

A photograph of two young women embracing on a wooden walkway. The woman on the left is wearing a grey sweater with white stars and dark jeans. The woman on the right is wearing a purple long-sleeved shirt and dark jeans. They are standing on a wooden boardwalk with a metal railing. In the background, there is a park with green grass, trees, and a city skyline under a sunset sky with warm orange and pink tones.

EMMA DALTON

Best Friends
don't fall for
Best Friends

Invisible Girls Club Book Eight

**Best Friends Don't Fall For Best
Friends**

By

Emma Dalton

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The Invisible Girls Club List of Characters

- 1) Kara Gander is married to Brayden Barrington and they have three kids:

Noah, 17

Chloe, 16

Rylee, 10

- 2) Dani Wood is married to Easton Knight and they have a daughter:

Ava, 16

- 3) Ally Bensen is married to Zack Hastings and they have three kids:

Evie, 17

Liam, 16

Lily, 16

- 4) Charlie Raine is married to Asher Park and they have two kids:

Willow, 16

Mia, 10

- 5) Baily Barrington (Brayden's younger sister) is married to Zane Hastings (Zack's younger brother) and they have two kids:

Zoey, 10

Brock, 8

- 6) Teagyn Myers is married to Brody Abberton and they have a daughter:

Paisley, 16

Chapter One

Chloe

“Guys...I have a secret admirer.”

I stare down at the piece of paper in my hands, the one that fell out of my locker when I opened it five minutes ago. My eyes soak in the words for what must be the millionth time.

Dear Chloe,

Hello. You don't know me, but I've been debating whether or not I should hand you this note or hide it in my desk drawer. After much deliberation, I decided to go for it. Please, feel free to toss this away if you'd like, but I hope you'll continue reading.

Chloe, you are such an inspiration to me. I'm in awe of you. From the moment I read your first article in the Edenbury High Times, I knew you were special. You have opened my eyes to topics and issues I have never thought about before. You've made me see the world in a different light. I find myself questioning things, challenging my beliefs, debating with others. I look forward to reading your articles every month.

I know writing this letter is a little strange, but I haven't worked up the courage to face you in real life. I hope to one day, but for now, you have my words on this paper.

Please keep writing and inspiring others. Like I said, you are a very special person.

I look forward to reading more of what your brilliant mind has to offer the world.

Sincerely,

Your Secret Admirer

My friends stare at me, each of them with a different expression. Lily Hastings thinks this is the most romantic thing that has ever happened to me, and her boyfriend Xavier Hall agrees. Ava Knight is super curious and hopeful, but her boyfriend Aidan West seems a little wary. Willow Park appears overprotective and skeptical, and Lily's twin brother Liam...well, he's made it quite clear that he thinks the author of the note is a creepy stalker and that I should throw it out.

But me? I have no idea what to think.

As I absorb the words on the note—for the millionth and one time—a warm, fuzzy feeling invades my insides. Someone at school likes me? Who can it be?

At the same time, I know this could be a prank. My friends and I are basically invisible at this school, and no one really notices us. But there is one person who likes to make our lives a living hell—Paisley Abberton. She's totally capable of doing something like this.

“I can't believe this!” Lily bounces on her heels with a squeal, her light brown hair flapping behind her. “Someone *likes* you. But who???” She peers around the hallway with wide gray eyes, as though the author of the note will magically

pop out of his hiding place and profess his undying love for me. But as usual, the halls are full of kids who are laughing and talking and paying no attention to us.

“Why did he write a note, though?” Willow asks with creased dark brows. “That’s so outdated.”

“Maybe he’s shy?” Aidan suggests. “It’s not easy telling someone how you feel.”

“Getting love notes is soooo romantic,” Lily gushes.

I frown at the note. “But I don’t talk to anyone other than you guys and the newspaper team. I don’t think anyone here says a single word to me.”

“He must be shy then,” Ava concludes, playing with her luscious, wavy dark brown hair. “That just makes him even more mysterious!”

Liam folds his arms over his chest with a huff. “I said it once and I’ll say it again. This is creepy.” He holds up his finger at his twin sister with narrowed gray eyes. “Before you say anything, Lily, this isn’t a romance book or movie. This is real life. And there are some real sickos out there.”

We girls scowl at him.

“What? It’s true.”

“But there are some really great guys out there, too,” Lily points out. “Sweet guys who might be perfect for Chloe.”

“There are,” Xavier agrees.

Liam gestures to the students gathered in the hallway. “At Edenbury High? Doubt it.”

He might be right. We've been going to the same school with these kids for years. I'm sure I would know if there was a sweet, kind, caring guy who had the potential to be the perfect guy for me.

Lily whacks her brother's arm. "Don't burst Chloe's bubble. Let her have this."

"Willow, you're the rational one here." Liam turns to her. "You have to agree that this is fishy."

Willow wrinkles her nose as she thinks about it, adjusting her glasses. "I am suspicious," she admits. "But at the same time...it's possible it could be a legit good guy. Think about it. We're always together, right? We're a tight group, almost impenetrable. Maybe that's intimidating."

Liam watches her for a few seconds before laughing. "We're invisible at this school. No one gives a crap about us."

Willow shrugs, causing her straight black hair to shift on her shoulders. "You never know."

Liam grumbles, "Outnumbered again."

I'm about to say something, but the bell rings. The seven of us head to first period, English with Ally Hastings. She's Liam and Lily's mom, and the most amazing English teacher in the entire Universe because she loves books. It's her greatest passion. She makes the lessons so fun and interesting. If I didn't love to read since I was born, she would totally convert me.

"How do we find out who he is?" Lily asks as we settle down in our desks. "Do you think he wants Chloe to figure out

who he is? He said he doesn't have the courage to talk to her in real life."

"Would he feel even more shy if she did discover who he is and confronts him?" Willow muses.

"You're right," Ava says with wide brown eyes. "That could scare him away."

"He's not a baby," Liam mutters as he opens his notebook. "If he truly felt that way about Chloe, he should man up and be honest with her."

We girls frown at him again.

"Why are you all looking at me like I committed a major crime?"

"Would you walk up to a girl you like and tell her how you feel?" Lily demands.

"Well...I..." he stammers.

"Thought so, womb buddy."

He rolls his eyes. "Ugh, you're being weird again, Lily."

"So is she just supposed to wait until...what exactly?" Ava asks.

"Unless you want to go around to every guy at school and ask if he wrote the note," Willow says.

"No way." I quickly shake my head, mortified at the thought.

"Good morning, students," Ally says as she strides into the classroom with her usual cheery smile. "I can't wait to discuss *A Tale of Two Cities* with you."

“We could try to narrow down a list of potential guys,” Lily suggests. “Minus out all the jerks and see who we’re left with.”

“That will take forever,” Ava says. “And do we even know everyone who goes here?”

“I think you should forget about this, Chloe,” Liam says. “This will take over your life.”

“So?” his sister says. “Maybe she wants it to take over her life.”

He gives her a face. “Lily, we’re not in a romance novel —”

“What’s up with you? You like romance. Why are you ruining this for Chloe?”

“I’m just concerned,” he says. “He could be a—”

“Girls?” Ally says. “Liam? If you haven’t noticed, class has already started.”

Wow. We were so caught up in our discussion and the secret admirer that we interrupted Ally’s class. That’s so rude.

“Sorry, Mom,” Lily mutters as we pull away from each other with guilty and apologetic expressions and focus our attention on our teacher.

Ally’s entire face is lit up like the sun has taken permanent residence there, like it always is when she discusses a book with her students. Her lessons are magical. But I can’t concentrate on a single thing she’s saying. Because the only thing running through my head are the words the secret admirer wrote.

I glance around the room, focusing on the guys in my class. I know them all by face, but do I *know* them? Not really. The secret admirer could be *in here*. My face heats up just thinking about it. But no one's looking at me.

Throughout the rest of the lesson, I wrack my brain, trying to replay the last few weeks. Did someone say something to me? Maybe ask me for a pen or what was for homework? I don't think so. But it's possible...

I sigh.

Everyone's head whips in my direction, including Ally's. Shoot. I so did not mean for that sigh to actually escape my lips, and for it to be broadcasted across the entire classroom.

"Chloe, is everything okay?" Ally asks.

My cheeks scorching, I nod and mutter, "Y-yeah. Sorry."

She keeps her eyes on me for a few seconds to make sure I'm telling the truth before returning to the discussion.

Ally, Willow's Mom, Charlie, Ava's mom, Dani, and my mom, Kara, were best friends in high school. Dani started a book club in their sophomore year because she didn't have friends and knew there had to be some kids at school who loved to read as much as she did. Ally and Charlie joined that year, and my mom joined a year later. They became the Four Musketeers. Lily noticed at the start of this year that the five of us were drifting apart, so we started our own book club and coined ourselves the Junior Musketeers.

In a way, they're all my moms, too. That's why it's a little hard to keep things from Ally, who is super observant. But

thankfully, she doesn't seem to think anything is wrong with me. Ugh, I really need to focus on her lesson...

And I do, for maybe ten minutes. Then my mind wanders, sifting through the guys at our school and imagining one of them...

The bell rings, yanking me from my thoughts.

"That's your homework for tonight," Ally announces. "I expect them emailed to me before midnight. No excuses."

Shoot! I was so lost in my thoughts that I missed what's for homework. My friends have already gathered their stuff and are making their way to the door. I grab my things, hurrying after them.

"I never thought about it that way," Willow is saying when I catch up to them. "Your mom has definitely put her own unique spin on it, Lily. I think I have a lot to think about tonight when I write my paper."

"What was the assignment?" I ask.

"What do you mean?" Ava asks as we stop in the hallway.

I run a hand through my brown hair as I laugh sheepishly. "I wasn't paying attention and missed the assignment."

Willow clutches her chest dramatically. "Did Chloe Barrington miss an English assignment? It's her favorite subject in school. Someone, call the fire department."

"Are you feeling well?" Ava teases as she places her hand on my forehead.

"She's got the *love bug*." Lily bumps her shoulder into mine with a giggle.

Xavier and Aidan chuckle, but Liam frowns. “Were you paying attention at all in class?”

“Yeah,” I lie.

He watches me for a few seconds before shaking his head and muttering, “Heading to second period. See you guys at lunch.”

I stare after him as he marches away, noticing that his shoulders are a little hunched and that his hands clench and unclench at his sides. But I don’t have time to dwell on it because the bell rings.

Xavier and Aidan wish us goodbye and head to their classes.

“See you guys at lunch!” Ava says as she flings her arms around me, then Lily and Willow. “We gotta make the most of it because book club is canceled today.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Willow says with a shrug. “My mom’s super ticked off that I keep pushing off my doctor’s appointment, and she’s forcing me to go after school. I mean, sheesh, it’s just a yearly checkup.”

“Well, your health is more important than book club,” I say.

Willow thinks about it for a second. “Nah.”

That makes all of us laugh. Then we separate to our classrooms. I’ve got history now, and to say I concentrate in this class...nope. I don’t concentrate in my next classes, either. No matter how much I try, random guys’ faces pop into my head and make me imagine what it would be like if they

marched over to me with their hands outstretched and confessed they're the author of the note...

"Miss Barrington," my psychology teacher says as she stops before my desk and looks down at me through lowered glasses. "Am I disturbing you?"

"What?" I ask.

"You're not paying attention in my class."

"Oh." My cheeks sizzle again. "Sorry."

I can't let this whole secret admirer thing make me fail my classes. So I force him out of my head and focus on the lesson.

After getting lunch, I carry my tray to our table in the back corner of the cafeteria, where my friends and the boys are already seated.

"This looks promising." Xavier nods at his plate of barbeque chicken.

"Yep," Ava says as she opens her container that holds the gourmet lunch her family chef prepared for her. "Had a long talk with my parents the other day and they promised they would make some changes around here. Starting with the awful school lunch."

My eyes scan the guys seated at the tables near us. Are any of them looking my way? Considering no one pays attention to us, I should be able to spot someone glancing at me, right?

"Well, I'm starving," Liam says, cutting a huge chunk of chicken and shoving it into his mouth. His eyes light up in surprise. "Hey. Not bad at all." He chews for a few seconds.

“There’s something in this, though...” He takes another bite and chews it slowly. “Can’t figure out what the ingredient is. Try it, Chloe. Maybe you can figure it out.”

I blink at him. “What? Did you say something?”

He raises a brow. “I was talking about the chicken. There’s an ingredient I can’t identify.”

“Oh.” I cut a small piece and take a bite. “Chili powder.”

His brows come down. “No way. It’s not chili powder.”

I shrug and continue studying the guys in the cafeteria. Not a single person glances in my direction.

“Well, you guys are the culinary experts,” Ava says. “If you can’t identify the mystery ingredient, there’s no hope for us.”

“Does it matter?” Aidan asks as he devours his chicken like he hasn’t eaten in days. “This thing is ridiculously good.”

“My brother and Chloe eat, drink, and breathe cooking and baking,” Lily tells him.

“We’re not that bad,” Liam says.

“You were close to tears the other day when you ran out of chocolate chips for the cookies you were baking,” she teases.

Liam’s face turns pink as he glances at me. “No I wasn’t! I just wanted to have all the ingredients ready for when Chloe came over. She had so much work to do on the paper...”

With a sigh, I play with my chicken.

“You okay?” Willow asks. “The chicken’s pretty good. Even for your and Liam’s standards.”

I shake my head. “It’s not that.”

“Is it your secret admirer?” Lily asks, her eyes lit up like her mom’s.

I scan the area again. “I thought I could find him, but…” I nod toward the popular table, where cheerleader Paisley and her friends and the jocks sit. “Maybe it’s a prank.”

“It’s *not* a prank,” Lily insists.

“It could be Paisley. You know she has it in for me.”

Paisley Abberton is the daughter of cheerleading coach Teagyn Myers Abberton, a woman who went to school with our parents. For some reason, she had it in for our moms and has managed to brainwash her daughter to treat us the same. Paisley was pretty ticked off at me because of the article I wrote in the latest issue of our school newspaper, the Edenbury High Times. I wanted to bring to the attention of the popular kids, like Paisley, how great our school could be if they were more welcoming to students who were different from them. Like unpopular kids, and kids who have no friends. But of course she took it the wrong way.

And her mom has an extra vendetta against my family because she was after my dad in high school. But he fell in love with my mom. Seriously, that woman doesn’t know how to let go of a grudge.

“Forget Paisley,” Ava says. “She doesn’t have enough brain cells to orchestrate this whole thing.”

I raise a brow at her.

“Come on, Chloe! I can’t imagine her taking the time to write you a letter.”

“She could hire someone,” Willow points out.

Lily shoots her a look. “Whose side are you on?”

“The logical one.”

“Well, I’m on the side of love,” Lily says with a happy sigh.

“Me, too.” Ava throws me a smile. “In a few weeks, you’ll have your Prince Charming.”

Liam snorts.

Lily and Ava glare at him. “If you’re going to crush Chloe’s dreams, leave the table,” Lily says.

“I’m two minutes older than you. I’m the one who bosses you around.”

“You can’t pull the older twin card forever.”

“Yes, I can.”

“Forget it, guys,” I say as I take a bite of my chicken. “Like Liam said, this could take over my life. Maybe the guy won’t write me again. I don’t want to obsess over it if nothing will come out of it.”

“Oh, he’ll write you again,” Lily says. “I know he will.”

“Agreed!” Ava says.

“Yeah, I’m with my girl on this one,” Aidan says.

“Same,” Xavier says. “What would be the point if he didn’t?”

We turn to Willow to hear her opinion. “Logic dictates that he will try to write you again,” she says.

“Don’t hold your breaths,” Liam mutters.

“We will,” Ava and Lily say.

And me? I’ll hold my breath, too. Because I want to believe that there is a guy out there who likes me. The perfect guy who will love me and cherish me the way I dream.

He’s got to be out there...right?

Chapter Two

Liam

I haven't been able to stop thinking about that darn note. From the moment Chloe and I walked into algebra after lunch, my head has been a mess. Nah, that's a lie. It's been a mess since that piece of paper tumbled out of her locker.

I also haven't taken my eyes off Chloe since it happened. She's sitting at the desk across from me as we wait for Ms. Bhatt to enter the classroom. Her finger runs along the table, her thoughts seeming to be elsewhere. Just like they were all morning and at lunch.

I've cleared my throat a few times, tried to say something to her, but the words are stuck. My twin sister Lily and the rest of our friends have tried to dissect that note to death and so far have gotten nowhere. So for me to try to say...what? Chloe already knows what I think. It seems she and the others refuse to consider my opinion—that I think the guy is a creep. Then again, none of us have ever gotten a love note before, so we have no idea what to make of it.

Honestly, I'm curious who the guy is. If he really is a decent, kind-hearted guy who has real feelings for Chloe, I'll relax. But if he's a creep? I'll give him a piece of my mind.

I plow my fingers through my light brown hair that's getting a bit too long. Why is this messing me up so much? Maybe because as the only male member of the Junior

Musketeers, it's my job to protect the girls? Ugh. That's so sexist. Chloe can take care of herself.

But at the same time, it wouldn't hurt for me to watch over her.

"Clear your desks for a pop quiz," Ms. Bhatt instructs as she walks into the classroom. Each student does as directed, except for Chloe, who's still tracing her finger along her desk, her thoughts in a different place.

"Chloe," I hiss.

No reaction.

"Chloe," I say louder.

Again, nothing.

"Chloe!"

"Mr. Hastings," Ms. Bhatt says as she comes to stand near my desk. "Do we have a problem? Or would you like to fail this quiz?"

I sink in my seat, my long legs scraping against the floor. "No, Ms. Bhatt. There's no problem. Sorry."

I glance at Chloe and find her brown eyes on mine, confused, like she doesn't understand why I'm disturbing class.

Ms. Bhatt faces her. "Please clear your desk, Miss Barrington, so I may hand out the quiz."

At the mention of a quiz, Chloe's eyes get huge with panic, as if she has no idea what's going on. Man, was she really not here and didn't hear a word our teacher said? I'm worried that she's so distracted. Didn't she say at lunch that she doesn't

want this secret admirer thing taking over her life? So much for that.

After Chloe's desk is cleared, Ms. Bhatt hands out the quizzes. The Junior Musketeers pride themselves on being good at school, so neither I nor Chloe should have a problem with this quiz. But as I peek to my left, I'm surprised to see her struggling.

Algebra is hard, but Chloe doesn't normally have a problem with it. That darn note...

We get through the quiz and then the teacher begins the lesson. I know I should be concentrating, but I can't stop watching Chloe. She's just as distracted as she was all day. Is this guy really going to make her fall behind in school?

Ms. Bhatt calls on a few kids to solve some equations on the board while the rest of us jot them down. Her eyes skim over the students until they land on Chloe. "Problem number five, Miss Barrington."

Chloe snaps in. "What?"

The teacher gestures to the board. "Please solve equation five."

We learned something new today and I don't think Chloe was paying attention.

She gets to her feet, slowly making her way to the front of the room like she's walking to her death. Her cheeks flush as she tries to complete the equation, and I feel so bad when she's completely lost. She solves it all wrong.

"That's incorrect, I'm afraid," Ms. Bhatt says with an apologetic look in her eyes. "Please sit down and...Liam, why

don't you solve the equation?"

As Chloe and I pass each other, I mouth, "Sorry." I hate that I'm about to show her up. But she waves her hand with the Chloe smile that I love. It transforms her entire face, her eyes shine, and it makes me feel like all things are good in this world. Everything is better when she's around.

"Correct," Ms. Bhatt says with a proud grin.

The lesson carries on until the bell rings, and all the kids rush out of the door like this class is torture. If I wasn't good at math, I guess I'd share their feelings. Chloe and I are the only ones who take our time packing away our things.

I lean against her desk. "You okay?"

She glances up as she stuffs her things into her backpack. "Yeah, why do you ask?"

"No reason. I just noticed you struggled a little with the quiz. And with that equation."

Her cheeks redden slightly. "I know. Um, I know you're not on board with the whole thing and I'm trying not to, but..." Her shoulders fall forward. "I can't stop obsessing over the note. Like...I don't know. The more we talk about it, the crazier I get. I *need* to know who he is."

No, what she needs is to forget about him. But who am I to tell her what to do? Yeah, she's my best friend, but she's free to have her own thoughts.

I swing my backpack over my shoulder. "I'd better get to class. See you later?"

She nods. I give her a smile and wave before leaving the classroom.

The rest of the day passes uneventfully. My friends, the guys, and I see each other in the hallway between classes, but we don't have time to exchange words. And I know the girls are dying to discuss this secret admirer more, especially Lily. She gets her love for romance from Mom, who's also obsessed with romance novels. I mean, I get it. I also enjoy reading the romance novels in book club, but I'm not a hopeless romantic like my mom and sister. Though I'm sure Lily would disagree. For some reason, she thinks I'm this romantic guy like Dad, even though I've never had a girlfriend. Never even been close to having a girlfriend. I may be on the basketball team, but I'm not popular, and I like it that way. The others on the team try to include me, but I just feel so out of place. I'm happy with my Junior Musketeers, my buddy Xavier, and our new addition, Aidan.

I head to the gym for basketball practice after school, along with my teammates. Coach is hard on us, only because we have the ability to go to state. Just like we did last year. Everyone is expecting great things from us.

Basketball has always been part of me, since I was little. I was always the tall kid and felt a little awkward about it, but Dad bought me a basketball hoop and I didn't feel so awkward anymore. And Lily and our older sister Evie, a senior, are also obsessed with it. But my sisters don't play on the girls' team.

I've been on the team for years, and while I enjoy it, I'm not interested in a basketball career. Xavier, our captain, does though. That guy is crazy talented. And he's the perfect

boyfriend to my sister. Cares about her, protects her, treats her like she's his queen. I'm glad those two are in love. I'm happy for them.

My thoughts once again travel to Chloe and that note. I know she wants to believe there's this romantic guy behind the words, but how likely is that? Most guys our age don't write such letters. Still, I can't get her excited smile out of my head. It'd kill me to see her so disappointed if the guy doesn't turn out to be who she imagined.

"You got a crush on that wall or something?" My teammate Darren chuckles as he elbows me in the ribs. "You've been staring at it."

I tear my gaze away from the gym wall and focus on him and Brian standing before me. "Just have a lot on my mind."

Brian smiles. "Like a girl?"

"No! Not a girl." My face gets hot for some reason. It's perfectly normal for a sixteen-year-old guy like me to be thinking about a girl. Though in this case, thinking about my best friend is probably not a good idea.

Brian and Darren grin at each other as if they know something I don't. I make an excuse and walk away from them and spot Lily in the bleachers, blowing kisses at Xavier. He grins, catching her kiss in his palm and pressing it to his chest.

I'm not jealous. I'm *not* jealous. I'm happy for them.

So why do I keep forcing myself to think those thoughts? I never felt this way before. Maybe it's because we're getting older and Lily and Ava have boyfriends now. And things will only be harder the older we get. I don't even want to think

about what will happen to the Junior Musketeers once we graduate next year.

Coach blows his whistle, calling for us to gather around so he can give us some instructions. As I listen to him, my eyes wander to the bleachers. Since our book club has been canceled today, I wonder if Chloe will come watch Xavier and me practice. But it doesn't look like she's coming.

Coach blows his whistle again and we start practice. I forget about Chloe and the note, and the future and focus on the game. We're killing it. Even though she's quiet, my twin telepathy can hear Lily cheering silently from the sidelines. A few other girls are whooping from the bleachers as well, and even though this isn't a real game, it seems to pump my teammates with adrenaline.

I peer at the bleachers to check if maybe Chloe made it here after all, but there's no one sitting next to Lily.

"Took you long enough," Evie grumbles as Lily and I make our way to the parking lot, where our older sister stands beside her car. She pushes her dark hair out of her face impatiently. Since Lily and I don't have our licenses yet, Evie goes home while I practice, then comes to pick us up. "I was about to go inside to see what happened to you."

I point my thumb at my twin. "She couldn't separate herself from Xavier," I tease.

Lily rolls her eyes. "Just wait until you get a girlfriend, Liam, and you a boyfriend Evie. You'll see what it's like to be

in love.” She sighs with a wide smile. “Ugh, I miss him already.”

Evie lifts a brow. “You do know he lives right next door to us and his window is *across* from yours, right?”

Lily makes a face. “Just wait until you fall in love, Evie,” she repeats as she gets in the car.

Evie snickers. “Like that’s going to happen. All I need is my art and I’m good.” She and I get in the car, too.

“There’s someone out there for you, big sis,” Lily insists. She’s about to say something else, but Evie holds up her hand.

“Please don’t go all Cupid Lily on me. I don’t have time for boyfriends. I need to focus on college. And anyway, it’s silly to meet someone now when we’ll go our separate ways after we graduate.”

Lily crosses her arms over her chest. “There’s long distance and—”

Evie grumbles. “I’m not talking about this right now.”

Lily shoots up. “Is there someone you like?”

“Yeah, my art.”

Lily frowns. “You’re so not fun. You hide all day in the basement drawing when you could be meeting this super romantic guy who will sweep you off your feet and kiss you in the most romantic way that’ll transport you to a magical place where—”

“Come back to reality, little sister who worships me, and let’s go home before Mom and Dad begin to worry.” She starts the car and pulls out of the student lot.

Our parents aren't overprotective, but they never hide how much their three kids mean to them. Dad lost his parents in a fire when he was fourteen, so I guess there's a part of him that always worries about us. He's a social worker, helping kids find good homes, since he lived in some terrible foster homes when he was my age.

Evie puts on music and all three of us sing along. We're pretty good singers, a talent we inherited from Mom, but none of us want to pursue a career in that. I'm hoping to go to culinary school after I graduate. Lily wants to be a marriage counselor and Evie's been accepted to an incredible art school.

We reach our house and walk inside, dumping our school stuff in the kitchen. Mom and Dad—Ally and Zack—are at the stove making dinner. Dad's arms are wrapped around her waist as they sway to the beat of a song only the two of them can hear. Then they press their lips together and make out like they haven't seen each other in years.

“Ugh,” I groan, like I do every time I see them like this. Lily's got hearts in her eyes, as usual, and Evie rolls her brown eyes.

“Again?” she mumbles as she makes her way toward the basement, where her art studio is.

“Ally, the kids are home from school,” Dad whispers in Mom's ear.

Mom laughs. “Maybe we should pretend they're off living on their own and aren't bothering us?”

Lily squeals. “You can pretend all you want. We're leaving. Come, Liam.” She nods toward the stairs, signaling

me to give them privacy. Evie salutes and goes downstairs to work on another masterpiece.

I grab a water bottle from the fridge. “You know, you’ve got only a few months left with Evie and less than a year with me and Lily. You sure you want to get rid of us that badly?”

Chuckling, Dad wraps his arm around me. “You know we’re just kidding. How was school and practice?”

I shrug. “Same old. Coach’s been tough on us, but we’re doing great. And school was school.”

Mom turns to my sister with a grin. “Did you discuss any good books at book club?”

“Unfortunately, Willow had an appointment so we had to cancel. Are you and the rest of the Four Musketeers reading anything good?” Mom and her friends have recently resurrected the book club they started when they were in high school.

“Sure. I’ll give you the list of the books we have lined up.” She looks from Lily to me, putting on her teacher face. “Go get started on your essay that’s due tonight. Remember, I want it in my inbox before midnight.”

I groan. “Trying to kick us out so you can make out some more? We get the message. Come, Lil.”

Lily lingers behind as I go to the stairs, smiling excitedly as she watches them for a few more seconds, and then follows me. I know we’re lucky. Many kids our age don’t have parents who are so sickeningly and annoyingly in love. I should jump for joy every time they make out, like Lily does. But ugh. It’s a bit too much sometimes.

Fine, I admit it—I secretly love seeing them all lovey-dovey with each other. But no one has to know that.

In my room, I drop down at my desk and start my algebra homework. I'll write the essay later, since it's easier. As I'm working on the problems, my mind wanders to what happened in class today. How embarrassed Chloe was when she couldn't solve the equation on the board.

Reaching for my phone, I tap on her number and bring it to my ear.

“Hey, Liam,” Chloe says, and I can picture the smile on her face. “What's up?”

“Not much. Doing homework.”

“Yeah...I'd do it too if I actually knew what homework we were assigned today...” She laughs shyly.

“It's part of the reason I called. I thought you might want some help with algebra since you, uh...”

“Looked like a dummy today in class?”

“You're not a dummy, Chloe.”

“I know, thanks. I just felt like one today. Sure, I'd love help with algebra.”

We spend a while going over what we learned today. I also tell her about the English essay that's due tonight, since she was too distracted in class to hear Mom give us the assignment.

“Thanks, Liam,” she says once we're done. “That was very sweet of you.”

I smile, even though she can't see. "Of course. You know I'd do anything for you. And for the rest of the Musketeers, too," I quickly add so things won't be weird.

"Yeah, thanks. So I need to email the essay to your mom before midnight. Add that to the pile of homework my other teachers assigned..." She sighs like she's carrying the world on her shoulders. "Seriously, teachers don't understand that we're dealing with personal stuff that could be distracting..."

I'm pretty sure she's talking about her note. I clear my throat and shift on my desk chair. "Hey, Chloe? Sorry about the way I behaved today. You know, with the note and everything. I was just..."

"I know," she says softly. "You're just looking out for me. And that's why you're so amazing. I just thought..." She sighs. "There might be a guy out there who likes me, you know?"

I don't say anything, just swallow the lump in my throat.

"I mean, I'm sixteen and have never even been kissed," she continues. "I've never been on a date or even had a guy look at me in *that* way."

I still don't say anything. I can't. The lump has transformed into a boulder.

"Liam? You still here?"

"Y-yeah. I'm here, sorry. If it's any consolation, I've never done those things, either."

She laughs. "Maybe, but you've had girls look at you."

"When?"

“At the dinner party Ava’s grandparents hosted last month. A flock of girls practically mowed you down until you told them you don’t have a trust fund.”

I cringe as I remember that evening. Not one of my finest moments, ducking away from those girls and stammering as I tried to form a coherent sentence. “That doesn’t count.”

“Yes it does. Ugh, sorry. I don’t want to feel sorry for myself.”

“No. Like I told you a million times, Chloe, you can tell me anything.” Even if she starts a monologue about a shower curtain, I’d be captivated.

“Thanks, but I’m okay. I should probably get started on my essay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye.”

As I finish my homework, I can hear Lily in the room next door chatting with Xavier from her window. I can’t make out what they’re saying since my window is shut, but from the tone of the conversation, it’s love words.

I smile to myself before heading to my window and popping it open. Leaning out so I can see Lily, I give her a face. “You know I can hear every. Single. Word.”

Lily crosses her arms over her chest. “It’s a private conversation. Go away.” Her tone is light, so I know she’s just kidding. Lily and I don’t really argue, we just like teasing each other.

“Nope. This is my room and I want to look out the window.” I turn to Xavier. “Hey, man, what’s up? Is your grandfather doing okay?”

Spencer is like a second grandfather to me and my siblings. It sucks that he's been diagnosed with cancer and was told by doctors that he only has a few years to live. It's taken a toll on Xavier, but he's trying his hardest to cherish whatever time he has left with his grandpa and to make him as happy as he can.

Xavier nods with a smile. "He's great. We're going to watch his favorite fishing show later."

"Now if you don't mind..." Lily shoos me away. "Please?"

"Only because you asked so nicely." I pull my head inside and shut the window, then go downstairs for a snack. Mom and Dad are still kissing while cooking.

I hide behind the door and watch them for a little bit. A few months ago, I didn't think much about relationships. I guess I figured if it was meant to happen to me, it'll happen. But I don't feel like that anymore. Maybe because I see how happy Lily, Xavier, Ava, and Aidan are.

I want a girlfriend. I want a girl to look at me the way Mom looks at Dad. I want to hold a girl close, like she's so precious to me, and whisper romantic things in her ear. To feel so close to her and share every part of myself with her.

Sighing, I shake my head and return to my room.

Chapter Three

Chloe

I hang up with Liam, a smile tugging my lips.

He was so sweet to help me with homework. He's always looking out for us girls and has our best interests at heart. I feel bad for him sometimes because he feels left out, and I worry he might one day drift away from us and make new friends. Which, I guess, would be great for him...but not so much for me. Being around Liam makes me feel safe. Familiar. Comfortable. I can't imagine him not being in my life.

But it's selfish of me to want to keep him all to myself and to the Junior Musketeers. He hasn't made any new friends, other than Xavier and Aidan, but he's part of the basketball team and they're a tight group. He is shy like his sister, though, so maybe I *can* keep him all to myself. At least until we graduate high school. Ugh, I don't want to think what'll happen after that.

I concentrate on completing my homework so I won't think about the uncertain future. Reaching for my psychology textbook, a crumpled piece of paper tumbles to the floor. Oh my gosh, the secret admirer's note! I stashed it in my backpack because I didn't want to think about it anymore, but seeing it there on the floor...butterflies flap around in my stomach.

I bend down and sweep it off the floor, my fingers eagerly unfolding it. My eyes devour the words like they're a hungry lion and the note is their prey. Another smile tugs my lips at how raw and honest the author seems. He must have spent days agonizing whether or not to slip the note into my locker or throw it out and forget all about it.

I know I told Liam and my friends that I don't want this to rule my life, but...how *exciting* is it that there's a guy out there who likes me? I mean, assuming it's not a mean girl messing with me. I can't just let this go, can I? It's not every day Chloe Barrington gets a love letter.

Pushing my homework aside, I grab my phone and open the social media app, Spill it!. Ava's grandfather created it years ago, and it's still as popular now as it was back then. I look over the posts I put up within the last month. I'm not a heavy social media user, I just post a few photos of me and my friends, and my family. I also post links to my articles that are featured in the online version of the Edenbury High Times. They barely get views or likes, other than my friends and family. But is it possible someone has been liking them? He did say in his note that he loves reading my articles. Maybe that could lead me to his identity.

Nope. No likes from people I don't know, no comments, and no tags or mentions.

I try not to sigh in disappointment. Does he want me to figure out who he is or does he want to torture me like this?

Frowning, I push my phone aside, out of sight. Liam's right—this is messing with my life and my mental health.

After I'm done with homework, I make my way downstairs to start dinner. I'm more of a baker and Liam is the cook, but I still love it and enjoy cooking dinner for my family a few times a week. I especially love trying Liam's new recipes (even though he sucks at giving instructions). Mom and Dad are currently at Edenbury Elementary School because my ten-year-old sister, Rylee, has gotten into trouble. Again. I swear that girl is going to send my parents to an early grave. I wonder what mischief she's gotten herself into this time.

My brother Noah, who is a senior, dropped me off at home after school and has been hanging out with his friends ever since. He'll return for dinner. So I'm home all alone. Which I prefer when I cook because the last thing I need is Rylee skipping into the kitchen and touching everything and asking over and over, "What's cookin'?"

Liam spent the entire last week working on a fettuccine alfredo recipe. He hasn't yet had a chance to cook it for his family, so the Barringtons will be the guinea pigs. I know the food will be delicious, though—that is, if I can make sense of his notes. Seriously, how is he going to be a famous chef one day if he can't even write a straightforward recipe?

With a groan, I grab my phone and text him.

Chloe: You'll never have a career in the restaurant biz if you can't write a darn recipe.

Liam: ???

Chloe: Write better recipes!

Liam: What? They seem fine to me.

Liam: What the heck is a p of s?

Liam: A pinch of salt

Chloe: ...

Liam: You should have known that one.

**Chloe: So a cup of parm is a cup of parmesan? What's the
I? Half a cup?**

**Liam: No. The recipe is doubled because my family are
animals. a cup is a cupload.**

Chloe: ...

Liam: A salad is nothing without the parm

Chloe: Seriously.

He sends me an emoji with a huge smiley face. Even though I'm rolling my eyes, I'm smiling. Because as annoying as Liam can be, I still love him. And when I mean love, I mean...you know, as a friend. Because that's what we are—friends.

**Liam: Let me know if you have any questions. Gonna
work out soon, but I'll have my phone close by.**

Chloe: Okay, thanks.

After deciphering the rest of the recipe like it's a freakin' code book, I finally start on the dish. And oh my gosh, it comes out *delicious*. I keep sneaking in spoonfuls before my family comes home. At this rate, there won't be anything left for them.

While working on a salad for a side dish, the door opens and Noah walks in. He's got a pretty bummed expression on his face as he rakes his fingers through his sandy brown hair.

“What happened?” I ask as I add olive oil to the salad.

He perches himself on a kitchen chair and rubs his hands down his face. “Just tired.”

“From?” I prompt.

“Nothing.”

I roll my eyes. “What are you even doing with your friends after school? You go there like every day.”

He shrugs. “Just hanging out.”

“And doing something that makes you come home exhausted?”

“No.”

I watch him for a few seconds before sighing. “I’m not going to tell anyone. You know I’m not a tattletale like I was when I was five.”

“I know,” he says. “Don’t worry, I’m not up to something. Just hanging out with my friends, hitting the PlayStation a bit too hard. You know how much energy it takes to shoot the undead.”

Why do I get the sense that he’s lying?

“I’ve got homework,” he says as he plucks himself off the chair and goes up to his room.

Noah is a closed book. He keeps everything to himself and barely opens up. I still consider us close, even though he doesn’t share much with me. I know I can always rely on him and that he has my back. He thinks that since he’s the older brother, it’s his job to protect me and Rylee. Which means he’s

always putting us first and isn't as concerned about his own well-being.

He also doesn't want to cause my parents any problems. Especially Dad. My father is Brayden Barrington, who some people around here call a legend because after being quarterback in high school, he was the quarterback for the Silverton Sharks, a pro football team. It's been Dad's dream for Noah to follow in his footsteps, but Noah is so stressed about it. I don't know if he actually likes football. I've tried telling him many times to talk to Dad about it and tell him how he feels, but of course he shoots me down. He thinks it's his job to make our parents happy.

I think part of it has to do with the fact that my dad's brother, my Uncle Brock, died in a car accident when he was in high school. Brock was a rising football star, and after he died, Dad felt like he had to continue his legacy and pushed himself to make quarterback just like his brother. His younger sister, my Aunt Bailey, was also quarterback—the first female football player to play for the Edenbury High Lions—and I think Noah feels like it's up to him to keep the family tradition.

I know Dad doesn't want to make him feel obligated to continue the legacy. All Dad wants is for us to follow our own dreams and be happy. But Noah refuses to listen to me. I would talk to my dad for him, but that would make me a tattletale. Is it worth being a tattletale if it means Noah can be happy?

“Rylee, you put yourself in danger,” Mom's voice says as the door opens and she, Dad, and my younger sister pile into

the house. “Not to mention you endangered the lives of Mia and Zoey.”

“Come on! It was an adventure,” Rylee says as she shrugs out of her jacket and pats down her straight brown hair. “This town is so boring.”

“Read a book,” Dad says. “You’ll have enough adventures there.”

“But that just makes it worse! I want to go on adventures like the characters in the books.”

“Oh, dear.” Mom rubs her forehead with a sigh.

“Were you the ringleader of this specific adventure, or was Mia or Zoey responsible?”

Rylee just beams innocently.

“What happened this time?” I ask as I toss the salad.

“Your sister decided to put her life and the lives of her best friends at risk by trespassing on private property.”

“We weren’t trespassing! No one owns the building.”

“The city does,” Mom points out. “You’re lucky you didn’t get arrested.”

With a shrug, Rylee hops onto the counter beside me and gushes, “You know that building next to the school that has this huge sign warning people to keep out?”

“Of course. It’s been there ever since I went to elementary school.”

“Right. So kids said there’s a ghost that haunts it. A woman who was murdered by her husband. He chopped her up

into a million pieces and buried her parts all over the house.”

Mom frowns at her. “Where do kids come up with this stuff?”

“Those were the rumors I heard at school, too, Mom,” I tell her.

She shakes her head. “I did research on that building for an article I wrote for The Edenbury Press. There was a rat infestation many years ago, so the city closed it down. They still haven’t decided what to do with it. They might want to extend the elementary school—”

“Whatever, Mom.” Rylee turns back to me with bright blue eyes. “So Mia got into an argument with a boy in our class because she said the rumors were BS—”

“Language, Chloe,” Dad scolds.

“I said BS! Not the real world. Anyway, the stupid boy said the ghost will haunt us if we don’t believe in her existence. So Zoey joked that we should check out the place just to prove him wrong. I said we should do it! So as soon as school was over, we slipped through the backyard—you know there’s this broken fence in the back? Adults can’t fit through, but we can and—”

“And police found them wandering in a very dangerous location,” Mom says with a stern expression. “Seriously, Rylee, what were you thinking? That place has been abandoned for years. You could have gotten hurt.”

“But we didn’t,” she points out.

“But you *could* have. Why are you always putting yourself in danger like this?”

Rylee shrugs like she can't help it. "It was fun. And we didn't see any ghosts. Take that, Loser Louis!"

"You're grounded until you're old and wrinkly," Mom says. "I don't want you going into strange places again. Do you understand me?"

"Sure," she mutters. Then she winks at me and whispers, "Watch them lift my sentence in a week." She hops off the counter and skips up to her room.

"You'd better start your homework!" Mom calls after her. She turns to Dad with an exasperated sigh. "What are we going to do with that girl, Bray? And I hate that she's dragging Zoey and Mia with her. It feels like all I do is apologize to Charlie and your sister."

Dad places his hands on her shoulders, giving her a massage. "Relax, Kara. Charlie and Bailey don't blame you. They know you're an amazing mom. Maybe we need to find an activity for Rylee to release all that energy on."

"Like what? We signed her up for dance classes and archery lessons and rock climbing and rollerblading and swim lessons. If she doesn't come up with the idea on her own or from her friends, she's not interested in it." Another sigh escapes her lips as she rubs her forehead.

"She'll be okay." Dad leans forward to kiss her. "This is just a phase. She'll grow out of it."

"I hope so." Mom turns to me with a smile. "Thanks for making dinner, Chloe."

I return the smile. "No problem. It's ready if you want to eat."

“Sure. Noah! Rylee! Dinner. Though, I’m considering denying that little troublemaker dinner.”

Dad chuckles as he gathers Mom in his arms and kisses her. “It’ll be okay, girlfriend,” he murmurs, using the nickname he gave her in high school. “She’s a good kid.”

“I know.” Mom relaxes in Dad’s arms and melts into his kiss. Unlike my brother and sister, I don’t mind seeing them kiss in front of me. It shows how beautiful a relationship can be if you’re with the right person, your soulmate. It gives me hope that I can have that one day.

Maybe with...the secret admirer?

I throw that thought away. I’m supposed to forget about him and not let him consume my life.

But what if...?

Chapter Four

Liam

Thank the heavens my friends aren't discussing that darn note the next day and things are back to normal. Except, I can tell Lily is bursting to talk about it, but she must figure there isn't much to say. We don't know who the writer is and unless he comes forward, we never will.

Chloe's back to her old self, concentrating in class and doing the work. And when lunchtime rolls around, the discussion around the table is about a movie Willow's dad, Asher Park, will be working on this summer.

Tye, Aidan's friend who sometimes sits with us, widens his eyes. "A new movie? Cool. Your dad's a legend, man."

"Thanks," Willow says. "He passed on the other offer because it would take up too much time and he wants to spend the summer with my family, but this new movie should wrap up in only a few weeks. And Mia will have a small role, too." She's smiling with pride about her ten-year-old sister, who caught the acting bug. Willow takes after her mom, Charlie, who works for NASA.

"That's awesome," Ava says as she lays her head on Aidan's chest. His arms are wrapped around her like he never wants to let her go. PDA isn't allowed at Edenbury High, but as the daughter of the billionaires who are pretty much keeping this place running, she can get away with anything.

Willow nods. “She’s so excited. But my mom’s not sure she’ll let her do it.”

“Why?” Chloe asks. “She and your dad could spend time doing what they love together.”

“Yeah, but after that stunt they pulled yesterday, my mom doesn’t think it’s fair to reward her. She and Dad were arguing about it. And my dad started cursing in Korean. He only does that when he’s upset.”

“They were arguing?” I ask. Charlie and Asher only argue playfully.

She shrugs. “Not really arguing. A heated debate, I guess?” She rolls her eyes. “Don’t worry, I saw them making out after.”

Lily bends close. “So what’s the conclusion? Will your parents let Mia do the movie?”

Willow holds up her hands like she has no clue. “They didn’t conclude anything. I think they got distracted making out.”

Lily presses her hand to her chest. “I hope we’ll be like them when we’re old with kids.”

Xavier grins at her, taking her hand and popping a quick kiss on the back of her palm. “I hope so, too, Cupid Lily.” He pecks her lips.

“Mr. Hall,” Vice Principal Rivera reprimands as she passes by. She stops before him and Lily with a frown. “Do I need to remind you of the rules we have at this school?”

Xavier shakes his head so fast he gets blurry. “No, ma’am. Sorry.”

She nods curtly before turning away and marching off. As soon as she’s out of sight, Lily quickly brushes her lips across his.

“I swear she’s got a PDA radar or something,” Lily grumbles. “It’s like she’s purposely looking to bust couples.”

We watch as she goes over to another couple and writes them up a detention slip. As soon as Lily sees that, she tears her hand from Xavier’s. He pouts.

“We hardly see each other because of basketball,” he says. “I mean, I love basketball, but...”

She leans in close. “You love me more?”

“Hands down.”

She giggles and nuzzles her nose against his.

“Rivera!” I hiss when I catch the VP’s hawk-like eyes fitting in our direction. My sister and Xavier propel away from each other like magnets.

We talk about other things as we eat. Like yesterday, Chloe and I try to figure out an unidentifiable ingredient in this dish, but we can’t pinpoint what it is. It’s a little disappointing that I don’t have a more sophisticated pallet. If I want to be a chef one day...

“Xavier, Liam!” a voice calls from the popular table, where our teammates and the cheerleaders sit. “Get your butts here.”

Xavier divides his lunchtime between that table and the Junior Musketeers'. He hates that he has to choose, but he can't ditch the guys. Lily understands and doesn't complain when he goes to sit over there.

Before he leaves, though, he clutches her hand, staring into her eyes like he's giving her a secret message.

Even though I don't like sitting there, I join him. The guys are cool, it's just that I don't fit in. I never have. So it's very awkward for me to sit there.

Darren stands to clap Xavier on the back, and then me, causing some air to get knocked out of my lungs. I'm still breathing deeply as I sit down near Xavier. Unlike me, he's comfortable here and gets along great with the guys. I've never had guy friends, except for Xavier and now Aidan. And by extension, Tye too, but we're not close and he has other friends.

Brian points his fork at me. "We were just talking about you, Hastings," he says with a large grin. "How you *still* don't have a girlfriend. Not throwing shade or anything, man. Just saying." He gestures around. "Got a nice bunch of ladies to choose from."

"Thanks, I'm okay," I mutter, wanting to leave from here. They mean well and I appreciate them trying to help. But they wouldn't know the kind of girl I dream about.

Darren shakes his head. "What about Paisley?" He nods toward the cheerleader at the other end of the table. She's talking to head cheerleader Andrea and the other girls on the squad, loving the attention.

“Uh...no.”

Brian’s eyebrows furrow. “Come on, dude. She might not be the nicest, but she’s pretty. And her mom’s the cheerleading coach and she’s pretty hot, too.”

“Dude, ew.”

He holds up his hands. “Just saying you can have a hot girl hanging off your arm.”

I don’t like the way they’re talking about her, even if she *is* Paisley Abberton.

“Guys, come on,” Xavier says. “Don’t be jerks. You know there’s more to a girl than her looks.”

The guys shrug like they know this but don’t care because we’re in high school and just want to have fun. Xavier and I stick out like sore thumbs, but that’s why we’re good friends and he’s the perfect guy for my sister.

“Give Paisley a shot,” Brian urges. “You never know. You guys might hit it off.” He’s about to get to his feet and call for Paisley, but I grab his arm.

“Never in a million years would I date Paisley Abberton. Look, guys, I appreciate the help, but I’m good.”

Topher, a guy from the team I’m not friendly with, shakes his head. “Dude, you’re on the basketball team. People talk. They think it’s weird that you don’t have a girlfriend and that you always sit at the nerdy table.”

Xavier’s shoulders stiffen. “There’s nothing wrong with the people who sit at that table.”

Another guy, Gibson, shrugs. “Whatever, man.”

“I don’t really care what others say about me,” I tell them. Then I look from one guy to the other. “Wait...are you embarrassed to be associated with me?”

“No, you’re our bro and one of us,” Darren says.

“But you could be popular—” Gibson starts, but I cut him off.

“Thanks, but I’m good.”

The table is quiet, except for the cheerleaders. They’re laughing at something Paisley just said, and she’s glowing from all the attention.

“Sorry, Liam,” Brian says, noticing my unease. “We were just trying to help.”

“I know, but let’s focus more on the game and less on girls. We need to make it to state or I’m pretty sure Coach will roast us over a spit.”

The guys chuckle. “You’re funny, man,” Darren says as he slugs my arm. “We’ll find you a girl.”

The bell rings before I have a chance to decline, and the table clears out. Only Xavier remains. He places a hand on my arm. “You good?”

I force a smile. “I know I’m not like the others on the team. I don’t fit in and I never will. And trying to set me up with a girl...”

He nods in understanding. “They mean well, but they’re overstepping. Want me to talk to them?”

“Thanks, but I’ve got it.” It’s embarrassing that the team is trying to set me up, and having our captain get involved will

only make it worse.

Am I really that pathetic that the team wants to set me up with Paisley Abberton? The girl who goes after every hot guy she sees?

She had her eyes on Xavier for a while, then Aidan as soon as he transferred to Edenbury High. If she wasn't so mean to Lily and our friends, I'd feel sorry for her.

"Coming to algebra?" Chloe asks as she and the others stand before me.

I force a smile. "Sure."

Chloe and I separate from the others and enter the classroom, taking our usual seats across from each other.

I take out my things, but my mind is still on that conversation with my teammates.

"Are you okay, Liam?" Chloe breaks me from my thoughts.

Blinking, I meet her gaze. "Yeah, perfect." I force another smile.

She narrows her eyes. "You know you can't lie to me. I see it all over your face. Want to talk about it?"

Sighing, I slump forward. "It's embarrassing."

She places her hand on my shoulder. "You don't have to be embarrassed in front of me. We're buddies."

I swallow the boulder in my throat. "Yeah, I know. Uh... the guys want to set me up with a girl."

"A girl? What do you mean?"

I shift in my seat. “Like a girlfriend. Potentially. They suggested Paisley.”

Her mouth falls open. “*Paisley?*”

I release a heavy sigh. “They think I’m so pathetic that the only girl who’d give me a shot is Paisley.”

“They said that?”

“No, but it’s kind of obvious. But I’d never go out with her, even if the world was about to get sucked into a black hole and she was on the only emergency spacecraft in space.”

She smiles. “Good. You scared me for a second. Paisley’s mom was horrible to our moms and she’s just like her.”

I nod. “Don’t worry. If I date a girl, she’ll be someone...”

“Sweet and caring and kind and wonderful.”

I clear my throat, averting my gaze. “Yeah.” I cough. “Someone like that.”

She takes my hand. “All we need to do is find her.” She smiles that Chloe smile that sends a calmness over me.

“Yeah...” I say, then shake my head. “I mean, I’m okay.”

“Miss Barrington and Mr. Hastings,” Ms. Bhatt says from the doorway. “Do I have your permission to start my lesson?”

Chloe and I exchange a look with wide eyes, then smile at one another, trying hard not to laugh.

“Sorry,” Chloe mumbles.

“Thank you. Now, Chloe, please go up to the board and solve problem number one.”

Chloe shoots me a wide grin, thanking me for helping her last night. She walks up to the front of the room with confidence, and I smile as I watch her.

Chapter Five

Chloe

I enter the newsroom and settle down at my computer. None of my colleagues are here yet, so I read the book the Junior Musketeers have chosen for book club. It's a teen fantasy romance about witches and werewolves and vampires and dragons and all the good stuff. It's one of my favorite genres. We just finished discussing a Regency romance, which is Lily's favorite.

Okay, one of the werewolves is totally swoon-worthy. I'm so absorbed in the book that I don't hear my colleagues come in, chatting happily. The students who work with me on the Edenbury High Times are friendly with me, but they have never made much of an effort to be more than that. I've tried to get closer to them, but I guess we don't mesh that well together. Which is okay by me because I have my Musketeers and the guys, and that's all I need.

And the secret admirer, a little voice in my head reminds me.

I try to push that little voice away. Because I have no idea what will come out of it, if the guy will write me again, if he's even real...Of course I've been thinking about him the last few days, but I'm trying really hard not to make him the focus of my life.

"Okay, everyone," Kendell announces as she walks into the room and drops down at the editor-in-chief's desk at the

front. “The next issue will be out next week. Who still owes me an article?” Her eyes scan over the team. “Chloe, I got yours last night. Thanks for sending it. And awesome work.”

My lips lift into a proud smile. “Thanks.” My article is about the impact books can have on a person. They can transform lives, inspire people to be better versions of themselves. To go out there and do good in the world. Or, they can be a person’s outlet, somewhere they can disappear to for a few hours to help them deal with whatever hardships they’re going through. And it can bring people closer and help them find communities.

It was definitely a passion article, and I can’t wait for the students to read it. I’m super nervous, too, since it means so much to me.

“Johnny, where’s your article on the new school lunch?” Kendall asks.

He shrugs. “I ate it?”

Some of the other kids chuckle.

“Haha. Email it to me tonight, or you’re off the paper.”

The laugh vanishes from his face. “You serious?”

“*You* need to take *this* seriously. It’s my last year and I want to make a difference. You’re always goofing off and making excuses. Chloe has had to pick up your slack a few times.”

He turns to me with a frown.

I hold up my hands. “I don’t mind.”

“But I do,” Kendell says. “Do the work or don’t bother showing up.”

I can’t imagine the amount of pressure she’s under. She’s trying to get into the top journalism school and has had no luck so far. Honestly, it makes me a little nervous about my future. I also want to get into a top journalism school and follow in my mom’s footsteps and work for a newspaper like the Edenbury Press.

“Okay,” Kendell announces. “What are we doing for the next issue?”

The team spends the next hour brainstorming. Arguing back and forth, wracking our brains. Just like usual. Trying to keep the students engaged is one of the most stressful parts about working on the paper. There’s so much going on in people’s lives and I know the kids would rather browse social media than pick up the paper. Mom told me that when she was in high school, barely anyone read the paper. But that changed after she interviewed my dad. Not only was the article amazing and got the students’ attention, Dad made sure every kid read it. He appreciated how hard Mom and the rest of the team worked, how much time and effort and dedication they put. I’m not surprised Mom had a huge crush on him for years before they finally got together.

An hour later, we’ve made some progress. It’ll take a few days before Kendell is satisfied, but I know we’re heading in the right direction.

I pack up my stuff and follow the others out. Then I make my way toward the school exit, where Mom’s waiting for me in the car. As I pass the gym, I stop and peer inside. The

basketball team is still practicing. My eyes scan the players until they settle on Liam. It's usually easy to spot him because he's so tall, but not when he's with his team who are just as tall as him. But I can easily identify him by his light brown hair that's gotten pretty long. Right now, it's a little messy and sticking to his sweaty face, but I love the length. I hope he doesn't cut it. It's perfect to run my fingers through—

My eyes widen and a small gasp escapes my lips. What did I just...?

Squeezing my eyes shut, I shake my head. Nope. Not going there. He's my best friend. He's supposed to be like a brother to me. Those thoughts should *not* be in my head.

Even though I know Mom's waiting, I can't help but watch him. My lips lift in a smile. He's such an amazing basketball player. If he didn't dream about going to culinary school and opening his own restaurant, I know he'd have a successful basketball career. Liam doesn't like being in the spotlight, though, so I don't think he'd want to be a famous athlete. He'd rather hide in a kitchen and bring people joy through his food.

I'm so lucky to be that close to him.

My body heats up as my thoughts wander to places they shouldn't wander to. *Nope. No. Out of my head.*

I'm about to leave the school, when I notice something is off with Liam's playing. I guess I didn't see it before because I was thinking about...things I shouldn't be thinking about, but now I realize that something's wrong. His shoulders are a bit hunched over and he's making many mistakes. Missing his shots, knocking into his teammates, tripping over his feet. That's so unlike him because he's a great player and confident

on the court. This Liam looks like he's really bothered about something.

“Hastings!” his coach yells at him. “Head in the game. Head in the game!”

He nods and tries to focus.

Xavier shoots him a questioning look, asking him if he's good, and Liam offers him a reassuring nod. Xavier returns the nod, looking relieved. But I'm not buying it. Something seems to weigh heavily on his mind. Is it the game? I know he seems confident out there, but he gets super nervous before every game. I usually bake him something to help with the nerves, which he's so thankful for. I swear he plays much better because of it. Not to toot my own horn or anything, but when I bake something for the people I care about, I put all my love into it, and the results show. My baked goods come out *delicious*.

My phone beeps with a text.

Mom: Hey, sweetie. Are you done with the newspaper? I'm starting to get worried.

Shoot. I got sidetracked worrying about Liam. When I glance back at him, I find his shoulders no longer hunched over and he's playing better. Maybe he's over whatever was bothering him?

I quickly text Mom that I'm on my way and leave the school, pushing my worry over Liam out of my head. He'll be okay. He's sensitive like me, but he's strong, too. And I know he always has people to talk to, like Lily, Evie, his parents, and me.

“Hey, Mom,” I greet as I slide into the car. “Sorry for making you wait. I stopped by the gym to watch Liam practice. I guess I lost track of time,” I add with a nervous laugh as my cheeks grow warm.

“That’s okay.” She starts the car and pulls out of the lot. “I just need to make a quick stop at the grocery store to buy brown sugar for the cookies I want to bake.”

“Ooh, are you making Dad’s favorite?” I ask.

She chuckles and throws me a smile. “You know it.”

“Tell me the story of the famous chocolate chip cookies. I love hearing it.”

A loving smile passes over Mom’s face as she gets a faraway look in her eyes, like she’s reliving one of the best moments of her past. “It was your grandma’s recipe. After she died, I tried so hard to cling to whatever reminded me of her. Of whatever made me feel close to her. Which is why I worked so hard to perfect the cookie recipe and have it taste just like my mother’s.” She smiles wryly. “It’s the only thing I can bake.” At a red light, she leans forward to press a kiss on my forehead. “I’m so glad you inherited her baking talent. I see so much of her in you.”

Warmth spreads through me. I never met my mom’s mom because she died when Mom was thirteen, but Mom has told me and my siblings so much about her that I feel like I know her.

“But I can never make my cookies as good as yours,” I tell her.

That causes tears to prick her eyes. “Thanks, sweetie, but your cookies are just as amazing as mine.” The light turns green and she steps on the gas. “So when I asked your dad—the *super* amazing hottie quarterback at my high school—” She winks. “—for an interview for the paper, he came to my house and I served him cookies. He fell in love with them. And that—”

“And that was the start of a beautiful fake relationship that led to a beautiful real relationship.”

Mom smiles as she shakes her head. “To this day, I still wonder what the heck we were thinking. A fake relationship? When is that ever a good idea?”

“But it was the only way the two of you could have gotten together, right?” I say. “Because you hung out in different circles and would never be friends, let alone a couple.”

“I had a crush on him for years. I should have told him how I felt. It could have saved us a lot of heartache.” She glances at me for a second before focusing on the road. “I hope you’d be braver than me if you were ever in the same situation. If you like a boy, don’t be afraid to tell him how you feel. He might feel the same, and that could lead you on a wonderful, life-changing path.”

My cheeks heat up so fast I wonder if they’ll catch fire. “Or it could ruin things,” I mutter.

Mom glances at me. “What, sweetie?”

“Nothing.” I force a smile. “Don’t worry. There’s no guy I like.”

We stop off at the grocery store to buy the brown sugar. Mom reaches for Rylee's favorite candy. I raise a brow at her. "I thought she's still punished."

"Yeah, but they're on sale," she says with a sigh. "And she'll finish her sentence soon."

I try to hide a smile. "You can't handle punishing her for more than a week, can you?"

Mom sighs again. "I'm like the weakest mom in the entire Universe. I can't help it. I see so much of your dad in her. In all you kids. It just makes me love you guys even more."

"Dad was a troublemaker?" I ask.

"No. But she has his energy. His spark for life."

I shake my head, still trying to hide a smile. "You cracked faster than the last time."

She sighs for the third time. "Fine, I'll try to be tougher. I'll hide these in the top pantry so she won't find them."

We settle back in the car and drive home.

"So how's the newspaper coming along?" Mom asks.

"It's going well. The next issue will be out next week. I can't wait for everyone to read my article, but I'm super nervous, too."

"I know the feeling," she says with a smile.

"Does it get easier? Will I ever not freak out when my article is out there for the whole world to read and tear apart?"

"Nope," she says with a laugh. "I get just as nervous now as I did when I was in high school. But it's good to be nervous."

Shows you care.”

“Yeah, that’s what Ally always tells us when she forces us to read our essays to the class. She says we should be proud and happy that we’re nervous.” I roll my eyes. “And that’s coming from a woman who’s really shy.”

Mom chuckles. “She was so shy, she refused to have a solo when she was part of the choir in high school. And she has such a great voice. Zack helped her come out of her shell.” She sighs wistfully. “I miss those years.”

“Ugh, Mom. You’re making me dread growing old. I hope I don’t drift away from my friends.”

She lets go of the steering wheel to grab my hand. “Of course not. You and your Musketeers will be best friends for eternity, just like me and my Musketeers.”

“How can you be so sure? Liam will be a successful chef and might tour the world, and Willow will have a super successful career in tech and who knows where she’ll live, and —”

“I also worried about that when I was your age,” she tells me. “We all did. But you see it all worked out in the end. Besides...” She winks. “Edenbury has a way of making people stay. I guess it’s the love in the air.”

That has me giggling. “That was so cheesy, Mom.”

“Haven’t you heard? I’m like the queen of cheesy. I should win a crown.”

We’re both laughing as we pull into the driveway. Before Mom gets out of the car, she says, “Sorry we haven’t been

spending a lot of time together lately. There's always some new drama happening with your sister."

"It's okay," I tell her.

"Just remember that you can talk to me whenever you need or want to, okay?"

"I know. Thanks."

She wraps her arms around me and kisses the top of my head. "I'm so proud of you. I can't believe you'll be going off to college soon. Where have the years flown?" Tears gather in her eyes.

"Mom," I groan. "You sound like Dad."

She chuckles. "He must have rubbed off on me after all these years." She places her hands on my shoulders. "Isn't Kendell graduating this year?"

"Yeah."

"Will she name the next editor-in-chief, or will it be a vote?"

I shrug. "Knowing Kendell, she'll probably choose someone herself."

"You think you have a shot?"

"*Me?* There are so many better writers on the team."

"Don't sell yourself short, sweetie. I read every one of your articles. You're super talented, way better than those other kids—"

"Mom..."

“And you definitely deserve it. You’d make a great editor-in-chief because you care.”

“You have to say that because you’re my mom.”

“True, but I’m also a journalist. And I always speak the truth.”

I snuggle close to her. “Thanks for being one of the most amazing parents in the world.”

I feel her melt into the hug. “Thanks for being one of the best kids in the world.”

Chapter Six

Liam

It's Friday evening and everyone's off doing their own thing. Lily's on a romantic date with Xavier, Ava and Aidan are at a charity dinner, Willow's working on her app. Mom and Dad are out riding on his motorcycle, and Evie's out with her friends. That just leaves me and Chloe.

She'll be here any minute and we're planning to watch at least three movies. I've got a selection picked out already—a little bit of everything. Romance, action, sci-fi. Although the sci-fi could technically be categorized as a thriller.

The doorbell rings and my legs flee down the stairs to open the door for Chloe. She's standing there all bundled up for the January weather and she has a sweet smile on her face.

I chuckle. "Someone looks cozy. It's just a short walk from your house to mine."

She shivers as I widen the door for her and she steps inside. "Don't make fun. It feels like my skin is frozen."

Laughing again, I take her hands. "Man, your hands are ice even through your gloves. Come, the house is all toasty. Want hot chocolate?"

"Yes. Thanks."

I wrap my arm around her, pulling her close to warm her up as I lead her to the kitchen. It doesn't take long for me to make the hot chocolates and then we sit at the table, slowly

sipping. The liquid feels great as it makes its way down to my stomach.

“Gosh, this is sooo good,” she moans.

I smile. “Yeah? It’s a new recipe.”

“Nice. I love it.”

I smile again. “Thanks. By the way, how did the fettuccine alfredo come out?”

“Delicious. The fam loved it. You’re awesome.”

I smile again as I wave my hand. “Nah. But I’m glad they loved it.”

She sets down her mug and playfully glares at me. “We need to do something about your recipe-writing skills, though.”

I groan. “I’m not that bad.”

With a determined nod, she heads to my cookbook and starts flipping through the pages. “Ah, here’s one for chili. What’s a TW of cayenne?”

“Teensy weensy. Evie doesn’t like spicy food.”

She turns to another recipe. “And SO?”

“Sautéed onions...”

“And CG?”

“Crushed garlic?”

She places a hand on her hip. “Sheesh, Liam.”

I throw my hands up. “Okay. Next time, I’ll write clearer notes so amateurs like you can understand,” I tease.

“Amateurs?”

I reach for my cookbook and put it back in its place. “You know I’m kidding.”

Her lips twist into a frown. “You’re lucky you’re my best friend.”

“Yep, I know. Let’s finish up our drinks so we can get our movie on. I hope you like the ones I chose.”

She waves her hand as she returns to her seat and lifts her mug to her lips. “You know I’d enjoy any movie as long as I watch it with you. I mean, with all you guys. But they’re not here, so it’s just us both...” She snaps her lips shut and takes a long sip.

“Right.” I shift in my seat. “I knew you meant that.” I take a sip, too.

We drink in silence.

When we’re done, I wash our mugs and then Chloe and I make our way upstairs to my room. It’s not weird that we’ll be alone in my room because Chloe’s just a friend and my parents know nothing will happen. Why would it, anyway...?

“Are you shaking your head?” Chloe interrupts my thoughts.

I freeze for a second before laughing lightly. “Nope. Just thinking. So...” I clear my throat as I step into my room and gesture to where I placed pillows on my bed along with snacks. Healthy and non-healthy because I’m not sure what she’s in the mood for tonight. “Make yourself comfy.”

“Ooh. Yummy snacks.” She sits down on the bed and checks out the movie lineup I’ve chosen. “Looks cool. Let’s start?”

“Yep.” I drop down next to her, my shoulder accidentally crashing into hers. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Want to start with romance?”

“Sure. I heard it’s cheesy, but whatever.”

She giggles. “I’m in the mood for cheesy. You know how nervous I am about my article.”

I shift so I’m facing her. “But you’ve got nothing to worry about. Your articles are phenomenal.”

Her cheeks turn pink as she averts her gaze. “Thanks. Tell that to Paisley.”

“Forget Paisley. She’s just jealous that you have an amazing talent while she…”

Chloe lifts a brow. “She what?”

“She’s as talented as a brick wall.”

She bursts out laughing. Then she rests her head on my shoulder. “Thanks, Liam. You always make me feel better.”

The area where her body touches mine tingles. It has to be because she hasn’t yet adjusted to the temperature in my room and is making me feel a little cold…right?

“Same,” I tell her, trying to ignore the way my heart has picked up its pace. “You always make me feel better, too.”

She smiles, her cheeks growing pink again.

We stare at each other for a bit.

I yank my gaze away and clear my throat. “So...the movie? Let’s get ready to be smothered in cheese.” I hit play and we scoot a bit back on the bed to get comfortable.

The opening scenes are all right, but yeah, so cheesy. Chloe and I are laughing so hard that she nearly spurts Coke from her nose.

“Wait, did he just say, ‘I have come to save you, my sweet!’” she gasps between giggles.

“Apparently.”

We both nearly topple off the bed with laughter.

As we move on to the next movie and continue stuffing our faces with junk food, my phone beeps. I sweep it off the bed and find a notification from Spill It! The guys from the team are at Mikey’s Diner. Xavier’s not there because he’s with Lily and...no one invited me.

“You okay?” Chloe asks as she bends close to peer at my phone.

I drop it back on the bed as my shoulders slump forward. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Liam...”

I sigh heavily, as though my lungs are made of stone. “It’s just that the team is hanging out at Mikey’s and I’m not there.”

Her eyebrows furrow. “Why not? Did you ditch to hang out with me?”

“No. I mean, of course I would choose you over them, but they didn’t even invite me.”

She watches me for a little while, her eyes overflowing with care. “Liam, I’m sure they didn’t mean to exclude you.”

I shake my head. “Maybe. That means they forgot about me. What does that say about me? That I’m not a team player? That I don’t want close friendships with the guys?”

She rests her hand on my shoulder. “No, it’s just hard for you to make friends. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

I slump forward even more. “I’m part of a team. A family. But I don’t feel that way and they don’t treat me like I’m one of them. Well other than Xavier, and I guess Darren and Brian. But the rest of the guys...” I shake my head.

“I know how you feel,” she says in a low voice. “No one on the paper is my friend outside of the newsroom.”

I turn to her. “That’s stupid. They don’t know what they’re missing.”

She squeezes my shoulder. “Same with the guys on the team. I know it’s not the same, but you have me and the Junior Musketeers and Xavier and Aidan. You’re not alone.”

“I know and I love you guys. I just feel so out of place with the guys on the team. So distanced. So disliked. So... pathetic.”

She gets to her feet. “Come.”

“Where?”

“Maybe they didn’t invite you because they didn’t think you wanted to go. Let’s go to Mikey’s. You can hang out with them. Get friendly with them.”

I squint as I think. “But what about you? I can’t just abandon you.”

She shrugs. “I’ll find a table and be there for moral support. Come on, Liam. You can do this.”

I swallow as a batch of nerves overwhelms me. “I’m not sure they want me.”

“Then make them want you. You’re an awesome person and they need to see that.”

I think over her words for a little while. “But what about the movie?”

She waves her hand. “We can do that another time. Let’s go.”

She practically has to drag me out of the house because I feel so weird about the whole thing. I’m not social at all and would rather hide at home with a book. Or in the kitchen, or working out, or hanging out with my siblings or friends.

Mikey’s isn’t that far from my house and we get there within ten minutes. I swallow again as I take in the table at the back, where the guys are chatting and laughing.

Chloe places her hand on my arm. “You’ve got this. I’ll be in the booth over there.” She tilts her head toward one across the diner. “Just be your wonderful self and they’ll accept you.”

“Wonderful self?”

“Duh.” She playfully punches my arm. “Now go before you back out.” She gives me an encouraging smile and then heads toward her booth, where she has a good view of the basketball table.

I clear my throat, wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans, then slowly make my way over to the table. If Xavier were here, it'd be way easier because he and I are tight. But because he's not, I'm like a little fish venturing into shark-infested water.

Darren's head lifts when he catches me approach. "Liam! What's up, man? Come, join us." He grabs a chair from another table and slides it next to him. "What's up?"

I shrug as I sit down. "Not much. What are you guys up to?"

"Just hanging out," Brian says. "The girls are going to meet us here a little bit later, but order some food." He whistles for a server to come over.

Macy, a woman who went to school with our parents and has been working here since she graduated, scowls as she marches to our table.

"He wants to order." Brian points his thumb at me.

With another scowl, Macy holds out her tablet to tap in my order.

"Uh, a burger and fries, please," I tell her. "Oh, and please take her order, too." I nod toward Chloe.

"Super," Macy grumbles before heading to Chloe's table.

Topher watches her walk off, a wide smile on his face as he scans her from top to bottom. "Pretty hot."

"Ew," I mutter.

The rest of the guys turn to me.

"You serious?" Gibson asks. "You don't think she's hot?"

“She’s my parents’ age.”

“So what?” Topher says. “Still hot.” The others cheer and slap each other.

Desmond rolls his eyes at me. “Dude, you’ve gotta be blind if you don’t think that woman is the hottest thing in this diner.”

“Second to hottest,” Topher corrects, nodding at a college-age server. She must have just started her shift because she’s scrambling to fix her nametag.

“Man, you’re right. Hottest thing in here.”

“There’s more to a girl than her looks,” I say.

When all the guys look at me like I’m a loser, I wonder if maybe I shouldn’t have said that.

Why am I so different? I mean, I’m glad I know there’s more to a girl than her looks, but why can’t I fit in?

“Are you in some dumb romance movie or something?” Topher chortles. “The only thing that matters is if a girl is hot, man.”

I play with a salt shaker. “What about her mind?”

They exchange tired looks like they don’t want to have this conversation right now. If Xavier were here, he’d back me up. I’m not trying to educate the guys or tell them what to do, but it’d be nice for them to see a girl as more than a pretty face.

“Who cares about her mind?” Desmond says with a deep laugh. “Dude, this guy thinks he’s Romeo or something.”

“No wonder he doesn’t have a girl,” Topher snickers. “Waiting for his fairytale princess who will never come!”

The table explodes with laughter. Even Darren and Brian, who I thought were my friends, join in their laughter.

I move my head to Chloe and find her watching me with concern. I'm not sure if she heard what they said, but it's pretty obvious they're laughing at me.

My face heats up faster than a furnace. I jet to my feet, pushing my chair back. It's on the tip of my tongue to say *something*, but I can't. And even if I did, I doubt it'd make a difference.

In a few long strides, I'm at the exit to the dinner.

"Liam!" Chloe calls after me.

I don't want to face her, so I speed up and nearly crash into Macy. She's holding a plate with my burger and fries.

"Are you going somewhere?" she demands, glaring at the food.

"Can you please pack it up for me?"

She grunts, "Sure," with such animosity and walks off.

"Liam!" Chloe takes my hand, forcing me to look at her. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"I happened, that's what," I mumble, turning away from her.

"What?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. "Can we not talk about it, please?"

"Okay..."

I open my eyes. "Did you order anything? I told Macy to serve you."

“Yeah, I just got a milkshake, but I’ll tell her to pack it to go, too. Um…” She looks at the basketball table. “Do you want to wait outside? I’ll take your to-go for you.”

I seriously want to pull her into my arms and hold her close and tell her she’s the most amazing, wonderful, spectacular person in the world. But I mutter, “Yeah, thanks,” and hand her some money for my food. “I just need to get out of here.”

She nods.

I give her the best smile I can muster before leaving the diner. As I wait for her to come out, I can’t stop replaying what happened over and over in my head.

Did I do something wrong? Why is hanging out with my teammates so hard for me? Do I need to change myself in order to fit in? I don’t want to do that.

Mom has always told me and my siblings to be ourselves and never let anyone tell us who to be. When she was my age, she tried to change herself to be more like her older sister, my Aunt Amanda, because she thought her mother would love her more. But she was wrong. Grandma loved her just as she was.

But this is different, isn’t it?

“Hey,” Chloe says as she steps closer to me, milkshake and a package of food in her hands.

“Thanks.” I take the food from her. “Want to go back to my place and share the fries?”

She studies my face. “Liam, are you okay?”

I force a wide smile on my face. “Of course I’m okay.”

She searches my eyes. “I told you a million times that you can talk to me about anything. But if you’re not comfortable, I understand. I just wish you were.”

“What?”

“Comfortable to talk to me about it.”

I lower my eyes to the ground. I want to be, I really do. But it’s so embarrassing. I don’t want to be embarrassed in front of my best friend, but I am.

Chloe takes my hand. “You know what? Let’s forget about tonight.” She gives me a guilty look. “I’m sorry I talked you into coming here.”

I shake my head. “No. This isn’t your fault. I’m just a failure to the human race.”

Her eyes widen. “What? Liam—”

I turn away from her. “Please, let’s forget about it and go home.”

“Sure. Sorry if I’m making you uncomfortable.”

“No, Chloe. You never do.”

We don’t talk much as we walk to my house. We share my fries, I gobble down my burger because Mikey’s makes the best fast food, and Chloe downs her shake. Just being with her lifts all the negative emotions I was feeling a few minutes ago.

Like I said, everything is better when she’s around.

Chapter Seven

Chloe

Today is book club!

Even though we've been having our meetings twice a week for the past few months, I always get excited. Because I get to spend an afternoon with my favorite people in the world, doing one of my most favorite things in the world—discussing books. Today we'll be talking about the young adult fantasy book.

When I reach the sacred room 1B, I find Ava and Aidan already there, Ava sitting on his lap with his arms wrapped around her waist. They're rubbing noses, and every so often, Aidan whispers something in her ear and sweeps his lips across her cheek. She gazes into his eyes with nothing but undying, unconditional love. It's crazy that they wanted to tear each other's throats out only a few weeks ago.

Of course I'm super happy for them, but...I'm also a little jealous. Fine, a lot jealous. They found their soulmates—in *high school*. Just like Lily and Xavier. I wish I'd find mine, too.

I waver in the doorway, not sure I should go in. I don't want to interrupt them. So I walk off to the side and slip the latest issue of the Edenbury High Times—which just came out today—out of my backpack, my lips lifting in a smile as I flip to my article. There it is, my pride and joy. It looks even better

than I imagined. I soak in the words, my smile growing bigger. I hope my article inspires more people to read books.

“Hey, Chloe.” Willow slides up to me with her overstuffed backpack looking like it might snap her back in half. All her tech stuff is in there. “Why aren’t you in 1B?”

I give her a wry smile. “Superman and Princess are sharing special alone time,” I tell her, using the nicknames Aidan and Ava have coined for each other.

Willow smiles. “Nice. Let’s give them some more time until Lily arrives. Ooh, are you reading your article again?”

“Only for the millionth time,” I say, my face heating up. “I just feel, um...”

“Proud? You should be. Because that, Chloe Barrington, is one bangin’ article.”

I raise a brow. “Bangin’? Since when do you use that word?”

“Ugh. Some boys in my coding class think they’re so cool.” She shivers. “I absorb everything like a sponge.”

I put my arm around her. “And that’s why you’re a genius.”

“Nope. My mom’s the genius. I’m just...well, me.”

I squeeze her close to my chest. “And you’re one of the most awesome people in the world. Thanks for complimenting me on the article. No one other than you guys and a few teachers have said anything, and I’m curious what everyone else thinks.”

Now she puts her arm around me. “They think—no, they *know*—that our school harbors a future journalist who will change the world through her kindness, thoughtfulness, and huge heart.”

“And they’ll feel that through my articles? I don’t think so.”

“You kidding? Every one of your articles has a bit of your soul in it. And we can *definitely* feel it as we read them.”

That causes tears to prick my eyes. “Willow, you’re going to make me cry.”

“Good.” She laughs as she squishes me to her body. “You have nothing to worry about because you’re special and your articles are special. There’s no one like you.”

I laugh, embarrassed, as I wipe my eyes. “Thanks. I can’t wait for you to share your app with the world. I know it’ll be a hit.”

She shakes her head as we pull out of the hug. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, but my app is such a mess. I doubt I’ll have it ready for the coding competition.”

“Well, I believe in you. Let me know if you need any help.”

“Thanks.” She grips one edge of the newspaper. “Now let’s read your golden words for the trillionth time.”

We’re so absorbed in my words that we don’t hear Lily arrive until she calls over her shoulder, “Romeo, Romeo, ‘Parting is such sweet sorrow, That I shall say good night till it be morrow.’”

Xavier blows her a kiss, “Til death do us apart, my Cupid Lily.”

She giggles. “That’s not a line from the play.”

“Oh...” He bows in an overly exaggerated manner. “Please forgive me, my beautiful Lily.”

“Yo, Captain,” a few of his teammates say as they pass by. “What the heck are you doing?”

He laughs sheepishly. “Nothing. Just saying goodbye to my girl.”

“You romantic sap,” they say as they drag him away. He manages to blow her another kiss before he vanishes from sight.

Lily giggles again, her cheeks red as she faces us. “He’s so cute, isn’t he?”

“The cutest,” I tell her. “You two, and Ava and Aidan, are the cutest couples at school.”

“You wish,” Paisley Abberton snorts as she and the rest of the cheerleaders pass by on the way to practice. “More like the most loserish couples at school.”

Her minions giggle like she said the wittiest joke.

“Takes one to know one!” Willow calls after her.

She stops and slowly turns around. “Did you just call me a loser, loser?”

Willow glances behind her before widening her eyes in mock shock and pointing at herself. “Wait, did the popular cheerleader, Paisley Abberton, actually speak to me? Oh my gosh, I might faint from overwhelming bliss.”

Paisley rolls her eyes. “Whatever, Macintosh.”

“Did you just call me ‘Macintosh?’”

She rolls her eyes again. “You’re always on your stupid computer.”

“I love *all* tech. If you’d paid attention, you’d know that I use my PC just as much as I use my Mac. Because while the Mac is better for—”

“Oh my gosh, do you think I care about your geek talk?” she exclaims, making the rest of the cheerleaders snicker again. “And if *you’d* paid attention, *you’d* know that the cutest couple at school is Colton and Vanessa. Everyone knows that. Well, other than the losers at the bottom rung of the social ladder,” she says, eliciting more snickers from her posse.

“Am I supposed to know who they are?” Willow says as she pushes her glasses up her nose. She just got a new pair and they’re already falling off her face. Maybe her robot accidentally ran them over like the previous pair.

Paisley flicks her blonde hair over her shoulder. “Whatever. I have more important things to do.”

She turns around and heads toward the gym with the rest of the girls, just as her mom and cheerleading coach storms out of the gym. Upon seeing them, Coach Abberton shrills, “Where have you been? Paisley, you’re *late* again.”

“But...but...it’s not just me—”

“Get in!” she orders. “And we still need to talk about those candy bars you’ve been sneaking after dinner.”

Ducking her head in shame, Paisley hurries into the gym. The rest quickly follow.

Willow whistles. “I don’t want to be her right now. Or ever.”

Lily puts her arm around her. “How about we head to our sacred 1B, Macintosh?”

With a laugh, Willow wraps her arm around me, and the three of us make our way to our favorite classroom. Ava and Aidan are now making out. Pretty passionately.

“Uh...should we give them some privacy?” Lily asks.

“And miss out on book club?” Willow says. “Heck no. I think they had enough time to make up for all the potential kisses they could have exchanged all day.”

“Agreed,” I say.

Lily groans. “We’ll see how you two feel once you have boyfriends. Because the last thing you’d want is to get interrupted while making out.”

“Nah, book club will always be more important than making out,” Willow says.

“Ha.”

Willow claps her hands as she barges into the room. “Okay, okay. Break it up, lovebirds!”

Ava and Aidan repel from each other. “Oh,” Ava says with a laugh as she clutches her heart. “You scared me. I was in another place. An island where it was just me and this handsome fella.” She grabs Aidan by the front of his shirt and plants another kiss on him.

“I think your friends are here for book club,” Aidan tells her once they take a break to breathe.

“No one’s here except for you,” she grumbles as she reaches for him again.

Aidan chuckles. “I know I’m super irresistible, but I don’t want to take this special time away from you and your friends. I’ll see you later, Princess.” He gives her a quick peck on the lips before reaching for his backpack and smiling at us. “Have fun, guys.” He walks out.

“Finally!” Willow heaves her overstuffed backpack off her shoulders and drops down in her desk. “There’s so much to discuss about *The Devermoor Beasts*. Number one: it’s impossible for a fire dragon to live underwater. A water dragon, sure. But not a fire dragon.”

“There goes Willow with her logic again,” I tease as I slide into my desk. “I thought fire dragons that live underwater are pretty cool.”

“It defies science.”

“It’s a fantasy book, Willow. The genre defies all science and logic. Fire dragons can survive underwater with magic. Duh.”

Willow folds her arms over her chest. “Not buying it.”

“I thought it was cool, too,” Lily says as she reaches for her e-reader. She frowns. “But there wasn’t enough romance.”

“Agreed,” Ava adds with a sigh as she opens her paperback. “Now that I have my awesome Superman, I don’t think I can read a book that doesn’t have romance.”

Lily nods with a knowing grin.

“That may be a problem,” Willow says. “Because a book caught my eye yesterday. A thriller that’s supposed to keep you on the edge of your seat. No romance.”

Lily frowns at her. “Not even a teensy weensy?”

“Nope.”

“Unheard of.”

“Should be banned,” Ava jokes.

“You guys are in la la land,” Willow teases.

“Can’t argue with that,” Lily says with a happy sigh.

“Oh my gosh! Before we dive into the book,” Ava gushes. “We need to discuss Chloe’s article!”

I hold up my hands. “No we don’t.”

“You kidding?” Lily says. “You wrote about how much this world needs books. I agree with every single thing you said. Books have changed my life.”

“Same!” Ava says.

Despite my protests, my friends spend half of book club time praising me on my article. This isn’t the first time they’ve complimented me like this, but it never gets old. I’m so lucky I have such amazing, supportive friends.

“I love this part,” Willow says as she opens the newspaper and flips through the pages. “Where is it... Ah, here. Where you wrote...” Her eyes skim over the words. “Where... wait, huh?” She turns the pages before turning back. “Chloe, I

didn't know you wrote two articles. Nice. Was this supposed to be a surprise?"

"What?"

Her eyes are lit with excitement as she devours the words, but then she frowns. "Wait. This doesn't sound like you."

"What do you mean?" Lily reaches for the paper and studies the words. She glances up at me with wide eyes. "You're trashing Topher Fletcher?"

"Trashing who? What are you talking about? I only submitted one article."

Willow passes the newspaper to me. "You sure? It says your name on it."

My eyes soak in the words. The article is totally roasting basketball player Topher Fletcher. Saying all these terrible things about him.

"Guys, I didn't write this."

"Yeah, it's not your style," Ava says as she slides it over and reads it again. "Do you know who wrote it?"

"No. Do you think someone sent it in anonymously and my name somehow ended up on it?" I ask.

"It's possible, right?" Willow asks. "A mix-up?"

"Yeah. I guess we'll have to republish it with the right name in the next issue. But I hope people don't think it was actually me who wrote it. I would never roast someone so harshly. 'He's worse than the crap I stepped on on the way to school?' Geez, someone is pretty ticked off at him."

“Some of the basketball players are real jerks.” Lily scowls. “They’re always teasing Xavier for being so romantic. Like he’s pathetic or something. Good thing Xavier and Liam are good guys. Maybe they’ll eventually turn them good, too?”

I’m about to tell them what happened on Friday when Liam tried to hang out with the team at Mikey’s, but I purse my lips. I know he was embarrassed about it and I don’t think he’d want me talking about it behind his back. Not that he’s ashamed in front of the other Musketeers, but I’m pretty sure he wishes I hadn’t witnessed it.

Willow waves her hand. “He’ll probably take the article as a compliment. Guys like him love the spotlight. Bad press is good press, right?” She offers me a reassuring smile.

I return a thankful one. “Yeah. I’m not worried. He’ll probably tell me to write one for every issue.”

With my worries gone, I focus on the discussion of *The Devermoor Beasts*. We usually don’t get into heated arguments, but the way Willow and I refuse to see eye to eye on the underwater fire dragon thing is pretty hilarious. No, it’s pretty hilarious how worked up Willow is getting.

Ava giggles. “You need to suspend your belief just a bit more, Willow.”

She stubbornly folds her arms over her chest again. “Fire and water do *not* mix.”

“It’s magic fire,” I remind her.

“My mind will not be changed.”

“Fine, Macintosh.”

That has us all laughing, even Willow.

When book club is sadly over, Willow stretches her arm over me with a smile. “Thanks for taking my mind off my stress.”

“What stress?” Lily asks. “App stuff?”

“Yep. But I don’t want to talk about it when I’m with you guys. You guys equal no stress. That’s where I’m happiest.”

Ava squeals as she wraps her arms around us. “Me, too! You guys and Aidan.”

“Darn the competition,” Willow jokes.

“There’s no competition. My heart is big enough for all of you.”

We pack up our things and exit the room.

“I need to do some work on the paper,” I tell them. “I’m catching a ride with Liam and Evie after he’s done with practice.”

“I can keep you company,” Willow offers.

“That’s okay. You focus on your app. With *no* stress. Got it?”

She twists her nose. “I’ll try.”

Before Ava or Lily can offer to stay with me, I assure them that I’ll be fine and that they should go home. After we hug each other goodbye, I head to the newsroom and work on my article for fifteen minutes. The team should be done with practice now. I already texted Liam earlier, so he knows to wait for me.

I stop at my locker to grab my books, and after I close it, I come face to face with Topher Fletcher. He's surrounded by a few of his teammates. I don't see Liam or Xavier anywhere.

He glares at me with his hands fisted at his sides. "Who the heck do you think you are?" he demands.

I'm confused for a second, but then I remember why he's so upset. "Is this about the article?" I ask. "There's been a misuder—"

"I don't even know who the heck you are. My buddies pointed you out to me. Are you so insecure with your position at the paper that you had to drag me through the mud to gain more readers?"

"No. Let me explain—"

"Explain what? Your name is Chloe Barrington, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but—"

He grabs my arm, squeezing it so tightly that it hurts. "You think you'll get to the top by stepping on people? You want the hard truth? You suck as a writer. The only reason you're still on the paper is because your dad is somebody here."

His words prick my heart, but I push them away before they can stab me. Even though I doubt myself many times, I know deep down that I *am* good enough. And Kendall is very serious about the paper and wouldn't let just anyone work there.

"Her mom works for the Edenbury Press," his friend Gibson informs him.

He scoffs. "Nepotism."

“No,” I say. “It would be nepotism if I got a job at the Edenbury Press because of my mom. Nepotism means—”

“I know what it means!” Squeezing my arm tighter, he pulls me toward him and glares into my eyes. “If you ever write an article about me again, you’ll regret it.”

“I *didn’t* write it—”

He shoves me to the floor. I tumble down, my head nearly bumping into the lockers. The air gets knocked out of me and I cough.

“You better publish an apology in the next issue or—”

“Leave her alone!” a familiar voice says. When I look past him, I find Liam standing there with his hands fisted at his sides. He glares at Topher like all he wants to do is bash the jerk’s head into the lockers.

His eyes flit to mine for a second and they fill with concern when he sees me coughing.

“What do you want, Hastings?” Topher says. “You know this jerk?”

A look of panic passes over his face because Liam isn’t the kind of person to confront someone like this—especially a guy as menacing-looking as Topher. But he swallows and raises his chin, narrowing his eyes at him. “The only jerk here is you. If you lay a finger on her again, I’ll—”

Topher chortles. “You’ll what? Throw a stupid book at me? Isn’t that what you do in your free time? Read books?” He chortles again, making Gibson and the other guys follow suit. “You’re such a weirdo, Hastings. Books over girls?”

Unless you like this piece of trash over here.” He jerks his thumb in my direction.

Liam charges at him and grabs him by the front of his shirt. “Leave her alone or you’ll regret the day you were born.”

Topher glares back at him, the vein in his forehead bulging. He keeps his eyes on him for a good while, the vein in his forehead bulging even more. Like he’s seriously contemplating punching him.

“Liam, let him go,” I tell him. “He’s not worth it.” He could get expelled for fighting.

Topher smirks. “Listen to your stupid girlfriend. Isn’t that how it is? You’ve got no backbone and you let a girl tell you what to do.”

Liam tightens his hands on his shirt.

“*Liam*,” I urge. “Let him go, please.”

With a grunt, Liam shoves him away. He turns to me and holds out his hand. “Sorry, Chloe. I didn’t...are you okay—?”

Topher grabs Liam by the back of his shirt and slams him into the lockers. Then he pummels his fist into his chest.

“Liam!” I cry.

I watch in horror as Topher continues to ram his fist into Liam. He gets him in the face, the chest, anywhere he can.

“Liam!” Tears burst out of my eyes and rain down my cheeks. The other guys guffaw as my best friend gets the living heck beat out of him. By now, other kids who are still at school have gathered around.

“Leave him alone!” I cry. “He didn’t do anything to you!”

Liam’s face is all bloody and swollen. He looks like he might collapse from pain.

“My grandma would kill me if I hurt a girl,” Topher says as he grabs Liam by his long hair and raises his fist. “So your man will take the heat. You can handle it, can’t you, pretty boy? Well, you won’t be pretty now.” He raises his fist even higher.

“STOP!” I yell.

“What’s going on here?” a female voice shouts.

Principal Nakamura pushes her way through the crowd. “Stop it this instant! Gibson, grab Topher. Desmond, grab Liam.”

Gibson tears Topher away from Liam, but Topher doesn’t let go of his hair.

“Topher, release him,” Principal Nakamura orders.

With a growl, he does.

Oh, gosh. Liam looks really bad. He’s on his palms and knees, blood dripping from his lip and nose and dripping on the floor. I rush over to him and touch his shoulder. “Liam?”

“Into my office, Hastings, Fletcher,” Principal Nakamura says. “And you, too, Barrington.”

Topher glares at me and Liam before following the principal.

“Can you stand?” I ask Liam.

He doesn't say anything as he tries to get to his feet. He doesn't even look at me. It seems like he's upset with himself.

"You shouldn't have done that," I say as I slide my arm underneath him and help him to his feet. "He wouldn't have hurt me. Your wounds—"

"I'm fine." He wrenches himself from me and wipes his lip.

"Let me get you some paper towels," I say before rushing into the bathroom a few feet away and grabbing a bunch. Liam takes them from me and starts wiping the blood off his face.

"Oh, Liam." My lips quiver as my eyes fill with fresh tears. "I'm sorry. This is all my fault."

"I'm fine, Chloe. Nakamura will be ticked off if we don't go to her office."

I'm about to reach over and help him, but he twists away from me and ambles toward the principal's office. I swipe my hand across my eyes before hurrying after him.

Chapter Eight

Chloe

Principal Nakamura's expression hasn't changed since Liam and I came to her office a few minutes ago. She's looking at us like we're nothing but disappointments. She doesn't seem surprised to see Topher here, but Liam and I are a totally different story. We're good kids and are never called to the principal's office.

She asked Liam if he was okay or needed to go to the hospital, but he assured her that he's fine—he barely feels any pain. Which is a total lie. I know him well and I *know* when he's hurting.

The door to the office springs open and Ally flies in. “Liam?” Her eyes search the room and land on her son. They widen in horror when she takes one look at him. “Liam!” She hurries over and gently touches his face. “Oh my gosh. Are you okay?”

Liam pulls away from her. “I'm fine, Mom.”

“Thanks for coming, Mrs. Hastings,” Nakamura says. “We're still waiting for Chloe and Topher's parents to arrive. Will your husband be joining us?”

“No, he's at work and can't make it.” Her eyes move to Topher, who doesn't have a scratch, and they harden. “Did this boy attack my son?”

“We’ll get to the bottom of this once the other parents arrive. Please sit down, Mrs. Hastings.”

It looks like sitting down is the last thing she wants to do, but she lowers herself on one of the empty chairs, crossing her arms over her chest and keeping cold eyes on Topher. He doesn’t look like he holds even an ounce of remorse for what he did.

It feels like forever until my parents arrive, and then Topher’s. Mom and Dad are super concerned when they see Liam and me, while Topher’s parents seem like this is a huge waste of time for them.

Once everyone is settled, Principal Nakamura clasps her hands and leans forward. “Okay, let’s start with Chloe. Can you tell me what happened?”

I swallow and nod, keeping my gaze away from Topher. “Um, I was about to get something from my locker when Topher confronted me. He said some stuff to me, then grabbed my arm. Then he pushed me to the floor.”

Dad explodes out of his seat. “If you touch my daughter again—”

Nakamura holds up her hand. “Please relax, Coach Barrington. We need to get to the bottom of this in a civil manner.”

Dad glares at Topher’s dad. “You’re just sitting there with no care in the world. Your son pushed my daughter. Haven’t you taught him anything?”

“And what about you?” Mom says to Topher’s mom. “Are you seriously checking your messages right now?”

“I have an important meeting in fifteen minutes,” she says.
“Can we wrap this up?”

“Shows what kind of son you raised,” Ally mutters.

Topher’s mom glances at her. “Did you say something?”

Ally purses her lips, looking away from her.

“Chloe, please continue,” Mom says.

“Um...he threw me to the floor and then Liam told him to leave me alone.”

“He attacked me!” Topher says. “He grabbed me by the front of my shirt.”

“But Liam let him go. He didn’t hurt him,” I tell them.
“And when he turned his back on him, Topher grabbed him and started punching him. I yelled at him to stop, but he wouldn’t listen. He just kept going at him.”

Nakamura turns to Topher. “Is what Chloe said true? Did you punch Liam?”

Topher shrugs. “She had to pay for what she did.”

“And what exactly did she do?” Dad throws at him.

“She trashed me in her article. Made me look like a monster.”

Nakamura opens her drawer and pulls out the latest issue of the newspaper, turning the pages until she finds my article.
“All I see here is an article stating the benefits of reading books.”

“There’s another article with my name on it,” I tell her.
“But I didn’t write it.”

Nakamura flips through the pages until she finds the second article. Her eyes skim over it and then she says, “Hmm. I see.” She lifts her gaze to me. “You’re saying you didn’t write it?”

I shake my head. “I don’t even know Topher. Whoever wrote that knows him personally.”

“Can I see it?” Mom asks.

Nakamura passes it to her. Dad leans over and reads it with Mom. “This is not my daughter’s writing style,” Mom says. “The amount of adverbs in this piece is horrendous.”

“Do you know who wrote it?” Dad asks me.

I shake my head.

“Maybe I can recognize the writer,” Ally offers. “I can usually tell which student wrote what.” After Mom passes it to her, Ally studies the words. She purses her lips. “I think whoever wrote this is a good writer who is pretending to be a bad writer so no one could figure out who he or she is.”

“She’s lying!” Topher points at me. “She did write it.”

“Why would I if I don’t even know you?” I ask, incredulously.

“Idiot,” Liam mutters.

“Don’t talk about my son that way,” Topher’s dad shoots at him.

“Let’s relax, all right?” Nakamura says. “I believe Chloe when she claims she didn’t write that article. But whatever the case, Topher did act violently toward Liam. This isn’t the first time he’s been called to my office for fighting. I told him the

last time that he was on thin ice, and that if he ever got into another fight, he would be expelled.”

Topher’s mom leaps to her feet. “Expelled?!”

“We have a zero-tolerance for violence here,” Principal Nakamura says. “So yes, I’m afraid I have to expel your son from Edenbury High School. Please pack your things and leave.”

Topher’s dad points at his son. “He’s one of the best players on the basketball team. You expel him and you won’t make it to state.”

Nakamura keeps her eyes on him for a few seconds before saying. “The team will survive. Now please go.”

Topher’s mom turns to Dad. “You’re the football coach. Putting your personal feelings aside, you understand how vital each player is to the team.”

“This concerns my *daughter*,” Dad says through clenched teeth. “If any of my players touched a girl without her permission or punched someone, he would be off my team. No questions asked.”

Topher’s dad grunts.

“I won’t ask you again,” Principal Nakamura says. “Leave this school.”

“He’s graduating in a few months,” Mrs. Fletcher says. “What is he supposed to do now?”

Principal Nakamura shrugs one shoulder. “He should have thought of that before he harmed his fellow student.”

Topher lets out a grunt identical to his dad's. His parents try one more time to change the principal's mind, but she won't hear it. Topher glares at Liam, curses under his breath, then follows his parents out of the office.

Principal Nakamura looks at Mom, Dad, and Ally. "I'm sorry this happened. We have strict rules in place, but unfortunately we can't prevent the students from taking their anger out on one another. Topher won't bother you again, Chloe. And in regards to that article, we'll figure out who wrote it and I'll take the necessary action. We don't allow such pieces at this school."

Our parents thank Principal Nakamura, Liam reassures her that he's okay, and I tell her I'm fine, too. Then the five of us leave the office.

"Are you kids really okay?" Mom asks me and Liam.

He nods, trying to put on a brave smile.

"I'm okay," I tell her.

Ally places her hand on Liam's back. "I'm taking you to the hospital."

"Why? I'm fine."

"This isn't up for negotiation."

He looks like he wants to argue, but winces. That makes my heart ache.

He slowly turns to me. "Bye, Chloe."

"Bye."

Mom wraps her arms around Ally. "Take care of your kiddo."

“You, too.”

Ally bids us goodbye before she and Liam walk off. I watch them go, my heart once again aching when I catch him limping.

Today, Liam Hastings was my hero. He put himself at risk to protect me. I don't know if I can ever repay him. I appreciate him more than I ever did before.

Chapter Nine

Liam

My face is so swollen I can hardly see through my puffy eyes.

“Good thing they expelled him, or he’d have heck to pay,” Mom seethes as she clutches the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles turn white. We just left the hospital, where the doctors reassured my mom over and over that I’m okay. Nothing is broken, my nose is intact, and I’ll have this swollen face for a few days.

I groan as I press the ice pack to my face. “I’m okay, Mom.”

She glances at me before focusing back on the road. “You don’t have to try to be brave, honey. I know you’re in a lot of pain, but we’ll go home and you’ll snuggle up in bed with a good book or movie and focus on getting better.”

“Okay.” I stare out the window as I continue pressing the ice to my face. I can’t get what happened out of my head.

“I’m proud of you,” Mom says. “I’m not happy that happened, of course, but I’m glad you were there for Chloe.”

I nod. I don’t really care how beaten up I am—all that matters is that Chloe is okay. When I saw that jerk Topher shove her to the floor, I felt like I lost my mind. The thought of something terrible happening to Chloe, or to Lily, or Evie, or the others....I wouldn’t be able to handle it. I’d let myself get

beaten up over and over if it meant my friends and sisters were safe.

But at the same time....why aren't I strong enough to defend the people I care about? What would have happened if Principal Nakamura hadn't stopped Topher?

"Talk to me, Liam," Mom says, almost desperately. "Are you okay?"

"Fine."

She must sense that I don't want to talk about it because she reaches for my hand and clasps it in hers. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

We reach our house and get out of the car. My vision is still a little blurry, so Mom guides me into the house. As soon as we walk in, Dad, Lily, and Evie, who are all gathered in the kitchen, rush over to us. Dad wanted to come to the school when he heard what happened, but he was at work. He's trying to find four siblings a good home.

Lily's eyes are wide with tears as she stares at my face. She tries to blink them away.

"I'm okay," I reassure her, trying to smile, but my face is way too swollen. Her shoulders relax, though she still looks worried.

"Dude, you look like crap," Evie says.

Mom gives her a look. "Evie."

"Sorry. Was just trying to make him feel better by teasing him. Unless you want us to treat you differently, sibling one?"

“No. You’re right.” My eyes scan my family, who can’t take their gazes off me. “Please stop looking at me like I’ll shatter into pieces any minute. I’m fine. Just have this pounding headache.”

Dad gently folds his arms around me. “I’m so glad and relieved you’re okay, Liam.”

Even though he’s making this a bigger deal than it is, I let him take a few moments to reassure himself that I’m in one piece. Things could have gone much worse than they had, and I know Dad wouldn’t be able to handle losing me.

“If anyone’s up for lasagna tonight, I can whip it up real quick,” I say.

Dad places his hands on my shoulders. “The last thing you should be worrying about is making us dinner. Your mother and I want you to take it easy for a few days so you can heal.”

I can’t *not* be in the kitchen—it’s the best distraction—but maybe he’s right. Straining myself over a hot stove is probably not a good idea right now.

Lily follows me upstairs to my room, as if she thinks I’ll vanish if she leaves my side. I’m grateful that everyone cares, but I just want to lie down and forget that I’m so pathetic I couldn’t properly defend my best friend.

Lily drops down on my desk chair while I slowly stretch myself out on my bed. Man, all my limbs ache.

“So...” Lily says.

I turn my head to her.

“Need more ice?” she asks.

I shake my head. "I'm okay, thanks."

She pulls her phone from her pocket. "Chloe's been texting me like crazy asking if you're home yet. I'll tell her you just got here."

I slowly sit up, trying not to wince. "How is she?"

She glances up at me as her fingers tap on her phone. "You're asking how Chloe is when you got beaten up?"

I flinch.

"Sorry."

"No. I mean, it's the truth. I got my butt kicked." Sighing, I lie back down and shut my eyes tightly. Maybe the tighter I shut them, the easier I can forget how weak I am.

"But you helped Chloe and that's all that matters."

I'm about to say something, but there's a knock on the door.

"It's Chloe," a voice says from behind the closed door.

Lily gets up to open it for her. "Wow, that was fast." She returns to the chair while Chloe sits down next to me on the bed.

As she takes in my face, I wish I could turn away from her and hide my shame. But I don't want to be rude. Or to worry her. Plus she's *here*. Her hair is a little messy like she ran her fingers through it multiple times.

"Hey," she says with an uneasy smile.

I try to return one, but it's impossible with my temporary new face. "Hey."

She slides her hand into mine and all I can think about is how soft and warm it is. I forget for a second what happened and how much pain I'm in.

"How are you feeling?" she asks.

"I'm okay. It looks worse than it is."

She bites her bottom lip as she scans my bruises. From the look on her face, I know she doesn't believe me. But it's true. The emotional pain is worse than the physical one. I hate that it happened to her and I hate that I wasn't stronger.

"All this happened because an article was accidentally published under your name," Lily mutters. "And you still have no idea who wrote it?"

Chloe shakes her head. "I'm not sure it was done accidentally."

Lily pushes her chair closer to us. "What do you mean?"

She shrugs. "Why would they put my name on it? When I told Nakamura I didn't write it, she believed me and told me she'll investigate and get to the bottom of it."

"That's good."

Chloe nods. "Yeah, but maybe we shouldn't talk about it now. Let's let Liam get better."

"Thanks, but I told you to treat me the same," I say.

Lily stands and walks over to me. "No way. You could have really gotten hurt, womb buddy."

I groan. I hate when she calls me that, though I kind of like it, too. It's something special only the two of us share.

Lily bends toward me and carefully wraps her arms around me. “I’m really happy you’re okay, twin bro. I’m going to help Mom with dinner. See you later.” She leaves the room.

Chloe looks at me, biting her lip.

I slowly sit up. “I’m fine,” I try to reassure her.

She slides closer to me. “I didn’t have a chance to thank you for helping me. But I’m sorry that jerk hurt you.”

I take her hand, again loving how warm and soft it feels. “I don’t regret it. I’m glad I was there at the right time. I wouldn’t be able to bear it if...” My voice tails off as I swallow. “You’re my best friend.”

“And you’re mine. I’m so lucky to have you.” She hugs me and I hold her close, squeezing her gently to show her just how much she means to me.

As she draws back, her shoulder accidentally knocks into my face and I see stars. “Darn it,” I groan.

“Sorry!”

“It’s okay.” I force a smile. “No harm done.”

She returns a hesitant smile. I know she’s still worried about me and feels guilty, but I wish she wouldn’t. If I hadn’t come to her aid, what would have happened?

Chloe’s still clutching my hand and I’m not complaining one bit. Though I hope mine isn’t sweaty...

“Why do you look so bothered?” she asks after a little while.

I slump forward. “I just feel pathetic and inadequate.”

“What do you mean?”

I sigh, shutting my eyes and then opening them. “I wanted to defend you like a real man, you know? But I got beaten up like a piece of raw meat.”

“Liam—”

“When my parents were in high school, my dad stood up for my mom. He threatened anyone who wanted to harm her. He *saved* her. Was strong for her. Kept her safe. And me... I’m nothing like him.”

She scoots even closer and takes both my hands. “Of course you’re just as strong as your dad. Okay, maybe not in muscle, but you’re brave and sweet and kind and caring and an overall amazing person. You don’t need big muscles to prove that. All that matters is what kind of person you are inside. How big your heart is.”

I want to believe her, I do, but I can’t. What if something like that happens again? What if it’s Lily or Evie or my friends who are in danger? If I’m so pathetic I can’t defend them, then what good am I?

I work out as much as I can, but I guess it wasn’t enough to take Topher on. But I’ll do better, I’ll be stronger. I’ll make sure to defend Chloe or the others properly next time. Though I hope there won’t be a next time.

“You don’t have to stay with me,” I tell Chloe after we’ve been sitting here in silence for a little while.

“Of course I want to stay with you.”

As her smile wraps around me, warming me up, I know she’s staying because she wants to and not because she feels

guilty or responsible for what happened.

“Thanks. What do you want to do? Movie?”

She twists her nose. “Not really in the mood.” She scans the shelves that are popping with books. There’s hardly any room because I’ve stuffed it with so many. “We can read together, if you want?”

I smile. “Sure. I’d love that. Hmm. Maybe Uncle Zane’s book?”

She nods and plucks it off the shelf. I’ve read it already, but I’ve been wanting to read it again.

Chloe slips under the covers and snuggles up to me with the book between us. She’s so warm, and it feels perfect that she’s under here with me. Again, I don’t think about my wounds or the pain.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen Uncle Zane,” Chloe tells me. “He’s busy with his book tours and everything.”

“Yeah, I miss him.”

My dad’s brother, Zane, married Chloe’s dad’s sister, Bailey, which is why we share Uncle Zane and Aunt Bailey. It’s funny that we share cousins, ten-year-old Zoey and eight-year-old Brock, but we’re not related.

“What are you thinking about?” Chloe asks.

I force a laugh, turning my head away from her. “You’re going to think I’m weird.”

She bends closer, her warm breath on my cheek. “Nothing you say is weird, Liam Hastings.”

After I tell her, she also laughs. “Yeah. Small world, huh?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’d be really weird if we were actually related, wouldn’t it?”

She slowly turns to me. “What do you mean?”

I have no idea why I said that. It just slipped out. I know Chloe sees me as a brother, so...

“Never mind,” I quickly say. “Must be the pain talking.”

Her face contorts with worry and sympathy. “Do you want me to get you something for the pain?”

I wave my hand. “Thanks, but the doctors pumped me up with enough painkillers. I’ll be okay.”

She heaves in relief and lies down next to me, resting the book between us. “Want to start?”

“Sure.”

As we read the book together, it dawns on me that we’re under my covers together. If Mom or Dad walked in...what would they think?

Then again, Chloe is pretty much my sister...right?

Chapter Ten

Liam

Mom and Dad let me stay home from school today so I can heal from my injuries. But just today, since I don't want to fall behind in my classes.

It's nice to sleep in, though it's weird to wake up to a quiet house. I heard Mom open my door a few hours ago before she left for school, probably checking if I'm okay. Other than the pain, I feel fine.

After swallowing down the pain meds she left on my night table, I climb out of bed. As I go downstairs for some food, I hear voices coming from the kitchen. Dad's at the table, his laptop before him. He's video chatting with someone, but I can't see who it is.

He turns his head and smiles when he sees me. "Good morning, Liam. Did you sleep well?"

I nod as I step into the room. "I thought you were at work."

"Don't have to go in until later."

Hmm. I bet he's home because he and Mom are worried about me.

"Who are you talking to?" I ask.

He gestures to the laptop where Uncle Zane's face is on the screen.

“Hey, kid,” Uncle Zane says with a grin. “Ouch. That looks like it hurts. You okay?”

I forgot to look at my face today, but I know I probably look like a toad or something. “Yeah, I’m okay,” I tell him. “How’s the book tour going?”

Uncle Zane shrugs. “Stressful, but fun. I’m in New York City now.”

He’s staying at a hotel by himself since Aunt Bailey and the kids couldn’t accompany him on this tour like they sometimes do, especially in the summer.

“Cool. I was up reading your book for the second time last night.” Chloe stayed pretty late, but Mom and Dad didn’t have a problem with it. I wish she could have stayed longer.

Uncle Zane laughs, pushing his fingers through his long, dark hair. It’s the same shade as Dad’s, but Dad’s is a little shorter. He and my uncle look nearly identical, except Dad’s ten years older than his brother. “Good. Can I pay you to write the sequel for me?”

“Think I’ll pass,” I tell him.

He groans. “This book is kicking my butt, I’m telling you.”

Dad bends close. “I told you that you can bounce ideas off of me any time.”

Uncle Zane nods. “Yeah, thanks, bro. But since your precious youngest daughter was adamant that I put more romance in the sequel, I’m in way over my head.”

I grin. “Lily can be *very* persuasive.”

“No kidding. But forget about me. I want to know how you’re doing, Liam.”

I pull out a chair, drag it over near Dad, and plop down. “Missing school.”

My uncle narrows his gray eyes, studying me. “And you’re upset about that?”

I shrug. “Yeah.”

“When I was your age, I didn’t care about school at all. All I cared about was football, reading, and giving Bailey rides on my motorcycle.”

“Zane, don’t give him any ideas,” Dad says.

Uncle Zane waves his hand. “You have responsible kids, Zack. It’s not like Liam’s going to ride a motorcycle. Now Brock...that’s another story.”

“He’s into motorcycles?” I ask.

“He keeps asking me when he’ll be old enough to drive one.”

Dad raises a brow. “What do you expect when he sees his mom and dad riding around on their motorcycles all the time?”

Uncle Zane playfully sticks out his tongue. “Look, if he wants one when he’s older and he’s responsible, Bailey and I won’t stop him. But he needs to focus on school and getting into a good college.”

“He’s a good student,” Dad says. “So is Zoey, when she’s not getting into trouble with Rylee and Mia.”

Uncle Zane snickers. “She definitely keeps Bailey and me on our toes.” He glances at his phone. “I need to get going

soon. Give my love to everyone. We really need to get together soon. It's been forever."

Dad nods. "It has. Once you're done with your book tour, we'll gather everyone together for a party or something."

Uncle Zane smiles. "Sounds good. Miss ya, bro."

"Miss you."

Uncle Zane waves at me. "See you soon, kid. And don't sweat the face. It'll heal soon."

"Is it really that bad?" I lean forward to look at myself on the screen. Darn it. I look like a giant blueberry.

"Nah, Liam. It's okay," Uncle Zane reassures me while Dad pats my arm. "I'll talk to you guys later."

"Have fun," Dad says.

"As long as no one asks me to sign my name on weird parts of their body, I'll be okay." With a chuckle, he waves and ends the call.

Dad lowers the laptop and turns to me. "Hungry? Want me to make you something?"

Shaking my head, I get up and fetch some cereal and milk. "You don't have to stay home with me, Dad. I'm sixteen."

"I know that. Like I said, I don't have to go to work for a few hours."

I give him a look like I know that's a lie. But whatever, I won't argue with him. I don't know what it's like to be a parent, so I can't judge. We once had goldfish and I was devastated when they died...

Dad watches me as I eat my cereal. “What?” I ask, mouth full. “Why are you staring at me?”

He shakes his head. “I’m not. I’m just glad you’re okay. Sorry I couldn’t go to school yesterday. I was swamped with work.”

I wave my hand. “It’s okay. Mom was there and you needed to take care of those siblings. Have you found a home for them yet?”

“Not yet, but we’re getting there.”

I nod and play around with my cereal. Dad’s so cool and I’m...well...me.

“You okay?” Dad asks. “You completely shut down.”

I shrug. “I guess.”

He pushes his chair closer to me. “What’s wrong? Are you in pain?”

I shake my head. “I’m okay.”

He studies me. “You sure?”

Dad doesn’t push me to talk when I don’t want to, but he’s got such a caring and concerned look on his face that the words tumble out of my mouth.

“I’m a loser.”

“What? Why would you say that?”

I shrug again. “It’s true. I tried to help my best friend and I got my butt kicked.”

Dad sighs, reaching to rest a hand on my shoulder. “Liam, you’re not a loser. You were brave to help Chloe.”

I shrug his hand off. “I’m not like you. I’m not strong or confident...I’m a wimp.”

“Liam, why do you think you have to be like me?”

I shrug for a third time. “You stuck up for Mom when you were my age. She was getting bullied and you helped her. You didn’t get your butt handed to you.”

He puffs out his cheeks and wraps his arm around my shoulder, pulling me close. “Yes, it’s true that I did help your mom when jerks were giving her a hard time, but you shouldn’t strive to be like me. You’re your own person, Liam. A kind, special, wonderful, sweet young man.”

I frown. “Sweet guys can’t defend those they care about.”

He squishes me to his chest. “Your strengths lie elsewhere. Like on the basketball court. In the kitchen. You don’t have to prove you’re a man by throwing a punch. Being a man is much, much more than that. And you, my son, are growing up to be a wonderful and amazing man.”

I pull away from him. “I’m not.”

“You’re kind and caring. You were *injured* yesterday and all you cared about was cooking for your family. And you put yourself in a dangerous situation to help your friend. You don’t think that makes you a special person?”

I don’t say anything as I absorb his words. “But when you were my age—”

“Please don’t compare yourself to me, Liam. I was going through a tough time back then. And I’m so happy and relieved that I can provide you and your siblings with a good

life. That's all I care about. That you kids and your mom are happy."

I nod. "I'm happy. I'm very grateful for everything you and Mom have done for me."

He wraps both arms around me. "Please don't feel like you need to be someone else. You're perfect just the way you are." He rubs my arm. "All right?"

I nod slowly as his words continue to sink in. "Thanks, Dad. You can go to work now."

He chuckles. "You kicking me out?"

"No, I know you're here and not at work because of me. But I'm fine. And if I need help, I know who to call."

He gets to his feet. "Okay. Call your grandparents because they're worried about you."

"I will."

He bends forward and kisses my head. "I'll see you later."

"Later."

After he leaves, I clean up the kitchen, then talk to my grandparents—Mom's parents. They live in Florida now, and we see each other as often as we can.

I never knew Dad's parents because they died in a fire, but Dad has told me and Lily and Evie so much about them that I have a sense of what they were like. Dad's father's name was Liam and his mom was Evelyn—Evie. Lily's named after Grandma's favorite flower.

Once I'm done reassuring my grandparents that I'm okay and that my face looks worse than it is, I head up to my room

and plop down on my bed. I scroll through my texts. Lily and the gang wished me a speedy recovery this morning, Chloe adding in an apology for probably the hundredth time. Ava promised me she'll bring over some chocolate rainbow cake, my favorite, after school. I can't wait!

I snort as I read over the text Xavier sent me last night. He suggested I watch his favorite TV show—*Swords and Legends*—because it'll help me feel better. He loves that show and swears it has magical powers or something because it always heals him when he's not feeling well.

I told him nothing can make me watch that nerdy show, but as I sit on my bed staring at the walls, my curiosity gets the better of me. I guess it wouldn't hurt to try an episode. It's not like I have anything else to do, other than read, but my head hurts too much to concentrate.

I get comfy on my bed and start the first episode. It's actually pretty good. Very heavy on the fantasy, but that's what makes it so interesting. And the magic is done so perfectly that I start episode two without a second thought.

Man. I shouldn't have teased Xavier about this show. I shouldn't have called it nerdy. And he's right—I'm feeling so much better, mentally, emotionally, and physically.

Even though he's at school, I send Xavier a text.

Liam: I'm a jerk and you were right. This show is killer.

The romance between the two leads is done very well. Most of the fantasy shows I have watched don't have the greatest love stories. But this one? It's the perfect blend of

magic and action and romance. No wonder my best buddy and Lily are obsessed with it.

I'm so into the show that I don't realize I'm hungry. I've been watching for hours and forgot about lunch. Eh, I'm not in the mood to make anything big—I want to keep watching—so I make myself a PB and J sandwich and hurry back to my room to continue watching.

A little while later, my phone beeps with a text.

Xavier: Told you! I'll make a Swordie out of you.

Liam: Swordie? Man, that's lame.

Xavier: You're a Swordie whether you like it or not.

Liam: Fine. You, me, and Lily can all be Swordies together.

Xavier: Nice. Hey, you doing all right?"

Liam: Fine. You guys are at lunch?

Xavier: Yeah.

I'm about to ask him what's for lunch, but my phone explodes with texts from the others. They want to know how I'm doing.

I answer each one, except for Chloe's. She's still worried about me and I sense she couldn't concentrate in her classes.

I call her, bringing the phone to my ear as I eat my second sandwich.

"Liam?" she asks.

"Hey."

“You sound so awake and energetic. I thought you’d be sleeping all day.”

I chuckle. I tend to be lazy on the weekends and sleep in. “Nope. Xavier talked me into watching *Swords and Legends* and I’m hooked.”

She giggles. It sounds so cute and sweet. “Really? That’s so funny. You swore you’d never watch it.”

“What can I say? I’m a Swordie.”

“A what?”

I laugh. “Ask Xavier and he’ll tell you. Hey, Chloe, are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah, why do you ask?”

“I just don’t want you to worry about me. I’m okay. I mean, my face looks like a giant blueberry, but I’m fine. So please don’t worry.”

She releases a breath. “I’m sorry. But I *am* worried. You could have gotten really hurt. I know we talked about it last night, but I couldn’t stop thinking about it all day. And everyone at school is talking about it.”

“Oh...they are?”

“Mostly about Topher getting expelled because he beat up a nerd. Sorry, that’s what they’re saying. You know I’d never call you a nerd.”

Even though I’m not feeling the best right now, I smile. “I know, Chloe. Thanks for taking time away from your lunch to talk to me.”

“You don’t have to thank me. We’re besties.”

“Yeah.”

“We’re all coming over to your place after school. Ava owes you that chocolate rainbow cake.”

“Owes me?”

“That’s what she said. Other than the fact that you’re awesome, she wants to reward you for saving my life. A bit dramatic, but that’s Ava.”

I laugh. “Yeah. But I don’t need rewards. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“I am. Thanks. I owe you.”

“No, you don’t owe me anything, Chloe. I’d do it again and again. I don’t want anything to happen to you or the others.”

She’s quiet for a bit. “That’s so sweet.” Her voice sounds choked up. “I love you, bestie.”

My heart skips a beat and the room gets a bit too hot. “Me, too. Bestie.”

She’s quiet. I’m quiet.

I don’t know how much time passes.

“You still here?” she asks.

“Yeah. Sorry. I should let you get back to lunch. What’s on the menu?”

She laughs. “Pizza. It’s delicious this time. Willow’s having the time of her life. I think she’s on her third slice.”

“Jealous.”

“What are you having?” she asks.

“PB and J.”

“Jealous!”

I laugh and she laughs.

“See you later, Liam.”

“Have fun at school.”

I end the call and smile as I gulp down half of my water bottle. Then I resume watching the nerdiest show that’s become my new favorite.

The hours zoom by and I haven’t moved from my bed once, except to use the bathroom. I don’t realize how late it is until the Junior Musketeers, Xavier, and Aidan enter my room.

“We come bearing gifts!” Ava says with a smile as she places a container on my bed. “Chocolate rainbow cake, as promised.”

“Score! Thanks.” I drag it onto my lap. “Been waiting hours for this.”

Mom steps into the room, a look of concern in her eyes. “Are you feeling okay?” she asks.

I nod. “I’m great. Ready to go back to school tomorrow.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Make sure to do your homework.”

“Don’t worry, dear teacher, I’ve got him covered,” Lily assures her. “He’ll be all caught up with his classes by tomorrow morning.”

Mom laughs. “I’m getting started on dinner. You kids want to stay?”

Ava takes Aidan's hand with a warm smile. "We're having dinner with Grandma and Grandpa Knight tonight. They want to get to know Aidan better."

He swallows. "It's a little intimidating, to be honest."

"Just be yourself and they'll love you," Mom tells him. "What about you, Chloe, Willow, and Xavier?"

"You know I'm in," Willow says with a grin. "I love hanging out with the Hastings fam."

"Thanks, I'd love to stay for dinner," Chloe says with a smile.

"Me, too," Xavier says.

"Glad to have you." She leaves the room, reminding us not to forget to do our homework.

"Evie's right. Having a mom for a teacher sucks sometimes," Lily grumbles.

"Did someone mention me?" Evie asks as she enters the room, her hands and the front of her shirt covered in green paint. She's also got some in her hair. "Hey, bro. How goes it? Gosh, your face."

"I know. Maybe I should write on my forehead that I'm okay so everyone will stop asking me."

She backs away from the room, lifting her hands. "Geez. Sorry I asked. That's what I get for caring about my little bother?"

"Sorry. Thanks for caring."

She nods. "Yep. I'm off to finish my painting. Later, siblings and friends." She walks out of the room.

“You have paint in your hair!” Willow calls after her.

“I know!”

Xavier plops down on my desk chair and wheels it over to me. He’s got an eager expression on his face. “So...?”

“What?”

“What do you think of *Swords and Legends*? What episode are you up to?”

I shrug, trying to hide my smile. “Finished season one. Are you sure they might cancel the show?”

He puffs out his cheeks. “If the guy playing Onin leaves, then yeah.”

I frown. “Sucks.”

The rest of the gang gather around me and tell me what happened at school today. Other than kids talking about Topher’s expulsion, nothing special happened. Was just a regular day.

“So you’re going back tomorrow, huh?” Willow asks me.

“Yeah. I’m nervous, though.”

“Why?” Chloe asks. I point to my face and she says, “Oh.”

Willow grunts. “Ignore them.”

“I’ll probably sit on the bench during practice until I heal,” I tell them. “Coach spoke to my parents last night and they want me to take it easy.” I lift the lid off the container and sigh happily as the smell of the chocolate rainbow cake attacks my nose. “Yum. You guys want a piece?”

“No,” they all say at once.

“All for me, then!” I take a large bite. “Yummm! Ava, this is amazing.”

She laughs. “I’ll let Chef Maggie know. She bought special chocolate just for you.”

I stop chewing. “Oh. She didn’t have to.”

“Of course she did. You’re Liam and you’re awesome.”

My cheeks feel hot. “Thank her for me. Tell her I really appreciate it.”

Ava nods.

My friends help me catch up with my classes, and then we talk about random things. I keep my focus on everyone, but I find my eyes constantly trekking to Chloe. Wanting to check if she’s okay. All the attention has been on me, but she went through an ordeal, too. That darn Topher *pushed her to the floor*. But from the shine in her eyes and the smile on her face, it seems like she’s okay.

As long as she’s okay, I’m okay.

Chapter Eleven

Chloe

“Has anyone had a chance to read Mr. Love’s column?” Ava asks as she shifts on Liam’s bed. “I know we’ve all been worrying about Liam, but...”

“Ugh, Ava,” Liam grumbles. “Here I am, trying to heal from an injury, and you *had* to mention that darn Mr. Love.”

Mr. Love is an advice column in our school paper. Students write in about their dating problems and he offers advice. All the girls love reading his column every issue, but the boys, like Liam, aren’t into it. Mr. Love has gotten so popular that he also posts on the school website a few times a month.

“Oh, stop hating on him,” Ava teases him. “And you’re not *that* injured.”

He clutches his chest and collapses on his bed, groaning in pain.

“Save the acting for my dad and sister,” Willow jokes.

He lifts his head a few inches. “Et tu, Willow?”

She shrugs with an innocent smile.

“I didn’t have a chance yet,” Lily says, eyes shining with curiosity. “I haven’t touched the paper since I read Chloe’s article before book club yesterday.”

“Same,” Willow says.

“Yeah, between my Superman and Liam, and the charity event I attended last night, I’m swamped,” Ava says, smiling at her boyfriend. “It was the first event we went together as a couple. It was so much fun showing him off to everyone.”

Aidan lifts their interlocked hands and kisses the back of her palm. “If we could ignore the women who were staring at me like I was some low-class barbarian. And if someone asks me one more time if I’m related to the Wests from England…”

Ava giggles. “Their expressions are priceless!”

He chuckles, too.

“So, it’s my turn to read Mr. Love’s column out loud,” Ava says.

Lily frowns at her. “Didn’t you do it last time?”

“No…”

“Pretty sure you did.”

“No. *You* read the last response.”

“Maybe it was Chloe?”

“Are you guys seriously fighting over this?” Liam mutters as he falls down on his bed again, stabbing himself with an invisible sword.

They ignore Liam and continue arguing.

“I know how to solve this.” Willow reaches into her humongous backpack and pulls out the newspaper, which is crumpled because of all her tech stuff. “I’ll read it.”

Before Lily or Ava can argue, Willow stands up and flips to Mr. Love’s page.

“Dear Mr. Love,

I have a major problem and hope you can help me. I recently got out of a relationship that lasted about five months. My ex-boyfriend was so charming when we first started hanging out. We met in gym class when Coach Barrington asked him to escort me to the nurse when I wasn't feeling well. The walk to her office was short, but it was enough time for us to have a great conversation. He asked one of my friends for my number and we texted for weeks until officially becoming a couple. Like I said, he was so charming and cool in the beginning. I thought I was in love. My parents felt there was something off about him, though. They told me he seemed a bit controlling and possessive. I thought they were crazy because I was so smitten, but after about two months, I started to see his true colors. He was very controlling and possessive. He told me what to wear, what to eat, who to hang out with. I thought I could change him, but I was wrong. So I broke up with him. Thankfully, he didn't grow violent or anything. Sure he was upset, but he handled it much better than I thought he would.

A few days ago, my best friend confided in me that she has feelings for my ex. She wanted to know if I was okay with her asking him out. I hadn't told her or my other friends about my ex's true nature because I guess I was ashamed. I used to worship him, and I was embarrassed what my friends would think. But now that my bestie is interested in him, I immediately told her what my ex is really like.

I thought she would understand because of the many times my ex convinced me to blow her off and hang out with him instead, but she accused me of being jealous. She thinks my ex dumped me and that I'm jealous he's interested in her. But that's not true at all. I don't want any girl, especially one of my best friends, to go through what I went through. I even got my mom to speak to her, but that just ticked her off more. Now she's not speaking to me. I caught her kissing my ex the other day and felt like I was going to throw up. He didn't hurt me, but I'm so worried he might hurt my friend.

What should I do?

A concerned friend.

Lily's eyes are wide. "Wow. I feel so bad for all the girls who go through that. I wish I had a magic wand and could conjure up kind and caring guys for everyone." She throws her arms around Xavier. "Thanks for being the awesome guy that you are. You're the perfect gentleman, and the perfect boyfriend."

"I did have help from Cupid Lily," he reminds her.

She shakes her head as she squeezes him. "You were perfect even before that. I appreciate you so much."

"Thanks. I appreciate you so much, too." They exchange a quick kiss.

"Same with you," Ava says as she snuggles into Aidan's arms. He stares down at her with nothing but pure love and adoration.

Liam sits up on his bed. “So since you forced me to sit through this torture, can we please hear the supposed expert’s response?”

“Okay, okay,” Willow says as she focuses back on the paper.

“Dear A concerned friend,

I’m so sorry you experienced that. And I’m so glad you were able to get out of that situation. Guys like him should combust into flames and burn for eternity. Sorry, I have issues with men and guys who don’t treat their women with the proper respect they deserve.

You have every right to be concerned for your friend, and I agree that she needs to leave that jerk as soon as possible. It’s unfortunate that she refuses to see him for who he really is. I think you shouldn’t give up on her. Keep trying to have conversations with her, and maybe get your other friends to speak to her as well. But keep in mind that the manner in which you phrase your words is very crucial. Saying something like, “He’s a jerk. You need to leave him” won’t get the right message across. You need to tell her how much you care about her, help her understand that you’re not jealous but love her and don’t want to see her get hurt. Right now, she’s in Love Land and sees the guy the way she wants to see him. It’ll be hard to show her who he truly is, but you need to keep at it. Because he might treat her even worse than he treated you.

If you’re not successful with words, maybe try sending her an email or a text. Put your heart and soul into the text so she can see that you’re coming from a place of concern and not

jealousy. I think it was a good idea that you spoke to your mom about it because things could escalate into a bad situation, and you may need an adult to get involved. But it's no surprise that your friend was upset about that. And asking her mom to force her to stay away from him would just make her cling to him more strongly. You might have to think of creative ways to get your message across. Maybe film him losing his temper or comb through his social media posts to find incriminating evidence. You seem like a really good friend, and she needs you now. Don't give up on her. Be there for her. Hopefully she'll see reason and you'll be there to help her get through it. But if she gets into a dangerous situation, notify an adult immediately.

I hope my advice helps you.

Sincerely,

Mr. Love

“So what do you think?” Ava asks.

“I think he gave good advice,” Willow says as she drops back on her chair and stuffs the newspaper into her bag. “Her friend can keep an eye on her and step in if the situation turns dangerous.”

“Ugh, why can't guys just treat girls right?” Lily mutters with a scowl.

“And the bad ones are snatched up right away,” Liam says with a nearly-identical scowl. “While the good guys...” He purses his lips and shakes his head.

“You’ll meet an amazing girl one day, Liam,” Lily says as she closes her arms around him. “Just keep being the awesome person that you are and she’ll fall into your lap.”

He raises a brow. “She’ll fall into my lap? Just like that?”

“Xavier fell into my lap.”

“No. He sought you out to help him get with another girl, but he fell for you instead.”

“Yep. Right into my lap.”

Liam sighs and shakes his head again.

“I wish I knew who the guy is,” Xavier mutters. “So I could tell him how to respect women.”

“Yeah, me, too,” Aidan says.

“Chloe, you’re so quiet,” Ava says as she stretches her arm to poke me in the shoulder. “Do you love your crush’s advice?”

I shrug. “He’s not my crush. I don’t care what he says.”

They all gape at me like I told them I want to burn every single one of my books.

“What?” I say with a laugh. “You’re all staring at me like ___”

“Who are you, imposter?!” Lily gasps. “We want our friend back!”

I laugh again. “I’m still me. But...I don’t know.” I shrug again. “I really don’t care what he has to say.”

“Finally, someone here sees reason.” Liam holds up his hand to me for a high-five.

“It’s because you have a secret admirer, huh?” Ava pokes my shoulder again.

My cheeks flame. “*No.*”

“*Yes.*”

“*No!*”

“*Yes!*”

“You left me hanging here,” Liam complains, his hand still raised for a high-five.

“Well, I guess a secret admirer is more attainable than a phantom newspaper advice columnist,” Willow muses.

“Sucks he hasn’t written you any more love notes,” Lily says.

“Still hanging here,” Liam says.

“Well...” My cheeks are blazing.

Lily’s eyes widen as she bounces in her seat. “Wait. Did he write you another letter?”

With my cheeks still scorching, I grab my bag and reach inside. “I didn’t want to say anything because we were all worried about Liam and I didn’t want to be selfish...”

“Be selfish,” Lily urges. “Be very, *very* selfish.”

With a heavy sigh, Liam drops his hand and eyes the paper I pulled out of my backpack like it contains a contagious disease.

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh!” Ava squeals. “You got another love letter from your secret admirer!”

“What does it say? Lily demands. “*What does it say?*”

With my heart beating wildly, I read the letter out loud.

Dear Chloe,

I hope you're not upset with me for contacting you again. The truth is that I still can't bring myself to face you in real life. But know that I want to. I just still haven't worked up the courage.

First off, I want to congratulate you on another well-written, inspiring, well-thought-out article. I'll admit that I've read it more than once—and please don't think that I'm stalking you. That's not my intention at all. You don't seem to receive a lot of praise for your articles, and I want you to know I'm here and I have read, absorbed, enjoyed every word you have written.

I'm ashamed to admit I haven't touched a book in quite a few years. But the way you described the power and beauty of reading in your article has inspired me to sign up for a library card at my library and check out the books you recommended. Maybe we could discuss them one day, if you'd like (if I'll be confident enough to reveal myself to you). I'm very excited to start devouring the pages and being transported into a new world with many possibilities. I hated reading when I was younger, but now I'll begin the first chapter with a new mindset. I'm going on a journey along with the characters. Thank you for once again opening my eyes to possibilities.

Keep being the special person that you are. I look forward to your next article.

Sincerely,

Your Secret Admirer

As soon as I'm done reading, Lily squeals. "You wanted to inspire at least one person to read and you succeeded!"

"Look how powerful your words are, Chloe," Ava says. "Told you that you'll change the world. One person at a time."

"I love that you inspired him to get a library card," Willow says. "Half the kids here think libraries don't exist anymore."

Lowering his head in shame, Xavier raises his hand. "I hate to admit I used to be part of said group." He lifts his head and smiles at Lily. "But I'm a changed man now thanks to my lovely girlfriend. Books are amazing."

"Duh," all four of us say.

"Don't you see he's sucking up to you?" Liam folds his arms over his chest a bit too roughly and winces. "He's manipulating you."

Lily, Willow, Ava, and even Xavier and Aidan frown at him.

"Are you guys not on my side?" Liam asks the boys.

Aidan holds his hands up helplessly. "I was suspicious at first, but his words were sweet. Like he said, Chloe doesn't get a lot of recognition for her articles. It's so great someone appreciates her work."

"Yeah," Xavier agrees. "And I'm not getting creepy stalker vibes."

“Nope,” Lily says.

Liam shakes his head and reaches for his phone, busying himself with it. It hurts that he’s so against the secret admirer. I hold his opinion in the highest regard, and if he doesn’t like the guy who could potentially be my boyfriend...

“Do you think he feels more comfortable now?” Lily asks. “Maybe it won’t be long before he reveals himself to you.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I say.

Ava watches me carefully. “Why are you so quiet? What’s wrong?”

I run my hand through my hair. “This week has been so overwhelming. I think I need to decompress over the weekend.”

“While reading the secret admirer’s letter over a million times.” Lily smiles knowingly.

“And Mr. Love’s, too,” Ava says.

“Chloe’s not into him anymore,” Willow reminds her.

“I’m not giving up on him yet.”

“Are you Team Secret Admirer or Team Mr. Love?” Lily asks her.

“What, is Chloe in a love triangle now?” Liam grumbles as he taps on his phone. Looks like he’s playing a game.

“I’m not in a love triangle,” I say.

“Team Secret Admirer, then?” Xavier asks me.

My face heats up. “I don’t know...”

“I think that means yes,” Aidan says with a laugh.

Lily is about to say something, but her mom calls from downstairs that dinner is ready.

Ava jumps to her feet. “Shoot! We were supposed to leave half an hour ago to get ready for dinner with my grandparents.” She grabs Aidan’s hand and hauls him off his chair.

“Is it time already?” His eyes are wide. “I’m not mentally prepared for this.”

She stretches her neck to place a sweet kiss on his lips. “You’ve been mentally prepared since the day you were born.”

He holds up his finger. “That doesn’t make sense. Especially because we hated each other’s guts when we first met.”

She giggles as she gives him another kiss. “They’ll love you.” She waves at us. “See you guys tomorrow. Enjoy dinner.”

We wave goodbye and they exit the room.

“Well, I’m starving,” Xavier says.

“Me, too.” Willow stands and stretches her arms. “Did your mom make pizza by any chance?”

Lily gives her a face. “Didn’t we have pizza for lunch?”

“I’d eat pizza three times a day if I could.”

“Yeah, we know you would,” I say with a laugh.

As everyone files out of Liam’s room, I stop him before he walks out. “You okay?”

He smiles. “Yep. I heal like Wolverine.”

“No, I mean...with the secret admirer’s letter. You know I think highly of your opinion.”

He shakes his head. “I just worry who he is and what his intentions are. After what that jerk did to you yesterday... maybe I’m just overprotective. I guess he could be a decent guy.”

I smile. “And if not, you’ll be here to look out for me. Right?”

He smiles, too, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Yeah, of course. We should go down. Evie’s probably getting impatient because we’re keeping her from her masterpiece.”

I watch him walk away, then follow him.

“Hey, sweetie,” Dad says when I walk into the kitchen after dinner at the Hastings’s. He and Mom are sitting at the table, eating from the cookies Mom baked.

“Hey.” I grab a cookie from the plate and take a bite. “Yum. These are great, Mom.”

“Thank you, honey. How was dinner?”

“Awesome. Noisy. But so much fun.” I plop down on the chair next to Dad.

Mom bends forward. “Is Liam okay?”

“He’s great. He’ll be back in school tomorrow.”

“We’re very glad to hear that,” Dad says. He takes my hand. “Chloe, your mother and I want to know how you’re doing.”

I glance from one parent to the other. “Again? You asked me that a million times yesterday.”

“We know,” Mom says. “But we want to make sure you’re truly okay. That boy grabbed you and shoved you to the floor.”

I nod slowly. “I was scared, but I’m okay now. I’m lucky he didn’t hurt me.”

Mom takes my other hand. “If you ever need to talk to someone, we’re here for you. Or if you’d like to talk to a professional, just let us know.”

I wrap my arms around my parents. “Thanks so much, but I’m okay. Really, truly, one hundred percent okay. I’m so happy he’s gone and we don’t have to worry about him anymore. I’d better get started on my homework.”

“We love you.”

“Love you, too.”

I climb the stairs, and as I pass Noah’s room, he calls, “Hey, Chloe?”

I stop and look inside. He’s sitting on his bed with his guitar and a tablet. “Yeah?”

He squints his blue eyes, studying me. “You good?”

“Yeah. Perfect. Like I just told Mom and Dad two minutes ago. And how many times did I have to reassure you last night that I’m not going to break?”

He frowns. “Sorry. I was just worried.”

I sit down next to him. “I know and I appreciate it. But I’m not your little sister anymore. I’m sixteen.”

He runs a hand down his face. “Doesn’t matter how old you get. I’m always going to worry about you and Rylee.”

I smile and slug his arm. “Thanks. I love having a big bro looking out for me.”

“I don’t,” Rylee says as she stands in the doorway. “I heard my name mentioned and had to know what you’re saying about me. But as usual, Noah is being Dad.”

He gives her a look. “Looking out for my little sisters doesn’t make me Dad.”

Rylee crosses her arms over her chest. “Having two parents nag me is enough. I don’t need you to do it, too.”

He shakes his head. “Can’t help it. You and your friends should be more responsible. You could have gotten hurt in that abandoned building.”

“As Mother and Father so often remind me.”

Noah strums his guitar. “Fine, I get it.” He scans the tablet and his eyes widen like a lightbulb flicked on in his head. He taps on the tablet.

Rylee inches into the room. “You’re working on a song?”

He glances up. “Oh, um. No, not really. This is for school.”

She narrows her eyes. “Liar.”

“Yeah, what are you hiding?” I ask.

He shoos us away. “I need some privacy. And please shut the door on your way out.”

Rylee rolls her eyes at me before we walk out, closing the door. There’s no point trying to figure out what he’s up to.

Noah is and always will be a closed book.

“Hey, Rylee?” I stop her before she enters her room.

She turns around.

“You know Mom and Dad love you and are only looking out for you. They’re not trying to ruin your life.”

She sighs heavily. “I know.”

“And if anyone ever hurts you, tell an adult, okay?”

She studies me. “Is this about what happened to you yesterday?”

“I guess. I just want you to be safe.”

“Yep. I know to tell an adult whenever I don’t feel safe. Thanks, sis.” She turns to enter her room, then faces me. “By the way, I’m really glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks. Good night.”

“Night.” She waves and disappears into her room.

Chapter Twelve

Liam

My first day back at school won't be easy. I know I only missed a day, but so many things could happen in one day. Like the entire student body gossiping about Topher's expulsion and the loser he beat up.

Sighing, I climb out of bed and stand before the mirror in my room. My face is still pretty red and swollen, but I guess there's nothing I can do about it. Other than wear a *Phantom of the Opera* mask.

After staring at myself for a few more minutes, I get ready and meet my parents and sisters in the kitchen. Mom's been busy this morning making enough pancakes to feed an army, maybe as a way to ease her mind from everything that happened.

"Morning," I greet as I lower myself between Lily and Evie. They're packing in their pancakes like they haven't eaten in days. "Must be out of this world," I say.

Evie stuffs another piece into her mouth. "It's your recipe, so you know it's good. And your homemade maple syrup is heaven."

Mom sets another plate before Dad. "Hope I followed the directions correctly. Liam, your recipes are very confusing."

I groan. "You're like the third person to tell me that. Chloe always complains about it and Xavier couldn't follow my

directions when he prepared food for his picnic with Lily.” I hold up my hands. “I’m working on making them clearer.”

“Clear recipe or not, these are delicious,” Dad says as he takes a bite. “You and your mom are beasts in the kitchen.”

Mom waves her hand with a blush. “I just followed his recipe.”

With a grin, Dad pulls her close until their lips are inches from each other’s. “They’re amazing and you’re amazing, Ponytail. And our kids are amazing.” He presses his lips to hers slowly, like he wants to savor every minute.

“Great,” I mutter, though I can’t help watching them. What does it feel like to be so in love with someone like that? To be so happy?

“Well, there goes my appetite,” Evie grumbles.

Mom and Dad either don’t hear her or they don’t care. Lily, of course, is swooning. When she catches me frowning at her, she says, “Let them have this, Liam. They were worried about you.”

I drop my gaze to my plate of half-eaten pancakes. I don’t want them to worry about me. Dad’s had difficult teenage years, so all I want is for him to be happy and live stress-free.

“You’re right,” I tell my twin. “Sorry.”

Evie picks up her fork and continues eating. “I don’t approve of them making out in my face, but I’m not letting this delicious pancake go to waste.”

Mom and Dad are still making out like teenagers as we finish our food and get ready for school. It’s not until Dad’s

phone rings that he and Mom are forced to separate.

“I need to run,” Dad tells us. “They found a home for the siblings.”

Lily smiles. “That’s great.”

“It is.” Dad kisses her on the head, then Evie, then me, though he’s careful not to hurt me. He wraps his arms around Mom and kisses her again, so passionately I feel it deep in my heart. Man, that’s intense stuff they’ve got going on there. It’s great that they haven’t lost their love over the years like some couples do. I, along with the rest of the Musketeers, am very lucky our parents are still crazy in love with each other.

He tells us all to have a good day before leaving the house.

“I’ll see you kids at school,” Mom tells us as my sisters and I head for Evie’s car. She puts on loud music and we sing along with it like we do every morning. My face hurts a little, but I’m not giving up our morning routine.

Lily, sitting in the back, sticks her head between the seats. “Nervous?”

I want to shrug, but my shoulders are as stiff as the seats. “Yeah, everyone’s talking about what happened. I shouldn’t care what those kids think of me, but...” I shake my head.

Evie turns her head to glance at me for a second. “Wanting to fit in is normal. Caring what others think about you is normal.”

“But that’s the thing. I don’t really care what anyone thinks of me. Except for the guys on the team. We’re supposed to be a family, but I don’t mesh well with them.”

“And Topher, your *teammate*, hurt you,” Lily says. “That’s messed up.”

“He never liked me, so...”

“That’s not an excuse.”

I stare out the window. “Can we please not talk about this? Talk about anything else. Evie, how’s your portfolio coming along?”

“It could be better,” she grumbles.

Lily scowls at her. “It’s amazing and you know it.”

My older sister is nervous to go to the prestigious art college because she doesn’t think she’s as talented as the other students. But she’s wrong.

“Maybe talking about my art isn’t a good idea,” Evie says. “How about you gush to us about you and Xavier, Lil?”

Lily glances at me and Evie. “I think Liam will jump out the window if I start talking about me and Xavier.”

I nod. “You got that right. Listening to you talk about making out or snuggling in bed together or cozying up on the couch is *not* something I’m interested in.”

Evie laughs. “Okay, good point. So...we have nothing to talk about? That’s sad. I’m leaving in a few months and I’ll miss you guys like crazy.”

It sucks, but that’s life, I guess? Growing up and moving on with our lives. I hate thinking about it because I don’t want to face the reality of me, Lily, and the Junior Musketeers breaking up. I know it’s healthy to move on and meet new people, but I don’t really want to do that.

“I just got so depressed,” Lily whines, probably sharing my thoughts. “Ooh, I know. Let’s discuss *The Heart of a Lady*. It’s the *perfect* Regency romance. Have you read it, Evie?”

She taps her chin. “Would that be the book you insisted—over and over—that I *must* read or I haven’t lived life?”

Lily’s cheeks redden. “Oh...I guess I got a little carried away.”

“Understatement,” Evie mutters. “You know I don’t like reading romance, especially Regency. Now, if it was fantasy, I’d be all over it.”

“You and Uncle Zane could be twins,” Lily says.

She shrugs. “Guess we formed a close bond when he used to read me fantasy books when I was little. Okay, we’re here.” She turns to me and places her hand on my arm. “Liam, if anyone gives you problems, let me know and I’ll set them straight.”

My eyes widen. “You? But you’re...”

“A girl? I know. I wouldn’t stand a chance against Topher’s friends. But I can get Noah and his football buddies to help. So if anyone messes with you...” She holds up her fists. “Okay?”

I swallow. I don’t want to make things worse. I just want to go about my day, enjoy school with my friends, and come home and cook or read.

“Thanks, Evie.”

She salutes and we get out of the car. It feels like all eyes are on me as I follow my sisters into the building. Lily slides

her hand into mine, giving me an encouraging smile. She's right. I can do this. Let them stare. I have my sisters, my friends, my parents. I have Chloe. No one else matters.

Lily and I meet the others at Chloe's locker, where they're laughing at something Willow just said. Her overstuffed backpack sits at her feet, looking like it'll explode any minute.

"Hey!" Chloe says with a grin as she waves. "Welcome back to Edenbury High."

I chuckle. "Was just gone a day."

"True, but a day without Liam is like a lifetime," Ava adds, also smiling.

The others nod in agreement.

"Thanks, guys." I'm about to say something else, but freeze when I spot a group of kids in the distance looking and laughing at me. A few are pointing.

Chloe wraps her arm around me, turning me to face our friends. "Ignore them."

"I liked it better when I was invisible," I mumble.

Xavier claps me on the back. "Another juicy piece of gossip will pop up soon and they won't give you another thought."

"True," I say. "Thanks."

The bell rings and we head to English. Like before, kids whisper and laugh, but I ignore them. It helps a lot that I've got my friends by my side. I wouldn't be able to get through the day without them.

We find our seats and talk about today's lunch. Apparently, they're trying to implement more healthy food.

"That means less pizza," Willow grumbles as she knocks her face into her table. "The Universe hates me."

Ava pats her back.

"Can't believe Topher got expelled because of that nerd," a girl mutters as she and her friends pass by. "No one wants that loser around."

I watch them walk off, trying not to let their words get to me.

A soft, warm hand takes hold of mine. I turn my head and find Chloe's concerned eyes on me. "Are you okay?"

I smile at her. "Of course I am." Only because I've got her and the others in my life.

She returns the smile. "Good. Because they can take a hike."

Willow glares at the two girls. "If you have something to say, say it to our faces."

"Willow!" I hiss. "I don't want the whole school after me."

She crosses her arms over her chest and huffs.

The girls ignore her, which is great because I really don't want all this drama. I want things to go back to normal.

The bell rings and Mom walks in. Her eyes immediately settle on me, like she was worried I got thrown to the wolves or something. When she concludes I'm in one piece, she starts the lesson.

The day passes with more kids talking about me, but for the most part, it's a normal day. After school, Xavier and I head to the gym for basketball practice. Even though I'm taking a break from basketball, Coach still wants me here.

"How's it going, Swordie?" Xavier asks.

"Are you dying to know if I watched more episodes?"

He laughs. "Nope. Well, yeah. I want you to get to season two. Lily's obsessed with the romance. And I am, too. There's nothing wrong with a guy admitting he likes romance." He lifts a brow at me.

I give him an incredulous look. "I don't like romance."

"That's not what Lily says."

"She doesn't know me as well as she thinks."

"Your twin sister knows you inside out. I don't want to be like Darren and Brian trying to set you up with girls, but..." He clears his throat. "Remember when we played basketball with Lily and Evie? You told us you had a crush on someone."

I stop in place. "What? I never said that."

"You kind of did. And I was wondering if...maybe you like someone and need help..."

I hold up my hands. "Thanks, man, but I don't like anyone."

He watches me for a little while. "Okay. Just know that the offer still stands."

I nod. "I'm good. Focusing on basketball and cooking."

He looks like he wants to say more, but I push the gym door open and we walk in. Most of the guys from the team are here.

Usually, I could hear Topher a mile away because of his booming voice, but it's so quiet now. A few guys are chatting and laughing. I spot Topher's best friend, Gibson, in the group with his arms crossed over his chest.

Xavier and I head over to join the rest of the team, and the second Gibson looks at me, his eyes fill with hatred.

He stomps over to me, fists at his sides, though it seems like he wants to ram them into my face. My first instinct is to flinch away from him, but I straighten up and hold his glare. "What's your problem?"

"Look what you did, you piece of garbage," he spits at me. "Topher got expelled because of you!"

"It wasn't my fault."

He inches closer. "He should be here instead of you. You're completely useless."

A hand rests on my shoulder as Xavier steps in between us. "Leave Liam alone," he warns. "Topher deserved to get expelled. You don't hit a classmate, let alone a *teammate*. And you *don't* push a girl. Liam's a much better player than Topher was. We all know he was only on the team because his dad has connections."

Gibson, Desmond, and a few others exchange a glance.

"If anyone has a problem with Liam, take it up with me," Xavier says. "If anyone touches him, you're dead."

I thought I'd be embarrassed that I can't defend myself, but you know something? I'm glad my friend has my back. He's there for me. One day, I might be confident, but right now, I appreciate everyone who cares about me.

Gibson rolls his eyes. "Just because you're captain, doesn't mean you call the shots."

With a hard look in his eyes, Xavier moves closer to him. "Want to say that again?"

Gibson glares at him.

"Is there a problem here?" Coach demands as he walks over to us. He glances at me, Xavier, and Gibson and grunts. "Listen up, boys. Topher is no longer on this team because he was expelled for violence. I don't care what personal problems you have with each other, but keep it off my court, got it? When you're here, you act like a team. But..." He holds up a hand. "If anyone is disrespectful to another team member, harms him in any way, or even looks at him wrong, you're off my team. It doesn't matter if you're not on school grounds. If you hurt another member of this team, you're gone. Is that understood?" His eyes move between me, Xavier, and Gibson.

Xavier and I nod while Gibson crosses his arms over his chest.

Coach narrows his eyes at him. "Is that understood, McSteffan?"

"Yeah. It's understood, Coach."

Coach keeps those eyes on him. "You're seconds away from being kicked off my team, McSteffan. You leave

Hastings alone or you can kiss your basketball career goodbye. Is that clear?”

He throws his hands up. “It’s just not fair that Topher’s gone, man.”

Coach steps closer to him. “Topher deserved that for acting with his fists and not his brain. Give me your word that you’ll behave or get out of my face.”

Gibson glances at me, then back at Coach. “Yeah, I’ll behave. For the team.”

Coach nods. “Good. We’re a family here. We support one another, uplift one another. If anyone has a problem with that, get out of my gym.”

No one moves.

“Good,” Coach says. “Now let’s start practice. Hastings, sit this one out.”

Xavier gently claps me on the back as he and the others get into position and I lower myself on the bleachers.

For the first few minutes, Gibson glares at me, but he eventually either gets bored or figures he’s wasting too much energy on me and ignores me completely.

I was so determined to fit in with my teammates and have them accept me, but that’s not important anymore. I don’t need to be friends with them. We’re teammates and that’s it. I have many people in my life who care about me. That’s what matters.

Chapter Thirteen

Chloe

Noah parks in the student lot Thursday morning and we enter the school building, where my friends are gathered at my locker. After my brother and I wish each other a good day, I make my way over to them.

“Are we gathered at *my* locker this morning for a specific reason?” I joke as I join them.

“Open it!” Lily starts to chat. “Open it!”

“The odds of Chloe receiving another love letter are low,” Willow points out. “The secret admirer just wrote her one two days ago.”

Ava frowns at her. “Such a buzzkill.”

She shrugs. “Just being logical.”

“Where are the guys?” I ask as I step closer and place my fingers on my combination lock.

“Liam and Xavier are at a meeting with the team and Aidan isn’t here yet,” Ava tells me.

My heart pounds in my ears as I do my combination. Willow’s right, but I can’t help wondering—and hoping!—that maybe...

My locker pops open and Lily, Ava, Willow, and I lean forward. But nothing tumbles out of my locker.

“Rats,” Ava says.

“Bummer,” Lily agrees. “I so thought he would write you again.”

“Any closer to discovering who he is?” Willow asks me.

I study the area, focusing on any guy who might be looking in my direction. But like usual, no one is paying attention to me.

I lift my shoulders. “He’s good at hiding in the shadows.”

Lily rubs my back. “Don’t worry. One day he’ll gather the courage and reveal himself to you. And then you’ll fall madly in love and live happily ever after!”

“I wish,” I mutter.

“It can happen,” she urges. “No, it *will* happen.”

“Logically speaking—”

“Willow,” she warns.

Willow presses her lips together before muttering, “I’m just saying that even if she does figure out who he is, there’s no saying she’ll like him—”

“Uh, uh, uh.” Lily wags her finger. “She’ll meet him and she’ll like him and they’ll fall madly in love and live happily ever after.”

Ava nods curtly. “Agreed.”

I’m about to say something, but I spot Kendell passing by.

“Guys, I’ll be back in a sec. Needa ask Kendell something.” I hurry after my editor-in-chief, calling out, “Kendell! Wait up.”

She stops and turns around. “Hey, Chloe.”

“Can I talk to you for a sec?”

“Sure.”

“You’re the last person who has access to the paper before it goes to print, right?”

She nods. “I do a last-minute check to make sure everything looks good.”

“Right. So you didn’t see the second article with my name on it?”

Kendell shakes her head. “I already told Nakamura. I swear there was only one article with your name on it.”

I think for a few seconds. “Does anyone else have access to the paper other than you?”

She shrugs. “It was on my computer. I guess anyone could have gotten access if they knew my password. Or maybe someone hacked in and sent the printer another version with the second article.”

“Who would hack in?”

Kendell shrugs again. “Isn’t your friend a hacker?”

My eyes bug out. “Are you accusing Willow?”

“Are you accusing me?”

“No. I’m just trying to get to the bottom of it.”

She puts her hand on my shoulder. “I posted a formal apology on the school website. And no one’s talking about it anymore. I think you should put this behind you. And don’t worry, I’ll be more careful with the issues from now on.”

I frown, not happy that she's not taking it seriously. Doesn't she get that my reputation is being hurt here? And the reputation of the paper. Muttering a, "Thanks," I make it back to my friends, my mind a whirlwind of thoughts.

"You okay?" Lily asks.

"I asked Kendell if anyone else had access to her computer."

"What did she say?" Ava asks.

"She said someone could have hacked in and sent the printer a different version." I move my eyes to Willow. "She accused you."

"Me? Why would she accuse me?"

"Because you know how to hack."

She folds her arms over her chest. "How would she know that?"

"I guess she's a good journalist."

"I'm not the only one who can hack, though," she says. "I'm sure many kids here, especially the boys in my coding class, can easily hack in. And anyway, I did hack her computer, actually."

My eyes bug out again. "What?"

"*After* that article was published," she clarifies. "No one hacked into her computer. Only someone who knew her password got in."

"So..." Ava's brows dip.

“So it has to be someone she knows,” I say. “Someone she trusts.”

“Or someone who snuck a peek over her shoulder and saw her password,” Willow says.

“It could be anyone,” I say.

The bell rings.

Lily frowns. “Ugh. PE.”

With a groan, the four of us go to the girls’ locker room to change into our gym clothes. My dad is the football coach and also the PE teacher. He’s pretty fair, but he can be tough on the students sometimes. Unfortunately, I don’t get any special treatment for being his daughter, like cutting class. And there’s no point trying to get out of class because he knows every trick in the book.

“I can pretend WillowBot ran over my hand and injured my poor little pinky.” Willow holds up her right pinky. “Look, I can’t even bend it.”

“Tried it two weeks ago, except my excuse was my chair ran over my finger,” Ava tells her. “Brayden didn’t buy it.”

“How about I ate bad food last night and feel like I’m going to puke any second?” Lily asks.

“Puke is like the number one excuse,” I tell them. “Unless you projectile on him, it’s a no-go.”

Willow frowns. “Lack of sleep?”

“He’d say you should learn from your mistakes.”

“Headache?”

I shake my head.

“There has to be something,” Willow insists. “I bet it’s dodgeball today, and I’d rather not get pelted by fireballs.”

“Dodgeball again?” Lily scowls. “Is that your dad’s favorite sport?”

I shrug. “It keeps the kids engaged and competitive.”

“I think you should have a talk with your dad and convince him to let students skip class at least once a month or something,” Willow says. “You know, for our sanity.”

“I tried, Willow, believe me. But you know sports are his life. He misses being out there. And since football season is over, he misses it that much more.”

“Dude needs a hobby,” Ava mutters.

Someone blows a whistle from the direction of the gym.

“Darn it,” I mutter. “He’s already blowing his whistle. We’ll be late, guys.”

“We should be,” Willow grumbles. “Maybe we’ll miss half the class.”

“You know that would just get us detention,” Lily points out. “You want detention, Willow?”

She scowls. “No.”

With groans, we head to the gym, where all the kids are already gathered. Dad gives us a tired face. “Why are the four of you always the last to arrive?”

“One might think it’s on purpose,” Willow grumbles again.

I shove her shoulder.

“This can’t go on, girls,” Dad says. “You’re a minute late. If it happens again, I’ll have to give you detention.”

Ava clutches her heart dramatically. “You’d give your own flesh and blood detention?”

Dad’s eyes shoot to me. “My flesh and blood should know better. And you, too, Willow. You’re known for your punctuality.”

“Not when I’m forced to face my doom.”

“I’m allergic to sports,” Lily pipes up.

“You’re great at basketball,” Dad reminds her. “If you can handle that, you can handle volleyball.”

“Volleyball?” I perk up. “It’s not dodgeball today?”

“Is my flesh and blood actually excited for PE?” Dad asks.

“No. I’m just glad we’re not playing that murderous dodgeball.”

“Good.” He blows his whistle. “Split up into two teams!” he calls out.

My friends and I put on blue jerseys and get into position. Volleyball is a little better, but darn it, some of the kids are just too vicious. The ball knocks into Willow’s face and sends her glasses flying in the air. On instinct, I leap to the left and catch them. But since my hands are occupied, I have no way to soften the blow. A cry shoots out of my lips when the left side of my body hits the hard floor.

“Ow,” I moan.

“Chloe!” Willow, Ava, and Lily rush over to me.

“You didn’t have to risk your life for my glasses,” Willow says as she takes them from me and touches my shoulder. “Are you okay?” She slides them onto her face.

“Chloe?” Dad pushes through the small crowd gathered around me. “Are you hurt?”

“Just my dignity,” I mutter.

“She’s a hero!” Ava says.

I give her a look. “I just saved Willow’s glasses.”

“I think she should be excused for the rest of class,” Willow tells Dad.

He helps me sit up. “Tell me the truth, Chloe. Can you continue playing?”

This would be the perfect excuse, but I don’t want to lie to my dad. With a frown, I say, “I’m fine.”

“Good. Back to the game, everyone!”

When I enter the newsroom, I go straight to our editor-in-chief, who’s typing on her computer. She glances up at me. “Need something, Chloe? Aren’t you going to interview Nakamura for your article?”

“Accusing my friend was a really low blow,” I tell her.

She sighs like she doesn’t have time to deal with this right now. “I didn’t accuse her. I only said—”

“It was you, wasn’t it?”

She gapes at me. “What?”

“It’s so obvious. You’re the last one to see the paper before it goes to print. You’re the only one who could have snuck in an article last minute. I don’t know why I hadn’t considered it before. Oh, I know. Because I never imagined my editor-in-chief would mess me up like this.”

For a second, something flashes in her eyes. Then she straightens her shoulders. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She focuses on her computer. “Get back to work, Chloe.”

“I already voiced my concerns to Nakamura. She wants to see us both in her office.”

She stares at me. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

With a glare, she plucks herself off her seat and heads for the principal’s office. I follow her, feeling every single person on the newspaper team staring at us. Principal Nakamura is waiting for us, a frown on her face.

“Please sit down.” She gestures to the chairs before her desk.

“Chloe’s claims are false, Principal Nakamura,” Kendell insists as she drops down on one of the chairs. “I told you, I have no idea how that article got in the paper.”

“I want to believe you, Kendell, but there has to be an explanation. Did you look over the paper one last time before you sent it to the printer?”

“Yes,” she stresses. “But, um...” She plays with her hair. “I didn’t send it to them right away. It was on my computer for a few hours. I had to run an errand, and then I returned to the

newsroom and sent it to print. Someone could have accessed my computer during that time.”

Her gaze flits around the room and her shoe taps on the floor. She’s lying.

“I spoke to the printer,” Nakamura says. “He told me exactly when you sent him the paper. It doesn’t fit with the timeline you just presented me.”

Kendell blanches. “What?”

“You claim you left for a few hours? He told me you sent him the paper as soon as your meeting ended.”

Kendell starts stammering unintelligibly.

“Kendell.” Nakamura’s tone is stricter. “Tell me the truth. Now.”

Kendell glances at me before bursting into tears. “I didn’t mean to do it! I don’t know what I was thinking. I was just upset.”

Nakamura reaches for a tissue box and hands it to her. “It’s okay, Kendell. Just tell me what happened.”

“I had a crush on him for months. *Months!* And when I finally told him how I felt...” Tears choke up her words. “He played with my emotions. He promised he’d take me out, but he kept making excuses. And then I found him making out with another girl...” The tears rain down her cheeks like there’s a fountain behind her eyes. Seems like she’s been holding this in for a long time, and the dam just burst. “I’ve been so stressed with getting into my dream school and the paper, and then my heart was broken...” She reaches for a

tissue and wipes her eyes and nose. “I just wanted to hurt him as badly as he hurt me.”

“You wanted to ruin Topher’s reputation and you used your colleague as a scapegoat.”

Kendall looks at me with a guilty expression. “I’m sorry, Chloe. I wasn’t in the right headspace. I didn’t know he would hurt you like that. And Liam.”

I shift in my seat. “Why me? Do you think that low of me?”

“No! Of course not. You’re one of the best writers on the team. But...” She sighs with her shoulders bent. “You were getting a lot of heat because of some of your previous articles and I figured...” She hangs her head. “I figured you could take it.”

I try not to scoff. “I could *take* it? My friend was beaten up because of you.”

“I know! I feel horrible. I’m sorry, Chloe. I never imagined it would get so out of hand like this.”

Principal Nakamura is silent for a bit as she regards her. “I’m very disappointed in you, Kendell. I expect so much more from you.”

“I know,” she whispers, sniffing.

“I have no choice but to ask you to leave the paper, and with it, your position as editor-in-chief.”

Kendell gapes at her. “I’m off the paper?”

Nakamura frowns. “The newspaper team holds a great responsibility, and they can hold a lot of power as well. You,

Kendell, abused that power.”

Fresh tears pool in her eyes. “I just made a mistake. I was too emotional.”

“I understand that,” she says softly as she reaches to pat her hand. “And I know you regret it. I will still write you a letter of recommendation because you deserve to attend a great journalism school and have an amazing career. But you must be held accountable for your actions. Starting today, you’re off the Edenbury High Times.”

Kendell reaches for another tissue and sobs into it, letting out all her pain and anguish and loss. After a bit, she says, “If I can, I’d like to nominate Chloe as editor-in-chief.”

“What?” I ask.

“I think you would do a fabulous job, Chloe.”

“No way. There are more qualified students—”

“Thank you, Kendell, but the decision will be mine,” Nakamura says. “For now, the newspaper will have to make do without an editor-in-chief. Now please get back to work, Chloe. And Kendell, please clear your desk in the newsroom.”

As Kendell and I leave the principal’s office, she says, “I’m really so sorry, Chloe. Gosh, I was so stupid. I let a jerk ruin something that means the world to me. And I hurt you and Liam. Please forgive me.”

I puff out my cheeks. “Yeah, you did hurt us, but you didn’t send Topher after me. He’s responsible for his actions. So I guess I can forgive you. And I know what it’s like to pine after someone. It can drive you insane.”

She stops and stares at me. “You have a crush on someone?”

I freeze in place. “N-no...I mean, hypothetically...”

“Oh. Well, you’re much smarter than me. You’d never let a boy get in the way of your dreams.”

When we reach the newsroom, everyone stops what they’re doing and stares at us. It’s pretty obvious something major happened. With fresh tears in her eyes and her knees shaking, Kendell stands before everyone and announces, “I’m leaving the newspaper.”

Everyone starts talking at once.

She holds up her hand. “It was me who wrote that article on Topher Fletcher. I was upset with him for not reciprocating my feelings, and I was a jerk and put Chloe’s name on it. I’m so sorry. I wish you guys lots of luck with the paper. Please continue being amazing.”

Some of the kids clap or go over to hug her while others look a little upset. Some of them even come over to see if I’m okay.

Kendell wishes everyone good luck one more time before she leaves with her stuff, her whole body folded over like she might collapse from the loss.

Without a leader, it’ll be a little hard to get things done. But we hold another meeting to make sure we’re all on the same page and that everyone knows what they’re doing. Hopefully, it won’t be long before Principal Nakamura chooses a new editor-in-chief.

Chapter Fourteen

Liam

Basketball practice is canceled Friday afternoon because Coach has a family thing.

My friends and I are at Chloe's locker—again. The girls are convinced Chloe's secret admirer will strike again, so they've been obsessively checking her locker between classes. Just like they did yesterday.

But nope. No note today, thank the heavens. Another word about that dude and I'm seriously going to lose it.

When Chloe realizes nothing drops from her locker, her shoulders slump a little. Darn it. Does she really think this guy is legit?

"How are you doing, Chloe?" Lily asks. "It must be hard to learn someone you trusted and looked up to hurt you like that."

"Yeah, Kendell sucks," Willow says.

"I'm okay." Chloe gives us a brave smile. "I'm just worried about the future of the paper. Kendell was a strong editor-in-chief."

I place my hand on her arm. "You guys will do great without her. You're all so talented."

"Thanks. What are your plans for tonight, guys?"

“Date night,” Xavier says as he takes Lily’s hand with a smile.

“Working on my app,” Willow informs us. “Probably going to work on it all weekend and it still won’t be ready in time.” She sighs. “What about you, Ava? Another charity dinner?”

“Yep. It’ll be full of adults and soooo boring. But at least I’ve got my Superman with me.” She grins at Aidan. “Maybe he’ll even distract me...”

He chuckles. “If we can sneak away.” He winks.

“Liam? Chloe? Any plans?” Willow asks.

Chloe and I exchange a glance. She shrugs. “No plans. Maybe I’ll bake a cake or something. Or maybe decipher one of Liam’s recipes.”

I hold up my hands. “I’m working on making them clearer, but I don’t really have much time. But I’m free tonight. Want help with the cake, Chloe? And we can make dinner, too, if you want.”

Ava pokes me in the ribs. “You’re just dying to get your hands on her kitchen equipment again, huh?”

I laugh. “Sure, but that’s not my main reason for wanting to help Chloe. Maybe we can even fix up my recipes together?”

She smiles. “Sure, sounds like fun.”

“Oh look, it’s the loser club,” Paisley snickers as she and a few of her friends pass us on their way to cheer practice.

“You got a problem, Abberton?” Willow calls after her.

Paisley turns around. “Yeah, I have a problem. You and your stupid friends take up so much space.” She gestures around where our large group is gathered

Willow narrows her eyes. “Wow. You’re so jealous that we are true friends while you don’t have *any*.”

Paisley’s nostrils flare. “You wish I’m jealous of you losers.” She scans the group, specifically Xavier and Aidan. “Like I said before, you must be witches for snagging the hottest guys at school. But they’ll realize their mistake and throw you to the curb.”

Aidan pushes forward, a scowl on his face. “Don’t talk to my friends and girlfriend that way.”

She flips her hair. “Aidan, it’s time to take off the nerd glasses and go out with a real girl.”

Ava snorts, crossing her arms over her chest. “You better go before Momzilla comes looking for you and demands you cut down on the candy bars or you might...” She gasps. “Gain a pound.”

Paisley blanches, then her eyes turn hard. She glares at the girls. “You losers think you’re so great because your parents have good jobs here and everything.” She narrows her eyes. “My mom can get your parents fired with the snap of her finger.”

Ava’s lips twist. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but my parents have sway over what happens at this school. Your mom is just the cheer coach. If anyone’s getting fired, it’s her.”

Paisley’s eyes widen.

Ava rolls her eyes. “But I’m not an evil witch like you. I know your mom needs her job. Just go away.”

Paisley laughs awkwardly at her posse. “No, my mom *chooses* to work here. Come, girls. This is such a waste of time.” With another flip of her hair, she and the others vanish from sight.

Chloe backs into the wall. “Guys, I’m seriously thinking she’s the secret admirer. Why is she suddenly messing with us? She’s been quiet for a while. I mean, I guess she’s gotten worse ever since I wrote that article about the social hierarchy here...”

Willow throws her arm around her. “Paisley is *not* your secret admirer. She’s not smart enough to write such well-written, eloquent words.”

Chloe thinks about it for a second or two. “I guess you’re right.”

“We’d better get going,” Ava says as she takes hold of Aidan’s hand. “Got to make ourselves look pretty or else Grandma Celine will have a heart attack.” She and Aidan wave before walking off.

Xavier and Lily bid us goodbye as well and leave the building. Willow glances at her phone. “My dad’s picking me up today and he’s getting a little impatient because he wants to help at my grandparents’ restaurant. I’ll see you guys later.” She hugs Chloe and me, then pushes the doors open.

Chloe and I look at one another. She smiles. I return it.

“Guess it’s just you and me. Again,” she says, her cheeks a little pink. “Not that there’s anything wrong with it,” she

quickly adds. “You know I love spending time with you.”

“Yeah. Me, too. Evie’s waiting in the car and I’m sure she won’t mind dropping us off at your place.”

Once we find my older sister in the parking lot, we get in her car. She puts on music and she and I sing along with it. Chloe’s a little too shy to sing, claiming she doesn’t have a good voice. I want to tell her it doesn’t matter if she sounds good or not. I’d love to hear her sing. But I press my lips shut because I don’t want to make her uncomfortable.

“Here ya go,” Evie says as she pulls up before Chloe’s house. We thank her, get out, then she drives off.

“Let’s hope the house isn’t in chaos,” Chloe says with a laugh as she leads me up the stairs to the front door. “Who knows what Rylee has gotten herself into today—” She yelps when she trips over her feet and pivots forward. I quickly catch her before she goes splat on the stairs.

Her face is so close to mine. I feel the heat radiating off her skin.

“You okay?” I ask.

She stares into my eyes. “Yeah. I’m...I’m good.”

“What are you doing?” a voice demands.

I drop my arms from around her and find Rylee standing in the doorway with the door open.

“What are you doing here?” Chloe asks, her cheeks a little red.

“I live here?” Rylee rolls her eyes as she lifts a garbage bag. “Mom and Dad are making me take out the trash.”

“Oh,” Chloe says. “We were just...um...” She looks at me helplessly.

“School project,” I blurt. “We’re reenacting a scene from Shakespeare.” My eyebrows furrow. That was probably the lamest excuse.

Rylee shrugs. “Whatever.” She shoves the garbage bag into the bin and drags herself back toward the house. Turning around, she asks, “If Liam’s here, does that mean he’s making us dinner?”

“I sometimes make us dinner,” Chloe says.

Her sister tilts her head to the side. “Yeah, but he’s better.”

“Hey,” I say. “That’s not nice.”

She shrugs. “Mom and Dad always tell me to be honest, so this is me being honest. Oh, and by the way, your face doesn’t look that bad.” She gives me two thumbs up and walks into the house and shuts the door.

I turn to Chloe. “She doesn’t know what she’s saying. Of course you’re a great cook.”

She rolls her shoulders. “We all know I’m more of the baker and you’re the cook. It’s okay.” She smiles. “Your talents shouldn’t go by unnoticed. We’d better get inside before people start thinking we’re...um...” She shrugs. “You know.”

I swallow. “Right. Of course.” I follow her inside.

Kara and Brayden are snuggled on the living room couch, his arms wrapped around her waist as they watch sports on

TV. They sit up as soon as they see us and smile. “Hey, kids,” Kara says. “Liam, it’s so good to see you, hun.”

“Same. It’s been a while since you and the moms have had your book club.”

Kara frowns. “Yeah, unfortunately Charlie’s been swamped with work, but we’ll meet up soon. We’re not giving up our tradition.”

Brayden looks from me to Chloe. “Any plans for tonight? A party? A movie?”

Chloe shakes her head. “Liam and I want to cook dinner tonight. I have a feeling he has something special up his sleeve,” she teases as she smiles at me.

I chuckle. “A few options are spinning around in my head.”

Chloe sighs dramatically. “Looks like we get to be the guinea pigs tonight again.”

“Hey!” I playfully whack her shoulder.

She just laughs. “Kidding. I know whatever you make will be delicious.”

“Agreed,” Kara says. She gestures to the kitchen. “It’s all yours. Thanks for volunteering. I’m a little exhausted after a long day.”

Brayden hugs her. “Your mom’s working hard on a story about Edenbury’s history.” He kisses her temple. “We all know it’ll be an amazing article.”

She rakes her fingers through his hair. “Always my number one supporter.”

He grins, moving his lips toward hers. “You know it.” And they start making out. They’re exactly like my parents, but I feel a little weird watching them.

I turn to Chloe. “Can we, uh...?”

“Yeah. Sure. Sorry.”

We dump our school things on a nearby chair and enter the kitchen. The smell of baked goods lingers in the air, probably from Kara and Chloe’s baking.

Chloe opens the pantry. “Should we start on dinner or the cake?”

“Dinner. If your family is anything like mine, they’ll be like a pack of hungry elephants and that’s never a good thing.”

She laughs. “Okay. Lead the way, chef.” She gestures around. “Kitchen is yours for the evening. And I’m your sous.”

“How about we both are executive chefs tonight?”

She furrows her brows. “I’m okay with following your orders. Besides, you’re the mastermind.”

“Okay. We should probably write it down, since it’s all in my head.”

“Good idea.”

We get started and it’s a lot of fun. Chloe and I have been in the kitchen together many times, but it feels different today for some reason. Maybe because we’re closer now, even though I kind of also feel distant? It’s so strange. We’re hanging out more than usual because the others, except for

Willow, are paired up. But at the same time, this whole secret admirer thing is kind of separating us. I wish it didn't, but...

As I watch Chloe, I can't help but notice she seems distracted. She doesn't crack the eggs properly, or chop the vegetables correctly, and she accidentally drops the knife in the garbage bin along with all the peels. I don't need to be a genius to know she's thinking about her potential boyfriend.

Will he send more notes? Probably. I'm probably a jerk for saying this, but I kind of dread the day he'll reveal himself to her.

I just...I can't deal with her and another guy. I mean, she has the right to date whoever she wants. It's not like she and I would ever...that's crazy!

"Are you okay?" Chloe breaks me from my thoughts. "You're staring at a boiling pot of water."

I blink at it like I've never seen a pot before. "Oh. Yeah. We should probably add the vegetables...you didn't finish peeling them."

She stares down at the counter where only half the veggies are peeled. "Oh. Um..." She tucks some hair behind her ear. "Sorry. I was distracted."

I swallow the lump in my throat. What's happening to us? One of my greatest fears is coming true: we're growing distant. The guy isn't even real and I'm already losing her.

I shake my head. No. It's selfish of me. Chloe should have someone who will love her and cherish her the way she deserves.

"Distracted by...him?" I can't help but ask.

She resumes chopping and slowly turns to me. “Uh, yeah. Sorry.”

“No, don’t be sorry. I told you that you can tell me anything.”

She sighs. “I know, but you don’t like him and I don’t want to upset you.”

The fact that she cares so much about my feelings makes me want to hug her and never let go. But that’s not something a friend does.

“No, I’m not upset. Please don’t take my feelings into consideration. I mean, I know I’m not Lily or Ava or Willow, but you can confide in me.”

She searches my eyes. “You think I’m closer to them?”

I huff. “You and I have a special bond, but I *am* a guy and they’re girls.”

She’s quiet for a little while. “That’s true, I guess. It bothers me that you’re left out a lot, but I guess that’s just how it is.”

I nod slowly. “It helps that Xavier and Aidan have joined the group. I’m not so alone anymore. But I’ll probably never be as friendly with them as I am with you and the others. I mean, we grew up together.”

“Yeah.”

And in a few years, we’ll all go our separate ways. Growing up sucks sometimes.

“Ooh!” Rylee says as she skips into the kitchen and hops onto the counter. “What’s cookin’? It smells good...wait,

there's nothing other than water." She frowns. "I'm starving."

I give Chloe a pointed look. I was right about the hungry elephants. She just smiles.

"It won't take too long," I tell Rylee. "Want to help?"

She frowns. "Do I look like a kitchen maid?" Shaking her head, she hops off the counter and hurries out of the room.

"Kitchen maid?" I ask Chloe.

She shrugs. "I didn't put that idea into her head. There's nothing wrong with making food for the people you love. Shows what a great person you are." She gives me a wide smile that makes my heart skip a beat. I drop my gaze to the boiling water on the stove. I really need to get a move on this or dinner won't be ready for hours and I know the Barringtons are starving.

Chapter Fifteen

Liam

Dinner with the Barringtons is great and fun. Chloe's family isn't quite as noisy as my house. Noah mostly keeps to himself—a closed book, as Chloe claims—Rylee doesn't talk much, too busy gobbling down the food. Kara and Brayden discuss various things, from school to sports to news going around town. No one brings up my slowly-healing face, which I'm very glad and relieved about. Though I catch Kara giving me worried looks from time to time. The Musketeers and their husbands are like second parents to us, so we all care for one another like one huge family.

After dinner, Kara puts Rylee on dish duty as part of her punishment while the parents continue resting on the couch with a movie. Noah leaves to hang out with his friends, and Chloe and I go up to her room.

“What do you want to do?” She asks as she bounces on her bed. “Unless you want to go home?”

“Nah. It's Friday and we can stay up however late we want. I kind of wanted to do something with you, but I'm not sure you'd be into it.”

Her eyes overflow with curiosity. “Fix your recipes?”

I nod slowly. “Yeah, I should probably get started on that, but not tonight. I have something else in mind.”

“What? You're killing me, Liam.”

I give her an unsure look. “Watch *Swords and Legends* with me?”

Her eyebrows furrow as she thinks it over. “Sure, I’d love to.”

My eyebrows shoot to the moon. “Really?”

“Why not? I’ve always been curious about it and Lily tells me and the others over and over how awesome it is. So why not? And watching it with you will make the experience so much better.”

I just stare at her. What exactly does she mean by that? Because I’ve sort of become an expert and can explain things she might not understand? Or maybe I can give her inside scoop about all the behind-the-scenes I’ve watched online and read in articles?

“Liam?” she asks. “I feel like you disappeared for a second.”

I snap back in. “What? Oh, sure. Yeah. What did you say?”

She laughs. “I said I’d love to watch it with you. Let me get my laptop.” She fetches it from her desk and plops down on her bed. Giving me an odd look, she says, “Why are you just standing there?”

My fingers plow through my hair. I guess I didn’t realize we’d be sitting on her bed, so close to each other...

“Liam?”

I blink and turn to her, forcing a smile. “Sorry, was thinking about something...”

Her eyebrow lifts. “What?”

I shake my head. “Nothing important. So yeah, we can sit.”

She settles down on the bed, dragging her computer on her lap. Swallowing another lump in my throat, I lower myself next to her, trying not to knock my leg into her. But it hits her anyway.

“Sorry.”

She places the laptop between us. “It’s okay. Sorry I don’t have a TV in my room and we’re cramped like this.”

Her face is so close to mine, brown eyes so beautiful. “No, it’s fine,” I say as I stare into them. I quickly blink. “I mean, it’s okay. Sorry in advance if I crash into you.”

Laughing, she rests her head on my shoulder. “You know I don’t mind.”

I try not to focus on the fact that her body is pressed to mine.

“Are you okay with starting from episode one?” she asks. “It sucks for you to watch from the beginning because of me.”

“Are you kidding? I’d watch this show a hundred times if I could.”

She lifts her head off my shoulder. “Dang, Liam. I’ve never seen you so obsessed with a TV show that’s not cooking. I remember when your favorite chef stopped her show and you nearly went insane.”

I frown. “I did not.”

“Did too.”

“Did not.”

“Did too!”

I chuckle. “It’s getting late and I want to start. So I win the argument and let’s move on.”

She scrunches up her nose in the most adorable way. “You didn’t win, but fine.” She scoots even closer to me. “Let’s start episode one.”

I don’t have anywhere to place my left hand, so I wrap it around her back. She smiles at me and snuggles closer.

As soon as the opening scene unfolds, Chloe is hooked. I smile as her eyes light up like fireworks.

I find myself watching her instead of the show.

Slowly, she turns her head. “What?”

“What?”

“Why aren’t you watching? Are you bored? Should I catch up on my own and—”

“Chloe.” I take her hand. “It’s cool. I’m not bored. Was just...thinking.”

Her eyebrows furrow. “About what?”

“Um, how much you’re into this. You’re a Swordie. Did Xavier tell you what that is?”

She nods. “I think I was a Swordie before I even watched the show.”

“Huh?”

She lightly bangs her shoulder into mine. “I knew I’d love it. You know fantasy is my favorite genre. I don’t know why I haven’t gotten into this until now.”

We resume watching and I try to focus on the screen and not on the wonderful girl next to me. We get through three episodes before Brayden knocks on the open door.

“Sorry, but it’s time to go home, Liam.”

I glance at the time. Darn, it’s past 10 PM. Chloe and I were so into the show that we lost track of time.

“Sure.” I get to my feet. “Thanks for having me.”

Brayden claps me on the back as I leave Chloe’s room, with her trailing behind to walk me out. “You know we love having you and you’re welcome any time.”

I smile. “Thanks.”

Brayden nods toward the front door. “I’ll drive you.”

“It’s just a short walk,” I start to protest.

“That’s all right. I don’t mind driving you.”

I thank him and fetch my jacket and school things from the living room. Kara stands from the couch and wraps her arms around me. “It was so good to see you, Liam.” She draws back to study me. “Stay strong.”

“I will. Thanks for dinner.”

“Thank *you* for making dinner.” The exhaustion on her face is as clear as day. I’m glad I was able to ease her load.

“Of course. No problem.”

She kisses my cheek. “Such a sweet kid. Say hi to your parents for me.”

“Sure. Good night.”

“Good night, Liam.”

Chloe walks me to the front door. “Don’t you dare watch more episodes without me,” she playfully warns. “I’ll be over at your place bright and early tomorrow so we can continue.”

My eyes bug out. “Bright and early? On a Saturday?”

She giggles. “The sky will crash down if Liam wakes up early on a non-school day,” she teases.

With a smile, I bend close to her. “For you, I’ll make an exception. Bright and early, yeah?”

“Bright and early.”

I wave and walk to the car, where Brayden is waiting for me. “I really appreciate you driving me home,” I tell him as I get in and shut the door.

“Of course, bud.”

The drive home is a short one and Brayden and I talk about random things. I thank him when he pulls up to my house, wish him a good night, and get out. He makes sure I’m inside before driving off.

I can’t stop smiling as I greet my parents and make my way to my room. I had so much fun tonight. I replay Chloe’s excitement over and over in my head.

There’s a knock on my door the next morning. “Liam?” Mom calls. “Chloe’s here.”

It’s hard to focus on what she’s saying as sleep slowly seeps out of me.

“Liam? Did you hear me? Chloe’s here.”

My eyes pop open. Shoot! I was supposed to wake up early so she and I could binge more episodes of *Swords and Legends*!

“Uh! I’m still in bed. Can you tell her to wait, like, five minutes?”

“Got it,” Chloe says from behind the door. She laughs. “I knew you wouldn’t wake up early.” There’s a playful tone in her voice, so I know she’s not upset with me.

“Sorry!”

“It’s fine. I’ll hang out with your mom in the kitchen.”

I leap to my feet and quickly get ready. Why didn’t I set my alarm last night?

I’m ready in less than five minutes and meet Chloe in the kitchen, where she’s helping Mom with a cake.

“Hey, sorry,” I say sheepishly as I enter the kitchen.

Chloe smiles. “No problem. Your mom and I were discussing the new book she’s reading.” She bends close. “It’s not a Regency romance.”

I feign shock. “Oh my gosh! The world is coming to an end.”

Mom playfully rolls her eyes. “You kids know I like to broaden my horizons.”

“Yeah, we’re just teasing you,” Chloe says. “Ready to watch, Liam?”

“Sure.” I turn to Mom. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Your dad had to drop by at work for a few hours. Evie is downstairs in her studio. And Lily is out on a breakfast date with Xavier.”

I quickly grab some breakfast, then Chloe and I head up to my room.

We drop down on my bed and I turn on the TV, playing the episode we’re up to. Chloe moves closer to me and I find myself moving a little closer to her.

We’re quiet as we watch, fixated on the amazing things happening on the screen. Just like last night, my gaze drifts over to her.

“Liam, I’m not on TV,” she says with a small laugh.

“Huh?”

“You’re watching me more than the show. Are you worried I don’t like it? I *love* it. Aleriana is my favorite character.”

I smile. “Yeah? That’s so funny.”

“Why?”

“Because she reminds me of you.”

She stares at me. “Really? Why?”

“Because she’s brave and smart and she fights for truth and justice. Just like you.”

Her cheeks redden.

“And she’s really sweet,” I add. “Just like my bestie.”

Her smile is shy. “I’m not any of those things.”

“You are, and so much more.”

She doesn't say anything as we continue watching.

"Thanks," she says after a little while, as though she spent the last few minutes replaying my compliments in her head.

"You know I was speaking the truth," I tell her. "Ooh. You *have* to see this part."

It's an epic battle where Aleriana, an elf, and my favorite character, a human named Torenin, are forced to kill each other. But they're secretly in love, so of course they do whatever they can to keep each other alive. Even though I've watched this scene many times, I'm still on pins and needles as the battle plays out.

"Oh my gosh!" Chloe gasps when Torenin saves Aleriana instead of shooting an arrow through her heart. "That was the most romantic, amazing, epic thing I have ever seen in my life." She grabs the remote. "I need to watch it again!"

I chuckle. "You're not the only one who rewinded it. I might have done so more than once."

She joins in my laughter. We watch the scene at least another ten times. And each time, Chloe finds something she missed. Like the expressions on their faces, how they subtly avoid hurting the other, and other details.

I can listen to her gush about it for hours.

Shadows pass my room, and when I turn my head, I find Lily and Xavier walking by. Lily stops and peeks inside.

"Hey. I didn't know you were over, Chloe." She glances at the screen. "You're watching *Swords and Legends*?"

Xavier peeks in and stares at the screen. “You made a Swordie out of Chloe?”

I grin at her. “Sure did. She’s hooked. We’re about halfway through season one.”

“Nice,” Xavier says.

Lily’s eyes shine. “Let’s watch together. The four of us Swordies.”

“You sure?” Chloe asks. “You guys are way past season one.”

Xavier waves his hand. “We don’t mind. It’ll be fun.” He and Lily drop down at the foot of my bed, Xavier wrapping his arms around her and Lily resting her head on his chest.

“I love this scene!” Lily gushes as she takes in the paused image on the screen. “One of the best in the entire show.”

Chloe sits forward. “You mean there’s more?”

“Lots more,” Xavier answers. “It’s doing so well and has a huge fandom. I don’t know why the actor who plays Onin wants to leave. I know he has a life and doesn’t owe anyone explanations, but this show has touched so many lives.”

Lily kisses his cheek. “It brought us together.”

He laughs. “Sure did. You know, they’re having a *Swords and Legends* convention in two weeks.”

“Really?” Lily asks. “That’s so cool.”

“What do they do there?” Chloe asks, ears perked with interest and excitement.

“It’s a few days where the cast and fans meet up and we all geek out over this amazing show. There are performances and costume contests and autograph signings and so many cool things. I went last year with my grandfather. Before he…” He swallows. “And we had so much fun. You guys interested in going?”

“I’d love to,” Lily says, eyes shining brighter than before. “It sounds like so much fun. And the perfect place for us.”

Xavier rubs his nose with hers. “It is.” He turns to me and Chloe. “You guys in?”

“Heck yeah, I’m in!” I say.

“Yes,” Chloe says. “If my parents let. Where is it?”

Xavier hesitates. “The thing is, it’s in Derryton.”

Derryton is a few towns over, a three-hour drive from Edenbury.

Lily’s face falls. “That’s so far. You think Mom and Dad will let us go?”

“If we go as a group, I’m sure they’ll be okay with it,” I say. “As long as we promise to be responsible. What about you, Xavier?”

He shrugs. “It wouldn’t be my first time going, so my mom and grandpa are cool with it. Especially if we go as a group.”

Lily squeals. “This is so exciting! I always wanted to go on a road trip. Wait, it’s not on a school night, right?”

“Nope. It starts on Friday night and stretches until Sunday night,” Xavier explains. “But we can stay for a day or two.”

“Mom and Dad would never let us go for two days,” Lily says. “They wouldn’t want us staying in a hotel by ourselves. I think it’s best we tell them that we’ll go early Saturday morning and come home late. Do you think we’ll accomplish anything in one day?”

Xavier nods. “Sure. It really doesn’t matter how long we stay. I just want to go with you guys and have a good time.”

“Aw.” Lily kisses him. Then they start making out like my parents.

“How about we get back to the show, lovebirds?” I ask.

No response. They just continue making out.

I look at Chloe and she looks at me. With a shrug, I press resume and she and I continue watching.

Chapter Sixteen

Chloe

The Junior Musketeers and their guys are waiting at my locker Monday morning, Lily and Ava looking extra eager.

“Open it!” they chant. “Open it!”

“I doubt there’s anything in here today,” I tell them as I do the combination on my lock.

“He hasn’t sent you anything in six days,” Willow points out. “And it’s the start of a new week, so statistically speaking, there’s a high chance that—”

The locker springs open and a folded note flutters to the floor.

“Squee!” Lily jumps up and down like a little kid. Some of the surrounding students look at her like she’s lost her mind, but she doesn’t care. She just continues to squeal and urges me to open my new love letter.

With shaky hands, I unfold it.

I know of a girl name Chloe

Such an inspiration I wish she’d know me

But as I’m not ready to be shown

This I want to be known

That she’s special and kind

Has written things to change my mind
I look forward to reading more
To read them over and over until my eyes get sore
Her words have changed me for the better
And I hope she's enjoying reading this letter
Sincerely,
Your Secret Admirer

“That has got to be the worst poem I’ve ever heard in my life,” Liam says.

“No it’s not!” his twin sister refutes. “It’s so romantic.”

“Lily, you’ve got better taste than that. You have to admit it’s pretty bad.”

“Like you can do any better?”

“I’m sure I can—”

“It might not be the best,” I say as I hug the poem to my chest. “But he wrote it for me. So that makes it perfect.”

“Ooh.” Ava pokes my shoulder. “I think Chloe has just fallen in love.”

Willow also pokes me in the shoulder with a teasing smile.

My cheeks catch fire. “Stop it.”

“This is the most romantic thing ever!” Lily gushes. “Chloe’s secret admirer has upgraded to writing her love poems. Oh my gosh, aren’t you melting?”

“Totally melting,” I say with a giggle.

Liam is about to say something, but Lily shoots him a look. “Zip it, womb buddy.”

“But he’s manipulating her again—”

“If the guy puts this much effort, I say he’s the real deal,” Aidan says.

“Yeah, I can’t write a poem to save my life,” Xavier says with a jealous frown. “Wish I could. I’d love to wow my amazing girlfriend.”

“You’re perfect just the way you are,” Lily promises. “Don’t change anything about yourself.”

He beams. “Same for you.”

Lily puts her arm around Liam. “I don’t mean to snap at you, twin bro. I just wish you would see him in a better light.”

Liam shakes his head as his gaze flicks to me. “I know I sound like a broken record, and I want to be supportive, but I’m just looking out for Chloe. Until I know he’s legit and only has good intentions, I’ll feel better.”

That causes warmth to enter my bloodstream. “Thanks, Liam. That’s so sweet.”

He inclines his head. “I just want you to be safe and happy.”

I unfold the letter and soak in the poem. The more I read it, the more I love it. I know it was written straight from his heart—his soul. He put all of himself into it. I *know* his heart is as big as Mount Everest.

“I need to know who he is,” I mutter.

“Well, Ava and I have been watching your locker like a hawk every chance we get,” Lily tells me. “We haven’t seen anyone lurking around or dropping anything into your locker.”

“So that means he must do it early in the morning,” Xavier says.

“Or late at night,” Aidan says.

“What, he sneaks into the school?” Lily asks.

“Maybe it’s the security guard?” Ava asks.

“Ew. He’s like fifty.” Lily frowns.

“I meant his kid.”

“His kid goes here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Um...I did think of something,” Willow says.

We all look at her.

“Been thinking about it for a while, actually. But it makes me question my ethics and my morals.”

We stare at her in confusion.

“Huh?” I ask.

“The guy obviously drops the notes into your locker at odd hours. There’s no way we can catch him in the act. Unless we had a camera.” She lifts her head to the corner ceiling across the hallway. “There’s a camera *right there*. I can hack into the security system and find the footage of when the guy visited your locker.”

We just stand there gaping at her.

“But like I said,” she continues, “it makes me question my morals and ethics. I mean, I’ve hacked into the school before, but this seems a bit...I don’t know, extreme. Messing with the security system? I know I can cover my tracks, but...”

Lily’s jaw falls open. “Willow, you’re so cool.”

That makes her laugh lightly. “Thanks.”

Xavier gapes at Willow as he rubs the back of his neck. “Dang, Willow. You could work for the CIA.”

“Puhlease. And of course, there is the simpler option, which doesn’t sound as cool.”

We lean forward.

“I can attach a small camera to Chloe’s locker. Practically invisible to the naked eye. It’ll record anyone who comes close to her locker. The problem with that is that those batteries don’t usually run for more than twenty-four hours, maybe less. Considering we have no idea when the secret admirer might strike again, I’d have to exchange the camera every day. And even that isn’t very reliable. The battery could die at any moment and we might lose our shot at catching him in the act. Which makes me conclude that hacking into the security system is the better option.”

My heart pounds so strongly that it’s making me feel lightheaded. “I might finally see his face? See who he is?” Oh, gosh. I think I really might faint.

“All your questions will finally be answered,” Ava says. “You know, if you ignore the whole ethical and moral thing.”

Willow shrugs. “I can let it fly if it’s something Chloe really wants.”

“Oh, she wants it,” Lily says with a giggle.

“Totally!” Ava agrees.

I turn away from them and stare down at the poem. “No,” I whisper. “I don’t want it.”

“What?” Lily asks.

I slowly turn around. “That would be an invasion of his privacy. He’s not ready to reveal himself to me yet. It would be so rude and disrespectful to breach his privacy like that. As much as it’s killing me to know who he is, I need to be patient. I need to wait until *he’s* ready.”

They’re quiet as they mull over my words.

“You’re right,” Lily says. “I guess we’re so focused on how Chloe feels that we didn’t consider his feelings. It would crush him if Chloe found out who he is before he’s ready.”

“And that can ruin their happily ever after,” Ava gasps. “We can’t let that happen.”

“So...I just have to wait,” I say.

Willow nods. “I think that’s the right choice.”

It’s a little disappointing, I have to admit. To think I can find out who my secret admirer is...that he’s *just* within my grasp. But I know it’s the right thing. I don’t want to hurt the guy who—I hope—has such strong feelings for me.

“For now, I’ll just hug this until I can hug him for real,” I say as I squish the poem to my chest.

The bell rings and we head to English, with me still clutching the poem tightly.

“By the way,” Lily says as she lowers herself in her desk. “My parents said yes to the convention.”

“Mine, too!” I tell her with a huge grin. “It’s going to be so much fun. I already know who I’m going to cosplay.”

“What are you talking about?” Willow asks as she takes out her school laptop.

“Ooh, I didn’t have a chance to tell you guys.”

When Lily’s done informing them about the *Swords and Legends* convention, Willow smiles. “Nice. Hope you guys have a great time.”

“Come with us!” Lily urges. “You too, Ava and Aidan.”

Willow waves her hand. “It’s okay. It’s your guys’ thing. Besides, I can’t afford to lose a weekend. I need to fix my app before the coding competition.”

“And Aidan and I have a dinner,” Ava says. “It’s okay. You guys have fun.”

When Ally comes in and starts discussing the book we’re reading in class, I try to concentrate, but the only thing I can focus on are the lovely words my secret admirer wrote to me. I wish I at least knew his name so I could stop referring to him as the “Secret Admirer.”

Hiding behind the kid in front of me, I unfold the letter and read the poem. My heart expands so much I think it might pop like a balloon.

“Chloe, does that paper pertain to class?” Ally asks.

I gasp and shove it under my notebook. “No.”

“Please concentrate on the lesson. I don’t want you to miss anything for the test next week.”

I can’t lose myself like this. Daydreaming about my secret admirer will have to wait until I’m at home.

As my friends and I enjoy delicious ravioli for lunch, a kid comes over to me. “Principal Nakamura wants to see you.”

I finish my last bite of ravioli and stand. “I’ll see you guys later.”

When I get to her office, the secretary asks me to wait outside on one of the chairs. I wring my hands in my lap, not sure what this is about. Am I in trouble? I don’t think I broke any school rules. I hope this isn’t about Topher...maybe his parents have somehow convinced the school to take him back? That would suck.

“You can go in now, Chloe,” the secretary tells me.

Taking a deep breath, I let it out and make my way into the principal’s office. She smiles. “Hello, Chloe. I hope I’m not taking you away from your lunch.”

“That’s okay. I finished eating.”

She gestures to the chair before her desk, and I sit down.

She leans forward and offers me another smile. “I’ve thought about this a great deal, but the truth is, there wasn’t much to consider. I’d like to offer you the position of editor-in-chief for the Edenbury High Times.”

I just sit there staring at her, completely dumbfounded.

When I finally blink, snapping myself out of it, I stammer, “A-are you sure? There are so many more qualified people than me...”

She locks her fingers together. “Chloe, you’re one of the most dedicated and hardworking journalists on the paper. You always hand in your work on time and your articles are always intelligent, straight to the point, and they evoke a strong feeling in your readers. I believe the paper will thrive with you as its editor-in-chief.”

I drop my gaze to my lap. “But some of the kids at school will be upset with that.”

“What do you mean?”

I slowly raise my eyes to her. “Some kids aren’t my biggest fans. They won’t be happy. They might boycott the paper.”

I doubt she knows about the many times Paisley picked on my articles just to take a jab at me. I took it personally in the past, but it’s not about me now—it’s about the paper. What if it suffers because of me?

Her face changes. “Is someone giving you problems?”

Oh, shoot. The last thing I need is her yelling at Paisley. “No,” I quickly say. “I don’t have problems with anyone. I just mean I’m not very popular and I don’t know if students will be interested in the paper.”

“Chloe, you are an amazing writer and a talented journalist. You’ll flourish as editor-in-chief and lead your team exceptionally well. The students will eagerly stand in line

every month waiting for the next issue. I have no doubt about it. You need to believe in yourself.”

A part of me wants to argue, but I realize she’s right. I know I’m a talented writer and journalist, and with hard work, I can make the paper the best Edenbury High has ever had.

With a smile, I stand. “Thanks so much for giving me the opportunity, Principal Nakamura. I won’t let you down.”

She grins. “I know you won’t.”

I make my way back to the cafeteria.

“What happened?” Lily asks when I return to our table. “You look like...” She peers closer at me. “Are you trying to hide a smile?”

My cheeks flushed, I drop down in my seat and blurt, “I’m editor-in-chief of the Edenbury High Times!”

“*What?*”

“Are you serious?”

“No way!”

“This is amazing news!”

At once, they throw their arms around me and hug me so tightly I think my spine might snap in half. Each and every one of them can’t stop praising me and telling me how happy and excited they are for me.

“I knew you’d get the position!” Ava says as she yanks me in for another hug. “No one deserves it more than you.”

“You’ll be amazing,” Liam says as he gathers me to his chest. “The best editor-in-chief the paper has ever had.”

“Thanks. I’m just so...I don’t know. In a state of shock.”

“Don’t be,” Willow says as she hugs me. “Like Ava said, no one deserves it more than you.”

Lily flings her arms around me, then lets me go, then hugs me again. “I’m so proud of you. So happy for you!”

“Thanks. It’s going to be a lot of hard work and it’ll take up a lot of my time, but I think I can do it. And don’t worry, I’ll still have time for book club.”

My cheeks hurt because I haven’t stopped smiling since this morning. First the poem from the secret admirer and then receiving the title of editor-in-chief. I feel like I’m in a dream.

Now as I sit in my room doing my homework, the secret admirer’s sweet words run around in my head. I wish I could write back to him and let him know how much his poem means to me. How much I appreciate him. But since I have no idea who he is, I’m stuck.

If only there was a way...

I sit up sharply in my seat. Wait a second. Of course! He reads my articles, both in the physical edition and on the online one. If I can somehow write him a secret message in one of my articles...

I head to my computer and plop down. The truth is, the online edition can use a few more articles...

My fingers fly over the keys as I delve into my new article, the words coming straight from my heart. I’m so gone in my

writing world, that when I finally return to Earth, I realize it's gotten pretty late.

And the article? It means more to me than anything I've ever written. Maybe because it's a personal letter to my secret admirer?

I fall back in my seat with a smile and read it another time, wanting it to be perfect.

Poems. Some people love them, some people hate them. For me? I have always appreciated them. Poems are written straight from the heart and soul. They can touch people in a way they've never been touched before. Like fiction, they can transport a reader to a different world and inspire them to be better, do better. They can inspire them to change the world.

What matters most about poems is how they make the reader feel. And speaking from experience, I *felt*. Oh, how much I felt.

Thank you to all the poets out there. For baring your souls and making us feel. I hope you know that you're special and we appreciate you very much. We hope you continue being the amazing people that you are.

The rest of the article is about famous poets and how they left their mark on society and changed the world. I also recommend a few poems readers can check out. At the end of the article, I encourage anyone who might want to write poetry—or do anything, really—to not be afraid to put themselves out there.

It's probably the most personal article I have ever written, and for a second, I almost trash it because I'm too nervous to post it. Too nervous for people to read it. But before I can chicken out, I post it. Now, it's out there for the world to see.

For *him* to see.

Chapter Seventeen

Liam

I'm well enough to get back on the court, much to Gibson's dismay, but I've been ignoring him for the past few days. Although I'm a little rusty at first, it comes back to me fairly easily. Gibson tries to mess me up, but I'm not having it. He can glare and grunt all he wants. I'm here to stay.

"McSteffan! What are you doing?" Coach howls at Gibson. "Pass the ball to Hastings or get off my court!"

Gibson mutters under his breath. He's the only one who has been giving me crap. All the other guys have welcomed me back and treat me like nothing happened.

Gibson does pass the ball to me, reluctantly, but like I said, I won't let him get to me.

Practice always makes me feel alive, but it's different today. More intense for some reason. Like my body craves the adrenaline rush.

When it ends, the guys gather in the locker room to shower and get changed. Darren and Brian come to stand before me. Darren hands me his phone, where a dark-haired girl is on the screen.

"Hot, right?" Darren says, waggling his brows.

Shrugging, I hand it back to him. "I told you I don't want a girlfriend."

“Do we look like matchmakers, man?” Brian chuckles.
“Who said anything about a girlfriend? We figured after everything that went down with Topher, you can use some fun. Look, I know you told us you’re not interested, but Darren told her about you and *she’s* interested. Thinks you’re cute.”

Is it weird that I don’t care?

“She’s my cousin’s friend’s sister,” Darren continues. He waggles his brows again. “Told her about our game next week and she wants to see you play.” He slaps my chest. “What do ya think?”

I shut my locker. “Like I said, not interested.” I move away from them.

“If you don’t go for her, I will,” Brian calls after me.

I wave my hand, letting him know he’s free to do whatever he wants because I really don’t care.

When I leave the school building, I glance around for Evie’s car, but freeze when I spot Chloe standing outside, a folded piece of paper in her hand.

The secret admirer’s lame poem.

“Chloe?”

She looks up and smiles. “Hey.” She stuffs the poem into her backpack.

I step closer to her. “Were you waiting for me?”

“You wanted to know how my first day as editor-in-chief was, so...”

My eyes widen. “Right! How was it?”

A horn honks.

Evie gestures for me to get in the car. I can see Lily in the back seat.

“Darn it. She’s so impatient,” I mutter. “You got a ride home?”

She glances at her phone. “My dad’s supposed to pick me up, but he’s running late. Maybe half an hour. Maybe more.”

I point my thumb at the car. “Evie can drop you off.”

Chloe twists her nose. “It’ll take time away from her precious artwork,” she teases.

“She loves you like a sister and I know she wouldn’t mind giving you a lift. And you can tell us all about your first day as the awesome new editor-in-chief of the Edenbury High Times.”

She smiles, her cheeks red. “I don’t know about the awesome part…”

“*Yes*. Awesome.”

She doesn’t argue as she follows me to Evie’s car, texting her dad to let him know she got a ride.

“Finally,” Evie grumbles. “Lily was getting impatient.”

Lily’s jaw drops. “No. I’m the most patient person right now.”

“Okay, okay. Get in, sibling one and Chloe,” Evie says.

Chloe bends her head in. “You really don’t mind dropping me off?”

Evie waves her hand. “Course not.”

Chloe and I get in the back. “Xavier’s not taking you home, Lil?” Chloe asks. “No special alone time with your boy in his car today?” With their busy schedules and Mom and Dad watching them like hawks, they take advantage of whatever privacy they can.

She shakes her head. “He had to pick up his mom and grandfather from the doctor.”

“Is Spencer okay?” I ask.

“As okay as he can be, considering his situation. But Xavier told me he’s constantly making his lame grandpa jokes, so that’s good.”

I smile encouragingly.

On the ride home, Chloe tells us about her first day as editor-in-chief. She was very nervous in the beginning, worried no one at the paper would take her seriously. But they respected her and listened to her.

Sighing happily, she leans her head on the seat. “I think it’s the start of something beautiful.” She frowns. “Though I bet Paisley will do anything to try to tear me down.”

“Forget her,” I tell her. “The paper will be even more fantastic than it already is.”

“Agreed,” Evie says as she pulls into Chloe’s driveway. Chloe thanks her for the ride and gets out.

“Chloe?” I call.

She turns around.

“Remember, after dinner. You and me and *Swords and Legends*.”

She nods with a grin. We're going to be on video chat as we watch the next episode, since our parents don't let us stay out too late on a school night. But if we watch from the comfort of our rooms, we can binge for hours.

Chloe waves and walks off.

"What's with the nerdy show?" Evie asks as she drives us toward our house.

I explain everything to her, and Evie's eyes widen when I tell her about the convention. "So Mom and Dad are actually letting you go?"

"Yep," Lily says with an excited laugh. "Driving all the way there will be a little crazy. Crazy, but fun."

Evie frowns. "They wouldn't even let me go to a party in Silverton with my friends," she grumbles.

"Because it was in a shady area," Lily reminds her.

Evie grunts. "Was not."

"Uh hu," Lily says with a knowing smile. "Besides, you don't even like parties. You just wanted to go because everyone else was going."

Evie shrugs. "Heaven forbid I do *one* normal high school thing before I graduate. Anyway, cops busted the party because someone tipped them off that there was underage drinking."

I lift a brow. "So the parents are always right, huh?"

She sighs dramatically. "The parents are always right."

I wait for Chloe to text me that she's ready to video chat, but half an hour passes and nothing. Figuring she might be finishing up her homework or busy with something else, I wait another fifteen minutes before texting her.

Liam: Hey, are you ready?

Her response comes ten minutes later.

Chloe: ?

Liam: We're starting season two, aren't we?

Chloe: Oh. I forgot, sorry.

Liam: It's okay. We still got time.

Chloe: Actually, I was reading over the poem and trying to figure out who the guy is. I know, stupid.

So...she ditched me for her secret admirer.

I mean, that's great....that she might have a boyfriend and everything.

Liam: Oh. Cool. Yeah. Maybe you can figure it out.

Chloe: It's like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Liam: How about you distract yourself with Aleriana and Torenin?

Chloe: I didn't do my homework yet. Gosh, I feel so irresponsible...I just couldn't stop thinking about him.

Liam: That guy's driving you insane. It's not healthy.

Chloe: Liam...

Liam: No. He should man up and reveal himself. What's he hiding?

As soon as I send the text, I regret it.

Liam: Sorry.

Chloe: No, you just care. Thanks for looking out for me.

Liam: Always.

Chloe: Sorry about *Swords and Legends*. You can watch without me.

Liam: That's okay. I'll go bake something or work out or read a book. See ya tomorrow.

Chloe: See you.

I drop my phone on my bed and stare at it, like I'm blowing a hole through it. Letting out a sigh, I slide off my bed and go to the kitchen. I wouldn't be able to focus on a book, so looks like the family will be eating cupcakes tonight.

Chapter Eighteen

Liam

The Junior Musketeers are meeting at my house after school for book club because the heat at school isn't working. Practice has been canceled as well. As much as I love basketball, I've missed hanging out at the club with my peeps.

Ava's driver, Peter, will drive us. I follow the girls toward the school doors, when a voice calls, "Liam?"

I turn around and find Mrs. Duncan standing there. She's the teacher for the life, responsibility, and growth class we have at Edenbury High—LRG for short. The class teaches students the skills they'll need to navigate life and adulthood. I took her class last year, which included some cooking lessons. I loved her class and would have taken it this year, too, but it conflicted with my other classes.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" she asks.

"Sure. Wait for me in the car, guys," I tell my friends before walking over to her. "Hi, Mrs. Duncan."

She smiles. "Liam, how are you?"

"I'm good."

"Great. I have good news. Have you heard of the Young Chefs of Tomorrow?"

"Yeah. It's a cooking competition where teens from Edenbury and a few other towns compete for a scholarship to

culinary school.” Each qualifying school sends its top student. “Jacklyn’s competing, right?” She’s a senior and was in the class with me last year.

“Unfortunately, Jacklyn had to pull out of the competition. Which means there’s an open slot and I’d like you to fill it.”

I gape at her. “What? Me?”

“Yes. You’re a very talented cook, Liam. I’m sorry to spring this on you so suddenly. The competition is only two weeks away.”

I’m hardly listening to her because my head is spinning. Me, compete in a cooking contest?

“You don’t have to make any decisions now,” she tells me. “But I need your answer by Monday. Here is all the information.” She hands me a packet, then places her hand on my shoulder. “I think you should really consider it, Liam. This could open many doors for you.”

“Thanks. Yeah, I’ll think about it.”

She nods with a smile and walks off, leaving me with my head a mess. A cooking competition...?

When I first found out about it, I didn’t think much of it. I knew there were many talented cooks at my school. And when Jacklyn was chosen, I was happy for her. She dominated our class. But is Mrs. Duncan insinuating I’m second best? While I want to believe in myself, I know I have a long way to go before I’ll ever be good enough.

Somehow, I make it out of the building and to the parking lot, where my friends are seated in the car.

Peter tips his hat and opens the door for me. I thank him and climb in. As he drives us toward my house, the only thing I think about is the competition, barely listening to my friends as they chat.

“Liam, why are you so quiet?” Lily asks.

I can’t talk, so I hand her the packet Mrs. Duncan gave me.

“Wait, you’re entering a cooking competition?” she asks.

I nod, then swallow and tell them everything Mrs. Duncan said.

“This is awesome! Perfect for you,” my sister gushes with an excited smile.

The others tell me how happy and thrilled they are for me. My mind is still a mess, so it’s hard to focus.

“So it’ll take place in two weeks, in Silverton.” Willow scans the instructions. “And it says each contestant must bring a partner to cook with them. You should take Chloe. You guys will kill it.”

Chloe smiles at me. “Of course I’ll help you.”

“And the prize is a scholarship to culinary school,” Ava adds. “Exactly what you’ve been dreaming about for years, Liam.”

“I don’t know...”

“Why are you hesitating?” Lily asks. “You should have told Mrs. Duncan on the spot that you’re in.”

“Yeah, what’s wrong?” Ava asks.

I sigh. “Come on, guys. Me compete with kids who are better cooks than me?” I shake my head. “I won’t win.”

They all give me disappointed and frustrated looks.

“Dude, what are you talking about?” Willow demands. “Your food is amazing and you’re so talented.”

“Yeah, you need more confidence,” Ava adds. “You need to believe in yourself.”

Chloe places her hand on my arm. “I don’t want to tell you to do something you’re not comfortable with, but I think you can do it.” She smiles encouragingly. “*We* can do it, Liam.”

I search her eyes, taking in her sweet smile. “But...” I release a heavy breath.

“We all know you’re amazing,” she continues. “The best and most talented cook out there. You need to show the world what you’ve got.”

I drop my gaze. “You all think I’m so good, but I’m *not*. I’m just me.”

Willow tsks. “Liam, Liam, Liam. What are we going to do with you?”

I hunch my shoulders forward. “I know. I suck.”

Chloe rubs my back. “We *can* do it. I’ll be with you. Please, Liam. The world needs to know about you.”

That’s the problem. I don’t want the world to know about me.

“I know it’s hard to put yourself out there, twin bro,” Lily says. “But this could change your life.”

The others nod in agreement, Chloe giving me an encouraging smile. I focus on that smile as I picture myself at the competition with all the other kids.

“What if I make a fool of myself?” I ask.

“What if you don’t?” Willow counters.

I’m quiet as I ponder her words. Maybe my friends are right. What can it hurt? Mrs. Duncan said it could open many doors for me. Maybe my dream of going to culinary school could actually happen.

I turn to Chloe. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Positive.”

I smile. “Thanks.”

Willow continues flipping through the pages. “It says you have to submit a video of you cooking your signature dish. I think they want to get to know you.”

“Okay. We’ll film the video as soon as we come home,” Chloe says. “I’ll help you.”

“What about book club?” I ask.

Ava says, “I think we can all agree that this is so much more important than book club.”

“That’s okay. We can make the video after book club. I’m a mess and talking about books will calm me. And anyway, I miss discussing books with you guys.”

“Aw.” Ava grins. “We miss it, too. Okay, book club first and then we’ll film this amazing chef doing amazing things.”

I playfully shake my head at her. My friends are too nice.

They continue talking about the competition and I try to keep my cool. I don't want to be scared and miss out on opportunities. It's time for me to conquer my fear and put myself out there.

Peter stops the car before my house and the five of us get out, thank him, and walk in.

The house is empty. Mom's out running errands and Dad's still at work. We drop our things in Lily's room, and Willow and I settle down on chairs while Ava, Lily, and Chloe sit on her bed.

Lily pulls her e-reader from her backpack and flips to the book we're discussing. It's another Regency romance. Seriously, my sister devours those things like candy.

"Okay, so what do you think about the misunderstanding between the duke and the maid, Henrietta?" Lily asks.

"That misunderstandings suck?" Willow frowns as she bends the pages of her paperback. "All she had to do was explain what happened and then they would have gotten together like a hundred pages earlier."

Lily twists her nose. "But that's what makes a good story, doesn't it? Conflict?"

Willow shrugs. "Could have had a better conflict."

Lily's quiet as she thinks it over. "Hmm. Maybe. What do you think, Ava?"

"Well, I'm all about the drama, so I love the conflict. I mean, everyone knows they're going to end up together, so isn't it about the journey? And their journey had conflict. Maybe it's cliché, but there's nothing wrong with it. Chloe?"

She holds up her hands. “I liked it. It made their relationship more intense, you know? I was on the edge of my seat during some parts. What do you think, Liam?”

“Both parties were too afraid to tell the other how they felt. So when his enemy kissed Henrietta, she didn’t understand why the duke got so upset. And he thought she kissed his enemy because she loved him. The duke got jealous and was so hurt that it nearly destroyed him.”

Willow nods. “Yep. Like I said: the misunderstanding could have been avoided if they just told each other how they felt.”

Yeah...but telling someone how you feel—especially when you know she doesn’t feel the same—isn’t easy.

We continue dissecting the book, when shouting comes from downstairs.

“What’s that?” Ava asks with wide eyes. “Someone else is in the house?”

Lily rolls her eyes. “It’s Evie and Noah. They’re doing a project for school and they keep arguing. They were here yesterday, too, and nearly brought the house down with their bickering.”

Evie and Noah are friendly, but they’re not best friends like I am with my Junior Musketeers. He’s a neat freak who likes order, she’s messy and chaotic. They’re like water and oil.

“You think they’ll kill each other one day?” Willow asks with a chuckle.

They shout even louder than before, her voice overshadowing his because he's not one to raise his voice. I can't make out what they're saying, but clearly those two aren't meant to do any projects together.

"They're ruining our vibe," Lily mutters. "No one bothers us when we're in 1B."

I stand. "I'll ask them to keep their voices down."

Lily snorts as I head for the door. "Sure. As if that'll ever happen."

I go down the stairs and find my sister and Noah in the dining room, the table covered with their project.

Evie's arms are crossed, glaring at Noah as he reads something on his phone. His jaw clenches.

"Hey," I say as I walk into the room. "Can you guys please keep it down? We're trying to have our book club upstairs."

Evie turns to me, her eyes hard. "Tell Noah to stop cleaning the table *every* second. It's a project—we're supposed to make a mess. And also, tell him not to be so OCD about our research."

He glances up from his phone. "Research is important. Why bother doing a project if you won't do it properly? I want an A."

She throws her hands up. "We already got accepted to college, dude. You can get a B. Or heck, a C."

He shakes his head.

Noah has always been a straight-A student. Even when he was the quarterback and was under so much pressure to live up

to his dad's name, he kept his grades up.

“Gosh, you're so annoying. Mr. Gomez made a HUGE mistake pairing us up.”

“No kidding,” he mutters, resuming his research on his phone. Evie slumps against the back of her chair, glaring at her partner some more.

“So will you guys please tone it down?” I ask. “For the sake of books? You know how strongly Mom feels about the younger generation keeping reading alive. So do it for Mom?”

Evie narrows her eyes at Noah. “Tell him to loosen the heck up.”

Noah's jaw twitches as he scrolls through his phone.

Sighing, I turn around and go back upstairs, telling the others I don't think those two will be quiet any time soon.

“Let's try to ignore them,” Lily says. “Okay...so about that long-awaited epic kiss....”

I slump in my seat. “Can we *not* talk about it?”

Sure, it was romantic and I liked it. But I don't really want to talk about it. What's there to say, anyway? The hero and heroine kissed at the end of the book and it was satisfying. Fine, I thought it was more than satisfying. But my friends don't need to know that.

“Ignore Liam,” Lily teases. “He won't admit he liked it. But we all know he did.”

“Lily, what the heck? No, I didn't!”

“I know you well, womb buddy.”

Groaning, I sink down in my chair some more. “Can we talk about that epic battle between the duke and his enemy? The way the author described it was so vivid, I could see everything clearly.”

The girls exchange a glance and shake their heads. “Nah,” Ava says. “So back to the kiss...”

I shut my eyes, lean my head back, and pretend not to be interested. But when Chloe tells everyone what she thought of the kiss, my ears have minds of their own and perk up.

“I like that both parties were shy and hesitant,” she says. “Obviously they both wanted it very badly. But they *waited* forever. They were both scared the kiss wouldn’t be as magical as they dreamed about.”

“But it was!” Lily squeals. “I think it’s one of the best kiss scenes I’ve ever read.”

“Agreed,” Willow says.

More shouting seeps through the bedroom door, but we don’t pay attention to it. Thankfully, the discussion shifts to another topic in the book and I don’t have to hear them talk about epic kisses anymore.

After we’re done with book club, it’s time to make the video. The others follow me as I go to the kitchen and pull out my cookbook. What to make? I’d like to impress the judges.

Chloe comes to stand beside me and together we choose the perfect dish. Willow has her camera set up on a tripod. I stop and take everything in, from the camera, to the ingredients Chloe is placing on the table. Once I accept the offer and submit the video, everything will be real.

But I'm ready. I've got to be. And with my bestie by my side, I know I can accomplish anything.

Chloe takes my hand, giving me a bright smile. "Ready to wow them?"

I squeeze her hand, returning her smile. "Ready. But before we start, let me email Mrs. Duncan the good news."

We watch the video a few times to make sure it's as perfect as it can be. And not to pat myself on the back, but the recipe is solid. Chloe and I had a lot of fun explaining the dish and hopefully showing off my talent. *Our* talent, because like I said, I wouldn't be able to do this without her.

"And sent!" Willow says. "This is so awesome."

Yeah. It is.

"My brother, the famous chef!" Lily squeals. "There will be crowds of people lining up to eat at your restaurant."

I give her a look. "I think we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves. It's just a competition."

"That could change your life," Ava reminds me.

"Okay. But as much as I appreciate your support, can we please not make a big deal about it? It's making me really nervous."

"Sure, but we'll need to prep for the competition," Chloe says. "What dishes to make and all that."

I nod slowly. "Wow. I'm actually doing this."

My friends cheer and wrap their arms around me.

“What’s up with you?” Evie asks as she and Noah stand in the doorway to the kitchen. “What was all that commotion? And sheesh.” She gawks at the state of the kitchen. “What have you done to this place?”

When we explain everything, Noah and Evie are very excited for me. They wish me luck before Evie nods curtly at Noah and goes up to her room.

“How’s the project coming along?” Ava asks him.

His jaw clenches. “We got it done. That’s what matters. You want a lift home, Chloe? I’m leaving now.”

“Okay. Let me grab my stuff.” She runs upstairs and returns a minute later with her school things. “Bye, guys.” She hugs each of us, and when her arms are around me, she whispers, “I’m so proud of you. And excited.”

Drawing back, I give her a shy smile. “Thanks, and thanks so much for doing it with me. I wouldn’t be able to step foot in there if you weren’t by my side.”

She smiles warmly. “Of course.”

“Chloe?” Noah says. “We need to get going. I promised my friends I’d meet up with them soon.”

She nods. “See you later, guys.” She waves, then she and her brother leave the house.

The rest of us clean up the kitchen. When Mom and Dad come home, we tell them about the competition and that I’ve decided to enter.

Dad wraps an arm around me. “Liam, that’s great.”

I smile. “Thanks, but I’m not crossing my fingers.”

Mom hugs me. “Why do you think you have less of a shot at winning than anyone else, sweetie?”

I shrug. “Because there are more talented cooks out there.”

“That’s not true.” She hugs me close. “Whatever happens, know that you’re wonderful and we love you. Can we see the video?”

Willow brings them over to her laptop and Dad and Mom smile as they watch us. Mom kisses my cheek. “We’re so proud of you, Liam.”

I shrug again. “Why? It’s not like I won.”

“Because you’ve overcome your fear and have decided to compete,” Dad explains. He bends close. “Remember what we talked about? Strength and bravery that goes beyond muscles?” He pushes some hair away from my eyes. “I’m happy and honored to call myself your dad.”

“Thanks.”

And this is the start of a rollercoaster ride that might change my life.

Chapter Nineteen

Chloe

Chloe. Chloe. Chloe.

With eyes so beautiful they move me

Her smile so bright and infectious

A gift held so precious

Chloe, a queen so regal

She soars in the sky like an eagle

Chloe, I've said this more than once

How special you are, I sound like a dunce

But for you, I'll do anything

Get down on my knees and grant you many things

Whatever your heart may desire

And elevate you higher and higher

Until you rule the world with your kindness and wisdom

And one day maybe have your own kingdom

But until then you have me, your secret admirer

A guy so smitten he wants to soar higher

With you by his side, dear Chloe

One day you will know me

For now I must bid you good day

And hope this letter touches you in every way

Sincerely,

Your Secret Admirer

Tears well up in my eyes. “This is the sweetest thing I’ve ever received in my life.”

My friends and their boyfriends pass the note around, their eyes devouring the poem. I try to battle the tears because it’s so embarrassing to cry in the middle of the school hallway, but I’m overwhelmed with emotion. I thought the other poem was sweet and came straight from his heart, but this one is on a whole new level. I need to...I want to...I just wish I could hug him.

“Oh, Chloe.” Lily gathers me in her arms. “He’s such a good guy. I *know* he is. And when you guys finally meet face to face, your life will change forever.”

Liam rubs his forehead with a sigh. “I guess I can see the good in this one. Even if it’s also pretty bad.”

Ava frowns at him. “Liam.”

He holds up his hands. “Sorry. As supportive as I want to be, I’m still on the fence about it. Until I’m one *thousand* percent sure he’s a good guy and will treat Chloe right.”

I smile at him through my tears. “Thanks.” I take the note from Aidan and read the words another time. “I wish...” Fresh tears pour down my face. “I need...”

“Chloe?” Lily puts her hand on my shoulder.

“I need to know who he is, guys. I’ve been losing sleep over it. And I can’t take it anymore.”

“You mean...?” Ava’s eyes widen as she looks at Willow.

“Operation Hack into the School’s Security System?”
Xavier whispers.

Willow’s expression turns serious. “If that’s what you want, Chloe, I’d be happy to oblige. But I need to know that *is* what you want. One hundred million percent.”

I play with my hair as I pace the area near my locker. “I don’t know.” I sigh as I quicken my pacing. “How long has it been since I got my first letter? Nearly a month. It feels like it’s been ages. How much longer can I wait until he reveals himself? What if he never does? What if I spend the rest of my life wondering what could have been?”

I slowly turn around to face them. “Or worse. What if it’s a prank? What if it’s been Paisley all this time? What if she stretches it for months, plays me for months? I could get hurt.”

Liam’s face grows furious. “I hadn’t considered that. If Paisley is behind this, I’ll—”

“It’s *not* Paisley,” Lily stresses. “No way in heck is it her.”

“Like I said before, this isn’t a romance novel, Lily,” her brother tells her. “This might not end up in a happily ever after.”

“It will,” she insists.

“I want it so badly for Chloe.” Ava rests her hand on Lily’s arm. “But I don’t want to encourage her when there’s a chance it could be a prank.”

Lily looks from one of us to the other, a stubborn frown settling on her face. Then her shoulders fall. “I guess it’s possible.”

“So...I hack into the school security system,” Willow says, raising her brow at me.

I nod. “I *need* to know who he is. It’s not fair that he knows who I am but has been hiding his identity from me all this time. Besides, maybe this is what he needs. Maybe he’s too shy and nervous to reveal himself and wants me to figure out who he is. Maybe I’ll do him favor.”

Everyone is quiet as they think it over.

“Maybe,” Ava says.

“Look, he’s been stringing Chloe along for weeks,” Willow says. “She’s been imagining him in her head. What if he doesn’t live up to her expectations? The more he stretches this out, the more Chloe will fall for an imaginary version of him. She needs to know who he is so she can fall for the real him. Not her own fantasy version.”

“Willow has a point,” Aidan says. “I think the sooner she discovers who he is, the better.”

I take a deep breath and let it out. “You think hacking in is still the best option, Willow? We can try using the small cameras before we do something drastic like that. I don’t want you to question your morals.”

She grimaces. “Forget my morals. The guy is starting to annoy me a bit. He’s baring his heart out to you by writing sweet poems, but he doesn’t have the courage to speak to you face to face? Makes me wonder what he’s hiding.”

“You mean...he could be a serial killer.”

That causes Willow to chuckle. “He goes to our school, Chloe. Unless we’re harboring a criminal here...”

“Oh. Right.” I laugh lightly. “But it could be anyone. I need to know who he is before I let myself ...” I avert my gaze to the floor. “Fall for him.”

They nod in understanding. Before anyone can say anything, the bell rings.

“Think about it throughout the day, Chloe, okay?” Willow says. “If you still want to...you know, we’ll get together at my place after school.”

With my heart racing, I nod. “Okay. Thanks.”

It seems like Operation Hack into the School’s Security System is on.

I’ve thought long and hard about it all day, not concentrating in any of my classes. It feels like this is one of the biggest decisions I’ve ever made in my life. But I’m done agonizing over it. Done questioning what’s the right thing to do. I *need* to know who my secret admirer is. And if confronting him ends us...well, that’s a risk I’ll have to take. Because if it’s been a prank all this time, I might just die of heartache.

Okay, that’s a little extreme. But it would hurt a lot.

After Willow is done with coding class and I’m done with the paper, Peter drives Lily, Ava, Willow, Liam, and me to Willow’s house.

Willow stabs the key into the lock and pushes the front door open. The five of us pile into the house, where we're met with Willow's mom, Charlie, lying on the couch with a book. Her red hair spills over her face.

"Mom?" Willow asks as she steps into the living room. "What are you doing home so early?"

"Hey, kids," she greets as she places her bookmark in the book and sets it aside. "I finished work early and decided to take the afternoon off. Finally had some time to catch up on reading for book club." She gets up from the sofa and comes over to hug each of us. "It's so good to see you. Feels like forever since you guys hung out here."

"Where are Dad and Mia?" Willow asks.

"Helping out at Ji-Ho's. Mia is a server and is on clean-up duty, as part of her punishment."

Ji-Ho's is the Korean restaurant Asher's parents own. It's named after his Korean name. Asher's parents and grandmother immigrated to America from South Korea after his parents got married. Asher was born here. They opened a restaurant, but unfortunately, it didn't do well. Asher was discovered at four years old and starred in his first movie, which launched his acting career. He helped keep his family afloat. Now Ji-Ho's is a very popular restaurant in Edenbury and is doing really well. My friends and I hang out there many times. The atmosphere is so homey and the food is delicious.

"So what's the occasion for this gathering?" Charlie asks.

"Project."

"Homework."

“Test.”

She raises her brows.

“Homework that’s a project that we’re going to be tested on,” Ava quickly explains.

“Uh huh…” There’s never getting anything past Charlie.

But before she can question us further, I say, “How’s work at NASA?”

“Do you really want to know, or are you just trying to divert my attention away from my next question?”

“Divert what?” Ava says with an innocent smile. “Why would we divert anything? We’re not up to anything…”

“Uh huh. You kids are lucky it’s my relaxing time. Just don’t do anything illegal.” She falls back on the sofa with her book.

“Right,” Lily whispers. “Don’t do anything illegal. Like hack into your school.”

“Don’t think about it,” Willow says as she nods toward the stairs. “Just do. Come on.”

We follow her up to her room and settle down on her bed and chairs while she takes a seat at her computer.

“This won’t take long,” she says as she starts pounding the keys. “Just gotta…yep…okay, past the first security barrier. Total piece of cake. Now to get past the second one…”

I start pacing. Maybe I didn’t think this through. I’m making a felon out of Willow.

“I’m fine, Chloe,” Willow says as she continues to type. “You don’t want to know how often I hack into the school.”

Lily gapes at her. “You do?”

“Just to make sure no one’s trying to harm the school, you know? Plus, the school app is always acting up. And sometimes I want to check my grades.”

Ava throws her hands over her ears. “I don’t think we should be hearing this. I plead the fifth!”

“Okay, I’m in,” Willow says. “Now where do they keep all the security footage...?”

All four of us gather around her desk.

“Hey, you guys want to know how you did on your math exams?”

“No!” we all say.

“Okay. Geez. Ah, here we go. This folder holds all the security camera footage from this semester. It’s sorted by date.” She searches the files for the date when I received my first letter. “Here it is.”

We lean forward as Willow finds the right camera, the one that’s right across from my locker. She fast-forwards through the footage, since no one is around at night and all we see are rows of lockers.

“Wait, students are already coming.” Lily points. “Did we miss him?”

“Maybe I fast-forwarded too much. The guy is like a ninja.” She taps her chin. “He couldn’t have come earlier than

an hour or two before school started, right? I'll focus on that time frame."

She rewinds to two hours before school starts and slows down.

"Why isn't anyone showing up?" I complain. "You think my secret admirer is a ghost?"

"Ooh, maybe he's like the Phantom of the High School," Ava says with a giggle. "He'll bring you down to his lair underneath the school and—"

"There!" Willow points.

We nearly topple over each other as we push closer to peer at the screen. The video is black and white, has no sound, and is a little grainy because the camera isn't the best quality, but we can see a guy in a baseball cap rush up to my locker, quickly look to his right and left, and then slide a folded piece of paper into my locker. Then he vanishes from sight.

"He really is a ninja," Lily says. "In and out like a pro."

"But I can't see his face," I say. "The quality is so bad. I'll never know who he is."

"Maybe we can find more footage?" Ava suggests.

"I have a program to make the video clearer," Willow says as she pulls up the program. "Just give me a few seconds..."

"Makes me wonder how you spend your nights, Willow," Liam jokes.

"Usually working on my app or curled up with the book we've chosen for book club," she says. "Don't worry. I'm not always up to nefarious activities."

The program finishes with the video, and we're met with a very clear picture of my secret admirer. The video is still black and white with no sound, but it seems like the guy has straight dark hair. The baseball cap nearly shields his eyes, but I can still make out his face.

I squint at the screen as my heart picks up pace. "Who is that? I've never seen him before."

"No clue," Lily says.

"I know him!" Ava says. "He's Derek Chen. He's in my bio class. He's super, super smart. And sweet."

My body lights up with excitement. "Really?"

"Yeah! But um...he's a freshman."

It feels like my world just came crashing down. "A... freshman?"

"But he's so cute!" Lily says. "And Ava said he's sweet and smart. He's taking junior-level classes."

"But he's a *freshman*. Guys, he's two years younger than me."

"So?" Ava asks. "Lots of women date younger men. Besides, it's just two years—"

"Oh my gosh." I'm in a daze as I pace Willow's room. "That explains everything. Why he's so nervous to reveal himself to me. Because he's a *freshman*." I drop down on Willow's bed and cover my face. "I thought he would be this romantic guy who'd sweep me off my feet and..." I sigh. "This is not how I imagined this would go."

“And this is why he should have revealed himself to you,” Liam says.

“Chloe.” Lily sits down next to me and takes my hand. “Why does it matter how old he is? You don’t care about things like that. You always look at the inside of a person, never judging them on the outside. Derek Chen is a sweet and nice guy. He might be the right one for you.”

“I don’t mean to sound like a snob,” I say. “But a freshman...he’s so young. I want someone serious, someone my age. Someone I can have a mature relationship with. Someone I can fall in love with. Derek Chen...I’m probably just his crush.”

Ava sits on my other side and takes my free hand. “Maybe give him a chance? He might be more mature than you think.”

“I guess that’s true.” I glance at Liam. “What do you think?”

He sighs as he lowers himself on the chair next to me. “I don’t know what to think, honestly. I’m relieved he’s not Paisley or a jerk from school. But I don’t know anything about this kid. And to be even more honest? I doubt he’s looking for a serious relationship at fourteen years old.”

“Maybe he’s fifteen,” Ava offers.

“Even if he wants to have a relationship with you, I don’t think he’s mature enough. Maybe in a few years.”

“The only way for you to know is to talk to him,” Willow says.

I gape at her. “You mean...confront him?”

She nods. “Maybe he’ll surprise you and be even more mature than you.”

“If that’s the case, would you give him a shot?” Lily asks.

“If he’s mature and sweet and kind and has all the qualities I’m looking for?” I muse. “Yeah. I’d give him a shot.”

Lily cheers. “Yay! Hopefully he is and Chloe will finally start living her dream.”

“Don’t pump her up with too much hope,” Liam says. “Chloe, you need to be careful. Guard your heart before it gets hurt.”

I nod. “I will, thanks. We need to practice what we’ll say to him tomorrow.”

“*We?*” Willow asks.

“You guys aren’t coming with me?”

“Heck no,” Ava says. “You need to talk to him yourself.”

“Yeah, we would only scare him away,” Lily adds.

“You can do it, Chloe,” Willow encourages. “Be honest with him. If anything, you guys can start off being friends and take it from there.”

“That’s true,” Lily says. “If he’s not ready now, he might be in a few months.”

“Or years,” Liam says. “Two, to be exact.”

Lily whacks his arm.

Standing, I start pacing again. “Okay. Confront him tomorrow. The worse that could happen is that we won’t speak to each other again, right?”

“Yeah.” Willow nods. “And you can move on with your life.”

“And meet a real man,” Liam mutters.

Lily whacks him again.

“Thanks for all your help, guys. I don’t think I would be able to do this without—”

The door to Willow’s room bursts open and Mia skips inside with her straight dark hair bouncing behind her.

“Whatchaya doin’?”

“Mia! How many times have I told you to knock?” Willow scolds her little sister.

“I don’t know. I lost count years ago. Hi, Lily, Ava, Chloe, and Liam. What are you guys up to?”

“Project.”

“Homework.”

“Test.”

She raises her brows just like her mom. “You guys suck at lying. Good thing you’re not actors.”

“Yeah, good thing,” Willow mutters. “Now shoo.”

“Can I hang out with you?”

“No.”

“But your friends are hardly ever over and you never hang out with me. She’s always working on her app,” she tells us with a roll of her eyes. “She never makes time for me. Soon, she’ll be off to MIT and won’t say a single word to me. And

then when I'm rich and famous and resent her, she'll blame me."

Willow looks up at the ceiling with a sigh.

I smile at Mia. "Willow is pressured to get her app ready in time for the coding competition. But she loves you and wishes she could hang out with you."

She glances at her older sister. "Really?"

Willow sighs again and turns to her. "I'm sorry I'm not making time for you. I'm just so stressed with my app."

"Oh. Well, I can try to learn to code and maybe help you..."

Willow shakes her head. "You focus on your acting."

"Have you gone on any auditions?" Lily asks her.

She sighs very dramatically as she falls down on Willow's bed. "I am currently not allowed to go on any auditions. My parents are going to ruin my budding acting career."

"You should have thought about that before you put your life at risk. Mom and Dad were worried sick about you."

"It wasn't *my* idea..."

"I think my sister is a bad influence on you and Zoey," I say.

"Rylee is the best friend a girl can ask for. She's awesome."

"She is," I agree. "A little misguided..."

"Ooh, can I play with WillowBot?" Mia gets up and heads to where Willow's two-foot, human-looking robot sits on her

desk, inactive.

“Stop right there!” Willow orders when her sister’s hands are inches from the robot. “Drop your hands and step away from the bot.”

“Aw, come on. I won’t break her.”

“She’s *not* a toy, Mia. How many times do I have to tell you? I worked extremely hard on her for the eighth-grade robotics competition—”

“I know, I know. But I won’t drop her, I *swear*.”

“You said that the last time. And I spent days repairing her.”

“You treat her like your maid by making her clean your room,” she complains. “I would treat her much better than you.”

“Mia, I don’t have time for this.”

“Right. You have no time for your own sister. Got the message loud and clear. I’m out.”

She leaves the room and slams the door behind her.

“Ugh.” Willow rubs her hands down her face. “I don’t mean to push her away. I’m just so stressed... Maybe the app isn’t even worth it.”

Lily rubs her back. “Don’t say that. Of course it’s worth it. Mia understands how hard you’ve been working, and she’s very supportive of you. After you win the competition, you’ll have all the time in the world for her.”

Willow chuckles softly. “*After* I win? You think too highly of me, Lily Hastings.”

Lily gestures to WillowBot. “Did you not build that awesome robot all on your own?”

“Well, yeah. But so did all the other kids who entered the competition.”

“But only one of them won!” Ava says as she squeezes Willow to her chest. “Our Junior Musketeer.”

Willow returns the hug. “Thanks for all your support, guys. It makes all of this much easier. I’m sorry I’ve been so caught up in my own world. It feels like all I do is eat, drink, breathe the app.”

“We get it,” I tell her with a smile. “But you’re not caught up in your own world. You just helped me discover the identity of my secret admirer.”

She laughs again as she adjusts her glasses. “True.”

“We can’t get rid of you that easily,” Liam says.

“Haha.”

There’s a knock on the door.

“Come in!” Willow calls.

Her dad, Asher Park, sticks his head inside. “Am I interrupting?”

“Of course not, Dad. Come in.”

With a grin, Asher steps into the room. “Hey, kids. Mia told me you had your Musketeers over, Willow, and I wanted to stop by and say hi.” He sits down on an empty chair and smiles at us again. “How are all of you?”

We spend some time catching him up with our lives. There's not much to update him on my life, though, only that I am now editor-in-chief of the school newspaper.

"No kidding," he says. "Pursuing journalism like your mom? That's great."

"And she's done an incredible job so far." Willow beams. "She'll be the best editor-in-chief the Edenbury High Times has ever had."

My cheeks are roasting. "I'm not that great."

"You'll be amazing just like your mom," Asher tells me. "Do you know she helped clear my name when we were your age?"

"Yes!" Ava gushes. "People started rumors that you were difficult to work with and you weren't booking jobs. That's why you moved back in with your grandmother and attended our school. You met Charlie and fell in love."

"I've heard that story a million times," Willow mutters.

Asher chuckles. "It wasn't easy winning over your mom, Willow. She was so stubborn."

"So were you."

"True, true. But in the end, true love conquered all. Eh, Lily?"

"Yes!"

"And then my mom cleared your name," I conclude. "You went back to Hollywood."

"Nope. I graduated with your mom and our friends first. Then I started my adult acting career. Some weddings

happened and a few births, and then this one popped into our lives.” He ruffles Willow’s hair.

“Dad,” she groans.

He just laughs again. Then he turns to Liam. “What about you?”

Liam shrugs. “Nothing much. Just hanging in there.”

“He’s so modest,” Lily says. “He’s going to compete in the Young Chefs of Tomorrow teen cooking competition. Winner gets a scholarship to culinary school.”

Asher’s brows shoot up. “You serious? Liam, that’s amazing.”

His cheeks grow a little red. “It’s no big deal.”

“Of course it is. You go in there and you wow them with your sick skills. I know you’ll knock it out of the park.”

“Thanks.”

“What about you, Asher?” Ava asks. “Willow told us you’re taking a break from acting to spend time with your family.”

He nods. “Yeah. I’ve been booking jobs like crazy the past few years, and I felt like I was missing out on my wonderful kids’ lives. So Charlie and I decided I was going to take it easy until the summer. There’s a movie that looks promising, and they assured me it won’t take too long to film it. And Mia might have a role as well.”

“Willow told us about it,” Lily says. “It’s so exciting. Will there be romance in it?”

Asher chuckles. “If I say no, will you watch it?”

“Yes, but only because you’re in it.”

“Thank you. I’m so honored.”

We spend a few more minutes catching up, and then he leaves. The five of us start our homework.

After we’re done, Lily, Liam, Ava, and I gather our things and Willow walks us to the door. As we pass the kitchen, we find Asher and Charlie making out against the counter.

“Oh, great,” Willow grumbles as she marches to the front door. “They’re at it again. Don’t people ever get sick of making out?”

“No!” Lily and Ava exclaim.

Willow holds up her hands. “Sorry I asked. Thanks for coming over, guys. I’ve missed it.”

“Yeah. We need to have more sleepovers,” I say.

“Once I’m done with my freakin’ app, we will. Promise.”

We all exchange hugs.

“Don’t stress about Derek Chen,” she tells me as we pull out of the hug. “I know you’re super nervous to talk to him tomorrow, but if it’s meant to work out, it will.”

Lily presses her hand to her chest. “Are those words coming from Willow Park? I thought she doesn’t like the mushy stuff.”

Willow laughs. “I’m fine with it. I just don’t think kids our age should be so obsessed with boyfriends and girlfriends and relationships when we’re so young. Most high school relationships don’t last. Well, other than you guys, Ava and Lily. And I guess our parents.” She shrugs. “I just want Chloe

to have an open mind when she talks to her secret admirer. Try to give him a chance, okay? You might get the happily ever after you've been dreaming about."

I hug her again. "Thanks. I'll try my best."

Lily wraps an arm around Willow. "Try not to pop any blood vessels as you work on your app."

"Yeah, we can't survive with one Junior Musketeer down," Liam says.

She nods. "Will do. 'Night, guys."

"Night, Willow."

Chapter Twenty

Chloe

I arrive at school early to...confront my secret admirer.

Blowing air out of my mouth as I wait outside the school building, I scan around. Lots of kids are here, but I haven't spotted Derek anywhere.

Every time a guy with dark hair appears in the distance, my blood begins to race. But none of them are Derek.

To placate my mind, I play around with some dessert recipes in my head for the Young Chefs of Tomorrow. I really, really want Liam to win.

My heart freezes when I spot Derek Chen being dropped off by his mom before the school building. I squint, taking him in to make sure he really is my guy. Oh my gosh, he is.

My heart hammers in my chest. My palms grow sweaty. I think I'm going to throw up.

Every part of me urges me to flee. Run far, far away. But no. I *need* to do this.

He climbs up the school steps with a pretty large backpack on his back. Is he the one I'm meant to spend the rest of my life with? Just from looking at his face, I can tell he's a sweet guy. Maybe we *are* meant to be.

He's only a few feet away from me now. But my legs are cemented to the ground.

Move, Chloe, my mind orders. Move your feet and speak to your secret admirer.

But I'm just frozen in place with my blood surging throughout my body. I'm going to puke and then faint, and then wake up, and puke again.

I shake my head. No. I'm strong. I can do this.

By the time I gather my bearings, I notice that Derek has already entered the school building and is talking to another kid.

Shoot!

Taking a deep breath and giving myself a quick pep talk, I straighten my shoulders and march into school, heading straight for Derek. He doesn't notice me as he continues to chat with his friend.

I clear my throat as I step closer. "Um, Derek?"

He glances at me. "Yeah?"

The words get stuck in my throat. I just stand there staring at him.

He watches me for a few seconds like he has no idea who I am or what I want from him. Then his eyes get super big. "Oh. Um. Hi."

He looks beyond confused. And a little panicked.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" I ask, my voice shaking so much I can barely talk coherently.

Swallowing hard, he nods and follows me into an empty classroom. We stand there facing each other, both of us not knowing what to say.

I wish he would say something. But then again, we're in this situation because he was too shy to speak to me face to face. So putting on a brave smile, I say, "I...um...I figured it out."

His eyes get huge again. "You did?"

"Yeah." I clear my throat. "My friend...I mean, I was able to, um...figure it out."

Ugh. Why do I sound so lame? Whenever I imagined meeting my secret admirer face to face, I pictured it would go really well and be the best moment of my life. But this feels all kinds of awkward.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I know you didn't want me to figure it out yet. But after I got your last poem—which was so sweet and perfect—I just needed to know who you are. I'm sorry if it was an invasion of your privacy—"

"Wait."

"Please let me finish. I'm so flattered that you think so highly of me. You seem to know so much about me, but I don't know anything about you. All I know is that your name is Derek Chen and that you're a freshman. My friend is in your biology class. Rather, *you're* in my friend's class because you're taking a junior class. I think it's so cool that you're in an advanced bio class—"

"It's not me," he says.

My lips snap shut. "What?"

"I'm not the one writing you those letters."

I just stare at him as my brain gets stuffed with cotton.
“W...what?”

He sighs like he'd rather be anywhere but here. “I'm not the one writing you the letters, okay? Sorry.”

“But...but...if it's not you, then who is it?”

He hesitates, then shakes his head. “I can't tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“I'm sworn to secrecy.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” I step back and take a few breaths, trying to regulate my breathing and calm my racing heart.
“Are you telling me that someone asked you to put those letters in my locker?”

He shuts his eyes for a second as a breath leaves his lips.
“Yeah. I'm really sorry. I'm not a bad person, I swear. It's just that...”

“What did he promise you?”

“Limited edition *Lord of the Rings* collectibles.”

I just gape at him, not believing this is happening. This guy, Derek Chen, is *not* my secret admirer. Someone's bribing him to put the letters in my locker.

“Please, you need to tell me who he is,” I beg.

He steps away and shakes his head. “I told you, I'm sworn to secrecy.”

“This is messing with my life. I can't sleep at night. I'm not eating properly. I'm not centering in my classes.”

Derek seems sympathetic, like he's fighting an internal battle. It looks like he might crack, but he shakes his head with a regretful frown.

"You're not going to help me all because of those *Lord of the Rings* collectibles?"

"They're so rare that you can barely find them at a store or online. And they're pretty expensive. I know it sucks, but I *really* need them."

I blow air from my lips and drop down at an empty desk. "Is there anything I can do to change your mind?"

He shakes his head again. "Like I said, I'm really sorry."

As frustrated as I am, Derek is not the person to blame. I can't be upset with him.

"Can you give him a message, then?" I ask.

"I guess. What's the message?"

"Tell him that Chloe Barrington is done playing games. If he's serious about the way he feels about me, then he should meet me face to face so we can have a real conversation. If he can't do that, I want him out of my life. No more letters, no more poems. Can you tell him that?"

"Uh..." He reaches into his pocket for his phone and starts tapping it in. "Yeah. I'll tell him."

"Thanks."

Tears prick my eyes as I leave the classroom and press my back against the lockers. I'm trying so hard not to cry because I don't want this guy—whoever he is—to have such a strong

hold over me. But the tears seep out of my eyes and rain down my cheeks.

I'm so stupid. I actually thought...

My secret admirer is a coward. I'm a fool to think I could have an epic love story with a happily ever after. Those things only happen in books and movies. I bet the person behind the letters isn't even a real person. Maybe Paisley or her crew. Are they watching me have a meltdown? When I glance around the hallway, I don't find anyone here. Still, I'm starting to believe the secret admirer isn't real. Definitely not my soulmate.

"Chloe?"

My friends, Xavier, and Aidan stand before me with concerned expressions. I must look like a wreck standing here with tears pouring down my face.

I quickly wipe my eyes. "Sorry."

"What happened?" Lily steps closer. "Did you talk to Derek?"

"I did. It's not him."

"What do you mean?" Willow asks.

"He's just the messenger. The guy is bribing him to slip the letters into my locker."

"What?" they all gasp.

I nod. "And Derek refused to tell me his identity, no matter how much I begged." More tears burst from my eyes. "I'm such an idiot."

"Hey, it's okay." Ava gathers me in her arms. "You're not an idiot. You're one of the smartest people I know."

“He’s not real,” I cry into her shoulder.

“Who said he’s not?” Lily wraps her arms around the both of us. “There’s still someone writing you the letters and poems. Someone who’s too shy to tell you who he is. There’s still hope, Chloe. You can still find your dream guy. Don’t give up on him.”

“What if it’s Paisley?”

“It’s *not*,” Lily says.

“They’re right,” Liam says. “I don’t think you should give up on him.”

I slowly remove myself from their arms and stare at him. “Liam...? But you...”

“I know,” he says, concern floating in his eyes. “I’ve never been a fan of him. And the truth is that I wish I could slam my fist into his jaw. But seeing you like this...I want you to have your happily ever after. I want you to have your dream guy. So I’m with the others—don’t give up on him yet. Not until you know his true identity.”

I shake my head as I wipe my eyes. “I told Derek to give the secret admirer a message. Either he reveals himself to me, or I’m done. I can’t live like this anymore.”

Willow hugs her. “That’s good. If he’s real and serious, he’ll step up and do the right thing.”

I nod as I bury my face in her shoulder. “I just wish it didn’t hurt so much.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Chloe

It's been nearly a week since I confronted Derek Chen, and I haven't heard back from the secret admirer. No letters. No poems. Nothing.

I lie in bed Thursday night, trying not to agonize over it. I kind of gave him an ultimatum—either step up or step out. Does he not like me enough to show me who he is?

I can't help but put some of the blame on myself. Maybe I pushed too hard. Maybe I was too demanding. I mean, he obviously wasn't ready to reveal himself, and I basically forced him to either do something he wasn't comfortable with, or give up on me.

The fact that he's chosen to give up on me...

But I know it's not right. To keep his identity a secret from me for so long because of what? Fear? What can he possibly be so afraid of? What does he have to hide? Which makes the possibility that it's Paisley or a prank that much more believable.

I try not to sigh as I read over the letters and poems. I delve into them, dissecting, searching, hoping that maybe there's a clue to his identity. Or a clue why he's so reluctant to tell me who he is. But I can't find anything.

Maybe it's not the loss of *him* that has me this upset, but the loss of the *possibility* of having a relationship with

someone who appreciates me for who I am. Accepts me for who I am.

My phone beeps with a text from Willow in the group chat.

Willow: Heard anything from him?

Chloe: No. Nothing.

Willow: Sucks. I'm sorry.

Lily: Maybe he needs more time?

Willow: How much more time can she give him? What he's doing isn't right.

Lily: You never know what a person is going through. Maybe he has an issue he's worried Chloe won't accept.

Chloe: I don't care what issues he has. I would give him a chance no matter what.

Ava: Maybe he has really bad social anxiety?

Willow: Definitely a possibility. Would explain why it's so hard to work up the courage to speak to her.

Chloe: I wouldn't want to force him if he really does have anxiety. Ugh, guys. I messed up big time.

Willow: I don't think you did. I think you were firm with him. If he really does have anxiety and has a hard time meeting people, he could have written you another letter. Maybe explained why he's hiding?

Chloe: Not if I pushed too hard.

They're quiet. They probably don't know what to say.

Chloe: I have no way of contacting him to apologize. Unless I write something for the online paper. But that

might make things worse...

Willow: I want to root for you guys, but seeing him hurt you like this really upsets me. Maybe it's time to forget him.

Ava: I don't want to give up on you guys, but Willow might be right. Maybe he's not ready for a relationship.

Chloe: Maybe I should just forget about him. Forget any of this happened and just move on with my boring life.

They're quiet again.

Lily: I wish it didn't end like this.

Chloe: Me too

Willow: There is something I can do...

Chloe: What?

Willow: I can try hacking into the security system again and search through every footage that features Derek Chen. Maybe there's a video of him speaking to someone. It could be your guy.

Chloe: Forget it. You don't have time for that because you need to work on your app. Besides, I don't want you to hack into the school again. Look, I just need to accept that this is over.

Lily: Maybe don't close the door on him completely. He might still reach out.

Willow: Lily...

Lily: I don't want Chloe to pine after him, but I also don't want her to shut her heart off completely. But the

choice is up to you, Chloe.

Ava: Maybe Lily's right. Maybe keep the door slightly open?

Chloe: Maybe. I have a lot to think about. Thanks for the talk, guys.

We chat about other things before it's time for bed. I toss and turn, telling myself to forget the secret admirer. He made his choice, and I need to move on.

But why does a part of me not want to give up on him completely?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Liam

Chloe and I have been working hard in the kitchen to perfect my recipes. I'm still a nervous wreck, but I'm more excited now.

The competition is next weekend. Yikes. That's so soon. But I'm ready and feel good about it.

Today is Friday and Xavier, Lily, Chloe, and I are preparing for our trip tomorrow to Derryton for the *Swords and Legends* convention. We'll be up before the sun, but it's worth it.

Once we're done packing our costumes and other items we'll need, Chloe comes over and we binge the last few episodes of the show. I'm a little tired from all the cooking and basketball, but *Swords and Legends* always keeps me awake.

Before we begin the episode, I notice that Chloe's quiet. She's been quiet for the past few days. I bet it's because of the secret admirer. He hasn't written her any more notes or poems since she confronted Derek Chen.

The guy's a jerk for playing with her emotions like that.

Chloe turns to me. "Why aren't we watching?"

"I thought you needed a minute."

Her eyebrows furrow. "Why? I'm fine."

No, she's not. But I don't want to bring him up. Not only because I don't like the guy, but because I don't want to make her feel worse than she already does.

I start the episode and we watch. Normally, I get so sucked into the show that everything else around me vanishes. But because Chloe is in such a rotten mood, it's hard for me to enjoy it.

"Want to do something else?" I ask her.

She blinks and looks at me. "What's wrong? Don't you like the show anymore?"

"Of course I do. I'm just worried about you."

"I'm fine. Let's watch. Lily said they're going to show a sneak peek to the new—and possibly last—season and we don't want any spoilers."

I nod with a sigh and resume watching, trying to push my mind away from Chloe and my worried thoughts.

When we're halfway through the last episode, Lily knocks on the open doorway and slowly steps into my room. The expression on her face makes my heart skip a beat.

"What's wrong?" I ask, jumping to my feet.

She swallows, blinking away her tears. "Xavier's grandfather was rushed to the hospital."

I release a heavy breath and wrap my arms around her. "I'm so sorry. Will he be okay?"

She shakes her head against my shoulder. "I don't know. Xavier just texted me." She draws back and accepts a hug from Chloe. "I'd go to the hospital, but it's too late and they

don't allow visitors. Xavier and his mom might be there all night." She bites her lip. "Guys, he can't make it to the convention tomorrow."

I hug her close again. "Don't worry about that. We don't care about the convention."

"I want to stay with Xavier and his grandpa. But you guys should still go."

"What?" Chloe asks. "We're not going without you."

"Xavier wants you to. He told me to tell you not to worry about his grandpa and to go and have fun."

I shake my head. "Of course we're worried about Spencer. He's like our second grandfather."

"I know. But what's the point of you guys not going? It won't make his grandfather better. And you know Spencer wouldn't want your lives to stop because of him."

Chloe and I exchange a glance.

"Xavier insists that you go," Lily says. "He wanted me to go, too, but I want to be there for him. But you guys *have* to go. Have fun for us."

"Are you sure?"

She lifts a brow. "Have you checked your texts?"

I grab my phone from my bed and read my texts. Xavier has sent many messages telling me that if I don't go, he'll ban me from watching *Swords and Legends* again.

It's not like he can stop me, but I get it. He doesn't want Chloe and me to miss out because he can't make it.

“Okay,” I say with a nod. “If it means that much to him.”

“It does. Take tons of pics and videos.”

Chloe hugs her. “We will.”

I furrow my brows. “You think Mom and Dad will let us go on our own? Crap. We’ll have to take the bus.”

Lily heads for the door. “Let’s ask.”

After Mom and Dad discuss it with Chloe’s parents, they agree to let us go. Taking the bus will delay us by an hour. I still feel bad that Xavier and Lily can’t go, but at the same time, I’m excited to go with Chloe. And we’ll keep my sister and my best buddy in mind as we enjoy the convention.

“See ya tomorrow,” Chloe says as I walk her to the door. “Bright and early. Super, super early.”

I laugh. “Super, super, super early. Don’t forget to bring your costume.”

Her eyes sparkle. “I won’t. Don’t forget yours.”

“Believe me, I won’t. And I’ll pack us enough food for the bus ride. Healthy and non-healthy snacks. And mark my words, sous chef, one day I’ll persuade you to eat broccoli.”

I’ve been trying to get her to taste my broccoli dishes for weeks, but she’s too stubborn.

She smiles, though it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. Darn that darn secret admirer.

My alarm blasts in my ears before the sun is even up.

Groaning, I roll onto my side and shut my eyes. My phone keeps blaring. I want to slam my hand on it to shut it up, but if I do that, I'll be late for the convention.

Muttering under my breath that this convention is so not worth it (complete lie), I drag myself out of bed and get dressed.

I make my way downstairs and find Mom sitting in the dark.

“You're up?” I ask her.

She jumps, clutching her heart.

“Sorry! Didn't mean to scare you.”

She smiles and gestures for me to sit down. “I wanted to see you before you left.”

“So you woke up super early just to see me off?”

She nods, brushing some hair away from my face. “Of course, sweetie. Do you want me to make you some breakfast?”

I shake my head. “It's a little too early to eat. Mom, you should go to bed. Sleep in—it's the weekend. I'll be okay.”

“I'm fine. And anyway, you need someone to drive you to the bus stop.” She smiles. “Excited?”

“Yeah. But I'm worried about Spencer.”

Xavier texted Lily last night and told her that his grandpa had an infection. He'll be okay, he just needs to stay in the hospital for a few days. Xavier doesn't want to leave his side and Lily wants to be there for him, too.

My phone rings. Chloe.

“Hey,” I say as I put my phone to my ear.

“Just making sure you got your lazy butt out of bed. Did you call a cab yet?”

“My mom’s driving us. We’ll be at your place in...ten minutes?”

“Sounds good. See you then.” She ends the call.

“Are you sure you don’t want to eat anything?” Mom asks.

I go to the fridge and pull out the sandwiches and other food I prepared for the trip. “I think I’m good.”

She looks a little worried. I’m sixteen and old enough to take a trip, but I guess my parents will always worry about me. “Call every hour.”

I groan. “Mom...”

“Fine, every two hours. Just let us know where you are and what you’re doing.”

“Okay. We’d better get going.”

I grab my stuff from my room, including my costume and other essential items, and follow my mom to the car.

Darn, it’s pitch black out here. I don’t think I’ve ever been up this early.

We get in the car and head to Chloe’s house. She’s sitting on the stairs with an oversized bag at her feet. Her dad sits next to her. As soon as they see us, her dad heaves the bag and dumps it in the trunk. After they exchange a hug, she gets in the car.

“Morning, Ally,” she greets as she pulls her seatbelt across her body and clicks it shut. “So early, isn’t it? I’m actually surprised you were able to get Liam out of bed,” she teases.

“I didn’t wake him. He woke up himself.”

Chloe raises a brow at me. “I’m impressed, Chef. Maybe this can become a habit.”

I bang my head on the window. “Never again.”

Mom and Chloe chuckle.

Mom gives us some last-minute instructions as we drive to the bus stop. Like, to make sure we catch an early bus back home so we won’t get stranded in the middle of the night, and to be in contact with our families, etc.

“Don’t worry, Mom, we got it,” I mumble sleepily, my face still pressed to the window.

“And please be alert,” Mom says. “You aren’t little kids, but you need to be aware of your surroundings.”

“Yes, Ally. We will.”

Mom pulls up before the stop and wraps her arms around us. “Make sure you have a good time,” she says. “I know you’re worried about Spencer, but please enjoy yourselves. I’m sure he’ll want to hear all about your trip when you get back.”

We thank Mom for the ride and grab our stuff. She wants to stay with us until the bus arrives. No one else is at the stop.

Chloe and I sit down on the seats and don’t really talk much. I think we’re too tired. But it’s not long before the bus pulls up. We wave to Mom and get on.

The bus is mostly packed. Finding seats in the back, we plop down, Chloe taking the window seat and me the aisle.

It's a four-hour drive to Derryton. Chloe and I chat for a little bit, but we're both so out of it. It's not long before my eyes droop.

My eyes shoot open, and the first thing I see is brown hair. What the...? Oh right. I'm on the bus with Chloe and we're headed to the *Swords and Legends* convention.

My head is resting on Chloe's shoulder and her head is on mine. I guess we must have fallen asleep.

I don't move because I don't want to wake her. I'm not sure how much time passes—maybe I drift off again?—but her head shifts. Finally, she's up. I was getting bored.

As I lift off her shoulder, her head rolls forward. Her eyes fly open and she glances around like she has no idea where she is.

“Shoot. I didn't mean to wake you. I thought you were up.”

She blinks at me as the sleep leaves her eyes. “Liam? What are we...?” She glances around again. “Oh. Right. Did we fall asleep?”

Yeah...on each other.

She must realize how close we were because her cheeks are a little pink. She clears her throat. “How much longer until we're there?”

I peer at the map and list of stops at the front of the bus.
“Looks like we have about forty minutes.”

Nodding, she shuts her eyes.

I bend close. “You sleeping again?”

“No. I just want to shut my eyes and think for a little bit.”

About her secret admirer?

“Oh, okay. Sure.”

I play a game on my phone. After a little while, Chloe gets bored thinking and we talk about *Swords and Legends* and how awesome today will be.

“We’re here!” Chloe informs me as she peers out the window. I bend over to get a closer look as a building with signs and posters of our favorite show comes into view.

“We made it,” I say with a laugh. “We’re actually here, Chloe.”

She grins at me. “Just wait until you see my costume.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chloe

After entering the large building that's hosting the *Swords and Legends* convention, Liam and I separate to the bathrooms to change into our costumes. I'm all giddy as I lock myself in a stall and carefully pull out my costume from my bag. I can't wait for Liam to see it. I worked so hard planning the perfect costume, and I hope I look amazing.

After I get dressed, I leave the stall and stare at myself in the mirror. Oh my gosh! I *do* look amazing. Almost identical to Aleriana. She's famous for her blue and gold armor and matching sword and shield, plus her long white hair with a single braid off the right side of her head. On her head sits a silver and gold circlet with a purple gemstone in the center that holds tremendous power. It's an heirloom that was passed down to her from her dying mother when she was a little girl. And she wears cool black boots with laces.

Now the hardest part—makeup. Liam's aunt, Amanda, showed me how to apply the correct makeup for Aleriana, but I've never done it before. I look over the notes I wrote down and do the best I can. The results? *Spectacular*.

"You are one kickbutt elf," I tell my reflection with a proud smile. I hope Liam flips when he sees me.

Gathering my stuff, I make my way out of the bathroom and find Liam waiting outside. I freeze when I take him in. He's dressed as Torenin, the human who's hopelessly in love

with Aleriana, even though they aren't allowed to be together. Aren't forbidden romances the best? Liam looks *AMAZING*. He's wearing a long black wig that reaches his mid-back, and his costume is the famous one Torenin wore when he rescued Aleriana from that awful prison. It's a torn green shirt and brown pants. Liam is wearing a green shirt underneath because the shirt has so many holes, but the look is perfect. He's also got his signature bow and arrow hanging off his back.

As if he feels me gawking, his eyes flit in my direction. And he just stares at me, eyes and mouth widening with every passing second. I turn around, thinking he's gaping at someone behind me, but there's nothing there but the bathroom.

"Chloe." He strides over and lifts his hand like he wants to touch my face. "Oh my gosh. You look phenomenal."

With my cheeks sizzling, I give him a shy smile. "Thanks. You look phenomenal, too. I love the costume. And the wig. It's perfect."

"Your costume is perfect. And your wig is perfect, too. And oh my gosh, are those elf ears?"

I push my wig aside to show him my pointy ears. "Amanda showed me how to use makeup to blend them in with my natural skin color. Do they look real?"

"Heck yeah. You're the prettiest and most kickbutt Aleriana I've ever seen!"

Every part of me lights up like Torenin shot me with a fire arrow. I don't know why it makes me feel so good that Liam likes the way I look.

“We need to take a selfie.” Liam reaches for his phone. We both smile at the camera and snap a few photos.

Two women who are dressed as other characters from the show stop and stare at us. “You guys make the cutest Aleriana and Torenin. Want me to take a photo of you?”

“That would be great, thanks.” Liam hands her his phone.

“But you need to change your pose,” her friend says, stepping over to us. “Aleriana and Torenin are madly in love.” She pushes me closer to Liam until my back hits his torso. She takes Liam’s arm and wraps it around my middle. Then she takes my hand and places it on Liam’s cheek. “Now stare at each other as though you’re madly in love and can’t live without each other.”

The area where Liam’s arm is wrapped around my waist burns. I feel tingly all over at how close his face is to mine. How close his lips are to mine. He stares down into my eyes and I stare up into his, getting lost in them. His costume brings out his beautiful gray eyes.

“That’s *perfect*.”

I hear her snap a few photos. When she’s done, I tear my gaze away from Liam and notice that a few other people have crowded around us, too, each of them complimenting us on our costumes.

“Cute couple in real life as well,” an older woman says with a wink as she passes by.

I slowly move my eyes to Liam, and he slowly moves his eyes to me. I laugh lightly. He does, too.

“We should head in,” he says.

“Yeah.”

Because that woman mentioned the word “couple,” the only thing that flashes in my head is the secret admirer. It’s like for a few minutes, I forgot all about him and was living in bliss. But now it all comes crashing down on me, and my body fills with the loss of what could have been.

I stop walking and drop down on a bench outside the entrance to the main room.

“Chloe?” Liam lowers himself next to me. “What happened? Is it the crowd? Xavier warned me that there would be a lot of people here.”

I shake my head. “It’s not the crowd. Sorry. I just got sad all of a sudden.”

“What made you sad? Do you wish Lily and Xavier were here? It sucks they’re missing out on this, but I want them to be there for Spencer.”

I shake my head again. “It’s him...the...you know. That woman said ‘couple’ and it reminded me of him. He hasn’t written me anything in days. I told myself to forget about him, but I can’t seem to let him go.”

Liam is quiet for a bit, then slides his hand into mine and squeezes it. “I can’t tell you how to feel. But I can tell you that we can have loads of fun here. Me, you, and the entire *Swords and Legends* universe. Is there any way you can forget about the guy just for today? Because you’re not Chloe Barrington and I’m not Liam Hastings. You’re Aleriana and I’m Torenin.”

I search his eyes as his words make sense in my head. He’s right. Liam and I traveled all the way here to have fun at this

event. I can't let the guy dictate my happiness. I can't let him take this moment with Liam away from me.

Squeezing his hand and offering him a thankful smile, I say, "You're right. I'm here with you, my lovely Torenin. For today, we won't stress about our real lives. We're just going to have fun and enjoy spending the day together."

He grins. "That's much better."

He stands and holds out his hand. "Please allow me to escort you inside, my dear Aleriana."

I smile again as I slide my hand into his. "I would be honored."

The place is like nothing I've seen before. There are so many *Swords and Legends* stuff here. Life-sized posters guests can take pictures with—and trust me, Liam and I take lots of photos—toys and games and action figures. T-shirts and mugs and keychains. There are booths and booths full of anything you can think of. Liam convinces me to get matching temporary tattoos on our faces, just like some of the characters have. We want to take our time exploring the items they have, but there are going to be many performances, events, and signings that we don't want to miss.

We manage to squeeze into a dance performance put together by the showrunners, which features a few of the cast members. They reenact the famous dance a group of outlawed sorceresses performed to try to regain their magic. The whole thing is pretty hilarious because it's a funny dance, but the sorceresses did manage to get back their magic. The performance ends with the lights turning off and lightning

crackling in the air. Some of the cast members float up as their bodies are surrounded by light. Their magic has been restored.

When the performance is over, I turn to Liam with such a huge smile that my cheeks hurt. “That was the coolest thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

He smiles. “I’m so glad you’re having fun, Chloe.”

My brows furrow. “You’re not having fun?”

“Of course I am. Because you’re here with me.”

I stare at him for a moment, then lower my eyes and tuck some of my white hair behind my pointy ear. “Thanks. I feel the same way.” I slowly raise my eyes and gaze into his.

He lifts his hand like he wants to touch my face, but someone behind us yells, “Awesome costume, guys! Can I take a photo with you?”

We both blink at him.

“What?” Liam asks.

“You guys have one of the best costumes I’ve seen all day. Can I take a photo with you?”

“Oh, sure,” I say.

Once we’re done with that, Liam leads me to a room where the actors are sitting on a panel and taking questions from the fans. Oh my gosh, I can’t believe we’re going to be in the same room with the famous actors. It’s going to be epic.

There are hardly any seats left, so Liam and I squeeze in somehow in the back. And when I say squeeze, I mean *squeeze*. My body is pressed so tightly against his that I feel

his warmth seeping through both our costumes. And I feel the hard muscles of his chest.

“Sorry,” I whisper. “It’s either squish against you, or squish against...that guy.” I nod my head to the stranger on my other side.

Liam wraps his arm around me and pulls me even closer to his body, like he’s protecting me from that guy and the rest of the world. “No. Squish against me. Me and only me.”

It feels so good to be this close to him. Closed in his arms like I’m the most important person in his life. Which, I know is not the case. One day, he’ll have a special girl to squeeze in his arms like this.

Why does that thought make my heart hurt a little?

“It’s starting!” Liam says.

The next two hours are filled with the cast members answering fan questions. It’s so incredible to hear what goes on behind the scenes and how much work and dedication it takes to create those memorable scenes. Every single actor in the show loves it as much as the fans.

But the best part about all of this? The guy who plays Onin, who was thinking about leaving the show, suddenly makes an appearance in the last five minutes. And he has a major announcement. He informs his fans that he’s decided to stay on the show. Which means it has been renewed for another season.

The audience erupts in applause. “The show’s not being canceled!” Liam squeezes me against his body again. “That’s awesome. I can’t wait to tell Lily and Xavier.”

After the panel, some of the actors sign autographs. Liam and I stand in line because we want to surprise Xavier and Lily with autographs from their favorite actors. It'll take up a lot of our time, but it's worth it.

The coolest thing is that the woman who plays Aleriana is floored by my costume. She tells me it's one of the best she's ever seen.

"Oh my gosh," I gasp as Liam and I walk away from the tables with our signed autographs. "I can't believe that just happened."

"Aunt Amanda is going to take all the credit for your costume," he says with a chuckle. "Wait, there's something in your hair."

"What?"

He reaches over and lifts a strand of wig hair off my cheek, his skin touching mine and causing a shiver to travel down my spine. "Oh. It's just confetti."

"I thought it was a bug."

He chuckles. "A shiny bug."

I laugh, too. "Maybe a *Swords and Legends* bug."

With another laugh, he glances at the time on his phone. "It's lunchtime. I don't think there are any events for another hour. Want to eat? I'm kind of hungry."

"Okay. Is there anything good around here?"

"Yeah. I found an Indian food restaurant online. Only a few blocks away."

“Sounds yummy. But what about our costumes? Will we look weird walking into the restaurant? I mean, I’m not a human.”

“I’m sure there will be tons of people coming in dressed as elves.”

The Indian food is delicious, but all Liam and I want to do is get back to the convention. There are still so many performances to see and events to participate in.

The hours fly by so fast, and we still haven’t had time to buy anything.

Finally, finally, we have a chance to browse around and shop.

“Oh wow, did you see this?” I march over to a row of snow globes, each of them in the theme of the show. “Xavier would love to add one of these to his collection.”

“Yeah. But which one? There are so many to choose from.”

Liam and I spend a few minutes searching through the many, many options. I know he has a few *Swords and Legends* snow globes, so we’re trying to find him something unique that he hopefully doesn’t have. We finally settle on the epic finale of the last season, where Xavier’s favorite character, Selos, faces off with a hydra.

“Wow, I can’t believe how detailed this is.” I marvel at the hydra heads. “They look just like in the episode.”

“He’s going to love it.”

Liam and I split the payment and ask the guy to wrap it for us. Then we continue browsing through the items. There are so many things here, you can literally spend days.

“These stuffed animals are so cute,” I say as I look through them. “You think Aidan’s little sister might like this?”

Liam twists his nose. “I don’t know. Lexi is into ocean life animals. She might not appreciate it.”

“Yeah. And everything is so expensive. Ooh, look! Katilyn’s wand.” I pick it up and wave it before Liam. “I banish you to the outer realms, Jinper of the Morrow Lands. Begone, son of darkness!”

Liam spins around and then vanishes from sight.

I laugh as he comes back over. “Want it?” he asks.

I look at the price. “Forty dollars? Ugh, tempting, but nope.”

“Are you going to buy something for yourself?”

I shrug. “Maybe a T-shirt. I’d rather buy stuff for our friends because they missed out. What about you? See anything you like?”

He scans around and shrugs. “We’ll see.”

We continue browsing, and at some point, I feel like I might lose my mind because there is just so much stuff. But my eyes widen to extreme proportions when I find a stall with rows and rows of books.

“Oh my gosh.” I hurry over and touch the spines. “They have books based on the show?”

“Just recently published,” the man at the stall says.
“They’ll be released to the public in a few months. But fans can buy advanced copies here.”

“Wow.” I slide one of the books out and open it. “This one focuses on the love story between Selos and Fiora, Xavier and Lily’s favorite characters. Lily will *love* this.”

“It’s an entire series based on their story arc,” the man tells me, reaching to pull out the complete set.

My jaw falls open. “No way.” There are six books in the set. “We have to buy this for Lily.”

“Done,” Liam says with a smile.

We choose some things for the rest of our friends and families, like hats and mugs, and T-shirts. I get a T-shirt for myself and a figurine of Aleriana, and Liam chooses socks and a T-shirt, and a figurine of Torenin.

After I give him my half of the cost, he goes to pay for everything. I continue looking through the books, and my eyes catch sight of Torenin and Aleriana on one of the covers. “They have a series on Torenin and Aleriana’s epic love story, too,” I whisper to myself.

“Ready?” Liam asks, clutching bags containing the gifts. “What’s that?” he asks, nodding to the book I’m holding.

“They have a series that focuses on Torenin and Aleriana’s love story, too.”

“Cool. Want it?”

I shake my head as I put the book back. “I already paid a fortune on our friends’ gifts. It’s okay, I’ll take out the books

from the library once they're released. Come, there's still so much to see."

Liam stands at the bookcase, his eyes not leaving the books.

"Liam?" I ask. "I want to squeeze in one more event before we leave."

He blinks and looks at me. "What? Oh, yeah. Sure."

We attend the last event for today, which is a reenactment of one of the most famous scenes in the entire series, and then it's time to head home.

"Thanks for everything." I close my arms around Liam. "I'm so happy I spent the day with you. I had so much fun."

He presses his cheek to mine. "Me too."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chloe

As Liam and I leave the convention, I stop dead in my tracks. It's pouring outside. And not just pouring—buckets and buckets of water surge down from the sky. The sidewalks are covered with puddles.

Liam and I gape at one another. We've never seen anything like this before in our lives.

My phone buzzes. When I peer down at it, my eyes nearly bug out of their sockets. "I have a million missed calls from my parents."

He checks his phone. "Me, too."

I listen to my voicemail, where Mom and Dad tell me to call them back immediately. They've been trying to reach us for the last few hours. Crap. Liam and I were having so much fun that we forgot to check our phones.

He calls his parents back and I dial Mom.

"Chloe! Where have you been?" she asks, her voice ringing with relief. "I've been trying to reach you for hours."

"I'm sorry. We forgot to check our phones. What's wrong?"

"Have you seen the weather?"

"Yeah. It's pouring."

“It’s not just pouring. There is major flooding and they predict it will get worse. It’s impossible to leave or enter Edenbury. And all buses leaving Derryton have stopped running.”

Panic seizes me. “What do you mean? There are no buses?”

“No. The roads are closed. We were trying to call you to tell you to come home immediately before the last bus went out.”

I glance at Liam. His face pales as his parents tell him the news.

“What? How...? What do we do? How are we going to get back home?”

“Take a deep breath and relax, sweetie. Liam’s parents and your dad and I think it’s best you guys stay at a hotel until the roads clear up. Hopefully by tomorrow.”

“A hotel?”

“Yes. Find something close to the convention—don’t venture too far. And watch over each other.”

I swallow and look at Liam again, watching him nod, seeming totally cool and collected.

We’re in an unfamiliar town with people we don’t know.

“Chloe, did you hear me?” Mom asks.

“Yeah.”

“Keep in touch with us,” Dad says when Mom puts the phone on speaker. “Let us know where you are and what you’re doing.”

“Okay.”

“You guys better find something quick,” Mom says. “All the hotels will probably fill up quickly.”

“I’ll call you later.”

“We love you.”

“Me, too.”

I hang up and turn to Liam. He’s searching for nearby hotels on his phone. As soon as he finds one, we make our way to it.

“Wow,” I say as I take in the buckets and buckets of rain slamming into the sidewalk. My hood’s not really doing much to protect me from this crazy rain. And it’s freeeeezing.

Liam wraps an arm around me, pulling me close like he wants to shield me from the rain. Neither of us brought umbrellas.

“You’re getting wet.” I try to pull away from him.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind. You okay?”

“I think so. I’m a little scared to be in an unfamiliar place and so far from my family, but I’m happy you’re with me.”

He smiles, though it’s hard to see through this heavy rain. “I feel the same. The hotel should be...there.”

We quickly head inside. The person at the counter tells us they’re booked. Darn it. Liam and I go from hotel to hotel. Mom was right—places are filling up. We can’t find anything.

“There’s a motel a few blocks away,” Liam says as he scans his phone. “And that’s pretty much it. We gotta run if we

want a room.”

We jet to the place like our lives depend on it. It’s not as close to the convention as our parents would probably want, but what else can we do?

We’re completely soaked as we push our way into the motel and to the front desk.

There’s a college-aged woman behind the counter, who gives us a kind smile. “Hello, welcome. How can I help you?”

“We’re looking for two rooms, please,” Liam says. “Preferably near each other, if that’s possible.”

She clicks on the computer, tapping her fingers on the counter. “Let’s see...Hmm...I have only one room available.”

Liam and I look at each other.

“Just one?” I ask. “Um...I guess...but there are two beds, right?”

“Nope. One bed. It’s a very small room, but it’s all we got. You guys want it?”

Liam and I look at each other again.

“Yes,” I quickly say. “We need a room.”

She nods. “Alrighty.”

She hands us our key. Liam and I thank her before going back out in the rain and searching for our room. It’s all the way in the back, forgotten and forlorn. Ugh. What does it look like inside?

Liam glances at me, gives me a brave smile, and slips the keycard into the lock. As soon as the door opens, I expect to

see bugs and mice, but I don't see any of that. It appears very clean and it smells okay.

There's a bed near the window. A small bed, not queen sized like most hotels have.

Clearly, this is a room for one person.

I don't realize I'm still standing outside in the rain until Liam wraps his arm around my waist and tugs me inside.

He pushes away some matted hair from my cheeks as he gazes into my eyes. "You okay, Chloe?"

I pull down my hood and take another look around. There's a tiny TV that looks like it belongs in another decade sitting on a worn-out dresser. A small table is near the bed, there's a bathroom, a window with the blinds shut, and that's pretty much it.

"Yeah. I'm okay," I tell him. "You?"

He pulls off his jacket and swings it over one of the chairs. "Cold and a little wet, but other than that, I'm fine. We should tell our parents we got a room."

I take off my jacket and quickly call my parents while he calls his. Mom and Dad are relieved we found a place to stay for the night and tell me to stay in touch with them. After I wish them good night, I end the call.

Liam plops down on the bed and looks at me. "What a day, huh?"

I sit down next to him. "Who knew we'd end up here? Do you think our stuff got ruined?" I open our bags and check on

the gifts we bought for everyone. They're a little wet, but seem to be okay. Liam and I spread them on the table to dry off.

I notice Liam's back is facing me as he pulls his stuff out of his bags. It's almost like he's hiding something from me.

"What's that?" I ask.

He whirls around, eyes wide. "Nothing. Just making sure my costume isn't ruined."

"Is it?"

"No."

"Mine, either." I've spread my costume on the table and am relieved to learn it's in good condition.

"So uh..." Liam says as he turns around.

Why is he acting so weird?

"I got you something," he says with a shy smile.

"What?"

He pulls out something from behind him. It's the collection of books that features Aleriana and Torenin's love story.

"What?" I ask as I accept them from him. "You got me the whole set?"

He nods. "I saw the way you were looking at them and had to buy them for you."

I look down at the books. "But they're so expensive."

"You're worth every penny."

My cheeks blaze. "Thanks so much!" I wrap my free arm around him. "I love it! But I didn't get you anything."

He shakes his head with a smile. “I don’t need anything. Just you here with me.”

“Thanks. You can borrow these books anytime. They’re yours just as much as they’re mine.”

“Thanks. I’d love to read them.”

We smile at each other like goofs.

He shifts in his place. “So...nice room, huh?”

I shrug. “It’s cute. A little old, but cute. Look at the TV. Have you ever seen anything like that before?”

“Xavier has something similar in his room. It was his mom’s when she was a kid. Does it even work?” He presses a button on the remote control and the TV comes to life. “Nice.” He starts flipping through the channels. “Only three channels. News...news...and comedy.”

I twist my nose. “Ugh.”

He shuts off the TV and flings the remote on the bed. “The important thing is that we have a room and we’re not stranded in that weather.”

“True.”

His stomach makes a noise. He looks down at himself, then gives me a sheepish laugh. “Guess my stomach’s hungry after such a busy today.”

I sit down next to him. “We haven’t eaten since lunch. And it’s nearly eight at night. But what are we supposed to eat? They don’t have food here and I’m not going out in the rain. I bet no one’s delivering food right now.”

He walks to the table and rummages around in his bag.
“They might be a little wet, but I made sandwiches in case we got hungry.”

I lift a brow. “PB and J?”

“Is there anything better?”

We settle down on the bed, since the small table is covered with our stuff, and Liam hands me a sandwich. Luckily, he had them in a cooler so the temperature is perfect.

“Yum,” I say as I chew.

He chuckles. “So yum.”

I hold out my sandwich. “Make these at the cooking competition and you’ll win first prize.”

He laughs again. “I didn’t think about the competition once.”

“Did we think about anything other than *Swords and Legends*?”

“Guess not.”

We wash down our sandwiches with the water he brought, then sit on the bed looking at each other.

“So...since the TV sucks, want to watch more *Swords and Legends* on my phone?” he asks.

“I kind of want to start reading the books. Want to read together?”

“Sure.”

After I fetch the first book, he and I scoot close to each other, which is pretty easy since the bed is so tiny. Liam’s so

tall his feet nearly spill off the bed.

He shifts, frowning. “Man, this is uncomfortable.” He moves his body around to try to find a better position. We’re pretty much crashing into each other because we don’t have much room. “Sorry for being so tall.” He pushes his wet hair out of his face. “I should probably get a haircut.”

“No!” I blurt.

He fixes confused eyes on me.

“I mean, I like long hair on a guy. Not that it really matters what I think...” I want to smack myself. He’s my best friend, but who am I to tell him what to do with his hair? And what does it matter what I like?

He brushes his fingers through the strands, his eyes unfocused like he’s thinking about something. I wonder what, but I don’t dare ask. This is awkward enough.

“Your costume was pretty cool,” I say to change the subject. Then I cringe. “I already told you that.”

He bends close. “More than once, but I don’t mind hearing it again. And yours was kickbutt.”

“As you already said.”

He laughs.

Why are things so weird?

And why is it so cold in here? Does this tiny room not have a heater? It looks like it’s on, but I guess it’s barely doing anything. I shiver and hug myself.

“You’re cold?” Liam wraps his arms around me, and I feel his body heat instantly.

“A little, yeah. This helps, thanks.” I press my head to his chest.

My heart pounds when I feel the hard muscles of his chest again.

I glance up at him. He smiles sweetly at me. He’s always had such a nice smile, but it feels different now. Like it’s lighting up his entire face.

It dawns on me that I’ve been an idiot. Why have I been pining after a guy who doesn’t exist for weeks when this awesome, amazing, kind, sweet guy has been here all this time?

But...I can’t let myself feel that way about my best friend, can I? It’ll ruin everything. Change everything. Because if we got together and broke up, we would lose our friendship. Is it worth exploring what could be when there’s so much at stake?

I’m so confused.

“You okay?” he asks as he looks at me with a raised brow.

I throw those thoughts away. “I’m fine. You?”

“Yep. Warm and toasty.” He tightens his hold on me.

Neither of us wants to move to open the book, so we just remain in each other’s arms, talking about today, the show, the cooking competition, everything.

When it gets pretty late, we have no choice but to let go of each other. We don’t have pajamas or spare clothes, so I’ll have to put these back on after I shower.

The water is warm and enjoyable, but the second I leave the bathroom, it’s like walking into a freezer. I shiver.

Liam lifts the blanket. "Get inside and stay warm," he says in a soft voice. "I'll tuck you in tightly to keep out the cold wind."

"You're so sweet." I climb into the bed and he tucks in every inch he can, keeping me warm and comfortable.

"Wait, where will you sleep?" I ask.

He waves his hand. "Don't worry about it." He disappears into the bathroom.

He returns a few minutes later and drops down on the floor.

"What are you doing?" I ask as I sit up and peer down at him. He's sitting there with his legs crossed.

He looks up at me. "I like to read before I go to sleep. Can I borrow book one?"

"You're sleeping on the floor?"

He nods. "Don't worry about it. But, uh, can I have a pillow?"

I stare at the pillow, then at him. My eyebrows knit. "You can't sleep on the floor. It's so cold."

"I don't mind, Chloe."

I shake my head. "But you might get sick. Is there another blanket?" I look around, but don't see anything. "Here, you can have my second covering."

I'm about to pull it off the bed, but he says, "It's okay, Chloe. Really. I just need a pillow and I'm good."

I frown as I take in the T-shirt and jeans he's wearing.
"You'll freeze. There's no way you're sleeping on the floor."

"Where should I sleep then? No way you're sleeping on the floor."

I cross my arms. "But why should you? Because you're a guy?"

"No, because I don't mind. Chloe, let's not argue. I'm fine."

I tighten my arms across my chest. "But I'm not. Come into the bed with me."

His eyes widen. "W-what?"

My cheeks flame.

"There's hardly any room for one person, let alone two. And I'm like a giant. I barely fit."

I lift the blanket. "Get under here or I'm sleeping on the floor."

He sighs, his eyes lingering on mine. Maybe he's thinking of another argument or excuse? There's nothing wrong with best friends sharing a bed.

"Come on, Liam," I urge.

He sighs again, pushing his hair away from his face.
"You're not going to drop this, are you?"

I shake my head resolutely.

After releasing another sigh, he grabs his pillow and climbs in under the covers with me. He's so tall that he drags the whole thing off me. I'm hit with a blast of cold air.

“Hey!” I yank the blanket to me. “Share.”

He shifts again, trying to get comfortable and taking the blanket with him again. “Sorry. I told you I’m too big. I’m going back on the floor.”

I grab his hand before he can make a move. “No. You’re staying right here.” I push myself closer to him. “We just need to figure out how to make this work.”

He shifts closer to me, knocking his leg into mine. “Sorry!”

“It’s okay.”

Back to back doesn’t work, so we turn around to face each other. He looks at me and I look at him.

He lifts his hand to my hair, where he pushes away some strands from my face. He smiles sweetly. “I know I said it already, but I really had a lot of fun with you today.”

The way he’s staring into my eyes? Like he’s been searching for years for something precious and finally found it. It makes me feel so confused. Has he ever looked at me like that?

I playfully slug his shoulder. “We always have fun together.”

“Yeah, but…” He looks away. “You’re right.”

I take his hand. “I had a lot of fun, too.”

He watches me for a while.

“What?” I ask.

His eyes widen and he averts his gaze. “Was just thinking about...stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“Stuff.”

I laugh. “Care to elaborate?”

He shrugs. “A lot of stuff?” He groans. “Just the stuff happening in my life. The future. You know. It was nice to take a break from all that.”

I snuggle up to his chest and immediately feel his warmth. And his pounding heart. Is that because he’s so cold? And maybe a little nervous to be in an unfamiliar town, so far from home? “I know what you mean,” I say. “Once we leave Derryton, it’s back to the real world.”

He smooths his hand down my hair. “Yeah,” he whispers. “The real world.”

I turn around so my back faces him and move to the edge of the bed to give him some room. Liam wraps his arm around me, slowly tugging me back to him. “Is this okay? I don’t want you to accidentally fall off the bed.”

My heart thumps because he’s so close to me. His body so close to mine. Our legs tangled in each other’s. I can feel the hard muscles of his chest, his legs, his arm. “Yeah,” I breathe. “It’s okay.” And so warm and perfect.

His arm around my waist holds me close like he wants to protect me. The place where he touches me burns, just like earlier today.

I turn my head to face him, and his eyes meet mine.

“What?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Just checking if you were sleeping.” I turn back around and face the wall, trying to shove my confusing thoughts out of my head. Liam means so much to me. I love our close friendship. So why is everything blending into one big cloud of confusion?

Is it because I’m so desperate for a boyfriend that my body goes crazy when a guy is nearby? Doesn’t it understand that Liam isn’t...that he can never be...

“Night, Chloe,” he whispers, his warm breath tickling my ear.

My breath catches in my throat and a tingly feeling zaps down my spine.

“You’re so cold,” he murmurs, tightening his arm around me and pulling me toward his chest to try to warm me up. He has no idea that my shiver has nothing to do with the temperature.

“I’m okay, thanks. Good night, Liam,” I whisper.

He bends close and presses a soft kiss on my cheek.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Liam

I press my pillow tightly to my chest, but something doesn't feel right. My pillow is way too hard.

My eyes pop open and I find long brown hair spilled over my chest. My arms are wrapped around Chloe like she really is my pillow, and her head rests on my chest like I'm hers. Her arms are draped around my neck.

I have no idea how that happened. I guess we must have hugged each other in our sleep. Maybe because it's so cold in this motel room.

I keep my eyes on her, my chest rising and falling softly. I dare not move as to not wake her. I have no idea what time it is.

Her head is angled in a way where I can see her face clearly. She looks so peaceful and relaxed, her hair covering her left cheek. I wish I could run my hand through it, feel the silky strands.

This is the closest I've ever been to her and I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it. Heck, I don't mind this at all. My thoughts venture to places they shouldn't venture to—Chloe and me many years down the line, married and waking up like this every morning.

Stupid, my brain yells at me. She doesn't like you like that.

I shut my eyes to try to get more sleep, but my thoughts are too active with this beautiful girl lying so comfortably on my chest.

So I keep my eyes open and try not to watch her. I know she'd be very uncomfortable about that. I busy myself thinking about yesterday and how much fun we had.

I'm not sure how much time passes before she begins to stir, pressing herself even closer to me. She lets out a sigh, as if she's in her happy place and doesn't want to leave.

Her eyes slowly flutter open and she looks straight at me. She blinks and looks around, the motel room and everything that happened probably entering her brain. She looks at where my arms are wrapped protectively around her and her face grows deep red.

"Sorry," I say in a low voice. "Guess we fell asleep on each other." I unwrap my arms from around her and scoot over. "I didn't want to wake you."

She slowly sits up, tucking some hair behind her ear. "It's, um, fine. Thanks for not waking me."

"Of course. We had quite the night."

She nods, her mind seeming to be somewhere else. "What time is it?"

Reaching for my phone, I check the time. "After eleven. Dang, we must have been beat, huh?"

She gives me a small smile. "Pretty standard for you on a Sunday, eh?"

I chuckle. "Kinda."

We're both quiet.

And quiet again.

I look at her, but she's looking anywhere but at me. Why are things so awkward?

She tucks more hair behind her ear, then grabs her phone to check her messages. "My parents want to know what's going on."

I peer at my phone. "Same."

We quickly update our parents that we're fine. Mom tells me the roads have cleared up and bus service has been restored, though there are many delays. We should grab something to eat and come home. Chloe's Dad tells her the same.

"I'm starving," I say as I pat my stomach. "Those sandwiches did *not* fill me up."

She just smiles kindly.

Darn it. We just fell asleep in one bed, all snuggled up—a moment I'll remember forever. Why do things have to be so awkward between us?

Do I make her uncomfortable? Is she upset that I kissed her cheek? I don't know why I did it. It just happened.

"Chloe...about last night..."

She gets to her feet, shoving the blanket out of the way. "Going to the bathroom."

"Oh, sure," I whisper.

I don't want things to be weird between us. If things are weird now, I can only imagine what would happen if we dated. This is why I *need* to keep my distance from her. I'm terrified to lose what we have.

She emerges from the bathroom, then I go. After I'm done, I find her sitting on the bed, her mind once again in a different place.

"Want to grab something to eat?" I ask her. "There's a bus leaving in two hours. Figured we could pack our stuff, check out of the motel, and eat."

She nods. "Okay."

I inch closer to her. "Are you okay?"

She nods again.

"Are you thinking about...?"

Her eyes move to me. "What?"

"Him?" The last time she was this quiet was because of that guy.

She blinks a few times, as if she completely forgot about the secret admirer. "Oh, no. I wasn't. Let's pack."

We don't say much to each other as we stuff our bags. I carefully put away my costume, looking forward to wearing it again next year. If we go, that is.

Chloe stares at her costume for a bit, smiles, and packs it away. We place the gifts we bought for our friends and family in our bags as well. After sweeping the room to make sure we haven't forgotten anything, we check out.

Then it's off to a café for breakfast.

We still don't say much to each other. I want to talk to her, but I don't know what to say. How could we be best friends but have nothing to say to one another? That's never happened to us before.

We enter the café, browse the menu, pick our food, and find seats. I smile at Chloe as I place our bags on the floor between our feet. She returns a small one.

"Nice place," I say.

She nods.

"Is everything okay?" I ask. "You're so quiet."

She plays with the napkin dispenser. "I'm fine. Do I not seem fine?"

"You do," I lie. "Just a little quiet, that's all."

She doesn't say anything, and the table is dead silent. The only sounds are from the other customers and the staff doing their job.

"I guess I'm just tired," she says. "And a little nervous to go home."

I lift a brow. "Nervous?"

"Yeah. We might get stuck somewhere. I don't know. It's stupid."

I reach for her hand and clutch it in mine, immediately feeling her warmth that makes a calmness spread over me. "Nothing you say is stupid. But don't worry, everything will be fine. And you have me. Wherever you go, I go. You're not alone."

She smiles, slowly pulling her hand out of mine and looking away. Puffing out my cheeks, I glance around the café so I won't let my thoughts get consumed by her.

Our food arrives and we dig in. Pancakes, yum, but not as good as Mom's, or mine. And this isn't me being confident or cocky. I just prefer mine.

Chloe takes a bite, makes a face, but continues eating. "They're a little burned. And dry. And..."

"Not like mine?" I tease.

"Yeah. Yours are always so soft and fluffy and perfect."

I grin. "Thanks. Maybe I'll make some for you when we get home."

"It's fine. You don't have to. You should focus on the competition. It's only a few days away."

"Yeah."

We're quiet again as we finish our breakfast. Things are still strained between us as we make our way to the bus stop and sit down. We have forty minutes until it arrives. Too much time to be sitting here in awkward silence. But what can I do if she can hardly look at me?

"Chloe, are we okay?"

Blinking, she faces me. "Of course. Why are you asking?"

"You just seem so quiet and distant."

"I'm not."

I want to argue, but decide not to. I'll just push her away more. We sit in silence for a few more minutes before I say,

“Is this about this morning? When we woke up wrapped—”

“Is that the bus?” she cuts me off.

Straining my eyes, I don’t see anything in the distance other than cars. “Don’t think so.”

She nods and shuts her eyes, clearly not interested in having a conversation with me. And it sucks because I love talking to her. I love just being with her. And she’s treating me like I’m a nuisance. A pesky fly buzzing in her ear.

But I kind of get it. Things were awkward this morning when we woke up in each other’s arms. Why do they still have to be weird, though? Why can’t we go back to before?

She continues to rest while I play a game on my phone. I text Xavier for an update on Spencer. He’s feeling better, but needs to stay in the hospital for another day or two.

Then the bus comes and Chloe and I climb on, taking seats in the back. She rests her head on the window, as though she wants to keep an even larger distance between us.

For the first half hour of the drive, I keep my distance as well. But I can’t take this anymore. If we don’t fix whatever is broken between us, we might never recover.

“Chloe, please talk to me,” I nearly beg. “You’re treating me like a stranger.”

She slowly turns her head, eyes filled with guilt and regret as they settle on me. “I don’t mean to,” she says in a low voice. “I’m just embarrassed.” She cringes and turns to the window again.

I rest my hand on her shoulder. “Because of this morning?”

Still with her head turned away from me, she nods.

“But why? We used to fall asleep on each all the time when we were kids.”

“We’re not kids anymore, Liam.”

“I...I know...”

She finally faces me. “Can we not talk about it?”

“Sure, but please don’t shut me out. You’re my best friend.”

She smiles and takes hold of my hand. “And you’re mine. But...I just want to be alone with my thoughts for three and a half hours. Is that okay?”

“Of course. Sorry.”

“Thanks.” She drops my hand and faces the window again.

Mom’s waiting for us at the bus stop as we pull up. The second we get off, she throws her arms over both of us, hugging us close.

“I’m so glad you kids are all right,” she breathes. Drawing back, she smiles. “Did you have a good time?”

“The best,” I say. Chloe nods in agreement, a small smile on her face.

As we drive home, we tell Mom all about our day and our experience at the motel. Of course we skip the part about sharing one bed and waking up snuggled in each other’s arms. Nope. As far as our parents are concerned, we slept in two separate beds in two separate rooms.

We drop Chloe off at her place, she clutching her bag with her costume and gifts for her family. She thanks us, gives me a stiff smile, then tells me she'll see me later. We invited our friends to come to my house in a few hours to give them their presents and tell them about the convention.

Mom and I reach our house and enter. Lily, Evie, and Dad crowd around me, everyone wanting to know how I am and how the convention and motel were.

As we all sit together and eat an early dinner, I tell them everything—again, omitting certain parts.

Lily squeals. “You really got the actors’ autographs?”

I chuckle. “Sure did. And we got some for you and Xavier, too.”

“Awesome. He’ll be so happy.”

We chat for a little while before Evie goes down to the basement and Mom and Dad clean up. Lily and I go up to my room and wait for the others. They should be here soon.

We talk about Spencer, more about the convention, and she’s a little jealous when I tell her I saw the trailer for the upcoming season. It’s online, now, so she runs to watch it.

“I’m so happy it’s been renewed for another season. My life is complete.”

I laugh, but I can’t help worrying about Chloe. Will she be back to her old self now that the others will be here? Will they notice something off with her?

“Wow, you just got all serious,” Lily says as she studies my face. Her hands shoot to her hips. “Are you hiding

something from me, Liam Hastings?”

I give her the best innocent look I can muster. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m not hiding anything.”

She rolls her eyes. “My twin telepathy tells me otherwise.”

“Knock, knock! The Junior Musketeers and the boyfriends are in the house,” Ava announces as she and the others pile into my room.

My eyes automatically spring to Chloe, who focuses on the others instead of me. I slump forward. Darn it.

“We want to hear all about it,” Willow says as they gather around on my bed and the floor.

Chloe and I tell them everything. She completely transforms, acting like her old self. She even gives me her usual Chloe smile that I love. My heart lifts at the hope that maybe things will be okay between us.

“Now for the gifts,” I say as I get to my feet.

“Aw, you shouldn’t have,” Ava says with an excited smile.

I lift both eyebrows at her and touch my chest. “Oh, rats. I forgot Ava.”

Laughing, she says, “Okay, I totally deserved that. But you did get me something, right?”

I tap my chin. “I don’t remember.”

She playfully rolls her eyes. “I know you didn’t forget me. Because I’m so loveable and memorable.”

“You’ll just have to see,” I say with another chuckle.

We hand Willow, Ava, and Aidan their T-shirts and hats, and other things we got for them. None of them are into the show, but they love their presents.

“See! Told ya.” Ava hugs her stuff. “Thanks.”

Lily and Xavier glance at one another. “What about us?” Xavier asks.

Chloe and I grin at each other before she pulls out Lily’s gift from the bag and hides it behind her back. I hand Xavier the snow globe. His eyes nearly pop out of their sockets as he takes it. “This is amazing! Selos’s epic battle with the hydra.”

“We thought you might like it,” I say with another grin. “You don’t have this one, right?”

He shakes his head, eyes still wide as he gazes at his gift. “No. Thanks so much.” He wraps his free arm around me, then does the same to Chloe.

Lily bounces in her seat, trying to be happy for her boyfriend while trying to contain her excitement and curiosity.

Chloe pulls the collection of books out from behind her and presents them to my sister. Lily leaps off the bed and grabs them from Chloe. “Is this what I think it is?”

Chloe nods with her lips kicked up. “You bet.”

“A series of books about Selos and Fiora’s epic story? I thought these aren’t available yet!”

“Not to the public,” I tell her. “But the guests were able to buy an advanced copy.”

“We knew you had to have it,” Chloe adds.

Lily flings her arms around Chloe, squishing her to her chest. “This is one of the most awesome gifts anyone has ever given me. Thanks so much!” She releases Chloe and then pulls me into her arms. “You guys are the best brother and friend I could ever ask for.”

I smile. “Of course, sis.”

The others thank us for their gifts as well.

“Did you get the set of books for yourself too, Chloe?” Lily asks.

“I got the series about Aleriana and Torenin.”

Lily squeals. “Fiora and Selos are my favorite, but you need to let me borrow Aleriana and Torenin.”

“Duh. As long as you let me borrow those.”

Lily hugs her again. “Deal!”

When Lily releases her from the hug, Chloe smiles at me, a real, warm smile. It’s like she’s giving me a message—we made Lily and Xavier happy. They couldn’t make it to the convention, but they have a little piece of it with them.

But I’m more focused on the fact that she’s no longer shutting me out. Whatever that was this morning...I hope we can forget about it and go back to how we used to be.

Best friends.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chloe

“Ugh,” I mutter as I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror Monday morning. I wish I could go back in time and agree to allow Liam to sleep on the floor at the motel. Not that I would have wanted him to be uncomfortable, but it would have saved us the awkward morning. Liam is my *best friend*. We’ve known each other since we were in diapers. And we woke up together in one bed like we were a couple.

“Ugh, again.”

This is why I can’t think of him other than my best friend. I can’t get closer to him, even though a part of me wonders, hopes, dreams...

“No.” I shake my head resolutely. Liam and I need to be friends and only friends. Because he and I are good together, and if I would lose him, it would change everything. Ruin everything. And not just for him and for me. It will affect the whole gang. How weird would it be if two of the Junior Musketeers would become closer? Hang out all the time without everyone else and make out and...

And what would happen if things didn’t work out and we broke up? Would that tear apart our friends? Lily would have to side with Liam because she’s his twin, and what would Ava and Willow do? Not to mention my friendship with Liam would be over. No, no, no. Things have to stay the way they are. They *have* to.

Which is why I sit down at my desk to write a letter to my secret admirer. I can't ruin my relationship with Liam because he means too much to me, but I have the potential to start a relationship with someone new. I know he hasn't been treating me fairly by keeping his identity a secret, but I want to give him the benefit of the doubt and believe there's a genuine reason for his behavior. Maybe he really is shy or has anxiety and needs to take things slow. Maybe he's never approached a girl before and is scared of being rejected.

Or maybe he's been burned in the past and is trying to protect his heart from possible future heartache. I believe deep inside that he's a good guy who just needs time. I can give him that. I'm hoping that he would read my apology letter and forgive me and we can pick up from where we left off.

Taking a deep breath, I start the letter:

Dear Secret Admirer,

Hi. It's me, Chloe Barrington. How are you? I hope you're doing okay, and I hope it's okay that I wrote you this letter. There's so much I want to say to you. I hope you can find it in your heart to accept my apology and forgive me.

I'm sorry for pushing you when you weren't ready. I think I've just been...I guess a little too eager to find out who you are. No one has ever written me a letter before. Well honestly, no guy has ever been interested in me before. Your letters were so special and I loved your poems. They made me feel something I've never felt before. So it drove me a little crazy, haha. But I want you to know that I can wait. I can wait as long as you need. Until you're ready to reveal who you are. If

it helps, we can continue writing letters and get to know each other better. If Derek Chen is okay with being the deliveryman, I would be okay with this arrangement.

I hope my words have brought you some peace of mind. If you'd rather cut ties with me, I completely understand. I want you to do what you're most comfortable with.

Sincerely,

Chloe Barrington

I read the letter over several times to make sure it's perfect. Then I fold it and place it in an envelope, my heart galloping faster than an award-winning racehorse. If my secret admirer doesn't want to keep some sort of relationship between us, I'll accept it and move on.

After I eat breakfast with my family, Noah drives us to school. The whole ride, my heart races through my chest. I barely pay attention to Noah or my friends who text me. I just stare at the spot before me, imagining what it would be like if my secret admirer accepted my apology and we would start... something.

"Chloe? We're here."

I blink and realize Noah has parked in the student lot and has unbuckled his belt.

"Oh." I gather my stuff and push the door open.

"You, okay?" he asks. "You seem out of it."

"Yeah. Just stressing out about my physics test."

"Good luck. I'm sure you'll do great."

“Thanks.”

I get out of the car and make my way toward the school building, my eyes scanning the area for Derek Chen. I don't see him out here, so he's either inside or hasn't come to school yet.

“Chloe! Over here!” Ava calls from her locker, where she stands with Aidan and Willow.

I wave at them, letting them know I'll join them soon, and then walk through the hallway, eyes focusing on the students gathered around. “Please be here,” I mutter. If I don't give it to him soon, I might lose my nerve.

My body deflates when I reach the end of the hallway and there's no sign of Derek. Maybe I can catch him during lunch.

I'm about to head to Ava's locker, when I spot him entering the school with the friend he was speaking to the other day. As though someone has lit a fire under my butt, I race over to him and make a short stop before him, almost crashing into him.

His eyes widen when he sees me. “Oh. Hey.”

“Hey. Can you—?”

He holds up his hands. “Sorry. I can't tell you who he is. Please don't put me in this position.”

I shake my head. “I don't want you to tell me who he is. I just want to know a few things.”

“Um...okay. If I can answer them.”

“Does he go to our school?”

“Yeah.”

“Is he my age?”

“Um...I think so.”

“Is he messing with me or is he serious?”

“From what I can tell, he seems pretty serious to me.”

That causes a sigh of relief to escape out of me. “Okay, good. Is he a jerk or is he a good guy, as far as you can tell?”

“Seems like a good guy.”

That causes another sigh to escape me. “Have you spoken to him since the last time? Does he seem upset that he and I... that we’re um...?”

Derek scratches the back of his head. “He did seem pretty down, yeah.”

“Can you give this to him?” I hold out the letter. “Please?”

He regards the note. “You want me to give it to him, even though I’m not telling you who he is?”

“Yeah. If you don’t mind. And don’t worry, I won’t try to spy on you or anything. I want to respect his privacy.”

Derek seems a little suspicious, but he must see the honest expression on my face because he nods and takes it from me. “I’ll give it to him.”

“Thanks.”

I make my way to Ava’s locker. Lily, Xavier, and Liam have joined them as well, and they all watch me with curious expressions.

“What was that?” Lily asks.

“I decided to write him a letter,” I admit. “I’ve thought about this long and hard and concluded that I want to give him a shot. Derek assured me that he’s not a jerk but someone who is serious. I don’t want to give up on him yet. He needs time, and I’ll give him as much as he needs. Until he’s comfortable to reveal his identity to me.”

“That makes me so happy!” Lily throws her arms around me. “I knew it couldn’t be over between you guys. Just be patient with him and everything will work out.”

“Well, he needs to respond to my letter first,” I say. “But yeah, I’m hopeful.”

“I’m also so glad you’re not giving up on him,” Ava says. “I am and always will be on Team Love.”

Willow and the boys tell me similar things. Liam is quiet. I bring my eyes to his. “What do you think?”

He sighs. “Does it really matter?”

I tear my eyes away. “No. I mean, yeah. I mean, I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, Liam?” Lily asks. “Of course Chloe thinks highly of your opinion. Look, can you please not ruin this for her? I get that you’re worried about her, but I think you need to let her do this. She needs to know if something could be there with this guy or she’ll wonder for the rest of her life.”

Liam shrugs. “You’re right. Either way, you’re free to do whatever you want. Don’t let me hold you back.” He’s about to turn around, then twists back around and puts his hand on my shoulder. “Just be careful, okay? If he writes something that makes you uncomfortable or confronts you at school, or

makes you feel unsafe in any way, promise you'll tell me?
Don't keep it to yourself because you're embarrassed or want
to prove that he's a good guy. I just want you to be safe.
Okay?"

His eyes hold nothing but raw and real concern.

I nod.

"Thanks."

The bell rings and Liam removes his hand from my
shoulder. Lily wraps her arm around me as we head to English.
"Now, are you going to tell us what you wrote in that letter?"

Dear Chloe,

Thanks so much for your letter. You can't imagine the
smile it brought to my face. I really appreciate you taking the
time to write me such a thoughtful and heartfelt message.

My only issue with your letter is that you have no reason
to apologize to me. I'm the one who should be apologizing to
you. I have so much to explain to you. I hope you find it in
YOUR unbelievably kind heart to forgive me. You've been
nothing but sweet and kind.

I suppose the only explanation I can give you is that I felt
like a jerk. I still feel like a jerk. You've been so amazing, and
I've kept you in the dark all this time. I convinced myself that
you're better off without me because the only thing I'll bring
you is disappointment, which is why I decided to cut myself
out of your life. If I'm honest, it was one of the hardest things
I've done in my life. I've missed writing to you. Which I know

might make me sound like a stalker...but I'm not a stalker. I swear. I just think the world of you.

I wish I were confident enough to tell you who I am. I dream of that day. But I'm not ready. You're so kind for suggesting we exchange letters until I'm ready. The fact that you're willing to wait for me makes you the selfless, lovely person that you are. Thank you so much for being patient with me. It makes me a little emotional to know that I'm corresponding with such a special person like yourself.

I spoke to Derek and he agreed to be the deliveryman. He'll continue dropping my letters into your locker, if that's okay with you. And you can hand him your letters to me.

Chloe, I can't emphasize how much I appreciate you and the amazing, special, stupendous, wonderful, extraordinary, fantastic, remarkable, phenomenal (there are many more adjectives I can use, but I'll stop here) person that you are. I hope I'm worthy enough for you when we meet face to face.

I very much look forward to your next letter.

Sincerely,

Your Secret Admirer

My cheeks hurt from the huge smile that has taken over my face. My friends and I are in the hallway Tuesday morning. Lily asks for the note, and I'm about to pass it to her, but Willow snatches it from her hand.

"Hey! Me first," Lily protests.

“Now that Chloe and her man are getting closer, I think the rest of us need to stay out of it.” Willow holds the letter out to me. “This is something private between you guys. Don’t be scared to be real with him, Chloe. I think the more genuine and honest you are, the more comfortable he will be. And hopefully, it won’t be long before he reveals himself to you.”

Ava nods. “Willow’s right. We’ve all been too nosy. Keep him to yourself, Chloe. Just keep us in the loop, okay?”

Lily’s frown disappears. “Sorry. I guess I’m so invested in you guys that I didn’t realize we stepped out of line. He’s all yours, Chloe.” She smiles.

“Thanks, guys.” I hug the letter to my chest. “I think this has been his most authentic letter yet.”

Liam rubs my shoulder again. “Just remember what I told you. Let me know the second you feel uncomfortable.”

“Thanks.”

They head to class while I remain at my locker and read the letter for the millionth time, my cheeks hurting even more.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Liam

The entire gang of Barringtons, Hastings, Parks, and Knights are coming to watch Chloe and me compete in the first round of the Young Chefs of Tomorrow cooking competition.

I'm in way, way over my head. Chloe and I have been practicing and the dishes are solid, but I'm up against fierce competition.

On the drive to Silverton, Mom glances at me. "You doing okay?"

I force a smile. "Hanging in there."

Lily, on my right, squeezes my shoulder. "You're going to kick everyone's butts."

I try to laugh, but I'm too frozen with nerves. Evie, on my other side, is finishing up the posters she made with "Liam is #1," plus a few others for our family and friends to wave around in the audience.

Uncle Zane, Aunt Bailey, and my cousins will come watch me compete as well. And Aunt Amanda, her husband Alejandro, and my cousin Alex hope to attend, too. So we're going to have quite the cheering squad.

We arrive at the building and get out of the car. Those who aren't competing aren't allowed inside yet, so my family will take in the sights while Chloe and I are inside.

As soon as her parents drop her off, she wraps her arms around me. “I’m so excited for you,” she whispers against my chest.

I hold her close. “Thanks, Chloe.”

She glances up at me with a smile that makes her entire face shine. I’m so glad we’re back to normal and can put whatever happened at the motel behind us. Chloe’s pretending like it didn’t happen and I try to do the same. But it’s hard for me not to think about it here and there.

She takes my hand, and together we make our way into the building. The other contestants are there as well and we’re instructed to sit down and listen to the events that will happen today.

They go over the rules a few times to make sure everyone’s on the same page. Soon, the audience starts filling up. We can hear them from where we’re gathered in a separate room.

I wipe my sweaty palms on my pants. They handed us chef coats with the competition logo on the front, and for the first time I feel like a real chef. Like I’m about to start my day working in a restaurant. Just thinking about it makes me very excited about the future. Whether or not I win the scholarship, this is definitely something I want to do with my life.

Viraj, the host, steps out into the audience and welcomes everyone. The contestants are standing backstage, getting ready to be introduced. Chloe takes my hand and gives it a squeeze. Did I mention she looks adorable in her chef coat?

“Let us meet your teen contestants!” Viraj announces. One by one, he calls the contestants and their schools. It sucks that they’re not introducing the helpers, too. Chloe should be recognized for all the great things she’ll do.

“And a junior from Edenbury High School, Liam Hastings!” I swear I can hear our family and friends’ rowdy cheering as we run onto the stage. The place is set up with twenty stations for the contestants. Chloe and I are toward the center, so our families and friends should have a good view of us.

I give my friends and family a wave and a large smile. Evie, cheering the loudest, waves her poster around. The others wave theirs as well.

I get super nervous all of a sudden. I know they believe in me and won’t be disappointed if I don’t win. But still. I want to win. For them, for Chloe, and for myself.

It’s kind of the same adrenaline rush I get when they come to my games, but also a little different. When I’m on the court, I rely on my teammates. Now, it’s on my shoulders. And Chloe’s as well, but I hope she doesn’t feel any stress.

I turn to her and smile. “Whatever happens, let’s have fun.”

She nods, returning the smile.

Viraj introduces the judges. Two of them are famous chefs who own restaurants all over the country and the third is Catherine Robinson, dean of the Robinson Culinary Institute. It’s one of the top culinary schools in America. The winner of the competition will win a scholarship to her school.

Then Viraj announces the rules of the first challenge. No one is getting eliminated, but the contestant with the winning dish will have an advantage in the next round.

Two people push in a long table covered in a white sheet. Every single contestant's eyes widen as they watch. Oh, man. What are they going to have us do?

"I know you're all dying to know what's under the sheet." Viraj chuckles. "Please remove the sheet." They do as instructed and everyone gasps in wonder at the items on the table.

All different kinds of seafood. I recognize a few, but I have no idea what most of them are.

"There are twenty varieties of seafood," Viraj explains. "Each team must cook one item, and you will have access to anything you find in the pantry as well. On the count of three, the contestants must run to grab their item. But if you shove or hurt anyone, you will be disqualified."

"What are we going for?" Chloe hisses at me.

My mouth opens and closes, my mind blank. "Whatever I can grab, I guess."

"But Liam..."

I know. I know. Working with an ingredient we don't know will put us at a disadvantage. But isn't the point of the competition to step out of my comfort zone and show the judges what I can do?

"It'll be okay," I whisper to her. "Trust me."

"One, two, three!"

The cooks dash to the table, a few pushing, but no one hurts anyone. I manage to squeeze between two guys and reach for whatever I can find. A plate full of sardines. Okay, not bad. I can work with this.

“What did you get?” Chloe asks when I return to her. When she sees the sardines, she sighs in relief.

Some of the other ingredients are so foreign I wouldn't know what to do with them.

One by one, Viraj has us display what we have chosen. When it's my turn, my cheer team whoops and squeals.

Viraj laughs. “Quite a crowd you got there.”

“Yeah.” I laugh awkwardly, glancing at my crew, who wave frantically and cheer some more.

“You have forty minutes to cook your seafood dish,” Viraj instructs. “And your time starts now!”

And we're off to the pantry to grab whatever we'll need for our dish. I direct Chloe to fetch the vegetables, while I gather the other items we'll need, like appliances and spices.

Once we get everything we need, we lug our baskets back to the kitchen to start cooking. Chloe and I have made something similar in practice, so we pretty much know what to do.

Because our station is tiny, we keep knocking into each other while reaching for various ingredients.

“Sorry!” I say when my shoulder knocks into hers. A zap shoots down my arm.

“It's, um, fine.”

What was that? Did she feel it, too? She's not looking my way—she's busy with the dish—and I wonder if it was all in my head. I mean, it's not like she thinks about me in any special way. She pretty much has a boyfriend now...

I squeeze my eyes shut. Why the heck am I thinking about this *now*? It's not the time to be jealous.

Jealous? Am I jealous? Why should I be jealous of him?

“Liam?” Chloe breaks me from my thoughts.

I shake my head. “Yeah, sorry. I need to...” I bend over her to reach for something and our lips are inches from each other.

I can't help but glance at hers. She glances at mine, too. But then she pushes away and focuses on her dish.

What am I doing? She's into someone else. I'm at a competition that could change my life. So why am I feeling all these weird things? It's *not* the place or the time.

“Liam!” my cheer team chants. “Liam! Liam! Liam!”

I smile and wave at them. Others are chanting the rest of the contestants' names, but they're not as loud as my crew. It pumps me up with so much adrenaline, I want to destroy this challenge.

Like other cooking competitions, the judges visit the contestants to chat about their dish. They seem interested in what I'm going to present to them, and that makes me even more excited than I was. Maybe Chloe and I could win this round and have that advantage?

The audience counts down the last ten seconds while we put the finishing touches to our dish. My hands shake, but I

manage to get everything on the plate and Chloe helps make it look pretty. After all, people eat with their eyes first before their stomachs.

“Hands in the air!” Viraj instructs.

All our hands shoot in the air to show we’re not cheating by quickly adding something to our dishes.

The judges walk down the line of stations, tasting everyone’s dish. I glance at my parents and find them both smiling encouragingly at me.

When the judges reach our station, Chloe and I straighten up. I explain the dish to them, watch as they taste it, and answer the questions they ask.

“Hmm, very interesting,” one of the judges murmurs. The others nod and then they move on to the next contestant.

Chloe and I look at one another. I have no idea what that means. This is the first time professional chefs have tasted my food.

After they’ve sampled everyone’s dish, they announce the top three they enjoyed the most.

“Sienna, Frances, and Liam.”

The audience erupts in cheers, my family and Chloe’s and all our friends the loudest.

“Liam! Top three!” Chloe flings her arms around me.

I hug her back, lifting her a few inches off the floor.

The judges go to deliberate for a bit, then return to announce the winner. “Sienna!”

Darn.

Chloe takes my hand. “It’s okay. We don’t need an advantage to own their butts.”

I nod, smiling. The important thing is that they liked our dish.

“Now for the elimination challenge,” Viraj announces. “We’d like you to put yourself on a dish. Let us get to know you.”

Chloe and I prepared for this, but I’m still freaking out. They give us a few minutes to plan the dish, then we run to the pantry to grab everything we need. We’ve decided on a dish that encompasses my interests—basketball, *Swords and Legends*, and books. It’s going to be one epic dish. I hope.

Chloe and I work very hard, once again knocking and crashing into one another. I know I shouldn’t be focusing on the feelings sparking through my body, but I can’t help it. It’s like ever since we slept together in that bed, something has shifted inside me. Something that clearly has not had the same effect on Chloe.

“Time is up!” Viraj announces. “Hands in the air.”

Like before, the judges walk from station to station, tasting the dishes. My heart hammers in my chest. If I don’t pass this round, I’m out.

When the judges reach our station, I grab Chloe’s hand and she squeezes mine. The judges ask questions, but put on poker faces so I have no idea what they’re thinking.

It’s torture as they finish with the tasting, then leave to deliberate. Most teams keep to themselves as we wait, a few

chat. Chloe and I stand at our station, facing each other with our hands clasped.

“You’ve got this,” she encourages. “Those kids have nothing on you.”

“Us,” I correct. “Thanks for being here with me.”

She wraps her arms around my waist, keeping a bit of a distance. I want to tug her closer, but I force myself not to.

It doesn’t take long for the judges to return with their decision. They call ten names, ordering them to step up before them. I’m part of the first group. The partners hang behind.

“Congratulations,” Catherine Robinson says with a wide grin. “You have all made it to the next round.” She turns to the other ten contestants. “You all did great and should be proud of yourselves. But I’m afraid it’s time for you to go home.”

Everyone claps for them as they leave the kitchen.

Viraj stands and addresses the top ten. “Congratulations to those who made it to the next round!”

He gives us instructions, and then we’re directed out of the kitchen. We’re allowed to keep our aprons. Win or lose, they’re ours.

“Yay!” Chloe throws her arms around me once we’re in the back room. “I knew you’d make it.”

“Thanks so much.” I hug her close.

We meet our friends and family outside. Mom and Dad can’t stop hugging me and telling me how proud they are of me. Uncle Zane and Aunt Bailey also pull me into their arms.

Zoey and Brock inform me that they think I'm pretty cool for making it to the next round.

I ruffle both their heads. "Thanks, guys."

The rest of the Four Musketeers and their kids, and my friends, also congratulate me. And hug me close. I don't think it's sinking in yet that I'm one step closer to winning a scholarship to culinary school and fulfilling my dreams.

The gang talks and laughs for a while before it's time for us to head home. My head spins as we get in the car and Dad drives us to Edenbury.

Lily wraps her arm over me. "I knew you could do it, womb buddy."

Even though I hate when she calls me that, I let it slide because I'm just too excited. And nervous, and I don't know!

Evie hands me a sheet of paper. It's a drawing of me and Chloe during the competition. I look so happy, so in my element. "Wow," I say with wide eyes. "This is so cool. You drew it so quickly."

She shrugs. "It's just a rough sketch."

"It's perfect."

"Thanks. Figured you'd want to hang that on your wall."

I hug her. "I love it. Thanks."

"Just captured you exactly how you are. A budding chef."

I smile. "Thanks again."

As we continue the drive home, I think back to the competition. Specifically, the sparks that shot through my

body when Chloe and I knocked into each other.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chloe

My secret admirer and I have been exchanging letters for the past few days. Every morning, a letter falls out of my locker, and I hand a response to Derek before the day is over. It's become our routine. While my guy has been writing sweet words and poems, I still don't have a sense of *who* he is. He keeps everything on the surface. Which, I can understand because he's still not ready to be that open with me. But I do feel him opening up just a little with each letter, and that gives me hope that it won't be long before he feels comfortable to open up completely.

As I wait in 1B for my friends to arrive, my phone beeps with an email to my school address. It's Mr. Love's next response for the online advice column. As editor-in-chief, I need to approve it before he can post it on the school website. I slip out my laptop and open the email.

Dear Mr. Love,

I'm not much of a writer, so I'll keep this brief.

I love my girlfriend. She's awesome and great with me. But my seven-year-old sister claims my girlfriend bullies her. My sister is a prankster and lies a lot, so I don't know if I should believe her. My girlfriend is a mess, crying every day

claiming it's not true. My parents tell me to break up with her. But I really think she's innocent. What should I do?

Thanks for answering, man. Doing me a solid.

Desperate Guy

Dear Desperate Guy,

That's a tough situation to be in. I'm sorry for what you're going through. I think the only thing you can do at this point is to talk to your parents and voice your concerns. Tell them exactly what's going on. Hopefully, they'll be able to get through to your sister and get to the bottom of this. Is she the one lying, or is it your girlfriend? It might also be wise to not allow your girlfriend and sister to be alone together until you figure this out. If your sister is telling the truth, then I hope you know what the right choice is.

Stay strong and always strive to be the best person you can be. Because you never know what kind of effect you can have on the people around you.

Sincerely,

Mr. Love

I sit up straight in my seat when my eyes soak in the last paragraph in Mr. Love's post. My heart pounds in my head, making me feel lightheaded. Those words...I've seen them before.

I reach into the folder where I've carefully stashed all of the letters my secret admirer and I have exchanged and

quickly open it, my hands shaking so badly that I drop it a few times. Finally, I manage to get control of my hands and flip through the letters and poems. Until I find the poem he wrote to me a few days ago.

I know you always strive to be the best person you can be, Chloe,

Because you know the kind of effect you have on people around you, especially me.

The words are pretty similar. Too similar? That has to be a coincidence, right? It's not so unheard of for two people to write similar words...right?

My heart beats stronger in my head. This is too much of a coincidence.

I open the folder on my computer, where I saved all of Mr. Love's online responses. I guess I used to have a huge crush on him. I comb through each and every response he's given, devouring the words like I've never devoured anything in my life. My heart hammers so intensely that I grow dizzy. A few of his responses are similar to my secret admirer's.

Is my guy stealing Mr. Love's words?

But it can't be because the secret admirer wrote those words a few days ago. Mr. Love's new response hasn't been posted yet because I haven't approved it. Which means my secret admirer couldn't have stolen Mr. Love's words. Does that mean that Mr. Love has stolen from my secret admirer? Which means...

They're the same person.

No. I'm being too rash. I'm sure it's just a coincidence. It has to be. The two of them don't even write in similar styles.

But the more I study their words, the more similar they seem. And as I study my secret admirer's words and compare them to Mr. Love's responses, I find many more similarities. They're so easy to miss, unless you're dissecting them like I am.

"Holy..." I gasp as I fall back in my seat. "Mr. Love is my secret admirer."

"Hey, Chloe," Ava says as she and Willow walk in and settle down in their seats. "Lily will be here soon and Liam has basketball."

"You okay?" Willow narrows her eyes at me, studying me closely. "You look like you saw a ghost."

"I...he..." The words get stuck in my throat.

"I'm here, I'm here." Lily runs inside and drops down in her seat. "I held back from making out with Xavier so we could have more time for book club. So, who's ready to discuss *Dracula*." She says it in a spooky tone, but my head feels like it's going to explode.

"Chloe?" Lily asks. "You look like you saw the real Dracula."

"Yeah," Willow agrees. "I don't think I've ever seen you so pale."

"Chloe." Lily takes my arms and shakes me gently. "What's wrong? You're scaring us."

“He’s Mr. Love,” I whisper.

“What? Who?” Ava asks.

“My secret admirer. He’s Mr. Love.”

“What do you mean?” Lily asks.

With shaky hands, I pass them the poem and show them my computer screen. Willow takes them from me and studies them closely, her eyes narrowing, then widening, and then her jaw falls open. “Wait a sec. This is very similar.”

“And these, too.” I open the other responses and show her more of my secret admirer’s letters. Ava and Lily stretch their necks to glimpse them.

“Oh my gosh.” Ava gasps. “He *is* the same person.”

“How did I not notice it sooner?” I ask, my mind still reeling. “I used to know Mr. Love’s responses by heart. I had some of them memorized.”

“I guess because you didn’t care about him anymore because your focus was on your secret admirer,” Willow says.

“But they’re the same person.” Lily gapes at me. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

I raise my shoulders. “I don’t know. I don’t know who either of them is.”

“But you have his email,” Ava points out. “You can email him and tell him you figured it out.”

I shake my head. “He and I are exchanging wonderful letters. I feel like he’s slowly opening up to me. I can’t drop a bomb on him like that. I can’t risk losing him again.” With another shake of my head, I gather all the letters and my

computer. “I need to forget this information. I’ll wait until he feels comfortable enough to tell me.”

“Mr. Love and your secret admirer, the same person.” Lily’s eyes are wide open. “I never saw that coming.”

“So...Chloe’s had a crush on the same person,” Ava realizes.

Lily squeals. “Which means they’re meant to be!”

“Totally!” Ava agrees.

“You think so?” I ask, my cheeks heating up and my stomach twisting with hope.

“I’m not one to believe in destiny and all that stuff,” Willow says. “But it’s interesting that you had feelings for the same person. Maybe you *are* destined to be with him.”

“It’s a good thing you didn’t give up on him.” Lily nods with a proud smile. “See, I told you not to close the door on him. He’s an expert on romance, Chloe!”

I hold up my hand. “We’re getting way ahead of ourselves. I think he and I need to continue going at the pace we’re at. The only difference is...”

“You can swoon over Mr. Love’s responses!” Lily exclaims, clutching her heart, her eyes shining.

Willow reaches for her copy of *Dracula*. “This is so wild.”

“So wild, indeed,” I say.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Liam

After I get home from basketball practice and am about to start my homework, my phone beeps with a text.

Willow: Can you come over to my house ASAP? I need to talk to you.

Liam: Sure. Leaving now.

I tell my parents that I'm heading to Willow's and then make my way over there. She doesn't live too far from my house, so it doesn't take long to get there. Just as I jog up the stairs to ring her bell, the door swings open and Mia appears.

"Hey, Liam. Willow's expecting you." She widens the door for me to enter and then shuts it after me.

"Are you her secretary?" I joke.

"Nope. Just trying to do nice things around the house so my parents will let me go on an audition next week."

"Still serving your sentence, huh?"

She scowls. "My mom doesn't know how to have fun. My dad's okay, though. But I think he's softening her up. Fingers crossed that my good deeds around the house will sway her."

"And don't forget good grades. You'll totally win brownie points with your mom."

She grins. "Already taken care of. Straight As in the *bag*."

“Nice. Well, I hope you get to go on that audition. See you later.”

After exchanging hellos with Charlie and Asher, I go upstairs to Willow’s room and knock on the door.

“Come in!” she calls.

“Hey, Willow,” I greet when I enter. “What’s the big emergency?”

She’s sitting at her desk with her back facing me. She doesn’t turn around, just says, “Can you sit on that chair?”

There’s only one other chair in the room. The one right in the center.

“Uh...okay. Why are you being weird?” Her back still faces me.

She doesn’t answer as I sit down. Nor does she move for the first thirty seconds. When she finally does, she slowly lifts herself off her chair and walks over to WillowBot, who’s cleaning her room. Willow sweeps her off the floor and turns her off, depositing her on the desk. Her gaze hasn’t met mine since I stepped foot in here.

“Uh, Willow? Is everything okay?”

She finally turns around and pins her eyes on me. She’s got a strange expression on her face, one I’ve never seen before.

Folding her arms over her chest, she leans against the desk and narrows her eyes at me. “So Chloe learned something very interesting yesterday.”

“She did?”

“Yeah. She figured out that Mr. Love is her secret admirer.”

“Wait, what?” I gape at her. “You’re saying Mr. Love is the one who’s been writing her those love notes? But how? There’s no way. Mr. Love is a girl.”

“Liam, he’s not a girl. He’s the one who’s been writing her those letters. Mr. Love used similar phrases that her secret admirer used.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” I ask. “I mean, Chloe likes Mr. Love. And he’s supposedly this amazing love expert—”

“Chloe is falling hard for her secret admirer and I wanted to make sure the guy was legit,” she interrupts as she straightens up and starts pacing her room. “I kept asking myself the whole day today, ‘Is there any way I can find out who Mr. Love is?’ I was able to trace his location. I found out where he lives.” She spins around to face me. “It brought me to the Hastings residence.”

I just stare at her, not sure what she’s getting at.

“So let’s see...” She paces her room again. “How many people live in the Hastings residence? Five, right?” She raises five fingers. “Your parents, Ally and Zack. Pretty sure the last thing either of them would do is spend their time writing in an anonymous advice column for our high school paper.” She lowers two fingers. “Next is Evie Hastings. The girl who’s so dedicated to her art. I’m pretty positive she wouldn’t spend her time on a dating advice column, not when she’s so preoccupied with her college art portfolio.” She lowers another finger. “Now there’s Lily Hastings, our hopeless romantic who has snagged the boy of her dreams. She eats, breathes, lives

love, but would she be writing Chloe love letters? I highly doubt it.” She lowers another finger. “So that leaves us with one Hastings.” She holds up her finger and turns to face me. “Liam.”

My heart pounds in my head like a hammer. Over and over. Harder and harder.

I hang my head. “Are you going to tell her?” I whisper.

“*Liam.*” She yanks the chair from her desk and drags it over to me, plopping down and pinning intense eyes on me. “What the heck is going on?”

I just sit still in my seat, the pounding in my head growing so strong I can barely think. Or breathe. Heaving myself off the chair, I twist around and plow my fingers through my hair.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“How could you do this to Chloe?” she demands. “Do you have any idea what you’re putting her through?”

I whirl around. “Do I have any idea? *I’m* the one who spends the most time with her. *I’m* the one who sees how...” I swallow hard. “How she feels about him.”

“Liam...do you like Chloe?”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Oh my gosh. You do, don’t you? How did I not see this? For how long?”

I sigh as my eyes open. “A few years.”

“A few *years*? You’ve been in love with Chloe for years? Does anyone know? Lily?”

I shake my head.

She gapes at me. “How didn’t any of us notice this?”

“Because you all see me as a buddy, a brother. Including Chloe.”

“Liam, you need to tell her.”

“I can’t. She doesn’t feel the same way.”

“How do you know that?”

“I just do! Don’t you get it? I’ve been here all this time. For *years*. By her side. Hanging out with her in the kitchen. Watching *Swords and Legends* and other TV shows and movies with her. All this time, I was right here. *Right here*. And she never noticed me.” A hard swallow makes its way down my throat. “And when a guy shows her interest, she starts having feelings for him. While I was here *the whole time*.”

“What other guy?” Willow asks. “*You’re* the other guy. Which means, she has feelings for you, too.”

“No—”

“I don’t get it, Liam. All this time, you made it seem like you weren’t the biggest fan of Mr. Love and the secret admirer. You were so against Chloe getting closer to the secret admirer. But it was *you*.” Her eyes widen. “Wait. Now I get it. You were jealous. That explains why you were so against him. But...” She scratches her head. “You’re him. So you were jealous of...yourself...*What?*” She shakes her head in total befuddlement.

“No, you don’t get it. Those guys *aren’t* me. They’re versions of myself I wish I could be but never will be. And Chloe has fallen for them, not me. Which means, she will never like me. The *real* me.”

“Liam.” She gets up and places her hand on my arm. “You don’t know that.”

“Of course I do! Because I’ve spent the last few years hoping and dreaming...I was *right here*. By her side the entire time. But she’ll only ever see me as a brother.” I gulp in a shaky breath and let it seep out of my nose. “I thought if I was Mr. Love and she liked me, it would be easier to tell her how I felt. But it wasn’t any easier. So I thought I could write her a letter. Thought it would be easier to tell her the truth.” I laugh bitterly. “But it didn’t make it any easier, either. It just showed me that she could never want me. Because she wanted the guy from the letters. Not her best friend.”

Willow is quiet for a bit before rubbing my arm. “Liam, you need to tell her how you feel. This isn’t healthy for you —”

I yank my arm away from her. “Do you have any idea what that would do to our relationship? She’ll never be comfortable around me. She’ll never be her true self around me. Our friendship will be ruined.”

“Who said that will happen?”

“I know it will! When we stayed in the motel after the convention, there was only one bed. I offered to sleep on the floor, but Chloe insisted I share the bed with her. When we woke up...” I swallow because it still hurts to think about it. “We were tangled in each other’s arms. I felt so happy to be

that close to her. But Chloe?" I squeeze my eyes shut as my stomach twists like a pretzel. "She was so uncomfortable. So uncomfortable to wake up in my arms like that. To be that *close* to me." Tears prick my eyes, but I force them away. "I knew right then that there could never be anything between us. And then she wrote a letter to the secret admirer and..." I rub my forehead. "I wanted to stop. It killed me how much I was hurting her. But..." I sigh and turn around. "I just couldn't leave her hanging like that. Something's wrong with me, Willow. I can't explain it, but I saw him as a real person. It was like I *became* a different person when I was him. And me, the real Liam, was so jealous of him. Jealous of the way her eyes lit up when she read his letters or spoke about him. Jealous of the way she was always daydreaming about him during class. Jealous of the sweet words she wrote to him." I turn around to face her. "I'm jealous of the person I can never be."

Willow walks over to me and slides her hand into mine. "You don't have to try to be someone you're not. Just be yourself. Chloe will love you for you."

I shake my head. "She never will. And you know it."

Willow twists her mouth, like she wants to refute but knows I'm right. Because she and the rest of our friends would have noticed if Chloe liked me. But like the rest of them, she just sees me as a friend.

Willow squeezes my hand. "Whether or not she has feelings for you, you need to tell her the truth, Liam. I can't pretend to understand how hard this must be for you, but you're hurting her."

“She’ll be so devastated when she finds out it’s me. Our friendship will be destroyed. That’s why I haven’t told her the truth. I wanted to on so many occasions, but...” I shake my head helplessly. “I can’t stand hurting her. Which is messed up because I’m hurting her right now.”

“Oh, Liam.” Willow wraps me in her arms. “What a mess you’ve made.”

“I know.” The tears finally break through. “Ugh, sorry. This is so embarrassing.”

“Nothing is embarrassing.” She rubs her hand down my back. “But you need to tell her. Even if it’ll hurt her. She deserves to know the truth. And you’re putting me in a difficult position, too. I don’t want to lie to my best friend.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I want to tell her. I *will* tell her. I just... I just need some more time...”

She pulls back and looks into my eyes. “She’s falling hard for him. That’s why I did the trace. I wanted to make sure Chloe wasn’t falling for a creep.” She sighs. “Liam...”

“I know. I suck.”

“No. I just wish you would have told her the truth from the start.”

“She and I would be over. Well, we’ll be over the second I tell her the truth. We’ll lose our special bond. And we’ll never get it back.”

“Liam—”

I step away and turn toward the door. “Sorry, Willow. For putting you in this position. I’m going.”

“I’m worried about you. Can’t you talk to Lily about this?”

I lower my gaze to my shoes. “She’d be so disappointed in me. And I don’t want to put her in the same position as I’m putting you in.”

“I get it. Just talk to me, okay? Don’t shut me out like this.”

“I don’t know. I need to be alone.”

I stalk out of her room and down the stairs, heading for the door. It’s possible Mia or Charlie or Asher call after me, but I pay no attention to them. I run around the neighborhood, keeping close to my house because it’s getting pretty late. I run as fast as I can, letting the sweat drip all over me. As though I want what I did to drip out of me, too.

When I get back home, I’m practically soaked.

“Ew.” Lily wrinkles her nose at me as I head to the fridge for water. “You look like you just took a shower.”

I don’t say anything as I gulp down the water. I wish I could just... I don’t know. Not be myself right now. Go back in time and stop myself from doing something so stupid.

“Liam? You okay?”

“Fine.” I pour whatever’s left of the water bottle over my head.

“You’re my twin. I know when you’re not okay. What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine, Lily. Just stressed about the game next week. I’ve got a lot of homework. Good night.”

I go up to my room and collapse on my bed, not caring that I'm getting it wet.

Chloe's expecting a letter from her secret admirer. The letter I received from her this morning is still in the hidden compartment of my backpack. The one no one knows about, not even Lily. They also don't know about the supply closet on the third floor of school where Derek and I have been meeting to exchange the letters.

Chloe.

Chloe.

Chloe.

I'm going to lose her before I even had her.

Chapter Thirty

Liam

I'm a mess as the contestants and I wait behind the closed door to be introduced to the audience. And that's not because I'm nervous for the second round of the Young Chefs of Tomorrow. No. It's because I can't bear to stand next to Chloe when I've been lying to her all this time.

I know I told Willow I'll tell her the truth, but...I don't know. I mean, I want to. I really do. It's just that...

I slump forward like I'm carrying the weight of the world on my back.

Chloe turns to me. "You okay?"

I nod, releasing another breath. If she knew the truth, would she ever talk to me again? Like I told Willow, I don't want Chloe and me to lose the special bond we have.

"You'll do great," my awesome partner says with a bright smile. "We'll beat them just like we did in the first round."

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I force myself to nod. She narrows her eyes as she studies me, maybe trying to determine why I'm acting like I left my brain at home this morning.

"Liam, what's going on?"

Tell her, the voice in my head urges.

Are you crazy? You're about to start the second round of a competition that might change your life. Do you really want your partner to ditch you?

Gosh. That's the most selfish thought I've ever had. It's not important how I do in this competition—what matters is Chloe. And I hurt her.

She places her hand on my shoulder. "You look like you're about to pass out." She looks around. "They're going to start introducing everyone. You good?"

Sure, I'm good. I'm the worst friend in the entire Universe. Best friends don't fool their best friends like I did. Man. What the heck was I thinking?

I explained it all to Willow last night, but the more I think about it, the more I tell myself that no matter how many times I try to justify what I did, it was wrong. Stupid.

Now Chloe places both hands on my shoulders, staring into my eyes. "Please pull yourself together. I can't do this without you."

I try to swallow the boulder in my throat, but it won't go down. Chloe hands me a water bottle and I chug half the liquid down.

"Didn't sleep at all last night," I mumble. And that's not because of the competition. As I lay in bed, I replayed the conversation with Willow over and over in my head.

Chloe slips her hand into mine. "You have me." She sends me a warm smile. "Always remember that."

I just stare into her beautiful brown eyes. Yes, I have her. But will I still have her when she finds out the truth?

One by one, the contestants are introduced. Chloe and I still clutch each other's hands as we run into the kitchen. My family, hers, and all of our friends are in the audience again, waving their posters and cheering at the top of their lungs.

My eyes flit to Willow, who keeps her gaze on me. I know she doesn't expect me to tell Chloe right now, but I guess maybe after?

Willow smiles and claps along with everyone else, encouraging me. A bit of confidence flows through me and I perk up, waving at my cheer team. I can't let this thing with Chloe tear me down. She and I have worked so hard for this. So even though it's hard, I need to forget about it. Pretend it doesn't exist for a little while as I get through what will probably be a tough day.

The judges are introduced as well before they settle down at their table with their hands clasped.

Then Viraj starts to explain the rules of the first challenge. I was right—it's pretty tough. I've never cooked in this style before, but Chloe and I have learned as much as we could, so I think we'll be okay.

We only have half an hour to cook. Viraj counts to three and we're off. Chloe and I, along with everyone else, frantically run to the pantry to grab our items, since the stock is limited. I'm not one to push, so everyone topples over their rivals to snatch whatever they need. Since the no-punching or pushing rules are in effect, no one is vicious. But geez.

Chloe and I manage to get everything we need, and we make our way back to our station to begin cooking. It's hard for me to interact with her without feeling like a complete jerk,

but I need to push that aside and focus on the task. Like I said, we worked too hard for this.

Chloe goes above and beyond doing what needs to be done, since my thoughts are a bit frazzled. She keeps me grounded. Gosh...how could I hurt her like this?

I place my hand on her shoulder when I catch the sweat gathering on her forehead and soaking her headband. “Chloe, you’re working too hard. Please don’t kill yourself.”

She shakes her head as she continues mixing the pot on the stove. “I’m fine.”

“I don’t deserve this,” I whisper. “You should hate me. Not help me.”

She turns to me. “What?”

I blink and look at her. Did I say that out loud?

She’s working so hard to get me this win, and I need to tell her. I can’t stand there pretending to be her friend when I betrayed her.

“Chloe, there’s something—”

“Liam,” Viraj says as he and the judges gather around our station. They peer at our food with interest.

I spend a few minutes describing the dish, and they seem even more excited. I have no idea how all this is coming together when I can’t keep my thoughts focused.

It’s all because of Chloe. She’s keeping me afloat.

After the judges leave, Chloe clasps my hand. She thinks I’m distracted because I’m nervous. I wish that was the reason.

The minutes tick by and then the audience is counting down the seconds.

“Hands in the air!” Viraj instructs.

Chloe squeezes my hand, giving me a warm smile that kills me. “We did it,” she says. She holds out her fist for a bump. “Liam?”

Shaking my worries away before I throw the competition, I bump my fist into hers. “Thanks for being here.”

“You know there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

Yeah. Far, far away from the best friend who has been lying to you for weeks.

I’m about to open my mouth, but then I take in the bright smile on her face. I can’t do it to her right now. I guess I didn’t realize that she loves being here because she loves to cook. Even though she doesn’t want a culinary career, she loves being in the kitchen.

So I’ll tell her. It just won’t be today.

Her smile drops when she glances at me. She takes my hand and sandwiches it between hers. “Don’t worry. You’ve got this.”

“*We*’ve got this.”

She smiles again, even brighter than before. My throat burns as I try to shove the guilt out of me.

The judges check out all the dishes before they announce the top three. “Sienna, Dusty, and Liam!”

Chloe and my friends and family explode in claps and cheers.

“But there can only be one winner who will receive an advantage in the elimination challenge.” Viraj takes a few minutes to ramp up the tension. “Liam!”

My eyes grow so huge, I swear they’ll pop right off. Chloe wraps her arms around me. “You did it! I knew you would!”

I bury my face in her shoulder. “All because of you. Thank you.”

Pulling back, she smiles. “You know I’d do anything for you.”

My throat burns again.

“As the winner of the first challenge, Liam has won ten extra minutes of cooking time,” Viraj says.

The audience erupts in more cheers.

I spot Sienna from Silverton Academy glaring at me. Seems like she’s my biggest competition, since we’ve been in the top three both rounds.

Chloe snorts. “Ignore her. Don’t let her get to you.”

I nod. “I’ll try.”

“Focus on me and only me.”

I shut my eyes for a second. “Chloe, I don’t deserve—”

“Now for the elimination challenge,” Viraj announces. “Contestants, please draw wooden spoons.” He gestures to a box with ten wooden spoons sticking out.

The box is passed around, and each contestant yanks out a spoon. I pull one out with “Greece” written on it.

“As you can see, each contestant has chosen a spoon with the name of a country. Your challenge is to prepare a dish from that country. Liam has an extra ten minutes and will start cooking first. The rest of the contestants, please take a seat.” They all sit down at their stations.

“Ready, Liam?” Viraj asks.

I nod. “Ready.”

“One, two, three go!”

I’ve cooked Greek food before, but I’m not one hundred percent familiar with it. I’ve seen many cooking shows that featured such food, though, so I’m feeling okay. Chloe also knows the food because she’s watched the cooking shows with me. I hope we’ll do fine.

We grab our ingredients and return to the kitchen, starting to cook. The ten minutes pass like the blink of an eye and the rest of the contestants are hard at work on their dishes.

Chloe and I are making something quite difficult because I need to knock this out of the park if I want to move on to the final round. We’ll be cutting it close with time, but I have confidence in us.

It’s not long before time is up and the judges are examining everyone’s dish. I wipe the sweat from my forehead and bend over. Man, I’m beat. That was hard.

When the judges come over to our station and ask questions, I start getting nervous. I have no idea if they like the food or not. They’ve got poker faces on again.

Chloe takes my hand, giving it a squeeze. I squeeze hers back.

The judges thank us and move on. They seem to like Sienna's dish a lot and she smiles proudly, like she already won the prize.

The judges take a few minutes to deliberate before they order us to gather around so they could announce the top three contestants who will move on to the finals. I know I did well, but seven people are going home today. The odds are not in my favor.

"Can Sienna, Harper, and Liam please step forward?"

I look at Chloe with wide eyes. Hers are even wider. My legs shake as they bring me forward, along with Sienna and Harper.

Viraj gives us regretful looks. "I'm sorry to say this, but..." He grins. "You three will not have to pack your equipment and go home. You're moving on to the finals!"

Arms wrap around my waist as Chloe presses her face to my chest. She's squeezing me so tightly she's cutting off my circulation. The audience goes wild with cheers and whoops and yells.

"I'm so proud of you," Chloe whispers against my chest. She slowly lifts her head and smiles at me. "I knew you'd do it. You're amazing."

My throat burns again and I'm pretty sure tears flash in my eyes. And that's not because I moved on to the next round.

Chloe must mistake my tears for happiness and disbelief because she pulls me closer and murmurs in my ear how much I deserve this.

No. I don't.

“Your dreams are coming true,” she says.

Maybe. But what about her dreams? For weeks she’s been dreaming about her secret admirer and...he doesn’t even exist.

“We’re so proud of you,” my cheer team enthuses as they crowd around, fighting to hug me and Chloe.

I don’t have time to think about how much I hurt Chloe because my friends and family keep praising me and treating me like the special person I’m not.

Chapter Thirty-One

Chloe

I nearly jump for joy Monday morning when a note tumbles out of my locker. My secret admirer and I haven't been in contact over the weekend, and let's just say it's been tough.

Good thing I had Liam's competition to distract myself with. I'm *so* proud of him.

I know it's not healthy to be obsessed with my secret admirer, but I don't really care. He makes me happy. So even though the bell will ring soon, I unfold the pages and read his beautiful words.

Dear Chloe,

I've been thinking about you a lot over the weekend and I'm ready for you to know who I am. We've been exchanging quite a few letters and I know I can trust you. Be totally and completely open with you. I'm sorry it has taken me this long.

I'll be attending the masquerade ball. Will you be there as well? If yes, I'll be looking for you. And I'll reveal myself to you.

I admit I'm very nervous, but you make me feel happiness and joy that I haven't felt with anyone else.

Thank you for being so patient and understanding, Chloe.

Sincerely,

Your Secret Admirer

I read the note over many times, my eyes flitting over the words like they're catching a train. He wants to reveal himself to me? Oh my gosh.

"Oooh, did he say something romantic?" Lily gushes as she slides over to me. The others gather around me, too. "That look on your face tells me your heart is melting."

I press the note to my chest as a happy sigh escapes my lips. "You guys won't believe this. He wants to reveal himself to me at the masquerade ball!"

"What?" they exclaim. "That's awesome!"

I smile down at the note. "He says he's ready." I glance up as my eyebrows furrow. "Guys, this is actually happening. What if...?" My voice trails off.

Lily lifts a brow. "You're disappointed?"

I shake my head. "No. What if he doesn't like me? I mean, he thinks he knows me, but does he really? Even though we've exchanged letters, we never met face to face."

"Chloe, of course he'll love you," Willow tells me. "Everyone loves you."

I take a deep breath. "I have an image of him and I'm pretty sure he has an image of me. I'm just worried he won't like me."

Liam places his hand on my arm. "If he doesn't like you, then it's his loss."

The others nod in agreement.

“So...I’m going to the ball,” I whisper.

Lily squeals. “We’re totally going with you! For moral support and to watch over you in case he tries something.”

Liam’s eyes harden. “He better not. But um...the masquerade ball? Really?”

Lily clutches her heart. “It’s been years since we’ve gone, and now I have someone to go with.”

“Me too!” Ava says.

And me as well. Oh my gosh. I might *dance* with my secret admirer.

“Life is good, isn’t it?” Ava says. “Liam made it to the finals of the cooking competition and Chloe’s going to meet the man of her dreams. Isn’t it exciting?”

“Duh,” Lily says with a laugh. “My twin bro will kill it at finals and Chloe will have a boyfriend!”

I can’t hide the smile that wants to split my face. Could she be right? Will I have a boyfriend in just a few days?

I catch Liam watching me, like he’s either worried I’ll be disappointed or I might get hurt. I love that he cares about me. It shows what a spectacular human being he is. I wish I could find the perfect girl for him.

His eyebrows furrow. “What?”

“You’re the one looking at me,” I say.

“No. You’re looking at me.”

I sigh. “It’ll be okay, Liam. The worst that could happen is that he’ll hate me.”

“Never,” Willow says. “No one could ever hate you.”

“Truth,” Liam adds. “You’re awesome.”

“Totally awesome,” Lily says.

My cheeks heat up. “Thanks, guys.”

The bell rings and we make our way to Ally’s class, chatting about the ball and how excited we are.

I tell myself not to focus on the negative that he might not like me but on the positive. I’m finally, *finally* going to meet the guy who’s been keeping me up all night, who’s been warming my heart with letters and poems. Who has made me dream of my perfect boyfriend. It’s him. I know it is.

“Chloe?” Ally asks as she stands near my desk. “I asked you to clear your desk for the test.”

Test...? Oh, right. I apologize and remove the items from my desk.

I think about his letter as I take the exam. Somehow I get through the answers before the bell rings. Ally collects the papers and tells us to have a good day.

“Chloe?” She stops me at the door. “Can I see you for a minute?”

“Yeah...” I make my way to her.

Ally gestures to the seat before her desk and I slowly lower myself on it. “We only have a few minutes before my next class, but I wanted to check in with you. Is everything okay, honey?”

I blink, confused. “Yeah. Why do you ask?”

“You seemed a little distracted during the exam.” She reaches for my test paper. “You wrote your name by the date.”

I shrug. “Just have a lot on my mind. You know, school, the paper, the competition. I want Liam to win.”

She nods with a smile. “We all do, but I want you to focus on yourself. Is balancing all your activities with school too much to handle?”

“No. I’m fine.” I just have a secret admirer who’s ready to reveal himself to me!

She studies me. “Are you sure? You know I’m here if you need to talk.”

“I know. Thanks, but I’m okay. And you don’t have to worry about the test. I aced it.”

She smiles. “Okay. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

I don’t realize I skip into the house until Rylee looks at me like I lost my mind. “Why are you humming?” she asks.

Noah follows me into the kitchen, twirling his keys. “She was like that during the ride home. And we all know she’s not a good singer.”

“You mean a terrible singer,” Rylee corrects.

I don’t let their words get to me because I’m in the best mood I’ve ever been in. “Say whatever you want, Rylee. I’ll be dancing at the masquerade ball while you’re stuck at home.”

I skip around the kitchen, humming again. So, I suck at singing. Doesn't mean I shouldn't sing. Would my secret admirer think my bad singing is cute or...would he find it unattractive?

"Hold up." Noah latches his hand on my arm. "What do you mean you're going to the ball? You never go."

"I never had a reason to."

His eyebrows shoot up. "And now you do? Did someone ask you?"

Great. He's being all protective Noah now. I've never come close to having a boyfriend, so he's never been the boyfriend police. But now...

I raise my chin. "No one asked me." It's not a total lie. "I'm going with my friends. Ava and Lily want to go with their boyfriends, so the rest of us decided to go, too."

Rylee makes gagging noises.

"You're just jealous," I throw at her.

She snorts. "Suuure."

I go up to my room, throw my school stuff on my desk, and plop down on my bed. I think about the message I sent to the secret admirer, where I told him I want to meet him at the masquerade ball at eight outside the ballroom.

In just a few days, my dreams might actually come true.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chloe

Tonight is the masquerade ball! I've barely been able to sit straight for hours. We're getting ready at Ava's house because she asked her family's hairdresser and makeup artist to help us.

"You think someone will catch your eye?" I tease Willow as the hairdresser does her hair. She's wearing a dark green dress, provided by Ava, of course, and her matching mask sits next to her on the table.

"Sure." She rolls her eyes. "I'm only here because of you guys." She throws me a smile. "But I'll have tons of fun. Don't worry."

I can't help but notice that her smile seems a little forced. I've also noticed that she's been a little off the past few days. I guess she's still stressed about her app.

Once the hairdresser and makeup artist finish their work, we examine ourselves in the mirror. "Dang we look good." Ava beams.

She's wearing a long red dress with a slit on the side, and a matching red and white mask. Aidan will have an identical mask and matching tie. Xavier's tie matches Lily's light blue sparkly dress that reaches just below her knees. And I've got on a dark purple ruffled dress.

My eyes catch sight of the person who just walked into the room. A young man dressed in a dashing black suit that makes him look like the most handsome guy I've ever seen in my life.

"Someone cleans up nicely," Willow jokes.

"Liam, you look amazing!" Lily gushes.

"Ooh, you look so mature in that suit," Ava says.

He gives everyone a look. "This isn't the first time I'm wearing a suit."

"But you look different," Ava says. "It's like you grew the last few weeks and have gotten more good-looking."

Liam's eyes flit to mine. I offer him a small smile. "You look really good, Liam."

"Thanks. You look beautiful. You all do," he quickly adds.

"Thanks!" Ava says. "Are we ready to go? Don't forget your masks."

The others leave the room. I'm about to follow them, when I remember I forgot to put something on. I hurry to my bag and rummage inside.

"Chloe?" Liam asks. "You're not ready?"

"I forgot something." I carefully pluck out the jewelry case.

"What's that?" Liam asks as he comes closer to me. I flick it open and stare down at the gorgeous necklace. "Wow. That's really pretty."

“It was my grandmother’s. My grandfather gave it to my mom on her wedding day and she’s passing it down to me. I want to wear it on special occasions.”

“Like the day your secret admirer finally reveals himself to you?”

I slowly move my eyes to him. “I’m so nervous, Liam.”

He swallows and then puts on a smile. “It’ll be okay.” The corners of his lips tremble a little. “Don’t worry. You’ll have an amazing night.”

“I hope so. I hope my grandmother will be with me tonight and make sure I have a wonderful evening.” I carefully take out the necklace from the case and sit before Ava’s vanity. Looking at my reflection, I try to clasp the necklace around my neck. “Ugh, my hair’s getting in the way.”

“Can I?” Liam offers.

I go still for a second, then nod with a thankful smile.

He steps closer to me, the front of his suit jacket grazing the back of my dress. The area that’s bare tingles when the soft fabric touches my skin. I feel the warmth from his body enter mine, and that causes a small shiver to pass through me.

Slowly, he takes the necklace from me, his fingers touching mine and causing my heart to sprint. As though he’s handling something extremely precious, he puts the necklace around my neck and fastens the clasp. He leans forward, his cheek inches from mine, and murmurs, “You look stunning, Chloe.”

I slowly turn my head. Our lips are a few inches apart.

“You’re always beautiful,” he whispers. “And you’re so special. One of the most amazing people in the world. I—”

“Chloe? Liam?” Lily pops into the room. “What’s going on? We’re ready to leave.”

Liam stumbles back. “I was just helping Chloe with her necklace.”

“It’s so pretty. You look like your grandma, you know. I’ve seen pictures.”

“Yeah?” I clutch the pendant. “I feel closer to her. I hope she brings me luck when I finally meet my secret admirer.”

Lily grins. “Of course she will. You, Chloe Barrington, are going to have the best night of your life.”

“I hope!”

I get up and follow Lily out the door, then stop and turn around. “Liam?”

He’s standing in the same position with his gaze trained on the floor, a troubled look in his eyes. Is he worried the secret admirer won’t be who he claims to be? I know I should be careful and not lower my guard completely, but I can’t help it. I *want* to believe he’s everything I’ve dreamed of. I want to be positive and trust that all this is meant to be.

“You coming, Liam?”

He blinks. “What? Yeah, I’m coming.”

“Don’t forget your mask.” I point to the blue one sitting on the table. Mine is dark purple and black.

“Right.” After sweeping it up in his hand, he follows me toward the front door, where the others are gathered and

waiting.

“Hey, Xavier and Aidan.” Liam fist bumps them. “You guys ready for a wild night?”

“Bet the girls will make sure we have a great time,” Xavier says with a chuckle.

“No doubt,” Aidan agrees.

Peter arrives with the limo. We gather inside, each and every one of us giddy and excited, even Willow. Our parents will meet us at the ball.

“I can’t believe I have a guy to share such a magical night with.” Lily snuggles in Xavier’s arms. She throws me a smile. “And it won’t be long before Chloe has her special guy, too. Oh my gosh, I can’t wait to see the two of you dancing together. It’ll be so romantic.”

Liam shifts in his seat. When I glance at him, he looks away and asks Aidan a question.

Willow clears her throat. “So I’m looking forward to the trivia game. I can’t wait to win money for charity. And the person who answers the most questions correctly wins an Xbox. I want to get it for Mia.”

“That’s so sweet, Willow,” Ava says.

“Thanks. I’ve been pushing her away lately and want to make it up to her. WillowBot broke her Xbox the other day when she stole her. I shouldn’t reward her for stealing my robot, but I feel bad for not spending time with her.”

Lily wraps her arm around her. “You’re a good sister.”

“I try.”

We talk about other topics on the drive to the ballroom, and my fingers wring in my lap. I try telling myself not to freak out because I don't want to be a nervous wreck when I meet the secret admirer, but the closer we get there, the more my heart feels like it's going to jet out of my throat. And when we pull up before the building, everyone else slides out of the limo while I just sit here, continuing to wring my fingers.

Ava slips back inside and snakes her fingers through mine. "I know you're nervous, but he'll love you, Chloe. You'll make him the happiest person in the world, and I know he'll make you the happiest person in the world, too."

"I feel like it has to be perfect."

She lays her head against mine. "Nothing has to be perfect. It's okay if things are a little weird and awkward in the beginning. But you know he's a good person, and he thinks the world of you. If it's meant to be, it'll work out."

I wrap my arms around her. "Thanks so much. I don't think I could do this without you and the others."

She returns the hug.

I follow her out of the limo and slip my mask on. Many people, adults and kids of all ages, are heading into the ballroom. There's a charge in the air. As nervous as I am, every part of me beats with anticipation. I feel like I'm in a dream.

My friends and I enter the ballroom, each of us marveling at the place. They decorated it beautifully. There are tons of people here, but the room is so large it doesn't really feel like it. I smile at the many unique masks. It adds to the vibe.

“There’s food. I’m starving.” Willow makes a beeline for the refreshment tables. They are filled to the max with so many different varieties of food, snacks, and drinks. My friends follow her and start piling things on their plates, but I don’t think I can get anything down.

I settle on a cookie and take a small bite, my eyes surveying the area. I wonder if my guy is here yet. I have no idea what he looks like, so even without a mask, he could be anyone. There’s still some time before he and I will meet. I wonder if he’s as nervous as I am.

“Time to dance!” Ava reaches for Aidan’s hand and pulls him to the dance floor, calling behind her, “You guys coming? Willow, Chloe, and Liam, you can join us, too.”

“Yeah, come,” Lily tells us as she and Xavier follow Ava and Aidan with their hands interlocked. “It’ll be a blast with all of us dancing together.”

Liam, Willow, and I exchange a glance.

Willow shrugs. “I’ve got some time to kill before the trivia game.”

“I have two left feet, but sure.”

“You don’t have two left feet,” Liam says. “You’re a great dancer.”

I burst out laughing. “You’re sweet for trying to make me feel better, but we all know how terrible I am.”

Liam shakes his head. “All that matters is that you’re having fun.”

“Agreed,” Willow says as she slides her hands into both of ours. “We shall attempt to have fun.”

The three of us join the lovebirds and start shaking our bodies. Liam’s right—as long as I’m having fun, who cares if I look like a fool?

With that notion, I let go and enjoy my time with my friends. Maybe I’m releasing all of my nerves and stress and negative emotions and keeping only the good ones. Because I want to have the time of my life tonight, with my friends and then with my secret admirer.

“Look at you!” Ava says with a laugh. “Chloe is such a boss.”

I raise my arms over my head and do a small twirl. “I think I’m a little high on good vibes because I cast out all the bad ones.” My leg gets caught in the other and I pivot forward, about to go splat on the floor.

Arms wrap around me and lift me before I could face-plant. I stare up at the masked face of Liam, his gray eyes the only thing visible. For a second, time stands still as he and I stare into each other’s eyes, but then I laugh sheepishly and free myself from his hold. “Told you I have two left feet.”

“Nice save, dude,” Lily tells her brother. “We can’t have our princess with a face injury right before she’s about to meet her prince.”

“You okay?” Liam asks me.

“Yeah. Just a bruised ego. Nothing new.” I laugh lamely.

“Well, don’t stop now.” Ava twirls into Aidan’s arms, and he dips her. “Continue getting your groove on, Junior

Musketeers.”

We dance for probably another twenty minutes before someone announces that the trivia game is about to start.

“You guys have fun,” Willow tells us. “I’m going to wait in line at the game.”

“I’ll come with you,” I say. “I can use a break from all the dancing.”

She and I make our way to where they set up the trivia game. The money raised from the game will go to charity. The more questions players answer correctly, the more money the sponsors will donate. And if someone reaches the bonus question, one of the sponsors will donate an extra ten thousand dollars. And the winner will get the Xbox.

Just as we’re about to stand in line, we almost get run over by two little kids. The boy is my cousin Brock, and he’s chasing after Aidan’s sister, Lexi.

“Come on!” he urges as he tries to keep up with her. “Dance with me! I don’t have cooties!”

“Not unless you give me your shark tooth!”

“But it was a present from my neighbor! C’mon, Lexi, just dance with me.”

I’m about to call after my cousin to say hello, but he and Lexi zip by and disappear into the crowd.

Willow and I chuckle at each other as we wait in line with the other guests. Most of them are adults, though I do see a few teens and a kid or two. Willow is about to say something, but she stares at the woman standing in front of us. “Mom?”

The woman turns around and lifts her emerald mask. It's Charlie. I should have known because I can recognize that red hair anywhere. She smiles at us. "Hey, Willow. And let's see who that is...Chloe, right?"

"Yep."

"What are you doing here?" Willow asks.

Charlie chuckles. "My goal is to go all the way and win those ten thousand dollars for charity. I did it when I was your age. Let's see if I can do it again. I still remember my question—it was about Joan of Arc."

"Cool," I say. "Willow's going to try to win it, too."

"I want to win lots of money for charity and the Xbox for Mia. Don't worry, I'll only let her have it when she's done with her punishment."

"Oh, honey. You're so kind for wanting to win something for your sister." She wraps an arm around her. "What do you say we team up and win it together?"

"Sure!"

Charlie lowers her mask and focuses on the game. The questions are pretty easy in the beginning but they get harder the further the player advances. Many players don't make it very far, but they're super happy with the money they raised. I'm tempted to play as well because I would love to raise money for charity, but I don't think my head is in the right place at the moment. The hour of the meeting with the secret admirer is getting closer and closer...

"And now we have two young ladies with beautiful green masks," the woman announces when it's Charlie and Willow's

turn. “Looks like quite the dynamic duo! Let’s see how much money they can raise.”

Willow and her mom breeze through the first round of questions without even a second of hesitation. And they pass the second round just as fast. Some younger kids crowd around when they realize there are serious challengers trying to reach the top. The way mother and daughter spit out the answers is staggering. They really are a force to be reckoned with.

“That’s my wife and daughter!” Asher yells from a few feet away, where he stands with Mia and wearing a matching emerald mask. Mia’s mask is hot pink. “Go get ‘em!”

When Charlie and Willow answer the final question and are ready for the bonus question, the crowd around them starts to chant, “Bonus! Bonus!”

Willow glances at the Xbox sitting on the table next to the woman. “That’s coming home with us.” She nods at the woman. “Hit us with the bonus question.”

The woman waits for the crowd’s cheers to die down before she says, “Who was the first person to introduce the idea of Daylight Saving Time?”

The audience and I gasp as we look at Willow and Charlie. Ooh, this is a hard one. I have no idea what the answer is.

Willow tilts her head to the side as she thinks it over. Charlie’s trying to hide a smile. It’s so obvious she knows the answer, but she wants her daughter to have the chance to win.

“Take as long as you need,” the woman says, glancing at the meter above that displays how much money has been

raised so far. If they answer the bonus question correctly, the total will amount to over a hundred thousand dollars.

“Okay, I got it,” Willow says before whispering in Charlie’s ear. Her mom nods with a proud smile. Willow faces the woman. “The first person to introduce the idea of Daylight Saving Time was Benjamin Franklin.”

With a huge smile, the woman presses a button and ten thousand dollars are added to the charity fund. The audience, including me, erupts in applause. Charlie and Willow fling their arms around each other, Charlie kissing the top of Willow’s head and telling her how proud she is of her. Asher whoops so loud he’s practically bursting my ears, and Mia jumps up and down near him, cheering so loud she might damage her voice.

“As the winners of the trivia game, you have won an Xbox!” The woman lifts the box off the table and hands it to Willow. With a thank you, Willow marches over to her little sister and hands it to her.

I can’t see Mia’s expression because of the mask, but I can definitely see that her eyes get huge. “For me?” she gasps.

Willow nods. “For you.”

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh! I thought I’d have to wait until my birthday to get a new one after WillowBot broke mine. Oh my gosh!” She hands the box to her dad before throwing her arms around her older sister. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Willow laughs as she strokes her hair. “Of course. You know I love you.”

My phone's alarm goes off. When I glance at it, I realize it's five to eight. Oh my gosh, it's time to meet my secret admirer. I was so caught up in the excitement of the trivia game that I almost forgot.

My heart beats in my ears, making me grow dizzy and nauseous. I don't know if I can do this.

"Chloe?" Willow removes her arms from around Mia and heads over to me. "You okay?"

"It's almost eight."

Willow places her hand on my shoulder. "Breathe. You can do this. Whatever happens, it will be okay."

My eyes slowly lift to hers. "What do you mean, 'Whatever happens'? Do you think something will go wrong? You think he won't like me?"

Willow groans like she wants to kick herself. "Sorry. That didn't come out right. Of course everything will be great. Just be honest about how you feel. And hopefully he'll be honest, too, and everything will work out."

I watch her for a few seconds before shaking my head. "Not the best pep talk, but I'll take it. My brain is scrambling and my heart beats so fast I think it's going to launch out of my chest."

"Chloe?" Ava, Lily, and the guys have joined us. "We've come to wish you good luck and tell you that you have nothing to worry about because everything will work out and you'll have your happily ever after."

I take a deep breath and let it out, nodding. "I'm ready."

They hug me and wish me good luck. I wave before making my way to the exit of the ballroom and to the hallway, where my secret admirer and I will meet in front of the large painting of a horse. There are a few people out here, some talking and some resting on the sofas. I find a spot in front of the painting and fold my arms over my chest. Why has it gotten so cold all of a sudden?

I lower my hands because I don't want to seem too serious. Where should I put my arms? Letting them hang to the side makes me feel like I'm a soldier standing at attention. So where should I put them?

Oh my gosh, am I really freaking out about where to put my arms?

Breathe, Chloe. Just breathe.

It's a minute to eight. He should be here any second.

Another minute passes. I hope he shows...

My eyes fixate on the entrance to the ballroom. But then I realize it's possible he hasn't arrived yet, so I stare at the entrance to the building. My eyes flit back and forth between both entrances, every part of me so wound up I think I need to...I don't know, shake myself around or something. Do a silly dance until the nerves leave my body. I don't think I've ever been this nervous before in my life.

Wait, I forgot about my mask. He'll need to see my face to know it's me. I take another breath and slowly let it seep out as I lift my mask to my forehead.

Another minute passes. Oh no. What if he stands me up? Or what if he has such bad anxiety that he's scared to meet

me? I hope he knows that I'm not scary and that he can approach me. I don't care what he looks like—all that matters is if he's my age and has a good, kind heart.

Another minute passes. And then another. Tears want to prick my eyes, but I don't let them. There's still time for him to arrive. He's only a few minutes late. I'm sure it takes a lot of courage for him to take that first step. It's a little ridiculous for me to expect him to arrive on the dot.

But then another few minutes pass. A little voice in my head starts whispering doubts in my mind, but I shove it away. There's still time.

Someone steps out of the ballroom. A guy in a black suit and blue mask. My heart speeds up and a small gasp of anticipation and anxiety conquers my body. Oh my gosh, is that...?

Wait a second. That's Liam. And he's heading my way.

"Liam, what are you doing here?" I hiss.

He swallows as he lifts his mask. "Chloe, I—"

"He'll be here any second." My eyes frantically move to the front door and then to the entrance to the ballroom.

"Chloe, I need to—"

"Liam." I force my eyes to his. "I'm okay. You don't have to worry. He's not that late. Just give him a chance."

He sighs. "Chloe, please hear me out."

"I know you don't think highly of the guy, but he'll show. I *know* he will."

I don't mean to be rude, but if my secret admirer sees me talking to another guy, he might get the wrong idea and leave. I can't let anything ruin my chance of finally meeting him.

“Chloe, I'm trying to tell you—”

I sigh. “Liam, I'm sorry, but I don't have time for this now. This moment is extremely important to me, and the last thing I want to hear is you telling me that he's manipulating me or playing me or—”

“No! That's not what I'm trying to say at all...”

A short guy in a dark blue suit walks into the building, and my whole body perks up. But he doesn't look my way, just goes straight to the ballroom.

My eyes snap to Liam. “I don't want to be rude, but you're ruining one of the most important moments of my life. I know you mean well, but I'm not a little kid and you don't need to protect me. So if you don't mind, I would really appreciate it if you would go back to the ballroom and let me have this moment that I've been waiting for since I got my first letter.”

His face looks pained. He opens his mouth to say something, but I cut him off.

“I don't want you to scare him away. Liam, please go. Just *go*.”

He doesn't move, just watches me with that same pained expression. Since he's so tall, he's somewhat blocking my view, and I need to crane my neck to see if anyone enters the building. What if Liam's blocking me from his view and he'll think I ditched?

“Liam, *please*.”

Honestly, the only thing I care about right now is meeting my secret admirer. Why doesn't Liam understand that whatever he wants to say can wait? Or if he's here because he thinks he needs to protect me, he should understand that I can handle it. That I believe wholeheartedly that the secret admirer is a good guy and that he'll show up. That I'll be okay.

“Liam...”

He sighs again and slowly nods. “Okay. I'll leave you alone.”

As soon as he walks away, a large sigh escapes my lips. Hopefully, my secret admirer hasn't shown up yet and didn't see me with another guy.

I relax my shoulders and place a smile on my lips. And then I wait.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Liam

I walk away from Chloe, then stop and turn around. She still stands near the painting, her mask lifted onto her forehead, her eyes flitting around the hallway. When she looks at me, she shakes her head with a nervous smile, motioning for me to leave.

She doesn't want me around when she meets her secret admirer for the first time. Even though *I'm* the guy she's waiting for.

Once again, I was standing right there—*right there*—and it didn't even cross her mind that I'm her guy.

Sighing, I give her an encouraging smile and wave, then slouch into the ballroom where Willow stands near the punch. Lily, Xavier, Ava, and Aidan are killing it on the dance floor.

Willow keeps her gaze on me as I make my way back to her. She practically pushed me toward Chloe when it was time for the secret admirer to reveal himself.

“What happened?” she asks. “You went over to Chloe and...?”

I shake my head. “She thought I came to protect her. You know, scope out the guy, maybe kick his butt if he threatened her. Not that I can actually do that, but you get the point.”

Her eyebrows furrow.

I release a heavy breath. “You see? Even when I’m trying to be honest with her, she doesn’t *see* me.” I squeeze my eyes shut for a second. “Forget it.”

“No. You have to try again.”

I glance at her, then toward the hallway where Chloe still waits. Maybe once she realizes her guy isn’t coming, she’ll finally notice me?

I take a deep breath. “Okay. Attempt number two.”

Willow pats my back, then once again practically launches me outside. When Chloe sees me approaching, she gives me a disappointed and slightly frustrated face.

“Liam, please. I told you to go away. Sorry, I’m trying to be nice, but...”

I step closer. “Chloe—”

“He’ll show up,” she says with a brave smile. “I know he will.”

“That’s not what I—”

She waves at me to quiet down when a guy makes his way over to us. My heart catapults out of my chest. Who is he?

He’s wearing a mask, so I can’t see his face. Chloe perks up like she’s been zapped with electricity. I can feel the excitement leaping off her.

And that really makes me feel like crap. I’m right here.

The guy nods to us before walking past us to the bathrooms. Chloe releases a heavy puff of air and lightly bangs her head against the wall. “Darn. I thought that was

him.” She turns to me, as if she forgot for a second that I’m standing beside her. “Liam, please. You might scare him off.”

“But Chloe...”

“Please.”

I gaze into her beautiful eyes for what feels like hours before nodding and walking away from her. This time, I don’t glance back. I can’t bear to see her looking around for her special guy.

A guy who will never come.

“So?” Willow asks, munching on potato chips.

I shake my head. “Every time I try to tell her, she basically tells me to get lost. She won’t even consider that I’m him.”

Willow’s eyes soften. “You’re her best friend.”

“And that’s the problem, isn’t it?” I puff out my cheeks. “I need fresh air.”

As I walk toward the exit, I turn around and take in all the dancing couples. Mom and Dad are wrapped in each other’s arms as they sway to the soft beat of the slow song. Her cheek is pressed to his and his eyes are closed, as if he’s in a magical, perfect world. Yeah, with Mom by his side, his life is pretty much perfect. He’s told us stories of when he was my age and pushed Mom away because he didn’t think he was good enough for her. But Mom pushed back and they’ve been in love ever since.

Watching them usually makes me feel good, but now I just feel rotten. The only girl I love and will ever love sees me as

nothing but a friend. A fellow Swordie. Never in a million years would she love me like Mom loves Dad.

And then there's my twin sister. Lily's in Xavier's arms, resting her head on his chest. They also look like they're in a magical world. I know we're only in high school, but those two will be together forever, just like our parents. I can feel it.

Ava and Aidan stare into each other's eyes with pure love. They'll also be together forever.

My gaze moves to the rest of the Four Musketeers and their husbands. They're all so happy and in love and I'm...

I'm just watching them and knowing that it will never happen to me. Someone could argue and tell me I shouldn't pine after Chloe. That it's not healthy, but I don't care. She's the only one for me.

And I messed it up. Even if there's a teensy weensy chance that she has feelings for me, she'll drop them the second she learns who her secret admirer is.

Man. I'm so stupid.

"Hey," my cousin Zoey says as she, Mia, and Rylee stand before me with plates filled with food.

I straighten up and force a smile. "Hey, kids. What are you doing here? Aren't you still grounded?"

"Noah insisted he hang out with his friends tonight," Rylee tells me. "And since Mom and Dad have been looking forward to this ball for weeks and there's no one to watch me to make sure I 'stay out of trouble', here I am."

"Same," Zoey and Mia say.

“Cool. You guys having fun?”

Mia shrugs. “Meh. The food’s good, though.”

“Did you see Brock and his girlfriend?” Zoey asks with a chuckle as she points to her brother and Lexi. “He had to *beg* her to dance.”

I smile an empty smile as I watch the two of them on the dance floor, trying to figure out the whole dancing thing. Even my eight-year-old cousin found a girl to hold in his arms. While I stand here, wishing Chloe would...

“You don’t look so good,” Rylee observes. “Where’s Chloe?”

Still waiting for her dream guy to show up. Why am I doing this to her?

The room gets so hot I can hardly breathe.

“In the hallway. I need some air.”

Rylee scans me from top to bottom. “I think that ridiculous suit is killing you.”

“It’s not ridiculous,” Zoey argues. “I think my big cousin looks very dashing.”

I’m barely listening to them because my thoughts are a mess and my body is overheating with guilt and worry.

I leave the girls and pull my jacket off, swinging it over my arm and making my way outside. The cool air feels good as it slams into my face.

I can’t do this. I can’t stand there and watch her dreams get crushed. But what can I do? She won’t *let* me tell her the truth. The second I get close to her, she pretty much tells me to take

a hike. And I get it. She's worried the "secret admirer" will see her with someone else and run away.

I remain out here for a bit, trying to collect my thoughts and calm down. I don't know what will happen tonight—I think that's what's stressing me out. I came to the dance with the intention to tell Chloe the truth. I can't stand lying to her anymore, even though I know everything will change.

But I need to do the right thing.

After taking a few gulps of air, I return to the ballroom. The couples are still dancing to that slow song. The entire place has such a serene feel to it. No wonder everyone loves the ball. If I had a girl in my arms, I'd never let her go. And when I mean girl, I'm referring to a specific one.

Peeking into the hallway, I find Chloe still at the meeting spot, wringing her hands. She's frantically glancing around, squinting her eyes when she spots a guy who might be her secret admirer. And when he either passes by or takes a turn, her entire body deflates.

My heart urges me to go over to her, but my feet are planted in place. She'll just shoo me away again and I don't think I can handle it.

I keep myself busy by packing food onto a plate so my eyes won't flit in her direction. But of course they venture there anyway. Chloe looks really sad. No, crushed. It's the look of someone who just had her heart broken.

After placing my plate on the table, I fill another with goodies and make my way over to Chloe.

Instead of looking ticked off that I'm ruining her epic meet-up with her guy, she perks up, as if she's relieved to not be all alone in her corner.

I present her with the plate of food. "Thought you might be hungry."

She glances at it, then away. "Thanks, but I'm good."

"Are you sure? Tastes delicious. Not as delicious as our food, but still decent," I joke.

She looks at me with heartbroken eyes. "Liam," she says in a low voice. "He's not coming."

My stomach muscles clench. "Chloe."

"You think I'm silly for waiting for him. You never believed in him. Maybe you were right all along. I shouldn't have fallen..." She chokes up. "I'm so stupid."

I take her hand with my free one. "No, you're not stupid. He is. But..." I take a deep breath and slowly release it. "Maybe he'll still come. Or..." I glance around. "Maybe he's here, just hasn't worked up the courage to talk to you."

She's quiet as she ponders my words. "You think so?"

"Y-yeah. He's probably watching you, thinking you're so beautiful and amazing. Maybe he doesn't feel like he can measure up."

Her eyebrows furrow. "You're defending him now?"

"I'm trying to understand him. No. I'm trying to make you feel better."

She groans. "Great. So now you think I'm pathetic."

“No. Chloe, please don’t twist my words. You’re not pathetic. He’s a jerk for chickening out.”

She gives me an incredulous look. “Now you’re judging him again when two seconds ago you were defending him.”

“Chloe—”

She sighs heavily. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you. But why would he lie? What’s he so scared of? Whatever it is, I won’t judge him or hold it against him. I just want to meet him.”

I’m right here, Chloe.

My mouth opens to say the words—just pull the Band-Aid right off—but they get stuck in my throat.

“Maybe I’ll wait a bit longer,” she says, forcing a smile. “The night is still young, right? He has time to show up.”

I nod encouragingly. “Yeah—he has time.”

She smiles again and holds out her hand for the plate of food. “Thanks.”

“Of course.”

“I don’t want to be too distracted and miss him, so I’ll just grab another cookie. Do you mind saving this for me?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks, Liam.”

I nod.

She looks at me. “Um, can you...?”

“Right. You want me to leave. Sorry.”

I push a grin on my face, fetch my plate of food from where I left it, and find a table where Uncle Zane and Aunt Bailey are taking a break from dancing.

“Hey, kid,” Aunt Bailey says.

I greet them and plop down. I set Chloe’s plate beside me and start picking at my food. I suddenly lost my appetite, but I need to do something to not think about Chloe and what a jerk I am.

“You okay?” Uncle Zane asks.

I nod.

“Not in a chatty mood?” Aunt Bailey says.

I shrug.

Uncle Zane places his hand on my arm. “Want to talk about it?”

I shake my head.

Uncle Zane exchanges a concerned glance with his wife. I don’t want them to worry about me, so I say, “Just tired from dancing.”

Aunt Bailey smiles. “You kids looked like you were having so much fun.”

I dip my head. “Yep. Lots of fun.”

“Hey, man.” Uncle Zane bends close. “Are you upset because you don’t have a date? The right girl will come at the right time.”

“No, that’s not it. I guess I’m just in a crappy mood. I don’t know.” I hate lying to them, but the last thing I need is

for them to be in my business.

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?” Aunt Bailey asks.

I nod. “Just normal teenage stuff. Nothing to worry about. I’ll get over it soon.”

Uncle Zane nods in understanding. “And I’m sure the final round of the cooking competition is taking a toll on you. But don’t sweat it. Whatever happens, know that we all support you.”

“Thanks.” I wish the only thing I’m worried about is the competition. It seems so petty to worry about that when my friendship with Chloe will be destroyed forever. All because I was too much of a wuss to tell her how I felt from the start.

If I did that, would it have ended our friendship? We wouldn’t have watched *Swords and Legends* together, probably wouldn’t compete in the cooking competition together. Would we be strangers?

Uncle Zane rubs my back. “You’re only a kid once,” he tells me. “Remember that. Whatever you’re worrying about will work out. Just enjoy yourself and your friends and all the good things in your life.”

I lift a brow. “You’re talking from your own experience.”

“I wish I would have enjoyed my life more when I was younger. Before I met this awesome person.” He smiles at Bailey. “I had so many people who cared about me, but I didn’t see it or appreciate it. You, Liam, have an army of people who want only what’s best for you.”

“I know. Thanks.”

Zoey runs over to her parents. “The women’s bathroom is flooded.”

Aunt Bailey gives her a look. “What did you girls do?”

Zoey blinks innocently. “Us?”

“We can sniff out the dirty work of you, Mia, and Rylee in a heartbeat.” Uncle Zane sighs. “All right. Let’s see the damage and call someone to check it out. See ya, bud.” He waves at me before he and Aunt Bailey follow my cousin to the bathroom.

I finish my food, forcing my eyes not to wander toward the hallway. But darn, I find myself getting up and peeking out. She’s still standing there. I’m pretty sure she’s been waiting there for over an hour.

I go back to the table with a sigh, and my friends, Aidan, and Xavier drop down on the chairs, pulling a few over from the other tables.

“That was so much fun!” Lily exclaims. She beams at Xavier. “Dancing with my Romeo never gets boring. I can do it all night.”

“All night,” Xavier agrees with a loving smile. “My amazing Cupid Lily.”

“Grandma Celine tried to get me to wear heels tonight,” Ava informs us. “I said heck no. Flats for the win. At least I didn’t step on Aidan’s toes too much.”

He chuckles. “Only once or twice, but you know I’m crazy about you, clumsiness and all.”

She pecks his lips. “I love you.”

“I love you more.”

I sink down in my seat.

“What’s up, Liam?” Willow asks.

“Nothing. I’m okay.”

Lily glances around. “Where’s Chloe? Did she meet him yet? Last I checked, she was waiting for him in the hallway.”

Xavier nods in that direction. “She’s still waiting.”

Willow looks at me and I look at her. I know she wants me to just tell Chloe the truth. But I’ve tried. More than once.

What else can I do?

“He still didn’t show?” Lily asks with creased brows. “Are you sure?”

“Maybe we should check on her,” Willow suggests.

I shake my head. “I already did. She thinks a crowd would scare him off. I think it’s best we leave her to it.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Ava says.

We busy ourselves with chatting and eating more food. After another half hour passes, Ava glances toward the hallway and sighs. “You think he’ll still show?”

“He *has* to,” Lily insists. “Her dreams have to come true. And at the most romantic ball ever. This needs to happen for her.”

“I want to be positive, too, but…” Ava sighs.

“But this isn’t the first time he disappointed her,” Xavier finishes for her.

She nods.

“I just wish we knew why he’s so reluctant,” Aidan says.
“Why is it so hard for him to tell her who he is?”

“And it’s hurting her so much,” Lily says. “She’s standing there—”

I shoot to my feet.

“What are you doing?” Ava asks me.

“Getting Chloe. It’s not right for her to be alone tonight.”

I can’t take this anymore. It’s time for her to know the truth, even if it will change everything.

I make my way to Chloe. She’s got tears in her eyes.

“Chloe.” I take her hands. “Listen—”

“He won’t show up, Liam.” She presses her face to my chest. “He ditched me.”

I bury my face in her soft hair. “No. He didn’t ditch you. He—”

“I don’t want to wait here like a pathetic person. He knows what I look like and can find me if he wants.”

“I need to—”

“You were right to suspect him. For all I know, it could be the janitor or someone in his forties. No. I’m done. I want to have fun with my friends and not think about him anymore.”

“Are you sure?” I search her eyes.

She nods resolutely. “I’m done with him.”

I intake a sharp breath. “But don’t you want to know who he—?”

She squeezes my hands. “I don’t want to talk about him anymore. He’s taken too much space in my heart and in my life. I almost lost my straight-A streak because of him. No. Not anymore.” She smiles at me. “Come, Liam. Let’s enjoy what’s left of this wonderful night.”

I let her lead me to the table our friends are seated at. Xavier pulls over a chair for her and she sits down, accepting the plate of food I saved for her.

“I’m not talking about him anymore,” she informs the rest of the group. “I want to have fun and pretend he never existed. If he wants to talk to me, he knows who I am.”

Lily looks like she’s about to cry. “I’m so sorry. Did I encourage you to fall for him? I should have protected you.”

She shakes her head. “The only person to blame is him. He played with my emotions and made me feel like I was special.”

Willow pins her eyes on me. I avert my gaze.

“You *are* special,” I tell her. “You don’t need a secret admirer to tell you that.”

The others nod in agreement.

We talk about random things before Lily, Xavier, Ava, and Aidan leave to join the others on the dance floor. Willow, Chloe, and I remain.

Willow eye-signals me to do something, but I have no idea what she wants. She gets to her feet. “I’m going to check if

there's another game or activity I can do." She gives me another face, urging me to tell Chloe the truth, then walks off.

Chloe watches her with furrowed brows. "Why was she in such a hurry to leave?"

"Guess she really loves exercising her brain. So, uh, how are you?"

She smiles. "Much better. You and the others always lift my spirits." She glances around some more, maybe hoping to find her guy.

I shift closer to her. "So, Chloe—"

She holds up her hand. "I know what you're going to say. That you're sorry things didn't work out. And while I appreciate it, I don't want to talk about him. Can you..." Her face washes with sorrow. "Can you distract me so I won't think about him? I tried to be brave in front of the others, but I'm feeling really crappy. Please help me."

"Sure. Anything."

"Dance with me?"

I swallow. "You want to dance with me?"

"Please."

"Of course." I stand and hold out my hand to her. She forces a small smile and places her hand in mine.

I lead her to the dance floor, my heart thumping in my chest. I know it won't mean anything to her, but it'll mean the world to me. But I don't deserve it.

How can I refuse her wish, though? If she needs to dance with me to distract herself from the pain I caused her, then I'll

do anything for her.

On the dance floor, I swing her toward me, accidentally crashing her into my chest. “Sorry!”

She laughs. “It’s okay.”

We just stand there looking at each other.

Chloe wraps her arms around my neck, pushing herself closer to me and enveloping me in her warmth. I just stand there, frozen, as a spark zaps down my spine.

She looks up at me with furrowed brows. “Why are you just standing there?” Taking hold of my arms, she closes them around her waist.

“You should be dancing with him,” I say. And when I mean him, I mean the part of me I wish I could be but never will be.

She lowers her gaze to the floor. “He didn’t feel like I was worth it.”

I move my lips to her ear. “Then he’s an idiot. And a jerk.”

“A total jerk,” she whispers.

“The jerk of all jerks.”

She draws back and smiles sadly at me. “Thanks for being there for me. And for looking out for me and protecting me. I was an idiot and didn’t see what you saw.”

“Chloe...”

“I know, I know. Let’s not talk about that jerk. He’s ruining my perfect dance with my perfect bestie.”

I search her eyes, looking—hoping—for a clue that will tell me she sees me as more than a friend. But I don't see anything.

“Yeah. Bestie.”

She rests her cheek on mine again. “I just want to feel the music. Is that okay?”

I shut my eyes. “Totally okay. Whatever you want, just ask.”

“But what about you? What do you want?”

I tighten my arms around her. “For you to be happy.”

“And I want you to be happy.”

We're quiet as we sway to the beat of the music. I glance around. No one other than Willow even notices Chloe and me dancing together. It doesn't cross anyone's mind that she and I could ever be...

Maybe because they're right.

Chloe lowers her head on my chest, right by my heart. Does she feel it pounding? My hand smooths down her silky hair, my mind wandering to a different time and place, where she and I are actually together.

We dance for a bit longer, and the only thing I could think about is that I need to tell her. The secret admirer promised he'd reveal himself tonight and I must deliver. It's time I stop being a coward and hurting the person I love.

Her cheek is pressed to mine now, her skin so soft and smooth I feel so right and calm. But I know it won't last long.

“Chloe,” I whisper in her ear. “It's me.”

She sighs dreamily like she's so comfortable in my arms.

"Hmm?"

"I'm him. He's me."

"What?"

I draw back and gaze into her eyes. "The secret admirer...
Mr. Love...he's me."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chloe

I stare up into Liam's eyes, his words echoing in my head. But they're not taking residence in my mind.

"What?" I ask.

His chest deflates as he continues to look intensely into my eyes, guilt and regret climbing onto his face. He lifts a shaky hand to my cheek and whispers, "Mr. Love, the secret admirer...it's all me. I'm sorry."

With my heart leaping into my throat, I step back, causing his hand to drop. "What...what are you talking about?" I whisper.

He squeezes his eyes shut for a second as he releases a breath. "They're me. I'm them. Both Mr. Love and the secret admirer."

I take another step back, my eyes widening in disbelief and confusion as I stare at him. "Wait a second. You're... you're..."

He nods.

"All this time...?"

He nods again.

I continue staring at him like I've never seen him before in my life. My head hammers and my heart pounds and my body shakes uncontrollably. I think I'm going to faint.

Liam takes a step toward me, raising his hand. “I’m sorry, Chloe. I—”

“This is a joke, right? You’re trying to make me feel better or something because he didn’t show.”

“No. He’s not showing because he’s standing right in front of you.”

I just gape at him. “So you’re saying...you let me wait there for over an hour knowing he wouldn’t show. You just let me stand there like a moron.”

“No! I tried to tell you—many times—but you kept pushing me away. You just wanted to get rid of me.”

“Because you were always so negative about him! You hated him. I thought you were trying to protect me...” I gasp as I gape at him again. “But you weren’t trying to protect me. You were just playing me. All this time.”

“Chloe—”

“Why did you do it?” Tears well up in my eyes and spill down my cheeks. “How could you do it?”

“Because I...” His mouth snaps shut and a large swallow makes its way down his throat. “Because I...” He huffs. “It’s because I’m in love with you, okay? I’ve been in love with you for years and you never noticed.”

I once again just stare at him. Did he just say he’s in love with me? Ten minutes ago, I would have jumped for joy to hear those words. But now? It feels like he’s taking the sharpest knife and stabbing me right through the heart.

“Someone who’s in love with someone wouldn’t...” My tears make my voice crack. “They wouldn’t hurt them like this.”

His eyes hold nothing but pain. “I know. I’m so sorry, Chloe. I didn’t mean for it to go this way—”

“No. I can’t...I can’t...” My vision is so blurry because of my tears. “I need to get out of here.”

“Please. Let me explain.”

“Explain what? That the guy who I thought was my best friend was playing me all this time? Who are you, Liam Hastings? Because you’re not the boy I grew up with. You’re...” I blink, causing my vision to clear up. “You’re a horrible person.”

He looks like I just slapped him across the face. Hard. “Chloe...” Tears drip down his cheeks, too, as he reaches for me. “I wasn’t playing you—”

“Leave me alone! I never want to see you or speak to you again.” I push past him and run away, tears continuing to rain down my cheeks. I find my parents sitting at a table with their friends, chatting and laughing, as though the world is one big happy place. It’s not. My world has just crashed down on me and buried me under layers and layers of debris.

Liam...the boy I’ve loved for so long...

How could he hurt me like this?

“Mom, Dad, can we please go home?”

When my parents glance at me, their expressions grow concerned. “What’s wrong, honey?” Mom asks.

“Can we go home, please?”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. I’m just...” I catch Liam standing where I left him, his eyes glistening with tears as they fixate on me. Yanking my gaze away from his, I say, “I’m not feeling well. Can you take me home?”

“Of course.” Dad stands. “We’ll all go home.”

The Four Musketeers and their husbands ask me if I’m okay. I just nod that I am. I can’t look at Ally and Zack without thinking about their son. Being reminded of that knife he sliced into my heart.

“Go to the car,” Mom tells Dad and me. “I’ll look for Rylee.”

Dad puts his arm around me and holds me close as he leads me to the car. The weather’s pretty cold, but I’m not shivering because of it. I’m shivering because my heart has just shattered into a million pieces.

“I hope you didn’t eat something bad,” Dad says as we head to the parking lot. “I thought the shrimp might have had a funny taste...”

It’s not the shrimp, Dad. It’s the boy who I thought would never hurt me. But he’s hurt me in the worst way possible. I can’t breathe normally because my lungs feel like wood.

I get in the car and cross my arms over my chest, leaning my head on the window. I don’t want to cry because I don’t want to worry my parents, but it’s like I’ve got a fountain behind my eyes. The only things that play in my head over and over are his words. Rubbing salt on the wound.

“But I don’t want to go home yet,” Rylee complains as she and Mom reach the car. “Zoey, Mia, and I were about to play Hide and Seek with the other kids.”

“Your sister’s not feeling well.”

“Oh. That sucks.” She slides in and sticks her face next to mine. “Are you going to throw up?”

“What?”

“Are you going to throw up?”

“No.”

“That’s good. Because I don’t like being near people who throw up—”

“I know, Rylee. Because it makes you feel like you’re going to throw up, too.”

I don’t mean to sound so harsh. Yeah, I’m super mad, but I’m more hurt.

“Okay, sheesh. But in case you do have to throw up, aim the other way and not at me.”

I close my eyes and allow the tears to fall. I’m just too weak to fight them.

“Chloe, are you sure you’re okay?” Mom asks as she gets in the passenger seat.

“Yeah.” I force a smile. “It’s just my head. I didn’t sleep well last night because I was excited for the ball. I just need to go to bed and I’ll be fine.”

Mom and Dad don’t look convinced, so I try to make my smile more believable.

“It doesn’t look like she’s gonna puke,” Rylee says. “I think our patient will be fine.”

Dad nods and starts the car. My parents and sister discuss the ball on the way home, and I wish I had earplugs. I want to forget about the ball. Never think about it again and remember how...

I can’t believe he let me stand out there like a pathetic loser. Waiting for my knight in shining armor to arrive. Did I really think my story would end in a happily ever after? Life doesn’t work that way. In life, there are disappointments. There’s heartache. I shouldn’t have allowed myself to fall for someone I never met. How ironic is it that the one person who told me to guard my heart was the one who stomped all over it?

And he claims it’s because he’s in love with me? That he’s loved me for years? Why didn’t he just tell me?

“Maybe you should take a nice warm bath, Chloe,” Mom says when we pull up before the house. “Would you like me to make you tea?”

“No, thanks. I just want to roll into bed.”

I get out of the car before she or Dad can say anything and march up to my room, jumping on my bed and burying my face in my pillow. I thought my tears would dry up by now, but the fountain has been replenished. I don’t know if I’ll ever stop crying.

“Chloe?” Mom and Dad knock on my door. “Can we come in?”

“I’m already in bed!” my muffled voice calls. “Don’t worry about me. I’m okay. Just need to sleep.”

They’re quiet for a few seconds before Mom says, “Okay. Let us know if you need anything.”

What I need is to lose all my memories. That’s the only way I can recover from this.

When my pillow is basically drenched from my tears, my phone beeps. And beeps again. And then again and again. I reach for it and scan the screen. It’s my friends and the guys, asking if I’m okay. It doesn’t look like they’ll quit texting me until I give them an answer.

There’s no text from him. I don’t know if that makes me relieved or even more hurt.

Chucking my phone aside, I smash my face into my pillow again. I never imagined my night would turn out this way. I thought it would end with a boyfriend, or at least a potential boyfriend. I would have settled for a friend, too. But what I got instead was a betrayal and a broken heart.

And I lost my best friend.

After crying like this for a few more minutes, I yank myself off my bed and pad over to my desk. My nose is runny and my face is puffy. I can’t remember the last time I bawled like this. Maybe never.

I pull open the bottom drawer and dig out the folder where I stashed every letter and poem the secret admirer has given me, plus Mr. Love’s responses for the advice column. I study the words, dissect them, analyze them, trying to determine if I can see Liam in here. Hoping that he’s lying and maybe the

secret admirer really does exist and all this is just one big nightmare...

But I need to stop living in a fantasy world.

I don't see Liam in here, just that Mr. Love seems like a good guy. Like an expert on love. I scoff. Liam, an expert on love? If he was such an expert, he would have told me how he felt. And the letters...fresh tears prick my eyes when I'm engulfed in the memories of how it felt to receive them. And the sweet poems.

I'm about to tear them up, but something stops me. My heart. Although it's broken, I can't bear to destroy these letters that meant so much to me. Because I know Liam's not a bad person. Even though I called him horrible, he's not. He just did something horrible. And I've loved him for so long...

These letters and poems would have had a whole different meaning if he just signed his name on the bottom.

After grabbing a tissue and wiping my nose and eyes, I close the folder and stash it back in the bottom drawer. Then I crawl into bed, fold myself into the fetal position with my stuffed animal in my arms, and continue to cry.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Liam

An hour earlier

“Chloe,” I whisper as I watch her leave the ballroom with her family.

Shaking my head, I swallow the lump in my throat and head to the hallway. Dropping down on one of the sofas, I bend forward and bury my face in my hands.

The thing I feared happened—Chloe ran away from me. She didn’t even give me a chance to explain. But maybe I deserve it. What I did was inexcusable.

She’s right. I am a horrible person.

My heart pounds all over my body as I replay the memory of her hurt and betrayed expression. It’s more than pain. It’s something so deep there’s no word for it.

Why didn’t I just tell her how I felt?

Footsteps stampede into the room. “Liam?”

A group crowds around me. I don’t need to raise my head to know it’s my friends.

“What happened?” Lily asks. “Chloe just ran off after you guys danced.”

“It was so sweet of you to dance with her after she was feeling so crummy,” Ava adds. “But why did she run?”

I lift my head and catch Willow’s eyes. From the look on her face, I know she knows exactly why Chloe fled.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I mumble.

Lily glances at her phone. “No texts from Chloe,” she says. “You guys?”

They shake their heads after checking their phones.

“Maybe she wasn’t feeling well?” Xavier says.

“Or she was upset about the secret admirer?” Aidan supplies.

Ava frowns. “But she wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye.” She turns to me. “Did something happen?”

I puff out my cheeks. “I said I don’t want to talk about it.”

Lily sits down beside me. “But she’s our friend and we’re worried about her. Did the secret admirer show up and hurt her or something?”

“Yeah,” I mumble. “He hurt her.”

The others, except for Willow, exchange shocked glances. Lily gasps.

“What do you mean?” Ava asks. “What happened?”

Willow steps closer to me. “I think you should tell them.”

“Tell us what?” Lily asks. When neither I nor Willow responds, she turns to me. “What’s going on, Liam? Why are you acting so weird? And what’s this big secret that Willow knows but the rest of us don’t?”

My gaze meets Willow's and she nods for me to go for it. She's right—the others have a right to know.

Taking a deep breath and slowly releasing it, I slump forward and rub a hand down my face. "He's me."

"What?" Ava asks.

I glance up, my eyes lingering on each of my friends. I can't get the words out. It's just too painful. And they'll probably hate me for hurting Chloe.

"What are you talking about?" Lily asks.

I wish Willow would just say it for me, but this is something I need to do. I take another breath. But I shut my mouth because I can't do it.

Willow doesn't take her eyes off me, urging me to get the words out. I know I need to, but I just can't. This will destroy everything. A sixteen-year-long friendship.

Lily looks from me, to Willow, and back to me. "Can someone please tell me what's going on before I completely lose it?"

I squeeze my eyes shut because I can't bear to see their reaction. "The secret admirer. Mr. Love."

"What do you mean?" Lily prods.

My eyes are still shut. "I'm him. I'm the one writing on the advice column and I've been sending Chloe those letters."

The room is dead silent. I don't dare open my eyes. I don't want to see their anger, disappointment, confusion.

Someone places their hand on my shoulder. "It's okay, man," Xavier says. "Just—"

“What the heck are you saying?” my sister demands.
“*You’re* the secret admirer?”

My eyes open and I force them to move to her. But I don’t say anything because there’s a large boulder in my throat.

Ava moves closer. “It’s been you all this time?”

I nod, my throat still tight.

“But...how?” Lily asks. “Why?”

I’m too frozen with shame and guilt and pain for Chloe, so I just sit there staring at the wall.

“Why would you write her love letters?” Ava mutters to herself, probably trying to make sense of this. Maybe there’s no making sense of it.

Lily gasps. “Unless you...oh my gosh. Liam, do you like Chloe?”

The walls are closing in on me and I can’t breathe. I can feel their gazes on me, questioning, accusing, demanding answers.

But I can’t answer them. I can’t stay here a second longer.

“I’ve got to go,” I mutter and make my way to the exit. Everyone else is dancing, oblivious to the turmoil inside me.

“Liam!” Lily calls after me, but I ignore her. I have no idea how I’m going to get home, and I didn’t even tell my parents I’m leaving. Gosh. My head’s a mess right now.

Lily grabs hold of my arm and yanks me back. I pull away from her.

“Wait. Liam, please.”

Tears of frustration well up in my eyes. I need this night to end.

“Liam!”

I’m at the exit now and pull the doors open, bursting into the cold air. I didn’t even grab my jacket from the coat room.

The cold wind slaps me from all sides, but I can’t feel that pain. Only the one I caused the girl who means the world to me.

The door opens and Lily rushes out, she too without her jacket. “Where are you going?” she demands. “You don’t drive.”

Having a license would be really convenient right now.

“Go away,” I mutter, looking anywhere but at her. “I want to be alone.”

She wraps her arms around herself.

“Lily, you’ll freeze to death.”

“And you won’t?”

I don’t really care about that right now.

The door opens and I expect the others to join us, but I’m surprised to find Mom and Dad there with confused and worried looks.

“What’s going on?” Mom asks. “Why are you standing out here in the cold?”

“Come inside.” Dad gestures as he holds the door open.

My cheeks, nose, even eyelashes feel like they’re frozen. Maybe I deserve this punishment.

Lily hurries inside, bouncing from one foot to the other as she tries to warm herself.

Mom steps toward me. “Liam, come inside.”

“I’m good out here.”

“I don’t want you to catch a cold.” She slings her arm around my shoulder, and I don’t protest as she leads me inside. Dad shuts the door, and Mom looks from me to Lily. “What’s going on?”

Lily glances at me. She must sense not to tell our parents about this because she pushes an innocent smile on her face. “Nothing. Just got into an argument. It was stupid.”

“And you went out in the cold?” Dad asks with furrowed brows.

Lily shrugs. “Guess we weren’t thinking.”

“I’m going home,” I tell them. “I’ll ask Evie to pick me up.”

Mom places her hands on my shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Just had enough of this. I want to go home.”

Dad nods slowly. “I’ll take you home and come back.”

“I’m coming, too,” Lily says.

“No. Stay and have fun with Xavier.”

“I’m not letting you stay home all by yourself after...” She presses her lips shut. “I mean, I’m all danced out. And anyway, Xavier wants to go home and be with his mom and grandpa.”

Dad looks from me to Lily. “You guys sure everything is okay?”

Lily and I nod. He and Mom exchange a glance, one where they look like they’re reading each other’s minds.

Dad places a kiss on Mom’s cheek. “See you later, Ponytail. Don’t have too much fun without me,” he jokes.

“Never. Drive safely.”

We fetch our jackets from the coat room and follow Dad to the car. We don’t say much on the ride home, and I sense that Dad is suspicious. But he doesn’t say anything.

He drops us off before heading back to the ballroom. Lily looks at me and I look at her. I whirl around and make my way up the stairs, stab my key in the lock, and push the door open.

“Can you please stop avoiding me?” Lily huffs after me. “Talk to me, Liam.”

Slipping off my jacket, I hang it in the closet. “I want to be alone.”

“Why can’t we talk about this? We always tell each other everything. Don’t shut me out.”

I take a deep breath and face her. “Fine. What do you want to talk about? That I hurt Chloe? That I destroyed the Junior Musketeers? That I wish I could just disappear?”

She purses her lips. “I just don’t understand. Chloe was the one you had a crush on?”

“How did you know I had a crush on someone?”

“I always suspected you liked someone. Why didn’t you tell me? And how didn’t any of us see this?”

“We’re all best friends and are super close. Why would anyone suspect I like Chloe?”

She’s quiet as she thinks it over. “I guess you’re right. But I wish you would have told me. Maybe I could have helped.”

I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter now, does it? Chloe hates me. She’ll never talk to me again.”

“Liam...”

I hold up my hands. “Sorry, but I want to be alone right now.”

She nods in understanding and wraps her arms around me. “I’m here if you need me.”

“Thanks.”

I slouch up to my room, take off my suit jacket and undo the first few buttons of my shirt. Walking over to the mirror, I stare at my reflection. I don’t know the guy staring back at me. Sure, I recognize the brown hair and gray eyes, but he’s a total stranger.

Shaking my head, I change into pajamas and climb into bed. I try to push everything that happened tonight out of my head, but they push back.

What I really need is to go back in time and stop myself from doing something that would destroy everything I hold dear.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Chloe

I barely slept all night. The tears finally dried up, but I don't feel better. Don't they say that you're supposed to feel better after you cry your heart out? Well, they lied.

There's no school today because it's Saturday. I'm so thankful for that because I can't deal with school, or anything really. I can't imagine going to school and seeing...him. Going to my locker and remembering what it was like when a letter fell out. How excited and *seen* I felt.

I don't want to think about this anymore. But the memories refuse to leave my head. It's nearly eleven and I'm still lying in bed like a lazy person.

Grabbing my phone, I scan the screen and see I have a million missed calls and texts. My friends have been trying to reach me nonstop since last night. I silenced my phone because it was driving me insane. I have no idea if they know what happened, but I do know that they care about me. As much as I appreciate it, I don't want to face anyone right now. Not even the people I'm closest to in the entire world.

I lie in bed for another fifteen minutes, trying to get some sleep. But it's useless. Not wanting my parents to freak out, I drag myself out of bed. I'll have to put up an act that I'm all fine and dandy because the last thing I want is them forcing me to talk about what's going on. I appreciate how much my

parents love me, but right now, I need to deal with this on my own...somehow.

I get dressed and go downstairs. My parents and Rylee are in the kitchen. Noah must have gone out.

“Good morning, sweetie.” Mom walks over and hugs me. “Are you feeling okay?”

I force another smile. “Much better, thanks.”

“You slept like the dead,” Dad jokes. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

If they knew how I didn’t sleep a wink last night, I’m sure they’d be wearing the same worried expressions they had on last night.

“We all slept in a little,” Mom admits with a laugh. “Last night was wonderful. Anyone want to go out for brunch?”

Rylee raises her fist in the air. “Yes, please!”

“I’m in,” Dad says. “What about you, Chloe?”

I don’t think I’d be able to get anything down. Plus, I’m not really in the mood to go out among people and pretend I’m okay.

I wave my hand. “You guys go ahead. I need to take a shower and I’ve got homework.”

Rylee gapes at me. “Are you seriously going to do homework on a Saturday?”

“Yes.”

“Are we even related?”

“Yes,” Mom stresses. “My body is proof of that.”

“Mom...” Rylee frowns.

“You sure you don’t want to join us?” Dad asks me.

I nod. “I’m not hungry.”

After they wish me goodbye, I go upstairs and take a shower. I usually don’t take long showers, but today is different. It’s like I’m trying to wash away last night and the past month.

After I’m done, I settle down on my bed with a book. The only thing that could make me feel better is reading. A book that doesn’t have an ounce of romance, like a horror or a thriller.

About ten minutes later, the doorbell rings. I put my book aside and make my way downstairs, opening the door.

Liam stands there.

He stares at me with sad and guilty eyes.

I back away. “Why are you here?”

He rakes his fingers through his hair. “Can I come in? I need to explain everything.”

“I don’t think—”

“Please, Chloe. I’m so sorry I hurt you. Just let me explain.”

My eyes lower to the floor before meeting his again. I want to say no. I should say no. He *hurt* me.

But at the same time, I want to hear what he has to say. I want to understand why he did it.

“Um, sure.”

“Thanks.”

I enter the living room and sit on the sofa. He hesitates in the doorway. After taking in a deep breath, he walks inside and lowers himself on the recliner.

We stare at one another. The minutes tick by.

“Chloe...” Liam’s body shakes. He wrings his fingers in his lap. Then he lets them drop to his sides. “Uh...” He clears his throat and stares at the floor. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for things to get so out of hand. I just thought...” He releases a frustrated breath. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

I don’t say anything as I keep my gaze on him.

Still staring at the floor, he shifts in his seat. “I’ve had a crush on you for years.” He shifts in his seat again. “I was scared to tell you how I felt. I knew you only saw me as a friend. But with every passing day, my feelings for you grew stronger. And one day, I just couldn’t take it anymore. So I...”

He sighs and rubs the back of his head. “I guess I wanted to find out if you had feelings for me. So I created Mr. Love. If you liked what he said—or rather, if you liked *him*—I thought it would give me the courage to confess my feelings to you.” He shakes his head. “But it just made it worse. You thought Mr. Love was this amazing expert on romance, and I couldn’t reveal that it was me. Boring, loser Liam who’s never had a girlfriend. I thought...” He rubs his forehead and glances at me for half a second before returning his gaze to the floor. “I thought you would be disappointed. That the person you thought so highly of was just silly old me.”

He laughs bitterly to himself. “With every newspaper issue, I promised myself I would tell you the truth. But you got more interested in him. I felt like such a fraud.” He rolls his eyes. “What am I saying? I *am* a fraud.”

He releases a shaky breath. “A little more than a month ago, I knew that it was too late to tell you the truth about Mr. Love. So I decided to write you an anonymous letter. I wanted to see how you would react. Whether you would like him or think he’s a major dork. I thought that if you liked him, it would be easier to tell you how I felt. But like with Mr. Love, it was harder. Actually, it was *much* harder. Because you really liked him, and I thought...” He slowly raises his eyes to me. “I thought you would be super disappointed if you knew your secret admirer was me. You envisioned this charismatic, confident romantic guy, and I’m...not that.”

The words are bursting off my tongue. That I would have been happy if my secret admirer wasn’t charismatic or confident. I just wanted him to be himself. His true, honest self. But he was the opposite of that.

Liam’s gaze drops back to the floor. “And it just got worse and worse. I tried to end it after Willow hacked into the security system and saw Derek Chen. I didn’t want to hurt you by ghosting you, but I knew it had to stop. It seemed like the perfect opportunity. I thought maybe you would forget him and move on.” He shakes his head at himself. “That was such a cowardly move. I’m sorry, Chloe. I’m a major coward.”

My mouth opens, but I have no idea what to say.

“I thought things were over between us,” he continues. “But then you wrote me a letter after the *Swords and Legends*

convention. I didn't want to write back to you. I wanted to end things, to stop stringing you along." He hangs his head. "But I didn't want to hurt you. You wrote such a sweet letter and I had to respond."

"You could have told me the truth then," I whisper.

He sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. "I didn't tell you because I thought that would crush you." He wipes the corner of his eye. "I can't explain it, but he felt real. Like the version of myself I wanted to be but could never be. A guy who's confident and romantic and can sweep you off your feet. He felt *real* to me. This is going to sound messed up, but I was jealous of him. I was jealous when your eyes lit up every time a letter fell out of your locker. I was jealous when you kept daydreaming about him during class. I was jealous that you were swooning over his terrible poems." He scoffs. "I was jealous of a guy who didn't *exist*. I really am messed up."

The room is quiet.

Finally, I say, "You were so against him. You made him out to be some creep."

Liam shrugs. "I didn't want you to find out the truth. At least not in the beginning. Later on, I just lost control of the situation. I guess...I guess I was testing what could be if I wasn't me."

"But the real you is amazing," I say. "You didn't have to invent an alter ego. Liam Hastings is perfect just the way he is."

He shakes his head. "No. You deserve so much better than that."

I wish I could tell him he's wrong. I accepted him wholeheartedly as he was. I loved him for who he was. Now, though? I have no idea how I feel.

"I'm not sure if Willow told you this, but after you discovered that Mr. Love and the secret admirer were the same person, she tracked him down. She found his address. The Hastings's residence. She figured out it was me."

I just stare at him, my mind a jumbled mess. "Wait, Willow knew? And she didn't tell me?"

He releases a breath. "I begged her not to. She told me I needed to tell you the truth. So I wrote you the letter about meeting up at the masquerade ball. I came over to you when you were waiting for him. I was going to tell you everything, but you shooed me away. You thought I'd get in the way of your happiness. I know I have no right to feel hurt, but I felt really hurt that you didn't even consider the possibility that I could be your secret admirer. I was here all this time—*all this time*—and you only thought of me as your friend or brother. That's another reason I couldn't tell you how I felt. Because I would just make you uncomfortable."

"Who said you would?"

He looks at me. "Remember what happened after we woke up in the motel? You were so uncomfortable when we slept in each other's arms. I knew that if I told you the truth, you would never be comfortable around me. I value our friendship so much, and the last thing I wanted was for you to hate being around me. Having you as a friend, no matter how hurtful it was, was more important than losing you as a girlfriend."

I squeeze a couch cushion to my chest, my stomach coiling around itself.

He shifts in his seat another time. “You mean so much to me, Chloe. It would kill me if we lost our friendship.”

A tear slides down my cheek. “I value you and our friendship, too.” I slowly move my eyes to him. “I appreciate you coming here and explaining everything. And I understand why you did it.”

He straightens up. “You do?”

“Yeah, because I’ve also been keeping a secret.”

His eyebrows furrow.

I take a deep breath and let it out. “You thought I wasn’t comfortable sleeping in the same bed as you because I didn’t like you that way. But you’re wrong. I was uncomfortable because I...” I take another deep breath and let it out, my mouth dry. “I have feelings for you, too. I freaked out at the motel because I didn’t think you felt the same way about me.”

Liam goes still, his eyes widening. “You have feelings for me?”

I nod, swatting at the tears. All this time...we both had feelings for each other. If one of us would have just been brave enough to admit it, this wouldn’t have happened. We could have gotten together, maybe had a happily ever after.

Tears gather in Liam’s eyes. He bends forward and buries his face in his arm. “You have feelings for me,” his muffled voice says. “And I messed it all up. You’ll never forgive me.”

More tears drip down my cheeks. I reach to place my hand on his arm, watching it tremble like an earthquake. “Liam, I don’t know what to say. How to feel. I’ve been in love with you for years, but ...”

He raises his head, cheeks splashed with tears. “But...?”

I hug myself, averting my gaze. “You really hurt me. I know you feel rotten about it, but I can’t just pretend it didn’t happen.”

He nods, a hard swallow making its way down his throat. “I deserve that. If you don’t want to talk to me ever again, I’ll understand. Just know that my feelings for you will never change.”

My throat burns as I hold in more tears. “I still love you. I just...need...” I blink the tears away.

“Yes, whatever you need. Me out of your life. Anything. Just tell me.”

My hand still trembles as I reach to rub his arm again. “I don’t want you out of my life, Liam. As hurt as I am, you’re still my best friend. But I don’t know what to do. I need time to make sense of my feelings.”

“I understand that.”

I hold out my hand and he places his inside. “Like I said, I understand why you did it. Both of us were too scared to tell each other how we felt. You pretended to be someone else and I pushed myself to fall for my secret admirer because it hurt me too much to love you. I thought if I told you how I felt and you didn’t feel the same, it would ruin everything. Our friendship, the Junior Musketeers. *Everything*. I hurt *you* by

throwing the secret admirer in your face. Getting excited when he wrote me poems, pushing you aside for him, skipping watching *Swords and Legends* to read over the letters. I'm sorry."

He smiles sadly through his tears. "All of this could have been avoided if we just told the other how we felt."

I nod.

Quiet.

"What happens now?" Liam asks.

I puff out my cheeks. "I don't know. I need some time. Maybe one day we could...figure out where we stand."

He looks crushed, but nods. "I'll keep my distance from you and give you the space and time you need." He stands. "Thanks for listening to me, Chloe. You're one of the most special people I've ever met. And I'm sorry again for hurting you."

"I'm sorry for saying you're a horrible person. You're not."

"Thanks."

"And I'm sorry you felt like you couldn't tell me how you felt. I'm sorry I pushed myself to fall for the secret admirer instead of you. You're amazing, Liam."

He frowns. "No. Amazing people don't hurt the people they love."

"You made a mistake. We both did."

He gives me a sad smile. "Talk to me whenever you're ready. And if it's never, I'll accept that. I just want you to be

happy.”

That makes a new batch of tears enter my eyes. “I want you to be happy, too.”

He makes a move like he wants to hug me, but shakes his head and steps back. After wishing me good night, he leaves my house.

I stare at the closed door, feeling even more confused than I did a few hours ago. I can’t fault Liam for doing what he did. He was so desperate to tell me how he felt that he jumped over hurdles. And I was no different.

Why couldn’t we just be open and honest with each other?

I go up to my room and plop down on my bed, starting a video chat with Ava, Lily, and Willow. One by one they pop up on my screen, each of them looking relieved when they see my face.

“Hey, guys,” I say with an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry I haven’t returned your calls and texts. I’ve just been, um…”

“It’s okay,” Lily says with an understanding smile. “You don’t have to explain yourself. We’re just glad you’re okay.”

Willow and Ava nod.

“Thanks.” I puff out my cheeks. “Liam was just over. We had a long talk.”

They’re quiet until Ava asks, “Did it go well?”

“I think so. He explained everything to me.” I look at Willow. “He told me how you found out it was him.”

“Chloe, I’m so sorry I kept it from you,” she says. “I didn’t want to hurt you, but—”

“It’s okay.” I offer her a reassuring smile. “Liam’s your friend just as much as I am. You didn’t want to betray his trust. I get it.”

“Thanks.”

“So…” Lily’s brows furrow. “Are you and Liam good?”

I puff out some air again. “There’s a lot I need to think about. So many feelings to work through. Honestly, I’m relieved he and I feel the same way about each other. We—”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Lily’s eyes are wide. “Are you saying you like Liam, too?”

My cheeks flush. “Yeah. I’ve had a crush on him for years.”

Ava’s jaw falls open. “Sheesh, both of you liking each other under our noses. You guys are *good*.”

“Wow.” Lily’s eyes are wider. “I don’t know why I’m surprised, though. You guys are perfect for each other.”

My stomach flutters. “We are?”

“Duh! You’re both so nice and kind-hearted and you have so many things in common. You guys love cooking and watching TV and hanging out together and you have an understanding. You just *work*.”

“Agreed.” Ava smiles. “You guys *do* work.”

Willow nods.

I'm quiet as I think over Lily's words. Then I say, "I understand why he did what he did. I kept my feelings from him just like he did. I was scared to tell him how I felt, and he was scared to tell me how he felt. But all along, we both felt the same way." I laugh lightly. "We could have avoided all of this if one of us was just brave enough to put themselves out there. I guess we *are* pretty similar."

"So what does all of this mean?" Lily asks. "Are you and Liam going to...?"

I sigh. "I don't know. Even though I understand why he did it, I'm still hurt. I need some time to work through my feelings."

Willow nods. "Yeah. It wouldn't be healthy to rush into anything. You need time to reflect and assess."

"The truth is, I'm glad Liam wrote the letters and not a stranger. I mean, it would have been better if he confessed his feelings to me, but I know he didn't have malicious intent. He just couldn't take his feelings anymore and had to do something about it. In a sense, he was braver than me because he actually did something while I continued hiding in my little corner. If he hadn't done it, we would possibly be in the friend zone forever."

They ponder my words and then Willow says, "True. This definitely got the ball rolling."

"I know he's my twin brother and I might be a little biased, but Liam is such a good guy," Lily says. "I've always hoped he'd end up with someone kind and sweet. I know you're not ready to explore anything with him right now, and I think you should take as much time as you need. But when you're ready,

don't be afraid to explore what could be with him. I know my brother, and he will be the perfect boyfriend. When he loves, he loves with every fiber of his being. Just like my mom and dad."

"And you," Willow says with a smile.

Lily laughs. "Well, I didn't want to sound *that* cocky."

Ava and Willow chuckle softly.

"It wouldn't be weird if he and I...?" I shake my head. "I mean, it's too soon to be thinking about this. But would it be weird?"

"Maybe at first," Lily admits. "But we've been best friends forever, and we'll get used to it. All we want is for you and Liam to be happy."

"Definitely," Willow says.

"Agreed. One thousand percent." Ava smiles.

I play with a loose thread on my bed. "I don't want to think about that right now. Honestly, I don't really know what to think or how to feel. I need to take a few days and see how I feel afterward."

"Whatever happens, we support you," Lily says.

"Yeah. Whatever is meant to happen will happen," Ava adds.

"Just do what's best for you," Willow tells me. "Not for anyone else."

I nod and smile. "Thanks. I already feel so much better talking to you guys."

We chat for a few more minutes before hanging up. I sit at my desk to occupy myself with homework. I know that Liam will be on my mind twenty-four-seven now. I only hope I'll be able to work through my feelings and decide what really is best for me.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Liam

It's hard to write Mr. Love's response for the advice column. Knowing that Chloe and the others will read it makes me feel a bit strange. But at the same time, I know I've been giving good advice, and this person needs my help. So as difficult as it is, I get it done.

It's been a few days since Chloe and I had that talk. Things have been...different. We're civil with each other, but that's pretty much it. I've been keeping my distance from her, giving her the time she needs to make sense of her thoughts and feelings. I haven't been pushing her or demanding anything. Really, we've hardly exchanged more than a few courteous smiles, hellos and goodbyes, and how are yous. I miss her like crazy.

If she doesn't want a relationship with me or if she doesn't want me in her life, then I'll accept it. As hard as it is, I'll put her needs before my own. Like I should have done from the start.

After I send Mr. Love's response to Chloe's school email address, I finish my homework, trying very hard not to think about her. Or what she'll think of Mr. Love's advice.

When I first started Mr. Love, I didn't think anyone would take my answers seriously or even pay attention to me. But with each issue, interest grew and soon he turned into the highlight of readers' experience.

It's odd that I've never had a girlfriend but I seem to be able to help others with their love lives. I guess my parents have a lot to do with it. Mom and Dad have shown me what a loving, healthy relationship looks like, one I want to emulate.

With a special girl. *One* special girl.

Sighing, I slump forward and close my school stuff. It can wait until later.

I leave my room and go downstairs to the kitchen. The final round of the competition is in two days and I need to come up with dishes that will prove to the judges that I deserve the scholarship.

The house is empty because everyone is off doing their own thing. Lily's hanging out with Xavier and Spencer at Xavier's house. Dad's at work and Mom is having her book club at Willow's house. Evie is probably downstairs.

In the kitchen, I grab whatever ingredients I can find and try to prepare a dish. But I can't concentrate. Instead of thinking about the competition, I think about Chloe. And because I'm so distracted, I accidentally knock a bowl full of the food I just prepared to the floor and it splatters everywhere.

"Darn it!" I kick the bowl across the kitchen. Why isn't anything working out?

"Whoa, what's going on in here?" Dad enters the kitchen. He takes one look at the mess I made and fetches a mop and broom to clean it up.

"Sorry," I mumble as I help him clean. "I don't know what happened."

He watches me for a little while. “Your mom and I have noticed that something has been bothering you the last few days. Is everything okay?”

“No,” I blurt before I can stop myself. “I mean, yeah. Everything is fine. Just preparing for the finals.” I give him a brave smile.

He continues watching me. “Liam, I know when something is troubling you and this has nothing to do with the competition.”

I release a heavy breath and slump forward. “You’re right. I’m trying to focus on the cooking, but I keep thinking about...”

He lifts a brow. “About what?”

I lower my gaze to the floor. My parents don’t know what happened between Chloe and me. It’s kind of embarrassing to tell my dad that I was pretending to be her secret admirer.

“Nothing. I’m okay.” I push another brave smile on my face.

Dad nods slowly, then puts away the broom and mop. “That’s all right,” he says in a soft tone. “You don’t have to tell me. But keeping it bottled inside will only make things worse.” He sits down at the table and gestures for me to join him.

“I’m not keeping anything bottled up.”

He studies me closely. “You look like you haven’t been getting much sleep. Mom and I are here for you. We love you and want to help you.”

I swallow the lump in my throat as I sit down next to him. He's right. Dad is the perfect dad to me. Loving, caring, making sure my sisters and I have everything we need. And Mom is the perfect mom, too.

I hang my head. "I did something really stupid and I'm worried I might have messed up something very special. Something that meant the world to me."

His eyebrows furrow. "Are you talking about the scholarship? Have you given up?"

Shaking my head, I release another heavy breath. "No, not the competition."

He just stares at me like he has no idea what I'm referring to. Then it's like a light bulb flicks on in his head. "This is about a girl."

Averting my gaze to the table, I nod. I have never come to my dad for dating advice. Have never been interested in anyone except for Chloe. So this is new territory for both of us.

Dad bends close to me. "Is there a girl at school you're interested in?"

I nod.

"Have you asked her out?"

I shake my head. "I messed everything up, Dad."

He places his hand on my arm. "Why don't you tell me everything from the beginning?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. "I did something so stupid."

"I doubt that's true."

Opening my eyes, I look at him. “Yes I did, and I’m worried she’ll never speak to me again. I mean, she said she needs time, but I know I messed it all up.”

He squeezes my shoulder. “Son, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I shrug his arm off because I know he won’t look at me the same, then take a deep breath. “I’ve been in love with Chloe for years and…” I stop talking to see his reaction. His eyes are a bit wide with surprise, but he’s not making this about himself. “And, uh, I couldn’t tell her how I felt. We’ve been best friends for years and I was sure she just saw me as a brother.”

I go on to tell him about Mr. Love, and then about the secret admirer, ending it with the masquerade ball, where I revealed myself to her, and the conversation Chloe and I had the next day.

I sink down in my seat. “She’ll never talk to me again. Dad…what do I do? I love her and I know she’s the one for me. I can’t imagine loving another girl the way I love her.” Tears flash in my eyes. “I’m so stupid.”

His arm comes around me. “You’re not stupid, Liam. You were brave to tell her the truth. You couldn’t hide it from her—it wouldn’t have been fair to her.”

I nod, swatting the tears from my eyes. “But what good did it do? We’ll never be the same again. *Nothing* will be the same again.”

He holds me close. “You need to give her as much space as she needs. But don’t give up. You guys have a special

relationship, something so pure and rare. Chloe will come to see that.”

But what if she doesn't? I know I said I'd accept it if Chloe doesn't want me in her life, but the thought of it makes my stomach burn.

“You made a mistake,” Dad continues. “And that's okay. You're only human. If things are meant to work out, they'll work out.” He bends forward to kiss my forehead. “The only thing you can do now is be there for her and give her as much time as she needs.”

“I love her so much, Dad.”

“I know you do, but you need to be patient. She'll come to you when she's ready.”

I puff out my cheeks. “Thanks for the talk.”

“No problem. Do you need help preparing for the finals?”

“Yeah, that would be great.”

As hard as it is, I need to push away my worry about Chloe and focus on the competition. I owe it to myself and her to win.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Liam

I rake my hand through my hair as I wait for Chloe to arrive at the competition.

After ten minutes, a car pulls up and she gets out. She looks at me and I look at her.

I smile. “Thanks for coming.”

“Of course. I’d never leave you hanging. You need to win the scholarship.”

I swallow. She’d do anything and everything for me. While I was so selfish I only thought about my needs.

I gesture toward the entrance and she follows me inside. This is the same building the other two rounds were held in, but it feels different. The place is decorated differently and there are only two other contestants.

We enter a room near the stage where the finals will be held. Viraj and the judges go over the rules, and of course they mention the prize. Sienna’s got a wide grin on her face, as though she’s positive she has it in the bag. Harper looks like she’s about to pass out. As for me, my heart pounds so hard I think I might puke.

Chloe places her hand on my arm, giving me an encouraging smile. I return a small one.

She removes her hand. I suddenly feel cold.

The audience starts to fill up, and it won't be long before the competition will start. Viraj and the judges leave us to chat among ourselves, but no one is really doing that. Pretty sure we're all nervous and can hardly focus on anything else.

Sienna presses her phone to her ear, telling the person on the other end that she'll come home with the prize and the trophy.

There's a trophy? I didn't know that.

"The competition?" she says, glancing at me and Harper. "Meh. No competition at all. Of course I know what I'm making. Mom..." She squeezes her phone. "Well, if you actually came to watch me compete, you'd know that... Um... yeah, I can hold, I guess." She frowns as she gazes around the room. When she spots me watching her, she glares at me.

"Geez," I mutter as I pull my eyes away from her. "I feel sorry for her."

Chloe looks at me. "Did you say something?"

I tilt my head toward Sienna. "Kinda rough not to have your parents supporting you."

She nods. "I also feel bad for her."

Come to think of it, Sienna didn't have anyone cheering her on during the previous rounds.

I smile at Chloe. "I'm lucky to have my cheer squad out there."

She returns it. "We all believe in you and want you to excel. Don't worry—you've got this. You'll win the

scholarship and follow your dreams and become an incredible chef.”

I wish I could hug her. “That was very sweet. Thank you.”

The audience is getting quite noisy out there. There are more people, since it’s the finals, and I’m feeling the pressure. Could it be that in only a few hours, I’ll be the winner? Is Chloe right and my dreams will come true? Well, one of my dreams.

“What?” she asks.

I blink, not realizing I was staring at her. “Nothing. Just nervous.”

“You’ll do great. And remember, you have me.” She gives me her usual Chloe smile, which melts my heart.

Viraj introduces the finalists and what school they go to. When my name is called, my cheer team goes wild. I glance at them and am surprised to see new faces. Ava’s maternal grandparents, Vivian and Robert Wood, are here, Principal Nakamura and VP Rivera, and Mrs. Duncan.

Wow. They’re all here to support me.

“Congratulations on making it to the finals, young cooks!” Viraj says and the crowd erupts in applause. Viraj waves his hands, quieting the crowd. “Yes, this is very exciting. Let me remind everyone of the prize. The winner of this year’s Young Chefs of Tomorrow will receive a scholarship to the Robinson Culinary Institute. He or she will also win a beautiful trophy.” He gestures to the golden trophy with a plate of food on it and the logo of the competition. “And of course the title of this year’s Young Chefs of Tomorrow winner!”

My lips lift in a smile. But then I swallow as it dawns on me how real this is. I'm actually here, at the finals. I have a one in three chance of winning this whole thing.

"Are you ready to hear your final challenge?" Viraj asks.

Everyone, including the contestants and their partners, starts clapping.

"Your final challenge is to cook us a three-course meal! An appetizer, an entrée, and a dessert."

Chloe and I expected this, so it's no surprise. The other finalists don't seem too shocked, either.

"You will have fifty minutes to cook each course and then you'll present it to the judges. Fifty minutes on the clock, please. Are you ready? One, two, three, go!"

And we're off, scrambling to get everything we need from the pantry like our lives depend on it.

Chloe and I grab our stuff, then heave our baskets onto our station and get started. Like before, the place is very tiny, and we're toppling over each other as we grab various things.

"Sorry!" I say as my shoulder knocks into hers, igniting a spark that shoots down to my toes.

Chloe flinches back. Did she feel it, too?

"It's okay," she says. "Crash into me all you want. I just want to finish on time."

We bang into each other more times than I can count. And each time, I feel that spark.

Why am I thinking about that when I should be focusing on the competition?

“Twenty minutes left,” Viraj announces.

My heart picks up speed. Crap. We’re making something very complicated and I’m not sure we’ll be ready in time.

Chloe’s freaking out, too. And that kills me because she’s once again working so hard for me.

“It’s okay,” I say to her. “Breathe.”

She nods unsurely. “Does this taste okay?”

I take a spoon, dip it into the dish, and taste it. “Salt.”

“Got it.”

“Thanks.”

The time flies by and the audience starts counting down the seconds. Chloe and I rush to put the last few items on the dish before Viraj says, “Time’s up! Hands in the air.”

We throw our hands up, Chloe giving me a relieved smile. We got everything on the plate.

“Let’s start with Liam,” Catherine says. “Please bring over your dish.”

Chloe and I carry the plates to the judges’ table at the other end of the stage. I describe the dish as they dig in, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

This is one of the most nerve-wracking moments of my life.

“Thank you, Liam. Next, Sienna.”

Chloe and I return to our station and grin at one another. Whatever happens, the first course is done.

After Sienna, it's Harper's turn. Once they're done with hers, they tell us what they liked and didn't like about our dishes. For me, they claim the plating was a little messy. But they liked the flavors and it felt like a restaurant-quality dish. Chloe looks at me with wide eyes. From what it seems, Sienna and Harper made more mistakes. Does that mean I won the first round?

Now it's time for the next course.

"I'm so nervous," Chloe tells me as we start cooking. "Look, my hands are shaking."

I place my hand on her shoulder. "It's okay. Forget about the competition and look at me."

She brings her eyes to mine.

"Remember to breathe and relax. We're in a competition, but I care more about you and your well-being."

She takes a deep breath. "I want to win for you."

"No. I don't care about that. I need to make sure you're okay."

She nods again, inhaling another deep breath. "I'm okay."

We work quickly to make up for the time we lost. So far, so good. I think we're doing great.

"Oh no!" Chloe gasps from where she stands at the stove. The pot next to her has spilled over. "I burned it!" Tears fill her eyes and rain down her cheeks. "I burned the sauce."

"It seems like Liam's having some trouble," Viraj announces to the audience as I rush to her side.

I wrap my arm around her. “It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.” I glance at the clock. There are only two minutes left. Not enough time to make a new one.

“I’m so sorry.” She cries into my shoulder. “I was just so nervous.”

I draw back and place my hands on her shoulders. “This isn’t your fault. I don’t blame you, so please don’t blame yourself. Accidents happen all the time. We just won’t put the sauce on the plate.”

She bites her lip. “It needs sauce, Liam.”

I know it does. But I can’t serve the judges burned sauce. “It’ll be okay. Let’s finish up before time runs out.”

We manage to get everything other than the sauce on the plate and Chloe tries to make it look pretty. It appears really nice, just it’s obvious the sauce is missing.

But like I told her, I don’t blame her.

I wrap my arm around her and give her a bright smile as the judges taste Sienna’s dish. Chloe looks so sad and guilty. I tighten my hold on her.

“Liam, please bring us your dish.”

Even though there’s a big mistake, I’m proud of me and Chloe. We attempted something quite difficult and should be proud of ourselves.

After I describe the dish, Catherine frowns at her plate. “Was there supposed to be a sauce?”

“Yes, but it got burned and I decided not to serve it.”

She and the other judges nod. “Thank you, Liam.”

I thank them and return to my station. Taking Chloe's hand, I give it a squeeze.

Once they've tasted everyone's dish, they give us feedback. "Liam, your dish was delicious, but as you know, without a sauce, it was quite lacking."

I nod. "Sorry about that."

I can feel Sienna gloating.

"Excuse me, can I say something?" Chloe asks as she steps forward. "Please don't penalize Liam for my mistake. I was the one who burned the sauce. So please don't use it against him."

The judges exchange a glance. "Thank you for that," Catherine says. "Unfortunately, we have to judge the dish that was presented to us. And sadly, the dish had problems."

Chloe nods slowly and steps back. I give her a grateful smile.

"I'm really sorry, Liam."

I put my arm around her. "It's okay."

We get started on the last course—the dessert. This is Chloe's grandma's recipe, though we're elevating it to make it more restaurant quality. Chloe's the brains behind it, taking the lead. I know we'll totally own this round.

There's a gasp and when I look up, I find Sienna's partner, clutching her palm. Blood drips down her hand.

"Medic! We need a medic!"

The medic tends to her, and although she's okay, she can't continue cooking. Sienna starts freaking out that there's no

way she'll finish her dish in time.

“Chloe, you got this, right?” I ask her.

“Yeah, why?”

“I'm going to help Sienna.”

Her eyes shine. “That's so kind of you. Go ahead. I know this dish backward and forward.”

I nod. “I'll see if I can run back and forth and help you.”

She shakes her head. “That's okay. Just help her.”

“Thanks for everything, Chloe.”

I dash over to Sienna, asking her what she needs done. Her eyes bug out and I can hear a hush fall over the audience.

“You want to help me?” She scoffs. “More like sabotage me. No thanks.”

“I don't want to sabotage you. Why would I leave my partner to make my dish all on her own if I wanted to sabotage you?”

She thinks it over for a bit. “Why are you doing this?”

I shrug. “Everyone needs a fair shot at the prize.”

She thanks me and tells me what to do. As I help her, I run back to Chloe to make sure she's not too overwhelmed. She reassures me that she's fine and that I should focus on Sienna.

It's so crazy in here, but we get everything done—my dish and Sienna's. I help her plate and assist Chloe as well. She doesn't complain once, which makes me love her ten times more than I already do.

Time's up and our hands are in the air. When Sienna presents her dish to the judges, she smiles at their compliments, and she even gives me a thankful one.

“Liam, please describe your dessert.”

After I do, the judges are very excited and pleased as they taste it.

I look at Chloe and she gives me two thumbs up. She totally rocked it.

“Now the judges will deliberate,” Viraj announces. “And then they'll announce who won this year's competition, the trophy, and the scholarship to the Robinson Culinary Institute!”

The audience cheers. The judges leave to a nearby room while the rest of us sit at our stations.

“Thanks so much, Chloe,” I tell her with a smile. “You owned that dessert.”

She waves her hand. “I was just following what we did during practice.”

I hesitate as I reach for her hand, then curl it to my side. “I know, but you were amazing.”

“So were you.”

“Thanks.”

Quiet.

Quiet again.

It feels like forever until the judges return to the stage. The finalists are asked to step forward and stand before the judges'

table.

“We’re very pleased with your dishes tonight,” Catherine says. “You all did exceptionally well and we’re excited to see more from you in the future.”

One by one, they talk about our dishes and what they loved and didn’t love about them. Of course they mention my lack of sauce, but I don’t let that get to me.

They loved my dessert most—well, Chloe’s dessert. One judge jokes that he licked his plate clean. I wish I could throw my arms around Chloe and thank her until the sun falls from the sky.

“The winner of this year’s Young Chefs of Tomorrow is....” The judges exchange smiles, the audience is on the edge of their seats, and my heart is thumping so hard in every inch of my body that I can hardly breathe.

“Sienna from Silverton Academy!”

The air is sucked out of me.

I didn’t win.

But that’s okay. I smile and clap with everyone else. She was a fierce competitor, a great cook, and she deserves this. She beams as she waves her trophy around. The audience cheers and I notice her glancing around, as if searching for her parents. But I don’t think they’re here. She does have fellow classmates and teachers there, though. But it’s hard to miss her sad eyes.

Chloe comes over to me and wraps her arms around my waist. I’m taken back for a second at her warmth and close

proximity, but then I hug her back, lifting her a few inches off the floor.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers.

“It’s okay. Please don’t blame yourself.”

She draws back and bites her lip. “I cost you the win.”

“No, you were amazing. It just wasn’t meant to be.”

The family and friends of the contestants run to hug and congratulate us. Mom and Dad pull me into their arms, telling me over and over how proud they are.

As the rest of my family and friends hug me, a voice says, “Liam Hastings?”

I pull away from Charlie and glance toward the voice. Dean Catherine Robinson stands there with an expression on her face that I can’t read.

“Yes?” I ask.

“May I speak with you for a minute?”

I nod and follow her to the side, away from the crowd. She wears a pleasant smile on her face, but I still can’t figure out what this is about.

“Congratulations on your accomplishments in this competition,” she tells me.

“Thank you.”

She nods. “Unfortunately, you didn’t win, but winning isn’t everything, is it?”

I swallow. “No, it’s not. I had fun and I’m glad I met so many talented people that I look up to. I’ll still follow my

dream of becoming a chef.”

She nods again, still with that smile. “I was pleasantly surprised with your behavior this evening.”

I just blink at her.

“When your sous chef burned the sauce, you handled it very professionally. I’ve had chefs in my restaurant lose their composure, yelling at the sous when they made mistakes. You, Liam, are wise beyond your years. Any chef would be lucky to have you working in their restaurant one day.”

My cheeks feel hot. “T-thank you.”

She smiles again. “But what shocked me even more? That you helped out your competitor. In all my years of judging the Young Chefs of Tomorrow, I have never seen that before.”

“Sorry. It just didn’t seem fair for her to fall behind because she lost her partner.”

“Liam, you have nothing to apologize for. What you did shows me what a magnificent young man you are.”

I blink at her again. “Thank you.”

“When I’m considering prospective students for my school, I’m not just looking at their culinary skills. I’m looking at them as a person. Is the student a good, selfless, caring person? Does the student have a good heart? You, Liam, check all those boxes.”

I have no idea what to say. I can’t even open my mouth.

“You helped your competitor complete her dish knowing she might beat you. And she did. But you didn’t get upset. You were happy for her. You displayed characteristics that exceed

what I'm looking for in a student. Which is why I'd like to offer you a scholarship to the Robinson Culinary Institute."

I just stare at her. "What? You're offering me...but I didn't win."

"This competition isn't only about winning, Liam. I saw what a marvelous person you are and I'd love for you to come to my school, hone your skills, and exceed in everything that you do."

"Are you sure?" I ask before I can stop myself.

"Very sure. I'll send you an application to fill out, but it's just a formality. I'm looking forward to you attending the Robinson Culinary Institute in two years."

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

She smiles with a nod. "One more thing. I'd like you to intern in my restaurant over the summer."

"Are you serious?"

"Dead serious."

"I'd love to. Thanks so much."

She pats my arm with another smile and walks off. My head is in a daze as I return to my family and friends and tell them the good news.

They all shout and go crazy, but my eyes flit to Chloe, who gives me a wide smile. I wouldn't have been able to do any of this without her.

I owe her everything.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Chloe

Ava's grandfather, Easton Knight, is having a birthday party tonight, and we're all invited. Considering the Knights are the richest people in Edenbury, the party is sure to be extravagant. Which is why I'm standing before my closet with a huge frown. Why is it so hard to find the right dress?

I push aside dress after dress, none of them seeming good enough. It's not every day the richest man in Edenbury has a birthday. I want to look good.

Okay, fine. There might be another reason why I want to look good. Because a certain person of the male species who I grew up with will be there, and I can't help but imagine what it would be like if he saw me in a gorgeous dress.

"Ugh." I shove another dress aside. "Why am I freaking out about this? It's not like he and I..."

I don't know. It's been a few days since I talked with Liam at the cooking competition. He was so sweet to not blame me for burning the sauce. And the way he smiled at me after he was offered a scholarship to culinary school...

Could it be I'm ready?

"I don't know!" I groan. "There are so many variables and...Great. Now I'm talking to myself."

"Chloe?" Mom steps into my room. "Are you okay? I heard some groaning."

I turn around and take her in. She's wearing a long plum dress with a pretty belt. It's so classy and fashionable. Dani sent it over a few days ago because Mom had nothing to wear. She asked me if I needed a dress, too, but I assured her I had enough. But now that I'm rummaging through my closet, I really have nothing to wear.

"I can't find the perfect dress," I complain.

She walks over and sorts through my dresses, suggesting a few. They're all beautiful, but none of them seem perfect enough.

Mom slides her hand into mine. "Sweetie, I have a feeling that your freaking out has nothing to do with the dress but something else. Want to talk about it?"

"Um...I don't know. I don't know how I feel..."

"Come." She tightens her hold on my hand and brings me to my bed, where we sit down facing each other. With a loving smile, she tucks some hair behind my ear. "I know there's a lot going on in your life. I might seem old to you, but trust me, I remember what it was like to be your age. The only difference is that I didn't have a mother to talk to. If you want to talk, I'm here."

I swallow as a lump forms in my throat. "I'm sorry you didn't have a mother to talk to. It must have been so hard."

Mom nods. "It was. But I had Grandpa and my Musketeers. And Dad, once we got together. Still, I wish I had a mom I could be close to."

"Mom..."

"Yeah, honey?"

“I don’t know how to feel. I wish the right answer would just flash in my mind.”

Mom chuckles. “I know what you mean. But part of life, and part of growing up, is making tough decisions. And learning from your mistakes.” She tucks more hair behind my ear. “Does this have anything to do with Liam and what happened between you guys?”

I stare at her. “You know about that?”

She laughs lightly. “I heard it through the Musketeer grapevine. I didn’t want to bring it up because I thought you would talk to me if you felt comfortable. You don’t have to if you don’t want to, but I want you to know that I’m here and I would never judge you. I just want to help you navigate life.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I puff out my cheeks. “This does have to do with Liam. Boy problems, what else?” I shake my head. “I never thought I would actually be dealing with boy problems. I thought I would be single my whole life.”

“Oh, sweetie.” She leans forward to kiss my forehead. “Honestly, I thought the same when I was your age. But that’s not true. Of course you won’t be single forever.”

My chest heaves as I gulp in some air. “This thing with Liam, it’s been eating away at me.”

“How do you feel about him?”

“I don’t know...”

“Don’t be afraid to delve deep into your emotions. You have feelings for him, don’t you?”

With my gaze on my bed, I nod.

“And he’s your best friend,” Mom continues. “I understand it can be scary.”

I finally look her in the face. “There’s so much unpredictability. We’re good together as friends. What if we try to date and realize how weird and awkward and *wrong* it is? What if we can’t go back to being friends? That will ruin everything. I’d lose my best friend. And what if we broke up? We’d tear the Junior Musketeers apart.”

I lower my gaze back to my blanket. “I know Liam had good intentions and was acting from the goodness of his heart, but he still hurt me. I do forgive him because I understand why he did it. But what if he accidentally hurts me again in the future? It’d sting so much more because he’s my best friend.”

Mom slides her hand into mine. “Sometimes the people we love most are the ones who hurt us the most. But of course they don’t mean it. It’s because you have such deep feelings for them. So when they make you happy, you’re over the moon. And when they make you sad, it hurts pretty badly. But Liam made a mistake. You know he’s an unbelievably sweet and amazing guy.”

“Yeah. He’s the best.”

“Why do you look at the negative?” she asks. “Instead of thinking this might ruin your relationship, why don’t you think of it positively? That you and Liam could have a wonderful relationship. Maybe even a wonderful life together.”

“I guess because it’ll hurt more if I look at it positively and then it crashes and burns.”

“I understand that,” she says. “It’s easier to hide behind your fear. But you could miss out on something wonderful if you keep hiding.”

“But what about my friends? What if things don’t work out and the Junior Musketeers are torn apart?”

“Sweetie, I think you kids are tight enough to withstand something like that. If that does indeed happen, you’ll figure it out. You guys mean the world to each other.”

“Yeah, but...I don’t know.”

“Sweetheart, your father and I made mistakes when we were your age, too. The whole business with the fake relationship to begin with. I should have told him how I felt from the start. Like mother like daughter,” she adds with a smile as she squeezes my hand. “But the worst mistake I made was believing that Dad had feelings for Teagyn. I saw him kissing her and assumed he liked her. I didn’t want to listen to him when he tried to tell me the truth. He didn’t kiss Teagyn—*she* kissed him. And he pushed her away. But when we finally talked and I listened to him, I believed him. Because I knew he spoke the truth and that his words came straight from his heart.”

She plays with my hair. “I know it’s scary to put yourself out there, especially with a friendship that means so much to you. But you have the opportunity to have something amazing with a special young man. You don’t want it to slip through your fingers, do you? You might spend the rest of your life wondering what could have been. Liam might move on and meet someone else. Start a life with her. And you might do the same.”

I feel like my eyes have nearly popped off my face. “Liam with another girl?” The thought makes my heart ache in the worst way possible.

Mom leans forward to kiss my forehead again. “Based on your reaction, I think we both know how you feel about your best friend.” She gets up and walks to my closet. “It doesn’t matter what you wear because I know Liam loves you just the way you are. But if you want to wow him, I think this would do the trick.” She holds out a sapphire dress that reaches just above my knees. “I remember how stunning you looked at Grandpa’s birthday party.”

“Thanks.” I take the dress and hug her. “And thanks for the talk.”

“Of course, sweetie. Let me know if you need help with your hair and makeup.”

After I get dressed and Mom does indeed help me with my hair and makeup, we meet Dad downstairs. He looks so good in his crisp black suit, such a contrast to the usual clothes he wears during PE. He smiles when he takes Mom and me in, nothing but love shining in his eyes. “My two beautiful, amazing women. How am I so lucky to have you in my life?” He presses a kiss to Mom’s lips before hugging me. “Thanks for being the wonderful people that you are.”

“Thanks for not giving up on Mom when you were my age,” I tell him. “Because of you guys, I know what it’s like to have a loving and happy marriage. I want to have that one day, too.”

“You will,” Dad assures me.

“And if you wouldn’t have made up, I wouldn’t be born,” I say, horrified. “Or worse, Teagyn could have been my mom.”

Dad looks like he’d rather jump into a snake pit. “Never in a million years would I choose her. I’d rather stay single for the rest of my life.”

“Did you just say you wanted to marry Teagyn Abberton?” Noah asks as he walks into the room. He, too, looks amazing in his suit.

“Heck no!” Mom says. “That’s how rumors start. Your dad said he would never in a *million years* marry Teagyn.”

“I married the most incredible woman in the world,” Dad says as he dips Mom and lays a big one on her.

“Ugh, seriously?” Rylee scowls as she marches into the room. “Mom, this dress is a little tight.”

After Dad straightens her up, she studies Rylee. “You’re right, sweetie. Looks like you grew a lot this year. I’m sure we can find something that fits you in your closet.” She and my sister go up to Rylee’s room.

Dad watches them, tears gathering in his eyes. “My baby is growing up so fast. Just like you, too.” He puts his arm around Noah and me. “Look at you, Noah. You’re almost a man. You’ll be going to college next year, and then it won’t be long before Chloe does. And then Rylee. Then your mom and I will be empty nesters...”

“Dad,” Noah complains. “You’re getting so sentimental.”

“Can you please not grow up so fast? Your old man isn’t ready for this.” He ruffles Noah’s hair. “And there’s nothing wrong with being sentimental, young man.”

“Dad,” he complains again as he pats his hair down. “I worked on this for hours.”

“Really? Looks like you just rolled out of bed,” I tease.

Noah grumbles as he walks to the mirror to fix his hair.

Dad smiles as he puts his arm around me and draws me to his chest. “You doing okay, sweetie?”

Is he alluding to Liam? I bet he is.

“I’m fine,” I tell him.

“Just know that whatever happens, it’s for the best. Just be true to yourself and the best person you can be. Everything else will fall into place.”

“Thanks.”

Mom returns with Rylee, who looks more comfortable in her dress. It’s a black one with white flowers. Now that I take a good look at her, I realize she *has* grown. My gosh, we really are growing up and getting old. Ugh, I sound like Dad.

“We ready?” Mom asks.

We get in the car and drive to the venue. The party is taking place in Silverton, and Ava’s grandmother, Vivian, is catering it. She owns Wood’s Catering and they make the most amazing food. As soon as we walk in, we find Grandpa Nigel standing in the foyer looking at the place cards.

“Hey, Dad!” Mom wraps her arms around him.

“Pumpkin!” He returns the hug and kisses her cheek.

“How are you and the Barrington gang?”

We exchange hugs and kisses with him.

“I found all your place cards.” He hands them to Mom and Dad. Then he turns to us. “There is a table for younger kids and one for the teens.” He gives Rylee her card, and then me and Noah ours.

My sister scowls. “Ugh, why do I have to sit at the kiddie table?”

“Because you’re a kiddie,” Noah tells her.

“You’ll be at the same table with Mia and Zoey,” I remind her.

She brightens. “So true!”

“Just don’t get into any mischief, Rylee, I’m begging you,” Mom says. “I want to have a nice, enjoyable evening.”

“Can’t make any promises, Mom. Are Zoey and Mia here yet?” She dashes into the hall.

“Quite a handful, that one,” Grandpa Nigel says with a chuckle.

“I wasn’t that much trouble was I, Dad?” Mom asks him.

He shakes his head. “No, pumpkin. You were a perfect child.”

Mom playfully narrows her eyes at Dad. “She gets it from your side of the family. From now on, she’s your responsibility.”

Dad chuckles as he spins her in his arms and dips her again. “Half of her genes are yours. So half of her is your responsibility.”

“I’m heading in before you guys embarrass me,” Noah says and disappears into the hall.

Even though Mom is dipped, she grabs Dad's suit jacket and presses her lips to his. The only things holding her up are Dad's arms. That just shows how much she trusts him. I wish I had that, too.

I sigh.

Grandpa's eyes jet to me. "You all right there, jelly bean?"

I blink. "Huh? Oh, yeah. Just, um...you know, teenage stuff. I'll be okay."

He puts his arm around me. "You sure?"

"Yeah. I'm heading in to see if my friends have arrived."

As soon as I walk in, I almost trip over my feet. Because the place is breathtaking. Mesmerizing chandeliers hang from the ceiling, the floors have been polished so hard they sparkle, the tables are covered in the most elegant white tablecloths, the cutlery shines like diamonds, and the walls have been painted in the most intricate designs. Feels like I just walked into a royal party.

I spot Ava's paternal grandparents and head over to wish her grandfather a happy birthday. Then Lily rushes over to me. "There you are! Come look at our table. They gave the kid and teens' tables extra stuff. Like candy!" She grabs my hand and pulls me to a table in the back of the hall, which is right next to the kids' table. Rylee and her friends are happily looking through their goody bags that seem stuffed with all kinds of goodies and toys. We have goody bags, too, but ours are filled with things geared to teens, like some tech stuff and gift cards.

"Score!" Willow squeals when she pulls out a memory card. "I ran out and wanted to buy one. And cool! A gift card

to my favorite tech store.”

I laugh to my friends. “I think Willow just went to heaven.”

Ava and Lily laugh as well.

I look around the area, wondering where a certain person is...

“Liam’s talking to my grandparents.” Lily nods to a group of people to our left. Evie and Liam are conversing with Ally’s parents.

“Hey, Chloe!”

Something boings into my head. I look at Rylee, who nods to the object that plopped onto the table right in front of me. A squishy ball.

“You can have it,” she says with a smile. “There were two in here.”

“Thanks.” I squish it in my hand, feeling a little relieved as I watch Liam continue to converse with his grandparents. I think he’s the best-looking guy I’ve ever seen in my life, but it’s more than just superficial. He’s beautiful inside and out. He has one of the purest hearts in the world, is always looking out for the people he loves. He always puts my needs before his own. Even Catherine Robinson saw how forgiving and selfless he is and wants him to attend her school. Because Liam has a huge heart, and it’s reflected in his cooking.

As if he feels me watching him, his eyes suddenly snap to me. I startle for a second and tear my gaze away, squeezing the squishy ball. When I glance back at him a few seconds later, his focus is on his grandparents.

Looking at my friends, I notice that all of them have seen the exchange. But thankfully, they don't bring it up.

More guests are arriving, including Aunt Bailey's best friend Manny Delgado, with his wife and two sons. The boys settle down at the kids' table and immediately dive into their goody bags while Manny and his wife sit next to Aunt Bailey and Uncle Zane. After a few more minutes, Xavier comes, and so does Aidan, along with his mom and sisters. Lexi rushes to plop down next to Brock, who saved her a seat and the goody bag that looks the most packed, and thirteen-year-old Skylar scowls as she stares at the kids' table. She glances at the teens' table with envy before once again scowling at the kids' table. I get how she feels. She's too old to sit with the little kids, but she's a bit too young to be with the teens.

Following my gaze, Ava stands. "I'll ask my grandma to add another seat at our table for Skylar. I think she'd be more comfortable with us than the kids."

Aidan's eyes shine like he's never loved her more than he does now. "Thanks so much, Princess." He kisses her. "Thanks for always thinking of my sisters."

"Of course."

Once her spot is set up, Skylar sits at the table with an elated expression. "This is so cool."

"Welcome," Ava says with a smile. "Just remember: what happens at the teens' table, stays at the teens' table." She winks.

Skylar beams. "Of course! My lips are sealed."

Liam and Evie have finished their conversation with their grandparents and make their way to our table. I feel his eyes on me, and when I peer up at him, I find them indeed pasted on me. I want to break my gaze, but for some reason, it stays planted on his face as he sits down. I miss him. So darn much. I miss smiling at him and laughing with him and talking to him without a care in the world. Now, every look seems to hold so much.

“Can’t wait for the food,” Evie says as she sits down next to Noah.

We discuss various things until the party starts. There are many speeches, given by Celine and then Ava’s dad, and then a few from his friends.

Ava rolls her eyes. “Rich people really love the sound of their own voices.”

“But you’re rich,” Skylar says.

“And that’s why I can make fun of them.” She winks again.

When the speeches are finally over, the first course arrives. A beautiful gourmet salmon dish.

“Oh my gosh, Grandma Vivian has outdone herself again,” Ava gushes as she digs in. Her eyes flutter shut. “I can die happy right now.”

“You better not,” Aidan says. “There’s still so much we need to experience together.”

She smiles and slides her hand into his.

My eyes creep to Liam, who's eating his fish quietly. Again, he must feel me watching him because his eyes lift to mine. I quickly yank my gaze away and focus on eating my fish, which is one of the best salmon dishes I've ever had. I can still feel his gaze on me, and a tingle travels down my spine. It reminds me of the sparks I felt when he and I touched at the cooking competition. Brings me back to that moment and how good it felt to cook with him in the kitchen. Just being *next* to him. Feeling his warmth. Being close to him and —

“What the heck, Noah!” Evie grumbles, breaking me from my thoughts. When I look at my brother and Evie, I find their elbows wrestling. “Quit knocking your elbow into mine.”

“Excuse me? You're the lefty. Maybe you shouldn't knock your elbow into mine.”

“*I'm* not knocking into you. You're—”

“Righties are the natural ones. It's the lefties who are the unnatural ones.”

Her mouth falls open. “What on Earth? Lefties are more creative, so—”

“That's a myth. Righties are just as creative as lefties.”

“So you're saying I should paint with my right hand?”

“No. I'm saying you need to figure out how to eat next to someone who's right-handed.”

“You're unbelievable.”

“You're annoying.”

“Ugh!” She scoots her chair over, but there’s not a lot of room because of the addition of Skylar.

Lily, Willow, Ava, and I try to hide our laughs. When I glance at Liam, I see that he’s hiding his laugh, too. My heart lurches. I wish I could look him full in the face and share a laugh, not peek at him like it’s forbidden.

After the second course is served, the music, which was classical up to this point, switches to a faster song. It’s basically inviting people to get onto the dance floor.

“Finally!” Ava jumps to her feet and throws her napkin on her plate. “Come dance with me, Superman.”

“It would be my pleasure.” She and Aidan hurry onto the dance floor.

Xavier glances at Lily. “Methinks this is the perfect opportunity to perform the Regency dance we’ve been practicing.”

“Yeah?” Her eyes light up with excitement. “You sure you’re ready?”

“Ready to *wow* you,” he says with a chuckle.

With a squeal, she grabs his hand and pulls him to the dance floor.

Skylar watches all the people dancing, including her little sister and Brock. Seriously, the two of them are the cutest thing, dancing their little hearts out.

“You know how to dance,” I tell her. “You’re taking dance lessons with Dani, aren’t you?”

She shrugs. “Yeah. But I don’t have anyone to dance with.”

“I’ll go with you,” Willow offers.

“Okay.”

They walk off together. Only Evie, Noah, Liam, and I remain.

“So...?” Noah glances at Evie. “Evie, do you want to...?”

She gapes at him. “You want to dance with a lefty?”

He rolls his eyes. “I was just kidding. You want to dance or not?”

“Fine. Only because it looks like a lot of fun.” They walk off.

Now only Liam and I remain.

I keep my eyes on my plate, then slowly lift them to him. His eyes are on me. But as soon as we make contact, he quickly looks away.

Things have never been so awkward between us before. It’s hard to imagine we competed together at a cooking competition only a few days ago. We’re like strangers now.

I open my mouth to say something, but Liam jumps to his feet. “Sorry. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. I’ll leave.” He bolts away before I can say anything. Before I can tell him that I don’t want him to run away from me. I don’t want things to be awkward between us. I just want to be close to him again.

I watch him head over to our friends and join their dancing. He doesn’t look my way once, as though he’s worried

that just looking at me would make me uncomfortable. He's so sweet and selfless to give me space, but I think I've had enough space. The only thing I want between us now? *No* space.

Taking a deep breath, I stand on shaky legs and head to the dance floor. There are so many couples here. All of our parents, Vivian and her husband Robert—I'm so glad she's taking a break from the kitchen and having fun—Aunt Bailey and Uncle Zane, plus Manny and his wife, lots of other guests, and Brock and Lexi. Lexi is trying to teach him some moves she learned in dance class, and it's so freakin' cute how Brock is trying so hard to impress her by getting the steps right.

Liam's eyes widen when I approach. There's so much I want to say to him, but my words get stuck in my throat. So even though I have two left feet, I dance my way over to him, offering him a small, hesitant smile. His eyes widen again, in total disbelief that I'm actually dancing right next to him. I can't deny the immense amount of hope practically shooting from his eyes.

"Hi," I say with a nervous smile.

"Hi, Chloe."

We dance next to each other in silence.

"I like this song," I say.

"What?" he yells over the music.

"I like this song."

"Oh, yeah. Me, too."

"The perfect music to dance to."

“What Oh, yeah. Totally.”

Quiet.

Awkward.

Ugh.

The music suddenly changes to a slow song. Some couples take this as a sign that it’s time for a break, others think—and maybe hope—it means the next course will arrive. Some are embarrassed and hightail it back to their tables, while others wrap themselves in each other’s arms. Lexi makes a move to charge to the kids’ table, but Brock grabs her hand and wraps his arms around her. Lexi gets a horrified expression and is about to yank free, but then her eyes flutter shut and she wraps her arms around his neck.

“I can’t believe my little sister is slow dancing with a guy when I’ve never even held hands with one,” Skylar says.

“Isn’t there a guy in anime club that you like?” Willow asks as they head back to our table.

“He doesn’t see me that way...” Their voices trail off as they move further away from me.

Liam looks at me. I look at him. He runs his hand through his hair, then clears his throat. “So, uh...I guess I’ll head back to the table.” He gives me a stiff smile before walking past me.

“Dance with me?” I blurt.

He freezes and slowly turns around. “What?”

“Do you...” I tuck some hair behind my ear. “Do you want to dance with me?”

He looks behind him as though I'm talking to someone else.

"I'm talking to *you*, Liam."

He points to himself and mouths, "Me?"

I nod, maybe a little too eagerly.

He takes a tentative step toward me. "Are you sure? I thought..."

I hold out my hand. "Never mind what you thought. Would you like to dance with me?"

"Yeah, but..." His brows furrow. "I, um..." He rubs the back of his neck.

My heart drops. "What?"

"I always pictured..." His gaze lowers to his shoes. "I always imagined me asking you to dance. You know..." He lifts his shoulders before dropping them. "Being the romantic one."

"Oh." My heart beats so wildly, I can't think straight. "That does sound like a more romantic scenario."

He gives me a small smile, but that's enough to light me up and make me feel so good inside. "Okay." He clears his throat, then holds out his hand to me. "Chloe Barrington, it would be my honor to share the dance floor with you."

Even though I knew he was going to ask me, his words cause butterflies to flap around in my stomach. With a smile, I slide my hand into his. "I would love to."

His hand is so warm and strong and protective. I've clutched his hand a lot, but it holds so much more meaning

now. It feels like forever until we reach an empty spot on the dance floor. Maybe because I'm savoring every second. I don't want to let go of his hand because it feels so good to hold it like this. And maybe because the thought of slow dancing with him, of my body being so close to his, makes me super nervous. Even though I'm excited as well.

We face each other, our eyes staring into each other's. A hard swallow makes its way down his throat as he takes me in. He's not judging me on my outward appearance or anything—I feel like he's reading my soul. Like the last few days have been torture for him because he's yearned to have a moment like this. And I've yearned for it just as much.

I step forward and lock my arms around his neck, my face so close to his. With another swallow, he rests his hands on my waist, his touch as light as a feather, but also burning. He doesn't move his gaze from mine and neither do I. As our bodies slowly sway to the beat of the song, everyone else in the room disappears and it's just me and him, in our own little bubble.

“You look so beautiful, Chloe,” he murmurs.

My heart rate picks up its pace. “Thanks. You look so handsome.”

“Thanks.”

We don't say anything else, just continue staring into each other's eyes and swaying to the music. I see so many raw emotions in his eyes, so much hope and fear and regret. But what stands out the most? His feelings for me. I see them in there as plain as day.

“Liam,” I whisper. “I’m sorry I’ve been so cold to you the last few days—”

He shakes his head. “You don’t have to apologize for anything. I know you needed time. And I told you I’ll give you however much you need. Even forever, if that’s what you want.”

I shake my head. “Never forever. I think I’m...”

His eyes grow hopeful.

“I think I’m ready.”

“Ready...?”

My fingers tangle in his hair. “I’ve missed you so much, Liam. I’ve missed talking to you and laughing with you. I’ve missed cooking with you. I’ve missed watching *Sword and Legends*. I’ve missed just being around you. Being close to you. I’ve been so scared to be vulnerable and open my heart to the possibility of us because of what it might do to us. But the truth is, the only thing I want is to be close to you. Closer than we’ve ever been.”

He stares at me with nothing but shock and confusion and disbelief and joy. So many emotions they make my head spin.

I giggle softly. “You’re staring at me like I’m an alien.”

He shakes his head. “Sorry. I’m just so...I feel like I’m in a dream.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t think...I mean, I hoped...” He sighs. “I didn’t know if you’d ever forgive me.”

“Of course I forgive you. If you hadn’t written me those letters, you and I would still be stuck in the friend zone. You were the brave one to take the first step. I was content to just continue living in my protective bubble. But I don’t want to be so safe anymore. I want to put my heart at risk. Because the reward could be so sweet.”

He presses his cheek to mine, and the heat of his skin causes a new spark to travel down my spine. “I’m so glad, Chloe. You have no idea how happy I am right now. I swear I’ll never hurt you again.”

“I know you won’t.”

“So does that mean...? I mean, are you ready to...?”

“Can we take things slow?” I ask. “I’m worried we might ruin things if we jump into something.”

“Of course. Whatever pace you need. I have all the time in the world because all I need is you, Chloe.” He presses his forehead to mine. “You’ve just made me the happiest person in the world.”

I smile up at him as I play with his hair again. “You’ve made me the happiest person in the world, too.”

Chapter Forty

Liam

I pace near my bedroom door as I wait for Chloe to arrive. We're going to binge *Swords and Legends*. Feels like forever since we watched the show.

I've been checking and rechecking my room to make sure it's perfect. That the snacks and drinks are okay, the temperature in the room is comfortable, that it doesn't smell and isn't too messy.

I'm so excited she wants to be close to me again. And like I told her, I'm ready and willing to take things slow.

When the doorbell rings, I nearly shoot to the ceiling. She's here!

I swallow a million times, trying to regulate my breathing and stop my hands from shaking.

With my heart slamming against my chest, I open the door. Chloe stands there with an adorable smile on her face, her eyes shining.

"Hi," she says with a shy giggle.

"Hi."

We just stand there.

She giggles again. "Can I come in?"

"What? Oh, yeah. Of course you can. Sorry. I'm a little nervous."

She smiles as she walks into the house and I reach over her to shut the door. I get a whiff of her scent. Maybe her shampoo? It's a berry flavor.

"I'm nervous, too," she admits. "But we shouldn't be."

"Yeah, I know. I want today to be perfect."

She takes my hands and gives me another sweet smile. "It doesn't have to be perfect. All that matters is that we're together."

I wrap my arms around her. "Thanks so much," I whisper in her ear. "I'm so happy you're here."

"Me, too," she whispers back. Pulling back, she beams. "Ready to watch *Swords and Legends*?"

"You bet. Let me take your jacket."

She slips it off and hands it to me. After I place it in the coat closet, we head toward the stairs. We pass the kitchen where Mom and Dad are making dinner. Now that Chloe and I are getting closer, they aren't exactly comfortable with us being alone in the house. They trust us, but still. Teenage hormones and all that.

Chloe greets my mom and dad before we go up to my room. As soon as we walk in, she takes a few seconds to examine the place. Xavier helped me adorn it in the *Swords and Legends* theme.

"So cool!" Chloe gushes.

"Yeah?"

"Totally. I love it."

I smile and gesture to the snacks. “I bought everything they’d eat in that world.”

She scans the items, focusing on the gummy worms. “I would totally eat worms.”

I laugh. “That episode where Torenin challenged Aleriana to eat worms, remember? He thought she wasn’t tough enough, but man did she prove him wrong and ate the entire container!”

“Oh yeah!” She laughs, too. “And then she got sick and blamed him.”

“And he told her not to be so competitive and upstage him all the time. And she pulled him and...”

“Kissed him and said he should *never* tell her what to do.”

We smile at each other.

The room is dead quiet.

I clear my throat. “So want to get comfy and start?” I gesture to the bed. “I wasn’t sure where you wanted to sit.”

“The bed’s fine.”

We sit down and start watching. But it’s a little uncomfy and we scoot to the headboard and lean against it.

As we watch the show, Chloe smiles at me and I smile at her. “I’m so glad we’re watching together again,” she tells me.

“Me, too.” I don’t think she has any idea how much this moment means to me. And maybe this moment means a lot to her, too? I can see a light in her eyes that I’ve never seen before. It’s brighter than her usual one.

“What?” she asks.

I shake my head. “Was just thinking how beautiful you are, Chloe.”

Her cheeks turn bright red. “Thanks. You’re so sweet and handsome and amazing.” She snuggles up to my chest.

“Thanks. You’re so sweet and amazing, too.” I slowly wrap my arm around her, then drop it to my side. I’m not sure she’s comfortable with me touching her like that.

She looks up at me and pulls my arm back around her. My heart pounds as she presses herself even closer to me, resting her head on my chest.

While watching the episodes, we somehow move even closer to each other. Practically fuse together. I don’t want to let go of her and it seems she doesn’t want to let go of me, either.

I bend forward and press a soft kiss on her cheek.

She looks up at me with those shining bright eyes and gives me a shy smile. I return it, running the back of my finger across her cheek. There’s so much I want to say to her, but it’s too soon. I don’t want to rush this. Our pace is nice and slow and I love it.

I love her. More than she’ll probably ever know.

“Chloe?”

She looks at me again. “Yeah?”

After pausing the show, I sit up. She also sits up, her eyes full of confusion. I take her hands. “Chloe, would you like to go on a date with me?”

A sweet smile tickles her mouth. “Yes, Liam! I’d love to go on a date with you.” She bends closer and kisses my cheek.

I want to pull her close and show her just how much she means to me, but we have all the time in the world.

She lays her head on my chest and I wrap my arm around her, tugging her close as we continue watching our favorite show.

Chapter Forty-One

Chloe

“Ooh, is that what you’re wearing to your hot date with Liam?” Ava gushes as I do a spin on video chat. It’s a light pink flowy dress with a matching belt.

“Yeah. Do you think it’s pretty enough? He said he’s taking me to a fancy restaurant in Silverton.”

“Of course it’s pretty!” Lily says. “And you’re even prettier.”

“Agreed!” Willow beams.

“Thanks.” I press my hands to my hot cheeks. “Guys, I can’t believe this is actually happening. I’m going on a *date* with Liam.”

“I told you that you guys are perfect for each other,” Lily says, nothing but joy in her eyes. “This is the best thing ever. I’m so happy for you! You guys are soulmates.”

“You think so?”

“Duh!” they all say.

Every part of me warms up. I’m so thankful my friends support me and Liam.

“I’m super nervous,” I admit. “Liam and I have never been on a date before. What if things are awkward?”

“They won’t be,” Willow reassures me. “Just enjoy every second with him and don’t worry about anything. You guys

will have a great time.”

Ava and Lily nod with large smiles.

I blow out some nervous air. They’re right. This evening will be amazing because I’ll spend it with an incredible person.

A text from Liam appears on the screen. I gasp. “Guys, he’s here!”

“What are you waiting for?” Ava demands. “Go to your guy!”

“Have a great time, Chloe!” Lily tells me.

“And enjoy every second,” Willow reminds me.

I smile. “Thanks, guys. I’ll text you later how it went.”

I check myself in the mirror one more time before taking a deep breath, letting it out, and making my way downstairs.

Evie’s car is waiting in front of my house. It’s quite chilly today, so I bundle myself up pretty well. But the warmth in my heart at seeing Liam step out of the car makes me toasty inside.

He’s also bundled up in a warm coat, but a suit peeks out from underneath.

“You look stunning,” he says.

“Thanks. You, too.”

He holds out his hand with a smile and I place mine in it. As he leads me to Evie’s car, he says, “Sorry I don’t have a license yet. Evie is fine with being our chauffeur, but it kind of

makes me lose points in the romance department. Next week, I'm starting driving lessons."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I want to take us wherever we want, without having to beg my older sister or parents."

I snuggle up to him. "I bet you'll ace your test."

"Thanks."

As soon as we get into the backseat of the car, Evie turns around, beaming at us. "Ready to head to your romantic date, my handsome sibling and his beautiful lady?"

"Yes, Evie," Liam grumbles. "And please don't be weird."

"Just don't make out in the back of my car and everything will be square."

My cheeks heat up. So do Liam's. I keep my gaze toward the front of the car. He does, too.

"And you guys just got totally quiet," Evie says with a chuckle. "Did I embarrass you?"

"Evie, shut up," Liam says through clenched teeth. "I'm getting my license ASAP," he whispers to me. I laugh.

"Okay, I'm sorry. Just had to tease my little brother. But I'll behave now. Promise."

Liam doesn't believe her, but she actually keeps quiet for most of the drive. Liam and I are pretty quiet, too, because what exactly are we supposed to talk about with Evie right there?

Finally, she pulls up before the restaurant. After we get out, she lowers the passenger window and sticks her head out. “Hey, sibling one. What time should I pick you up?”

“Um...” He glances at me.

“Two hours?” I say.

Liam nods. “Sounds good.”

“Cool. I’ll hang out at the mall, maybe check out some art supplies. Let me know if you want to extend your date. Just don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“The thought of that just plain scares me,” Liam mutters.

“Haha. Have fun, okay? And make sure you squeeze in some kisses before you get in my car, okay? Because doing it in my car?” She does the cut-it-out hand gesture.

“Evie, get the heck out of here,” Liam grits out.

She chuckles before waving and driving off.

He rolls his eyes at me. “Older sisters.”

“I get it. Noah had a talk with me earlier today.”

“Yeah?” He opens the door to the restaurant for me. “What did he say?”

“Thanks. He told me to be careful and always be aware of my surroundings. Not to be so absorbed in you that I don’t pay attention to what’s going on around me. Seriously, he’s worse than my dad.”

Liam laughs. “It’s good you have a brother who looks out for you, though. I was pretty concerned for Lily when she was

helping Xavier get with Andrea. She wanted to walk home alone from Mikey's. I was so upset with her."

"You're a good brother, too. One of the many reasons I love you— I mean, one of the many reasons I think the world of you."

He makes a face like he caught what almost slipped out of my mouth. He's about to say something, but the hostess says, "Reservation?"

Liam clears his throat as he walks over to her. "Reservation for Liam Hastings."

"Okay. Right this way."

I didn't notice before because I was too absorbed in Liam—I can already see Noah frowning—but this place is stunningly beautiful. Red carpet lines the floor, and the tables are adorned with red tablecloths as well, candles and beautiful flowers placed upon them. Lovely paintings hang on the walls, and the guests are dressed in their finest.

"Wow," I whisper to Liam. "You're spending way too much money on me."

"You deserve it," he says.

"I'll return the favor... somehow."

"I don't need you to return anything. Just being in your presence is a privilege."

I think I melted into a puddle.

"Was that dorky?" he asks.

"No, not at all."

“Because if it was, I own it,” he says in a playful tone.
“You’re spending the evening with this dork.”

I slide my hand into his. “And I’ll enjoy every second of it.”

He smiles warmly. “Me, too.”

The table the hostess leads us to has a spectacular view of the town. Liam pulls out my chair for me, and I thank him before sitting down. “Have you taken pointers from Lily?” I ask.

“No need.” He gives me a cocky grin. “It’s ingrained in me.”

I giggle. “You’ve been keeping it in all these years and now finally have a chance to show it off.”

He reaches for my hands and clasps them in his. “You have no idea, my beautiful Chloe. I’ve been dreaming about this moment for years.”

“Me, too,” I tell him with a smile.

The server comes with our menus, and Liam encourages me to order whatever I want, no matter the price. He’s being so sweet, but I don’t want him to spend so much money on me. I pick a relatively cheap dish. Our night is filled with amazing food and even more amazing conversation. I almost forgot what it was like when things were awkward between us because we never run out of things to talk about. It feels like before, when we were just friends, but so much more. Now, I don’t have to hold anything back. I’m not afraid to show him exactly how I feel.

“What?” I ask when I catch him staring at me like I’m the most incredible thing he’s ever seen.

He blinks. “Oh, sorry. Was I staring?”

I laugh a little. “Kind of.”

“I can’t help it. I’m just so happy I’m here with you. We belong together, like the Universe is aligned. Like the world makes sense. I mean, I know there will be things in our lives that won’t make sense, but you and I always will.”

I reach for his hands and squeeze them. “I feel the same way.”

He smiles so sweetly at me.

We continue our meal and our delightful conversations. When we’re done, Liam suggests we take a stroll around the park a few blocks away. He holds me in his arms, keeping me warm. He makes me feel loved and protected, and like I’m the most important person in his life, along with his family. I feel the same way about him.

We take a break on a bench. Liam’s arms are still wrapped around me. “Should I call Evie? I don’t want you to get sick.”

“No.” I snuggle closer to him. “I don’t want this night to end. Our parents are going to watch us like hawks now. We need every chance of privacy we can get.”

He chuckles. “You’re right. And I don’t want this night to end, either. Chloe?”

I raise my head off his shoulder.

“I just want you to know that I appreciate everything about you. I thought you needed me to be someone else, which is

why I pretended to be someone I'm not. But the truth is that you've always accepted me the way I am. I was just too stupid to see it."

I slip my hand into his. "Of course. I love everything about you, Liam. I..."

He raises his hand to my cheek. "I know," he whispers. "I love you, too, Chloe."

I shake my head. "I want to say it." I release a breath. "I love you, Liam Hastings. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. I know we're way too young to be talking about the rest of our lives, but our parents did it. I know we can, too."

"I feel the same way," he murmurs as he caresses my cheek with the back of his finger. "There's no one else I want to spend the rest of my life with."

Our gazes drop to each other's lips. Slowly, we move closer. Closer and closer. It feels like a million years pass until I finally feel his warm lips on mine. My eyes flutter shut as his lips move over mine in the sweetest, gentlest manner. Like he's trying to savor every moment because this means so much to both of us. His arms wrap around me as he pulls me close to his body. Until there's no space between us. His lips continue moving leisurely against mine, just as sweetly, but after a short while, they pick up a little. Even though his kisses are gentle, they're full of passion and longing and promise. Promise that he will do whatever it takes to make me happy, to protect me, to care for me, to be the shoulder I need to lean on and cry on, to be the person to joke around with. To be the person he can get even closer to.

When we pull apart, he presses his forehead to mine.
“Thanks so much for being who you are, Chloe. I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life learning even more about you and sharing every moment with you. I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but I’ll spend my days cherishing you.”

I wrap my hands around the back of his neck, tugging his lips closer to mine. After another make out session, I whisper, “What are you talking about? I don’t know what *I* did to deserve *you*. You’re one of the most amazing people I’ve ever met. I can’t believe I’m lucky enough to love you, and have you love me.”

“I’d argue that you’re the amazing one, but I’d rather spend my time kissing you.”

With a laugh, we do just that. I don’t know how much time passes, and I think the temperature drops. And then I hear something ringing. “Is that Evie?” I ask. “Maybe she’s wondering where we are.”

“Can’t we ignore her?” Liam asks.

“Maybe for another five minutes?”

With smiles, we continue making out.

Chapter Forty-Two

Chloe

My friends, Liam, the guys, and I walk into school and gather at my locker. We're talking about many things, like *Swords and Legends*, book club, and basketball. Liam and I are holding hands and smiling at one another like we can't get enough of each other.

I wish I could pull him close and kiss him senseless, but the VP is walking around and I don't want to get detention.

I was worried our friend dynamic would change, but everything is exactly how it was. Except I have a boyfriend now! The perfect boyfriend.

"Oh please," Willow says as we argue about a movie we watched. "That was the lamest part of the whole thing."

I open my locker and a note tumbles to the floor. My eyes widen as I stare at it. "What's this?" I sweep it up and unfold it.

"A love note!" Lily gushes. "I wonder from who?"

I quickly scan the words.

Chloe, Chloe, Chloe

Words can't encompass how much you mean to me

The moon and stars shine bright in the sky

But you're the only shining star in my eye
I love you dearly, you have changed my world
Sitting with you, our arms and toes curled
Around each other like I'll never let go
Of you, my sweet Chloe, I'll try to always show
That you're perfect in every which way
And I know together we'll stay
For all eternity
Forever and ever
Until we grow wrinkly and old
And tales of our endless love will for generations be told
Sincerely,
Your loving boyfriend

I take in the words like a sponge over and over until they blur together.

“What is it?” Ava demands playfully.

I fling my arms around Liam. “You wrote me another poem!”

He holds me close, cradling me to his chest. “Do you know how amazing it felt to sign it as your boyfriend and not your secret admirer?” he whispers, his breath warm on my cheek. “Every time I signed as him, I wished I was signing as myself.”

I press my lips to his. He melts into the kiss and kisses me back with as much fervor as I'm kissing him.

"Guys! Rivera," Willow hisses.

I don't care. Nothing and no one can take this perfect moment with my wonderful boyfriend away from me.

"Mr. Hastings and Miss Barrington," Rivera says, disappointment and frustration dripping off every word. "That's an automatic detention."

We're not listening as we kiss the daylights out of each other.

"Did you hear me? If you don't stop now, I'll extend your detention to a month!"

Lily pulls Liam off me and Ava grabs me.

"I'm not sorry," I mumble as the vice principal walks away with a frown. I quickly brush my lips across Liam's cheek. "More time for us to spend together."

He chuckles. "Bet she didn't consider that." He bends close. "Rain check on that kiss, Sous Chef Chloe?"

"Heck yeah, Chef Liam."

My friends and I continue discussing different topics, when there's a commotion down the hall.

"What's that about?" Lily asks with furrowed brows.

Xavier shrugs. "Some guys on the team told me that Colton and Vanessa broke up last night."

"Really?" Ava asks. "They were the hottest couple at Edenbury High. No one thought they'd ever break up."

Aidan shrugs. "I never really believed in their relationship. They didn't seem right for each other."

"Why in the world should we care about them?" Willow grumbles. "We never care about the popular kids."

Lily shrugs. "True, but they *were* the hottest couple. Well, except for us."

Willow scoffs. "I don't give a crap if some popular boy and his girlfriend broke up. I have better things to worry about. Like my darn app."

"Any progress?" Liam asks.

She sighs. "It's getting there, I guess."

Everyone murmurs as Colton Andersen walks down the hallway, keeping his dirty blond head raised like he doesn't care about the whispers. But it's so obvious from the uneasy expression in his green eyes that he does.

"Can I pass?" he asks Willow, whose overstuffed backpack hanging off her back blocks his way.

Willow steps aside, then mutters, "Those popular kids think students like us should move for them like they're royalty. He could have moved."

"Willow, are you okay?" Ava asks. "You seem a little touchy today."

"Sorry. I know he didn't personally do anything to me." She shrugs. "I just hate kids like him. He walks around like he owns the place."

"Well...he *is* considered king of the school," I tell her.

Willow scoffs again. “He’s not *my* king.” She turns around and marches to English.

I shut my locker, slide my hand into Liam’s warm one, and the rest of us follow her.

Thanks for reading!

Stay tuned for Willow and Colton's story, coming soon. For updates, join my [Facebook group](#) and/or sign up to my [newsletter](#) and/or click on the "follow" button on my Amazon author page [here](#).

Did you know that Chloe's parents, Kara and Brayden, have an epic love story of their own? Check out *Quarterbacks Don't Fall for Invisible Girls*, available [here](#).

And did you know that Liam's parents, Ally and Zack, have an epic love story of their own, too? Check out *Bad Boys Don't Fall for Shy Girls*, available [here](#).

And don't forget to check out the rest of the Invisible Girls Club series [here](#).

Read on for a sneak peek from Don't Kiss The Boy Next Door, [available on Amazon](#)

Chapter One

Katie

“Oh my gosh! Two hotties are moving in next door,” my best friend says from the window, where she’s peering out like a creeper. She whips around to stare at me with shining hazel eyes. “Did you know about this?”

Rising from my bed, where I’ve been diligently practicing for my audition tomorrow, I join her at the window and look out. Two guys with identical shades of black hair are carrying things from the moving truck into the Westons’ old house. They lived there practically my whole childhood, until Mr. Weston died and his wife was placed in a nursing home a few months ago.

I guess the house will be this new family’s now.

“No, I didn’t know,” I tell my best friend. Dad probably did, but it’s not like he and I talk much anymore, anyway.

Phoenix presses her face to the glass, her breath fogging it up. “They look our age, don’t they?”

I no longer have a clear shot of the guys because Phoenix is hogging the whole window. I only manage to see the top of their heads as they go to and fro from the truck to the house.

“Maybe,” I say.

“You’re so lucky,” she says, her face practically fused to the window. Any more and she’ll crash right through. “I wish two hot boys moved in next door to me. But nothing interesting ever happens on my block. All the good stuff happens on yours. Ooh!” She squeals when the two of them turn at the exact same time toward the direction of my window. “You think they’re twins?”

Because she moved over, I have a slightly better view of my new neighbors. Their faces are pretty similar and they’re tall, but everything else about them is so different. One of them, the one with the shorter hair, is built up like an athlete. His brother is much lankier, with hair that reaches just above his shoulders. He carries the stuff a little more carefully than the bigger guy, like he doesn’t want to damage his hands. I wonder if he’s some sort of artist.

Phoenix sits back with a sigh, pushing her dark red hair away from her face. “I can watch them all day.”

“That’s stalking,” I point out.

She shoos me away and strains her neck as far to the right as possible. The guys have brought in most of the stuff and are now standing in front of their new house, trying to make order of the huge mess before them.

“I guess the show is over?” I say.

“No way.” She stretches her neck so far back I swear it’s longer than a giraffe’s. “I can still see a little from here. There’s a woman. Must be their mom. Where’s their dad? Maybe he didn’t come yet.”

I walk back to my bed and plop down with the lyrics to “Home.” I know this song by heart, but I haven’t stopped memorizing it over and over again since Miss Diaz, the director of the musical, emailed the students to inform us we’ll be performing *Beauty and the Beast* this semester. It’s been my dream to play a Disney princess since I was a little kid. I’m nervous I’ll botch up my audition tomorrow.

“Aw, c’mon!” Phoenix complains as she presses her face to the far right of my window. “I can’t see them anymore. Ooh, there’s a motorcycle! You think it’s one of the guys’?”

“Don’t you have to start your live stream?” I ask.

My words seem to fly right past her ears.

“Phoenix?”

“Ooh, I caught a glimpse! C’mon, twin hotties, go get something else from the truck so I can see your beautiful faces.”

I roll my eyes and laugh. “I’m sure you’ll have plenty of time to ogle them when you come over again. Which is like every day.” She practically lives here.

Again, she doesn’t seem to hear me.

“Uh, Phoenix?”

Nothing.

“Earth to Phoenix?” I reach for my pillow and chuck it at her, smacking her in the back of her head.

“Hey!” she yelps, spinning around. “What the heck was that for?”

“Aren’t you supposed to start your stream?”

She blinks at me. “Stream?”

“Um, your channel? Have I completely lost you to Boy Land?”

“Oh.” She sweeps my pillow off the floor and glances out the window. “I forgot all about it.” She shrugs as she turns around and heads to where she set up on my desk. “The guys have gone into their house, anyway.”

She sits down and adjusts the microphone, then puts on her headphones. After reminding her fans on social media about the live stream, she checks a few more things and is ready to go.

“Good afternoon, FireBirds! How’s everyone doing on this fine Sunday afternoon? It’s the last day of summer here. I can’t believe school starts tomorrow. How am I doing? I’m great. Don’t you love it when a hot neighbor moves in right next door to you? It’s like the gods of love are offering you a present.” She laughs as she reads some of the comments. “I know, right? It’s like I’ve finally done something good this month and am getting a major reward. And I’m telling you, the guys that moved in? Total hotties. I can just melt into a puddle right here. But enough about that. You’re here to watch me kick some gaming butt. So sit back and enjoy, and let’s blow up some zombies!”

She loads her favorite first-person shooter and starts to take down the bad guys, talking smack and yelling at her screen like she always does. I’ve learned to tune her out when I’m in the middle of doing work, but usually I enjoy watching her. She’s so entertaining and hilarious, which might be one of

the reasons why she's accumulated so many subscribers. And the fact that she slays at video games.

But right now, I need to get this audition down. I'll be really bummed if I don't get Belle.

"Gotchya!" Phoenix throws her hands up and does a little dance in her seat. "Who's amazing? Who's amazing? We are! We are!" She sits forward to read her comments. "Yeah, you can send me a request to join my team, but please don't bombard me all at once. Last time, you crashed my game." She laughs. Her eyes rove over the comments. "Nah, it's okay if you're not the greatest player. My FireBirds are awesome no matter what." A grin captures her lips. "Yeah, of course my bestie is here. You guys know I stream at her place because my house is a total nightmare. Katie, they want you to join the stream."

I wave my hand, muttering the lyrics under my breath.

"Katie, the chat is exploding with your name."

I shake my head and continue to mutter.

"Sorry, guys. My girl's preparing for her audition tomorrow. Our school's putting on a production of *Beauty and the Beast* the musical. Poor Katie's been sitting there for hours memorizing the song when she knows the thing like the back of her hand. She wants it so badly." She leans forward to read the comments. "Totally! Katie, they're wishing you lots of luck and say you'll knock it out of the park. Katie was born to play Belle. I mean, just look at her hair. If that doesn't say Belle, I don't know what does."

“I’d be wearing a wig,” I remind her. “But tell everyone thanks.”

“Katie’s super grateful to all of you!” Phoenix says. “So much that she’ll come over right now and thank you personally.”

“Phoenix,” I groan.

She motions for me to get my butt over there.

“But I look like crap,” I whine.

She rolls her eyes. “You’d look good even if you wore a skunk on your head. Now get your little butt over here before everyone murders me for not including you in the stream.”

With a sigh, I pull a chair over and drop down next to Phoenix. She’s got over a thousand viewers right now. Super intimidating. You’d think I’d be used to it...but nope.

Throwing her arm over my shoulder, she grins at the camera. “And here is the future Belle now!”

The comments fly by so fast it’s hard to read them all. But I catch glimpses here and there.

Hi, Katie!

Katie, finally! Why aren’t you in Phoenix’s streams more often?

I love seeing the two of you together. You’re hilarious!

Ugh, Katie’s so pretty. I’m so jealous. But I love you so much!

Break a leg, Katie! You’ll do awesome tomorrow.

Wow, you were totally made to play Belle! You definitely look like her.

Yay, Katie's in the stream again finally! Can you sing some show tunes? I miss hearing your amazing voice.

Hey, is Katie single? So freakin' hot!

And of course there are the nasty comments that Phoenix immediately deletes. All these comments...I don't know how it doesn't make her head spin. Because it feels like mine's about to roll off my neck.

Phoenix giggles as she squeezes me closer to her. "Katie's still a little camera shy. But we love having her here, don't we?" She nudges me with her shoulder. "Say something."

"Uh...hi?"

OMG, so jealous of your friendship! Wish I had a best friend like yours.

Katie is adorable! Don't be shy, Katie. We love you!

I came here to watch a hot chick play video games. So stop your yapping and play!

"Uh, excuse me, Smellysox," Phoenix says. "Yes, I called you out. My stream isn't about a 'hot chick' playing video games. It's so much more than that. So if you don't like it, get the heck out." She rolls her eyes with a groan. "Anyway, we'll let Katie go so she can practice for her audition. But you've got nothing to worry about, bestie. You've got it in the bag."

I doubt that, because nothing is sure in theater. I can practice my lips off and still not get the role. But Mom always told me to be positive. That I should face a situation with

raised shoulders. But it was so much easier to do that when she was alive. This is the first audition I'll have without her...and I feel so lost.

“Bye, guys.” I wave with both hands. “Thanks so much for your support.”

“Yeah, I know you guys are sad to see her go. But let's get back to the game! Who's ready to kick some more zombie butt?”

I'm about to return to my bed, when I notice that Phoenix left the shade up. I walk over and reach for the chord to close it, then realize the other window is wide open. While the air conditioner is on. Ugh, I must have forgotten to close it.

I make my way over and shut it, then reach to pull the chord, and that's when I notice one of the guys standing in the room across from mine. It's the lankier twin, with the long hair. His head immediately snaps in my direction, his eyes zeroing in on me. Releasing a silent yelp, I pull the cord and slam the shade shut.

I slap my forehead. Shoot, shoot, shoot! What the heck did I just do? How rude was that? I just *closed* the shade on my new neighbor's face. I reach to open it, but no...that would be even weirder. Ugh! Now he'll think I'm being unneighborly.

But I can't worry about that now. I need to focus on my audition. I get back on the bed and continue memorizing the song, my eyes creeping toward the closed shade every few minutes.

I'm the worst.

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About the Author

Emma Dalton is a sweet young adult romance writer. When not writing, you can find her devouring heart-melting romance novels. Her titles include the Invisible Girls Club series, the Hotties Next Door series, and Don't Kiss The Brooding Artist. She loves hearing back from her readers. Email her at authoremmadalton@gmail.com or follow her on [Facebook](#). For updates on new releases, click on the “follow” button on her Amazon author page [here](#).

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