

A young man and woman are shown in a close, intimate embrace, nearly kissing. The woman has long, dark, wavy hair and is wearing a white short-sleeved top. The man has curly brown hair, is wearing a black beanie and a black tank top. The background is a plain, light grey color.

A  
BLUE RIDGE  
BOOK CLUB  
NOVELLA



Blue  
Collar Crush

JILL BRASHEAR

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# BLUE COLLAR CRUSH

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JILL BRASHEAR

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## Chapter 1

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The summer of 2001 was proving to be the most boring summer of my life.

My dad had taken his new wife sailing in the Caribbean for a month, so that left me with my thirteen-year-old brother until the middle of July.

Keeping him out of trouble was no problem. My brother, Beckett Anderson Vinroot III, was a total dweeb. The only thing he liked more than reading was computer games and baseball. He really liked baseball. And surprisingly, he didn't suck. He could actually hit the ball pretty far and run decently fast, for a glasses-wearing, skinny, shaggy-haired nerd.

Our older sisters were supposed to be supervising us for the summer, but they'd abandoned us for internships in the city.

I hadn't been surprised when they'd told us they were leaving us. Addison and Avery were twins who'd always stuck together. They went to the same school, studied in the same business program, and dated brothers. Addison and Avery were three years older than me, but they'd gone to boarding school too, and the last time we'd lived together, I'd been younger than Beckett.

"We can't pass this up," Addison had said. "It's the—"

"Opportunity of a lifetime," Avery finished for her.

They had an annoying habit of finishing each other's sentences.

“Besides, it’s only for a few weeks before you go to Italy,” Addison had said.

“And Beckett goes to camp,” Avery had finished.

Beckett and I didn’t mind having the house to ourselves. Lucinda, our long-time housekeeper was around if we needed her. She made tamales from scratch and was always up to give advice—even when we didn’t ask.

Beckett kept to himself, rarely coming out of the game room, and I spent most of my time at tennis practice or hanging out with my childhood friends who were around for the summer. Most of us were in the same situation. Our parents were loaded, but they were never around. So, we took their boats without permission, drank their liquor, and maxed out their credit cards. Our parents either didn’t notice, or felt too guilty to punish us. We had parties every weekend, taking turns at whoever’s parents were out of town.

“Are you gonna stay for practice?” Beckett asked.

I eased the brand-new BMW convertible my father had leased for the summer into a parking space, or two. My driving skills, never the greatest to begin with, were a little rusty after spending the last few months at boarding school with no car.

“You want me to stay?” I turned to Beckett, whose puppy dog eyes stared up at me from behind the lenses of his glasses.

A lock of brown hair fell over his forehead, and he pushed it aside. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” he said.

I gestured at my white pleated skirt and matching tank. “I’m still wearing my tennis clothes.”

Beckett looked at me as if I’d said something in a foreign language. “So?”

I wrinkled my nose. “I probably stink.”

Beckett sniffed the air in my direction. “Nope. You’re all good.”

I rolled my eyes, not sure I trusted the opinion of a teenage boy whose socks reeked so badly I could smell them from across the house.

He reached for the door. “It’s no big deal,” he said with a small shrug that looked so brave it pinched my heart.

And with that, I made my decision. I switched off the car and plucked the keys from the ignition. Beckett’s grin of approval was a fleeting flash of metal, disappearing almost as quickly as it came.

We climbed out of the car and walked along the stone path winding between soccer fields and playground equipment to the baseball fields.

It was a perfect June day. Not too hot, with just the right touch of mountain breeze that ruffled my skirt. I’d worked up a sweat playing tennis but hadn’t had time to change before rushing off to pick up Beckett. If I would have known I’d be out in public, I would have taken time with my appearance, but Beckett was right. It wasn’t a big deal. We were at Ginger Cake Acres, a county park where dogs outnumbered people. The chances of me running into someone I knew while looking less than perfect, and possibly smelling like a locker room, were slim.

Beckett strode along beside me on feet too big for his body, looking more like our father every day. His dark hair curled at his neck, and a thin shadow of hair dusted his upper lip. He hadn’t hit his growth spurt yet, but I knew it was only a matter of time before he towered over me. Those size twelve feet demanded a body to go with it.

“You need a haircut.” I reached over and ruffled Beckett’s shaggy brown mane. “What would Dad say?”

Beckett ducked from under my hand. “Dad’s not here.”

He had a point there. “I can make an appointment with Cindy for next week.”

He adjusted his duffle bag on his shoulder, giving me the stubborn look that he’d perfected a few years ago during StepMonster #1’s reign of terror. “I don’t need you to make me an appointment, Peppy,” he said. “You’re not my mom.”

A sharp pain speared my chest at the mention of Mom. She’d been gone for five years now. Scottsdale. We only saw



her once a year for mandatory holidays. Which was fine by me. Mom had never been the motherly type, and the less time we spent together the less I had to be the mediatory between her and Beckett.

“Well, I don’t know how you’re gonna hit the ball with all that hair in your eyes.” I took a swat at Beckett’s forehead, but he was too quick and ducked out of my range.

“Oh yeah? Watch me!” He ran off toward the field with a shit-eating grin.

His words hit home more than he knew. I’d watched him grow up more than our parents had. I’d been there for all his milestone moments when he was a kid. But since I’d been at boarding school most of the year, I’d missed a lot. Who’d been watching him in my absence? Probably no one.

I found a seat high on the bleachers away from a gaggle of moms dressed in coordinated outfits from Old Navy and pulled out my cellular Nokia. Dad had given it to me for emergencies before jetting off to the Caribbean with StepMonster #2.

I flipped open the phone and dialed Emily, whose parents were also divorced and had gifted her a cell phone.

When she finally answered, I could hardly hear her over the noise in the background.

“Where are you?”

“I’m already at the club. When are you coming?”

“I can’t make it,” I said.

“Bummer,” she said. “Justin is bussing tables.”

Justin was a total babe. A rising senior at Mossy Oak High, Justin was all dark hair, tanned skin, and dangerous black eyes.

“You should invite him to your party,” Emily said, her voice rising over the buzz of noise.

It was my turn to host this weekend, and the invitation list was already out of hand. Between me and Emily, we’d invited

everyone in town. And everyone had said yes.

“I don’t know,” I said. “The Party Boys are coming.”

Emily sighed dramatically. “The Party Boys are so last year.”

The Party Boys were the epicenter of our social group. They were wealthy, good looking, and they knew how to party. Hence the name they’d given themselves. Were the Party Boys obnoxious and annoying sometimes? Sure. But they were still the glue that held us together. And I had a feeling they wouldn’t welcome an outsider like Justin who bussed tables at the club and went to the local high school.

It was probably best not to invite him. Then again, this summer had been incredibly boring so far. Maybe Justin was just the spice we needed.

“Invite him,” I said.

She squealed in approval and hung up, presumably to carry out my directions with all the enthusiasm of a seventeen-year-old girl.

I flipped my phone shut and caught one of the Old Navy moms eyeing me. None of the moms ever talked to me at baseball practice. They hardly ever looked at me. I smiled politely, wondering if one of them was going to break formation and say hello to me, but she looked away without comment.

No big deal, I thought. Determined to adopt Beckett’s nonchalant attitude, I lifted my chin and dropped my phone in my bag. I was at the field for my brother, not to make friends with a bunch of women two decades older than me whose highlights needed retouching.

I focused my attention on Beckett. He was shorter and skinnier than the other kids, but it didn’t matter. He was the best hitter on the team.

He’d probably analyzed the trajectory of the ball on a spreadsheet. The kid was smarter than anyone. He figured out a way to excel at everything he did no matter his disadvantage.

Even if he couldn't see the baseball through his glasses and under the flop of his hair, he found a way to hit it out of the park.

"Here he comes," one of the mom's said in a shrill voice that carried up to me at the top of the bleachers.

"Oh my God," said another. "He's wearing the gray shorts again."

I followed their gazes to the dugout, to the coaches. They jogged onto the field. Well, one of them did. The other sort of shuffled along the dirt, barely picking his feet up. That was Coach Gribble. He'd been around forever. Back in the dark ages, he'd been my father's Little League coach. According to my dad, he was ancient back then.

"He's absolutely perfect," one mom said, lowering her sunglasses to stare.

She wasn't talking about Coach Gribble, or his considerable gut. She was talking about the tall, long-legged man next to him.

"He's too young," said one of the moms.

"Nope. He's legal."

The woman scoffed. "Barely."

"He's eighteen," the first woman said. "I asked him."

Just then, the eighteen-year-old coach with the tumble of blond hair that fell almost to his shoulders à la Brad Pitt in *Interview with the Vampire* looked over his shoulder, spotted the group of women on the bleachers, and lifted his hand in a wave.

The women giggled in unison and waved back. I stared at the flock of moms, wide-eyed and embarrassed for them. They were flirting with a kid. Well, technically he was an adult, but he was only five years older than their sons. It was disgusting.

I turned my attention back to the field and watched the Brad Pitt look-alike run across the field. It was quite the sight. His muscles flexed, his hair swished, and his ass looked amazing in those gray shorts.

An involuntary sigh escaped my mouth as he pushed a hand through his mane of luxurious hair. He smiled at the boys in encouragement, and I swear, I felt his smile all the way to my toes.

The group of moms also sighed. The collective sigh carried up the rows of bleachers like the wistful moan of lost youth. I narrowed my eyes at the group of moms, noticing there were more of them than usual. They had a healthy carpool routine, of which I wasn't a part of, and there were never more than three minivan-driving moms at practice at a time. Today, there were at least a dozen. Almost the entire team.

I could hardly blame them. The new coach was worth sticking around for. I settled into my seat and turned my attention to the gorgeous guy on the field.

Suddenly, the summer didn't seem so boring after all.

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## Chapter 2

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His name was Thatcher Hayes, and he wasn't from Mossy Oak. He'd come to stay with his uncle or grandfather (Beckett couldn't remember which) who needed help after having surgery. Thatcher was from Washington D.C., and he would only be in Mossy Oak for the summer before heading off to college.

"Where's he headed?" I asked Beckett with feigned disinterest.

My kid brother saw right through me. Like I said, he was pretty smart. "What do you care?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at me.

I flipped my ponytail. "Just making conversation." With a name like Thatcher Hayes, I guessed he was Ivy League material. He was probably headed to Princeton or Yale.

"Virginia," Beckett said.

"Oh?" Definitely not Ivy League.

"He's got a scholarship."

"That's cool." My brother was still staring at me, so I steered the conversation back in his direction. "Do you want to play in college?"

"Yeah," Beckett said. "But not baseball. Basketball."

I pulled into a parking spot and turned to gape at my brother. "You don't even play basketball."

He reached for the door. "I play NBA 2K every day."

"Playing a video game isn't the same as playing for real," I said.

"It's all about the strategy." He gave me a look that screamed "duh" and grabbed his gear. "You coming to practice?"

"Not tonight." I'd been hanging around almost every day trying to get an opportunity to talk to Thatcher, but it hadn't worked out. I was beginning to feel like a stalker. Beckett was having a sleepover with a teammate, so I didn't have a legitimate reason to be there. "I have to go home and hide all the valuables before the Party Boys get there."

Beckett laughed. "Make sure to lock my door. I don't want anyone messing with my setup."

"I got you." I gave him a fist bump as he got out of the car. "See you tomorrow at the game."

He paused before ducking out of the car. "You're coming?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

He grinned. "That's just because you want to stare at Coach T like all the other moms."

"Hey!" I yelled as he slammed the door. "I'm not your mom as you so love to remind me."

He flipped me the bird and jogged off, hair flopping into his eyes as he ran. I watched him with a faint smile until he disappeared behind a row of tall hedges.

Driving back to my house, I realized I was going to miss my brother when I left for Italy. He was a pretty great kid, and I hated the thought of leaving him alone with the parents. What if they corrupted him somehow?

Right there at the railroad tracks crossing over into the Frog District of town, I pledged to come home more during the school year. Beckett needed me.

I slowed my speed as I drove through the historic streets. There was an old man who sat on his porch yelling at people for speeding, and I didn't want to draw his wrath. My candy apple red convertible was conspicuous enough as it was, and I didn't need to add speeding to get noticed. I drove past the stately brick homes, pausing to glance at my favorite—a Southern Colonial with a deep double-decker porch and four chimneys. Imagining the family who lived there was one of my favorite games. They would be a happily married couple with two kids and a dog. They would go to corn mazes in the fall and pick fresh strawberries in the summer. The dad would never miss a baseball game, and the mom would bake chocolate chip cookies. The dog, a shaggy golden retriever, who shed hair all over the carpet and jumped on the furniture, would be named Scooter.

When I got home, I gave Lucinda a hundred bucks to help me get ready for the party. We dragged the living room furniture to the outskirts of the room to provide a dance floor, and everything of value went into the guest bedroom. I locked the door and hid the key, then did the same for Beckett's room.

I gave Lucinda another hundred and asked her to come back in the morning to clean up.

“Be careful,” Lucinda said on her way out.

“Don't worry. I know how to have a party.”

She gave me a long look as if she was dying to say something else but left without saying it.

Emily came over early to get ready with me.

“What do you think? The red or the black?” I held two lacy tops up to my chest and scrutinized myself in the mirror.

“Definitely the red,” Emily said. “It goes with your tan.”

I tossed the black top on my bed and smiled. My tan was pretty awesome. I'd been working on it non-stop since I got home from school in May. Winters in New Hampshire were brutal, and my skin hadn't seen the sun in months. I had to hand it to Mossy Oak—there was always an abundance of sunshine. They didn't call the sky Carolina Blue for nothing.

Emily took my spot in the mirror and swept iridescent eyeshadow over one lid, then the other. “Guess what?”

I pulled the top over my head and leaned over, fluffing my boobs to their best advantage. “What?”

“Justin’s coming tonight.” She drew mauve lip liner on her lips. “I think he wants to hook up.”

“You go, girl.”

“He’s bringing some friends. Maybe you’ll think one of them is cute.”

“How many friends?” This party was going to be out of control.

Emily slicked on lipstick and pressed her lips together. “Dunno.” She grinned at her reflection. “This party is going to be epic.”

The party was more than epic. Everyone would be trying to beat it for the rest of the summer. The Party Boys had outdone themselves. They’d brought coolers of beer, strawberry jello shots, and a DJ.

There was beer pong, keg stand competitions, and so many people I couldn’t see a blade of grass in our backyard.

I spent half the night glad to be the one to throw the best party of summer and the other half wishing everyone would leave before something bad happened. Because something bad always happened. It was only a matter of time.

It wasn’t easy playing hostess, and I couldn’t wait until someone else had a party. Let them clean up beer cans for hours and rearrange their furniture. I’d done my duty.

The night was still young, but I felt way too old. The friends I’d known since I was a kid were all cut from the same cloth. They’d always been slightly obnoxious, but over time, they’d gotten worse. They were good looking, rich, and charming. So why did I want to punch every one of them in the throat?

“Hey, Peppy.” It was Chaseton Healy, a boy I’d known since pre-school. He’d gotten better looking since braces fixed



his buck teeth and he'd found the gym. "Great party."

"Thanks."

We stood in awkward silence while Chaseton sipped his beer and bobbed his head to the music. "Wanna make out?" he asked, finally.

I blinked slowly and shook my head. "Not really."

He took it well. "Ok. Cool." Slugging his beer, he backed away. "See ya."

"See ya." I gave him a wave and headed out onto the deck. All was well in the outdoor venue. It was more of a chill vibe outside. The music was a faint whisper, and the darkened corners beckoned couples. I did my rounds, walking down the dock to check on my dad's boat. After a few parties when kids had tried to steal the boat, I made sure to check on it as I did my loop.

All was quiet on the dock. The party was far enough away that only a whisper of music and laughter drifted down to the shore. Moonlight shone on the gently rippling waves, and a breeze chased away the humidity. I stood for a moment, appreciating the stillness. It seemed I was always rushing somewhere. Tennis practice, which I had to keep up over the summer if I had a prayer of making the team my senior year, piano and Italian lessons, plus keeping up with my smartass little brother—I hardly had a chance to hear my own thoughts tumbling around in my head.

I tilted my face up to the starry sky and made a wish for my future. May it only include one husband instead of four. May it have a dog named Scooter, and chocolate chip cookies delivered by nosy neighbors. Don't get me wrong, I wanted to drive my kids around in a Porsche, not a minivan, and shopping at The Gap was definitely not on the agenda, but happiness was.

Movement from the other side of the boat caught my eye, and I noticed a lone figure sitting on the dock. I took a step closer, peering at the broad-shouldered figure in silhouette.

The clouds drifted away from the moon, and a beam of light shined on his hair. It was long and golden, The Vampire Luis.

A shiver ran down my spine, and I sucked in a breath. It was none other than baseball coach extraordinaire, Thatcher Hayes.

“Hello,” I said, moving out of the shadows.

He turned toward me and nodded. “Hey.” His expression changed when he saw me. A smile lifted the corner of his lips, and his eyes flashed in the darkness. “You’re Beckett’s sister,” he said.

My heart lodged in my throat. Under the silvery light of the moon, he was other-worldly handsome. His eyes were electric blue, and he had a dimple in one cheek that winked when he smiled.

“Peppy,” I said by way of introduction. The nickname sounded so juvenile, and I mentally kicked myself for not using my given name. Thatcher was only a year older, but was college bound. Already an adult. And I, Pressly Vinroot, who’d earned her nickname by being the loudest on the cheer squad, was a mere child.

He patted the wood beside him. “Wanna sit?” he asked, dimple flashing.

I smiled back and bent as gracefully as possible in my short skirt to sit beside him. When I was a kid, I used to come out here with my sisters and catch fireflies along the sandy shore. It seemed like forever ago. A sudden wave of longing hit me, and I mourned my childhood. Something about this summer felt so final. Even though I still had another year of high school, I felt my youth was slipping away, like sand through my fingers. The older I got, the more I wished I had time to be young. It was going by too fast.

I snuck a peek at Thatcher’s strong profile. “You’re going to Virginia?” I asked.

He glanced over at me as if he’d forgotten I was there. Laughing softly, he shook his hair off his face. “Sorry. I was

lost in thought. This is the first moment I've had to chill in weeks."

"I hear you." I raised my beer and drank, noticing belatedly he didn't have a drink. Hostess fail. "You want to share?" I asked.

He smiled and took the bottle from my hand, our fingers brushing lightly. A jolt of electricity raced down my spine, and Thatcher narrowed his eyes at me. Had he felt it too?

He lifted the bottle to his lips and sipped. "This seems wrong somehow. Drinking with the baseball moms."

"Hey!" I nudged his shoulder. "I'm not one of the moms."

He grinned, blue eyes flashing in the silvery moonlight. "Still."

"Don't you dare put me in the same category as them." I straightened my shoulders and glared at him. "They won't even talk to me."

He handed me the beer bottle. "Be glad for that."

I took a sip and leaned closer. This night was shaping up to be much better than I'd anticipated.

"T!" A voice rang out from above.

Thatcher jerked back and turned his face toward the stairs leading to the porch. "What?" he growled.

"Come quick." There was a scrambling sound as whoever it was raced down the stairs. "Danny's getting his ass beat."

"Shit."

Thatcher rose to his feet in a fluid motion and hurried up the dock. I followed as fast as I could, panic rising in my chest. This was what I deserved for shirking my hostess responsibilities. No good party was without the spilling of blood. But too much blood was a problem.

"Who's Danny?" I asked. The name was unfamiliar, as was the stocky guy with the buzz cut who raced up the stairs in front of us.

Thatcher took the stairs two at a time. “He’s a skinny kid with a big mouth.”

“Friend of yours?” I asked, wondering what Thatcher was doing at my house in the first place. The guest list had really gotten out of hand.

“Not really,” Thatcher said. “But no one else at this McMansion is going to help him out.”

“McMansion?” I asked in a righteous voice.

“Yep. Look at this place. Whoever lives here is probably a trust fund baby with no real friends.”

My step faltered, but I quickly recovered, my blood burning hot in my veins. “You don’t know whose party you’re crashing?”

Thatcher didn’t answer as we came upon the fight. Danny was indeed a skinny kid getting his ass beat. A crowd stood around, cheering as Hunter Bishop, one of the Party Boys, pinned Danny down and drove his fist into his face repeatedly. It didn’t look good for Danny, but no one lifted a hand to help him.

Then Thatcher stepped in and dragged Hunter off Danny. Thatcher threw Hunter to the ground, tossing him as easily as if he was an empty sack, not a muscle-bound jerk. Hunter rolled to his feet and challenged Thatcher, lunging at him with raised fists. Thatcher ducked Hunter’s punch and delivered one of his own—straight in the nose. There was a loud crunch, and blood spurted from Hunter’s nose in a violent arc. The crowd gasped, then cheered.

“Fight! Fight! Fight!”

Hunter grabbed his face, howling in outrage. “You broke my nose, you cunt!”

Thatcher ignored him and bent over poor, busted-up Danny, who hadn’t yet moved. “Come on, man. Get up.”

As Thatcher’s back was turned, Hunter staggered closer and hit him on the back of the head with a beer bottle. Thatcher went down hard. The crowd jeered, yelling for more.

Then a wail of sirens split the air, and the crowd dashed off into the woods, every man and woman for themselves.

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## Chapter 3

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Thatcher weighed a ton and was disoriented. Leaning his considerable weight against me, he allowed me to help him into the sitting room. I plunked him down on the loveseat and looked at him sternly. “Stay.”

He held his head in his hands, mumbling something I couldn’t understand. I worried he might have a concussion. Did he need the hospital? I had no experience playing nurse, so I couldn’t tell. I didn’t want to leave him alone, but he was bleeding all over the silk chintz. I ran to the kitchen and grabbed a bag of frozen peas and wet a hand towel. When I came back to the sitting room, he was trying to stand and failing.

“I said sit.” I pushed him down and pressed the bag of peas to his head. “You probably need to go to the hospital,” I said.

“I don’t need to go to the hospital,” he said, trying to stand. “I need to get out of here before the cops come.” His blue eyes were wild, and his hair was matted to his forehead with a sheen of sweat and blood.

Pressing him firmly back to a seat, I dabbed the cut gently. “Don’t worry. I’ll handle the cops.”

He stared down at the ground, wincing as I cleaned the cut. “I’m on scholarship,” he said. “If I get arrested, I can kiss college goodbye.”

The wail of sirens was so close now, I could tell the cops were mere seconds away. I’d dealt with cops before, and I

wasn't afraid of them, but I had nothing to lose. Thatcher did. I took a deep breath. "I've got this," I said with more confidence than I felt. "Go wait in my bedroom. Close the door. And don't come out."

His eyebrows pinched together, and he gave me a confused look. "This is your house?"

I stared at him. "Whose house did you think it was?" The sirens stopped blaring, and a moment later there was a loud knock on the door. Thatcher looked like someone had twisted a knife in his head wound.

"And those are your friends who beat up a defenseless kid?"

I straightened my shoulders and glared at him. This wasn't the time to debate the wisdom of my choice in friends. I pointed to the hall. "Go. First room on the left."

He struggled to his feet and grabbed the back of the loveseat for support.

The knock sounded again, and my heart pounded harder. "Can you make it?" I put my hand on Thatcher's shoulder, feeling the rock-hard tension in his muscles.

"Yeah." He made his way out of the room, looking more determined with each step.

When he was out of sight, I went to the front door. Smoothing a hand over my hair, I swung open the door and smiled brightly at the man in uniform. "Hello, Officer. What can I do for you?"

The police officer looked past my shoulder into the two-story foyer. "Is everything okay here, Miss?"

"Yes, sir," I said, smiling wider in hopes my mouth would stop trembling. "Everything's right as rain." Right as rain? Where did that come from?

"Your parents home?" he asked, looking me in the eye.

"They're already asleep." I squinted up at them. "Is something wrong? There isn't a serial killer clown on the loose, is there?"

He narrowed his eyes at me. “We had a noise complaint about this address.”

I laughed. “That must have been me practicing piano.” I pointed at the baby grand piano in the music room.

His eyebrow lifted. “They said it sounded like a wild party.”

I put my hands on my hips and smiled until my cheeks hurt. “Gosh, I’m not that terrible.”

He cocked his head at me, his jaw tightening. “You play piano while your parents are asleep?”

I didn’t miss a beat. “My dad snores so loud they both have to wear earplugs.”

“Maybe you should go wake them up,” he said. “I need to verify everything is okay.”

My skin turned clammy, and my mind raced. I swallowed hard and widened my eyes dramatically. “You really don’t want that,” I said. “My father is very grumpy if he doesn’t get his sleep.” I put my hand on my hip, gazing up at him with as much innocence as I could muster in a cherry red lace corset and black miniskirt. “You know my father?” I asked. “Anderson Vinroot?”

His posture changed when he heard the name. He knew my dad alright. Everyone in town did. The Vinroots had practically founded Mossy Oak.

“He’s not the kind of guy you want to wake in the middle of the night,” I said in a loud whisper. “Trust me.”

The cop stared at me for a long moment, and then finally took a step back. “Keep it down,” he said.

“Yes, sir. No more playing tonight; I promise.”

With a tight smile, he turned and went back to his car. I waited until he was gone before shutting the door and sprinting down the hall to my room. Thatcher was standing by my bookshelf, leaning a hand on my desk as he peered at my book collection.



He looked up when I shut the door. His shirt was torn at the sleeve, revealing the curve of his muscular shoulder, his face was pale, and his eyes were glassy. He looked like hell, but somehow, still dangerously hot. Brad Pitt in Fight Club hot.

“You got rid of them?” he asked, his gaze darting to the door.

I nodded. “You’re not getting arrested tonight.”

His shoulders sagged in relief, and he turned back to my bookshelf. “Sweet Valley High, huh?” A slight smile curved his lips. He pulled a book from the collection. “This one was my favorite,” he said.

I groaned inwardly. For some strange reason, I couldn’t part with the books from middle school. I should have given those books away years ago, but every time I redecorated my room, they ended up back on my bookshelf.

I plucked the book from his hand, my cheeks on fire. “You should be sitting down. You look like hell.”

He gestured at the book. “Jessica was such a bitch.”

My mouth dropped open. “How did you know that?”

His shoulders lifted in a slight shrug. “I read it.”

“You read a book for preteen girls?”

“Sure. My cousin was reading them, and I wanted to know what all the fuss was about.”

“The baseball coach, defender of Danny, Brad Pitt lookalike reads Sweet Valley High?”

He raised an eyebrow at my detailed description. “You think I look like Brad Pitt?”

“Everyone thinks you look like Brad Pitt.”

“I don’t.” His nose wrinkled. “He’s a pretty boy.”

He reached for another book on the shelf, one of my many journals, and I swatted at his hand. “Those are private.” I hadn’t had a lot of boys in my room, and Thatcher wasn’t a

boy. He was a man. Even though he was injured, he radiated masculine energy. He was taller than me by six inches and made entirely of lean muscle.

“Sorry,” he said, lifting both hands in the air as if I’d accused him of shoplifting.

He swayed on his feet a little, and his skin took on a gray tint. I grabbed his arm and led him to my bed, where he sank like a stone.

“You probably need a doctor.”

He grimaced. “I’m fine. No doctors.”

I stepped closer and pressed my hand to his head, feeling around with tender care. “You’ve got a goose egg,” I said. “That’s good.”

“Ouch.” He reached up and grabbed my hand, clutching my fingers. “Easy there, Katie.”

“Katie?” I frowned. He didn’t even remember my name. “My name’s not Katie.”

He gripped my fingers when I tried to pull away. “I know,” he said. “But you remind me of Katie Holmes. You ever watch Dawson’s Creek?”

I blinked down at him. “I don’t look anything like her.”

“And I don’t look like Brad Pitt.” He tugged my hand. “Can you sit down? It’s hurting my head to look up at you.”

“Are you okay?” I asked, sitting next to him. “Do you need an aspirin?”

He shook his head, wincing at the pain. “I don’t think it will do any good.”

Our fingers were still laced, our hands resting lightly on my thigh. I could feel his warmth and smell the clean scent of his freshly laundered shirt.

The soft denim of his jeans brushed my bare leg, and I gave an involuntary shiver. All week I’d been dying to get closer to Thatcher, and here he was in my bedroom. On my bed. And my dad was in the Caribbean. Too bad he was

injured. I couldn't possibly take advantage of him in his condition.

Thatcher slowly brushed his fingers along my thigh, and I trembled. "Cold?" he asked.

"No." A shiver gave me away.

He put his arm around my shoulder and drew me back against the headboard. We were silent for a long moment. Thatcher wasn't like other guys I knew. He didn't try to fill the empty space with words or impress me with dumb jokes.

His hand trailed down my arm in lazy strokes, and my head rested in the crook of his shoulder. I felt the puff of his breath against my cheek, and a thrill raced down my spine. When I turned my face to look at him, I saw the heat in his Carolina sky blue eyes. His gaze drifted over my face, riveted to my lips.

A fizzy feeling started in my belly and spread through my body. My heart raced, and my blood heated. My skin felt too tight, tingly with awareness.

Thatcher was going to kiss me.

I didn't have a ton of experience with boys. My friends said I was too picky, and maybe they were right. I had high standards. I didn't let just any boy kiss me. But Thatcher wasn't a boy. He was only a year older than me, but it felt like decades.

His gaze lifted to mine, searing me with blue heat. He lifted his hand and traced my jaw with gentle fingers, smiling softly. "You're prettier than her," he said.

"Prettier than who?"

"Katie."

I laughed. "Liar."

"I don't lie."

The hot pad of his thumb swept across my bottom lip. I let my eyes drift shut, waiting for his kiss.

"I should go," he said. "You're just a kid."

I wasn't a kid. I met his gaze in a brave challenge. Opening my lips, I drew his thumb into my mouth. When I sucked gently, his eyes widened. I swirled my tongue around his thumb and moaned softly. There was something so intimate about having his thumb in my mouth, something very forbidden and tempting.

His pupils dilated, and his blue eyes turned black with desire. He slipped his thumb from my mouth and smeared the wetness across my bottom lip, his eyes blazing with heat.

Time slowed as we stared at each other, breathing in the same air, our chests rising and falling dangerously close together. His gaze dropped to my mouth, and I felt a liquid rush of desire at the intensity of his gaze. I reached up and threaded my fingers through his silky hair, drawing him closer.

His gaze lifted to mine. He was so close our noses brushed together, and I could feel the soft puff of his breath against my lips. His eyes were hot and dangerous, his scent was intoxicating, and if he didn't kiss me soon, I was going to die.

He muttered something undecipherable, then dipped his head and crushed his lips to mine.

Finally.

His kiss was slow and thorough. His lips warm and firm. He slid his tongue along the seam of my lips until I opened for him. I touched my tongue to his. Hot and wet, our tongues slid against each other's.

He cupped the back of my head, slanting his mouth over mine to deepen the kiss. I pressed closer, tangling my fingers through his hair.

I wanted to keep kissing Thatcher forever, feel the rock-hard wall of his chest against mine, and taste the sweet spice of his tongue. When we finally pulled back for a breath, he looked down at me with glassy eyes.

I pressed my hand to his chest and felt his heart beating like crazy.

"Are you okay?" I asked, remembering his injury.

He smiled faintly. "I'm dizzy, but it's not because I got hit over the head."

I smiled back at him. "I'm dizzy too."

He lowered his head and kissed me again, just as slowly, just as thoroughly. We lowered down to the bed in each other's arms, our mouths seeking, our hands exploring.

I thought this might be the night that I finally got rid of my virginity. I'd never been ready before. I'd never found someone I wanted to give the gift of my innocence.

I wanted to give it to Thatcher, whose touch made me vibrate with need. But we went no further than light caresses and very thorough kissing. Our clothes stayed on. We kissed for hours before finally succumbing to sleep in each other's arms.

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## Chapter 4

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The morning after the party, I woke up to an empty bed. The bedspread was rumpled where Thatcher had lain on top of it, and the pillow still had the dent from his head. My lips were tender and swollen from his kisses, and my head ached from lack of sleep. He'd kept me up nearly half the night with those hot, tender kisses. And he'd been so respectful, barely brushing my body with a light grazing touch. My breasts felt full and heavy, my nipples stiffening at the thought of him touching me. I'd been ready for more, but Thatcher had pulled back every time I tried to steal under the hem of his shirt or press my palm to the crotch of his well-worn jeans. I could tell he was turned on. There was no hiding the ridge of his erection pressing against his zipper. But he insisted we take it slow, that we stick to kissing.

Not that I was complaining. Thatcher was an expert at kissing, and I didn't mind how thoroughly he wanted to get to know my mouth with his. He could kiss me for as long as he wanted. I was only sorry that he'd left without telling me goodbye.

A noise coming from outside my bedroom door penetrated my thoughts, and I realized that must have been what woke me up. It must have been Lucinda, arriving to help clean up. I glanced at the clock on my nightstand. Seven-thirty. Good God. What was she doing at the house so early?

There was a crash, and then the tinkle of broken glass. I cringed, hoping she hadn't broken something expensive.

After changing out of my party clothes from the night before, I left my room to investigate.

It wasn't Lucinda in my kitchen tossing beer cans and plastic cups into a garbage bag. It was Thatcher.

I stood in the hall, watching him as he hummed to himself while tossing trash into the bag. He looked impossibly fresh for so early in the morning, especially considering his head wound. I leaned against the wall for a moment, enjoying the show as he made a game of crushing the cans and throwing them into the trash can from across the room. His ass in those jeans was a work of art. And why did his hair look better than mine post-salon appointment? It swung in a luxurious arch, kissing his shoulders every time he arched back to throw a can.

He must have felt my stare because he looked up and smiled at me.

"About time you woke up," he said.

I straightened from the wall and walked into the kitchen. "I thought you'd left."

He glanced around at the mess. There were empty cans everywhere, and the tile floor was sticky with beer residue. "I couldn't leave you to clean this up on your own," he said. "Not when you saved me from getting arrested."

I smiled and strode across the kitchen. Taking the can from his hand, I tossed it in the direction of the trash can. It wasn't even close to making it. "You can leave this mess," I said.

He shook his head. "I can't."

I turned and wound my arms around his neck. "You can. I have hired help for that." I reached up on my tiptoes and pressed my lips to his.

He resisted at first, but after a moment, he relented and put his arms around me, kissing me back. When we finally broke apart, I had a hard time catching my breath.

"I think we should take this back to my bedroom," I said, my voice a hoarse whisper.

Thatcher's eyes were glassy with desire, but he gently pushed me away. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Seventeen."

He sighed. "Technically jailbait," he said.

"How old are you?"

"I'll be nineteen in December."

I hopped up on the counter and grabbed his hand, tugging him between my legs. Lacing my hands around his neck, I let my fingers sift through the silky strands of his golden hair. "Barely a year older than me. I don't see the problem."

His jaw clenched. "Unfortunately, the cops don't agree."

"Who's telling the cops?" I asked, drawing him closer and wrapping my legs around his hips.

"It doesn't matter." He dropped his hands to my thighs, his fingers warm on my bare skin. "I don't have sex with high school girls."

"Oh?" I linked my fingers at the nape of his neck, placing a soft kiss to his cheek. It was smooth, with barely a hint of peach fuzz. "You think you're big and bad because you're going off to college in the fall?" I scraped my teeth across his jaw. "You can't even grow a beard yet."

His hands gripped my hips. "Peppy, stop. I'm serious."

"I know." I kissed a path to his ear. "You're way too serious."

He took a step back, his eyes an intense blue. "I have to be," he said, his voice radiating tension. "I can't mess around with an underage girl." He grimaced, eyes flashing brightly. "I don't have hired help or a trust fund to fall back on."

My shoulders stiffened. "You're being pretty judgmental."

He looked away from me, letting his eyes travel around my house. I knew what he was seeing—the expensive paintings, the high-end furniture, the expansive view of the lake from the floor-to-ceiling windows. It was something I saw every day when I was home, but I never failed to appreciate it. My dorm



room in New Hampshire had cinderblock walls and one tiny window. Living on the lake in Mossy Oak was a privilege I didn't take for granted. But it wasn't all roses and rainbows. I might have money and luxury, but it didn't make me happy.

"I should go," Thatcher said, stepping back from the counter.

A chill ran down my spine at the dismissal in his voice. His rejection stung. I hopped off the counter and glared up at him. "Fine."

He pushed a hand through his hair and sighed heavily. "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to hurt your feelings."

I laughed and tossed my hair. "Don't worry about it."

He nodded and then looked away. "Will I see you at the game?" he asked.

I shrugged, still reeling from his dismissal. "I'll be there," I said. "For Beckett."

A look crossed his face as if he'd just remembered that as Beckett's coach, he had another reason to reject me. He backed away. "I guess I'll see you around."

I waved at him, summoning all my strength to come off as the queen of nonchalant. "See you."

I did not cry until he was gone.

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## Chapter 5

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I looked damn good, and I knew it.

My sundress showcased my assets to their best advantage. A hint of cleavage, a lot of leg, and the perfect soft yellow to show off my tan.

I might have been an underage virgin, but I sure as hell didn't look it.

The other moms avoided me as usual, sticking their noses in the air as I approached the bleachers, but the dads couldn't look away. A few of them probably got whiplash. Perverts.

I ignored them all and climbed to the top of the bleachers where I could see the game over everyone's head.

Beckett spotted me and waved. I waved back, giving him the thumbs-up sign. Letting my gaze drift across the field, I searched for a glimpse of Thatcher. A lump formed in my throat when I finally saw him, talking to the other coaches. He was wearing the coach's uniform of shorts and a team T-shirt, but he looked sinfully gorgeous.

The game started, and I cheered for the home team louder than anyone. I heckled the referee when he made a call in the other team's favor and pounded my feet on the bleachers when our team got a hit. When Beckett hit one out of the park, I yelled so loudly it hurt my throat.

Thatcher glanced up at me as Beckett ran the bases, and I offered him a frosty smile. He nodded and adjusted his hat to shade his eyes, turning his attention back to the game.

Jerk. He couldn't even smile back? He acted as if he hardly knew me, as if he hadn't spent hours the night before getting friendly with my mouth.

Thinking of his kiss made my skin tingle, and a tremor of longing raced down my spine. Did he have to look so good in shorts and a T-shirt? It was completely unfair. I'd spent all morning applying my makeup and fixing my hair, and all he'd done was throw on a T-shirt and a backward hat and he looked like he'd walked off a photoshoot.

It was the hat that did it for me. I was a sucker for a backward ball cap. I had to tear my eyes away from him and focus on the game.

Our team won, and afterward, everyone was heading to Hawthorne's Pizza to celebrate.

"You're coming, right?" Beckett asked.

I hardly ever came to the celebration dinners. I was too old to hang out with the thirteen-year-old boys and too young to sit with the parents. The last time I'd gone, I'd ended up sitting with Coach Gribble.

"Never mind," Beckett said, reading the look on my face. "You've probably got stuff to do."

It was Saturday night, and I had several parties to attend. But the fragile hope etched on my brother's face made me change my mind. "I'll meet you there," I said. "Unless you want a ride?"

Beckett grinned. "Can we put the top down?"

"You got it."

"Can Case and Aaron ride with us?"

"Absolutely."

Beckett lifted an eyebrow. "Can I drive?"

I laughed. "Hell no." The last time I'd let him drive, I'd thought he was going to kill us. He wasn't a bad driver; he just didn't think speed limits applied to him.

The boys piled into the car, and we drove the short ride to Main Street with the top down and radio blaring. I was careful to obey the speed limit as we drove through my favorite neighborhood. The dad was mowing the lawn at my dream house, and a little girl was swinging on a tire hung from the top branches of the sturdy oak. The magnolia tree was in bloom, and the scent of freshly cut grass hung in the air.

I imagined the mother inside baking cookies and felt a pang of jealousy so strong, tears filled my eyes. Why did some people get to have perfect families, while others got ditched for the summer?

I pressed the gas with too much aggression, which earned me a reprimand from the ever-present geezer sitting on the porch next door to my dream house.

“Slow down!” he yelled as I zoomed past.

“Sorry,” I yelled back, giving him a friendly wave.

The old man struggled to stand, shaking his fist at me as I drove off. “You’re gonna kill somebody,” he yelled.

“Don’t cry,” Beckett said. “That guy is out of his mind. He told me I was going too fast on my bike a few weeks ago.”

“I’m not crying,” I said, blinking furiously to staunch my tears. “Must have gotten dust in my eye.”

By the time we arrived at Hawthorne’s, some of the team was in the back pushing tables together. The boys hurried off to grab a seat, but I hung back, weighing my options.

It was either pull a chair up to the kids’ table or slide into the long booth with the parents.

There was no sign of Thatcher. Like any normal eighteen-year-old, he probably had better things to do than hang out with a bunch of kids on a Saturday night.

Suddenly, I wished I hadn’t come. Casting a gaze around the crowded restaurant, I felt like I didn’t belong anywhere.

Tears welled up again, and this time there was nothing I could do to stop them. I choked back a sob and weaved my way through the crowded restaurant to the bathroom, where I

locked the stall door and quietly cried into a handful of toilet paper like a pathetic loser.

Poor little rich girl with no tire swing, no homemade cookies, no sex with her brother's coach. I wallowed in a pity party for that girl for a few minutes before remembering who else I was: Pressly Alexis Vinroot—straight A student, captain of the tennis team, and sister to brilliant Beckett, future CEO of the world.

Thinking of Beckett finally snapped me out of my misery. I couldn't abandon him. There was no way he hadn't noticed my absence.

Time to face the music. I blew my nose and pulled out my compact to repair my makeup. It wasn't perfect, but after applying a fresh coat of red lipstick, I was ready. I washed my hands and glanced at myself in the mirror. Did I look like Katie Holmes from the popular television show? No one had ever mentioned the resemblance before. I couldn't help but think of Thatcher, stroking my cheek and whispering sweet words in my ear. A shiver of longing raced down my spine. I'd never been kissed the way he'd kissed me, as if I was something precious, something to cherish.

Thatcher had seemed so genuine. But maybe he treated every girl like a treasure. Maybe he was just a really good liar.

I pushed open the door to the bathroom and nearly ran into a man standing in the hall. It was Thatcher.

Tall, lean, blond, and gorgeous, he stepped closer, short-circuiting my senses. I breathed in his scent, sunshine and fresh laundry, and the memory of being in his arms all night crashed over me. I'd felt safe and turned on at the same time. Seeing him again made me want his mouth on mine in the worst way. He made me want things he'd already told me he was incapable of giving.

"Are you okay?" He dipped his head to mine, speaking over the buzz of noise into my ear.

At the sound of his voice, my knees went weak. I wasn't okay. I was alone. So alone. But no one could know it. I lifted

my chin a notch and met his piercing gaze. I'd planned to say something flippant, but when I opened my mouth, nothing came out. His eyes found mine, searching and finding every one of my secrets.

I didn't need to speak. Thatcher listened with his eyes. He took my arm, touching me lightly but firmly just above my elbow. "Come on," he said. "You're sitting with me."

The other moms looked on with envy as Thatcher led me to a table for two. We were close enough to the others to be part of their group, but far enough away to have a private conversation. Almost like we were on a date, but not quite.

We discovered we both liked black olives and anchovies and ordered a large pizza to share. The server brought us two Cokes and a basket of breadsticks. When she left, we both reached for the basket at the same time, and our hands brushed. Our gazes met across the table, and unspoken words vibrated between us. Thatcher's gaze was so intense, looking into his eyes was like falling into the ocean when I'd only meant to dip in a toe. I remembered the way he'd kissed me and held me all night long, his arms so safe and solid, his mouth so tender and inviting. I wanted to share more with him than a pizza with toppings no one else liked.

But he'd made himself clear. I was off limits.

"How's your head?" I asked.

He winced and touched the back of his head. "Hard."

I laughed, and some of the ice was broken. He was so gorgeous; it was hard not to stare. I watched his mouth move as he ate. I'd never noticed how sexy it was to watch someone eat. I wanted him to use that mouth to kiss me again. It was terrible being off limits.

"What does your dad do?" he asked. "Your last name is on half the buildings in town."

"He owns businesses." I wasn't exactly sure what my dad did. He never talked about it.

"How about yours?"

Thatcher took a bite of breadstick. “He’s a cop.”

“That’s why you were so scared last night?”

He laughed. “If I got arrested, my dad would kill me.”

“Good thing I covered for you,” I said. “You owe me.”

Thatcher’s eyes smoldered. “I know.”

I leaned across the table, feeling empowered by the desire I read in his eyes. “Maybe you can repay me sometime.”

“Maybe,” he said, glancing down at the table to avoid my gaze. “I’m sorry about this morning. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings or anything. It’s not you...” He trailed off, tugging on his hat.

A flush crept up my neck, and my ears felt like they were on fire. “I get it.” And the worst part of it was, I did. Thatcher was honorable—a quality highly lacking in most teenage males.

“Maybe I can come back to Mossy Oak next summer.” His brows pinched together. “I don’t want my uncle to have more surgery, but maybe he could use some help in his bookshop. And if they’ll have me, I could coach again.”

I glanced at the table of boys, who were smiling and talking excitedly, still high off their win. Last year they’d hardly won a game, and this year they were doing great, mostly thanks to Thatcher. “I think they’ll have you,” I said. “But who knows; I might have a boyfriend by then.”

His face darkened for a beat before he shook it off with a laugh. “It would serve me right,” he said.

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## Chapter 6

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The weeks passed quickly, and suddenly it was July 4th, the day before I left for Italy. My bag was packed and waiting by the door. A car was scheduled to pick me up at noon and drive me to the airport where I would take a nine-hour flight to Munich followed by an hour and half flight to Florence. I'd flown to Europe alone before, so I had no reason to be anxious. Yet, I was.

"Catch you at Thanksgiving," Beckett said on his way out the door. He was going to Sapphire Lake for the day with friends, and I was going to Highland Hills Country Club to watch the fireworks show.

I grabbed him and pulled him into a hug. "Stay out of trouble," I said, thinking it might be our last embrace when he was shorter than me.

He laughed. "You're the one going to Europe."

I ruffled his hair, still untrimmed and very unruly. "Just don't grow too much until I get back."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, jogging down the driveway to his friend's waiting car. He gave me one last wave, and then he was gone.

I was going to miss the little brat.

I took the boat across the lake to the club, and by the time I arrived, all my friends were already half-drunk. Tinsley Weatherby had snuck in a bottle full of vodka, and they'd been taking turns doing shots in the bathroom. Emily grabbed my



arm and propelled me to the bathroom, where we each took a long pull off the bottle.

“He’s here,” Emily said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and offering me the bottle again.

My mind immediately went to Thatcher Hayes. I pictured his long blond hair grazing his collar, his blue eyes blazing against his tanned face.

“He’s so hot, I can’t stand it,” Emily said, pulling out her mirror to touch up her lipstick.

Even though it was true, and every girl who’d laid eyes on him thought the same thing, I didn’t like thinking about other girls wanting Thatcher. I swallowed a long drink of vodka, hissing as the liquor burned down my throat.

“Maybe when he gets off work, he’ll party with us again,” Emily said.

“Wait. Who are you talking about?”

Emily tucked the bottle in her purse. “Justin.” She squinted at me, her lips pursed. “Who did you think I was talking about?”

“Of course.” I touched up my lipstick. “I was just making sure.”

We went back outside where everyone was gathered on the deck overlooking the eighteenth hole. The sun had begun to set, and a slight chill hung in the air. Music rang out over the speakers and a buzz of conversation and laughter spread across the lawn. Kids ran across the green with sparklers, weaving around picnic blankets.

The crowd was thick on the deck. We pushed our way to the high, round tables where our friends waited. The Party Boys inched over, making room for us.

“You can sit on my lap,” Chaseton said, making a playful grab for my hand.

I swatted him away. “In your dreams.”

The other boys laughed at Chaseton for getting burned, but he was a good sport as always. “How about you just take my seat?”

He started to slide off the chair, but I stopped him. I wanted to stand. I liked to be able to move around during the events at the club. There was always something to see, someone to say hello to. I’d been coming to events at the club since I was a little girl. One of my earliest memories was from Fourth of July at the club.

There had been a fire truck complete with the ladder and bucket, and my dad had taken me up for a ride. I must have only been about two because Beckett wasn’t born yet. My dad put me on his shoulders, so I was higher than everyone, and it felt amazing. It was thrilling and terrifying, and I’d loved every second of it.

When I got older, there were dog parades, bounce houses, and pie-eating contests. There was an annual spaceship building contest where everyone got the same kit of cardboard, glue, and wooden sticks, which Beckett almost always won, but this year he was at Sapphire Lake with another family.

I was the last holdout for the Vinroot family. First my mom had gone, then my dad, now Beckett had joined another family.

It was just me.

People surrounded me, but I’d never felt more alone in my life. My gaze skittered over the crowd, taking in the couples in love, the families, and the friend groups with their arms around each other.

My roaming gaze slammed to a halt on a tall man in the crowd. His long blond hair brushed the tops of his wide shoulders, and his strong profile stood out in silhouette against the brightly lit sky. My heart slammed in my chest, pounding so loudly it drowned out the boom of the fireworks.

There was no mistaking Thatcher Hayes. If I never saw him again, I would always remember him this way, gazing up

in wonder as fireworks exploded in the sky. Emotion clogged my throat, and my breath hitched.

I didn't want to leave Mossy Oak without speaking to him again. Even if all we said was goodbye, I had to talk to him one last time.

"I'll be back in a minute," I told Emily before making my way through the crowd toward Thatcher.

He must have felt me coming, because he turned his face from the sky and looked at me when I was only a few feet away. Our eyes met, and his expression was full of joy. I wasn't sure if it was for the fireworks, or me, but it was an amazing sight. Happiness radiated from him. His smile was contagious, and I found my lips curving up despite the melancholy I'd been feeling moments earlier.

"Hey!" He had to shout over the noise of the fireworks and the crowd.

"Hey!" I shouted back.

A rocket shot up in the air then exploded, shattering into thousands of dazzling sparks. The crowd gasped as smoke and magic filled the atmosphere.

I stepped closer to Thatcher, feeling the warmth of his radiant energy.

"I wanted to tell you goodbye," I said in between the pops and crackles of the shower of fireworks.

"You're leaving so soon?" He reached for my hand and tugged me close to his side. "The show isn't over."

"I leave tomorrow," I said. "For Italy."

Unspoken words hung between us. This was goodbye. Maybe forever. He'd mentioned coming back next summer, but who knew what would happen next year?

He squeezed my hand, pulling me so close our bodies brushed. "Let's get out of this crowd," he said.

We pushed our way through the crowd and walked down the stairs toward the sandy beach. Neither one of us spoke as

we walked along the shore, leaving the crowd behind.

“We can watch the rest of show from my boat,” I said, leading him toward the dock.

He followed in silence, and I could feel the tension coming off him in waves. Once we were on board my boat, we sat on the padded bench facing each other. The fireworks were a steady whiz and boom in the background as we gazed into each other’s eyes.

“I’m gonna miss you,” Thatcher said in a quiet voice I could barely hear.

My chest squeezed. “I didn’t want to leave without saying goodbye.”

He nodded. “What about Beckett?” he asked. “Who will take care of him?”

Thatcher knew my parents weren’t around and I was the closest thing Beckett had to a guardian.

“He’s staying with the Johnsons until my dad gets back on Thursday.” I shrugged. “He says Mrs. Johnson is a great cook, so he doesn’t mind.”

Thatcher nodded, his eyes solemn. “He’s gonna miss you too.”

I blinked back tears. “You’re not making this easy,” I said.

“I’m sorry.” Thatcher reached up and brushed a tear from my cheek. “I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

I turned my face into the palm of his hand, and his fingers curved around my face. “It’s okay.”

“I wish...” He trailed off, leaning closer to me until our faces almost touched. “I wish we had more time.”

I closed the distance between us, kissing him softly. When our mouths touched, he sighed and curled his hand around the back of my neck. The kiss deepened. The moment our lips touched, we were instantly hungry for each other. We pressed closer, our lips exploring, unable to get enough.

Even though we'd seen each other almost daily at baseball practice and games, we'd hardly touched since that morning after the party. We'd waved across the field, called hello in passing, let our gazes linger too long when we thought the other wasn't looking.

Now that we were kissing, we couldn't stop. Added to that was the fact that I was leaving, and we might never see each other again, and the kiss grew desperate.

His tongue speared into my mouth, and I opened for him, tasting the sweetness of his mouth. I thrust my hand into his hair, tangling my fingers in the silky strands. Everything about Thatcher was so sexy. From the soft drawl of his Southern accent to the way he smelled like salt and leather, he turned me on like no one else ever had. I crawled into his lap, straddling him, and bringing our chests together as we continued to kiss.

I slid my hands under the hem of his shirt, grazing my palms up his hard, lean chest. He obliged me when I tugged the shirt up and over his head. Seeing his bare chest sent a thrill of desire rocketing through my body. His skin was tanned and smooth with a faint smattering of hair across his upper chest. He didn't look like any of the boys I knew.

"I want to give you something before I leave," I said.

His blue eyes met mine, hazy with desire. "What?"

A loud boom sounded overhead, and a shower of dazzling lights filled the sky. "My virginity."

He groaned and dropped his hands to my hips, pushing me away. "Peppy."

I kissed his bottom lip, tugging it between my teeth then licked the seam of his mouth until he opened for me. Our tongues tangled, and I ground against him, feeling just how much he wanted me.

His hands tightened on my hips, fingers digging into my bare skin where my skirt had ridden up. "We should stop."

"Why?" I demanded.

“You know why.”

I rocked my hips against the straining evidence in his shorts. “I want you. You want me.”

He hissed, fingers sliding higher up my thighs. “If you don’t stop that...”

He trailed off as I rocked against him again, then took my mouth in a fierce kiss that left me breathless. When we broke apart, we were both panting. I met his eyes, then slowly slid off his lap to stand in front of him. Reaching under my dress, I wiggled out of my panties and kicked them aside.

A flash of light lit the sky behind Thatcher, illuminating the naked desire on his face. His eyes blazed as he watched me.

“I want my first time to be with a man who’s gentle and kind,” I said, stepping closer. “I want it to be with someone I care about. Someone who cares about me.” I settled myself in his lap again and hitched my skirt up around my thighs.

His eyes blazed brighter than the dazzling lights in the sky. “You really want this?”

I wound my arms around his neck and took his mouth in a long, hard kiss. “Yes.”

“Here?” His voice was a low, urgent whisper. “Now?”

We were alone on the docks, and everyone else was up at the club watching the show. No one could see us on the boat, shrouded in darkness. “Yes,” I confirmed, kissing the corner of his mouth. “Please.”

He took my mouth in a desperate kiss, and dragged my skirt up to my hips, baring me to the cool night air.

“You’re killing me,” he said, glancing down to take in the sight of me spread before him. When his gaze dragged back to meet mine, his eyes were hot enough to make me combust. “I can’t say no to you.”

I reached for his shorts, undoing the button. “So don’t.”

His hand closed over mine, and I thought he was going to push me away again, but when he gently moved my hand, it was only to help me with the stubborn button on his shorts. Then he was unzipping his zipper, sliding off his shorts, and pulling me back into his arms for a long, deep kiss.

It was finishing off to be a very not-boring summer.

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## Chapter 7

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### Thanksgiving Weekend

I WAS only home for the holiday for one reason—Thatcher Hayes.

He'd turned out to be everything I'd wanted and more in a first lover. He'd been tender and romantic, gentle with me as we came together on my dad's boat in the deserted marina while everyone was busy watching the fireworks.

Even though I could sense he was restraining himself for fear of hurting me, I knew he'd liked it too. The fireworks illuminating the sky behind his gorgeous face, full of fierce concentration, was etched in my memory forever.

We'd made plans to meet again over Thanksgiving break. There was no pretense that we were a couple, but neither did we want to let each other go.

There'd been no phone conversations between Fourth of July and Thanksgiving, no letters, only the promise of being together. It felt like a delicious secret I'd been nurturing all semester. I looked forward to our meeting at the club with enough hope to see me through my boring classes and tiresome tennis schedule.

When my dad told me we were going to spend Thanksgiving in Tulum with his new wife's extended family, I cried for a week and then flat out refused to go. I'd been looking forward to seeing Thatcher for months, and I wasn't



going to miss seeing him for a Mexican vacation with people I'd never met.

Beckett called me crazy and begged me to come. Avery and Addison were spending the holiday with their mother in Florida, so Beckett was going to be the sole Vinroot offspring at the dinner table. How could I abandon him?

Easy. Thatcher Hayes was going to meet me at the Highland Hills marina at nine p.m.

It was worth the microwaved dinner I ate by myself in front of the television on Thanksgiving night to see him again.

I wondered if he'd changed at all. Would he look different now that he was a college man? How was school going? Did he love it? I had a million questions for him.

My college plans were still up in the air. I'd submitted my applications to schools all over the country, but I hadn't heard from any of them. On a whim, I'd applied to Virginia. I'd never been interested in attending UVA before I met Thatcher, but the idea of going to the same college as him was too tempting to resist.

Boating over to Highland Hills Country Club to meet Thatcher, I was more nervous than I'd ever been in my life. Filled with worry that I wouldn't compare to the college girls he'd met in the last few months, I'd changed my clothes too many times to count and finally settled on jeans and a supple leather jacket I'd bought in Italy. I ran a brush through the windblown disaster of my hair and applied a quick coat of lip gloss before securing the boat and hopping onto the dock. I was early, but not obnoxiously early; only a few minutes.

We were supposed to meet at the marina, so I hung around trying to look nonchalant as my heart beat out of my chest.

“Peppy!”

A thrill ran through me at the sound of a deep male voice calling my name. I turned with a smile I couldn't hide, but it wasn't Thatcher. It was Chaseton Healy. My smile slipped as I saw him. He'd grown a few inches since I'd seen him last, and a fuzzy mustache crawled across his upper lip.

“Hi, Chaseton.” I tried to hide my disappointment, and my voice sounded falsely cheerful.

“You look great!” He pulled me into a hug, enveloping me in a cloud of his spicy cologne.

“Thanks.” I glanced over his shoulder for Thatcher.

He released me from the embrace, smiling down at me from his superior height. “How was Italy?”

“Boiling,” I said. “My apartment didn’t have air conditioning, and there was a heatwave that lasted all summer.”

He nodded. “I was in London, and it was unbearable. I thought I was going to die. And I’m so tired of eating fish and chips; I never want to see another plate of it for the rest of my life.”

I laughed. “I feel that way about pasta.” I cast a glance around the marina, then returned my gaze to Chaseton, realizing he’d asked me a question I hadn’t answered. “What?”

“How was your Thanksgiving?” he asked.

“Fine.” Terrible. Lonely. Boring. “Yours?”

He patted his stomach. “I’m still full.” His eyes narrowed on me. “You okay?”

I nodded, hoping to get rid of him without being obvious. It wasn’t as if Thatcher and I were a secret, but my birthday wasn’t until the following week. I was still underage, and Thatcher might not want anyone to know about us. “I’m good.”

“My mom refused to eat leftovers, and she didn’t feel like cooking after yesterday, so we’re eating here tonight.” He glanced behind him where my eyes had been trained during most of our conversation. “You with your family?”

I hesitated. “I’m meeting a friend.”

Chaseton studied my face. “Anyone I know?”

A blush crept up my neck and spread across my cheeks. “Probably not. Just a friend of the family.” Thatcher was

Beckett's friend, sort of. "I gotta go," I told Chaseton. "See you around?"

He narrowed his eyes at me, scrutinizing me as my cheeks blazed pink. "You sure you're okay?"

I gave him a quick hug, then stepped around him. "I'm fine. Gotta go!"

His gaze tracked me as I walked toward the beach. I ducked behind a cabana and waited a few minutes until I was sure he was gone, then headed back toward my boat.

It was time to meet Thatcher.

My heart raced as I neared the boat. The nerves I'd never fully suppressed came surging back. Excitement tingled down my spine. I felt like a kid on Christmas morning. I could hardly wait to open my present. I'd imagined my reunion with Thatcher so many times it felt like a memory. I couldn't wait to throw my arms around his neck, crush my mouth to his, and feel the warmth of his body pressed to mine. There was no way I would be able to play it cool. I'd missed him too much; thought about him daily.

Thatcher had been everything a first lover should be. He'd been gentle and sweet. We'd been in a bit of a rush since someone could have walked up on us, but that had only added to the thrill. Once with Thatcher hadn't been enough, and I planned to make up for it all weekend.

I'd bought a fresh box of condoms, and I hoped to use every one.

Checking my watch, I saw he was late. I'd waited months to see him again, and my patience stretched thin. The moments ticked by, and a chill settled in the air. I pulled a blanket around my shoulders and checked my watch again. A frown pulled down my mouth, and I had a bad feeling in my gut. He was twenty minutes late. Then thirty. Then forty.

Time crawled as I watched the docks for Thatcher's tall form to stride toward me. I waited for hours before finally giving up and going home. Tears streamed down my cheeks as

I drove across the lake and let myself into my empty house where I would spend the rest of my holiday weekend alone.

Read the rest of Peppy and Thatcher's love story...

Sincerely, Thatcher Hayes

## About the Author

Jill Brashear is a hopeless romantic and author of swoon-worthy contemporary romances that will leave you breathless. With a pen in her hand and a heart full of love, Jill weaves tales of passion, longing, and happily-ever-afters that will make your heart skip a beat.



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