket. "You're such a weirdo." I pulled up the app to order sushi from her local favorite. She always ate so much, she said it put her in a sushi coma. "The usual?"

"Yes, but get me an extra order of California rolls," she replied.

I raised an eyebrow at her. "An extra order?"

"For tomorrow," she fibbed, and we both giggled. She would definitely find a way to stuff all of it into her tiny body.

"I'd better order something for Landon, too," I muttered as I tapped the pictures on the app to add items to my order. I didn't even look at the total when I paid because I knew it would be outrageous thanks to Sophia's appetite. "So, I have to go upstairs and pack really quickly or you know I'll be scrambling in the morning. Wanna come?"

"Of course," Sophia said as she gestured for me to start walking toward the stairs. "Someone has to make sure you don't forget your bathing suit."

Laughing, I headed up to my room with my sister right behind me. "I doubt I'd forget that on a beach trip, although there's bound to be something I'll forget. I wonder if I should pack earplugs."

"Earplugs? Why would you need those?" Sophia asked, puzzled.

Shaking my head, I launched into how I had been sharing a room with Karrie at camp. Sophia plopped herself down on my bed while I went to the closet to grab my suitcase and opened it up next to her. From my tale of sleeping through a missile launch every night, I shifted to some stories about the girls, the pictures I'd taken, and the activities we'd done. I'd managed to

get my suitcase packed completely before I paused long enough for her to ask the real question.

“So did anything happen between you and Joshua?” Sophia stared up at me from my bed, her head resting on the palm of her hand.

Without blinking, I looked back at her for several seconds before a loud sigh exited my body. “Yeah, something happened. A lot of stuff happened, if I’m honest.”

Sitting up abruptly, my sister demanded, “Tell me everything.”

With my suitcase packed and zipped up, I set it on the floor and dropped down next to Sophia, making her bounce a few times. I wasn’t sure exactly how to tell her, so I started with our walk in the woods, how he’d kissed me, then the distance that had settled over us again until I’d made the first move. “I’m not sure what got into me, but I asked him to go swimming with me in the lake at night.”

“Did you go skinny dipping?” Her eyebrows waggled up and down as she grinned at me.

“No.” I watched my sister deflate. “But we did have sex.”

“What?” Sophia sat up so quickly, I was afraid she’d get a headrush. “You did?”

Before I could answer, the doorbell rang. “That’s the sushi.”

“No! Tell me everything!” she insisted, following me out the door as I rushed down the stairs to get our food.

Sophia was forced to stand behind me in the hallway and wait as patiently as she could for me to get the food from the delivery person. I made sure to leave a nice tip. Then, I brought the food into the living room and hurried to the kitchen to get us something to drink. When I returned, she was already eating, of course, but her full mouth didn’t prevent her from asking, “What happened? How was it?”

Pulling my own food from the bag, I began to eat for a few moments, contemplating how to explain it to my sister. Finally, I said, “He invited me to sleep in a bunk in his cabin because of Karrie—the snorer.” Sophia nodded. “So I was in the shower, and I decided I’d already been bold once that night. Why not see what happened if I just went for it? When I got out of the shower, I put on the T-shirt he’d loaned me—and nothing else.”

Sophia’s eyes bulged. “And?”

“And we did it.” I took a bite of my sushi like it was no big deal.

“And?” Sophia repeated, growing more impatient by the second.



“It was wonderful, even better than I’d always imagined it would be.” The wispy sigh that left my lips was a bit embarrassing. I sounded like a princess in a cartoon movie. “But the next day, he wouldn’t even look at me.”

Sophia dropped the California roll she’d been handling with her chopsticks back into the container. “What?”

“Yep. He wouldn’t talk to me, kept avoiding me. I tried. I really did. I sought him out, tried to strike up a conversation. I figured we still had several days of camp to be a couple before we had to come back to reality and hide from Landon, if that’s what Joshua wanted to do. But he wasn’t having any of it. So I left camp a few days early.” With that, I took a sip of my drink and returned my attention to my food for a moment, letting my sister digest the information—and her large quantity of sushi.

“Well, that fucking sucks,” she finally blurted. “What do you think made him act that way?”

“I’m not sure. Poppy thinks he’s just afraid of hurting Landon. I don’t know. We sort of made up the other night when Poppy and Landon invited us both to dinner to help them plan the beach trip. At least we’re talking again. Anyway, I’m tired of talking about me. Tell me about college.” I managed an encouraging smile, praying she’d just let it go.

It took her a moment. I could see she was still having trouble accepting what I’d told her, and I couldn’t blame her because it was hard for me to process as well. Eventually, Sophia started talking about college, how her classes were going this summer, her professors, and a few guys that she’d met at a party. “I’m not sure Landon would like Devon,” she said, shaking her head. “He gives off Grady vibes for sure, but I think he’s genuine. Not that I’m thinking of bringing him home.”

Alarmed, I reminded her, “Dating Grady was the worst mistake of my life. If you think this Devon guy is anything like him, sis, run for the hills.”

She shook her head. “He’s just got that confidence about him that can sometimes be irritating. It’s not like I think he’s just trying to get into my pants for shits and giggles.”

It still hurt to hear anyone talk about what Grady had done to me, but I let it go since my sister wasn’t trying to be rude. “Be careful,” I told her. “If you end up in a situation where Landon feels like he could’ve protected you from an asshole, but failed, he’ll start dictating who you can date, too. It’s no fun.” I thought for a moment before I muttered, “Sometimes I think he’s ruining my life.”

She stared at me for a moment, and I realized I'd said some things I'd never really admitted to her before—or maybe even to myself. “Do you think he’s still oblivious to the situation between you and Joshua? Surely, he has to see it. A sightless person could see it at this point.”

I shook my head. “He doesn’t see it. For that matter, I don’t think he wants to see it, even with Poppy encouraging him. It’s just as well, though. With the wedding coming up, we don’t need to add any drama to the situation.”

She nodded, but she was still having trouble understanding how our older brother could be so controlling and overprotective.

We didn’t get to say more about it though as the door to the garage opened, and Landon came in. “Where are my favorite sisters?” he asked, entering the room with a big smile on his face.

Sophia jumped up and ran over to hug him. I smiled at them, not angry at Landon despite what I’d just said. He was only trying to look out for me, and even though sometimes it felt suffocating, he did it out of love.

Landon grabbed a beer and came into the living room to join us, grabbing the food I’d ordered. “When we’re done with this, we should play Risk,” he said.

Sophia giggled wickedly. “Why? So I can kick your ass?”

“If you didn’t always hole yourself up in Australia where no one can reach you, you wouldn’t be so hard to beat,” he argued.

“That’s my strategy,” Sophia said with a shrug while Landon shook his head at her.

“That sounds fun,” I interjected, preventing them from going back and forth. “I’ll go get the game and get it set up.” Finished with my food, I took the container to the trash and grabbed the game on my way back. Even though there were things about Landon I’d like to change, he was still a great brother, and I knew the three of us would have a great time tonight like we used to do when we were younger. Talking to Sophia had taken a bit of the burden off my heart, but the hole was still there.

I missed Joshua.



## JOSHUA

A bunch of guys from the street carpoled to the airport so we wouldn't have a bunch of cars sitting in the hangar over the long weekend. We were only going to be gone for a couple of days, but it was easier this way anyway.

I was riding with Landon, Luke, William, and Arlo. The only girl in our vehicle was our sister, Hannah, who'd gotten in with us instead of arranging a less testosterone-filled transport.

I'd hoped that Poppy and Liberty would be in the car with us, but when Landon pulled up in front of my house, he mentioned that the girls were riding in a separate vehicle. "Poppy is taking her van so they can fit more girls in," he'd said, rolling his eyes. I had snickered because I knew how much he despised that tenement on wheels.

Now, we were coming to a stop near the private jet Landon had chartered for the excursion. A nice size, it would definitely fit the twenty of us, though I had a feeling Luke's family would be sending something twice as big to take all of us to Bali. There'd be a lot more people going on that trip.

Popping the door open, I got out and went around to the back to grab my suitcase. I'd managed to fit everything into one bag. As I waited for Arlo to take his bag off the top of mine, I heard someone shout, "There he is, the dude of the hour!"

Turning around, I saw a couple of guys I hardly knew that had met Landon in college coming over to shake his hand and half hug. "Ethan, Anthony, how are you?" Landon asked, greeting them both. "How was your drive?"

“Long,” Ethan, a blond, muscular dude who had always sort of rubbed me the wrong way, said with a smirk on his face. “But we’re here.”

“It would’ve been better if Ethan would’ve let me choose the tunes,” Anthony said, a smirk on his face. He had dark wavy hair, and while I could see some of the girls thinking he was attractive, he didn’t quite measure up to Ethan. It seemed pretty obvious who the star of the show was here. Irritated, I took a deep breath and prepared myself for fake niceties.

“Joshua, you remember Ethan and Anthony?” Landon said.

“Sure do. How’s it going?” I shook their hands, pretending to be happy to see the pair. Anthony was fine, but he was always part of the pair.

“If it isn’t the best man.” Ethan sized me up, and I had a feeling he thought he should’ve gotten that position, which was ridiculous since he’d only known Landon a few years, not his whole life. “Good to see you.”

I managed a nod, then disentangled myself to go put my bag on the plane when Poppy’s van pulled in.

The sound of the girls laughing as they piled out made us all stop and stare. Liberty hopped out of the passenger side, her long hair blowing in the breeze, a big grin on her beautiful face. My breath caught in my throat as I begged the universe to have her look my way.

“Is that your sister, Landon?” I heard Ethan say behind me. “Damn.”

The sound of Landon’s hand smacking him in the chest had me turning around. “Knock it off, bro,” he said, but it was a playful punch, not the slaughter Ethan would experience if he actually made a move on Liberty. Courtesy of her big brother—and me.

We piled into the plane, and I ended up sitting next to my brother, William, who would be serving as an usher along with Poppy’s little brothers, Arlo and August. Somehow the youngest of the brothers had managed to weasel his way into the girls’ van.

“We’re just waiting on Vanessa, Samantha, and Joyce,” Poppy said from her seat behind me where she was sitting next to Landon. “They should be here soon.”

“Your college friends are slower than mine,” Landon teased.

“Knowing Samantha, they’re probably lost,” Poppy replied.

We waited a few more minutes, and then another vehicle pulled in. Poppy squealed and rushed out to meet them, and within a half hour, we were on our way.

Liberty was sitting near the front of the plane. I wished it was her next to

me and not my kid brother, but at least I could see her. Every once in a while, she'd turn her head and catch my eye, and every time, I found myself gasping in response.

"Dude, are you all right?" William asked. "You sound like you're having trouble breathing."

"I'm fine," I told him, giving him a look that was enough for him to let it go. I needed to figure out a way to be with Liberty without Landon noticing.

But then, hadn't I decided not to sneak around anymore? Confusion washed over me as I puzzled through what the right choice was and still didn't know.

It was only a two-hour flight to West Palm Beach. Landon had vehicles waiting to transport us the short distance to the beach house once we arrived at the local airport. The smell of salt air wafted on the gentle breeze as we piled in. Once again, I was separated from Liberty. It seemed that was always the way.

The SUVs pulled through a gate to a private estate on the beach. The winding driveway led to a huge mansion adorned with palm trees and other tropical plants. Painted the same blue as the sky, the modern-looking home rose up to greet us, and all of us gasped at the beauty and charm. Though most of us were wealthy and lived in extravagant homes, this place took the cake.

"Girls in the west wing, boys in the east wing," Landon announced as we got out.

"You're not sharing a room with your fiancée?" Liberty teased him.

Landon's face turned a bit red, and I imagined he hadn't been talking about our hosts. I grabbed my bag and headed inside, taking my time. Even though some of the guys were rushing to get the best rooms, I didn't really care where I laid my head as long as Liberty was under the same roof.

The only bedroom left by the time I made it upstairs was a small one with only a view of the road out front. That was okay, though. It was private and had a shared Jack and Jill bathroom with William's room.

Leaving my door open, I went about unpacking. I hadn't brought too much since it was a quick trip, so it didn't take long, but by the time I'd finished, I looked up to see William standing in the doorway. "Landon and Poppy wanna talk to all of us in the kitchen."

"Cool," I mumbled, dropping my phone into my pocket. "How's your room?"

“Better than yours,” he said, taking a quick look around, a sarcastic grin on his face.

I let it go, not really caring, and followed him down the hall. Others fell into line with us, and by the time we reached the kitchen, it was crowded with all twenty of us standing around the island. The space itself was pretty large. There were just a lot of us.

“I just wanted to thank everyone for coming,” Landon began, looking a little sheepish as he stood in front of everyone, Poppy at his side. “We know this was a spur-of-the-moment trip, but the fact that you were all able to come means so much to us.”

“We are so blessed to have such amazing friends,” Poppy continued. “Our wedding will be the best ever because all of you will be there.”

That got a bunch of *oohs* and *ahhs* from the crowd. I glanced around and saw Liberty standing next to one of Poppy’s college friends I didn’t recognize, her sister, Sophia, up on her tiptoes behind her, trying to see over Liberty’s head.

“Now, let’s go down to the beach and have some fun,” Poppy proclaimed, clapping her hands.

With that, everyone broke, most of the guests heading back to their rooms to get changed into our swimsuits, spray ourselves with sunscreen, and get our towels and other beach items.

Again, I wasn’t in a huge hurry. I seemed to be dragging these days, stuck in neutral as I tried to navigate this new version of life after I’d slept with Liberty but still couldn’t claim her.

With my trunks on, I stepped into the bathroom to put on sunscreen and then walked back out to grab my towel when I noticed a woman standing in my bedroom door. “Hey,” she said, a bright smile on her face. “Would you mind helping me with this?”

The blonde girl extended a bottle of sunscreen in my direction. I stared at her, not knowing who she was or what she wanted. Maybe she couldn’t get it opened. “Help how?”

With a giggle, she lifted her long hair and spun around. “My back, silly,” she replied, still extending the bottle over her shoulder.

I swallowed hard, not sure what was happening, but being a gentleman, I decided to oblige. “Sure.” I took the bottle from her and squirted some of the coconut-smelling lotion into my hand before slathering it on her back.

“You’re Joshua, right? The best man?” she asked, her tone innocent

enough.

“That’s me,” I told her, not volunteering anything else as I glided my hands down her skin. Did she not have a friend who could do this?

“I’m Vanessa,” she supplied. “I went to school with Poppy.”

“Cool.” I had no idea what else to say, so I finished and then said, “Done.”

She dropped her hair and spun around, smiling at me. “Thanks so much, Joshua.”

“Yep. See you down there... you.” What had she said her name was? I wasn’t sure.

In the hallway, I ran into a redhead and a brunette that I also didn’t know who asked me how I knew Landon and Poppy. I answered briefly, but the moment we walked outside, my mind would no longer stay focused. My eyes fell on Liberty, looking stunning in a pink bikini, and I wasn’t able to speak to anyone.

She was lying on a towel near her sister and Poppy, soaking up the sun.

“See you later, Joshua,” the brunette said as I managed to pull my eyes off Liberty for one second and join my brother near where he was standing in the surf with Arlo and August.

“Were you guys chatting up Joshua?” I heard Hannah ask as I was walking away. “Girls, you’re wasting your time.”

“Why is that?” one of the two asked. I didn’t turn around to see if it was the redhead or the brunette.

“Because my brother’s already in love with someone else.” Hannah spoke matter-of-factly.

I heard some rumbles and a gasp and turned to see their reactions. Poppy’s college friends, all three of them, had annoyed looks on their faces, but when I looked back at Liberty, she was grinning, staring out at the sea.

Taking a deep breath, I spun back around, not sure if I should thank my sister or tell her to watch her mouth. Did I mind if these new girls stopped trying to talk to me? Not at all. At the same time, love was a pretty serious word. Was I ready to say I was in love with Liberty Johnson?

The image of her beautiful face formed in my mind as a wave splashed against my shins.

Yeah, I was. I definitely was.

“You okay, bro?” William asked, poking me with his elbow.

“I’m good,” I told him, and for the first time in a while, I meant it. I still



had a ton of shit to sort out, but if I truly loved Liberty, how could I let anything else matter?



## LIBERTY

Hearing Hannah warning Poppy's friends from college that they were wasting their time flirting with Joshua had me grinning. I didn't pull my eyes away from the ocean to see if he was looking at me, but then, I didn't need to. I could feel the weight of his eyes on my face.

It was nice of Hannah to try to give the girls a heads-up, but in some ways, I was afraid it might just make them try harder. I didn't know Poppy's college friends as well as she did, but I had known them for years. Vanessa the blonde, in particular, was always trying to come up with clever ways to flirt with boys she liked. I'd heard her saying she'd asked Joshua to put sunblock on her back. It was a good game plan. I, foolishly, had asked my sister.

Once the three college girls, as I'd come to start thinking of them, settled down on the far end of our line of girls near Poppy, I let my eyes wander back over to where Joshua was standing with a group of guys just deep enough in the water to wet his legs when a wave rolled in. The water looked refreshing, and I was anxious to get in it, but the other girls had decided to lay out for a while, so here I was. The beach itself was semi-private with access only from the houses situated behind us. No one else was using it at the moment, which was great. I liked the idea of being on a secluded beach with only my friends.

I liked the idea of being on a secluded beach with the handsome man in blue boardshorts showing off his tan even more.

A loud male voice caught my attention, and I turned my head back toward another group of guys standing a little behind Joshua. "Come on,

groomy,” a muscular blond I couldn’t quite place was telling Landon. “Get your team together, bro.”

“All right,” Landon said, and then the guy turned and looked right at me.

“Who is that?” I whispered to Sophia.

“That is Ethan,” she said in a monotone like she wasn’t sure whether or not she should be impressed. “Landon’s friend from college, remember?”

“Fuck, that’s right.” I hadn’t seen him in years. I remembered him, though, and not just because he was friends with my brother.

He’d been friends with Grady, too.

And now, he was walking right toward me. I held my breath wondering what in the world he might want.

“Well, if it isn’t Liberty Johnson,” he said, standing in front of me, spinning a volleyball in his hand. “Wanna play?”

Wide-eyed, I stared up at him, noticing how his eyes roamed over my scantily clad body. “What are we playing, Evan?” I purposely got his name wrong, just to test him.

With a crooked grin on his face, he said, “Come on now, gorgeous. You know my name’s Ethan. Volleyball, of course. You can be on the winning team.” He motioned with his head for me to come with him.

Looking down the line, I saw Poppy getting up and dusting sand off her bottom as she went over with Landon. Joshua’s eyes were on me as he slowly walked along with his best friend to where the sand volleyball court was set up.

“You should go,” Sophia said, but when the other girls started egging me on, I knew my sister was suggesting it for another reason entirely.

“Go with the handsome man,” Hannah said, batting her eyelashes at me.

“Okay.” Raising my hand, I waited for Ethan to take it and pull me to my feet. Not that I needed any help. I was pretty athletic, after all. Otherwise, he might not have even asked me. But I figured letting Joshua see me holding this other guy’s hand for a moment couldn’t hurt.

It was time for Joshua Smith to poop or get off the pot, to put it crudely.

“That’s my girl,” Ethan said with that rakish grin still on his face. As we walked along over the warm sand, I could see him sizing up the competition. Poppy and two of her sisters, Autumn and Rose, were the only girls on the other side. It appeared that Hannah had been recruited for our team as well, as she came over with Luke.

Ethan took charge, putting us in position. When I ended up standing right

next to him, my gaze went to Joshua to see his reaction. It was evident he looked irritated. *Well, good*, I thought. Maybe this will teach him a lesson about not claiming what he said he wanted for himself. If he didn't have the balls to come after me, I may as well make him sweat a little.

"This is going to be a piece of cake," Ethan whispered to me, and I grinned at him, knowing he was right. While Landon had some strong dudes on his team, I'd known Poppy and her sisters long enough to know they weren't going to pose a threat. A few well-placed balls, and we'd be out to a lead in no time.

Hannah served first, and with the same knowledge that I had, she shot a line drive right at Autumn. The girl cowered, not even trying to hit it. Even with Joshua trying to dodge over to help her out, the ball hit the ground near Poppy's sister's feet.

"One point for us," Hannah announced, and Joshua begrudgingly threw the ball back to her to serve again.

This time, Landon hopped in front of Autumn, hitting the ball back to us. He seemed to have a similar strategy because the ball was coming straight for me, but I had played volleyball in high school, unlike the girls on his team, and even though he knew that, he was willing to bet I would be the weakest link.

It didn't work. I bumped the ball straight up into the air over Ethan's head, banking he'd be able to set it. He did, and Luke came in to spike it into the sand near Poppy. We were up by two.

The rest of the game went in a similar fashion. Landon was a monster server, and so was Joshua, so they were able to sneak a few balls past us, but in the end, we were up by ten when it was match point, and I was the one with the ball in my hand, ready to serve.

"You've got this, Lib," Ethan said, clapping from his spot just in front of me.

Trying not to cringe at the annoying nickname, I spun the ball in my hands a few times, preparing to serve. Beach volleyball was a little different than playing on a court where I could bounce it a few times to get the feel, but my last turn serving had gone well. I'd even managed to sneak one past Joshua.

This time, I decided to play it safer with the game point. While I didn't really want to take the easy approach and aim for Autumn or Rose, I needed to put this game away so we could go on to other activities. It was late

afternoon, and Poppy had mentioned we had a fancy dinner planned for the night. I was getting hot and sweaty and really wanted to go take a shower.

“All right,” Luke began, clapping along with Ethan. “For the win, Liberty.”

I caught his eyes, nodded, and tossed the ball up into the air.

As it fell back to earth, I brought my arm around, slapping against the vinyl surface and sending it shooting out above the tops of my teammates’ heads with a woosh. It cleared the net easily and kept sailing, headed for a spot right between Autumn and Rose.

Only, the other team was shifting as if they’d anticipated my thoughts before the ball even left my hands. Landon and Joshua were quickly rotating to take the spots of Poppy’s sisters. Landon got there first, bumping the ball up into the air. Joshua moved in, faking a set, and instead of putting the ball into the proper position for my brother to send it flying back at us, he twisted around at the last second and spiked it himself.

The ball was headed right for me in a blur. Still recovering from the shock of them handling my serve differently than I’d anticipated, it took me a moment to get under it. When I bumped it up, I lost my footing and wiped out.

But the ball was redirected properly, and Luke was able to set it. Ethan moved in for the spike. His hand smacked against the ball, and as I pulled myself up off the ground, I watched it sail to the back corner of our opponent’s territory.

Poppy was the closest to where the projectile spiraled down toward the sand. She dove, trying to get beneath it, but she didn’t have the skill to hit it back in the right direction, and the ball went sailing out of bounds.

“We won!” I shouted, jumping up into the air. I didn’t land on the ground, though. Ethan wrapped his arms around me, shouting and hugging me like we were the only two people on the team.

It was slightly uncomfortable having some strange dude’s arms on my bare skin, but I hid it behind my joy at defeating my brother and Joshua. Within seconds, the rest of our team piled in, also embracing us until we were all jumping up and down on the sand like a bunch of crazy people.

Eventually, Ethan released me, looking into my eyes as I slid to the ground. I swallowed hard, pulling my eyes away. It wasn’t really fair of me to mess with him this way when I had no intention of letting this go anywhere at all. I needed to remind myself of that.

Looking over to the other side of the net, I saw Joshua staring at us. “Settle down over there,” he said as I realized Ethan still had his hands on me.

“See you later,” I told him and then rushed off to collect my towel and the water bottle I’d brought out with me.

Sophia picked them up and met me halfway. “That was... interesting,” my little sister said.

“You can say that again.”

She laughed, and we walked back to the house together. By then, Joshua was gone. Ethan lingered, still seeking me out, but my sister was very good at running interference.

I took a quick shower, trying to get my head on straight, thinking about what Joshua had meant by his comment. Was he really jealous? Well, maybe that would help him get his head out of his ass.

When I got out of the shower, I put on a sundress and started working on my hair. The sound of laughter from down the hallway had me sticking my head out just as Poppy stepped out of her room. “Hey, bestie,” she called. “Come on in. We’re getting ready together.”

It was nice to hear her call me that even when she had so many friends around. I knew we were best friends, but the reminder made my heart swell with pride. “Be right there.”

I grabbed my makeup bag and hair finishing products and hurried down the hall to Poppy’s massive room. Together, all of us girls got ready for a fancy oceanside dinner, but my mind kept wandering to what might happen after dinner. Was it possible that I might be able to sneak off with Joshua? We’d be right under Landon’s nose.

But Poppy was looking gorgeous in a red dress that showed off her figure. If she could distract my brother the way she had when we’d visited Hawaii together, I might actually be able to spend some quality time with the man who’d stolen my heart.





## JOSHUA

**N**ervous tension slowly began to replace the irritation I'd been feeling ever since the volleyball game. What in the world had that idiot Ethan thought he was doing, flirting so blatantly with Liberty right in front of Landon? It wasn't like that asshole wasn't around when Grady did what he did to her. Was he trying to follow in that douchebag's footsteps or something?

I stepped out of the shower and dried off, trying to focus on the dinner I was getting ready for. I'd decided to wear a simple white button-up shirt and dark jeans, something a little casual but still nice enough, especially for an oceanside restaurant. Once I was dressed, I headed over to the mirror to fix my hair, but laughter coming from the room next door piqued my curiosity. With my comb in hand, I headed over to see what was going on.

The "little brothers" as I sometimes liked to call them were there. Well, the ones that had come along with us. Two of my brothers weren't members of the wedding party, so they'd been left behind, but William, Arlo, and August were all in the same room gawking at themselves in front of the mirror as they got ready.

"All I know is that blonde is fine," August was saying as I walked in.

"She's hot, but I'm not so sure about her personality," William said with a shrug. He noticed me first. "What up, bro?" he asked. "What do you think about Poppy's friends from college? They all seemed to be digging you."

I felt my face flush red for a few seconds, but then, I found myself shaking my head. "They're fine I guess, but I'm not interested," I told them. I found myself gravitating over to the mirror where they were all standing.

“Why not?” Landon’s voice said behind me as he came into the room. “Poppy’s friends are good looking, and they’re nice enough, aren’t they? Don’t you think it’s about time you found yourself a woman?”

I turned and looked at him, eyebrows raised, as I heard my brother snickering. He was likely dying to tell Landon to open his eyes, but he didn’t say anything because I would have to pound him into the ground if he did. “I don’t know.” It was easier for me to just let Landon think it was a possibility than to explain. “Maybe.”

A moment later, a bunch more of the guys poured into the room until it was so crowded, I could hardly even see the mirror, let alone use it. That was okay, though. I was ready to go. It was surprising that my little brothers’ room was suddenly the place to be, but I had a feeling most of these guys were just following Landon around.

“We should go make sure the reservations are good to go,” Landon told me about the time Ethan and his friend came into the room.

“Good idea.” I’d do anything to get out of there. “It’ll probably take the girls a bit longer to get ready. I’ll head over with you now, if you like.”

“Shotgun!” Ethan yelled, as if anyone had invited him, and before I knew it, all of the guys were headed out to the SUVs. Landon and Poppy had provided drivers to take us wherever we needed to go, so if he wanted to sit in the front with that guy, let him, I thought as I got into the back of a different SUV.

As we drove, I sent Hannah a text to let her know the guys were leaving, just in case none of the other fellows happened to think we should alert the women of our intentions. “Going to make sure the reservations are in order. Drivers are ready when you girls are.”

She answered, “I’ve been ready for half an hour, but some of these chicks are taking forever.”

It made me laugh. Growing up with a bunch of brothers may have prevented Hannah from learning some of the expectations some of the other girls had for how they were supposed to primp, but I figured some guy would appreciate it someday.

We pulled up to an oceanside restaurant a few miles away from the house where we were staying. Lots of other people were milling about outside, which told me this was a popular place. From the scent of lobster and other delicious seafood wafting through the open doors on the breeze, I could imagine why. My stomach rumbled as I got out of the vehicle and followed

Landon inside.

He gave the host his name, and the older gentleman nodded. “Yes, of course, Mr. Johnson. We have our oceanside room ready for you. Is your entire party here?”

“No, not yet,” Landon said. “About half.”

“That’s no problem. Since it’s a private room, we can seat those of you who have arrived and escort the others back when they get here.”

“Thank you,” Landon said, and we followed the man around the crowded dining room to an area at the back of the restaurant that overlooked the ocean.

A wall of windows gave us the perfect view of the sun beginning to descend above the ocean, the sky already cast in an array of pinks, oranges, and golden tones that made the entire window look like a gorgeous painting. The blue of the ocean and the white of the frothy waves took on an otherworldly glow in the glint of the sun’s rays.

“Great room, Landon,” Ethan said, his voice pulling me out of my thoughts. “You know how to pick them.”

“Thanks, but Poppy chose this restaurant,” Landon said with an admiring smile.

“Well, you picked her, so my statement stands,” Ethan replied, finding a seat with a great view of the sunset.

I tried not to roll my eyes. Ethan and the others taking their seats made me realize I needed to be strategic in my seat selection. Landon had moved toward one end of the table, so I decided I needed to choose a seat further down. There were two empty seats on one side of William and another empty seat on the other side. I knew I could count on my brother to help me out. “Hannah can sit there,” I told him, gesturing to the seat on the other side of him.

“Okay.” His eyebrows furrowed, and I gave him a knowing look. Then he smiled at me and nodded. He knew the plan.

We didn’t have any time to discuss it anyway. Before I could’ve even whispered to him a plea to help me out, there was an eruption of chatter at the door as the ladies were escorted in by the same host that had seated us. They all gasped and exclaimed how beautiful it all was, but my eyes were on one face.

Liberty looked amazing in a sundress that made her sun-kissed cheeks glow. Her hair fell around her face in beach waves, making her eyes sparkle even brighter than usual.

Thankfully, Poppy and Landon were all wrapped up in one another because I couldn't control myself. I went right toward her before Ethan or anyone else had a chance to seek her out. "You look beautiful," I told her.

"Thank you. You look nice as well." She smiled at me, and my knees went weak. I was going to be the same consistency as an oyster by the time this night was over.

"I saved you a seat," I told her, and then, without a thought, I took her hand and led her over to the table, to the two seats my brother and sister had been protecting for me, not that anyone was dying to sit there. Still, it was nice to have their cooperation.

"This is nice." Liberty thanked my brother and sat down next to him, and I took the seat on her other side next to Luke. He gave me a bit of a questioning look, as if to ask if I was sure I wanted to do this, but I ignored him. With any luck, Landon wouldn't notice that the two of us were sitting next to each other, and since I was still holding her hand under the table, I had to hope he wouldn't notice that either.

We had to let go of one another to order, but I was very much aware of Liberty's knee pressing up against mine as we both ordered lobster and drinks. She went with a margarita while I ordered a specialty beer. Our drinks were served quickly, as were the appetizers, and before long, the entire table was full of laughter and storytelling as good friends got reacquainted and strangers built friendships.

"The sunset is so beautiful this evening," Liberty noted as we waited for our food. "I wonder what it would be like to live here."

"Did you like living in California?" I asked. "I know you weren't right on the ocean, but didn't you get to visit some?"

"We went to the ocean a few times a month, but it's not the same as living on it. And I'm not sure the view was this breathtaking anywhere I ever went. I liked living in California, but it never felt like home." She sighed, and I wondered if I'd made a mistake asking about that part of her life.

I had no plans of ever leaving Franklin. I loved my house, my job, my friends, but I would like to be able to afford to take more time off work so I could travel. I found myself saying, "West Palm Beach would be a nice place for a summer vacation home."

Liberty's face lit up. "It would be. Are you thinking of buying one someday?"

Shrugging, I said, "I don't know. Maybe. I'd love to work a little less and

spend more time with the people I care about, especially once I have a wife and kids. I mean, what's the point in earning a bunch of money if you can never enjoy it?"

She nodded. "I totally agree with you. I'm so happy for my parents that they get to live in Hawaii now. They finally get to enjoy everything they've worked so hard for over the years, even if they are far away. I love Franklin, too, and I'm really excited that my house will be done in a few months, so I'm not planning on moving, but it would be nice to have someplace to go with views like this." I felt her hand drop down on my leg, and a pulse of electricity shot through my entire body at the sensation.

Taking a deep breath, I did my best to regain my composure. I felt like we were talking about our future—together—as we were celebrating our best friends' union. Someday soon, would all of our friends be gathered around to celebrate the two of us getting married?

I had no idea if that was even a possibility since Landon was still such a huge obstacle to us, but I liked the idea of it. All I knew was, sitting here talking to her, nothing else in the world mattered. I didn't care what anyone else was talking about. The food was delicious, but we could've been eating bologna sandwiches for all I cared. At the moment, the only other person in the world was Liberty.

We enjoyed an amazing meal of lobster with decadent chocolate mousse for dessert. The entire time, Liberty and I talked to one another, rarely even speaking to anyone else. As the sun faded and the stars came out to illuminate the heavens, I could begin to see everything I would be giving up if I didn't find a way to tell Landon how I felt about his sister. Was it worth it to keep a friendship if it meant giving up the woman I loved?

I still wasn't certain but I was beginning to think it wasn't.



## LIBERTY

Laughter rang out from the back porch of the mansion as two different drinking games were happening at the same time. I wasn't sure which, if either of them, I was allegedly playing since I was situated in the middle between the two groups, but at the moment, I didn't care. I'd had a couple of margaritas over dinner, and I was definitely feeling a buzz now that I had a wine spritzer in my hand.

Joshua had sat next to me during dinner. My brother was so wrapped up in Poppy, as he was right now, the man was oblivious to the hushed conversation Joshua and I were having. Rather than talking about our everyday lives, the mundane, we'd gone deeper, exploring what we really wanted out of life. I'd enjoyed speaking to him about what it might be like someday to own a beach house.

Not that either of us had said it would be our beach house, a place we owned together. But it was pretty obvious, at least to me, that we were both thinking about it. Hearing him say he wanted kids one day was no surprise. He was so great with the athletes at camp, he would definitely want that. I just wondered, when he closed his eyes at night and pictured the woman he'd share that life with, was it my face he was seeing?

Now, he was sitting on the other side of the porch, drinking a beer, laughing at something William was saying. We weren't physically seated next to one another anymore, but we kept making eye contact. God, I wanted him so badly, I didn't know how I was going to make it through the night.

"Liberty, do you want a turn?" Hannah was asking. "It's not that hard."

They were playing beer pong, something Joshua's little sister had always

been great at. Maybe it was because she was such a good athlete. “Oh, uh, sure.” I got up and walked over to the table. “Who am I playing?”

“Me.” Sophia narrowed her eyes at me, as if she were trying to be menacing, and we both laughed.

It’d been a while since I’d played the game, so my first shot was wide, but after a bit of warming up, I got the hang of it, and I was able to sink a ball into Sophia’s cup with ease. She growled at me, having to drink whatever was in there. I glanced down at the cup in front of me, but I couldn’t tell what it was. It looked like it might be straight-up vodka.

After our game, Vanessa faced off against one of her friends from college, and I navigated over to the other game but quickly backed away when someone shouted, “Let’s play spin the bottle.” I was too old for that sort of activity in my life. A roar of laughter shot up as others protested, and then I heard my brother’s booming voice cut through the crowd.

“As much fun as this is, it is time for me to take my blushing bride off to our honeymoon suite.” He was swaying slightly as he spoke, obviously drunk off his ass. Poppy stood next to him, bouncing up and down as she giggled.

“You’re not married yet,” Arlo reminded them.

Landon glowered at him but didn’t make a verbal response. Instead, he picked Poppy up, bridal style, as she continued to laugh, and clumsily carried her into the house. For a moment, I was afraid he might drop her, but I figured no matter how drunk my brother was, he knew when he was carrying precious cargo.

It was actually kind of nice to see Landon let loose. He was always the “dad” of our group, taking charge and making sure no one got hurt. To see him so carefree and relaxed warmed my heart.

I was also glad to see him leaving. I loved my brother dearly, but knowing I could never really be myself with him around was a pressure I didn’t need on my shoulders. With him off to his bedroom, and definitely occupied in ways I didn’t want to think about, for the rest of the night, I was ready to let my hair down.

“Who wants to go for a midnight swim?” Ethan asked, clapping his hands together.

Another cheer went up, and even though it wasn’t near midnight yet, we all headed upstairs to put on our swimsuits and head back to the beach.

In my room, I opened my suitcase and looked inside, trying to decide which bathing suit to choose. The bikini I’d worn earlier was more



conservative than the bright neon pink one looking at me now. A mischievous grin slid onto my face as I picked it up, deciding now was the time to put it on. I didn't have to worry about getting a sunburn on any of my parts that hadn't seen the light of day for a while, and my brother wasn't there to judge. Double win.

About ten minutes later, I headed down the stairs in my tiny bikini, a towel tossed across my arm. Immediately, I heard whistling and turned my head, not surprised that it was Ethan.

"Daaamn, Liberty. Look at you." His eyes were wide as he made no attempt to hide his roaming eyes.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. "Are we going swimming or what?" I asked him. "Are you just going to stand there and ogle every girl who comes down the stairs?"

"Not all of them, but definitely you," he said, still staring at me as he stroked his chin.

I had known what to expect when I put this on, but it wasn't his attention I'd been looking for. And he wasn't the only one looking at me. Most of the guys from the neighborhood averted their gazes, probably thinking looking at me dressed in this was similar to checking out a sister, but Joshua made no show of looking away. He looked hot in a pair of red boardshorts, so I made my way over toward him, avoiding Ethan. After all, Landon was in bed, and Joshua and I had no one to hide from.

"Are we ready to swim?" he asked me, grinning at me.

"I'm ready if you are." I slipped my arm through his, and we led the way out to the beach.

The moment we could hear the waves crashing in the distance, Hannah shouted, "Last one there has to finish that bottle of vodka when we get back!"

Everyone laughed, but few people increased their speed, thinking she must be joking. Joshua and I dropped our towels in the sand and headed out into the warm water. Around us, the others separated into pairs and groups, laughing and splashing one another. I didn't pay too much attention to what anyone else was doing as we waded into the water, my hand in his.

The waves were calm this time of night without much of a breeze. Overhead, a thousand stars winked down at us, a sliver of moon only casting a few beams of light. That was for the best, I thought, as Joshua and I turned toward one another in the chest-high water.

"That bathing suit looks incredible on you," he said.

“Thanks. I was hoping you would like it.” I smiled at him, feeling his hand settle on my hip beneath the water. Everyone else was far away now. Their splashing and laughter barely registered in my mind.

Joshua pulled me a little further out to where I could barely touch. I wanted to wrap my legs around him, but I wasn’t sure with everyone else there. Would they notice? Would they say anything to Landon?

“Joshua, Liberty!” someone shouted. “Wanna go to the secret cove with us?”

I turned to see it was Luke calling our names. “No, thanks,” I shouted back. “Have fun!”

“See you later,” Joshua echoed.

We watched as the rest of our party trucked back to the sand, heading off to the right of the beach house. “What secret cove?” I asked Joshua.

“Oh, Ethan says there’s some cove around here somewhere that’s supposed to be beautiful and have sea turtles or something. I don’t know. I try not to listen when he talks.”

That made me giggle, but then, he pulled me closer, and nothing was funny anymore. I wrapped my legs around his waist, feeling how excited he already was as his hardness throbbed between us. “Be with me, Joshua,” I whispered, looking into his eyes.

His breath was ragged as he replied, “I am with you, Liberty.”

Shaking my head, I leaned in closer to him, my lips only a fraction of an inch from his. “No, be with me,” I reiterated.

He understood that time, and his mouth crashed down on mine. His hands on my ass lifted me as I pressed closer to him, losing myself fully in his kiss.

Both of us may as well have been underwater. When we came up for air, we gasped like our lungs were on fire. I wanted to go back in and kiss him again, but he pulled back. “Let’s go inside where there’s less chance of anyone seeing us.”

I nodded, thinking that was probably for the best. He started to walk back to shore, putting me down where I could touch, and the two of us hurried to grab our towels and rush back to the house, never letting go of one another.

We went to my room since it was further away from Landon’s. I didn’t want to think about what he was doing in there, and I sure as hell didn’t want him to know what we were up to. It wouldn’t take long for Joshua to get this bikini off me, it was so tiny, and as I locked the door behind us, I could see that he was ready for me, his cock throbbing through the thin material of his

swim trunks.

Joshua's lips claimed mine as his hands slid across my damp body. He untied the string at my back first, the fabric hanging over my breasts as his hands slipped around my ribcage to finger my nipples. His thumbs roamed over their hard peaks, making me gasp for air as I threaded my fingers through his hair. The ache in my core I always felt when he was around increased as my urgency flamed.

He untied the other part of my bikini and let it fall to the floor before lowering his head to take my breast in his mouth, his tongue lapping around the center as he sucked. I moaned and reached for him, my hand caressing his hardened cock through his swim trunks. Desperation took over, and I grabbed his waistband, tugging the wet shorts out of the way.

"Okay, baby," he said, lifting his head. "I want you, too. So badly."

With that, Joshua helped me get his trunks off and then took a few seconds to untie both sides of my bikini bottoms before the two of us fell onto my bed. This time, he was quick to turn so that I was on the bottom. I'd been in control for much of the first time we'd been together, but with his body pinning mine to the mattress, I gladly relinquished all the power to this man I cared so very much for.

His warm lips heated my skin as he kissed me from the crook of my neck to my belly button. Every place his fingers stroked left me on fire. By the time he spread my legs and poised himself at my entryway, I was so ready for him, my body was practically vibrating as my back arched and my need left my thighs slick.

Joshua hovered over me for a moment, looking down at me, his eyes locked on mine. "Are you ready for me, Liberty?" he asked.

The only word I could speak was, "Always."



## JOSHUA

I pushed inside of Liberty, and the moment I entered her, my ability to think rationally was gone. All I could do was act on instinct. The two of us moved together as one, our skin gliding over one another as we set the perfect rhythm.

Beneath me, her skin glowed in the faint moonlight streaming through the high windows. Her windswept hair, still full of beach curls, fanned out around her beautiful face. All I wanted to do was gaze into her eyes, kiss her luscious lips, and feel her wrapped around me for eternity.

“Oh, god, Joshua,” she moaned as we began to quicken our pace. “You feel so good.”

Instinct told me to shush her, to quietly remind her that her brother and Poppy were somewhere in the house, but I could barely breathe, let alone speak. Besides, I’d longed to hear her call my name like this for years. Why would I want to quiet her now?

Instead, I picked up my pace, instinctively wanting to make her moan even more. Her uneven breaths were coming in pants now, and I was right there with her, beads of sweat covering my body as we both came close to the end.

Just when I thought it couldn’t feel any better, Liberty raised her legs and wrapped them around my body, cocooning me deep inside of her as she squeezed her muscles around my shaft. My mouth dropped open as a grunt formed in my throat. Stars filled my vision as I came undone, lost to the world for several seconds as everything faded away except for me and her—the way it should always be.

My lungs burning, I rolled off Liberty, clutching her to my chest. Her mass of hair tangled around my arm, pulling it slightly as we both laughed and tried to recover. The idea clawed at the corner of my mind that this was wrong, that I had, yet again, betrayed my best friend. It didn't subside quickly, so I shoved it aside and put all of my concentration toward the woman in my arms.

After a few moments, Liberty abruptly sat up. "We should get out of here before everyone gets back from the cove," she noted.

Of course, she was right. Everyone would be expecting us to either be in our own beds or somewhere together—somewhere less conspicuous. Quickly, we both hopped up and threw our bathing suits on, giggling as we did so. We had a secret only the two of us knew about, and despite how wrong it felt sneaking around behind Landon's back, I liked knowing Liberty and I were in on something together.

A few moments later, the two of us were seated a good foot apart on the porch swing, trying to look innocent as we listened for approaching footsteps. All I could hear was the faint sound of the waves pounding the shore in the distance.

"That was an adventure," I mumbled, wishing I could hold her hand.

"You can say that again." She turned and looked at me, one eye slightly narrowed. "You're not going to ghost me again, are you?"

My mouth dropped open as I was momentarily shocked and offended—until I realized she had good reason to ask that question. "No," I told her. "No, I don't like sneaking around behind Landon's back, but I want to be with you, Liberty, so we'll have to figure it out."

She relaxed slightly, her eye going back to normal as her shoulders dropped. "Okay. Good. We're on the same page."

"Yep." I reached over and quickly squeezed her leg. "Oh, the things you'll do for love."

The words had slipped out of my mouth before I thought about it. Bug-eyed, I turned to look at her and saw a similar expression on her face. "So you love me?"

I didn't get a chance to confirm or deny the question as suddenly we heard the approach of everyone else, talking loudly as they headed up the path toward the house.

"There you guys are," Hannah said, smiling at us. "We were afraid you'd drowned."

“You should’ve come with us, Lib,” Ethan said, stopping to touch her arm, making my skin crawl. “It was fun.”

“Maybe next time,” she replied politely.

Knowing I couldn’t sit there any longer without having to answer her question, I let myself be swept up into the crowd, but I turned to give her a knowing smile before heading upstairs to go to bed.

Did I love Liberty? Absolutely. Was I allowed to? Probably not. I’d have to figure this all out sooner rather than later if I wanted to keep my best friend and my best girl.

The next morning, everyone was dragging, especially Landon and Poppy. Most of us hadn’t gotten to bed before two or three, and even though I hadn’t drunk as much as other people, I woke up with my head throbbing. Popping some medicine, I thought back to how good Liberty had felt and didn’t mind the ache at all.

Some of the others had gotten up early enough to make a big breakfast of eggs, bacon, and sausage, which helped with the hangovers we were all feeling to one degree or another. I helped with the dishes, and then we all headed out to the beach to relax and take it easy.

Almost everyone found a spot in the shade beneath the palm trees with their feet in the surf on either a beach chair or a towel. A few of the girls braved the direct sun, lying out to tan. I saw them spraying sunscreen on one another, so at least they weren’t being completely crazy like some of the stories my mom used to tell about when she was our age. With her fair skin, Liberty wasn’t chancing it. Not only was she in the shade of a wide beach umbrella, but she was also wearing a floppy hat. I smiled at her but quickly looked away when Landon set his chair down next to me.

“How’s it going, man?” he asked, groaning a little as he lowered his large frame into the ground-level chair. “You hungover, too?”

“Not too bad,” I told him, grinning at the pained look on his face. Clearly, he was still hurting from all the alcohol he’d had the night before. “I guess you can’t say the same?”

“Bruh, that was rough,” he said, shaking his head slightly before grimacing and stopping. “It was worth it because we had such an awesome time, but I think I might be getting too old for this.”

“Well, that was kind of the point of this trip, wasn’t it? To get it all out of your system before you settle down?” I chuckled under my breath and took a sip of my water. It would only be water for me today, at least for a while.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Landon admitted. “Although I do expect to drink when we get to Bali. And I’m sure that Poppy and I will have some fun on our honeymoon. But this ‘drinking so much I feel like I’m going to puke’ business is for the birds.”

“At least you didn’t actually puke.” My eyes wandered over to Ethan. I’d heard someone talking this morning saying he was up all night worshipping the porcelain god. Served him right, asshole.

“True,” Landon said, acting like he didn’t realize anyone had been up blowing chunks. Maybe he didn’t know. I had no idea how close he and Ethan were these days, but he never talked about him. I was honestly surprised the kid was here. “So what about you?”

“Me?” I didn’t follow his question. “What about me?”

Shrugging, my best friend said, “Poppy invited some girls from college. Any of them catch your eye?”

I looked over to where Vanessa and the other two girls, whose names always escaped my mind, were lying in the sun. It didn’t take me long to formulate a response. “Not my type.”

Landon laughed. “Yeah, I figured. That’s too bad, though. I hope you meet a nice girl sometime soon so you can settle down. You deserve something like what Poppy and I have.”

He wasn’t looking at me, his head tipped back, his face tilted toward the sun, so I stole a quick glance at Liberty. Her eyes were clearly closed beneath her sunglasses as she relaxed in the rolling waves.

I wanted that, too. Something exactly like what Landon and Poppy had—my childhood crush transformed into the girl I’d get to spend the rest of my life with. But I couldn’t say that to Landon.

“That would be nice,” I muttered, thinking he’d let it go.

He didn’t. Instead, he leaned closer to me and said, “You know, Poppy has some ideas.”

I’d been mid-swallow when he made this revelation, so I almost choked on my own saliva. I managed to sputter a few times, cover it with a cough, and then ask, “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. Poppy seems to think you’d be a great match for my little sister.”

The statement hung in the air between us as I attempted to navigate a response. I couldn’t seem too shocked or surprised, so I just nodded slowly and said, “Okay.”

“I know it’s probably a little weird for you since Liberty’s always been a



bit more like a sister than anything else to you. But Poppy keeps reminding me that you are the best guy I know, so if there's chemistry there, why wouldn't I want you with her? It does make sense. It's just difficult for me to trust any of my friends with her after... you know." His face wrinkled into a scowl as thoughts of Grady and how horrible he'd treated Liberty filled his mind.

I understood. I got the same bad taste in my mouth every time I thought of that asshole Grady. But it really wasn't fair for Landon to lump me in the same boat as him. After all, Grady had never appreciated Liberty in the slightest. He'd always been after her just for her body, whereas I'd been in love with the girl for as long as I could remember.

And last night, I'd slipped up and told her just that.

"I'm just saying," Landon continued, "if you're open to it, maybe the two of you could start talking, see where things lead, you know? I really would be happy to have my sister dating a stand-up guy like you."

"Okay," I said, trying to sound nonchalant, like maybe it was something I could consider. "I'll think it over."

"But don't think this means that it's okay for you to touch her," he continued. "If I were to find out you were acting like that dog Grady and sleeping with her, well, I'd probably have to stomp your face into the ground."

My eyes threatened to bug right out of my head as his words registered. Now probably wouldn't be the best time for me to tell him it was too late, that I'd already had sex with his little sister—twice.

"Uh, right," I stammered. "No, of course not. I'm nothing like fucking Grady," I promised him.

Landon didn't even blink as he nodded along with my statement. "I know you're not." He reached over and patted me on the arm, the way he had a million times.

Silence settled between us as I stole occasional glances at Liberty. It was great to hear that Landon was open to the idea that Liberty and I could see one another.

It wasn't so fantastic to hear him say he'd basically kill me if I had sex with her too early. And something told me the day after we got married would be too early for Landon.

If Landon found out we were already sleeping together, before we had his blessing, it would be worse than if he'd never given it at all.

Yep, I was fucked. In more ways than one.



## LIBERTY

“Well, how did it go last night?” Poppy whispered to me so that no one else could hear us, not even our younger sisters who were sitting on either side of us. Sophia appeared to be asleep, and I wasn’t sure if Autumn and Rose were meditating or had also drifted off. It was just as well. I didn’t need anyone else to hear the answer I shared with my best friend.

I gave her a devious grin. “Good,” I whispered. “Really good.”

Poppy laughed, not needing any more information to figure out exactly what had transpired between Joshua and me. We had been best friends practically our whole lives, after all, so we could almost read one another’s minds.

The rhythmic sound of the waves crashing against the shore had me deep in my feelings. “I can’t believe you’ll be marrying Landon soon. My big brother will be married—to my best friend.”

“I know. It’s hard for me to believe, too,” Poppy replied in a daydreamy voice. “It seems like just yesterday I was moving back from California, terrified of what I might discover. I was afraid of running into your brother, or maybe learning that he was with someone and you didn’t have the heart to tell me.”

“No way,” I assured her, though she knew beyond a doubt now that Landon only had eyes for her. “That man was made for you.”

“Yours was made for you, too,” she said, reaching over and patting my arm.

I wanted to embrace the idea, to think that Joshua and I would have our

happy ending someday, too, but at the moment, it was difficult to think that would be the case. “I don’t know.”

“Listen, I’ve been mentioning it to Landon whenever it comes up naturally, and he seems to be in agreement that you and Joshua are good for one another. I think, if you give him some time, let him catch on to the idea, maybe even let him think he somehow came up with it, he’d be okay with it.”

I lowered my sunglasses slightly to look at her more clearly. “Not if he knows what’s been happening behind his back.”

She giggled. “That’s none of his business. It’s not anyone else’s either, for that matter. I’m just saying, I think there’s more of a chance there than you’ve been recognizing. That’s all.”

“Maybe you’re right.” I hoped she was, but I still wasn’t convinced I could bring it up to my brother.

“Quit tiptoeing around the situation, and give your brother a chance. That’s all I’m saying.” With that, she lay back, resting her head, and I gave it some thought as the waves wet my toes.

A couple of the neighborhood guys walked by, and our group perked up, which I thought was unusual. Rose, Autumn, Hannah, and Sophia all exchanged glances as Luke, Arlo, and one of the quieter guys from our block, Kai, strolled by in the surf. I arched an eyebrow at my sister, but whatever she knew, she was keeping it to herself—for now. It was just as well. I didn’t want everyone in my business either.

Later that afternoon, when everyone had had a chance to recover from their hangovers, Poppy announced that her parents had rented a yacht for us to take out on a sunset cruise. Standing in the living room, she said, “We’ve got a great captain aboard who knows exactly where to look for the dolphins.”

Everyone clapped and cheered, excited to see some marine life. We all headed upstairs to change clothes, most of us showering, putting on fresh swimming attire, and then putting on sundresses or shorts over our outfits so we’d be ready for anything.

I was one of the first people back downstairs, ready to go. I hadn’t taken too much time with my hair or makeup, knowing it was likely going to get blown around on the boat anyway. Besides, Joshua knew what I looked like in my natural state, and he seemed to like it, so why would he care if I had on mascara or not?

He walked down the stairs a few moments after me, and the temptation to

run to him, to kiss him and hold his hand, was overwhelming. But we weren't alone, and only a few seconds after he came down, my brother was there, too.

Landon looked from Joshua to me and back again, and for a moment, I thought maybe he knew something, that he was about to shout at us. Instead, he clapped Joshua on the back and said, "Make sure my little sister has a good view of the dolphins, all right, my man?"

Joshua's face brightened. "I think I can do that."

I couldn't believe Landon was actually facilitating the two of us spending time together. Maybe Poppy was right after all and Landon really didn't mind if the two of us were together.

We made our way to the dock in the SUVs, since we weren't leaving from any place too awfully close to the house. I sat between my sister and Hannah, staring out the window the best I could around Sophia's head. I would miss this place when we left. I loved Tennessee, but there was something about the ocean that had always spoken to my soul.

We unloaded and headed up the dock to the waiting boat. That word was an understatement. The ship was massive. It could've easily fit another twenty people on board with no problem.

The captain introduced himself as Sharky, his first mate as Walrus, and then he told us about how we'd definitely get to see dolphins, and if we played our cards right, he might even be able to get them jumping out of the water for us. Excitement rolled through the crowd as we all took our positions to be able to set off into the sunset.

Joshua sat right next to me, and it wasn't weird at all because Landon had told him to. "Are you ready to see some dolphins?"

Grinning at him, I wished I could reach for his hand. "Yeah, I'm definitely down with that," I told him.

"There's a tube on the back of the boat," Ethan noticed a few minutes into our endeavor. "Do you think Captain Sharky will let us go tubing later?" he asked no one in particular.

"I can ask him," Poppy told him, getting a cheer out of the overgrown frat boy. Ethan's eyes flickered toward me, but before he could say anything, he noticed Joshua sitting very close to me and backed away. I laughed and accepted a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. This boat seemed to have a little bit of everything. I didn't think I'd ever seen anyone go tubing off the back of a yacht before, but if it could happen, something told me Ethan would make sure that it did.

Joshua and I sipped our champagne in companionable silence as the yacht headed out to sea. The sunset was gorgeous as ever, like a painting, and I couldn't help but stare at it. His breath tickled my ear as he leaned down and whispered, "The only thing more gorgeous than that sunset is you."

I turned to look at him, noting our lips were dangerously close, but we both pulled away. Landon had instructed him to make sure I had a good time, not to make out with me. If my brother saw that, he'd be livid.

In a few minutes, none of that mattered anyway as someone shouted, "There's a dolphin!" on the other side of the ship. We all popped up and rushed over to see. Sure enough, there were several dolphins in the water, bobbing up and down, coming up for air, or working together to feast on a school of fish we couldn't see below the surface.

Captain Sharky came over the loudspeaker and said, "We've got quite a large pod of dolphins over here to our left. We're going to see if we can ramp this boat up a few notches and create some waves out the back. If you will make your way to the aft portion of the boat—that's the back now—you may just see some dolphins leaping out of the water."

I turned and looked at Joshua, a bit skeptical. Over the years, I'd been on lots of dolphin cruises, and never once had I seen a bunch of dolphins leaping out of the water for any reason. In fact, I'd never seen a dolphin jump out of the water at all.

But I went along with everyone else to the rear part of the boat, and sure enough, as the captain increased the power and the waves began to form in our wake, the dolphins began to swim along behind us. Then, they actually started jumping! First one, then another, until several of them were leaping out of the water, landing, and then jumping again. All of us were cheering and clapping our hands, unable to believe the amazing sight. It was breathtaking to see the gorgeous creatures bounding out of their natural habitat in such a graceful way.

After about ten minutes of excitement, Captain Sharky slowed down. "I think that's enough for now. We'll get back to a reasonable pace, and if some of you want to hop on the tubes out back, we'll make that happen."

I took one look at Joshua and shook my head. "No, thank you. We are in the ocean, after all."

"Yeah, something tells me Captain Sharky knows a thing or two about dangerous sea creatures, but I'll leave this to Ethan and some of the other knuckleheads."

Ethan didn't hesitate to get in the tube. Hannah was right there with him, much to Joshua's chagrin. They had a good time, though, bouncing up and down along the waves. Captain Sharky kept it at a slow pace and constantly assessed the situation, making sure no one was in any danger. Eventually, we neared the shore, and the brave tube riders had to climb back on board. By then, Ethan had relinquished his tube to Kai, and Rose had decided to take a chance and give it a try as well. It was shocking to see Poppy's shy little sister stepping out of her comfort zone, but she rocked it.

I hoped I'd get a chance to spend more time with Joshua that night, one way or another, but as we made our way back to the house, it became clear that the girls were going one way and the boys another.

"Let's watch a movie in the cinema room," Poppy suggested. "We can stream that new romance everyone's talking about."

"See you later," I whispered to Joshua. He squeezed my hand and then followed my brother and the other guys to the game room for billiards.

Once we were in our separate groups, there was more gossiping going on than watching the movie as we munched on popcorn and sat in the oversized recliners. "So, what was up with you and Kai on the tubes?" Hannah asked Rose, blinking at her in an over-the-top fashion.

Poppy's sister's face turned as red as her namesake. "I don't know. It just looked like fun."

"You mean *he* looked like fun," Autumn said, jabbing her sister playfully in the ribs.

"So what if she likes him?" Hannah asked. "I think we're past this nonsense that none of the boys on our streets can date the girls because of the little-sister rule."

"You're just saying that because you're in love with Luke," Sophia proclaimed.

Hannah's eyes widened, but then she shrugged. "Luke is hot. And he's nice. So what if I like him? Poppy has broken down the barriers for all of us."

"That's right," I said, conviction overcoming me. "Poppy has been my best friend forever, and Landon, my brother, dated her anyway, so why shouldn't the rules be the same for the girls as the boys?"

"I think it's time to break this secret law of the land," Hannah said, winking at me.

While I felt my cheeks heating up, I nodded in agreement. It was time for a change for the better.





## JOSHUA

The trip to West Palm Beach ended much too soon. My alarm went off too early the day after the amazing boating trip where we got to see dolphins leaping out of the water. All of us were in a bit of a haze as we boarded the plane back to Tennessee.

I sat next to my sister because it was convenient. Liberty was a couple of rows ahead of me, sitting next to Sophia. I could see a bit of her hair sticking up every now and then. I wanted to be sitting next to her, holding her hand, and asking her what her favorite part of the trip was. Instead, I was listening to my sister flip through pages of a magazine, wondering if she was actually annoyed this time or if her aggressive nature was simply showing through. Hannah didn't really know how to do anything partway.

Landon, who was sitting next to Poppy in the row across from me, leaned over as we neared Tennessee airspace and asked, "Are you sure you don't need a ride back home?" We had all carpooled to the airport a few days ago, so it would make sense that most of the people in our party would be getting home the same way that they arrived, but I shook my head.

"Nah, I'll just take an Uber. I've gotta get to the office to finish up some stuff for the second session of camp. It'll just be easier that way."

He nodded but looked confused, and I couldn't blame him. It did sound a little strange that I wouldn't go home from the airport where we'd all parked and get my own car to go to work, but I had something else in mind. My eyes went to Liberty, and I had to hide the smile that threatened to creep across my face. We'd concocted a little plan the night before, and though it wouldn't seem like a big deal to most people, any sneaking around we could do to be

able to see one another without Landon knowing gave me a thrill.

It didn't take any time at all for my car to arrive once we landed. I told everyone goodbye, ignoring Ethan and his friend who were still hanging out, trying to talk to some disinterested girls. Others had already piled into their cars to drive home. I saw Liberty in the distance and smiled at her, wishing I could wave, but I'd see her soon enough. Landon had basically given me the green light to go ahead and date her, but would he feel that way if he knew we'd already hooked up a couple of times? I had no doubt he would not.

Traffic was light, so I arrived at my office pretty quickly. It was far more quiet than usual. No one else was working, or if they were, they were knee-deep in plans for the upcoming session. It was strange to walk inside and not hear the thumping of basketballs or the shrill trill of a whistle being blown by a coach, but it also meant fewer distractions. While I'd managed to get a lot done before our trip, I still had a list of items to go over just to make sure everything was ready to go for session two.

Sitting down at my desk, I pulled out a pad of paper and jotted down some notes, making sure not to leave off anything I needed to accomplish before I left the office. With the second session set to begin, there was little room for error. I needed all of my i's dotted and my t's crossed.

The first thing I did was send out an email to the team with the information for the registration packets, making sure everyone knew what they were required to do to make sure the kids had everything they needed. They'd need to include their name tags and itineraries. Then, I made some phone calls to vendors to make sure everything was lined up. Though we had a great group of kids, we used the same equipment over and over again, so it was bound to wear out. I needed to make sure we had everything replaced that had needed to be thrown out after this session last year. We also had little shops for the kids to buy candy, snacks, and souvenirs, so I gave those vendors a ring as well to make sure they didn't need anything.

Everything was falling into place, which put a smile on my face. This session of camp was always my favorite. While the first session focused on athletics, increasing skill level, sportsmanship, and all of the techniques students needed to improve in sports, the second one was more about community building. Instead of exclusively playing sports, we'd be focused on fishing, camping, and other water events. I'd ordered a couple of new canoes for this year, and I was super excited to see the kids out there on the lake, paddling away.

With all of the last-minute tasks nearly completed, I relaxed slightly and checked the time. My smile widened as it wouldn't be too much longer before a familiar face popped through my door. I couldn't wait to see her again regardless of the fact that we'd just been on an airplane together for a couple of hours. Every time I looked at Liberty, my heart drummed in my chest. I couldn't imagine a more beautiful woman, inside or out.

A knock on my door had me catching my breath. She was a little early, but that was cool. I was almost done with everything I'd set out to do anyway. I just needed one vendor to call me back and for a couple of team members to let me know they'd completed their assignments.

"Come on in," I called in a cheerful voice, but when the door opened, it wasn't Liberty standing there. Confusion washed over me as a different smiling face bobbed into my office. "Karrie?"

"Hey, Josh!" she said with a cheerful disposition as she approached my desk. "How was your little beach trip?" She sat down in a chair across from me, crossing her legs. The dress she was wearing, as usual, didn't quite fit the office. The skirt was too short, the top too low cut, and her shoes looked painful. But then, that was Karrie. Never quite fitting in.

"Um, it was good," I said, ignoring the belittling way she'd phrased it. "How are you?"

"I'm great," she said with a nod as she crossed her legs the other way and wrapped her hands around her knee. "Never better."

"Good, good. You know you didn't have to come in today, right?" I asked, trying to clarify what the hell she was even doing in the office, let alone *my* office.

"Yes, yes, I know, but I heard you were coming in to finish a few things, and I just wanted to check with you on an important matter I've been hoping to speak to you about for a while." She smiled at me, batting her eyelashes, so I stared back at her in confusion. What the heck was she talking about?

"What important matter?" I asked her.

Karrie cleared her throat. "Well, as you know, I've been working here for a while now. I absolutely love it. Everyone who works here is great. Especially you." Her grin widened, and those eyelashes started going to town.

Did she have something in her eye?

"Thanks, Karrie. You've come a long way since you first started here." I couldn't tell her that she was still far from a competent employee, not right

before we went to camp anyway. I tried to hide my resentment that my father had forced me to hire her. Karrie simply wasn't an athlete or a coach and would've been better suited to another type of job—like as a receptionist in an insurance office or data entry for telehealth, nothing that had to do with sports. At all.

She took my comment as a compliment. “Thank you so much. So, I was thinking, as soon as session two is over, would it be possible for you and I to go out to dinner together? I'd really like to talk about the future.”

My eyebrows arched as I contemplated what she was asking. Was Karrie finally ready to get serious about making a difference here? Did she want to learn the ins and outs of running a sports complex? Maybe she'd finally start learning some of the lingo so she'd stop shouting, “Touchover!” every time someone scored in flag football.

“Yeah, Karrie, I think that would be great,” I said with a nod. “I'd really love that.”

She actually clapped her hands a few times in excitement. “Oh, great. I was hoping you'd say that. Thank you so much, Josh. I think this is the start of something beautiful.” With another flutter of eyelashes, she hopped up out of her seat and headed for the door, leaving me confused.

But then, Karrie was often confusing. I just couldn't figure out how her being adequate at her job would be beautiful. I supposed it couldn't be any worse than what I was getting now.

I'd just stopped shaking my head and returned my attention to the work in front of me when another tap on the door caught my attention. This time, it was Liberty peeking her head in the already slightly open barrier. “Hey,” she said.

Immediately, I got out of my seat and rushed toward her, wrapping my arms around her. I kissed her cheek, fighting the urge to do more, and then realized she had a bag of Subway sandwiches in her hand. “Now, I really want to kiss you,” I told her as my stomach growled.

Laughing, Liberty plopped the bag on my desk and pulled herself away from me. We still had to be careful, even with Landon's new views on life.

“I just ran into Karrie in the hallway,” she told me as she opened the bag and pulled out a twelve-inch meatball sub, handing it over to me. I didn't need to read the scribbled writing on the side of the wrapper to know that was exactly what it was. The smell was enough for me.

“Yeah, she just came in to ask me a quick question.” I sat back down in

my chair, ready to dig in. “Thank you for this, and for coming to get me.”

“Of course,” she said, pulling out her own sweet onion chicken teriyaki six-inch. “I couldn’t let you Uber home.” We ate for a few moments in silence before Liberty asked another question. “Why did she look so unbelievably happy?”

Confused, I stared at her for a moment. “Who? Karrie?”

Nodding, she said, “Yeah, she looked like she’d just won the lottery or gotten a promotion or something.”

I shrugged. “Liberty, if I could figure Karrie out, I’d let you know, but honestly? The woman is an enigma.”

She mulled that over for a second before asking, “Do you have any water?”

“You bet.” I hopped up and went to the minifridge to grab us each a bottle of water and then sat back down. We’d had little meals like this a few times before, at various times over the years, but it was always nice. Just the two of us, doing something normal together, something a couple that had been together for years could do to spend time with one another.

Looking at Liberty sitting across my desk from me, I saw more than my best friend’s little sister. I saw more than the girl I’d known growing up who lived in the neighborhood. I saw a beautiful, intelligent woman, someone who was fun and knew how to make me feel like all was right with the world.

I wasn’t exactly sure what it was going to take to get Landon to come around and accept us as a couple, but I knew I had to find out.



## LIBERTY

Sitting in Joshua's office across from him, eating Subway sandwiches and chatting, everything felt right with the world. It wasn't. If my brother knew what we were up to, he'd be furious. Still, for a few moments, Joshua and I could act like a couple, doing something normal that a couple would do, behind closed doors.

As we munched on our subs, my mind went back to the situation with Karrie. She'd had such a massive grin on her face, like something really special had happened. Joshua said he didn't know what she was so happy about and sort of shrugged it off, but I couldn't get that grin out of my mind. It was the same kind of smile I might wear after Joshua and I had a stolen moment together, and it made me a bit jealous to think of Karrie walking around with a similar expression on her face.

Only about a fourth of Joshua's sandwich remained while I still had half of mine, and my sandwich was half the size of his to begin with. The man could eat, but he burned all of those calories off working with the kids, so he always looked amazing. I paused for a second to admire the way his bicep bulged beneath his shirt as he lifted his sub to his mouth.

Raising an eyebrow, he asked, "You okay, Libby? What are you thinking about?"

I felt my cheeks flush at being caught—and at the use of a name he never called me, for the most part. "Yep. I was just thinking about how nice this is," I admitted. "We're here, chilling, having a meal together, without having to worry about anyone else wondering what we're up to."

"Does Landon even know you're here?" he asked, taking a drink of his



water before he finished off the last few bites of his meatball sub.

Shaking my head, I said, “I was vague. Just told him I had some errands to run before I left for camp again. I ran by the new house, too, so it wasn’t a lie.”

Joshua nodded, but he had an odd look on his face. Maybe he was thinking about the fact that I was building a house, and he absolutely loved his house. If we did end up together, we’d have to sort that out. Or maybe I was reading too much into all of it, and he was just thinking about how good his sandwich tasted and how he wished he had more.

“I’m excited about camp,” I told him. “I’ve been thinking of some different types of pictures I can take to help round out the images you have on the website.”

Joshua’s face brightened as he grinned at me. “I absolutely loved the pictures you’ve already sent me. I’ve got a few of them up on the website, and people are commenting about how great they are. Same on social media. That one you have of Robby dunking is phenomenal.”

“Thank you.” I couldn’t help the rush of heat that came to my cheeks at the compliment. I was so proud of my work and couldn’t wait for him to see what else I had in mind for the next session. “I’ll get you the rest of the session-one pictures soon. I’m thinking a week after the second session, they should all be done.”

“No rush,” he said. “You’ve already supplied more pictures than all of my other photographers ever have over the years, and all of your pictures are great. Half the time, the pictures they send me aren’t even usable.”

That surprised me. I couldn’t imagine turning anything in that wasn’t my very best work, but then, I knew I took more pride in my photographs than a lot of people did. “I love the editing process, too, so I’ll get them to you soon.”

We were both finished with our sandwiches, so we cleaned up our trash. “I have a few more things to finish up before we can go,” Joshua said. “Is that all right?”

“Sure. Is there anything I can help you with?” I asked, leaning back in my chair.

“No. I just need to send a few more emails and double-check some of the files the team sent me. Then, I think we’ll be ready to go.”

It didn’t take Joshua long at all to finish what he had to do, and then the two of us walked out to my car. Once again, I was reminded of how nice it

was that we could do something normal without having to worry about Landon finding out.

On the way home, we listened to the radio and chatted, mostly about how great our beach trip had been. Inevitably, the topic of my brother came up as we neared Franklin. “Do you think there’s really a chance he’s actually open to us seeing one another?” Joshua asked.

I took a deep breath, thrumming my fingers on the steering wheel as I considered his question. It was the same one I’d been asking myself for days, especially since Poppy had said she’d been talking to my brother about it, and she thought he was open to the possibility. “I don’t know,” I finally said, which wasn’t helpful. “I hope that he is, but I’m afraid he’s going to change his mind.”

“Could he do that?” Joshua asked, but I wasn’t sure he was asking me so much as just thinking aloud.

“Most people wouldn’t, but Landon would. He’d say he never told us we could date each other or that he didn’t think it through and we just have to stop dating.” I rolled my eyes, fed up with my brother, who hadn’t even done anything yet.

“Well, one thing is for damn sure,” Joshua said as I snuck in the back way to our neighborhood, away from our house so Landon wouldn’t see me dropping Joshua off. “Landon can never know that we’ve already hooked up.”

I pulled to a stop in his driveway and turned to look at him. Taking a deep breath I nodded. He was absolutely right about that. “He would kill us both.”

“He would kill *me*,” he clarified. “You, he’d be angry with but eventually forgive. You are his sister, after all.”

I shrugged, thinking he wasn’t quite right on that, but Landon would definitely be madder at Joshua than me.

“Thanks for the ride home. I’ll see you soon.” Joshua squeezed my hand as I leaned toward him, but he didn’t lean down and kiss my cheek as I’d hoped he would, probably because we were in our neighborhood now, and even though Landon couldn’t see us, someone else might.

“Bye,” I told him. He grabbed his suitcase from the trip out of the trunk and headed inside.

The drive home should’ve taken less than two minutes, but I didn’t hurry. Winding my way through the neighborhood, I thought about Joshua and how badly I wanted him to be my boyfriend. The scent of his cologne, leather and

the ocean, lingered in my car. What I wouldn't have given to bask in that fragrance all the time.

At home, I parked in my usual spot and dragged myself in through the kitchen door. I wasn't in any mood to talk to Landon, so I hoped he'd be in the other room, but as I walked inside, the whir of the blender told me it wasn't my lucky day.

Landon flipped the switch to stop making his drink and looked at me, his piercing eyes seeming to stare through my soul. I stopped midstride, my mouth dropping open.

Before I could say a word, Landon stated, "I know about you and Joshua."

My hands started to tremble as my heart thundered in my chest. What? How could he possibly know? We'd been so careful. Had Poppy told him? She would never do that to me. But if she did, I'd kill her.

"Wh-what do you mean?" I stammered, praying that I could lie my way out of this. Landon would grab a knife from the drawer and end me right now. No, he'd do it with his bare hands.

"You and Joshua," he said again. "I know that you like one another."

I blinked a few times, wondering if that was all he knew. "Oh?" I asked, taking a tentative step toward him. "What makes you say that?"

"Come on, Liberty," he said, waving a hand at me as he went back to his smoothie. Shouting over the blender, he said, "Anyone can see it. I'm not blind or stupid, you know."

I kind of thought maybe he was a little stupid that it had taken him this long to see how Joshua and I felt about one another, and the fact that we'd managed to have sex twice without him having a clue also didn't win him any IQ points. But he was right—he wasn't stupid. "Okay," I said with a shrug. "I like him. He's really nice, as you know. Successful and handsome. What's your point, bro?"

Landon turned the blender off and let out a loud sigh. "Listen, Liberty, I know that the situation with you and Grady was rough. I never should've let you date a guy like him. We were friends, so I thought he'd treat you right, but obviously, he didn't. Ever since then, I've been overly cautious, trying to protect you from anyone and everyone I think might break your heart. It's been silly of me to think that Joshua would ever treat you that way. Obviously, he's a completely different sort of person than Grady, and I've been wrong to keep you from him."

I didn't know what to say. My older brother was finally telling me exactly what I'd been longing to hear him say for as long as I could remember. "Thank you, Landon. I appreciate that. Grady hurt me pretty badly, but I never thought he was the one. I never thought the two of us were going to get married or anything like that. Still, it would've been nice if he hadn't treated me like trash."

Landon cringed. Just thinking about the way that Grady had discarded me still stung him, probably more than it did me. I knew my brother felt responsible for having introduced us to begin with. "Well, Joshua would never do that," Landon assured me.

I nodded, knowing that was the truth. "We'll talk about it and see what happens," I said with a smile. "I appreciate you giving us your blessing."

"Of course," Landon said, though his lips were drawn into a tight line, like he wasn't quite sure what he thought about my choice of words.

I started to walk past him, headed toward the stairs. I needed to pack for camp. It seemed like I was always packing for one thing or another these days.

I only made it a few steps before Landon called my name. "Oh, and Liberty," he said, causing me to stop in my steps again and turn to look at him, arching an eyebrow. "Just so you know, if the two of you end up sleeping together too soon, I am gonna be pissed. I know it seems like it's not my business, but you need to get to know each other on a deeper level before you trust him—or anyone—like that."

I stared at him for a long moment, wanting to tell him off. Since when did he get to dictate who I let into my bed? But he'd just been so nice in giving his blessing to us to date that I didn't want to make him mad. I could erase the progress we'd just made with just one angry comment. "Okay," I said. "I understand."

Landon took a step toward me, and I could see the concern creasing his forehead. The anger I'd felt before melted away as I closed the distance between us and wrapped my arms around him.

I prayed he never found out the truth that I'd already lied to him.



## JOSHUA

Up bright and early the next day, I made the drive to the sports complex and headed through the doors to check on the registration packets and make sure everything got included. Whistling a song I'd heard on the radio yesterday when Liberty had driven me home, I went into my office and grabbed what I needed to before heading out to the parking lot to check with Sam on a few topics. Already, the kids were arriving and filing into the buses, their faces full of smiles as they waved hello to friends and goodbye to their parents.

“All right, don't forget to check in with me!” Karrie's tone made my brain swell in my skull and grated on my nerves, making half my cheerfulness immediately evaporate. Why did she insist on sounding like everyone's least favorite substitute teacher?

In a perfect world, I might've found a way to skirt around her and get on the bus without even having to speak to her, but that failed me, and as I walked toward the steps, she spotted me. “Hi there, Josh,” she purred. “How are you today?”

At least her tone changed when she addressed me and she no longer sounded like she'd been gargling glass. “I'm good, Karrie. How are you?”

“I'd be better if these kids would listen to me.” She rolled her eyes. “I have no idea why they can't just get on the bus. They'll see their parents again soon.”

I cleared my throat and reminded her, “It's hard to say goodbye to your family. We've got plenty of time. No need to rush them.”

“I guess.” She shrugged and then shouted again for the kids to hurry up,

as if she hadn't heard a single word I'd said.

Thankfully, once I got on the bus, I saw dozens of cheerful faces, and my disposition changed immediately.

"Hi, Coach Joshua!" Axel shouted. "Where's your girlfriend?"

Everyone laughed, and I walked over and ruffled his hair. "Miss Liberty isn't my girlfriend, but she'll be here in a few minutes." I wished I would've been able to give her a ride, but she said she was running behind and would meet me here.

After my discussion with Sam confirmed that everything was in order, I handed off the paperwork I'd picked up to Coach Marcy and then sank into a seat near where I'd been sitting the time before. My eyes were trained out the window as I patiently waited for Liberty to make an appearance.

It took her a while. She wasn't kidding about running behind. Since she tried to be a punctual person, I had a feeling she would be a bit frazzled when she arrived, but when she climbed aboard the bus, she had a big smile on her face.

"Well, well, well," Liberty began as she walked down the aisle toward me, her camera bag over her shoulder. "Funny seeing you here."

We both laughed, and she took the seat next to me. "How's it going? Did your alarm not go off?"

"Oh, it went off," she said, stuffing her camera bag beneath the seat in front of her. "I just accidentally turned it off and went back to sleep for twenty minutes." Liberty rolled her eyes, and I snickered at her. "If you hadn't sent me that text, I might still be asleep."

"I'm sorry." I meant it. That was rough. "I think we're all a little tired after the beach trip."

"So true," she agreed. "I really could've used a couple more days to recuperate. Oh, well. Camp will be fun. I'm excited to see all the kids again."

"Yep, they were already asking about you," I told her as Karrie climbed on the bus and told the driver everyone was here.

"Oh, yeah?" Liberty's eyes bulged. "Dare I ask what they were saying?"

Chuckling, I said, "You might not want to know." She continued to stare at me until I shrugged and said, "Axel wanted to know where my girlfriend was."

"Good grief." She shook her head and laughed before standing and looking back to where the teen was sitting. Liberty raised two fingers, pointed at her eyes and then at him a few times, saying that she had her eyes

on him, and then she turned and sat down, still laughing. I wanted to reach over and grab her hand, I was so happy that she was here.

We chatted on the way to camp, and then we got out, and the kids headed off to their cabins. For the most part, everyone had the same assignments, though a few of the kids hadn't made it back for the second session. We had several kids who wanted to come in their place, but I hadn't had room for all of them. I thought the new website with Liberty's pictures might've had something to do with the upturn in interest. We always had a lot of kiddos who wanted to take part, but most of them understood if they didn't make it into the first camp, they likely wouldn't make the second, so they didn't bother to apply. We'd had an influx of new applicants this time, which made me think I needed to increase the slots for next year. I'd have to provide more cabins and coaches, but I'd make it happen.

Before I dismissed everyone to their cabins this time, I signaled for all the kids to gather around in the main open area near the cafeteria. With excitement bubbling off them, the kids hauled their bags over, chatting and laughing as they fell into place. I raised my hand to signal for them to quiet so I could speak.

"Hey, boys and girls," I began, raising my voice so everyone could hear. "We are so glad to have you back at camp. For those of you who have never been here before, get ready. You are about to have the time of your life." With that, a cheer rolled through the group. "Unlike our last session, this one is focused on fun. We'll be fishing, canoeing, and learning camping skills, like how to pitch a tent and start a fire. Get ready because this session is going to be epic."

Once again, I had to pause for the kids to cheer. Karrie, who was standing to my right amongst some of her girls, raised a fist in the air and circled it around like she was Arsenio Hall shouting, "Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!" The kids all arched their brows at her, probably not recognizing what she was doing. I shook my head and looked away so that I didn't laugh in her face.

"You all have two hours to get to your cabins, unpack, get settled in, put on some comfortable clothes if you aren't wearing them already, and then meet me over at the flagpole. We are going to kick this session off with a nature hike through the woods. Be sure to apply plenty of sunscreen and insect repellent. Now, let's kick this thing off and have some fun!" I clapped my hands, and the others joined in as they dispersed, rushing to their various cabins. Not a single face in the crowd didn't wear a smile as the kids hurried



off with their friends.

With the welcome speech out of the way, I headed to my cabin to drop off my bags. The moment I walked through the door and spied the bed, warmth spread through my body. Liberty and I had made love here for the very first time, so this room would always be special to me. For a moment, I stared at the bed, wishing she was right here with me.

But she was likely taking her stuff to her cabin, getting reacquainted with her girls. All of them had come back for the second session, and I knew they'd be excited to see her. The kids had been upset when Liberty had gone home early. I had to make sure I didn't do anything to push her away again.

I unpacked, sprayed myself with sunscreen and bug spray, and then headed out again. I planned to go by each of the cabins to make sure everything was going smoothly and no one needed my assistance.

I walked into the cabin that was the home of Fox House and caught Axel and Robby in the middle of some sort of dance they were teaching the other kids. "Just in time!" Sam said, shaking his head at me. "They're trying to get me to learn it, but I told them I'm too old for that sort of thing."

I arched an eyebrow at him as Axel ran over to me. "Come on, Coach Josh. It's fun. Slide left, kick right, turn, wave your arm like this, then twirl and jump."

I watched him go through the steps, confused, but I wasn't opposed to giving it a try. A few minutes later, I'd mastered the Fox House dance, and the kids were all cheering for me. "All right, guys. You all good? You need anything?" I'd spent too much time here and needed to move on.

The kids were fine, so I headed to the next cabin. I made my way through most of them before it was time to meet at the flagpole. Unfortunately, I didn't make it to Bear House, but when I saw Liberty walking across the grass with her girls, I knew she would've already handled any problems that arose. It was great to have her here.

Once everyone arrived, we formed into different groups under the supervision of head coaches and headed into the woods to explore the various paths. I made sure two to three houses were together so that the kids had a chance to visit with people from other cabins.

As we walked along, the coaches and I pointed out different flora and fauna around us. I'd decided to go with Bear House, Raccoon House, and Fish House since I hadn't made it down to visit any of them, and since Coach Christina was with us and knew everything about the plants and animals in

the forest around our campsite, I let her take the lead. She pointed out various flowers and wild grasses, as well as some poison ivy the kids needed to steer clear of.

The constant click of Liberty's camera was a welcome sound to me. I loved knowing she was here, that she was a part of this, and I could only imagine how many great candid shots she was getting.

The kids broke into a well-known hiking song, and I found myself joining in as we wound our way through the woods. When we reached a clearing, Coach Christina motioned for everyone to be quiet. Up ahead of us, a couple of deer stepped into the clearing. A doe and her fawn, the two majestic creatures paused, looking right at us, before taking off into the woods.

Liberty gasped beside me, turned, and smiled. The look of pure joy on her face had me grinning from ear to ear.

I wanted to reach over and grab her hand, but I kept myself from doing it. Instead, one of her girls, Elizabeth, grabbed her arm. "Did you see that, Miss Liberty?"

"I did," she said, wrapping her arm around Elizabeth's shoulders. "They were so beautiful, I forgot to take a picture." Liberty pressed her palm to her forehead, and the girls laughed. "I hope we see some more."

"Let's keep looking," Coach Christina suggested, and we took off again. The kids started singing another song, this time more quietly so that if we came across any other wildlife, we wouldn't scare them away.

The wind whipped through my hair, the sun warmed my skin, and my heart sang as I walked along with the kids that fueled my passion and the girl that gave me purpose. Could this life get any better? I had no idea how.



## LIBERTY

“L iberity? Liberty?”

The sound of someone calling my name seemed far away, like on the other side of a thick door. I turned over, pulling my blanket up around my neck. The earplugs I’d remembered to bring with me this time helped a lot with Karrie’s snoring, and now, they just might be preventing me from acknowledging the outside world altogether.

The feel of a hand on my shoulder had me opening my eyes. Turning over, I blinked blearily and looked up at the outline of a man standing next to my bed in the dark.

Sitting up, I pulled out one earplug, staring at him. “Joshua?” Was this a dream? Why was he standing in my bunkroom before the sun even came up?

He pressed a single finger to his lips as a signal for me to be quiet and then gestured for me to follow him outside. Still having no idea what was going on, I slipped my feet into my shoes and grabbed a shirt I had lying next to me in case one of the girls needed something in the middle of the night, tossing it on over my pajama top. Pulling my shorts down to cover my thighs, I got out of bed and stumbled outside.

Joshua was standing a few feet outside of the door, an anxious look on his face. For a moment, I thought maybe someone had gotten hurt. Was there an emergency back home? “What’s going on?”

“Melba has the flu,” he explained, shaking his head.

I stared at him, having no idea who he was talking about. “Like the toast?” I asked. God, I really needed to wake up. “Who is Melba?”

He snickered at me, probably thinking my question was ridiculous—

which it was. “She’s the head cook,” he told me. “Sweet older woman who always smells like cinnamon.”

“Right.” I remembered her now. “That’s terrible. Is she in the infirmary?”

“No, the nurse said she needed to go home right away. At her age, the flu can be very serious,” he explained, and I nodded along, waking up now. “Some of the other people on her team were already starting to feel ill. They’d already prepared dozens of muffins for breakfast this morning, but the nurse advised we throw those out in case they were contaminated.”

“That makes sense.” I thought that was one of the reasons cooks wore gloves, but I wouldn’t want to take any chances on making the kids sick. “So the entire kitchen staff has been compromised?”

“That’s right. They all went home a few minutes ago.” He dragged his hand down his face.

“And none of the food they prepared is viable?” I clarified.

“None of it.” Joshua had a desperate look on his face, and I was beginning to understand why.

“Cold cereal?” I asked with a shrug.

He laughed. “No, not on a day like this when the kids have so many activities ahead of them. We’re going fishing, remember?”

I nodded, that piece of information clicking into my memory. “Okay, so what are we going to do?”

He cleared his throat. “Wanna help me make breakfast?”

At first, I thought he was joking. “Yeah, sure. I’ll help you make breakfast for over two hundred people. No problem.”

He continued to look at me, unblinking, until I realized he was serious.

“Shit, really? God, Joshua, you know I’ll help you, but I’m not a good cook. I can make scrambled eggs—”

“Perfect! You make the eggs, I’ll fry the bacon, and if we have time, we can whip up some of those blueberry muffins my mom used to make. I know the recipe. I’ll just need your help pouring them into the tins and getting them all in the oven. Sound like a plan?” His tone was the same one he used when he was coaching the kids, excited and ready to go.

“Well, who am I to argue with that?” A smile pulled up the corner of my mouth. “Go team.”

Joshua laughed and reached over to touch my arm for a moment, which was nice. “Thank you, Libby. I knew I could count on you.”

It was nice hearing him call me that nickname. “Let me go get dressed,

and I'll be right out." He nodded in agreement, and I started to walk inside but paused before I opened the door. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Half past four," he said, making me groan. His amused look didn't falter.

After I was dressed and my hair was up in a bun, I came back out, thinking I probably looked like grim death, but I was happy to have the opportunity to help Joshua out. Besides, Karrie was still snoring away, and even with earplugs, I probably wouldn't have been able to fall back to sleep easily.

The kitchen was pristine with everything put in its place. Joshua said he wasn't surprised since Melba was such a professional. "If you can get the muffin tins out of that lower cabinet, I'll start grabbing the ingredients. I think we should make them first, since they'll need time to bake and cool."

Rather than telling him I thought he was being ambitious in wanting to make something like three hundred large blueberry muffins and eggs and bacon, I did as he asked, and together the two of us started preparing breakfast.

As we worked, I asked an important question. "What about lunch? Are we going to have to make three hundred sandwiches, too?"

"Nope, I've got a backup team on the way," he assured me, which had me sighing in relief. "But they won't be here until closer to noon."

"Got it." Relief washed over me as I realized I wouldn't have to spend the rest of the day in the kitchen.

Joshua and I worked well together, him mixing the muffins while I poured them into the containers and put them in the oven. He helped me make sure they didn't burn, which I had a habit of doing sometimes even with a timer, and once they were all done and cooling, he moved to bacon while I started with the eggs.

I'd fully expected to see that egg concoction in the carton, but Joshua wrinkled his nose and said, "We don't eat that shit here."

Laughing, I started cracking real eggs. "It's no wonder the scrambled eggs are so good here," I noted as I made my first batch of yolk, cheese, and milk to pour into a giant pan. I'd have to be super careful not to burn this while I continued to crack eggs and make my second batch.

The sizzle of bacon had my stomach growling and my mouth watering. Joshua was handling all of that meat like a boss, even with it crackling and tossing grease in his direction. I smiled over at him, once again impressed

with how he handled himself under pressure.

“This is nice,” he said as he set a batch of bacon over on some paper towels to drain. “I like doing stuff like this with you.”

Warmth flooded my face as I gave him a quick hip bump from my place behind the pan of eggs. “Yeah? I like it, too. Maybe one day we’ll get married and have two hundred children, and we can do it every day.”

Joshua’s rich laughter filled the kitchen. “Nah, I think I’ll stick to only being responsible for this many mouths at camp.” His eyes roamed over my face for a second before he said, “But I know you’ll be an excellent mother.”

Again, I felt heat rising in my cheeks, and it had nothing to do with the eggs. “Thanks. You’re going to be a great dad one day, too. I love how well you interact with the kids. It’s amazing.”

“Thank you.” He seemed genuinely flattered. “It’s the best part about my job. Well, now that you’re here, maybe second best.”

The eggs might’ve burned if he hadn’t stepped away from me just then to get more bacon out of the massive refrigerator behind him. I loved how candidly the two of us could speak to one another, but his compliments were beginning to make me want to push everything off the counter, jump up there, and pull him on top of me.

With a clearer head, I took the next batch of eggs, poured them into a silver warming container, and moved them beneath the lights on another counter. The sun was nearly up now, so we’d have to work quickly to get the food out to where the kids could fix their trays. In another half hour or so, they’d be pouring into the cafeteria, starving to death.

Stifling a yawn, I went back to make another batch of scrambled eggs while Joshua finished up the bacon. We’d also need to clean up the giant mess we’d made. Even though I’d tried to be careful, I’d still gotten egg all over the counter, and little specks of shell dotted the floor, amongst other random messes.

When all of the food was finally prepared, I fought through the exhaustion I was beginning to feel and helped Joshua carry the containers out to the bar, putting the extra containers below where they would stay warm and placing the serving spoons and tongs in the containers. Joshua grabbed clean trays and set them on the counter where the kids could grab them, and I set up the silverware. Thank goodness the kitchen staff had gotten everything cleaned before they got sick the night before.

With only a few minutes to spare, we had finished. “Now, we just need to

go clean up our mess,” Joshua noted as the first house filtered in through the doors.

Wiping my brow on the back of my hand, I nodded, but I didn’t want to go back in there. I just wanted to grab a muffin and go sit with my girls.

“Where’s Melba?” Coach Sam asked as his long legs carried him across the cafeteria. “Did you two make breakfast?”

Joshua and I exchanged a look and then laughed.

“Yep, we did. The kitchen staff got sick,” Joshua said.

Several other staff members gathered around, their eyes wide with surprise. “Why didn’t you wake more of us up?” Coach Marcy asked. “We would’ve helped.”

“We had it under control,” Joshua assured them.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Coach Christina asked.

I looked at Joshua and he looked at me. I prayed he could read my pleading look. God, I didn’t want to go back in there and clean up the mess. Hooking a thumb over his shoulder, Joshua said, “You guys can go clean up.”

I fully expected them to scatter and not want to touch that with a ten-foot pole, but several of them headed right through the swinging doors to the kitchen and started cleaning up the disaster. With that many people, it wouldn’t take very long.

“Thank you!” I shouted behind them.

Relieved, I grabbed a muffin and a glass of juice before giving Joshua a high-five and heading over to join my girls.

“These eggs are amazing,” Rhiannon was saying as I sat down at the end of the table. “So much better than usual.”

A glowing smile claimed my face. She had no idea I’d made them, so the compliment was genuine. Knowing that the kids were enjoying the fruits of our labors made me happy, but the fact that I’d been able to whip up breakfast for over two hundred hungry campers and the staff along with the man of my dreams was the true reason for my smile.

Across the cafeteria, I saw Joshua settling in at one of the tables, his tray full of bacon and eggs with one of our muffins on the side. He turned and caught my eye, and we shared another knowing smile. Was there anything the two of us couldn’t do together? I was beginning to think we were unstoppable.





## JOSHUA

I would've loved to have taken a nap before the day's activities got started, but I just didn't have time for it. Breakfast was a huge success with many of the kids noting that it tasted even better than usual. Hearing some of the coaches volunteer to go clean up the mess Liberty and I had made had been a plus. It allowed me a few minutes to chill out before we had to get on with it.

Pulling myself up from the table, I got everyone's attention and told them what the plan was for the day. "Some of you will start off down at the dock with fishing skills. Others will be learning the craft of whittling wood. Another group will be inside the pavilion playing games while the final group will start with tent-pitching class out on the green. Every two hours, we'll rotate with lunch between the second and third rotations at the usual time. Your coaches have your schedules. You'll have a few minutes to go back to your cabins to apply sunscreen and bug spray for those outside activities. If you have any questions, be sure to let your coach know. Now, let's get out there and have a fun day!"

With that, I clapped, and everyone began to move, the kids chatting with excitement as the coaches led them out of the cafeteria and back to their cabins to get ready. Rather than following them out immediately, I headed to the back of the cafeteria to make sure everything was in order. Of course, my staff had managed to clean up the horrible mess with no problems. I really had the best people working for me—for the most part.

Back at my cabin, the bed called my name, but I ignored it. The exhaustion I was feeling from being awakened in the middle of the night by

the nurse would simply have to wait. I couldn't let the kids down, and they'd expect me to be there today.

I took a quick shower, sprayed myself down with repellent and sunscreen, and put on a fresh shirt and shorts before heading out. Even though it was only a little after eight in the morning, the sun was already beating down. I went back inside and grabbed a hat before taking off again.

I caught up to Fox House on their way to the lake. The boys were chatting, talking about who was going to catch the biggest fish. Robby told Axel, "If I catch a bigger fish than you, you have to buy me an ice cream from the snack shop."

"Fine, fine," Axel said, not worried at all. "If I catch a bigger fish, I'll take a chocolate bar."

"Deal." The two of them shook on it as I snickered and passed them. I loved hearing the kids push each other to do better, as long as it was good-natured like this was.

Up ahead of Fox House, another group was arriving at the dock. I could tell that it was Bear House because I could hear Karrie's screech from halfway down the path. I should've popped a couple of aspirin before embarking on this journey, it seemed. With a sigh, I put a little more effort into my steps, hoping to catch up with the girls in time to help them get their fishing poles and get set so they could begin the day's activities. It was unfortunate that the first group to arrive was one without a proper coach.

It turned out it didn't matter. By the time I got there, Liberty had already started getting the poles out and handing them to the girls, telling them what they needed to do in order to start fishing. "Miss Karrie has the live bait," she was saying. "Go ahead and get your hooks, and if you don't know how to tie them on, I'll help you."

I paused, holding back a little as I watched her work. Most of the girls had been here in previous years, so they knew how to tie the hooks on, though some of them still needed help. But what really surprised me was when Liberty took the container of worms from Karrie and showed the girls how to slide them onto their hooks. A few of the girls squealed a little, but Liberty assured them it wasn't that big of a deal. "Just stick it on like this, and you're ready to go."

"Be careful when casting now!" Karrie shouted, destroying the otherwise relaxing ambiance and probably terrifying every fish within a twenty-mile radius.

By now, the boys had arrived, along with a couple of other cabins' worth of kids, and everyone was getting their poles ready as Bear House spread their way down the dock.

Liberty was right there in the middle of it. The girls gravitated toward her, many of them asking her questions as they prepared to cast their hooks into the lake for the first time. For a moment, I lost awareness of everyone else around me as I stared at her side profile, remembering how beautiful she'd been when the two of us were swimming together in this lake not all that long ago. If I allowed my mind to continue down that path, I'd end up back in my bed with Liberty on top of me, a dangerous thought to have in the middle of a fishing excursion with nearly fifty kids.

Clearing my throat, I turned around to find someone who needed help and spied a kid who couldn't get his hook settled. I helped him before moving on to help someone who'd gotten his line tangled up in some brush.

For the next half hour or so, I helped the kids get situated. For the most part, once everyone had their poles ready and their hooks in the water, there wouldn't be too much to do. If someone caught a fish, then we'd have to reel it in and all of that fun stuff, but mostly the kids wouldn't catch that much. Many of them hadn't been fishing before and weren't that talented. In my experience, fishing was more of an art than anything else.

Once everyone was settled down, I moved down the dock, closer to where Liberty was sitting with some girls from her cabin. "Tighten your line up just a bit," she said to one of them. "Reel it in. There you go."

"Gee, Miss Liberty, you sure know what you're doing," Monique noted. "How come you know so much about fishing?"

I listened in, wondering if Liberty could feel the weight of my stare on the side of her face. I could almost always tell when she was looking at me, so I imagined she could and didn't mind.

"Well, when I was younger, I used to go fishing with my dad and my older brother," she explained. "I had to learn pretty quickly how to put my own hooks and bait on, or my brother would tease me."

"That's not very nice," Tara noted. "Your brother sounds like a jerk."

Liberty giggled, and I stifled a laugh. "No, he's not. A lot of big brothers are like that. In a way, him being hard on me helped me because I learned a lot of stuff I might not have otherwise."

"Do you have any sisters?" Elizabeth asked.

"I do. My sister Sophia is in college," Liberty explained.

“Are you guys friends?” one of the other girls asked.

“We are very good friends,” Liberty said with a nod. “But Sophia doesn’t really like icky things like worms or bugs, so she didn’t go with us when we went fishing. She usually stayed home with our mom.”

I chuckled under my breath, picturing little Sophia from years ago refusing to go out fishing with the older kids. All of that added up to me. I’d been on a few of those fishing trips, and Liberty had held her own back then with all of us, just like she was doing now.

“It’s really cool how you know how to do so much stuff, Miss Liberty,” Monique said. “When I grow up, I want to be just like you.”

“Oh, Monique, that’s so sweet,” Liberty said, wrapping an arm around the girl’s shoulder. “Thank you so much, but I have to tell you, I’ve seen how brave and strong you are, and when I grow up, I wanna be like you.”

Monique giggled, her cheeks turning pink. “Thank you, Miss Liberty. That’s totally cool.”

Liberty turned and caught my eyes, and I grinned at her, so glad to have witnessed that exchange. Monique couldn’t have picked a better role model to emulate, that was for damn sure.

With Liberty at camp, everything was different. I could see the two of us growing closer together, not just because we were spending so much time together but because we were taking such a deep interest in what the other one enjoyed. In my mind, as the week progressed, I found myself constantly thinking about how it would be if this was my life—if the camp wasn’t just mine but *ours*. What if she never went back to work for Landon at the drop-ship company but she worked for me full-time? Even when I wasn’t at camp, she could still take pictures in the facility. We could use her photographs for other aspects of the business as well. Everywhere I looked, I saw opportunities for Liberty and me to grow together.

At the end of the first week, Liberty came to my cabin one evening, after the kids were in bed, camera in hand. “Can I show you something?” she asked in a teasing tone.

*She can show me lots of things*, I thought to myself. “Sure. Come on in,” I told her, and she walked through the door, heading not for the bed but for the sitting area.

It was then that I noticed she had her laptop with her. I sat down next to her, grasping that this was more of a business meeting than an attempt at a sleepover. We’d kept our distance from one another the best we could since

Landon had asked us to take it slow. Only a few brushes of our hands and a stolen kiss or two had transpired.

“What do you think of these?” Liberty pulled up some photographs she’d taken of this session. I gasped in awe when I saw the first few images. It was clear she’d used some of the techniques she’d been talking to me about before camp started. The effects were stunning.

One picture showed Axel reeling in a fish, and all of the droplets of water that splashed as the fish emerged from the water were caught in the frame, perfect teardrops against the blue of the water.

Another showed Monique laughing, her face framed perfectly by the sun behind her head and the leaves of a tree.

“Wow, Liberty.” I shook my head, my eyes wide as I took the pictures in. “This is amazing.”

“Do you like them?” she asked, biting down on her bottom lip as she awaited my response.

“I love them,” I told her. “They’re breathtaking... magical.” Looking into her eyes, I added, “Just like you.”

Liberty’s cheeks pinked. “I’m glad you like them,” she told me, but she didn’t get another word out before my lips captured hers, pulling her into a passionate kiss.

She pulled back and looked up at me, surprised by my actions, but then, she tipped her head and kissed me, and everything was right with the world.

As we continued to kiss, I couldn’t help thinking about the fact that camp was almost over. Soon enough, we’d be back home, back to the real world.

Back to where Landon would be constantly monitoring our every move. I hoped he was sincere in his statement that he wanted us to date one another, but if he wasn’t, things were about to get super messy.



## LIBERTY

“I can’t believe this camp session is almost over,” Tara lamented from her bunk just a few feet from my bed. Sitting with my knees up, my laptop open and propped where I could use my editing tools, I listened to the girls talking.

“This one flew by,” Rhiannon agreed. “I wish we could stay here longer.”

“School will be starting soon,” Monique reminded them. The girls groaned, and Elizabeth hit her with a pillow. “Don’t shoot the messenger,” Monique whined.

I stifled a laugh, but I totally got what they were saying. This session had seemed to go by a lot more quickly than the first one. Once again, I thought about how nice it would be if I could take photographs for a living. My parents had enough money to support me if I wanted to try it again, but I didn’t want to be dependent upon them or anyone else. I wanted to be able to afford to start my own business by myself.

Besides, part of the joy of working at the camp had been working with the kids. I just loved the girls I’d gotten to know here, and I would miss them. They’d all promised to follow me on Instagram when they got home, so at least I’d be able to keep track of them through social media.

My mind went to Joshua as well. Being out here at camp with him, away from the distractions of our crazy families and everything else going on around us, was just what we’d needed in order to see what life could be like. We made an amazing team, and I love spending time with him. Seeing his passions made me even more excited about what the future could hold—if Landon was serious about letting us give this life a try.



“Miss Liberty, are you sad that camp’s almost over?” Tara asked. “Are you going to miss us?”

I looked over at her for a moment and saw the sadness in her eyes. I felt it in my heart. “Of course, I’ll miss you,” I told her. I put my laptop aside and patted my bed.

A bunch of the girls flocked over, as many as could fit on my bed finding a spot. Karrie’s bed was right next to mine, and she scooted over so that they could sit there as well. It was difficult to fit twelve girls and two grown women on the beds, but we managed.

“What’s your favorite part been?” Elizabeth asked, leaning her head on my shoulder.

“You guys,” I told them, looking around from one face to another. “I’ve loved getting to know all of you. I’m excited about what the upcoming school year holds for all of you. Not just that, but the future in general. You are all going to be amazing young women one day soon, out there conquering the world. It’ll be great to watch you do it.”

“What about you?” Monique asked. “Are you going to go back to your other job, or are you going to keep working for Coach Joshua?”

I swallowed hard, not exactly sure how to answer that question. I wondered if the girls had noticed anything going on between Joshua and me. We’d tried to keep it as off the radar as possible, but I was pretty sure anyone with a discerning eye could tell. But then, Landon hadn’t noticed for all of these years, so maybe Joshua and I were more covert than we realized.

“I would love to be a photographer full-time,” I told them. “What that might look like, I’m not sure.”

“It seems odd to me that grownups tell us we can be whatever we want to be, but then, they so seldom have their dream jobs,” Tara said in a thoughtful tone.

“I have my dream job,” Karrie chimed in, her voice much too chipper for the somber conversation we had been having about missing one another. “I get to work for a great company with lots of great people. And I have an amazing boss.”

Some of the girls giggled under their breath at Karrie’s last comment, which threw me off. What were they laughing about exactly?

“I bet she enjoys working for that boss,” one of the girls whispered to the girl next to her and they both laughed. What was I missing?

“Do you still have a crush on Coach Joshua?” Monique asked, point

blank.

My mouth fell open as I started to ask her how she knew, but then I realized she wasn't looking at me.

She wasn't talking to me.

"Oh, definitely," Karrie said, her face lighting up. She gave her hair a shake and brushed some loose strands over her shoulders. "As a matter of fact, can I tell you all a secret?"

My stomach twisted into a knot. Karrie had a crush on Joshua? For how long? Was he aware of this? Why hadn't he ever mentioned it to me?

"Sure, Miss Karrie. Your secret is safe with us," Elizabeth assured her.

Karrie cleared her throat and paused, possibly for dramatic effect, before she said, "We're going on a date."

"What?" Monique asked as the other girls squealed and covered their faces, a few of them bouncing up and down on the bed. "You're going on a date with Coach Joshua?"

The sickening feeling that had begun to consume me only a moment ago now traveled up my esophagus, the taste of bile in the back of my throat so strong, I truly thought I might vomit. What in the world was she talking about?

"That's right," Karrie said, sheer joy beaming off her face. "We are going on a date as soon as camp is over. I'm so excited. I keep trying to decide what I should wear."

"Definitely go with red," Tara suggested. "You look really good in red, Miss Karrie."

"You think?" Karrie wrinkled her nose and tapped her chin with one finger, clearly loving all of the attention she was getting from the girls. I couldn't speak. My eyes were starting to mist over as I contemplated what was going on. How had I missed this?

"See," Karrie continued. "This is just a testimony to all of you to keep pursuing your dreams. Last year around this time, I mentioned how I thought Josh was the perfect man, and you asked me if I had a crush on him. It's taken a full year for the two of us to realize we have feelings for one another, but it's finally happened. All this time, I've been dreaming of him, and it turns out he likes me, too. He was just too shy to let me know until a few days ago. Now, we have our first date planned, and my life couldn't be more perfect."

"That's great, Miss Karrie." Something about Elizabeth's tone seemed

not as sincere as usual. "I'm happy for you."

"Thank you, Lizzy," she said, and I felt the girl next to me cringe. She hated it when people called her that. Karrie always abbreviated people's names even though they didn't like it. Like calling Joshua *Josh*. It always bothered me when she did that since he didn't really like it. At least, he'd always told me he didn't like it. Maybe there was more about Joshua that I didn't know. Was it possible Karrie was more of a Joshua expert than I was?

The conversation around me shifted as the girls started talking about cute boys at camp or boyfriends back home. I kept a smile plastered on my face and willed myself to nod along and be present, but in my mind, I was going over everything that had transpired between Joshua and me this summer, trying to figure out how the two of us had had sex twice, kissed several times, and talked about our future all while he was secretly dating Karrie.

Karrie had mentioned that they'd just decided to go on this date recently. I went over everything I knew about the two of them, and an image popped into my head. I almost made an audible noise as pieces of the puzzle fell together.

The day we'd gotten back from Florida, I'd seen Karrie leaving his office with that huge grin on her face, similar to the one she wore now. Was that because she'd been in there with him talking about their relationship? Perhaps being away from her in Florida was all Joshua needed to make him realize he had true feelings for her.

Gulping back a groan, I continued to go over everything, thinking about how he'd been treating me lately. We'd been spending so much time together here. I hadn't seen him go out of his way to speak to Karrie or even smile at her. Was that because he didn't want me to know? If he was trying to keep her a secret, he would do everything he could to hide their relationship from me while sneaking off with her behind my back.

There'd been a few times when Karrie had said she was going for a walk or down to the lake. Maybe she was secretly meeting him there. The two of us had met at the lake during the last camp session, so it could happen without anyone knowing.

I didn't want to believe it, but it wasn't as if I'd never been caught off guard by the way a man had treated me before. Grady's face appeared in my mind's eye. He had been awful to me, and it had completely blindsided me. I'd had no idea that he was capable of being such a colossal asshole until he admitted that he'd never been interested in anything but fucking me. Landon

had wanted to pound him into the ground. I would've let him, too, but Grady slipped away. If Landon ever saw him again, even all these years later, he was bound to ram his fist down his throat.

"All right girls, it's lights out." Drill Sergeant Karrie was back, despite the nice conversation we'd been having. The moment the clock ticked over to ten, she was ready for everyone to hit the hay. "We have a busy day tomorrow, so let's get to our own beds so we can rest."

Reluctantly, the girls pulled themselves off our beds and headed to their bunks. I waited until all of them were settled before heading to the bathroom to get ready for bed.

In the mirror, I could see in my own expression that something was bothering me. I looked like I was about to cry. How had the girls missed that? Thank goodness Karrie hadn't noticed. The last thing I needed was for her to think I was jealous of her.

But if what she said was true, I was, wasn't I? It made no sense for her to lie about it, though. So why wouldn't she be telling the truth?

Sighing, I finished up and headed to bed, glad that the next day was our last one here. If I had to pretend to be nice to Joshua for more than a few hours after what I'd just been told, I didn't think I'd be able to do it.

I just couldn't figure out why he would treat me this way. Didn't he really like me? Hadn't he always? I'd thought so, but then, the last time I'd been here, he'd mistreated me, too.

Maybe Karrie was simply a less complicated choice. Perhaps he knew Landon wasn't serious when he said that the two of us could date, and Joshua simply wasn't willing to take the chance.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, my earplugs in place to drown out the sound of Karrie's snoring, but every breath she took felt like a jackhammer to my soul. Everything about this situation left my heart aching and my head hurting. I had found a way to overcome what had happened between Grady and me, but losing Joshua would be a million times worse.

I didn't think I could ever recover.



## JOSHUA

Waking up on the last day of summer camp was always bittersweet, especially when it was session two. And especially this year since that meant that Liberty and I would be going back home, back to our old life, back to tiptoeing around behind Landon's back.

At least, we would be forced to do that for a little while as we tested out the waters to make sure that Landon was serious when he said he didn't mind me dating his sister. As much as I wanted to leap in with both feet and embrace this newfound Landon, I'd known the guy long enough to realize there was a good chance he was going to change his mind once he actually saw the two of us together. That's just how he was.

He had a picture in his head of what he thought our romance should look like, and if any of the lines got blurred or didn't follow along exactly like he thought they should, he'd try to upend the whole thing, as if we could just amend our feelings based on what he'd like for us to do.

Sighing, I stretched and got out of bed, wishing I'd had the opportunity to bring Liberty back here at least once this camp session. But I'd avoided that situation because it hadn't been a good idea to dive in so deep. We'd made out a little when she came over to show me her pictures, but that was it. Until the situation with Landon was a non-issue, we had to take it slow for sanity's sake.

After a shower, I got dressed and headed to the cafeteria. Memories of making breakfast with Liberty for everyone early on in this session had me laughing. I couldn't wait to see her smiling face as I entered the room.

Only, she wasn't smiling. In fact, Liberty looked miserable. I stopped in

my tracks, a few feet inside the entryway, listening to the hum of the kids talking to one another as they ate their final breakfast here this summer. My eyes were glued to that beautiful face. Her mouth was turned down in a frown as she marched her eggs around her plate with her fork but didn't actually ever take a bite.

Something was very wrong. As I strode over to her, I thought maybe she was just upset to have to say goodbye to the girls. I knew how fond of them she'd grown over the weeks. Placing my hand on her shoulder, I said, "Good morning, Liberty," and I smiled at the other girls at the table, avoiding Karrie's gaze as she was giving me a strange stare.

Liberty pulled away from me and only mumbled something under her breath that might've been *hi*, but I wasn't sure. It was odd.

Before I could say more to her, one of the girls asked, "What are we doing today, Coach Joshua? Is it a lake day before we go home?"

"It is," I told her. "Some of the staff is out there right now getting the waterslides ready."

That made the entire table cheer, which made my smile more genuine. Liberty still wasn't smiling though. I returned my attention to her, but she wasn't having any of it. "See you guys in a bit," she said, grabbing her tray and getting up abruptly, walking away from me to toss her untouched food in the garbage, return her tray, and bolt out the door.

I took a few steps to go after her but didn't get far. Sam's hulking body appeared in front of me. "Good morning, Joshua. I've got a kid over here who's got a rash. I'm not sure he should be in the lake."

I stared at Sam for a moment, annoyed that he'd interrupted me, but then, this was my job—taking care of kids who needed help, not chasing after staff members who may or may not have a problem with me. Shaking my head to clear it, I asked, "Has he been to the nurse?"

"Not yet," Sam said, and I followed him over to his table, already wound up in the never-ending tasks associated with leading the camp.

For the next couple of hours, I ran around putting out fires, making sure everyone had everything they needed in order to enjoy our last day. It seemed the further along in the session we went, the needier some of the kids became, and the staff was usually so exhausted by that point, they just wanted to be done with it all. That put more on my shoulders, which I normally wouldn't mind, but today, I needed to find time to talk to Liberty.

I didn't get a chance to truly stick my toes in the water until near

lunchtime. We were doing a come-and-go picnic where the kids could grab a sandwich, chips, a cookie, and a drink, eat whenever they wanted, and then hop back in the lake. Since the plan was to get everyone out of the water by one, cleaned up by two, and loaded in the buses by three, I had to make sure everything was running smoothly.

I had just taken a few steps into the shallow portion of the water when I saw Liberty with some of her girls under a tree eating their sandwiches. I watched her for a few moments, noting how amazing she looked in her bathing suit, the way the sun glinted through the vibrant leaves of the tree to catch the golden strands in her hair. She was always the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, but when she didn't know I was looking, that was when she seemed more like an angel than an actual person.

The water felt good on my warm skin, but I needed to speak to her. Without even getting my swim trunks wet, I pulled myself out of the lake and headed over to where they were talking and laughing together. I hated to interrupt since it was clear they were in the middle of something, but as soon as I approached, the girls greeted me. "Hey, Coach Joshua!" they all shouted and then laughed.

"Hi," I said, smiling. "How are you guys doing?"

"Good," Monique answered for everyone. "Miss Karrie is over there with some of the other staff members."

"Okay," I said with a shrug. I assumed she just wanted me to know where her other supervisor was. "How are you, Liberty?"

"Fine." She didn't even lift her head to look at me. "Tara, tell me again about that English teacher you mentioned before, the one with the hiccups."

"Oh, yeah. He was so funny!" Tara launched into a story, and I just stood there, realizing this was Liberty's way of letting me know that she didn't want to speak to me, but I had no idea why. She didn't have her camera with her today, which was fine since she'd already gotten so many amazing pictures. So I could've chalked it up to her just wanting to concentrate on the girls, but normally, she would've been happy to see me.

Sighing, I turned around and walked away, not sure what else I could possibly do. I wanted to take her hand and pull her up, leading her away from the girls to talk about all this, but that would've been enough to cause a scene, and I didn't want to alarm any of the kids.

Reluctantly, I headed back to the lake, jumping off the dock into a deeper part. A splash went up, hitting some of the guys that were hanging around



there. They all laughed, some of them cheering for me, none of them realizing it was an act of aggression meant to regulate my feelings.

I stayed under for a while, letting the water surround me and bring the real world out of focus. Down here, everything was different. Plants, fish, insects, an entire new ecosphere revealed itself to me through the murky green water. I stayed down until my lungs began to burn a little, and then I shot to the surface, pulling in a lungful of air.

“We thought you might need help down there, Coach,” Axel said, grinning at me. “Dang, you can stay under a long time.”

“Just looking at the fish,” I assured him, even though it wasn’t quite true. “I don’t recommend you guys stay down for quite that long.”

“I’d drown,” Robby noted, and I nodded along with him. It probably wasn’t a good idea for me to do it either, and it hadn’t helped my disposition.

I wouldn’t be able to stay in the water long anyway. I had to go check that the buses were going to be arriving on time, amongst other things. I swam around with the guys from Fox House for a bit, trying not to think about how some of them were seniors and this would be their last visit to camp, before I headed to the shore and pulled myself out of the water.

“Hi, Josh!” Karrie’s voice grated on my last nerve as I grabbed a towel and wrapped it around me. “Camp sure has been busy.”

I raised an eyebrow, not sure what she was getting at. “It always is.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t get a chance to see one another more.” Her eyelashes were going to town, like usual, blinking up a storm. “But I’m looking forward to dinner.”

At first, I was confused. If she was hungry, she could go grab another sandwich. But then I remembered that we’d made plans to have dinner together once we got back so that we could talk about the future. I hoped that included her quitting or me coming up with a plan to fire her. I hadn’t had a whole lot of opportunities to think about it with camp going on, so all I did was nod. “Yep. It’ll be nice. Excuse me.”

With that, I stepped around her and headed back toward my cabin. I may as well go take a shower to rinse off the lake and then start facilitating the successful transport of everyone back to civilization. Inevitably, someone left something somewhere and we had to stop and turn around. I’d like to avoid that if possible this time.

By a quarter till three, we had everyone heading toward the buses, bags in hand, staff members going back to check all the cabins for any items that

might've been left behind. I thought we might actually be able to roll out of here on time for once.

The kids chatted as they climbed onto the buses, but many of them had sad looks on their faces. No one ever wanted camp to end.

"Looks like we've got everything," Marcy told me, coming back from the cabins. "All the kids are out here, so as soon as they get loaded up, we can go."

"Perfect. Thank you." I clapped her on the shoulder and then headed onto the bus, my eyes roaming the rows for Liberty.

She was sitting in the back with Elizabeth. A sigh escaped my lips as I realized she didn't want to sit by me.

"Hey, Josh!" Karrie shouted from a few rows to my left. "Saved you a seat!"

I swallowed hard and looked around for other options. Seeing none, I reluctantly sank down beside her, knowing she'd talk my fucking ear off the entire ride home.

We pulled out of the camp parking lot a few minutes later as Karrie told me a story about a squirrel she'd seen at the lake. I tried to stay engaged, but it was hard. What in the world was wrong with Liberty?

Finally, we arrived back at the sports complex. Normally, I would stand by the bus door and tell all the kids goodbye, but I had to keep an eye on Liberty. I needed to talk to her. I saw her hugging her girls as they all grabbed their bags, and then, she turned and looked at me with fire in her eyes.

Saying nothing, she turned and walked around the back of the bus. Impulsively, I followed her, cutting through kids, probably ignoring some of them who were trying to tell me goodbye. I caught up to Liberty as she was getting into her car. "What's going on?" I shouted to her.

Still looking like she wanted to run me through with a javelin, she said, "I know everything, Joshua. Karrie told me, okay? You're a complete and utter asshole, even worse than Grady because I thought you actually cared about me." Tears glistened in her eyes as she threw her bags into her car. "Go to hell, Joshua. I never, ever want to see you or speak to you again."

With that, she got in and drove off, her tires squealing across the pavement.

My mouth hung open as I watched, confused and overwhelmed.

What the fuck was she talking about?



## LIBERTY

The drive home from the sports complex was exhausting. It had taken everything I had within me to keep from crying at camp, but as soon as I was alone in the car, the tears came flooding out of me. The stupid romantic song on the radio didn't help. I punched it to turn the damn thing off and ended up hurting my hand.

What the fuck had Joshua been thinking? Did he really think he could put the two women he was fucking around with in the same cabin, and they wouldn't ever talk about him? Maybe he thought Karrie and I were different enough that we wouldn't like one another and we wouldn't speak. To a degree, that was true. Karrie was absolutely obnoxious and bothered me in more ways than I could count. But it was inevitable that she would mention her date with him, how they were secretly seeing one another, eventually. It wasn't as if she was the quiet type.

Still fuming, I made my way into our neighborhood, hoping Joshua got caught up telling the kids goodbye or something so that I wouldn't have to worry about him showing up at my house. I parked in the garage so maybe Joshua would think I wasn't home. Landon's car wasn't there.

Getting out of the car, I pulled out my phone and checked my calendar trying to figure out where my brother was. I'd marked down that he had a business trip that I'd otherwise totally forgotten about. Relieved that I wouldn't have to face Landon again, I grabbed my stuff and headed inside.

The house was quiet as I made my way to the laundry room to take my clothes out of my luggage. The last thing I needed was to accidentally leave a wet bathing suit in there for a couple of weeks. With that chore done, I went

to my room and deposited everything else in the corner—for now. I should've gone ahead and unpacked the rest, but I was exhausted both physically and mentally, so I fell face first onto my bed.

What the fuck was Joshua thinking?

I didn't have an answer for that. It didn't make any sense, and it just made me sad. Was it possible this was his attempt to blow me off? At the end of camp last time, he'd just decided to give me the cold shoulder, so maybe this time he thought it would be easier if he had someone else ruin our relationship for him. He could have Karrie tell me that he was in love with her and not even have to open his mouth.

The whole thing was depressing. I'd just begun to think there was a good chance that Joshua and I might have a future together, especially since Landon had given us his blessing. Now, everything seemed ruined in every way imaginable.

The urge to go to sleep for the next couple of weeks and only get up in time for my brother's wedding, even missing the trip to Bali, was tempting. But my family and friends would never let me get away with that anyway. No, this was the sort of problem that begged for friendship, lots of good food, and wine.

It was a given that I'd have to have Poppy over for this. She was my best friend, and I needed her shoulder to cry on. I wished that Sophia was available, but she had gone back to school, and there was no way I was bothering my sister on her way back here for our Bali trip because Joshua was an asshole. No, I'd need someone else to make me feel better about this situation. Or at least help me understand what had gone on.

"Hannah," I muttered, pulling my phone out of my pocket to send her a text. Of course! Joshua's little sister might have some insight into this whole issue. Maybe she could explain to me how it was I'd managed to miss the fact that her brother was a jackass for so many years. Surely, with all the time she'd spent living with the man, she could explain his complete disregard for someone he claimed to care about and how it seemed to make no difference to him whatsoever that he'd crushed my soul.

I sent Poppy a text asking her if she wanted to come over for some girl time, and she answered almost immediately. Hannah said she'd be over in about an hour, which left me with a bit of time to drag myself off the bed and figure out what we should do for dinner.

I went downstairs and checked to see how much wine we had. Two

bottles seemed like enough for three girls, even with the mood I was in. I sent Hannah and Poppy both another text asking if Chinese sounded good to them, and when they said yes, I ordered from a local restaurant for delivery. Then, I headed into the living room to mindlessly watch some Netflix while I waited.

Poppy got there first, since she just lived across the street. “Hey!” she said, coming through the door with open arms. “How are you?” Before I could even respond, she said, “Oh, no. What happened?”

“What? My face tells all my secrets now?” I asked, trying not to cry.

Shrugging, she said, “Maybe not to everyone, but it sure does to me. Did something happen with Joshua again?”

I let out a loud sigh and nodded. “I’d just as soon wait until Hannah gets here to go over it all, though.”

“Okay.” I could tell she was concerned and didn’t want to wait for me to tell her, but Poppy had always been a very patient person, so she was content to wait. The two of us went into the living room, talking about what had been going on in Poppy’s life, until Hannah arrived.

She didn’t notice how upset I was as she came into the living room, telling us that she’d seen Luke doing some yard work. “That man is fine,” she said, dropping down onto the couch.

That made me laugh, but then, I was also a little jealous. They wouldn’t have any interference from older siblings if they tried to be together. I still wasn’t sure if it was Landon who had come between Joshua and me, since being with Karrie would just be less complex than dating me.

“What’s up with you?” Hannah asked. “I haven’t seen my brother yet. Did you guys have a good time?”

I opened my mouth to reply, not knowing what was going to pour out, but before I could speak, the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” Poppy said, leaping up off the couch to go get the food.

“What’s the matter?” Hannah asked. “You look like I just asked about your dog five minutes after it got hit by a car.”

I swallowed hard. “Let’s wait for Poppy,” I told her.

Hannah nodded, but the look in her eyes didn’t fade. A moment later, Poppy was back. She set the containers out on the coffee table while I poured the wine. We took our time fixing our plates, each of us taking a little bit of everything, and we ate in relative silence watching the television show I’d put on, me avoiding the question, the two of them concerned but unwilling to ask again until I was ready to talk about it.

Finally, when we were done eating, the mess was cleaned up, and I'd refilled the wine glasses, I said, "Hannah, dear, your brother is an asshole."

Her eyebrows lifted, and I could see she was alarmed. Poppy was, too.

"What happened?" Hannah wasn't aware of much of what had transpired between her brother and me since my first session of camp, so with a deep breath, I jumped in at that first kiss we'd shared in the woods on the night of the big campfire.

Since Joshua was her brother, I glossed over the sex, but I did mention it. I included the fact that he'd blown me off the next day after we'd slept together for the first time, but then, I told her how he'd made it up to me.

I admitted to her that we'd snuck upstairs and had sex during the wedding party trip to Florida. I told her how we'd been close since then and how we'd both been super happy about the fact that Landon had said we could try dating. "We weren't overly clingy at the second session of camp," I admitted. "But we did make out a little once, and we spent a lot of time together, just talking, having conversations that I thought were making us a better couple."

"So what the hell happened?" Hannah asked, her eyebrows knitted together in confusion.

I let out a sigh and gulped my wine. After three glasses, I was beginning to feel it. "I found out about the other woman."

"What?" That came from Poppy. "No way. Joshua doesn't have another woman."

"Oh, yes he does," I argued, pointing at her with my wine glass. "She told me all about it. How they were going out as soon as they got back from camp. She's had a crush on him for a long time, and it's finally paying off, that's what she said." I sounded ridiculous, like some belligerent person trying to convince a police officer that they weren't drunk, but the more wine I had in me, the more certain I was that what Karrie had told me was the truth.

"I am not aware of any other girl," Hannah said, shaking her head. "Joshua talks about you all the time. He never even mentions anyone else. Liberty, are you sure this woman wasn't just fucking with you?"

In the back of my mind, I knew that was a possibility, but I didn't want to admit it. "Nope. She doesn't know that I like Joshua, so why would she do that? I think he just got scared about Landon and decided if he had another woman, he wouldn't have to worry about me anymore."

"That's fucked up," Hannah said.

“I know.” I took another drink of my wine.

Hannah shook her head. “No, not what you’re accusing my brother of—what you just said. Liberty, he’s been in love with you for, well, forever. There’s no way in hell he’s going out with another woman. The only other girl he’s ever even mentioned in the last couple of months is that psycho Karrie.”

“That’s it! That’s her,” I told her, nodding as a rush of vindication washed through me. “See? His secret woman.”

“No,” Hannah said, setting her wine glass down. “Not like that. He’s going out with Karrie for dinner because she wants to talk to him about her future working for him. He agreed to it because he thinks it’s time to let her go. He’s dreading it. Joshua can’t stand Karrie.”

I stared at her, my mouth hanging open, not sure what to say. Now, I was beginning to doubt Hannah.

“Why would she think that was a date?” Poppy asked while I continued to gape.

“I have no fucking idea,” Hannah said. “Maybe she suspects you like him and just wanted to fuck with you. I’m telling you, Liberty, there’s absolutely nothing going on between my brother and Karrie. He would’ve never hired her in the first place if my dad hadn’t forced him. It was a favor for a family friend. Her dad and our dad go way back.” She rolled her eyes. “If you’re upset that Joshua is going to dinner with Karrie, you have nothing to worry about.”

Even though I was drunk, her words registered in my mind. I let them resonate, realizing I’d overreacted. I’d said some awful things to the man I loved because I’d believed what some crazy woman said behind his back.

“Shit,” I whispered. “Man, did I fuck up.”





## JOSHUA

I'd gone to bed super early the night before but lay in bed staring up at the ceiling for a long time. Being away at camp for so long was both physically and emotionally exhausting, but I couldn't sleep. My mind kept going back to Liberty, the ugly words she'd yelled at me in the parking lot of the sports complex, and why she would possibly think any of that was true.

If there was one thing I'd learned from being Landon's best friend, and watching him navigate his early relationship with Poppy, it was that women could be unpredictable at times. I had no idea what I'd done or said to make Liberty react that way, but I knew something similar had happened with Landon and Poppy. I could only hope that Liberty and I would find a way to get through this like they had done.

The sun wasn't even up yet when my eyes opened. Exhaustion had settled into every fiber of my being, but I had a lot to do that day, and something told me even if I attempted to go back to sleep, I wouldn't be able to. I might get a few minutes in, but I'd be right back where I was in no time at all, thinking about Liberty and wondering what the day might hold.

With both sessions of camp over, our wedding trip, and plenty of wedding planning already behind me, all that was left of the summer was our vacation and the wedding itself. Thinking of the trip to Bali, I realized I needed to do some laundry before I repacked my suitcases. It seemed I was living out of luggage these days. With a deep sigh, I threw back the covers and got out of bed.

Out of habit more than anything else, I checked my phone, not expecting

there to be anything from Liberty, not after how mad she'd been the day before. I doubted anything could change her mood overnight. So I was surprised when I saw a text from her from very late last night—early this morning—that said, “Can you meet me at the coffee shop downtown this morning, please?”

Something about the way she'd phrased the request made me think that something had happened to make her realize nothing she'd screamed at me was true. I thought about what she might've done when she got home last night and figured she'd probably seen Poppy. Landon was out of town on business, so maybe they had a girls' night out, and Poppy convinced her she was overreacting to whatever it was that had her so bent out of shape.

I didn't even think twice when I replied, “Of course. What time?”

I got up to go to the bathroom, thinking she might still be asleep and not answer for a while, but when I returned, there was a response telling me to meet her at nine.

That gave me a couple hours. I took a shower and got cleaned up before starting the laundry. I managed to get a load washed, dried, and put away before I headed out the door, my heart heavy in my chest. While I was hopeful she'd gotten over whatever it was that had made her so upset, I wasn't certain. She could be asking to speak to me because she wanted to tell me that we weren't working anymore, that she didn't want to see me again.

Could she actually break up with me when technically we weren't even dating? I wasn't sure, but hearing her say she meant it when she said she never wanted to see me again the day before would probably send me over the edge. I wasn't sure that was something I could ever recover from.

The coffee shop was a bit busy when I pulled into a spot and turned my engine off. A lot of people were out and about early, possibly on their way to work or to the airport to head off on their own vacations. It wasn't too hot out yet, but the weather report had promised another scorcher. In some ways, I was ready for summer to be over just so I could enjoy the fall air.

The bell above the door dinged as I walked inside. Looking around, I didn't see Liberty at first and thought maybe I'd gotten there first, but then I saw her sitting in a booth in the very back of the café, a cup of steaming coffee in front of her and her face downcast as she stared into the black brew, her hair cascading around her as if she was trying to hide.

Maybe she was. It was clear that she wasn't feeling particularly chipper, based on her body language. I needed to find out what was going on, but

whatever she had to say, coffee would make it better. I stepped up to the counter and ordered my usual, leaving a nice tip before heading over to join her.

I stood by the side of the booth for a moment, staring at her. Even when she looked so unbelievably sad, she was still the most beautiful woman in the world. It took her a few seconds to realize I was there. When she finally did, she lifted her head, her eyes rimmed with red. “Hey.” Her voice was soft and weak.

“Hi.” I slid into the booth across from her, my forehead creased with concern. “What’s going on, Libby? You look really upset.”

“I am really upset,” she admitted. “Joshua, I owe you a huge apology. I’m so sorry for everything I said to you yesterday. I was confused and heartbroken by something I’d heard. That isn’t an excuse, though. I should’ve come to you and talked to you about it, given you a chance to explain, and I’m very sorry I didn’t do that.”

Regardless of what it was that she’d heard about me, at the moment, all I could think about was the fact that she was hurting. Reaching across the table, I took her hand in mine. “It’s all right, Liberty. I’m not sure what happened, but we can work it out. What is it that you heard?”

She drew in a shuddering breath, shaking her head slightly before she replied. “Karrie told me the two of you are dating.”

“What?” I couldn’t help the shock that raised the volume of my voice. We both looked around to see if anyone was staring. Thankfully, everyone seemed caught up in their own conversations. “She told you we were dating?”

Liberty nodded. “That’s right. In front of all the girls in our cabin, she said that she’d had a crush on you since last year and that the two of you were going to go out once you got back. It was like a little speech about how they shouldn’t give up on their dreams or some bullshit. Anyway, I felt betrayed, like maybe you’d been seeing us both at the same time. Or maybe you just decided that it was too difficult to date me because of my brother, so you decided to go out with her instead. I didn’t know. I couldn’t make a lot of sense out of it, and I was so upset that thinking about it clearly was impossible.”

“Liberty, I can assure you that there’s no way in hell that I would ever want to go out with Karrie for any reason. I can’t stand her. She drives me insane. Why she would tell you or anyone else that we’re dating is beyond

me. Honestly, if there was something that came up that made me not want to date you, I'd let you know, though I don't think that could ever be the case. You have to know I'd never disrespect you like that."

"I do know," she said with a nod, squeezing my hand. "I just overreacted. I guess I was thinking about what happened during the first camp session and how you hadn't wanted to talk to me about your feelings then, so I decided you must've determined you'd rather go out with her and not let me know, figuring I'd find out the truth eventually."

Letting out a deep sigh, I ran my free hand through my hair. I couldn't blame her for thinking I might do something douche-y after the way I'd treated her after the first night we'd slept together. "I hate that any of this has happened, Liberty. From now on, we've got to be open and communicate with one another better. Both of us. Especially me. You have to be able to trust me as much as I trust you. Okay?"

She nodded. "I do trust you. I hope you know you can tell me how you're feeling and not have to worry about anything with me. I'm here for you, Joshua."

I wanted to lean across the booth and kiss her right then and there, but Franklin was a relatively small town, and I had no idea who might see us. "I trust you."

"Good." She let out a sigh and brushed her hair back over her shoulder. "Thank god that's over."

"Yeah. Who told you the truth anyway?" I asked.

"Hannah." She picked up her coffee cup and took a sip as I nodded. "She came over last night, and I was all out of sorts. When I told her what Karrie had said, she almost blew a gasket. She said you're thinking about firing her?"

"I am thinking about firing her." It was then that I realized I was supposed to go out with Karrie—to talk about her future with the company. Had Karrie really thought it was a date, or was that just her way of manipulating the situation? I didn't know for sure, but I'd have to make sure she was clear that I had no romantic interest in her. "I would've never hired her in the first place if our dads weren't friends."

"That's what Hannah said," Liberty replied with a nod. "Karrie doesn't quite seem to fit in with the rest of your staff."

"To put it mildly." I tried not to roll my eyes. "Anyway, the last thing I want to talk about right now is Karrie. Are you excited about our Bali trip?"

Liberty's face lit up. "Yes, I can't wait. I need to go home and pack soon, though."

"Are you going to bring that little pink bikini?" I couldn't help but grin at her, just thinking about how stunning she'd looked in that.

Her cheeks turned all rosy. "I was planning on it."

"Good." We spent a few more minutes chatting about the trip as we finished our coffee, and by the time we got up to walk out together, I knew everything between us was going to be all right. I just hoped that this was the last misunderstanding we'd have to endure. With Landon giving us the green light to finally pursue our relationship, I wanted to focus on the future, on moving forward, and not let anything get in the way of the two of us finally building that trusting bond we'd always known we could have.

As I walked Liberty out to her car, I told her I'd see her soon. I hated saying goodbye to her, but at least we'd be on our way to a tropical island together again soon. Taking a quick look around, I made sure no one we knew was out and about, and then I stole a quick kiss.

Once I pulled away, Liberty stood there a moment longer with her eyes closed and her face lifted to mine, letting out a deep breath. When she opened her eyes again, she smiled at me. "See you soon, Joshy."

I grinned. "See you soon, Libby." I took a step back and watched her pull away from the curb, my heart heavy with the love I felt for that amazing woman.

Thank goodness for my sister Hannah who had saved the day.



## LIBERTY

**A**fter coffee with Joshua, I was on cloud nine, fluttering back home to finish packing before we all had to leave for the airport. I couldn't help the enormous grin on my face as I packed my bag, being sure to include the little pink bikini Joshua had asked about. I was so thankful that he'd understood why I was upset, and while he was right, we did need to talk to one another the next time something like this came up, I prayed nothing else would.

With my bags packed, I headed downstairs, bag in hand, ready to leave as soon as Landon was. He'd gotten back from his business trip earlier that morning and was upstairs in his room tossing some stuff in another suitcase for the Bali trip. It seemed like none of us could find time to rest these days.

As I was waiting on the couch, I got a text from Hannah. "Everything worked out with Joshua?"

"Yes," I told her. "Thanks again for your help. Are you ready for the trip?"

"Just finished packing. Can't wait to head out to the airport."

"See you soon." I sent the text as Sophia came down the stairs, carrying her rolling bag so it didn't *thunk* all the way down. "You ready to go?" I asked my sister.

"Hells yes. I can't wait. I've never been to Bali before." Her grin was huge as she parked her bag next to mine. "Everyone from the neighborhood is going to be there."

She was grinning from ear to ear, which made me wonder if there was a special guy from the block she was longing to see. If there was, I was sure



she would tell me eventually.

When Landon came down a few minutes later, we loaded everything into his vehicle and headed out. “Poppy’s family is all going in her van,” my brother explained. “So we’ll meet her there.”

“I’m just so excited to see everyone,” Sophia said. “More people will be there from the neighborhood than the last trip.”

“I would think so.” Landon backed out of the driveway but paused, and we all waved at Poppy and her family, who were loading luggage into her van. “Luke’s parents volunteered to fly everyone who lives here down, so I’m sure a lot of people will be taking advantage of that. It’s not every day we get a free trip to another country.”

Everything Landon said was true, and even though a lot of his wedding party was made up of people who had grown up here, not everyone who went on our Florida trip was from the neighborhood. I was secretly glad that Ethan guy wouldn’t be going to Bali with us. He couldn’t take the hint that I wasn’t interested in him, though it was nice to see Joshua a little jealous.

We arrived at the airport in time to see Joshua’s family pulling in just ahead of us. The workers grabbed their bags and loaded them into the enormous jet while my family got out of the truck. I stood there in awe for a moment. The private jet was so big, it may as well be an airliner. I couldn’t believe someone I knew had a plane like this they could just loan out to the neighborhood whenever they wanted. We were all wealthy, but the Robertsons were standing out as the elite of our little community at the moment.

“What do you think?” Joshua asked, raising an arm to gesture at the plane. “Pretty nice, huh?”

“It’s amazing,” I agreed. “Think you’ll have one of these someday?”

He chuckled. “Maybe. If I marry a famous photographer.”

His words had me blushing as we took our carry-on bags and headed to the steps leading to the massive door. By now, Poppy was there and latched on to Landon’s arm, so Joshua and I didn’t have to hide. Other people in the neighborhood knew we were friends and wouldn’t think anything of the two of us boarding together.

He gestured for me to take a seat near the window and then sat down next to me. I wondered if anyone would think this was strange. But then, surely everyone else was already aware of what my brother somehow hadn’t been able to see.

Joshua and I settled in next to one another, not really paying attention to anyone else. “What snacks did you bring?” I asked him.

His eyes enlarged. “Huh? Luke’s family can afford to fly us all down to Bali but they can’t provide in-flight snacks? Cheapskates.” He snickered, and we both laughed. “I didn’t bring any snacks. It never even crossed my mind.”

“I’m sure they’ve got something to feed us, but I brought all kinds of snacks, just in case,” I informed him.

Wiggling his eyebrows at me, he said, “Define all kinds.”

That made me laugh. “Well, let me show you.” I pulled my bag out from where I’d stashed it under the seat in front of me, then unzipped it, displaying all of my goodies for him. I had everything from chocolate-covered pretzels to potato chips, with all kinds of gummy candies and cookies in between.

“Damn, girl,” Joshua said, shaking his head. “You came prepared.”

We both laughed again as I offered him first choice. He grabbed a candy bar and stowed it away for later, and then we turned our attention to the flight crew, who was getting us ready for departure.

Twenty minutes later, we were in the air, champagne glasses in hand, trying to decide which movie to watch. I wasn’t even sure how long the flight was, but I knew it was going to take a while. We decided on a rom-com we’d both seen a dozen times so that if we talked through it, neither one of us would miss anything. Around us, our friends and family were buzzing with excitement, talking about the trip or trying to decide on something to watch together.

Joshua and I both paired our earbuds with the screen we’d be watching the movie on, and we settled in with our snacks and drinks. I loved that we were able to do this together without having to hide from my brother. Landon and Poppy were in the front of the plane, so they couldn’t really see us. For the first time in a long time, I truly felt like I could be part of a couple with a man I loved, and I didn’t have to worry about anyone finding out about it.

We were served a chicken dish for dinner, which was pretty tasty, and ate at least half the snacks. I tried not to drink too much champagne because some of the other people on the plane were getting loud, obviously tipsy, and I didn’t want to embarrass myself.

It was dark outside by the time we were done with dinner and all the trash had been collected. We watched another movie, snacked, and chatted, but before long, I found myself yawning. I tried asking the flight attendant for a cup of coffee to wake me up, but that didn’t do any good, and the next thing I

knew, I was waking up from a nap—on Joshua’s shoulder.

Sitting up, I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand, staring at him in confusion. It took me a moment to remember where I was and that this was okay. He grinned at me. “Did you have a nice snooze?”

“I did,” I said, stretching. “So sorry for falling asleep on you.”

“Nah, I liked it,” he said, and I figured he really did. “I may have slept for a while, too.”

“Really?” That was good to hear. The seats were really comfy, and we’d reclined ours to watch the movie. “Is the sun up?” I peeked under the shutter covering the window next to me. The sun was definitely up.

“It is. We should be landing pretty soon.”

I stared at him, unblinking. I’d been asleep a lot longer than I realized, but then, I hadn’t slept much the night before. “Wow. What time is it?”

“Well, that depends on what time zone you’re asking about,” he reminded me. “But we’ll be landing in Bali at about ten o’clock local time.”

Excitement bubbled to the surface as I clapped my hands a few times. “I can’t wait to see the resort. Luke said it’s huge, and his family reserved a big section just for us.”

“I know,” Joshua said, smiling back at me. “He said there are indoor and outdoor pools, besides the beach being close by. I can’t wait to check out all the courts—tennis, basketball, pickle.”

I chuckled. “You always say pickleball isn’t a real sport.”

He shrugged. “Well, it’s not like it will be in the Olympics any time soon, but if it gets people exercising and they have fun, that’s sport enough for me, I suppose. Anyway, I’m excited to check out all the amenities. I’ve read about the resort online, and it has phenomenal reviews from people all over the world.”

I’d read the same. The Robertsons really had made a name for themselves when it came to offering luxurious accommodations in a number of magnificent locations around the world.

As the plane touched down, Joshua reached over and held my hand, which was comforting. I liked the idea of us being there for one another even in the bumpier parts of life.

We took our time getting off the plane, letting the others go first, not because we weren’t just as thrilled to get to the resort but because we’d had such a nice time together. Neither of us wanted to see our time together come to an end.

When we finally got off the plane, carry-ons rolling beside us, we saw the massive transport vehicles Luke's family had sent to get us. They were the size of party buses with spacious seating for everyone. We waited a few minutes while our bags were carefully loaded beneath us, and then we took off.

My sister's voice carried across the seats. "Liberty, see the ocean out there?" She pointed out the window next to where I was sitting.

I hadn't noticed it until Sophia pointed it out, but now, I could see a sliver of turquoise growing larger on the horizon. It was unlike any water I'd ever seen, so tropical and full of vibrant color. "Amazing," was all I could say.

It didn't take too long for us to get to the resort, and once again, I was caught off guard by how breathtaking the place was. The building was about four stories tall, so not a skyscraper by any means, but it stretched out so far in either direction, I could hardly see the end of it. Painted a muted pink to match the tropical vibe, the resort was warm and inviting, with tropical plants dotting the pristine landscape.

Luke was standing in front of the doors to greet us as we got off the buses. "Welcome, welcome, friends," he said, sounding more mature and confident than ever. "Thanks so much for coming. As you step inside, my associate will be giving you the keys to your private rooms."

Private rooms? That made everything even better. No sharing a room—unless we wanted to. "Thank you, Luke," I said, giving him a quick hug around the neck. "This is wonderful."

"I'm so glad you could come, Liberty." He shook hands with Joshua, and we went to get our room assignments.

A lovely girl with curly black hair asked my name, and when I gave it to her, she handed me a key. I noted the tag on the key said, "Room 347."

"It's at the end of the hall on the third floor," she explained. I thanked her and stepped aside.

When Joshua showed me he was in Room 348, we both stared at each other and grinned. Luke really was the best friend either of us could ever have. Our rooms were right across the hall from one another at the very end of the hall where no one could bother us.

Best. Trip. Ever.



## JOSHUA

**E**xhaustion blurred my vision at the corners of my eyes as I looked around my room. The resort in Bali was spectacular. I'd never seen anything like it. Not only was the building itself stately and impressive, the view of the ocean out my window was extraordinary as well. I could hear the waves licking the shore as I walked around the room, hoping to find a way to fully wake up.

I hadn't slept much at all on the plane. Having Liberty's head on my shoulder as she pleasantly slumbered had been too much for me. I'd found myself wide awake. Now, after a second night of not sleeping more than a few minutes, I found myself running on fumes. But the beauty of this place and the promise of spending more time with Liberty had me buzzing with excitement despite the tiredness I felt.

I had a feeling if I sat down on the bed, I'd probably fall right to sleep, but I just couldn't help it. I'd been running around so much lately, I needed a few moments to catch my breath. Knowing that Liberty was right across the hall—and it was likely that no one would even know if we spent time in one another's room—was another reason for me to relax, and the next thing I knew, I'd fallen asleep.

The sound of someone knocking on my door startled me awake. Sitting up, I rubbed my eyes and noted I'd been passed out for a couple of hours. Swearing under my breath, I pulled myself up and went to the door.

Arlo, Poppy's brother, was standing there in a pair of swim trunks and a T-shirt. "Dude, something wrong with your phone?" he asked with an amused look on his face.

“No, I fell asleep,” I admitted sheepishly. “What’s up?”

“We’re all going to hang out at the pool downstairs,” he said. “The indoor pool by the bar. Landon sent me to check on you before I came down since my room is right next to yours.”

“Shit. Okay.” I shook my head. “I’ll be down in a few minutes. Thanks, bro.” He nodded and headed off, and I went back into my room to check my phone and get ready.

I had five missed texts and a missed call. Most of them were from Landon, but one was from Liberty, asking if I was coming down. I took that to mean she was already down there. Cursing again, I got ready, throwing on some swim trunks and a T-shirt to make it through the building in a presentable fashion, and then made my way to the elevator.

Since only the Robertsons’ guests were staying on this floor, it was relatively quiet—until I got to the pool room. Then, the noise was overwhelming before I even opened the door. Laughter and conversation filled the air as people from the block caught up on what had been happening all summer. A smile formed on my face as I pushed through the glass door, taking in the ambiance.

Even though the pool was indoors, there were tropical plants growing all around it in the greenhouse-like room. The bar sat back from the pool quite a ways with a bartender and servers bringing my friends and acquaintances from Swanson Ridge drinks directly to their loungers or poolside. My eyes landed on Liberty, where she was sitting on a tanning ledge, her legs in the water, and we both smiled at one another. She wasn’t wearing the pink bikini at the moment, but she still looked stunning in aqua blue.

“There he is.” Landon came over, offering me his hand, and I shook it, half hugging him. “I thought maybe you’d run off with a maid or something.”

I felt my face flush red with the comment. “Nope. Just decided to take a little nap.” As if it had actually been a decision and not just me unable to keep my eyes open anymore.

“Come on in and grab a beer,” he said, as if he were still the host, as he had been on our last trip. But that was Landon—the dad of the group.

“Thanks.” A waiter happened by with a tray of drinks, and when he paused for me to make a selection, I took a bottle of Bud and began to sip it as I mingled with the crowd, greeting many people I hadn’t had a chance to see on the plane.

My sister and Sophia were hanging out together near Liberty, who was

sitting next to Poppy. The four of them had always been pretty close, which I was glad for, considering it had been Hannah who had cleared things up about Karrie. I owed my sister a huge thank you, but now wasn't the time to bring it up with so many people milling around.

"Hey, brother," she called to me, a big grin on her face. "Come on over. The water is nice and warm."

"I bet it is," I told her, pausing to take my T-shirt off and drop it next to an empty chair as I kicked off my flip-flops. "It's warm in here."

"It is a greenhouse," Hannah said, rolling her eyes.

I narrowed my gaze at her but bit my tongue. I couldn't inwardly be thanking her for being such an awesome sister and then curse her aloud.

"Where've you been?" Liberty asked in a teasing tone.

I waded over toward her, the cool, refreshing water feeling good against my skin. "I fell asleep," I admitted. I felt like I needed to make an announcement to everyone so I didn't have to keep repeating myself.

"You didn't sleep on the plane?" Her tone was a mix of shock and accusation, but she was still smiling at me.

Shrugging, I said, "Only a little bit. I was preoccupied." Seeing her cheeks turn rosy made my stomach tighten and my dick start to pulse. God, she was fucking gorgeous. I wanted to pick her up and carry her out of here, back to my room, and have my way with her right this moment. Landon had given us the okay, but I didn't quite think that he'd be okay with that.

"Well, Poppy, this is it," Sophia was saying, bringing my thoughts back to the present conversation. "Your last event before the wedding. Are you excited?"

"I'm thrilled," Poppy said, swinging her feet leisurely through the water. "I absolutely cannot wait until Landon and I say I do."

Liberty reached over and squeezed her friend's arm. "Then we'll be sisters—legally."

"God," I murmured. "I can't believe Landon is actually getting married. It seems like just yesterday the two of us were trying to learn to ride our bikes on the sidewalk outside of your house. We must've fallen over a hundred times, skinned our knees and elbows. Now, he's gonna be a married man. Before you know it, he'll be trading that bike in for a minivan."

"Nah, not Landon," Poppy said, giggling. "He doesn't even want me to keep my van, let alone purchase one for the family."

"Family." I repeated the word, in awe of it. That was what Landon was



doing, though. He was making a family with Poppy. My gaze shifted to Liberty's beautiful face again. I longed for the opportunity to do the same with her, to get married, have kids, buy a minivan, if that's what she wanted. Would we ever get our chance?

"Luke says the restaurant we're going to for dinner is amazing." Hannah's face lit up when she mentioned Luke. Was my kid sister crushing on the quiet guy from the block? "He said the food is amazing, and the view of the mountains is to die for."

"I can't wait to see it," Liberty said as everyone else nodded in agreement. "What time are we supposed to be ready to go?"

"Luke said he'd like for us to be on the buses by six. It's not a long drive, but the restaurant is expecting us at six thirty. His parents own the place, and they rented out the entire space just for us." It seemed Hannah was in awe of everything Luke and his parents did. I wasn't sure how to feel about this. I liked Luke a lot and knew he was a good guy, but she was my little sister.

Realization dawned on me, and I vowed to never be like Landon and put my own level of comfort before my sister's happiness. If she wanted to be with Luke, I definitely wasn't standing in the way.

For the next few hours, we played in the pool, lounged in the comfortable seats at the water's edge, and ate delicious food from the bar. Rather than a formal lunch, we ate appetizers and sandwiches. The staff was friendly and quick to bring us anything we asked for.

Around five, most of us headed upstairs to get ready, though Liberty and some of the other women had left a bit sooner. I'd wanted to kiss her goodbye but had refrained. Arlo and I rode the elevator up with another group and then walked down the hall together. He was quite a bit younger than me but had tagged around with Landon and me a lot when we were kids. His brother August was good friends with my brother William.

"Do you think that I can grow up to own a place like this one day?" he asked me. "If I get my master's in business."

"Of course, man," I told him. "You can be whatever you want to be." He thanked me, and I left him at his door, right next to mine.

An hour later, dressed in a nice button-down and slacks, I met Liberty in the hallway and escorted her to the bus. She looked amazing in a flowing red dress with bright yellow flowers on it, like a tropical dream. I hoped her brother would stay occupied with Poppy for a while tonight because I was planning on entertaining this woman through dinner—and hopefully

afterward.

The restaurant was just as spectacular as Hannah had described it, maybe even more so. The emerald mountains sprang up right outside of the window, their majestic crowns towering above us as the blue of the sea and sky melted together around them. I could've sat there and gazed at them for hours if the woman next to me wasn't far more lovely than even this natural wonder.

Being with this group was like being at a family reunion. We all knew each other so well and had been friends forever. We drank too much, ate amazing lobster and other seafood, and told stories for hours. All the while, beneath the table, Liberty's leg pressed against mine, doing things to me I couldn't have articulated if my life depended upon it. Everything about dinner was amazing, but best of all, I got to share it with her.

Landon gave me a look about halfway through dinner, as if he were trying to decide whether or not he could handle how close the two of us were sitting to one another. He smirked, shook his head, and then returned his attention to Poppy. I assumed that meant he wasn't going to go back on his word. Looking at Liberty, I smiled and brushed her hair over her shoulder. We could finally be together—so long as Landon didn't know about the sex.

After dinner, we headed back to the resort on the party bus. It was louder this time, with the music cranked up and some people attempting to dance in the aisle. Still exhausted, I decided to forego the party happening in the lounge and headed upstairs with a group of about ten other people who wanted to save their celebrating for the next day. Liberty was with me as we made our way up the stairs with the others.

"Goodnight, Joshua," Hannah said, ducking into her room. One by one, everyone peeled off, telling the others goodnight until Arlo went into his room, leaving Liberty and me alone for a second.

"Goodnight, Joshy," she said with a twinkle in her eye and popped into her room.

When her door was shut, the hallway was quiet. I sighed and went into my room, thinking maybe I'd gotten excited over nothing. About five minutes later, I heard a small tapping sound on my bedroom door. A devilish grin pulled up the corners of my mouth as I went to answer it.



## LIBERTY

I waited until everyone else had gone into their rooms and closed their doors—and then I waited some more. Once the entire building seemed to quiet down, I made my move, sneaking out of my room and across the hall to Joshua’s.

Knocking too loud would give everyone a heads-up that we were up to something, so I only tapped on the door softly. It didn’t matter. He was waiting for me. Joshua opened the door, and I flew into his arms, barely giving him time to close the door behind me before my lips consumed his.

He tasted like the wine from dinner, and while we were both a little tipsy, we certainly had our heads on straight as our hands roamed one another’s bodies and our tongues entangled. My lungs began to burn, craving oxygen the way my body craved his, so I pulled away for a moment, and we both sucked in a deep breath.

“Hello there, beautiful.” Joshua gazed down at me, longing sizzling in his eyes. “I was hoping you’d come over.”

“How could I resist?” I asked him, already reaching for the buttons on his shirt.

I told myself to take my time, to relish every moment we had together, but the hunger burning deep within me wouldn’t allow for even an extra second. I flew through the buttons of his shirt and then pulled it down off his shoulders, peeling it from his chiseled torso. Joshua helped me work his arms out, and then his hands were on my body again, tugging down the zipper on the back of my floral dress.

His room was laid out similarly to mine, though the reverse, with

everything on the other side. With the lights out, it was difficult for us to navigate to the bed in an unfamiliar place, especially with our lips melded together. We fumbled our way forward, stripping clothing and shoes along the way so that, when we reached his bed, I was down to my lacy red thong and bra and Joshua was only wearing his boxers.

His hands trailed fire along my ribcage to my waist as Joshua slowed his kisses down, making each of them last a little longer, consume me a little more. With my heart still pounding in my chest, I willed myself again to take it easy. We had all night. No one knew I was there, and no one would come looking for us.

Joshua pulled away from me, his thumbs pressed to the lower edge of my bra. "I want to worship you, Liberty. I want to savor your body, taste every inch of you."

A chill went down my spine as I bit down on my bottom lip, hearing his request and physically responding to it. "Whatever you want, baby," I whispered, not even sure if I had complete control of my tongue.

A crooked smile took over his face as he lifted my bottom and dropped me onto the bed so that my legs were hanging over the edge of the mattress. Joshua dropped to his knees, his warm breath fanning over my inner thighs as he took his time planning whatever he was going to do to me.

His tongue was rough and thick as he began to lap up my legs, first one then the other, starting near my knees and reaching all the way to the trim of my thong. By the time he reached my apex, I was panting, my hands running wild as they traced over my stomach, up to my breasts. The anticipation was killing me.

Joshua hooked his fingers through my panties and pulled them off my legs, discarding them and baring me to him. I lay there, watching him, seeing his eyes enlarge as he took me in. He murmured, "Fuck, Liberty. You're gorgeous," and then, his mouth was on me, and everything else about the world faded away.

He worked his tongue over my heated skin, lapping and sucking, probing, driving me insane. I threaded my fingers through his hair, arching my back and leaning into him as he found my most sensitive area. Joshua continued to work me over until I couldn't handle it anymore. Panting and pleading, I fell over the edge and floated down in a cloud of euphoria.

When he was finished, I looked up at him, my eyes bleary with want. Joshua smiled and slipped his boxers down, his thick cock springing free. I

wanted to reach for it, to return the favor, but he was clearly in control this time.

He moved me up the bed and situated himself between my legs. Still taking his time, he unhooked my bra and tossed it aside, once again using his tongue to bring me to a fever pitch as he licked and sucked my nipples to hardened peaks.

Lifting his mouth to mine, he kissed me deeply. My own flavor punctuated the feel of his tongue wrapping around mine as he pushed inside of me. I let out a low moan as my body stretched to accommodate his massive size.

The two of us moved together, increasing our speed until we were humming in a rhythm all our own, hands wandering aimlessly over sweat-slickened skin, our mouths weaving in and out of kisses as we explored one another's bodies. It didn't take too long for Joshua to send me over the edge again. I held on for dear life, my fingers splaying on the bed, my entire body contracting, curses and pants spilling from my mouth.

Soon, Joshua joined me, his body growing rigid as he grunted, groaned, and finally filled me with his warmth. Even after the storm subsided, the two of us lay there, wrapped up in one another, his head on my shoulder as I lifted a leg to toss over his hip.

"Liberty," Joshua whispered, pulling me even closer. "I love you."

"I love you, too." I didn't even hesitate to say the words I'd been thinking for so long. I had no doubt in my mind that this man was meant to be mine, that we were intended to be together. No one would ever manage to keep us apart again.

We fell asleep still tangled in an embrace. Even when I was fast asleep, I was still conscious of the fact that Joshua and I were together. I could sense his arms around me in my sleep, hear him breathing, knowing that I was safer and happier than I'd ever been in my life.

My eyes fluttered open just as the sun was beginning to appear over the horizon outside of the window, the warm rays spreading sprays of gold across the ocean. Joshua slumbered on, his eyelashes moving slightly the more I moved.

I needed to get out of there. I couldn't see the clock, but I knew it was nearing the time of day when the early risers of the group would be up and about. The thought that Landon might see me, even though his room was far down the hallway, filled me with panic. I had to free myself of this marvelous

man—for now—and get back to my own room.

Somehow, I managed to pull my arm out from beneath Joshua's torso and pull my leg off his. The blankets and sheets, which we'd pulled up hastily in the middle of the night, were also twisted, so I had to be careful not to trip. Somehow, I managed to get out of bed without waking Joshua, but he was tossing and turning a little as I looked around the room for my clothes.

Rather than trying to put them back on, I grabbed a robe from Joshua's bathroom and slipped that on, finally finding my wet thong crumpled up beneath the corner of the bed. With all of my belongings in my arms, I tiptoed toward the door.

Out in the hallway, I managed to close Joshua's door and then spun around, still tiptoeing toward my own door. Halfway across the hall, I heard a creaking sound and held my breath. It sounded like a door opening. Slowly, I turned to look down the hall, but it seemed all the doors were closed tightly. Thinking it must've been a loose floorboard, I continued to my room, flying inside and closing the door behind me.

My heart pounding in my chest, I dropped my dirty clothes on the floor and headed to the shower, praying no one had seen me.

After a quick shower, I went about getting ready for the day, not sure what Luke's family had planned. That pink bikini Joshua had asked me to bring was burning a hole in my suitcase, but I decided not to put it on. Last time I'd worn it when Landon wasn't around, and I had no guarantee my brother wouldn't be with us today. Instead, I put on another sundress, thinking I could always come back and change later if we decided to go to the beach. I was hoping we would. The ocean beckoned me from outside, and I longed to feel the warm sand beneath my feet.

"Are you coming to breakfast?" I read Poppy's text just as I was finishing up my makeup. I hadn't realized we were all meeting for breakfast, but I hastily replied that I was on my way, my growling stomach pressing me on.

A few minutes later, I walked into a large room on the first floor that was set up like a dining room, even though I thought it was normally a conference room.

Joshua wasn't there yet, so I sent him a text as I fixed a plate. Everyone looked happy and excited as we began to discuss our plans. Poppy and Landon happened to be sitting across from two empty seats, so I chose a chair across from my best friend, hoping Joshua would get there in time to sit next to me.

All of Poppy's siblings were sitting near her, Rose and Autumn chatting about their bridesmaid dresses. The boys looked a little bored, though every once in a while, Arlo would grin at me. I had no idea what his deal was.

Joshua came in, fixed a plate, and sat down in the empty chair beside me. I wanted to lean over and kiss him, but I kept myself from it. Landon was right there, after all, and he'd come a long way, but he was still overly protective.

"There he is," Landon said as Joshua settled in his chair. "We were wondering if you were still sleeping."

"Sorry," Joshua said. "Didn't hear my alarm."

"You were probably super tired," Arlo said, snickering. "After last night."

An electric bolt shot down my back as I braced myself, praying he didn't say more. Joshua tensed beside me as well. Did Arlo know something? If he did, surely he wouldn't say anything.

"What's that?" Landon asked, his eyebrows knitted together as he peered around Poppy.

"Yeah, I mean, the walls are thick here, but they aren't that thick." I shook my head as Arlo continued, my willing him to shut his fucking mouth not working. "How was your walk of shame this morning, Liberty?"

There it was. All laid out on the table for my brother, Arlo grinning as he popped a bite of biscuit into his mouth.

"Arlo!" Poppy must've punched him in the leg under the table. "Knock it off."

"What?" Landon's voice was full of alarm as he looked from his future brother-in-law to me to Joshua. "What is he talking about?"

Joshua's mouth fell open as the two of us tried to come up with an explanation. It was obvious that Landon was about to blow his top. His face was turning red as the pieces of the puzzle came together. "Is he serious, Joshua?" Landon demanded. "He is, isn't he?"

Slowly, Joshua's head rocked back and forth. I felt paralyzed, like all I could do was watch my world implode.

Landon's fist slammed down on the table, jarring the dishes in a clatter of glass and silverware as the room went silent. "How long has this been fucking going on?"

Joshua stayed calm as he said, "Landon, let's talk about this outside."

It was clear my brother was furious as he threw his chair back and flew out of it. "Damn it!" he shouted. "I told you not to fuck my sister."



The entire room was so quiet, I could hear my heart hammering in my chest, but everything was beginning to blur together. With tears in my eyes, I felt myself beginning to crumble. Joshua asked Landon to step outside, but it was me who bolted up from the table. As fast as I could go, I flew out of the room toward the elevator.

Everything was ruined because of my brother, and there was nothing in the world I could do about it.



## JOSHUA

Landon was so angry, I could practically see steam coming out of his ears. When Liberty ran out of the room, concern for her almost had me following right behind, but I could tell Landon seriously wanted to fight me. His fisted hands moved back and forth as his face turned an angry shade of red.

“We should take this outside,” I told him, trying to stay calm, “so that everyone’s breakfast isn’t disturbed.”

“Fuck that!” Landon shouted. “I don’t give a damn. I trusted you, you asshole!”

“Landon,” Poppy said, reaching over to put a hand on him, but he jerked away from her, making everyone at the table gasp.

“Outside.” Luke’s voice was authoritative as he gave the direction, a reminder that he was in charge here, not Landon, even if he thought he was always the boss in the situation.

We moved silently down a short hallway to a deserted pool area. Landon came at me, and I took a few steps backward. “Knock it off, man. You’re out of control,” I warned him as Poppy stepped between us and put a hand on his chest, pushing him back enough that I could breathe. “It’s not what you think.”

“The fuck it is.” Landon glared at me. “I heard what Arlo said. The walk of shame? How could you do that to my sister, man? You’ve always been like a brother to me. I thought you cared about her. Instead, you’re just using her to get your jollies.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Now, I was getting angry, too,

which wouldn't help the situation. At least one of us needed to keep a level head, but to hear him spout off all that nonsense with absolutely no proof really pissed me off. "That's not true. Why would you even say that?"

"If it's not true then why the hell are you sneaking around behind my back?" Landon wanted to know. "I just gave you permission to start seeing her a couple of weeks ago, and now you're fucking her? That's messed up, man."

"First of all," I began, and Poppy gave me a warning look that my choice of words might trigger Landon to stop listening. I took a deep breath and started over. "Landon, I don't need your permission to date your sister. She's a grown-ass woman. She can date whoever she wants to. You're not her father."

"There's such a thing as the bro code. Have you forgotten about that?" he asked me, his eyes so narrow, they were barely slits.

"Oh, no, I'm well aware of that ridiculous pact guys make that puts someone else's illegitimate feelings over their own happiness, though I have to remind you that you technically broke a similar pact with your sister when you started dating her best friend. Or does that conveniently not count?"

"My relationship with Poppy has nothing to do with this," he spat. "Liberty knew Poppy and I were in love with one another, and she approved."

"What if she hadn't?" I suggested. "What if she would've thrown a screaming fit the moment that she saw the two of you together? Or if someone even suggested it to her over breakfast?"

I hoped he'd see the similarities, but he was too mad to think straight. "This is not the same. We love one another, and you are just fucking my little sister, someone I thought you respected, man. I should've never told you that you could go out with her to begin with."

"That's not true, Landon." So many parts of his statement had me wanting to punch him in the face, but I decided to concentrate on the most important aspect of all of them. "I love Liberty. I've loved her since we were in middle school, bro. She loves me, too. The fact that you've been too blinded by everything going on in your own life to see it shouldn't be my problem. Yet, it has been. For years. Everyone else has known. They've seen the way we look at one another, the way we dance around it so as not to hurt your feelings. But you've been too caught up in your own life to even notice."

Landon's expression didn't change for several seconds before he finally asked, "How long have you been fucking her?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" I ran a hand through my hair, not surprised when several strands came out. "Not long, Landon. That's not the point. Did you hear anything I said to you?"

"What I heard was that you've been lusting after her since we were in middle school," he replied. "Did you fuck her in high school?"

"No. What I said was I have been in love with her since then, but we have been putting our feelings aside because of you. All of this has been for you. If she would've thought you'd be okay with us dating, we would've gotten together years ago. She would've never dated that asshole Grady if you would've just gotten your self-centered head out of your ass for a few minutes just once in the last decade and a half and noticed that your little sister is in love with me. But you don't notice other people's feelings because you don't care about them." My anger was making my words sharper than they otherwise would've been, meaner.

"You fucking prick." Landon shook his head at me. "Liberty means everything to me. I've always tried to protect her. For you to stand there and say that bullshit makes me want to punch you in the face even more. If anyone should know how badly I want to protect her, especially after what Grady did, it would be you. But you don't seem to care about any of that as long as you get to fulfill some ridiculous fantasy you've had for fifteen years."

I stared at him in stunned silence, not sure how to respond to that. Was he really going down this path? Trying to put me in the same boat as Grady?

Taking a deep breath, I stepped away from him. I'd said everything I could to try to convince him that my intentions were good, that I loved Liberty, and that he needed to step back and let us figure it out for ourselves.

But I also realized that Liberty hadn't said a word to him before she'd fled the room, and that couldn't be good. She might be in a position where she didn't want to continue to see me for fear that her brother would never accept our relationship. If that was the case, then my friendship with Landon was ruined for nothing.

"Listen," I finally said, hearing the defeat in my own voice, "maybe you just need some time to think through what I've said to you. I'm sorry that I hurt you. That was never our intention. We've been trying to avoid that for years. That's why we've never acted on our feelings before. But now that

we're here, you need to understand that I love your sister more than anything, and I always have. I want you to be my best friend again, Landon. You're one of the most important people in the world to me. But it should tell you something to know that I'm willing to stand here right now, look you in the eye, and say, 'If I have to choose between you, my best friend my whole life, and the woman I love, who happens to be your sister, Liberty, I choose her. I will always choose her.'"

With those words, I heard Poppy let go of a little sob, which I hoped was a good thing because it meant someone was paying attention and had understood how much I meant what I'd said. Then I turned and walked away.

A crowd had gathered in the lobby area near the windows next to the door we'd gone through to have our "discussion." When I walked through, they parted, everyone staring in shocked silence. Embarrassment coursed through me as I realized the entire neighborhood now knew all of my business. My parents would be hearing about this soon. It seemed a little ironic that my father would've never tried to tell me who to date, but my best friend would.

As I walked away, Arlo grabbed my arm. "Joshua, man, I feel so bad. I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault, bud," I told him, finding a smile deep within me. "It's a good thing, actually. He needed to know." I patted Arlo on the shoulder and headed off to the elevator. While I wished that Landon would've found out a different way, I hadn't been lying to reassure Poppy's younger brother. In a way, it felt good to have everything out in the open.

The elevator seemed to take forever to arrive. Fear that Landon would come after me, ready to argue again, plagued me as I watched the floors slowly roll by on the little ticker above the doors. Finally, it arrived, and I stepped on, closing the door so that I was alone before I headed up to my room.

The hallway stretched on before me. Trudging toward my room, I listened through the blanket of silence to hear if perhaps Liberty was crying. When I got to my door, I heard nothing from hers, so I went inside.

The pain and heartache I felt were overwhelming. I wanted to go to her, to take her in my arms and tell her we'd be all right, that as long as we had one another, nothing else mattered. But I didn't know if she felt the same way. For years, she'd been so careful not to let Landon know how she felt about me. Now that he did, she might want peace in her family more than she wanted to be with me.

I thought back to that night we had been in Hawaii when Landon and Liberty's father had let Landon know that he didn't approve of his son dating Poppy. She'd given a rousing speech about accepting people for who they are and then ran out. Landon had been an idiot not to follow her right away.

Was I being an idiot now?

I wasn't sure, but my gut was telling me to give Liberty some space. For one thing, I couldn't handle losing her completely, especially not right now. Not after I'd just potentially lost my best friend of over twenty years.

With a deep sigh, I dropped down on my bed and lay on the pillows, staring up at the white ceiling. In the distance, I heard the rhythmic crash of the waves against the ocean. It was soothing, in a way, hearing that endless song of the sea meeting the shore. How many other people had stayed here and listened to that sound, contemplating life, knowing that no matter what happened, some things always remained the same?

Liberty and I loved one another. In my heart, I knew that to be a fact. Sometimes, things got choppy, and we had to work through them, but at the end of the day, I just had to believe, like the moon calling the sea to her side, I'd be beckoned back again. Now, my job was to wait until the commotion settled down and I was welcome to return to her loving embrace.

As for Landon, I hoped he'd see the error of his ways, that Poppy or someone would talk some sense into him. I couldn't imagine my life without my best friend in it, but I couldn't keep living this way either, tiptoeing around, afraid I might offend him. No, what I said to Arlo stood true. It was better that Landon knew the truth. What he did with that information was up to him. I'd done everything I could.

It was time to wait.





## LIBERTY

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I stared at the television screen in my hotel room, my eyes temporarily torn from my laptop screen as I became fully invested in the scene I'd watched unfold a thousand times.

"I'm so sorry, Melinda, but I can't be with you anymore. You're a cat person, and I'm a dog person, and our kinds just aren't meant to be together," the handsome movie star said.

Melinda's bottom lip quivered in such a pretty way, something I wasn't capable of. I'd be blubbering like a child. She was a hell of an actress. "But what about what you told me under the moonlight, on my grandpa's back porch? You said you'd find a way to love cats if it meant we could always be together."

He shook his head. "I was wrong." Bending down, he kissed the top of her head and then walked away, and my heart broke into a million pieces, just like poor, tragic Melinda.

Sobbing, I grabbed a tissue from the nearly empty box on my nightstand and wiped at my swollen eyes. For the last two days, I'd been watching tragic love stories like *Cats and Dogs Don't Mix* and *Love Isn't Always Forever*, crying like a baby, and eating way too much room service.

Knowing I should just turn off the sappy movies, I took some deep, calming breaths and looked around the room, trying to focus on something outside of the movie. Through the window, I could see the beach. The ocean itself looked cool and inviting, the sky above a brilliant shade of blue with hardly a cloud in sight. Seagulls circled above the heads of beachgoers in bright bathing suits. I wondered if any of those people were my friends.

I hoped they were still having fun, even though I'd decided to sequester myself in my room after the run-in Joshua and I had had with Landon the other morning. Since then, all I could think about was how my brother seemed hellbent on making sure my life turned into a tragic love story too.

Being with my friends probably would've made me feel better, but embarrassment kept me locked away, that and thoughts of Joshua. I couldn't believe he'd been subjected to my brother's anger like that, especially in front of everyone from our block. Landon could be such a prick. I wished the entire situation would've unfolded differently, but there was nothing I could do about it now.

In here, alone with my thoughts, the movies, and my laptop where I worked on editing photos from camp, I felt like I could cry in peace. I could come undone and be a total mess without anyone knowing how blotchy my face was or how swollen my eyes were. I definitely looked like something a cat would leave under their owner's pillow, an unwelcome treat.

I'd been working on the last photograph from session two of camp for almost an hour. It was finished—I knew it was. I just couldn't bring myself to put a period on it and send the batch over to Joshua.

Going to camp had been the highlight of my summer. Not only had I made so many legitimate friendships with the kids and most of the staff, except for Karrie, but I'd gotten to see Joshua in a new light. It was no secret that the man loved kids and was great with them, especially when teaching them about the sports he also loved, but seeing him with them on a daily basis, watching how he led the team of coaches, even seeing him bake muffins for the kids in a pinch had taught me that he was the perfect man for me.

Of course, I'd known that for years. Still, I'd been even more convinced of it after camp. Sending the last picture in would close that part of my life, and I had no reason to think that I'd ever have that experience again, especially since Landon was being such an asshole.

Reluctantly, I dropped the last picture into a file and sent it over to Joshua. The only message I typed out was, "This is the last of them. Thank you." Then, I hit send, and the file did something I couldn't do myself—rushed over to Joshua.

I wanted to do that. I wanted to fly through the air like the tiny data particles headed there now—or however that worked. The urge to go across the hall and knock on his door had been overwhelming, but I'd kept myself

from doing it a thousand times because I didn't want him to see me like this.

And I didn't know what to say to him. Did he even want to see me anymore? Maybe Landon and Joshua had reached an agreement while I was locked in here, deciding Joshua would no longer go out with me. Hell, maybe Landon would also disown me as his sister.

It was absurd, I knew, but my dark thoughts ran rampant. The urge to pull the blanket over my head and go to sleep for a week or two was hard to deny.

A knock on my door had my heart surging into my throat. I recognized the knock almost immediately, though my first thought was maybe it was Joshua. I knew who it was, though. Poppy, Hannah, and Sophia had each been by a few times in the last couple of days, knocking, pleading with me through the door, and texting to the point my phone buzzed itself off the nightstand. They were such good friends, and they truly wanted me to be happy. I just didn't know how to face any of them.

"Liberty, I know you can hear me." Poppy's sweet voice sounded slightly more demanding than usual. "I'm sorry, but I'm not going away this time until you open the door. I need to see that you're alive."

"I'm alive," I said, my voice weak from the lack of talking aloud over the last few days, that and all the crying.

"Liberty!" she scolded.

With a deep breath, I pulled myself off the bed, trudged to the door, and yanked it open. I'd only let room service in since all this started, so it was weird to see one of my friends. I blinked back tears, knowing I was a huge mess.

Poppy didn't care. She flung herself at me, and I let go of the door to embrace her, hearing it close with a loud thud. As soon as my head hit her shoulder, the waterworks started. My entire body began to vibrate with each heart-wrenching shudder.

Rubbing my back, Poppy said, "It's okay, Liberty."

"No, it's not." I hiccupped. "It's not, and it never will be again."

"It is, and it will be," she insisted.

I shook my head, even though she had a tight grip on me. "Everything is ruined because my brother thinks he owns me. It's not fair. I didn't say a damn word when he fell in love with my best friend."

"I know." Of course, Poppy knew. She had been there for the entire unfolding drama.

That didn't stop me from telling her anew, as if she'd just walked into this

nightmare. “Why does he have to be so fucking selfish? Why can’t he just step back and let me love whoever the hell I want to? It’s not healthy for my brother to be so involved in my relationship, to try to tell me how things are supposed to be.”

“You’re totally right,” Poppy said. She pulled back, sliding her hands down my arms to grasp my fingers. “Everything you’ve said is true, Liberty. Everyone agrees with you—even Landon.”

Puzzled, I stared at her the best I could through my tear-filled eyes. “What do you mean?”

Poppy let go of me to find a tissue. Plucking one from the box, she handed it to me and then sat down on the bed, gesturing for me to do the same.

Blowing my nose like a bugle, I didn’t care that I was being very unladylike in front of Poppy. I grabbed a couple more tissues and blew it again, then threw them away and paused to wash my hands in the bathroom. Then I came back to sit next to her on my messy bed.

“What’s going on?” I asked, realizing for the first time that the world really hadn’t stopped the moment I locked myself in here.

“Well, firstly, you should know that Landon feels terrible. He’s been wanting to come talk to you since about ten minutes after his argument with Joshua ended, but I wouldn’t let him. I told him he had to let me talk to you first.” I could see in her eyes that she was telling me the truth, and I suddenly felt bad for my brother. I pushed those thoughts aside. Landon deserved any bad feelings he might be experiencing now. “Everyone grilled Landon the moment the argument was over. The entire neighborhood stood up for you and Joshua.”

My eyes widened, despite their puffiness. “Really? What were they saying?”

“A lot of the guys said they didn’t blame Joshua for getting together with you.” She laughed at that, and so did I. “They said even if it meant sneaking around behind his back, you were worth it. That didn’t make Landon too happy, but then Luke and Kai stepped in and told him it wasn’t any different than him dating me. Landon disagreed, but they held firm that it wasn’t okay to say it’s different because you and I are girls. He said he wasn’t thinking of it that way, but they set him straight. Hannah told him it was messed up that he thought he could control his sister’s life, which pissed Landon off again until Sophia reminded him that he’d been doing just that. Really, it was an

eye-opener for Landon, and he feels really bad about the whole thing now.”

I took a deep breath, glad that so many people had stepped forward to try to help Joshua and me, but I did feel bad for Landon that everyone had jumped down his throat. “Landon’s not mad that I turned everyone against him?”

“They haven’t turned against him,” Poppy assured me. “Everyone was really supportive, despite the fact that they thought he was wrong. Tons of people told him that they thought it was admirable that he cared so much about you, but that they still thought he needed to back off and just let the two of you live your lives.”

I took a deep breath and let that all sink in. It sounded like everything was going to be okay between my brother and me, though I still wanted to yell at him a little bit. I had to wonder about Joshua, though I was afraid to ask just yet.

“Thank you, Poppy.” I looked into her eyes and saw nothing but love there. “You truly are the best friend a girl could have. You’ve been caught in the middle of this for so long, and with your wedding around the corner—”

She cut me off. “I love you, Liberty. I always have loved you like a sister, so of course, I’d do whatever it took to help you get the man of your dreams back into your life. Don’t worry about me. I’m just fine.”

“You’re amazing.” I wrapped my arms around her and squeezed tight.

“I’ve been waiting for this implosion for a while now, girl. I’ve been prepared. I’ve also done a lot of work on the back end.”

We both laughed, knowing that was true.

“Now, I believe there is a certain someone who loves you like crazy who has been dying to see you,” she said with a sparkle in her eye.

“I look like a trainwreck,” I reminded her, very much aware of my disheveled state.

Poppy shook her head. “He won’t care.”



## JOSHUA

**M**y suitcase sat open on the bed, gawking at me as I paced the room, listening to the ocean tide roll in from my window. I'd started taking my clothes out of the drawer, dumping them on the bed next to the suitcase, but I hadn't actually folded anything and put it in yet.

I didn't think I was making a mistake, leaving early. I just wasn't sure how Liberty would perceive it. For two days, I'd hardly left my room. I'd mostly just sat on the balcony, staring out at the water, wondering what to do about this mess. Landon was a prick. He'd proven that to be true time and again, and as much as I wanted to believe I had better judgment than to be best friends with someone so selfish and incapable of reason, I supposed I must have a character flaw or two of my own. Because I'd allowed him to weasel his way into my life all those years ago and had never been able to let him go.

Sighing, I dragged a hand through my hair and went back to my packing. I hadn't even scheduled a flight home yet, so I contemplated doing that first. It would be fucking stupid to leave this amazing resort to go sit in an airport when it wasn't like Landon had been bothering me. Since I'd disappeared into my room, he'd knocked on the door zero times, sent me the same number of texts, and my phone had only rung when my sister or Luke was trying to get a hold of me.

I hadn't talked to either of them much, just assured Hannah I was alive and let Luke know this wasn't his fault. I'd apologized to him a hundred times for causing a scene during his getaway, but he'd told me not to worry about that. He really was a stand-up guy, and if my sister liked him and he

returned the sentiment, I would absolutely give them my blessing—not that they'd need it because I was her brother, not her damn father.

Taking my shirts off the hangers at last, I folded them and laid them neatly in my suitcase, my thoughts on Liberty. I knew her soul was crushed, and I wished there was something I could do about it. Eventually, I hoped we'd have a chance to talk about this, after she had some time to breathe, but I knew what she was going to tell me. Landon had made his opinion on the matter clear, and as much as she loved me and wanted to be with me, she couldn't go against her brother's wishes. He was family, after all. And I was—well, whatever I was, I wasn't that.

A soft knock on my door had my heart racing. Maybe it was Liberty, and she was here to tell me she loved me and chose me over everyone else.

Without thinking, I flew to the door and ripped it open. When I realized it was Landon standing there and not his sister, I seriously wished I'd had the forethought to use the peephole. "Fuck," I muttered, slamming the door closed.

Only it didn't close. Instead, it hit him right in his size-twelve mammoth foot. "Shit," he groaned, gritting his teeth against the pain. "Okay, I deserved that."

"You think?" I asked. "Get the fuck out of here, Landon. I don't want to talk to you right now. I might not ever want to talk to you again."

"I know you're mad, Joshua," he said, wedging more of himself into the mostly closed door. "And you should be. But will you please just let me in for a few minutes?"

"There's nothing to talk about," I told him. Seeing as though there was nothing I could do to keep him out, I moved back to the suitcase. Of course, he followed me inside. Landon didn't like it when he didn't get his way.

"Are you going home?" he asked as I put another shirt inside the suitcase. This one wasn't folded nearly as neatly as the others since I was clearly distracted.

"No," I said sarcastically. "I've been chosen for the next mission to the moon. Who would've thought astronauts needed swim trunks?"

Landon said nothing in response to my annoyed remark, only stood behind me with his arms folded, watching. "Listen, we really need to talk about this."

"Well, since you've broken into my room, I guess I can't stop you from talking, but I can't imagine you have anything to say that I'd want to hear," I



told him, picking up a pair of khaki shorts and practically wadding them up before shoving them into my luggage. At this rate, not everything that came out was going to go back in.

Chuckling at my comment, he said, “I don’t think I broke in exactly. You did open the door.”

Tossing my head back, I let go of a loud sigh, coupled with a moan. “Okay, Landon. Whatever you say. You’re always right, after all.”

“I’m not always right, Joshua,” he said, something I wasn’t sure I’d ever heard come out of his mouth before. “I wasn’t right when it came to getting between you and Liberty, and for that, I’m very sorry.”

Disbelief washed over me as I turned to look at him. While I’d had plenty of time over the last couple of days to imagine him coming in here to apologize to me, I didn’t think it would ever really happen. At best, I expected him to come and growl some sort of half-hearted admission that he shouldn’t have interfered and then go on about his business, still trying to keep us apart.

But this was different. Not only had he actually said he was sorry, but judging by the look on his face, he actually meant it. Landon Johnson was sorry for something he’d said to me. It was a fucking miracle.

So I was suspicious.

“Really?” I asked, still scrutinizing him. “You’re sorry?”

“I am very sorry,” he said again. “Listen, Joshua, you have to know, you mean more to me than just about anyone else in the world. I love you like a brother. I always have. And Liberty, well, she’s my sister. There aren’t many other people on the planet I care more about than the two of you. The fact that the two of you like one another, that you enjoy spending time in one another’s company, that should be a good thing. It *is* a good thing to everyone. And now that I understand that, I’m really sorry I reacted the way I did. It was just a shock, honestly. I mean, I had no idea the two of you had moved your relationship along so quickly.”

He still didn’t get it. Shaking my head, I sank down on the bed, scooting my suitcase out of the way. “Landon, we haven’t moved quickly at all. In fact, there are snails that have lapped us in our efforts to make progress in our relationship.”

He stared at me, not understanding. Whether it was because he was still startled about the details of what had been going on between Liberty and me or the fact that he just didn’t get my analogy, I couldn’t say. I was going to

have to spell it out for him.

“We’ve been into one another for years. I’d dare say I’ve loved her since she was a little girl in pigtails. We were just avoiding hurting your feelings for so long that nothing ever really happened between us. Then, the whole situation with Grady blew up, and it turns out we were right to be concerned that you wouldn’t want us to see one another.”

Landon sat down, too, leaving a few feet between us. “Joshua, if you would’ve told me in high school that you wanted to date my sister, I would’ve been psyched about it. The only reason I became so guarded when it came to Liberty was because of Grady. I know that you’re not the same kind of guy as Grady, but when I found out the two of you had already slept together, and I’d just started encouraging you to see one another a couple of weeks ago, I lost my shit. It seemed like maybe you only had one thing in mind. And while I knew that Liberty liked you, I guess, it never occurred to me that you really liked her, too.”

I listened to everything he had to say, not sure it was all accurate. Even before the problems with Grady occurred, Liberty and I had been afraid to tell Landon about our feelings for one another for fear he’d flip out. I had been shocked when Landon had approved of Grady dating her. Everyone knew he was a player, but he’d fooled both of them into thinking he had good intentions, and I’d found out later that Liberty had really only gone out with him to see if it would make me jealous. It definitely had, but by the time I realized I needed to do something about it, Grady was breaking up with her, telling everyone he’d only dated her to get her into bed, and then Landon forbade all of his friends from dating his sister, so I was locked out.

I took a deep breath and tried to see this from Landon’s perspective. “Listen, I’m really sorry we weren’t honest with you from the beginning. A lot of this turmoil might’ve been avoided if we would’ve just trusted you and come to you with our feelings to start. We both just care so much about you, we didn’t want to do anything to upset you. I’m sorry I wasn’t more straightforward.” I hoped he heard what I was saying. I was trying to say I was sorry I’d fucked his sister behind his back, but I couldn’t get my mouth to form those words, no matter how hard I tried.

Landon smiled at me. “I appreciate it, brother. Listen, if Liberty makes you half as happy as Poppy makes me, I know the two of you will end up together. Your happiness and my sister’s happiness are what’s most important here, not my feelings.”

I shook his hand, and he pulled me into a hug. “Thank you, Landon. I promise you, I love Liberty more than anything. All I want is to make her happy. I’ll stop at nothing to make sure she has the best life imaginable.”

“Whoa, dude. Those sound like some serious words,” Landon said, grinning at me.

He was right—they did. I was talking about more than just dating her, wasn’t I? But then, hadn’t I known for years that, if I ever had the opportunity, I’d ask Liberty to marry me? I wasn’t planning on doing that right away, but I could see it happening someday. Maybe sooner than later.

“Thanks for the talk,” I told him. “I hope Liberty will chat with me eventually, and we can get this straightened out.”

“Yeah, I haven’t spoken to her myself,” he admitted. “But Poppy has. I’ll get out of your hair, but I hope you’re not planning on leaving now?”

I shook my head. “Not at the moment.”

“Cool. Why don’t you swing by my room in about thirty minutes? I have something I want to show you.”

I stared at him in confusion for a moment, wondering what in the world that could be, but then, a lot had happened in the last two days while I was sulking, I assumed. “Okay. See you soon.” He nodded and headed out the door, leaving me alone with my partially packed suitcase and a million thoughts running through my mind.

Was Liberty in her room, or had she ventured out? I had no idea. I wanted to see her so bad, but I couldn’t just knock on her door to see if she’d talk to me.

If she refused, I might never recover.



## LIBERTY

**A**fter Poppy left, I took a shower and got myself cleaned up. She was right—Joshua wouldn't care if I looked like a trainwreck, but I wasn't ready to head across the hall just yet. With my hair done and my makeup on, I did feel better. The cute outfit I'd selected helped, but I found myself lingering on the balcony overlooking the ocean, trying to decide what to say to him. "Hey, Joshua. How's it going? Sorry I haven't been brave enough to face you in two days," sounded lame.

The sound of my door opening had me thinking maybe time was up and I'd have to figure out what I was going to say right away. I'd given Poppy a keycard earlier when she'd come to visit me, in case she needed something while I was getting ready. Had she delivered it to Joshua? With a deep breath, I headed back inside, wondering if the right words would come out of my mouth when I opened it.

Only it wasn't Joshua standing in my room looking all sad like a hurt puppy dog. It was my brother. I wanted to slug him. Despite the way Poppy had explained the situation, how she'd tried to help me to see things from Landon's perspective, I couldn't help but think that this was all his fault. After all, if he hadn't stuck his nose where it didn't belong, none of this would've happened.

"I think you should leave," I told him. "I gave that keycard to your fiancée, not to you."

"But I brought you iced coffee." My big brother extended the plastic cup like it was some sort of a modern-day olive branch. "Please, Liberty? I came to apologize."

I scoffed at him, my need to be angry overriding my want to move on with my life. “You? Apologize? I’m surprised that word is even in your vocabulary.” I swiped the cup out of his hand and walked back outside, sinking down into one of the chairs that had a brilliant view of the ocean. Of course, he followed, sitting down near me.

“I don’t blame you for being angry. I shouldn’t have blown up like that. I only did it because I love you so much, and I was afraid this situation would end up like what happened with Grady.”

I took a sip of my coffee. It was really good—damn him. Shaking my head, I told him, “Grady and Joshua are nothing alike, and you know it. Do you really think Joshua is capable of treating anyone the way that Grady treated me?”

“No, of course not,” he said. “Not now that I stop and think about it. But I wasn’t thinking clearly then. I was just mad. I’m really sorry, Liberty, and I want the two of you to get together. I want you to be happy.” Landon’s tone was convincing. He sounded like he was on the verge of tears, something I’d never really seen from my brother. There had been only a handful of times, usually because he thought he’d lost Poppy forever.

That was how I felt at the moment. Even with Landon’s blessing, there was no guarantee that Joshua was ready to forgive everything that had happened and give me another chance. The idea that Landon might’ve ruined this for me made me want to punch him in the face. Instead, I just started crying all over again, ruining my makeup.

Landon’s hand on my shoulder shaking me lightly felt soothing. “Liberty, it’s okay. It’s all going to be all right.”

“You don’t know that.” I swiped at my tears. “What if this is all ruined because of you?”

“It won’t be.” Landon spoke with a confidence I couldn’t quite muster. “Sometimes you have to trust your big brother.”

I almost laughed at that, but it wasn’t funny. “Fine. I’ll forgive you as long as Joshua doesn’t decide he never wants to go out with me again.”

Nodding, Landon said, “That works for me. I promise to stay out of your business from now on and remember that I’m your big brother, not your father.”

“Dad wouldn’t even care if I was dating Joshua,” I reminded him.

“I know, but then, Dad doesn’t know about the situation with Grady, either, does he?” he reminded me. “That’s all this is, Liberty. If you two

would've told me back in high school you liked each other, I would've accepted it."

"Bullshit," I told him. "You've always been overly protective of me. That's why I was so shocked that you didn't mind when Grady asked me out."

"Grady and I were friends, but nothing like Joshua and me," he said as if that made it better. It shouldn't have. "While I will admit it probably would've taken me some time to get used to, this time, I got so mad because I didn't realize that you'd been crushing on one another for years. I thought he'd slept with you only a few weeks after I told him that it was okay for the two of you to see one another."

"But now you understand that even that's none of your business, right?" I asked, setting my coffee down to fold my arms.

"Yeah, I see that now."

I gave him a skeptical look, but it didn't matter. "All right, brother. I forgive you. As long as Joshua wants to get back together with me and you keep your nose out of our business."

"Deal."

We both stood and hugged it out. It felt nice to have my brother's strong, protective arms around me, but I couldn't let him know that or he'd be right back into ruthless mode.

Once he let me go, I went back into my room, intending to fix my makeup and go talk to Joshua—somehow.

"Hey, could you come down to my room in about ten minutes?" Landon asked me. "I have something I need to show you."

I arched an eyebrow but found myself nodding. "Okay." Whatever it was, it would give me a few more minutes to consider what to say to Joshua.

A few minutes later, with my makeup and hair straightened, I found myself walking down the hall toward my brother's room, wondering what in the world he wanted.

I knocked on the door, but when it opened, it wasn't my brother who was waiting inside. "Joshua?"

"Hey, Liberty. How are you?"

"I'm okay," I told him. He looked amazing, and I missed him so much, I just wanted to fling myself into his arms. But I had to move forward with caution. We both took a few steps toward Landon's bed and sat down on the edge, a few feet away from one another. For all I knew, he'd been tricked into

coming here, too.

“Did Landon come and talk to you?” Joshua asked me. I nodded. “Did he tell you why you needed to come to his room?”

“No,” I admitted. “Did he tell you?”

“Not until I got here,” he said. “I guess, then, that you had no idea I’d be waiting for you?”

“Not a clue.”

He took a deep breath, and I could tell he was nervous. I hoped it was because he wasn’t sure what I was going to say to him, not because he couldn’t find the words to break up with me.

“I’m really sorry about all of this. My brother can be such an asshole sometimes.”

“He really can be,” Joshua agreed. “I was ready to leave earlier today. I’d even started packing.”

Hearing that broke my heart. “Really? You were just going to go home?”

He nodded. “I felt like there was no point in staying here if you were going to be locked in your room and I was going to be locked in mine. I’d tried talking to Landon the other day, but he couldn’t be swayed to give what I was saying the time of day. I guess it helped that everyone else told him he was wrong.”

“Landon does love to be wrong.” Sarcasm dripped from every word that left my lips. We both laughed. “Well, I’m glad you didn’t leave. I wanted to tell you...” I took a deep breath as my voice gave out on me. “I want to be with you, Joshua. No matter what.”

“No matter what?” A small smile took hold of the corner of his mouth, but he fought it. “Even if that meant your brother never spoke to you again?”

I nodded. It had been one of the things I’d considered when I was in my room for so long. “Yeah. He’s my brother, and I love him, but I don’t love anyone the way that I love you. If I had to go back home and never see you again, I don’t think I could do it. I already thought I lost you once. The thought of going through that again makes me want to puke.” He snickered at my choice of words as I shrugged. “It’s true.”

“Liberty.” He reached up and brushed my hair behind my shoulder, his fingertips grazing my shoulder. “I’m so glad to hear you say that. When you left breakfast, I was afraid that you didn’t want to give this another try. I thought you’d decide it was too hard.”

Shaking my head, I stared at him in disbelief. “No, never. I just couldn’t



stand listening to my brother yell. I felt like everyone was looking at me, and I couldn't handle it, so I left. I'm sorry. I was running out on the situation, not you."

"I understand. I wanted to text you so many times in the last few days, but I was afraid I'd manage to make things worse." Sadness filled his eyes as his fingers continued to brush through my hair.

"You could never make things worse. I think it's best that we are having this conversation in person, but I don't ever want to go that long without seeing you again," I admitted.

His smile broke through, and both of us moved closer to one another. "Liberty, I've loved you for as long as I can remember. Every day with you is the perfect day. I'm so glad that we've finally got this situation with Landon straightened out. Now, we can move forward and not have to worry about who knows or what anyone else thinks."

That revelation sank in, and I felt a weight lift from off me, one I'd been carrying for more years than I could count. "It's amazing to think we're finally free to be together."

Joshua's lips came down on mine, and I lifted up to meet him. Our tongues danced as my hands roamed his body, missing the feel of him. Every breath was thick with his fragrance, the smells I'd been missing since the last time we were together. We continued to navigate closer, our limbs intertwining, and Joshua was about to lay me back on the bed when something occurred to me.

Breaking away from him, I said, "This is Landon's room. This is his bed."

Both of our eyes widened as we said, "Eww!" and shot up off the bed. Not only were we making out on my brother's bed, but who knew what he'd done there with my best friend?

Laughing, we fell into one another's arms, still standing, and Joshua held me against his muscular chest. "Liberty, I'm so glad we're together again. Let's enjoy the hell out of what's left of our time here."

"Let's do it," I agreed. I knew no one would mention it since all of us were such good friends. From time to time, people in the neighborhood had fallouts with one another and patched it over. That's what happened. No one would think twice about this—at least, I hoped not.

Hand in hand, we walked out of my brother's room and back into the resort, ready to see what else Luke had in store for us. This time, we'd take it

all on together.



## JOSHUA

Liberty's hair fell across my shoulder as she gazed up at me, our naked bodies intertwined in my bed. The sound of the ocean waves crashing against the shore was enough to lull me to sleep, but my heart was still racing from making love to this beautiful woman—my beautiful woman.

Several days had passed since we'd said we wanted to be together, no matter what. Since then, we'd spent nearly every moment together. Luke and his family had planned some terrific activities for all of us, including great dinners, sightseeing explorations, and downtime at the beach. One night, Liberty and I had snuck out alone so she could wear that tiny pink bikini. It'd been all I could do to keep from making love to her in the ocean, but fear that someone from our group might see had led us back to her room, where I'd taken her behind closed doors.

"What are you thinking about?" Her voice was heavy with sleep, moonlight giving her an ethereal glow, making her look like an angel in my arms.

"Just about how much fun this trip has been, how lucky I am to have gotten to share it with you, and how I can't wait until our next adventure together."

Liberty pressed her lips together and let out a sexy sigh of contentment. "I can't imagine doing life with anyone else."

Her words made my heart miss a beat. I loved it when she talked about us like that, like we were going to be together forever. I prayed we would be.

"When we get back, it'll be full wedding mode," she reminded me, bursting my bubble just a little. I'd loved our lazy days at the beach together,

but what she was talking about now sounded like work, like talking on the phone and paying vendors visits, and a bunch of shit I didn't want to do. But I was the best man, so that made it my job.

"I guess we'll figure that out when we get back," I said with a sigh.

Liberty giggled. "You don't want to go check the flowers with me or swing by the bakery and make sure the flavors on the cake are right?"

"Well, as long as you're there, I guess it'll be okay." I smiled at her, and she leaned up to kiss me. The idea that I might have another round in me came to mind, but when she pulled her lips away, it was clear she was nearly asleep. It would have to wait for another day. I kept her snuggled against my chest as we both drifted off.

The next day, we both showered and got packed. Saying goodbye to the amazing view was difficult, but as soon as we got downstairs, I heard Poppy excitedly talking to her sisters about the wedding, and I knew that what we were returning to was another adventure, even if it would be something totally different than this trip. My best friend and his girl needed me to step up and make sure they had the best wedding ever, and that was exactly what I intended to do.

Liberty and I sat next to each other on the plane again, but this time, we both stayed awake the whole time. We watched movies, shared snacks we'd bought together at a shop in the resort, and chatted away the hours. It was a long flight, but I enjoyed every moment of it because we were together.

Back at the airport, I kissed her goodbye as she got into her brother's truck. "I'll see you tomorrow." It was late, and everyone in our party needed to get some sleep.

"I'll see you every tomorrow," Liberty replied, and once again, my heart was singing with love for this amazing woman.

The next day, we all slept in, but around noon, I got a text from Landon. "Can you come over? We are in full wedding emergency mode over here."

"Sure thing," I sent back, hoping to calm him down. "Whatever it is, I'm sure I can help."

"I hope so," he replied. "We think the caterer has messed up the appetizers."

Since it was just a text, I could snicker. How bad could it be? But it was obviously important to Poppy and Landon that everything was perfect on their big day. "Give me ten minutes, and I'll be right there."

Exactly ten minutes later, I walked through Landon's back door. Poppy's

voice had hit my ears before I even opened the door. “I’m not sure why this is so complicated. How could she mess this up?” She didn’t sound angry, just disappointed. Poppy was no bridezilla, but she did have certain items she wanted a particular way. Obviously, the food was a big one.

“Joshua and I will go down there and talk to the caterer,” Liberty was saying as I walked through the door into the living room. “We’ll make sure that there are vegan options, Poppy. It’ll be okay.”

I thought I got the gist of what was happening without hearing the whole explanation. “Hi, Poppy,” I said, giving her a sympathetic smile. “We’ll get it straightened out.”

“Thank you, Joshua.” The bride-to-be gave me a hug, and I could tell she was frazzled. “Can you guys also swing by the florist and check out the flowers? I want to make sure they’re the right colors.”

“Of course,” Liberty told her. “We’re on it.”

“We’ve only got three days until the wedding,” Landon reminded us. He was sitting on the couch, his elbows buried in his knees. “We’ve got to make sure everything is on track.”

“Anything else we can help with?” I asked.

“Not at the moment,” Poppy told me. “Thanks again.”

“It’s no problem.” I patted her reassuringly on the shoulder and turned to Liberty. “You wanna drive or shall I?”

“Let’s take my car.” She had fire in her eyes that made me think this was the next adventure we’d been discussing. It seemed like a simple errand, but Liberty would find a way to make it fun.

In the car, Liberty turned the radio up, singing along to whatever song was playing, seemingly carefree like she already knew this issue her brother and best friend were having wouldn’t be difficult to fix. I admired her confidence, but then, I had missed the first part of the conversation, so I wasn’t sure what had Poppy so upset to begin with. I was really just here for moral support as Liberty pulled to a stop in front of the caterer’s location in the quaint downtown area of Franklin. She turned the engine off and looked at me, a big grin on her face.

“What?” I asked, smiling back at her and reaching for her hand.

“Nothing.” She gave me a sheepish grin, so I waited. “We’re doing wedding stuff.”

I wanted to read a lot more into that than I probably should have. “Yep. For our best friends.”

I thought I saw her face fall slightly as she nodded. “That’s true.” With that, she got out of the car and I wondered what the hell I’d said wrong, but she reached for my hand as we walked into the building, so I let it be. It couldn’t have been that bad if she still wanted to hold hands with me.

Inside, people were eating breakfast at little tables. This wasn’t just a caterer, they were also a restaurant, and it seemed like they were pretty busy. We strolled over to the checkout area in the back and waited a few minutes for a woman to come over.

She looked a little frazzled, like she was about to pull her gray-streaked dark hair out. “Can I help you?” At least she managed a smile.

“Good morning. I’m here to check on the Briar-Johnson catering menu. I’m Liberty, and this is Joshua. We’re part of the wedding party. The bride had a little bit of concern over the vegan options.”

“Oh, yes.” The woman’s face somehow grew more tense with each word coming out of Liberty’s mouth. “As I explained over the phone, we had a slight mix-up with the appetizers, but it’s been rectified now. I assured the bride that we would have the vegan options she asked for in the correct quantity for the wedding. Everything is going according to schedule, and there’s no reason to worry.”

“That’s wonderful.” Liberty’s mouth curled up at the edges in a knowing smile, as if to say she knew how Poppy could be when she thought something might be going wrong. “I’m so glad to hear that. You’re the owner?”

“That’s right. I’m Mildred Benson,” the woman replied, seeming to relax a bit as she saw that Liberty was going to be reasonable.

Liberty offered Mildred her hand. “So nice to meet you. I’ll let Poppy know that we double-checked with you and everything is fine. We appreciate your time. It seems you’re very busy, so we’ll get out of your hair.”

Mildred shook Liberty’s hand, so I offered her mine as well, which she took. Her grip was firm. “I know how stressful weddings can be. I assure you, we will be there on time with the correct menu items, as promised.”

“Wonderful. Poppy and Landon will be so thrilled. Have a wonderful day.” With that, Liberty turned to walk out the door, and since my hand was still in hers, I went along, wondering if I’d missed something or if it was truly that easy.

Back in the car, I asked, “Do you think that everything will really turn out all right?”

“Yes. My brother hired the best caterers around. Everyone makes

mistakes sometimes, but they called right away to let Poppy know they had it under control. They probably shouldn't have even called her, but they wanted to be transparent. Anyway, that's handled. Now, let's go check on the flowers and cake."

I went along with her on her other stops, watching in awe as Liberty handled everything smoothly. I was the businessman, or at least, I thought of myself as one, but she was the powerhouse when it came to making sure everything was as it should be. By the time we returned to her house, we knew everything was under control.

Just a few days later, the night before the wedding, I found myself once again in Landon's house, this time with Luke as the three of us reminisced about old times in preparation for the upcoming nuptials. "I hope the girls are having fun over at Poppy's house," I said, my eyes moving in the direction of the house across the street where I knew the girl I loved was hanging out with the woman Landon was about to marry.

"I can't believe you'll be married tomorrow," Luke said, shaking his head.

"I can't either, but I also can't wait." Landon grinned at both of us.

"Do you remember that day in the park, when we were playing catch, and Poppy and Liberty showed up? What were we, like eleven?" Of all our childhood memories, that day was etched in my mind like none other. It was the day that I realized Landon loved Poppy more than anything, that he would even throw his best friend under the bus in order to impress her.

"Of course, I remember that day," Landon said, a thoughtful expression on his face. "How could I ever forget it?"

"The two of you make an amazing couple, and whenever I see you together, I think about my own future and how blessed I'd be to have a love like that in my life someday." Luke looked a little teary-eyed as he spoke, and I found myself getting a little misty as well.

Raising my glass, I said, "To true love."

The other guys clinked their glasses against mine. "To true love."

We all drank to that. As the whisky burned my throat, I wondered if someday I'd be the groom and Landon would be the best man. I had no idea what the future held, but I sure hoped that would be the case.

And I already had the bride in mind.



# **EPILOGUE**

## LIBERTY

I hadn't realized just how bright my yellow dress was until I put it on and stood next to Poppy wearing all white. She looked gorgeous, of course.

All of us bridesmaids paled in comparison to the radiant bride, but that was okay. This was Poppy's day, a day for her and my brother to be celebrated by all of their friends and family.

Poppy was doing her best not to cry as I helped her put on her mother's gown. She'd had it taken in a bit, though her mother had always been a slender woman. Poppy was slightly taller, and her waist was so tiny, the dress had had to be altered to accommodate that. As I slipped the top button into place, I sighed and took a step back. "You look incredible," I told her.

"Thank you, Liberty." Poppy fanned her face, trying not to let the tears fall. The makeup artist had taken forever making sure everything was perfect. Neither one of us wanted to mess it up.

"Don't cry," I scolded, laughing. "If you cry, I cry, then your sisters will start crying. Your mama will cry, and Grandma Eleanor will cry. It'll just be a big mess." The other ladies all giggled as I pointed them out to Poppy, who was fighting tears but losing the battle.

"I'm sorry. I just can't help it. Marrying your brother has been such a dream come true for me. It's been a long time coming, and here I am, wearing my mama's wedding gown, ready to walk down the aisle and become Mrs. Landon Johnson."

"And then we'll be sisters for real," I reminded her. It probably wasn't the best thing I could've said, since it made her eyes gloss over again. Poppy pulled me to her, hugging me tightly, and I wrapped my arms around her,

squeezing her back. She was my best friend in the whole world and had been since we were little girls playing with dolls. I couldn't imagine a better match for my brother, and it was so fitting they were getting married just in time for their pact as well. Landon's thirtieth birthday was the cut-off date, after all. If he wasn't married by then, he was supposed to marry Poppy anyway. Thankfully, they'd made that commitment to one another nearly a year ago.

Poppy let me go, and then everyone else moved in to hug her, and I took a step back, trying to think of the latest horror movie I'd seen so I wouldn't want to cry. Even picturing a murderous doll wielding a knife in his little chubby hand didn't quite dry the tears up, but it helped.

Thankfully, I'd already given Poppy the letter my brother had written her, which had made her cry. The makeup artist had worked her magic, and now she looked stunning. I had no idea what Landon had said in that letter, but whatever it said must've been the type of sentiment one hears in movie dialogue or reads in romance books because Poppy had been overcome with emotion.

"How many more minutes do we have until the wedding is supposed to start?" Autumn asked, turning toward her mother.

"Just a few. I should probably go check on your father. He'll be sure to tear up when he sees his little girl. Thankfully, he won't have to worry about ruining his mascara." Laila, Poppy's mother, patted her daughter lovingly on the arm before heading off to find her father, Johnny. While Poppy's parents were nothing like my own, and those differences had even caused some problems for our two families over the years, I'd always appreciated Laila's loving care for her children. She looked at me and smiled before she turned and left, and I felt the same sort of warmth spread through me as I would've if my own mother had given me a loving look.

"Well now," Grandma Eleanor said, stepping over to Poppy, "today is the day I get to welcome a new granddaughter into my life. I'm so thankful that it just happens to be that sweet girl from the yoga studio." Grandma hugged her, and I felt myself tearing up again. Thinking of how Grandma's story about sunflowers and roses had been the catalyst for my father, Remington, to finally accept Poppy into the family made me want to cry all over again.

"Thank you so much for everything." Poppy hugged Grandma, and the two of them shared a moment before they broke apart.

Everyone else was going out into the hallway to get ready to line up to walk down the aisle. I'd be the last one out since I was the maid of honor, but

I couldn't quite pull myself away from the bride just yet. "Poppy," I said, fighting tears once more, "I'm just so happy for you and my brother."

She took a deep breath, her bottom lip quivering. "I can't even put into words how happy I am that this day is finally here." She held my hand, and we both squeezed before I finally let her go. Picking up my bouquet of roses from the table where I'd laid it earlier, I headed out, knowing I probably wouldn't see Poppy again until everyone else saw her walking down the aisle.

The hallway was abuzz with activity as the bridesmaids got in line before the double doors that led inside where everyone was waiting. The flower girl twirled around, her long gown flying up around her knees as she did so. I smiled, thinking I wasn't much older than her when I realized I loved Joshua.

Next time I was in a chapel like this, would it be at my own wedding? I didn't dare to think it might be.

"All right, Liberty. Here we go," the woman Poppy had hired to make sure everything went off without a hitch today said, directing me to come forward. She brushed my hair back over my shoulders and straightened my dress a little. "You look lovely, dear."

"Thank you." I took a deep breath, waiting for the music to change, just like we'd practiced in the rehearsal the evening before, although this time, the entire room would be full of people staring at me as I made my way down the aisle.

"One foot in front of the other," I reminded myself aloud. I knew it wasn't that big of a deal. Everyone would be staring behind me anyway, hoping for a glimpse of the bride. This day belonged to Poppy and my brother. I was only a minor character in their love story.

When the pianist changed the music, I knew that was my cue. The doors opened for me, and I stepped inside. Immediately, the sense that hundreds of pairs of eyes were on me made me stop in my tracks. My breath stuttered, my heart skipped in my chest, and my knees began to shake.

"You've got this," wedding planner whispered behind me, her hand gently touching my back to give me the slight push I needed.

She was right. I could do this. But it had nothing to do with suddenly becoming confident under the eyes of the masses. No, it was at that very moment that my eyes landed on a familiar face standing near the altar.

He wasn't directly in front of it, of course. That was where my brother was standing. A fleeting glance at Landon told me he looked as handsome as

ever, his hands trembling slightly as he waited for his beloved to make her appearance. But that was not who I was staring at as my feet began to move again.

Joshua stood right next to his best friend, between Landon and Luke, in front of the other groomsmen. My eyes never wandered too far past his smiling face as I walked down the aisle, a forced smile glued to my face. When I looked at him, my smile became more genuine. He put my soul at ease. His eyes twinkled in the candlelight coming from behind the wedding party, and I found my lungs expanding more and more with each breath.

As I made my way down the aisle, the thoughts I'd had earlier about how the next time I was in a similar situation I might actually be walking up to the altar to join Joshua there crossed my mind. Ordinarily, it might be too soon for a couple who had only been officially dating for a couple of weeks to be thinking about such things. But our situation was different. We'd known for years that we were in love with one another. We didn't have to have a history of dating to know that we were right. If Joshua were to ever ask me to be his bride, I had no doubt that I would answer, "Yes!" with all of my heart.

His smile widened as I grew closer to him, and I had to wonder if maybe he was thinking the same thing. Was he imagining me walking up the aisle in a long white gown instead of this yellow frock Poppy had chosen for me? Could he see me with the veil on the back of my head and a larger bouquet of flowers?

Eventually, I reached the end of the very long aisle and took my place on the other side of the preacher. I couldn't see Joshua easily from here because my brother was in the way, but every once in a while we would peek around Landon and meet each other's gaze with a smile.

The other girls had looked a bit nervous as well as they went down the aisle, but once they were in line behind me, they could breathe again, and then the flower girl and ring bearer made their appearance, leaving the audience gushing. Red rose petals flew everywhere, very few of them actually landing on the runner. We all laughed at how adorable the littles were. Once they made it to the end of the aisle, they rushed off to sit with their parents, rather than standing up front with us for the ceremony.

The music shifted once more. We all held our breath, waiting, and when the door opened again, Poppy stepped through looking as gorgeous as ever, a radiant smile on her face. I heard Landon's gasp as he took her in. It was difficult to pull my eyes away from my beautiful best friend, but I needed to

see my brother's reaction. He had a tear in the corner of his eye as he beamed at the love of his life, who was slowly making her way toward him on the arm of her sobbing father.

I turned to look at Joshua then, glad I could see him since Landon had moved forward to meet Poppy. Joshua's eyes weren't on the blushing bride. They were on me, a confident smile on his handsome face. My smile widened as we shared similar thoughts, I was certain. Today was the most important day in the life of my brother, his best friend, and my best friend, but between the two of us hung another promise, the idea that someday we would meet at an altar again. Only the next time, we wouldn't be standing on the sidelines.

Warmth and love spread throughout my body as I managed to pull my eyes off Joshua and return my attention to the stars of the show, but in my soul, I was waiting for the day that I would stand before a crowd and promise myself to Joshua. When that day came, I would be even more happy than Poppy and Landon were right now.

It had been a long time coming, reaching this point, being able to say that Joshua and I would be together forever, but now that my childhood crush was finally mine, I would never let him go.

\*\*\*\*

Want more of Liberty and Joshua? I've got a special Extended Epilogue just for you!! [Get your copy HERE!!](#)



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Need more of Swanson Ridge?? Check out book 1 in the series called [The Marriage Pact!](#)

**HE's the one that got away.**

Now that I'm back in town, the jerk wants to offer me a job.

This isn't good for either of us. He feels like he's got to make up for what happened when we were kids.

And I have to restrain my hormones from doing the tango in front of him.

Never a good working relationship. Or is it?

See, here's the deal. We made a pact when we were kids.

If by some crazy reason we weren't married by the time we were thirty, we'd marry each other.

Well, time's up. And the pact was never broken.

Now what? Do I forgive the guy that ripped my heart out as a lovesick teenage girl?

He wants a second chance, and honestly, no one is rooting harder for him than me.

In our small town, this handsome, rich boy and I couldn't have been more different, but they say opposites attract.



Either way, our Marriage Pact is an interesting thought.

Feels more like forever than a simple agreement, and with this boy?

**Forever is exactly what I've wished for.**

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## Introduction



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



After ten years of helping his wife, Ali Parker and brother-in-law, Weston Parker develop love stories of their own, Jacob Parker has decided to take the plunge with a new twist on the romance story.

He's a romantic guy in real life and wanted to bring the world of the Manhattan Men to life with his wife, Ali.

He lives in Tennessee with his family, loves to golf, also writes as J Stark, and can be found working in his wood shop when he's not writing.

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**The Perfect Deal**  
A Swanson Ridge Novel #2

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First Edition.

**Editor:** Eric Martinez  
**Cover Designer:** Ryn Katryn Digital Art