



IT  
STARTED  
WITH A

*Chance*

DON'T LET FEELINGS  
GET INVOLVED.

TINIA MONTFORD

IT  
STARTED  
WITH A  
*Dance*

TINIA MONTFORD



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# PLAYLIST

Girl-Jukebox The Ghost

LSD-Bryon Juane

High School-Chloe Lilac

boys r dumb! duh!- Sophie Cates

Immortal-J. Cole

Didn't Cha Know-Erykah Badu

Shea Butter Baby-Ari Lennox, J. Cole

The Panties-Mos Def

Baby I Don't Mind-Sunni Colón

CPR- Summer Walker



**Interested in listening to Marsh & Cami's entire playlist?**

Click [here](#). Or would you like to see deleted scenes, character interviews and exclusive character art?

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This story touches on autoimmune diseases and grief.  
As someone with an invisible disability, I've drawn from my own experiences with my disease. No two people will have the same experience with the same disease. I hope to have treated my characters, and readers and those with Lupus, caringly.

For a complete list of trigger warnings, please visit  
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To Grandma Dorothy—  
and to those battling invisible disabilities and wounds,  
I know how hard you're trying.

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“The wound is the place where the Light enters you.”

—Rumi

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## CHAPTER ONE

**GIRL, DON'T DO IT; IT'S** *not worth it. Don't do it... Don't do it, Cami. Last time was supposed to be it! Don't...*

Paper crinkled under Cami as she shifted on the exam table, facing the cabinet on the wall. It held a box of gloves, a thermometer, an otoscope, and the little disposable thingies that went with it. She exhaled shakily and squeezed her eyes shut. *I swear I'm just thinking about stealing the doctor's glove; I'm not gonna do it. Last time was it... They are good for cleaning. It would be awful if Devin had to bail me out of jail for stealing gloves in a doctor's office. I'll get expelled from school and be forced onto the mean streets of the Tenderloin. I'll have to fight cats for chicken bones and steal cough syrup to stay high.*

Cami's karma was shot to hell based on her last six months of existence. She didn't want the big man upstairs to send a bolt of lightning down to obliterate her.

She would be good...

Pushing herself up, she strained to hear any footsteps in the hall. The doctor wouldn't notice a few missing gloves, would she?

Her phone dinged twice with a text message. It was her best friend, Deja. *Saved by the bell.*

Where are you?? I thought we were getting lunch? Winter and I are in the restaurant.

Cami slapped her forehead. *How could she forget?* It was their annual back-to-school tradition. Lunch in Japantown

and mochi ice cream afterward. A staple in their friendship since freshmen year and even more important since last semester.

I had to meet with my adviser. :( Let's meet for dinner?

Deja's reply was instant.

Fine. Take a sneak pic of your adviser. Clark is foine.

Cami hung her head. *Why did I lie?* Deja and Winter, her best friends, knew about her hospital stint. They visited her every day until they had to go home for summer break, right before she finally received her diagnosis. Cami still couldn't utter the words *chronic disease*...

She told herself she would confess to them, but when the moment came, she found herself saying *viral infection* instead. Each time after that, the lie flowed easier and it became harder and harder for her to backpedal. She told herself lying was for a good reason. Cami was tired of being the one people needed to look after. She was reinventing herself after this setback, presenting herself as independent and poised. Even if it was a façade.

Anxiety churned in her stomach, and she hoped her doctor would come back with the results she wanted. A glance at her phone let her know the time.

12:04 PM.

How long had she been sitting here? Twenty or thirty minutes? It was the first day of the semester, and Cami wasn't letting it slip through her fingers. It was late August and freezing in San Francisco because of the coastal fog and wind. She tugged at the pink chunky sweater she'd paired with a skirt and combat boots. She pulled her knotless braids over her shoulder, biting her lip with a glance at the door before she pushed herself off the exam table.

"I'm just gonna take one. I've been through a lot," she

muttered, justifying the petty theft.

Cami plucked a glove from the box and held her breath as if alarms would sound. Once the coast was clear, she took another. Then another. Her hands were full as someone knocked at the door. She squealed, dropping some contraband as she darted across the room and shoved the gloves into her book bag, and plopped her butt back on the exam table, winded from that simple yet covert act.

“Y-yes?”

She tried placing a neutral expression on her face, hoping it didn't reveal how fast her heart was beating, or her fear that a minor sprint consumed most of her energy.

The door opened, and her doctor's head appeared. “Camille?”

“Dr. Aguilar.”

The last time Cami was in a hospital, besides her own illness, she found out her father had died. Of course, she didn't remember this. She had been a toddler; her mother and brother recounted the story solemnly to her years later. It was a good enough excuse to avoid hospitals ever since.

Dr. Aguilar *almost* changed her mind about hospitals. The older woman's aura of calmness and matronly appearance never failed to put her at ease. Bracelets adorning both arms and rings on all fingers. Plump. Graying hair. She smiled and her eyes went to the blue glove lying on the floor.

“The gloves fell out of the box...” *That was a lame excuse.*

“Oh, no worries.” Picking up the glove, Dr. Aguilar tossed it into the trash and sat. “It's been about a month since our last visit. How are you feeling? Resting?”

“Fine... Perfectly fine. You're going to tell me my test results, right?” Cami smoothed her damp palms over her

thighs.

How could Cami not rest? Her brother, Devin, made a point of not letting her lift a finger. Even when she was given the green light. She felt hostage to her obligation to her brother, ten years older, he'd been her primary caregiver since their father's death. Then he uprooted his family across the country to California to take care of her after falling ill, which was another knife to her heart. Cami had to let him play Sir Galahad, and revert to the little girl he always viewed her as.

"We'll get to that shortly. Any more flare-ups we should know about? Joint pain or fatigue? Loss of appetite?"

"I'm good as new!"

"How's physical therapy? Can you stand in the shower for five minutes?" Dr. Aguilar rattled off as she scribbled on her clipboard and observed Cami.

Muscular dystrophy, nephritis, anemia, and low platelet are what the doctors diagnosed her with before discovering she had systemic lupus. Those conditions were symptoms of her lupus and went away or improved with time and medication, but the emotional damage had not faded.

Cami shook her head and swallowed. "Right now, we're working with the resistance band. I think it actually helped me get a bubble butt! I know everyone wants a big butt, not that I did physical therapy for a butt... My mom always said I'm as flat as a pancake. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. Too much information. I'm better. I swear I am."

*Please, just tell me what I want to hear!*

"Your brother said he would help in your recovery. Did he make good on his promise?" Dr. Aguilar's brown eyes shined in humor.

Of course, the last time the doctor saw Devin, he swarmed the hospital with his marine buddies, causing

unnecessary chaos. People thought Cami was a politician that'd been shot.

He'd been honorably discharged six years ago, but old habits die hard. He was a drill sergeant during these last four months of recovery. Slamming open her bedroom door at six in the morning for a jog. Restricting her diet to fruits and veggies, no carbs or sugar. Cami loved her sugar and carbs! It had gotten to the point where she would sneak and pay the kids on the block to get her junk food from the corner store.

“He’s, uh, he’s been keeping an eye alright...”

He could have been her rheumatologist instead of Dr. Aguilar since he swore the internet was the finest medical school there was. *Not.*

“I want to draw some blood from you before you go. Just to make sure your levels are good. Oh—how’s it going with your medication?”

Cami’s face pinched. *The pills were the worst part.* Pills always made her gag. Pills reminded her she would take medication for life. That autoimmune diseases, once triggered, could not be cured.

She robotically answered every single question the doctor asked. Nodding when she suggested Cami should add thirty more minutes of exercise into her routine. Frowning when told to cut back on the sugar. Dr. Aguilar sat her clipboard on the desk and slid on a fresh set of gloves.

“I have one more question. It’s not about the mole or the thing my eye does when I haven’t eaten for over two hours. It’s just”—Cami huffed— “I haven’t had a flare-up or whatever you called it since. Maybe I don’t really have lupus or arthritis and then won’t have to come for these visits every month? I can go off these medications, right? I mean... I’m vice-president of my dance club now, and it’s a very busy semester for us, ya know?”



Intensified was the best dance group on the PGU campus. Everyone wanted to be a part of their crew, and not only were they respected amongst the school, but the entire bay area as well. Sean, the president, stepped out on faith, making her VP even when she missed their final dance audition because of her... temporary illness.

Cami needed to prove herself useful and strong, to remind Sean that it wasn't a mistake choosing her and that she could help lead the squad.

"I need to know I'm still gonna be able to dance. Without dancing... I just need to know I'm okay." Cami cleared her throat and clasped her hands.

She needed to hear those words to prove to herself that nothing had changed. Her condition wouldn't be a hindrance to her life.

Dr. Aguilar's lips thinned before she smiled tensely. "Let's do our normal exam, okay? Then we'll talk."

Accustomed to the routine, Cami extended her hands as the doctor felt every knuckle, asking about pain and stiffness. Once she inspected all the knuckles on both hands, Dr. Aguilar moved her elbow, twisting it back and forth, side to side.

"Camille, people who are diagnosed with lupus must be monitored for life. The longer you have the disease and it's maintained, the longer you can go between doctor's visits."

"I know, but is there a chance I may not have this... disease? Like, this was all a mistake? I feel fine, honest. I haven't taken the medicine in a few days and nothing."

The doctor's eyes widen. "That's dangerous, Camille. You should take your medicine every day—" Dr. Aguilar sat down and sighed. "We've gone over your chart and validated it. Cami, you have lupus and mild onset arthritis, but you have

nothing to worry about yet.”

Cami hung her head. This could end her budding dance career before it started and her new position as vice-president. Her dance scholarship would be in jeopardy. Devin would never let her out of his sight now.

“I know that’s not what you wanted to hear. Being diagnosed with a disease is hard. You’re not wrong in how you feel, and it’s not something you’ll accept overnight.” Dr. Aguilar handed her the pamphlets. “I think if you joined a lupus support group, it would be beneficial to see people of all walks of life living with this disease. Some for over twenty years, managing and thriving in the various stages of their condition.”

Cami’s eyes prickled with tears. She wanted to hear, *Sorry it was all a mistake; you’re well! Gotcha, it was all a prank! It was just a bad, bad cold.*

She could see her future going up in flames. She would have nothing, *absolutely nothing*. What dancer ever flourished with arthritis? How long would she make it before being forced to hang up the towel?

She remembered the night the doctors came into her hospital room. They handed her pamphlets, too, one with Selena Gomez, who was also diagnosed with lupus, on it. Cami burst into tears instantly. The doctors stood awkwardly, looking at the floor. At that moment she needed a hug. Someone to tell her everything was going to be okay. It didn’t help that her doctors didn’t look like her. Or who understood why women were affected more than men with autoimmune disease. For Black women, the number was exponentially higher. Due to predisposed genetics, black women were two to three times more likely to experience serious complications and have higher mortality rates. Cami read the pamphlets.

*Living with Lupus*

*Understanding Your Lupus*

*How to Live a Healthy Life with Lupus*

“The group meets here in the hospital every Wednesday night. I suggest you come. Having people who can relate will help you adjust to the changing conditions of your body.”

A support group wouldn't make lupus go away.

“I guess I have another question. Or statement really...”

Dr. Aguilar crossed her legs and nodded.

“How will this affect me in the long run? Like my life? I don't know what I'll do if I can't dance. I don't have a backup plan. There's this big dance festival at the end of the semester —”

“It's hard to predict exactly how lupus will affect you. Most people don't have serious complications. That's if you're taking your medications consistently and taking care of yourself. The more you come in and we can monitor your condition, the better you'll be.”

“So, it's just a waiting game to see what new ailment I'll get?” There was bitterness in her tone.

This was her redemption semester. She had to show Devin, her friends, and others she wasn't a little girl that needed looking after. She wasn't weak. She was strong. Maybe she'd convince herself of that too.

“If you do ever feel any fatigue or old symptoms and you need a letter to excuse yourself from work or class, I'll type one up and sign it for you, okay?”

Cami stood and Dr. Aguilar stopped her.

“Please promise me you'll take your medicine, Camille.”

Licking her lips, she placed one hand out of the doctor's sight and crossed her fingers.

“I promise.”



Coiled tight with tension, Marsh sat and faced his academic advisor, barely containing his annoyance. He knew his last semester would not go off without a hitch. The frat house flooded that morning. One professor assigned a five-page reflection before the first day of class in forty-eight hours. His bike had a flat. Now, this. Piling onto his stack of bullshit was a sinister text from his girlfriend, well, ex-girlfriend or *girlfriend*, she hadn't confirmed if they were getting back together or not since she broke up with him over the summer:

We need to talk.

“I have some bad news for you, Marsh.” Bryan typed rapidly on the computer and pushed up his Coke-bottle glasses.

“What is it?”

Marsh's body ached, but he tried to focus less on his discomfort. He never missed a day at the gym, a habit instilled in him after physical therapy. He tried his hand at sparring in the ring with some of the guys in the MMA club. What a fucking mistake that was. Marsh wasn't ready for the intensity to rock him, putting additional strain on his bad right leg. He'd struggled to stand afterward, and the throbbing pain from his knee to his hip further engrained it would never be the same.

“You're missing credits.”

*Missing credits?*

“Missing credits? How?” Shifting, Marsh tried not to flinch at the pain shooting up his body.

“The system doesn't lie. As a senior, you should be at ninety credits to graduate. That's standard across most colleges

in America. Right now, you're at eighty-six."

Bryan turned the computer screen so Marsh could see. In red letters: *Four credits missing.*

Marsh sat forward, his forearms on his thighs. "Refresh the system then."

He didn't want to stay at Pacific Grove longer than necessary. Or any place for that matter. Marsh made sure to check his transcripts not once, not twice... but *three times over*. He took a full load of classes and intercessions classes to graduate that upcoming December, an entire semester and a half early, all while managing a job and being president of his fraternity. Out-the-blue surprises were not welcomed in his well-thought-out plans.

"How? We've been through this too many times to count."

The overweight, fifty-something licked his lips and glanced at the screen. "I'll check again."

"You do that."

Marsh had to graduate. How long could he go on pretending he still fit into the world he created for himself? It used to be his scene. Parties and drinking, friends, and girlfriends. A cover-up for the truth he always knew. Larissa's break-up was fuel to the fire that each day was a reminder that he was floating far, far away from that world, and he didn't know which world he belonged in.

"You're missing two credits."

*Shit, shit, shit.*

He didn't need this. He'd been accepted into law school in Chicago. His sister was setting him up with his own place with a guaranteed internship at her law firm, Anders and Lincoln, where she was a partner with her old college

classmate.

“What do I need to do? Another politics class, history, literature? What?”

Bryan removed his glasses. “It’s an easy fix. You need an art elective.”

Marsh snorted. He was not the art type. The last thing he made in an art class was in high school, and that was a pottery vase that looked like a dick.

“Art, music, dance, photography. Anything of the sorts.”

Marsh didn’t dance. Not the two-step or the cha-cha slide. He couldn’t play an instrument. The best he could draw was a stick figure.

“Fine, what’s open right now?”

His phone buzzed with a text. Marsh pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to organize his thoughts.

“There’s one class open.”

“What’s that?”

Bryan turned on the computer and pointed. Marsh squinted to read the text.

*Ballroom dance.*

“You gotta be kiddin’ me, man.”

There was no way. He would look like the fucking Tin Man trying to dance. A thought forced him to sink into his seat. *Meg*. It had been almost six months since he’d last seen his sister in person. She was so excited they would be reunited since he left for college.

After the accident, he refused to return to their hometown in Texas. Unable to deal with the guilt of his actions, he inadvertently shunned his family. He knew if he stepped foot into the state, he’ll see *them* again.

“There’s gotta be somethin’ else. There’s nothin’ else?”

“Ballroom dance is the only one without a waiting list. You’re welcome to wait to see if you can get into another class, but that’s a gamble. Time isn’t on your side.”

“Are you serious?”

Bryan nodded. “You can take an intersession course. You would still walk during winter commencement.”

Marsh’s eyes narrowed in annoyance. “Let’s do that.”

“You can take an introduction to a creative writing course or photography—”

“Photography is perfect.”

No dancing. Not making a fool of himself. Just a click of a button; he could do that in his sleep.

“You know your financial aid doesn’t cover intersession. It would be an out-of-pocket expense.”

Chewing his bottom lip, he felt his phone buzz again with a text message. He had some money saved. His family was wrung dry, even a few years later. His medical bills were more than his family could handle, and Marsh had been prepared to take out loans to pay for them until Meg and his other sisters stepped in. Meg sold her favorite car. Miranda and Marissa dipped into their savings and took on extra jobs.

There had been little room for him to object when he was propped up in a hospital bed with half his body in a cast. As the only son, it was his duty to care for his parents and sisters, not the other way around, and it killed him that his actions were still affecting them.

“How much would that be?”

Bryan looked back at the screen. “Including studio and lab fees, along with incidentals... A little over seventeen-hundred dollars.”

*Seventeen-hundred dollars for one class?*

Marsh drew a deeper, fuller breath. Even if he missed home, he hated the thought of asking his parents for more help. Or Meg. After all she'd done. He knew he had to do this alone.

"Seventeen-hundred dollars and no financial aid for intersession courses?"

Bryan shook his head.

"If I don't do the intersession class, then..."

"You'll complete the rest of your degree in the spring. With the plans you have, it's not something I would suggest."

It was time for him to find a new place where the guilt wasn't as heavy, and memories impermeable. He fucked up at home. He fucked up here with Larissa. He was between a rock and a hard place. Where would he get the funds? He knew one thing; he wouldn't sit around feeling sorry for himself. Whining to Bryan would get him nowhere.

"Can I think about it?"

Bryan frowned. "There's only one spot left in the class. I would take the class. Feel it out and then decide what you will do next."

"Sign me up then."

Marsh glanced out the window at the students rushing back and forth. Fog crept over the campus. Fuck it. He'd conquered tougher scenarios.

Bryan smiled and registered him for the class. He could already hear the teasing and jeering from his frat. They would never let him live this down. *I'm taking ballroom dance...*

"You're all set." Bryan printed his new schedule.

"When does the class start?"



He was doing this to keep his family's pockets out of it. All would go well. Hopefully.

“Oh—” Bryan glanced at his watch. “In ten minutes.”

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## CHAPTER TWO

**“CAMI!”**

Groaning, she dropped her head forward. She knew that voice. Nothing good came from it. She barely got off the MUNI bus in time. A few homeless people with... domestic issues joined the commute. Peace didn't last before they screamed all of their dirty relationship secrets. Next, fists and curses flew. A good Samaritan tried to step in, and it all ended with the police coming to haul the couple away and the EMTs trying to remove a dirty needle from the Samaritan's jugular.

“Savannah...”

She was a thorn in her side since Cami beat her out for the lead in *Can-Can*, and she had an inkling as to why Savannah was lurking in the hallways.

“Cami, it's so nice to see you. How was your summer?”

Savannah wore workout pants and a fitted t-shirt. Her caramel skin looked gorgeous. No doubt, she spent the summer on the yacht she liked to brag about. Her curly hair was pulled back into a ponytail as she looked Cami up and down slowly, a sneer forming before she switched to a fake smile.

“Fine. How was yours?”

“You're taking Harry's ballroom dance?”

Gritting her teeth, she wondered what game Savannah was playing. “I am... That's why I'm here?”

“I didn’t think you would take it, especially with the way you left so abruptly last semester.” Savannah’s face morphed into false concern.

*Trying to dig up dirt, heffa?* Savannah must’ve thought Cami was dumber than a box of rocks. This was not Cami’s first tangle with her, but she was determined that it would be their last.

“I’m back,” she said calmly. “Just a fluke.”

“A fluke, huh?”

The lupus pamphlets were burning a hole in her backpack. Gripping the strap of her bag, she pulled it closer and took a step toward the locker room.

“It didn’t seem like a fluke. They said you were in the hospital... I mean, what’s wrong? What did they say?”

*Girl, I ain’t got time for your nosy ass today.*

Cami hesitated. She was instantly flooded with memories of not eating and losing nearly thirty pounds in a month. Constant fatigue. She wouldn’t wish that experience on anyone. Not even Savannah.

“Just a stomach virus.”

Savannah narrowed her eyes. “A stomach virus?”

“You know, I need to get changed... Great talking with you. I’ll see you in class.”

“I guess congratulations are in order.”

Cami took another step toward the locker room and Savannah followed.

“It’s just strange.... You’re vice-president of Intensified instead of me. I mean, I was actually in meetings last semester and auditioned. I know all the dances. I picked up your slack, yet somehow, you still became vice-president?”

So, that's what the fake concern was all about? She was pissed that Cami got the position and she didn't? While Savannah was complimenting herself, she forgot to add few people on the team liked Savannah—and with reason.

Savannah was loud, abrasive, and rude. Her parents were wealthy benefactors to the campus, and because of that, she assumed everyone on campus was a servant to her. Not to mention the very public meltdown that occurred when Sean placed her in the second line instead of the first.

“You know it was a club decision?”

“Right... A club decision. Just feels like I didn't have a chance.”

*When you act like a spoiled beeyatch, you rarely get what you want!*

“I think this is an issue for Sean. He's the president—”

“Then you also know if you can't fulfill your duties, then I'm next in line,” Savannah smirked.

“He said that?”

“But I'm sure you'll do great.” Savannah pivoted with false cheer. “I doubt you'll get sick anytime soon or...”

Cami's lips pressed together into a thin line. Sean didn't mention that.

“I have a clean bill of health.”

“That's great to hear. Let's hope we don't have a repeat of last semester. See you in class.”

Savannah disappeared into the studio, leaving Cami feeling stupid. Sean didn't tell her Savannah would replace her if she couldn't dance. Now she had to have words with him. *I'll be damned if that spoiled heffa replaces me.*

Cami clenched her fists. She would dance. Sickness or no

sickness, or if she had to hobble along with a cane. Savannah Presley would not get one over on her this semester. Muttering under her breath, she rushed to the locker room and was stopped in her tracks as she smacked into the door.

“Oww...”

Rubbing her nose, she pressed on the door. It didn't budge. Taking a step back, she glanced over it before pressing her shoulder into it.

“C'mon, you gotta be kidding me!” Cami pressed harder then kicked it.

The dance studios were on the third floor of the gym. The closest women's locker room was in the basement. She was already running behind, and Harry, the ballroom dance instructor, was a stickler about tardiness. That's when she read the sign in bold red letters on the floor:

**OUT OF ORDER.**

*It's one thing after the other!*

Cami's gaze landed on the men's door. She pursed her lips and looked behind her.

Empty.

She reminded herself that this was out of necessity. In and out, no one would know she'd been there. The dance major was female-dominated anyway. What willing guy would take ballroom dance? Before she could talk herself out of it, she squeezed her eyes shut and pushed inside the men's locker room.

The door bounced off the wall with an echo. Cami stood, eyes still closed as she waited for... something to happen. A few seconds passed. She cracked open an eye. What she was exactly expecting. Porn magazines and graffiti? Mold and dilapidated urinals? Rats? To some disappointment, the room was a carbon copy of the women's. It even smelled nicer too.

She hurried toward the back of the room where the showers and changing stalls were. Her boots squeaked loudly as she scurried across the linoleum. Stepping inside the accessible stall, she slammed it closed.

*Get in, get out.*

Cami changed quickly. Stuffing her clothes in her bag, the pamphlets spilled out.

*Living with Lupus*

Her vision blurred and her shoulders drooped. The pamphlet crinkled as she clenched it. She glared at it and ripped it in half. Tossing it to the floor, she stomped on it repeatedly. She wasn't sure how long she shouted at the paper like a crazy person. Her nostrils flared, and she slumped on the tile wall.

*Dramatic much, Cami?*

How many times had she gone from science to religion, trying to figure out what she did to deserve this? No one in her family had an autoimmune disease! What did she do to be punished like this?

That's the reason why no one else could know. It was bad enough Devin and her mom knew, but Cami wanted to prove to him that she wasn't still some naïve girl. This was the exact reason Devin never wanted her to leave Minnesota.

Setting her bag on the counter, she inspected herself. For months, it was hard to look in a mirror. The evidence of the disease in her body made her cry. Now, her skin was a rich brown again, minus the needle marks from constant blood draws all over.

She smiled. She had her father's nose, she was told. Long and small, it was a nose her mother loved to pinch, to her annoyance. Cami wondered how he would have reacted to her sickness. Anger? Sadness? Understanding? Would he have

dropped everything as Devin did for her?

Appearances were everything now. If she looked sick, people would know. Savannah was lurking. Cami had to appear at full energy, even if she felt some fatigue and stiffness settling in her limbs in that moment.

She thought of excuses she could tell Harry for being late. The truth seemed like fiction. A deep, masculine voice sounded. She froze in her steps.

*This is literally the day of hell!*

What was she going to do? She should be normal. Just nod to the guy and walk out. What could he do? Arrest her? More than likely, she would never see him again. But what if it was a gang of guys, all sweaty and ready to get naked? This wasn't Tumblr smut. Panicking, the door creaked open, and she did the dumbest thing possible. She hid in an open locker.

She was small enough to fit inside, and she dropped her book bag on the floor just as the person walked in. She crossed her fingers that she didn't end up in a horror movie situation in the future because she would be the dumb girl to get herself killed first.

“Ballroom dancin’. They got me doing ballroom dancin’ like I’m on some reality show or some shit.”

She gasped. *Ballroom dancing? Nooo!*

To make matters worse, this guy didn't sound like a happy camper.

His footsteps grew closer. The man's deep voice was low and calming as he bemoaned his cursed fate of ballroom dancing. Cami knew she shouldn't eavesdrop, but... What else could she do? He had a southern accent. It was obvious the way he dropped all his Gs on *dancing and prancing*. She maneuvered herself to peek through the slits in the locker. His back was to her, but his backside was mighty nice... A firm



butt, tapered hips, and broad shoulders. That's how Cami liked her men.

*Now is not the time to act thirsty over a man. Priorities, sis!*

“Do I look like Pinocchio or somethin’, Meg? I can’t do this shit, and you know my leg—it’s fine. I swear it is. I don’t need a doctor. No, you can’t send me money.”

She pressed her lips together. Money? Was he in the mob or a crack dealer? Crack dealers didn’t have cute butts now, did they? If they did... *No, no, I’m not going to try crack just to see a cute drug dealer. That’s only in the BET movies.*

He sat on the bench in front of her and ducked his head. Rubbing a hand over his low-cut waves, his shoulders dropped. Cami’s heart twitched. She knew that feeling.

“What’s wrong with dancin’? Alotta things. I ain’t danced since my eighth-grade formal. With Bessie Johnson... Yes, with the braces... We all know how that went down.”

*What happened at the eighth-grade formal?* Cami was invested now. Too bad she didn’t have supersonic hearing to know what the person on the phone was saying.

He sighed. “Only you would remember that. I’m scarred for life but keep laughin’.”

Cami tried not to move, but her arm tingled and went numb. Holding her breath, she moved like a snail, trying to bring the circulation back into her arm. *Bang!* She knocked against the side of the locker, and the guy’s head snapped up. He stared directly at her locker.

“I’m listenin’ to you. I heard somethin’—” He stood up and bent down. “Someone left a book bag.”

He held it with two fingers as if it was contagious. Cami bristled at that.

“It might belong to a girl.”

He twisted the bag back and forth, flicking her cute Pig Plush KeyChain attached.

“You tell me why a girl’s sack is in the men’s changin’ room?”

Cami’s eyes flickered closed and a headache began. He dropped the bag.

“I don’t wanna do this, but I got to. Ain’t no other way. I’m comin’ to Chicago, come hell or high water.”

The worst thing happened next. Her shuffling in the locker stirred up dust. She held her breath, praying that she didn’t sneeze. There was no room to lift her arms. She said another prayer that this guy would go in the back so she could escape.

“Why would I ask Mama and Daddy? I put them through enough. You too. I deserve this.”

The dust got into her nose. She wriggled her nose at first, trying to stop the sneeze. Her eyes rolled as her mouth opened and closed as if that would stop her nose from itching. *For the love of God, don’t you sneeze!*

“I’m not comin’ back to Texas. You know why.”

The sneeze was coming. Cami couldn’t stop her *achoo!*

Cute Butt Guy went silent and then looked at her. Well, not at her, but at the locker.

“I heard somebody sneeze.”

Her heart raced. Now she had to come up with a good excuse so he wouldn’t think she was some peeping Tom trying to see guys’ butts and junk. What if he called security? Or worse? Record it and post it on Facebook? Forever would she be the *creepy-chick-in-closet?* Then how would she get a job? She wouldn’t. Society would ostracize her. She’d be fighting cats for chicken bones in the Tenderloin. Again.

“I swear I heard somebody.” He stood and moved toward the locker. Her breath caught.

“If you find a way out of this class without havin’ to spend money, I’d appreciate it. Besides, you’re my favorite sister.”

He paused, and Cami could hear a woman on the other end.

“A lil’ compliment never hurt nobody.”

He laughed, and a surprise sneeze seized her.

“It was a sneeze, Meg. I’m not crazy. It came from the lockers.” His shoulders stiffened. “You think somebody’s hidin’ in the locker?”

*Oh snap!* Cute Butt Guy marched to the lockers, and she clenched her teeth. The locker next to her banged open.

There was no escape. Should she just step out of the locker and say, *Hey what’s up?* or *Funny meeting you here?* What about, *You got a cute butt?*

Something was crawling up her leg.

If there was one thing in her life she feared more than Kanye becoming president; it was creatures with more than four legs. Her mouth opened and fear stole her voice. Cami’s leg muscles tightened and her spine went ramrod straight. Whatever it was, it was moving fast.

Her mind registered either millipedes, centipedes, or spiders. All disgusting and horrifying. A choked scream was barely uttered from her lips when she felt something on her other leg. Cute Butt Guy stood in front of her locker, his arm extending toward it. Her need to escape overpowered her need to hide. She went barreling out of the locker and into him.

They collided with a grunt. Her head slamming into his throat, they tumbled to the floor. Cami let out a high-pitched yelp. He wheezed and his phone clattered to the floor.

Screeching, she clawed at her body, plucking at her clothes and running her fingers through her braids. She prayed no bug was on her.

Cami froze. She was straddling something—*someone*—and looked down.

“Hi.”

He didn’t respond. He was staring at her like she was a weirdo, and she deserved that. Another glance let her know she was *crotch-to-crotch* with said Cute Butt Guy. A first for her.

*Wow, he is good-looking...*

Gorgeous cocoa-brown skin. Full, pouty lips surrounded by a goatee. Hair freshly cut with deep waves. He licked his lips, and her body jerked as she watched his tongue retreat. Okay, she was definitely thirsty.

He was an extremely, extremely, good-looking guy. No doubt the chicks flock. When was the last time she found a guy even remotely attractive? Cami’s thoughts were running away with her. Cute Butt Guy hadn’t uttered a peep.

“I’m so, so sorry. There was a bug. I hate bugs, especially centipedes. They are just sooo gross-looking, and I have a fear of bugs crawling into my ears...” She sucked her bottom lip and released it with a pop.

He was dressed in dark jeans and what looked to be a fraternity sweatshirt. It had gloriously ridden up, revealing a happy trail.

*Jesus take the wheel!*

“You didn’t ask me about that. Right. I have a logical explanation for hiding in the locker. I’m not a perv trying to see guys’ junk and stuff. That’s not cool. I believe all sexes should respect one another.”

She couldn't help but ramble as he just blinked as if he was in a daze. What if he hit his head on the floor and cracked open his skull? Would she go to jail? Or did he have a concussion? What if he sued her? How could she afford the settlement when she overdrafted her account that morning on donut holes?

"Are you okay? You didn't crack your skull? I was watching *Untold Stories of the E.R.*, and this guy cracked his skull when he fell in the bathtub, but there was no blood. Six hours later he had a seizure and went into a coma. It's nothing to joke around with. I can call somebody."

He wasn't much of a conversationalist. Good to know.

"So, I... Yep." Cami blushed and pushed herself up. He moved to sit up, and her knee went into his chest, causing him to groan. She should have copped a feel or two for her dreams later that night. He gave her an irritated look, and Cami didn't dare look back as she ran out of the locker.

Cursing under her breath, she ran back inside as he was sitting up.

"Forgot my bag..."

She hauled ass into the dance studio. The entire class turned to look at her, and she let out a shaky breath and awkwardly nodded.

*I can't believe I just did that.*

"Camille, you're late."

"Sorry, Harry..."

She joined the circle, trying to think of the positive of the situation. He didn't know her name. Maybe he was in the other section of ballroom dancing. Hopefully, she would never see him again. Or he developed short-term memory loss. Why couldn't she have just gone to the creepy basement instead?

Why couldn't she just take the risk that the spider or centipede crawling into her ear and laying eggs? Cami couldn't look up even look up when her name was called. Harry called her twice before her head shot up. Savannah snickered evilly.

She didn't look up when the door opened and everyone turned. Nor did she look when footsteps approached. She was hoping the floor opened up into a black abyss and sucked her inside when she felt someone standing next to her.

Those shoes were awfully familiar.

Her eyes traveled slowly up the legs. By the time she got to his waist, her heart was beating wildly, and by the time she saw his face, all the blood rushed out of her body and she wanted to R.I.P. right then and there.

*Cute Butt Guy.*

He dissected her with sharp eyes. Cami squirmed and looked away.

"Are you Marshall Lincoln?" Harry asked.

"That's me."

Cami felt him still staring at her and suddenly she found the scuffs on the floor interesting.

"I want you and Miss Clinton to know that I don't tolerate lateness."

She nodded rapidly. "It will never happen again! I'm so sorry."

"Understood."

Sucking in a breath, she spared a glance. Marshall was still staring. Boy, this would be a joyful first day of class.

"Looks like it's gonna be a long semester. Take a seat and let's review the syllabus."

Most definitely it was going to be a very *long* and

awkward semester.

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## CHAPTER THREE

**“I’M GONNA GO OUT ON** a limb and say your day was no bueno?”  
Deja paused, eating her spaghetti.

Cami thumped her face onto the table. It was cold and sticky, but she didn’t care. This was the place she would die. No need to buy a casket or have a funeral. Just bury her raw in this booth because the embarrassment was too overwhelming for her to continue to exist.

“It’s only the first day. How could anything go wrong?”  
Winter patted Cami’s back.

Not only did she have to stay in class for almost two hours with Marshall, but she also had to be near him. She couldn’t even look around because he was there, *staring at her*. It was slightly off-putting, but she apologized for slamming his skull onto the ground.

“Girl, pick yo’ head off the table. It’s got germs and shit on it. You know people nasty.” Deja’s face scrunched up.

“I refuse. I welcome a quick demise by germs,” Cami muttered.

“Not today. I can’t handle your drama.”

Winter shushed Deja and squeezed Cami’s shoulder. “Why don’t you eat? We got your favorite, spicy tuna poke bowl.”

She peeked as the bowl scraped across the table and sniffed. She shook her head.

“It has extra seaweed and edamame...”

Her stomach growled. If she ate, she could sulk longer. This situation deserved at least four days of moping, *tops*.

“I’m eating but this doesn’t elevate the sorrow in my heart.”

She dived into the food and moaned; the first bite was delicious.

“See, you were just hangry.” Winter smiled.

It helped just a little bit. It didn’t take away the burning humiliation. As soon as class was over, a pretty girl with heels and a short skirt launched herself at Marshall.

“What’s wrong with you now? They stopped selling those baked potato chips at the Grab N’ Go? How about you riot instead with Winter and me about the school putting us in the Buena Vista apartments? It’s the ghetto of campus.” Deja pointed her fork between the girls.

Winter frowned. “That’s not nice to say.”

“It’s the truth. We pay too much damn money to be living like savages.”

Cami pouted. Why couldn’t she be bold and kick-ass like Deja? Then this situation wouldn’t bother her so much. Deja could be a model. Dark brown eyes and sharp cheekbones, deep brown skin. She was pushing five foot ten but towered over everyone when she worked her “kick-ass” boots as she called them—all leather and mid-thigh—with bright blue hair, she dared anyone to comment on it. Life would be better if she were Deja.

“None of that. It’s even worse,” Cami whined.

“How worse, sweetie?”

Or would it be better if she were like Winter?

A literal angel, nothing awful ever happened to her. If it did, it would upend the cosmic order of things. Skin the color of dark honey. Curvy and plump. Her vibe was so dope that people gravitated to her wherever she went. Winter never left the house without a perfect face of makeup, today, her eyeshadow was a beautiful orange gradient contrasted by the black eyeliner and intensified her green eyes—her pixie haircut slicked down and dyed platinum blonde—piercings from her ears to her nose.

Yep. Life would be better if she were Winter. Not like the awkward dork she was.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Girl, we ain’t got time to play *Clue* with you. Tell us now.” Deja slammed her fist on the table.

“Let her speak.”

Cami squirmed in her seat. Then exhaled.

“I-hid-in-a-locker-and-a-bug-crawled-on-me-and-I-fell-on-a-guy-in-the-locker-room.”

Deja and Winter blinked.

“Run that by us again?”

“It was too fast, sweetie.”

Cami huffed. “I hid in a locker and fell on a guy before I ran out of the locker room.”

Deja’s brows shot up so high they were practically in her hairline. Winter’s mouth dropped open.

“I’m not making this up.”

“How...” Winter tilted her head to the side and pursed her lips.

Cami told them the entire story. She left out her doctor’s visit and subsequent bad news. Amusement lit Deja’s face.

Cami narrowed her eyes, but a snort escaped Deja. She clamped her lips shut, looking at the table. Her shoulders shook and she snorted again. Winter bit her bottom lip to hide a smile.

“It’s not funny.” Cami crossed her arms.

Deja tossed her head back, roaring laughing, as Winter giggled.

“I-I’m sorry what? How? Why? *What?*” Deja sputtered, falling against the wall of the booth as she did not attempt to collect herself.

“It’s not funny!”

Deja laughed harder when she made eye contact with a pissed-off Cami.

“It is... out of the ordinary.” Winter tried not to laugh but she giggled, completely betraying Cami.

“Both of you suck.”

The girls laughed some more before calming down. It took them a while, too, and Cami shoved her food in her mouth, chewing aggressively.

“I’m sorry, but that shit’s hilarious.” Deja wiped a tear from her eye.

“It is funny, Cami. You can admit that.”

She needed new friends.

“What was his name?” Deja’s laugh calmed into a deep chuckle.

“Marshall Lincoln.”

Deja and Winter’s smiles fell and were replaced with identical looks of horror.

“What?” Cami scooped more rice and fish.

“Girl. *Girl*... Please tell us you didn’t. Should I tell her? I should tell her.” Deja looked at Winter.

“Tell me what?”

“Oh boy, it would only make her feel worse.”

“Let’s be honest, she’s already there.”

“Uh, I’m sitting right here,” Cami said with a mouth full of food.

Deja sat her fork down on the table and clasped her hands. Huffing, she sucked her teeth.

“Marsh Lincoln. President of Alpha Eta Phi. Honor student. Former soccer player, total overachiever and not to mention, *fine as hell*.”

Cami frowned. “I didn’t know his resume when I fell on him.” *She forgot to mention a cute butt!*

“I mean, the guy is a walking god. Do you see how the frat guys act around him? Untouchable and you just shit on his shoes. He has a girlfriend, you know? Larissa Aquino? Gorgeous and a slight bimbo.”

“She’s not a bimbo.” Winter shook her head at Deja.

Cami heard that name before... *Where had she heard it from?* A chill passed over her. She dropped chopsticks on the table. *No*.

“Savannah Presley’s friend?”

“Yes! That girl is highly territorial, and she doesn’t like people on her man. I had Microeconomics with her, remember? She is a bimbo, Winter. All she did was focus on her makeup and asked people if they liked her lip gloss.” Deja frowned before pausing to bite a chunk out of her garlic bread. “I mean... when your boyfriend is Marsh Lincoln, you know the female population is secretly plotting. You gotta be on your toes, and I don’t blame her. Don’t worry though, we not gonna

let her do anything to you. I sleep with my gym shoes and Vaseline by my bed.”

“Let’s hope it does not get to that.” Winter followed Deja’s lead and ate her food once more.

“I’m just saying…”

That was the girl that launched herself at him after class?

If she remembered correctly, he looked pissed when he saw her. Would he tell his girlfriend? Would Larissa come at her? *For an accident?* Did she have mind-reading abilities and knew Cami’s appreciation for his butt?

Cami tried not to think of that ass. Or the way his body felt under hers. Or his cologne. Or the lazy and scary way he looked up at her.

*Damn, was it hot in here?* The last fight she got into was in middle school. That was over a girl who said Freddie Prinze Jr. was ugly. Cami graduated next semester. She had no plans to get expelled from campus because she fell onto the boyfriend of a girl with unconfirmed mind-reading capabilities.

“Don’t worry. I know you wanna be a pacifist and shit like that, but I got your back. I’ll let Larissa know you ain’t the one to fuck with. Your people come packin’ with the heat—” Deja clutched at her pocket. “Or we can get your brother to rile up his military friends.”

“Marines, but thanks.”

“Let’s not choose violence… Anyway, you said you had other things you wanted to tell us when you texted. What is it?” Winter sent Deja a look.

Cami was glad for the conversation change. Dr. Aguilar and Savannah swirled in her brain. Now adding in Larissa, Marsh, and a fraternity was too much.

“You’re looking at the new vice-president of Intensified—”

Deja and Winter screamed. People looked over curiously, and Cami tried to shush them.

“Sean told me a while ago, but I wanted to tell you in person.”

“I bet Savannah was eatin’ her evil ass heart out.” Deja grinned, doing Birdman’s infamous hand rub.

That was the highlight of her day. Until she dropped that bomb.

“Are you sure you can handle it? With what happened last semester?” Winter’s gaze shifted from Cami to Deja.

Both girls shared looks of concern.

Cami’s eyes darted side to side. “I’m fine.”

Speaking of it. Cami flexed her hands and legs. No ache yet.

“What your doctors say? Coughing up blood and shit ain’t normal. It couldn’t have just been the flu.”

“We don’t want to assume the worst.”

Cami sighed and sunk low in her seat. These were her ride or dies. She should tell them everything; wait, she could tell them anything and everything. *It’s just...* Cami didn’t want looks of pity or thinking they had to take care of her more than they already did. How many times did Deja mention Cami had book smarts, but not street smarts? Especially when she posted that ad online for TV for her dorm and just got dick pics and other inappropriate messages?

“Exhaustion, dehydration, and a bunch of other stuff. You know how crazy my dance schedule was last semester...” Cami looked down into her bowl, no longer hungry.

“Exhaustion and dehydration? I thought you said viral infection?” Deja said slowly and cut her eyes at Winter.

“Two months in a hospital doesn’t seem like a normal bodily... reaction to exhaustion.”

Cami cringed. She was a horrible liar.

“You know viral infection, exhaustion they all blur together... I got a mild cold and I was coughing.”

It didn’t look like they were buying what she was trying to sell.

“All those doctors up in that hospital and all they can say is exhaustion and dehydration? If I was you, I’d sue they ass and get a second opinion.”

Dammit, Deja was too smart for her own good. Luck was on her side for once that day. Winter saw the uncomfortable look on Cami’s face and changed the subject.

“Well. This is an inopportune time to mention we were invited to the Alpha Eta Phi back-to-school bash.” Winter pursed her lips.

*“Nooo.”*

“Calm down now—”

Deja laughed.

“Obviously, I can’t go.”

Winter sighed. “I know you think that, but hear me out...”

Cami couldn’t think of a million reasons not to literally waltz into Marsh’s fraternity. She guessed what would happen if she did. Most likely something embarrassing, or she’d munch hors d’oeuvres and converse with him? Or hide and fall on him again?

“It’s a big party, Cami. Half of the campus will be there. You know I just broke up with Rashad, and Bria said she’ll be there...” Winter bit her bottom lip, and her eyes gleamed.



“About time you got over that piece of shit.”

“You just want us as backup so you can hit on her?” Cami squinted.

Winter giggled, and the girls rolled their eyes.

“You know Winter is on to something. They say to get over somebody it’s good to get under somebody else.”

“I think that’s for a breakup, Dej.” Cami rubbed her face.

“Or horrifying humiliation. Take your pick.”

“You know I’m shy and I would love it if you were there. I don’t ask for much. Please? I’m rusty at dating.” Winter batted her eyes. It was pointless to try to fight it.

“Fine. I’ll go and suffer even more for you to get laid.”

“Thanks, sweetie.”

Deja announced, “Creep incoming.”

Cami and Winter turned, and Cami immediately ducked into the booth and whispered, “Oh my God, not today.”

The incoming creep? Wade Wallace.

Adding to her naïveté since Devin and her mother kept Cami on a pretty tight leash, during her very first week of college, what did she do? Got drunk and lost her virginity to the worst possible person on planet Earth.

Wade obviously wasn’t over it. He sent love notes. Hired a quartet to sing for her every Valentine’s Day while she was at work in the library. *In public*. Took the same general education courses she did. He even told people about their little... mistake. Anywhere she stayed for over five minutes, Wade popped up. She developed spy-level skills in ducking and dodging him.

“Did he see me?” Cami looked and ducked. “He did.”

*This is the day from hell! I’m in hell. Literal hell right now.*

“Girl, since you won’t let me curse him out, call your brother and have him come up here to beat Wade’s ass. Devin is a freaking soldier.” Deja looked at Cami and then Wade with pity.

“Marine.”

“I told you to slow down on the jungle juice,” Winter added.

Deja shook her head slowly. “Out of all the dick in the world, you decided to fall on Wade’s. Adding insult to injury was a medicore fucking; don’t have to tell me, I can just tell.”

Cami didn’t know what else to do to show in a nice way she didn’t want him. She hated confrontation. In the past, she was aloof. Ignored him. Awkwardly chuckled and walked away. He wasn’t getting the hint. What was she supposed to do? Purchase a billboard that said: I DON’T WANT YOU. PLEASE LEAVE ME ALONE.

“Maybe I can slide under the table and roll out of the booth—”

Deja tilted her head. “Who do you think you are? One of Charlie’s Angels?”

“Hi, Cami! It’s me, Wade. You know? It’s me.”

Cami dropped her face into her hands, her voice muffled. “Hi, Wade... Wow. I totally didn’t see you walking toward me. It’s been a minute.”

Deja snickered and Cami kicked her under the table. If there was a poster child for nerds, then Wade was it.

A *Battlestar Galactica* t-shirt was tucked into his high-waisted pants. Black-rimmed glasses that were broken and taped together. His pants were too short for his long frame and beat-up shoes that had seen better days.

“Yeah! Are you still coming to anime club? I have this

series—”

“I’ll see you some other time, Wade. We’re just finishing up our food.” Cami sat up, sending looks to her girls.

“I’m not done with my garlic bread.” Deja frowned as Cami reached over and closed her container of food.

“Yes, you are,” Cami hissed.

“So soon? Maybe we could get together sometime,” Wade offered.

“Oh, Wade... I really have to go.” She faked a laugh and sent the girls looks to get the hell up and move.

Cami snatched Deja’s container of food. “My spaghetti!”

“I said you’re done eating.”

Winter smiled at him. “I guess we’re leaving. Nice to see you, Wade; how are you doing?”

“He’s doing fine. Aren’t you, Wade? Winter, grab your purse.”

All Cami wanted to do was return to her dorm room, take a hot shower, and sleep for the next ten days.

“I haven’t seen you since last semester; are you okay? Are you sure you’re okay? We can eat dinner tomorrow if you want.”

Cami nudged Winter out of the booth and grabbed her backpack. Deja grumbled as she took one last bite of her spaghetti before closing the container.

“Hmm, I’m booked solid for the next three years, so...” Cami shrugged.

“I know a place where they have a film festival downtown —” Wade rocked on his heels.

“No, I can’t.”

Winter stood up and Deja slid out muttering under her breath.

“Why? Classes just started so your homework load isn’t busy.” Wade frowned.

“I can’t, I... have other things going on in my life right now. Kinda got a handle on it, kinda don’t. I think I need to take some time and process it. You understand?”

“Do you still like rice balls? I can get you some from Japantown.”

Cami did like rice balls, especially with salmon. That was beside the point.

“Oh no, I’m allergic now.”

“God hates liars,” Deja muttered, snatching her container from Cami.

She wanted to put as far of a distance as she could between her and Wade. She didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but he was annoying. Nor could he understand social cues. Like her literally trying to run from him, but Deja was taking her sweet time to get her stuff.

“Are you free for a date? There’s a jazz festival in the Filmore—”

“I have a boyfriend or a cute butt guy, and I’m trying to see where we go—” Cami blurted it out and inhaled sharply.

Wade, Deja, and Winter’s eyes all ballooned. In unison, they said, “*What?*”

*Liar, Liar, pants on fire. You’re on a roll with the lies today, huh, Cami?*

“Yeah. It just... kinda happened, ya know? That’s how most relationships start right?” Cami wriggled her nose and looked up at the ceiling.

*What the hell am I saying?*

“You really lyin’ today, huh?” Deja looked unconvinced.

Wade’s mouth opened and closed. A look of sadness passed his features. She didn’t wait, dragging Winter toward the door with Deja bringing up the rear.

“I’ll see you another time, Wade.” Cami pushed both girls toward the cafeteria doors.

Wade watched them leave as they dumped their trash and headed to the student lounge. Deja pulled her to a stop.

“What the hell? Where did this magical boyfriend come from? You? You gotta be joking right? You still write dirty fanfiction about anime characters.”

Winter crossed her arms. “I have to say I’m in shock.”

It would be simple just to tell them she lied to get out of an awkward situation. It would have been simple. Did she do that? No. She didn’t. Marsh and his cute butt flashed in her mind.

“What? You think you are the only ones who can pull men?”

Deja laughed loudly. Clapping her hands, she shook her head. “I don’t believe it. I’ve been trying to hook you up with my plug for months. He was even willing to give you a discount on your first purchase. He’s Spencer’s close friend. He’s not a total creep.”

Cami gave her a dry look. “I don’t want to date your boyfriend’s weed supplier.”

Deja and Winter frowned and then looked at one another. She hated when they did that. She always felt like the bratty little sister.

“Just admit you’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

If Cami was going to reclaim her semester, she had to be different than before. What was more different than having a boyfriend? That would prove she was poised and could be mature. Her brother would stop asking her if she was dating. She could be just like Deja and Winter and truthfully say she’d been in a relationship before.

“It’s new, guys. Really, really new. I was going to tell you, I swear.” *As soon as I come up with him now.*

“I’m just hurt you didn’t tell us sooner.” Winter’s features turned downward.

*I’m garbage...* Cami averted her gaze as they walked out of the cafeteria, standing a few feet from the entrance.

“If we’re going to continue this lie, which we know is a lie, when? Where? What? How? I need all the logistics.” Deja counted off on her fingers

“It’s not official but could get there. Just talking.”

“You sound like an old millennial right now.”

Cami rolled her eyes. “It’s nothing wrong with being a millennial. My brother is one.”

“Cami, it’s fine if you don’t have somebody.” Winter placed a hand on her arm.

“Why can’t you show a picture? He ugly or somethin’? Oh my God, please tell me you’re not fucking the president of the college. You think you can get us a discount on tuition?”

Cami smacked her lips and shook her head. “How does your brain work? Stop watching *Scandal*. Like seriously.”

“Did this happen over the summer while we were gone?”

Students sitting in groups on benches ate and talked jovially. Some were walking to and from class as security

guards patrolled the area.

“Yes. Yes, it did.”

“Ain’t this some shit? While we worried about you being sick, you hopping on random dick in the hospital ward.”

Not being able to handle any more opinions, she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply before she said, “I’ll tell you everything, but I’m tired right now.”

“You met him in the hospital?”

“No.”

“So, he’s a student here?”

Cami pulled at the collar of her shirt. “Yes, he is.”

Deja crossed her arms. “What’s his student ID number? I can pull him up in the Dean’s office. They won’t catch me like last time.”

“Please don’t. Look, you guys, go hang out in the lounge, I’m going to my room.”

“Cami!”

Winter sucked her teeth. “See what you’ve done?”

Turning from their bickering, her heart collided with her ribs. *I’m on my way to becoming a criminal now. First, it was stealing the gloves. Now lying. What’s next? Murder?* Not only did she have to duck and dodge one guy who couldn’t take a hint, but she also had to dodge another and his girlfriend. A guy she had to see *consistently for the next four months*. Now, she had to find a boyfriend.

When it rained, it poured.



## CHAPTER FOUR

**DAYS LATER, MARSH'S FEET HIT** the treadmill on beat with Kanye West rapping about the good life. Besides the constant throbbing of pain in his right leg, nothing released his frustrations better than a good workout. Hanging his head, earbuds in, he watched his neon sneakers in a hypnotic motion.

*I wish I could get rid of the pain.*

He shouldn't want to get rid of the pain in his leg. It was a reminder, a consequence. Since he killed someone. He wasn't sure how long he'd spaced out when a hand slammed onto the control panels. Rolling his eyes, he pulled an earbud out.

"You scared the shit outta me."

Ezra, his best friend and half-assed secretary of Alpha Eta Phi, raised an eyebrow and sipped noisily from his milkshake.

"It's dinnertime, bro. Why are you still in the gym? I left you here like six hours ago."

Marsh grunted. His legs were starting to feel the effects of his workout, but he kept up the pace.

"I'm thinking."

"You're always thinking; that's your problem."

It wasn't his normal angst. No... Marsh was thinking about the petite girl with pink braids jumping out of a locker like she was The Boogeyman. She was weird. No doubt about that, but he also found her undeniably... *cute*.



Marsh hadn't expected to think a peeping Tom was cute. She had the classic girl-next-door vibe going on. Bright brown eyes and wore a shirt that clung to her small, curved frame. Sweet. Too sweet for him, and he willed his body not to react. He noticed when she smiled awkwardly at him, dimples appeared in each cheek. Considering he was trying to get back with Larissa, he shouldn't look at other women but... Yes, she was cute and talked too much.

He reminded himself he had a girlfriend. They were on a break, and he couldn't keep up with the dating terminology and shit. They were off and on so many times that they were barely hanging on by a thread, but the time they'd put in deserved for him to try. Even if the girl who talked too much wouldn't disappear from his mind.

“What do you want?”

Ezra grinned before sucking his milkshake and releasing it with a smack.

“To remind you of your duties as president? Did you forget we have a meeting in fifteen minutes? A party we're planning?” Ezra began pressing buttons on the dashboard. Marsh slapped his hands away. “Can't keep up as prez anymore? You know Austin's itching for you to go.”

“He can keep waitin' on that.”

There was no one else qualified to run Alpha Eta Phi as he could. Austin was barely competent as vice-president; how would he lead a highly respected fraternity? Marsh was the one who took their fraternity from the dark ages to the most sought-after one on campus. Pacific Grove was a PWI campus, and Alpha Eta Phi was one of the few predominately black frats on campus, but they did have some members who did not identify as black. Besides Black Student Union and other groups on campus, the black community on campus was small and well-interconnected, which could be burdensome

because gossip traveled fast.

“Feeling any remorse yet? You’re gonna be gone soon, leaving me here with the ratchets.”

Marsh cracked a smile.

“You’ll be fine. Say the word and I’ll make you president.”

“Nah homie, I’m not leadership material. I can’t handle the pressure. You know I’m a lover.” Ezra smirked, and his eyes drifted over to a couple of girls a few treadmills away. Gray eyes and nut-brown skin. Ezra’s silky and well-moisturized curls were his prized possession, and the ladies loved them. The girls giggled, eying both guys. Ezra winked back.

“Then why the hell are you secretary?”

“Because I’m not really expected to do much. Plus, the ladies love a man with a title.”

Marsh sighed.

“Besides, Austin’s the vice-president. Isn’t he supposed to be president next?”

*Right.* Marsh’s stomach twisted at the mention of the vice-president. This last semester, there was something different with Austin. Marsh couldn’t place his finger on what. Marsh, Ezra, and Austin all crossed the line at the same time and were friends, but lately, there was a disconnect.

“That can always be changed.”

“I’d rather you not disrupt our social hierarchy just yet.”

Marsh seriously needed new friends, but friends were hard to come by. As president, *he was often required to be at fraternity functions, including college parties, but as the authority figure. The circumstances of repetitive social gatherings lead to new friends and new enemies, and his social circle fluctuated. It sometimes felt isolating.*

“At some point, you gotta stop runnin’ from responsibility.”

“I know you’re a hardcore achiever with no emotions, but can you unwind for like five minutes? Relax.” Ezra shook his head.

It was a conversation they’d partaken in more times than he cared for. If he stayed preoccupied, the thoughts and memories of the past wouldn’t play on a loop in his brain.

“You have a girlfriend, dude; take advantage of the benefits. You should feel lucky you don’t have to deal with dating and the cesspool it can be. Oh! Did I tell you about my hook-up from hell last night with that thick one?”

*Girlfriend.*

For the life of him, he couldn’t pinpoint where things went wrong between them. No one knew, but Larissa broke up with him over the summer. It was as if one day he’d woken up and she’d changed. If he breathed too loud, she was annoyed. If he didn’t pick what she wanted to do, she threw a fit. At first, he was willing to let the relationship dissolve, but they were so used to one another. He swallowed his pride and asked for a second chance. It seemed as if she was interested, but they hadn’t officially reinstated their relationship yet, which he hoped to do soon if she actually talked to him.

Marsh was growing weary of being on Larissa’s hamster wheel, but he accepted some blame. He wasn’t the best boyfriend in the past. Now, he’d been trying. Catering to her. Being with her would give his final semester some normalcy.

“What’s wrong?”

“Huh?” Marsh blinked, coming out of his mental trance.

“It’s like your body is here, but your mind is always someplace else. What’s wrong? Talk to me, bro.”

Instead of revealing his true emotions, he stated instead, "I think it might be the end."

"Of what?"

Marsh stopped the treadmill. Picking up his towel, he wiped away the sweat. "With Larissa."

Ezra's eyes widened. "What?"

Grabbing his gym bag and water bottle, he headed for the exit with Ezra following.

"You and Larissa broke up? You're always off and on but that shit doesn't last."

"That gets old real quick."

"The girl is crazy over you."

Marsh wasn't stupid. He knew Larissa didn't love him as deeply as she probably once did. Adding onto her erratic behavior change, they were ships in the night. Larissa was the one who insisted on playing the act to the public. What would people think of her if the renowned couple weren't together?

"Don't worry; you're going to get back together."

His phone rang, and he glanced at the screen. Speak of the devil.

"Larissa?"

"Where are you? You were supposed to be here at the house thirty minutes ago." Larissa's voice came out in a shrill pitch, and he winced.

"I'm comin'."

"I swear, Marsh."

The line cut.

"Good luck." Ezra slapped him on the shoulder.

Fifteen minutes later, Marsh and Ezra were entering the

frat house. Ezra was telling him all about his date from hell. Details he hadn't wanted to know.

“Then she slid the condoms on the table and, flashed her nipple and said, ‘It’s gonna go down later.’ I damn near fainted.”

Marsh couldn't help but laugh and shake his head. The house was active. Brothers in the living room playing a console game. Some in the kitchen, cooking and studying. With a parting dap to Ezra, Marsh took the stairs two at a time. He made it to the second landing and rounded the corner. Larissa stepped out of a room, fixing her shirt.

“Rissa?”

She jumped and turned to him. Her long black curls flowed down her back. Larissa fit the social media “baddie” aesthetic perfectly. Pouty lips, perfect figure, long legs. Biracial, her mother was Black and her father Filipino, and her copper brown skin held a tan from over the summer. Her round, dark eyes, flashed between surprise and annoyance. In four-inch strappy heels, she shifted her skirt, glancing at the room and then at Marsh.

“If it took you any longer, I would be dead.” Her voice was dull.

His eyes went to the open door behind her.

“What are you doin’ in there?”

Larissa rolled her eyes. Her right eye twitched, and she looked at the ground before clearing her throat. “I was just—”

“President.”

Austin stepped into the doorway. Larissa hurried over to Marsh as she looked around the hallway. Nodding to his friend, he glanced at Larissa who blinked rapidly and swallowed.

“Austin’s taken human anatomy with Professor Blake. He’s helping me with the first assignment.”

Marsh’s eyes swung over to Austin.

Austin ran his hand through his hair. He was just as fine as Marsh and Ezra. Lustrous, curly hair and dark eyes. A rich kid, he wore a Burberry trench coat and a black sweatshirt underneath. High cheekbones and a devilish smile. “She’s been waiting a while, prez. Just thought I could help. Can’t let a girl like that wait around forever.”

Marsh’s gut was screaming at the moment, but not wanting to aggravate her more, he pushed that feeling aside. He licked his lips and nodded slowly.

“Thanks for that.” Marsh turned to Larissa. “Let’s go.”

Larissa focused on the floor and, without a word, hurried past Austin into his room down the hall. Austin leaned out of his doorway, watching them. The two guys held eye contact for a moment before Marsh shut the door.

The door slammed shut with a thud, and Larissa jumped. Spinning to face him, he tossed his bag to the floor and moved to hug her. She moved away, brushing past him to sit on the bed. He sighed and lifted his gym shirt over his head.

“Did you pick up the chips from the cafeteria like I asked you?”

“No, I forgot.”

Larissa smacks her lips as she slammed her hands on the bed. “Dammit, Marsh, I ask you to do the simplest things, and you can’t do that?”

“Let’s not start, I just walked in the door.”

“Then when should I start? I thought we talked about this on Monday.”

“We talked about it on Monday and the day before that

*and the day before that.*”

Larissa frowned and crossed her legs. “Do you have to be an asshole?”

“What’s wrong with your legs?” Marsh asked.

“This is the exact reason why I didn’t want to come over. It’s always an argument with you. I don’t feel like doing that all night.”

Marsh tossed his head toward the ceiling. “Whatever you say, Rissa.”

It was silent, he grabbed his shower caddy and towel, leaving her to take a quick shower. Returning, he changed into jogging pants and a shirt. He pulled out his desk chair and sat. Larissa watched him with her lips pressed into a white line.

“I’m wearing a red dress tomorrow for the party. I need you to match this time. Everyone’s expecting that.”

“Whatever you say.”

“And not that ugly shirt I told you to get rid of. Wear the silk shirt. You look nice in it.”

“Anythin’ you command.”

Larissa rolled her eyes as she stood up and stomped her heels.

“I’m getting sick of you being condescending.”

“What?” Marsh sits up in the chair. “I’m simply agreein’ with everythin’ you said. You’re the one makin’ a big deal out of chips. Shit, what more do you want from me?”

“Never mind—” Larissa flicked her hand dismissively. “We know you won’t change. I don’t know why I bother.”

“I guess I can say the same for you? I forgot some chips; it’s not the end of the world.”

“I just want you to give a damn about me. What if I

hadn't eaten all day? You walk around like nothing matters!"

They had been doing nothing but coasting along and pretending long before the breakup. They were only with each other because of the time they invested in one another, but Marsh couldn't let the time be wasted.

"I'm tired," Marsh sighed. "Can't we just chill until my meetin'?"

"Fine." Larissa made a beeline to the door.

"Rissa—"

Snatching it open, she turned and gave him a scathing look. "Just do what I say."

"Stop playin' with me Rissa, don't act brand new with me. That's how you feel? Leavin' over chips? Answer my question already? Are we together or not? Stop draggin' this shit out."

"I'll tell you at the party."

Larissa ripped the door open and slammed it shut. The clack of her heels faded down the hall. With each step she took, Marsh felt something crack within him.



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## CHAPTER FIVE

**THE PARTY AT ALPHA ETA** Phi was in full swing. The windows vibrated from the heavy bass of the music as never-ending cars arrived and groups of unruly undergraduates streamed out. The house was packed. Some people were dancing, others playing beer pong, taking body shots. On the first floor, people were shoulder to shoulder and all turned up. Cami, Deja, and Winter grooved to the beat of “Tap In” by Saweetie, but she couldn’t concentrate as her eyes wandered around the room.

“You need to chill. He’s not in here,” Deja shouted over the music.

“Can you specify which *he* we’re talking about?”

Deja and Winter wouldn’t let her look into the mirror while they poked and prodded her for over an hour. In Deja’s words, Cami had to let Marsh and everyone else know she was a “bad bitch” and channel her inner Meg Thee Stallion and Cardi B. She wasn’t even on the spectrum of those goddesses. Avoiding the guy next to her as he spilled his drink, not wanting anything to get on the sparkling mini dress and strappy heels that she brought on her credit card and would be returning immediately, but she’d admit she loved the way she looked.

The dress was a simple cowl neck with spaghetti straps, that gave her the appearance of cleavage and clung to what curves she possessed. Winter gave her a dramatic rave-inspired make-up look, going a bit crazy with the glitter as if they were going to Coachella, and pulled her braids up into two space buns, unraveled slightly, allowing a few braids to frame her

face. She was not the sickly girl. She was sexy.

“Marsh or Wade. Do you think Wade would even get an invitation?” Deja was right. Marsh and Wade did not hang out in the same social circle.

“It’s not like there’s security stopping him.”

“Paranoia ruins the skin. Lighten up!”

“How about we go get a drink? Are you thirsty?” Winter shouted and Cami nodded, grateful to get out of the pile of sweaty humans closing in.

Linking arms, they filed off of the makeshift dance floor toward the kitchen. The bowls of punch sat on the kitchen island. Cami eyed a frat guy and girl groping and making out on the counter. They did know they were in public, right? Winter poured them each a glass of punch.

“I have this feeling in my gut.” Cami downed her drink and held the glass up for Winter to refill. “Is it spiked?”

“It’s fine, Cami. Wade isn’t here. There are so many people that you probably won’t even speak to Marsh.”

Cami smacked her lips, tasting the remnants of vodka or tequila. Winter refilled her glass, but it didn’t calm that indisputable feeling something was going down.

“Slow down. Remember what happened the last time? You and jungle juice don’t mix.”

“I’m fine, somewhat.”

“You probably have the bubble guts. There’s a bathroom down the hall if you need it.” Deja cackled and did a little two-step as the music changed to a Drake song. She was feeling the punch along with the few shots of Grey Goose she had earlier.

“That’s disgusting, Dej.” Winter frowned. She plucked imaginary lint off her black cutout mini dress.

“Stop it! You look gorgeous. Have you seen Bria?” Cami decided to change the subject and clutched her refilled cup.

“She’s with her friends.”

“Why aren’t you over there talking to her?”

It was comical seeing the normally calm Winter jittery. Her skin was flushed and her eyes fixed to the floor. “Fine! I’m nervous. I just feel... I don’t know. Damn, I can’t even put a sentence together.”

“Girl, you’re fucking hot. Everybody’s been starin’ at your ass since we walked in here. You better push your shoulders back. Stick your titties out. Walk with some swag and let Bria’s ass know what it is.”

Cami rubbed Winter’s back in comfort, shaking her head at Deja.

“It’s just, I was with Rashad for so long...”

Rashad was Winter’s no-good boyfriend she finally decided to kick to the curb. It was about time too. After all the cheating and lying, Winter deserved some happiness.

Deja slammed her hand on the counter. “Do what I always say. Get drunk. Be somebody else. Bria won’t know the difference.”

“No.” Cami grimaced. “She should just be herself. Bria will adore her for who she is.”

“No one ever shows their true self on the first date or hookup. Who knows? Maybe Bria’s a psycho. Or they just fuck. Or they hate each other. No one’s looking for their soulmate at a rager.”

“Goodness and honesty always triumph.”

“Really? How’s that been working out for you and the imaginary boyfriend?” Deja cocked her hip and raised a brow.

Considering all the lies she told so far, she probably wasn't one to comment on the morality of goodness. Shifting back and forth on her heels, she broke Deja's stare.

At that moment, Bria and her friends walked past. She was a pretty girl with curly, sandy blonde hair and bright eyes. She lingered in the archway and smiled.

Cami nudged Winter. "Go have fun."

Winter grinned and headed toward Bria. They watched as the two girls hugged and disappeared down the hall. Deja's head jerked up. Sniffing the air, Cami looked around.

"What? You smell a fire?"

"No, I smell something better than that."

Cami tried to sniff the air but she was congested. "What smells better than a fire? Should fires smell nice? I think we should get out—"

"Weed."

Another whiff of the skunky odor passed, and Deja finished her drink.

"Aye, I'll be back. Hold it down for me." She waved her hand over her shoulder at Cami and stalked away. And just like that, Cami was alone.

Eying the crowd, it looked like everyone was having a good time but her. That sinking feeling was haunting her. Maybe Deja was right. She just needed a few more drinks and eventually, she'd be alright.

She glanced at her hands. That morning she woke up to find them swollen, hardly able to bend them. Hissing out a breath, she massaged her hands gently hoping to ease the arthritis in her hands as she stood at the punch bowl drinking. Maybe she should have taken her medicine that morning.

Before long, she became the unofficial pourer of drinks.

Exhausted and sweaty from the dance floor, the partygoers stuck out their cups to her. Cami tried to let them know she wasn't working for the party, but it gave her something to do. It loosened her up, along with another cup or two of spiked punch. She chatted and laughed with people as if she'd known them forever.

"You're pretty cute. Lemme guess; you're a Capricorn. I can see it in your eyes." A random guy in a muscle shirt and jeans rocked back and forth on his feet dangerously.

"I'm not a Capricorn."

The guy licked his lips in an unsexy way. His eyes were low as he squinted.

"Sagittarius?"

"Nope."

"Taurus?"

Cami laughed, massaging her hands. "You're not too good at guessing, are you?"

He barked out laughter as he leaned against the counter for support, his drink splashing onto the floor. "Don't tell me, don't tell me! I got this, baby. I got this. Just... lemme think. I just gotta concentrate and read your aura. It's overpowering me. Along with that sexy dress you're wearing..."

*Oh my...* Cami opened her mouth to tell him she was a Leo to end both of their misery as someone cleared their throat loudly.

"Don't y'all wanna take this lil' love connection somewhere else?"

*Damn! Damn! Damn!* Marsh Lincoln's eyes bored impatiently into hers. He looked like every girl's wet dream. His low-cut hair, thick eyebrows, sparkling dark eyes, full lips, and goatee were orgasmic. She swooned at his height. Her size

kink was also coming into full effect. There was something about a man as tall and strongly proportioned as him. It felt both imposing and comforting at the same time but... why was he wearing a red shirt that made him look like a gigolo?

He crossed his arms over his chest. It made everything bulge and strain.

*Get a grip!*

“M-Marsh—” Drunk guy tried to straighten himself up as Marsh narrowed his gaze on him.

“I was just... I was just, um. I was getting a drink.”

“Really?”

The power radiating in the small space was suffocating. Cami’s brain was whirling at Marsh’s muscles. He couldn’t get that size without lifting weights. What did he lift? Two twenty? Deja was right. All that smut fanfiction was rotting her brain.

Marsh’s voice rang with command. “Beat it, Caleb.”

Caleb didn’t glance at her as he scurried out of the kitchen. Cami’s mouth opened and closed as she watched her only admirer leave her with the one person in the world she was avoiding. She dared to peek at him, and Marsh was doing his own inspection of her. He broke into a leisurely smile, making her belly flip-flop. Without the smile, he was sexy. Mysterious. However, with that smile... He set off butterflies in her belly that she didn’t think happened with a non-fictional man. Her pussy throbbed, dampening her panties. Goosebumps raised on her skin, and her nipples hardened. Her heart sped up, and her breath caught.

*Larissa was a very lucky woman.*

That was a bucket of cold water. Not the guy to drool over.

“Umm. Do you want some punch? We have three kinds. Well, you have three kinds; you bought it, haha.” Cami pointed to the three bowls in front of her. “I don’t know the official names, but that’s jungle juice. I’m sure of that. This one? That’s snake wine. I named it that because it tastes like motor oil. Oh, this one—” she pointed to the last bowl filled with neon green liquor “—that’s Ninja Turtle.”

She found his stare and nearness disturbing and exciting. *Channel your inner bad bitch!* She wanted to walk away, but her feet were glued to the floor.

“I gave them these names, by the way. I said that, didn’t I? It’s not like... official or anything. Well, I guess it’s official. Unless someone else named them—” Her voice was shakier than she would have liked. “Ninja Turtle sounds off-putting, but it’s actually good. I don’t know what’s in it, but I taste coconut. You like coconut? I like coconut but not coconut candy. It’s kinda like banana flavor, you know? It tastes nothing like an actual banana and it’s all gross. Just nasty.”

Finally, he gave a slow nod. “Banana flavor is... gross.”

“Exactly!” She broke into an open, friendly smile. Claspng her hands together, she pressed them back as if she was cracking them but it did little to elevate the ache. “Just like strawberry. Nothing strawberry flavor *actually* tastes like strawberries. Somehow, as a society, we accept it! Cream soda? Ew. Then there’s grape flavor. Don’t get me started on that. Now that I’m thinking about this, I should write a letter to the people in charge of flavors...”

“Uh-huh.”

“Honestly, the lies have to stop. What’s that teaching the younger generation? You can’t claim something tastes like a fruit when in all actuality, it doesn’t. It’s chemicals made in the lab to get us addicted. Just like fast food joints putting chemicals into burgers to make people addicted and fat? I



learned about it in a documentary once. You watch documentaries? It's so educational."

"Can I have somethin' to drink now?"

"Of course! Jungle juice? What's your poison?"

Cami avoided Marsh's eyes. Gosh, it was hot in there. Her dress was too tight. She felt his gaze as she poured the red liquor, and her hands shook and punch sloshed out the sides. Could he see her hands shake? Was he thinking about her straddling him? Why hadn't he said anything about it yet? Did he remember her name?

"Thank you, Cami."

*Oh my god, he knows my name! How? Oh god, did he look me up? Wait, we were in class together, duh.*

"I didn't know we hired someone to stand guard of the punch." His voice was heavy with sarcasm.

"Oh, uh. Sorry? You probably have to pledge to do this, right? I'd also seen that in a movie before. Was it *American Pie*? Or another movie, but usually that's the job you give to the small guys on the totem pole?"

*"American Pie?"*

"Or *Bad Neighbors* with Zac Efron? Did you see it? Totally didn't put frats in good light. I heard the campus cracked down on them. You don't terrorize your neighbors, do you? That's probably against the rules. Did you see Zac Efron in that movie—" Cami thought about the actor's abs and fanned herself.

"You good?" His eyes rolled over her face and body before he took a sip from a cup.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be? Nothing's wrong with me, nothing. Nothing..." Cami trailed off and took a sip from her cup, looking up at the ceiling, flexed her right hand. "It's not

like I'm panicking because I straddled you, *a complete stranger*, a few days ago."

Marsh's brows rose, and he cracked a small smile.

"You straddle dudes you don't know often?"

"Oh, no. That was just Monday—"

"Mondays are for straddlin' guys?"

Cami exhaled slowly and pursed her lips. "I don't think what I'm trying to say is coming out right."

"You hide in guys' locker rooms and straddle them on Mondays." Marsh smirked and crossed his arms over his broad chest, tilting his head.

God, she wanted the world to open up and swallow her.

"Look. I'm going to be honest. Things in my life right now are kinda messy."

"Join the club."

"I mean, it's not an excuse. It's just Savannah. You know Savannah. She said some things, and I got some bad news... I'm not a Peeping Tom. Let's just make that clear. I don't go around trying to catch a glimpse of guys' junk."

"Right. That's what porn is for."

"Exactly!" Cami exhaled loudly and smiled. At least he knew she wasn't a creep. "Or smut. You read smut?"

"Do I have to answer that?"

She held her hands up in surrender. That was personal. "I just don't want you to have the wrong impression of who I am. I'm a good person. I pay some taxes."

"I don't doubt that."

Her eyes were bright and hopeful. "You don't?"

"I don't." He was grinning, giving her a look as he took

another sip from the cup. She didn't look away as her heart pounded.

"Marsh! You were supposed to bring me a drink."

It was as if the music came to a screeching halt.

Larissa appeared on Marsh's right. She was stunning in a form-fitting red dress that was no doubt designer and a face full of makeup with her hair in a ponytail like Arianna Grande. Cami caught a whiff of her perfume. Fruity but still chic. That was high-end perfume, not the cheap stuff Cami got from Walmart. Even though there was nothing wrong with Walmart because they had good deals. Larissa glowered at Cami, eyeing her up and down.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Cami was just helpin' me." He handed Larissa his cup.

Larissa's eyes flickered between them, eyebrows creasing as if she was trying to assess why on earth Marsh would speak to Cami. It took everything in her to act natural as she poured another cup and handed it over. Larissa flashed a smug look and grabbed the front of his shirt. Yanking him down, she planted a sloppy kiss on his mouth.

*Gross. Territorial much?*

"Let's go, the guys want us outside."

Sparing Cami one last glance, Larissa turned and sashayed out of the kitchen. Marsh lingered for a second. She chewed on her bottom lip as he looked her over before a neutral expression slid over his features, that friendly part of him disappearing just like that. Only after he followed Larissa then she dare to relax.

Talk about awkward.

Cami knew for a fact that she wasn't going to enjoy the

rest of her time at the party. Finishing off her drink, she wanted to find Deja and Winter to let them know she was heading home. As she exited the kitchen, Deja was coming down the stairs.

“*Cam, Cam, Cam, girl.* Where have you been?”

She staggered down the packed staircase, not caring as she bumped into people. Her eyes were low and red. She would have hit the floor if Cami hadn’t rushed over and caught her in time.

“You’re drunk.”

“I’m not drunk. I’m cross-faded. There’s a difference. They got some good shit up there,” Deja slurred, and a strong stench of weed and alcohol hit Cami’s nose.

“Let’s go find Winter and tell her we’re leaving.”

“Leaving, why?”

Cami pursed her lips. Should she tell Deja?

“Go ahead. Spill it. I see it in your face.”

Deja probably wouldn’t remember it, but Cami told her everything.

“Girl, you’re hopeless. You need some man seducin’ classes ASAP.”

“I don’t need seduction classes.”

“You don’t? What’s sexy about ranting about banana flavor for ten minutes? If I was a dude, my boner would be wilted and shriveled.”

“Did you completely miss the part where he has a girlfriend?”

Deja huffed. “I swear for someone so smart you act so dumb.”

Grabbing her wrist, Deja dragged her through the crowd.

She tried to apologize to the people Deja bulldozed through as they made it out on the back patio. People were crowded around a beer keg and funnel. Someone was passed out on the deck chair, and there was puke on the bushes.

“For some weird reason, don’t take offense because you’re my girl I love you, but that guy wants you.”

Cami followed Deja’s gaze and cocked her head in disbelief. “Excuse me?”

“He’s digging you. Read his body language.”

*“He has a girlfriend.”*

Deja groaned loudly and rolled her eyes. “I know you ain’t letting that slut box stop you. Can’t you see? She’s a complete ho. Stevie Wonder can see that’s she’s cheating on him!”

“Shh!”

Cami tugged on Deja’s arm and looked around, praying nobody heard her.

“You can’t assume things.”

“I’m not assumin’ shit. She’s cheating. That’s what my womanly intuition is saying, and it ain’t never failed me.”

Larissa cheating? Cami watched them. She was leaning on him, touching him, and kissing on him. They looked like a happy couple.

“Why are you so worried about Marsh? Don’t you have that imaginary guy?”

“He’s not imaginary.”

“If you wanna keep running with the lie, do you, boo.”

It was time to go. Cami couldn’t stay and watch the couple be all lovey-dovey. She shouldn’t even be bothered by it. She didn’t know him! They had what? A five-minute conversation? Yes, she found something intriguing about him.

Yes, she may have coped a feel. Yes, he was attractive, but he was off-limits.

“I’ve been looking for you both!”

The sliding doors opened, and Winter stepped out. Eyes wide and lipstick smeared, she pulled at the end of her dress.

“Someone had a good time,” Deja grinned evilly.

“I’m... enjoying myself. How’s it going? Are you okay?” Winter focused on Cami, and Deja cut her off before she could respond.

“Yeah, she just got the hots for Marsh and this imaginary boyfriend.”

“He’s not imaginary, and why don’t you say that louder? I don’t think the neighbors next door heard you.”

The patio door slammed open, cracking against the wall. Everyone turned to see another sexy guy (why were all the guys in frats good-looking?) with dark hair stumble out. The smell of alcohol oozed off him in waves, and his eyes fixed on Marsh and Larissa. The lead feeling in Cami’s belly intensified as she spotted Larissa slide from under Marsh’s arm, a look of horror etched on her face.

“Larissa!”

A hush went over the crowd, and Deja sucked in a breath. “It’s about to be some shit.”

He staggered, bumping into a few persons as he squinted at the couple.

“Come on, Larissa,” the guy slurred. “Stop the games.”

Energy buzzed throughout the crowd as the partygoers whispered. Cami’s eyes went to Marsh. His body was rigid and fixed on the guy.

“Austin—”

“I told you her ass was cheating!” Deja pursed her lips and shook her head.

“Thank you, Joey Greco,” Cami snorted, referencing the long-time host of the show *Cheaters*.

Austin didn’t seem to care that the entire party was focused on him. People from inside began streaming out to be nosy.

“Are you really fuckin’ around with him, Larissa? My frat *brother*?”

Marsh peered down at Larissa, his blank gaze darting between the both of them. “Seriously, Rissa?”

Cami’s chest ached for him. This wasn’t something that should be announced to the entire public. It was cruel.

“Marsh—”

Deja reached for her phone. “*Worldstar!*”

“Austin? My so-called boy out of all people.” His eyes were cold, hard, and flinty. “Why?”

Cami heard people whispering, “*He’s the vice-president!*” The vice-president of the frat? She was a ho. Didn’t she know you never sleep with someone your partner knows? *Especially when they were living in the same house?*

“I’m who Larissa wants to be with.”

Austin staggered toward the couple. Marsh sized him up and took a step forward.

Cami’s heart skipped; were they going to fight? Of course, she would cheer for Marsh. They stared at each other over Larissa’s head. Other frat members stood up and hovered in case it indeed went down. There was a rustle in the doorway, and Cami’s eyes widened as Wade stepped out, glancing through the crowd before he spotted her.

“Oh no.”

“No, Austin. Marsh, I can explain—”

“There ain’t nothin’ you need to explain.”

“Come on, Larissa.”

Austin reached for her, and Marsh intercepted. They were standing face to face. Everyone buzzed and pulled out their phones.

“Yes, fight!” Deja shouted.

“Deja!” Winter tried to take her phone.

“Kick his ass!”

Wade stood in front of her with two cups, distracting her from the current drama unfolding. “Cami! Hey, Cami, I was looking for you—”

“Wade, now is not the time.”

“I brought you a drink.”

“I’m allergic.”

Cami sighed exaggeratedly and crossed her arms. Now people were looking over at her and Wade. But just over his shoulder, she saw Marsh, who looked back with an unreadable expression. A jolt of warmth splintered through her.

“You were drinking the night we passionately made love,” Wade blurted out.

Winter and Deja grimaced.

“Just let me hurt his feelings!” Deja shook her head while Cami ducked hers.

“Wade, this is not appropriate right now. Why don’t we go inside so you both can chat?” Winter started to herd him away from Cami as the main attraction blew up.

“Him or me; you choose now!”



“Austin...” Larissa whined and looked between the guys.

“Are you fuckin’ kiddin’ me?”

“Does this look like a joke, *Prez*? It’s been a long time coming, so don’t act surprised.”

Marsh rolled up his sleeves, and the crowd howled. Frowning, he forced a humorless laugh and rubbed his goatee. “What the fuck do you know about our relationship?”

“*Everything* Larissa tells me. How you never have time for her. That you’re boring and predictable. How she’s tried to fix you, but she just can’t do it anymore.”

What did Larissa need to fix about him, and why was she telling the guy she was fuckin’ behind his back all their business? Cami stood there, her brain empty of thought as a flicker of pain crossed Marsh’s face. Wade shoved the drink toward her again, pulling her attention.

“Here, Cami, drink! We can talk if you—”

“Not now, Wade!”

Larissa pressed a hand to Austin’s chest, trying to calm him down, but he slapped it away, never losing eye contact with Marsh. Everyone oohed as she wrapped her arms around Austin, leaving Marsh, who began shaking his head slowly before he made a grab for Larissa. Cami took a step away from Wade, moving closer to the action in front of her. She felt so bad for him; she needed to do something.

“You’re really tryin’ to comfort him?” Marsh looked as if he wanted to wring Larissa’s neck.

“Are you that surprised?” Larissa said.

“Am I—*what*?”

The crowd chatter was deafening. Everyone was making comments and booing Larissa. Deja found an empty chair and stood on it. Cupping a hand around her mouth she yelled,

“Beat his ass, Marsh. He can’t be disrespectin’ you like that in public!”

“Deja Malik, get your behind down now. Give me your phone.” Winter pushed past Cami to get to her.

Wade pushed the cup towards her again. “But, Cami—”

She clenched her fist. “We did not make love. We had sex! It was a mistake. I was drunk.” Cami tried to focus on the escalating drama with Marsh, Larissa, and Austin. “Look, Wade, I can’t talk right now. Please. Leave me alone.”

“You don’t show me any affection. You never want to party anymore. Your mood swings are too much. I need someone to cater to me, who wants to love me like the way I deserve,” Larissa blabbed in front of the watchful crowd,

Marsh’s lips began to curl.

“So you fuckin’ embarrass me like this?”

“I want someone who wants me.” Larissa pointed her finger at herself. “It’s better this way. I wanted to tell you, but not like this. You know I still love you.”

The more Larissa talked, the more it looked as if Marsh was trying to keep himself from exploding. The empty cup in his other hand was crushed into flimsy plastic.

“Yo, you know how fuckin’ stupid you sound? I can’t believe you.” Marsh’s furious lasered on Austin. “I’m gon’ fuck you up.”

The crowd yelled as Marsh lurched toward Austin, and a guy with gray eyes shouted his name, the crushed cup falling to the floor. Cami felt so bad for him.

“You breakin’ up with me because I’m not up under yo ass 24/7? So you’ve been stringin’ me along all summer?” His voice was even, but Cami knew that was a mask. The way he said it was so... cold, no life or emotion behind his eyes, and he

flexed against the guy holding him back.

“I’ve tried to make it work,” she said as if the situation was now an inconvenience to her. “I’ve tried to fix it. I just can’t do it anymore.”

“This is low-down Rissa. Even for you. He was my friend!”

Austin snorted. “Miss us with that sob bullshit. You’ve been checked out for a minute now. You haven’t been hitting it right for a minute. She wants excitement.”

“Oh, so now you’re her spokesperson and shit.”

“More than that. I’m also her man, and you’re not anymore.”

The crowd roared at Austin’s declaration, and Marsh lurched again, and the gray-eyed guy almost lost his grip on him. Several more frat guys began rushing out of the house like the security on Jerry Springer. Wade pressed closer against Cami, and she flinched away.

“Cami—”

“Not now, Wade! Can’t you take a damn hint? I don’t want to be near you. I want nothing to do with you!” she exploded, and the crowd turned their attention back to the drama.

Cami’s gaze slipped to Marsh, and *embarrassment* flashed there. She knew that well. Wade was talking to her again. Deja was encouraging a fight. Larissa and Austin were smirking at Marsh. She closed her eyes; *breathe in, hold it. Breathe out. Open eyes.* Cami felt herself moving toward Marsh and slipping her arm around his waist.

“I guess you’re free now, babe?”

“*Babe?*” Larissa whirled on her, and everyone in the yard was sitting on the edge of their seats. This was better than

Jerry Springer. Voices erupted and Larissa narrowed her eyes on Cami.

“Cami!” Deja and Winter shouted.

Her heart was thundering as she looked up at Marsh, blinking one eye rapidly, silently urging him to play along. The guy holding Marsh gave her a look of shock before he let him go. Marsh looked at her, also shocked for a second, before regarding Larissa; Cami pulled him in closer to her and gave a smile. She held her breath as he stared at her, and she gave him another obvious wink to go along with her ruse and not blow it; his shoulders fell.

“Everythin’s good.”

Larissa gasped, “Who the hell is she?”

This was definitely going on the internet.

“I’ve had the crush on Marsh for the longest time,” Cami started talking to Larissa and hoped she found the end of her sentence along the way. “Now that you two are officially over, I guess that means a real chance for us.”

Phones were fixed on them. One guy yelled out that he went live on Instagram. Cami blinked at Marsh, hoping he could read the desperation in her eyes to go along with the act. *What am I doing?*

“Yes.”

The entire crowd went into an uproar, and Larissa looked as if she wanted to claw Cami’s face off. A sad expression passed over Wade’s face as he slunk away. Deja and Winter steamrolled over several people to get to her and started speaking at once before she cut them off. Sparing Marsh a look, Cami bit her lip and shrugged.

“Told you he wasn’t imaginary.”

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## CHAPTER SIX

**CAMI HALTED OUTSIDE THE DANCE** studio, gazing at the doorknob.

A doorknob was easy. You simply twisted it, and in you went. Instead, Cami's feet were glued to the spot. She spotted Marsh through the window, standing off to the side, mean-mugging the class. Savannah Presley was glowering at him.

Cami had to go in. She had to. But she didn't want to. What mess had she gotten herself into? *Don't be a punk, Cami.*

Inhaling deeply, she twisted the knob and stepped inside. Conversations fell. Everything felt so jumbled in her head. Why couldn't she have just watched like everyone? It wasn't her battle. *You couldn't stand there and do nothing...* Ducking her head she hurried to put up her things before joining the circle of students.

"How's everyone doing today?" Harry asked as he walked in with a smile on his face.

Apparently, he was the only one in class out of the loop. "We're going to start with the waltz."

The class murmured in excitement, and Cami snuck another glance at Marsh, who wore a pinched expression on his face, and his arms were crossed.

Harry wheeled over the squeaky TV stand. On it was a nineties, old-school black square-box TV and VCR player. The students sat as he pressed play. A grainy instruction video from the early 2000s played. Cami hugged her arms to her body

rocking slightly as her eyes darted once more to Marsh.

The video was short. Harry moved the TV stand to the side as he explained the class goal for today. Cami felt a surge of relief and nervousness, but not because of Marsh. This would be her first time getting back into dancing mode in months. Last class, they only went over the syllabus. Shakily inhaling, she rotated her foot, swinging her arms back and forth as she loosened up, rubbing her wrist she prayed the ache would fade in the next twenty seconds. *I can do this.*

Marsh stared at Harry, a perplexed expression on his face as the instructor explained the timing and foot placement.

“It’s a one, two, three count. Go forward with left, step to the right...”

That step was simple. You moved in the shape of a square. Harry made them line up, side by side facing the mirror. There were three people between Cami and Marsh. Another glance let her know that he looked like a deer in the headlights. Once the music played, he didn’t glide forward. He stomped. Forward and to the side like an animatronic. His arms were in a weird up and out position as if he was a toddler learning to walk or dancing to an unheard beat. It was painful to watch.

Cami hid her smile as Harry turned to Marsh and snapped his fingers impatiently to the count.

“It’s simple. Glide... Yes, glide.”

She realized she was gritting her teeth as if she expected her legs to give out. To feel that weakness in her knees. Exhaustion in the pit of her stomach. While the ache in her wrist and knees were there, the small movements weren’t aggravating her. She didn’t feel that soul-aching, lead feeling as she did when she first admitted herself to the hospital. It was a small win.

“You’re going up and down, up and down. Not like a

robot!” Harry complained.

They moved faster and faster. Cami could keep up, but Marsh was a lost cause. Harry rubbed his temples before he ordered the class to continue the motion as he inspected the line of students.

Savannah was the first person Harry stopped at. She moved with ease, smiling when Harry gave her the thumbs-up. Looking in the mirror, she and Cami made eye contact and she narrowed her eyes to slits.

Cami’s own eyes narrowed back before the girls broke gazes. Savannah reminded her of Larissa, which reminded her of the dog poo she was residing in. Which made her think of Marsh the dancing robot. After the showdown, Austin and Larissa made a dramatic exit, but not before making out sloppily in front of them. Marsh played calm for a while until he rudely shoved Cami to the side and disappeared inside the house. She didn’t see him for the rest of the evening.

It was no surprise Cami woke up the next day to hundreds of new followers on social media. No one was as petty and malicious as young girls on the internet. So, when *Rissaworld* aka Larissa Aquino, liked all of Cami’s photos, she knew it was war.

Harry continued down the line as he counted out the moves. Pausing in front of her, she willed her body to keep moving. Her heart fluttered when he stepped forward and whispered, “It’s good to see you back, Cami.”

Besides his role as instructor and advisor to Intensified, he was also her academic advisor and one of the few people on campus who knew the truth. He knew her one request. She didn’t want to be treated any differently than anyone else in the class.

She grinned at Harry, and he winked before moving through the next students till he gritted his teeth.



Poor Marsh.

Harry placed a hand over his mouth, his brows dipping. Cami bit her lip to stop the giggle as he placed a hand on Marsh's shoulder, stopping his monster mash. Harry spoke low and rapidly before he snapped his fingers as he stood beside him.

Marsh moved alongside Harry, slow and jerky. Harry spoke to him as they moved forward and back once, twice, and a third time. Harry picked up the pace, extending the move, going right, and Marsh stumbled then threw up his hands. Harry placed both hands on his shoulders, seemingly calming him down, and showed him the move again.

They repeated the step. Watching for a few seconds, Harry rubbed his temples before returning to the center of the room, calling attention.

“Let's get with a partner and work on the count, okay?”

Cami turned to find a partner. There was a guy, Juwan, she often worked with in the past. He was pretty nice and didn't step on her feet. Before she could turn to partner with him, Harry called her.

“Cami.” Harry made a come-here motion.

She motioned for Juwan to wait.

“Yeah?”

Harry placed his hands on his hips, inhaling deeply. “I want you to partner with Marshall.”

“What? Why me?” Her heart lurched. Cami glanced at Marsh lingering on the sidelines. It looked like he wanted to run away. *I feel you.*

“You're a knowledgeable dancer, and I know you'll be patient with him.”

She made a face.

“What about Keyonna or Louis? They’re good too.”

“I want you to do it. Plus—” Harry looked from side to side before he lowered his voice “—after all you’ve been through, I think he’ll be a great speed for you this semester.”

She didn’t need to be coddled.

“I think this would be best for you both, okay? Trust me on this.”

Cami wanted to argue with Harry, but he flashed her a hopeful grin and patted her shoulder. He called the class to attention as she trudged over to Marsh. Heart beating a mile a minute, she tucked a braid behind her ear as she inched before him.

“I’m going to be your partner.”

Marsh tilted his head.

Cami nodded. “Well... *Yep.*”

She stood awkwardly to Marsh’s side, trying to follow along with Harry’s instruction. It was hard... very hard to focus. Her eyes drifted to their reflection in the mirror. Nice, muscular arms that bulged. The same arms that were on her shoulders the night before. His skin was even more beautiful and rich under the fluorescent lights. Remembering his smile and lingering stare in the kitchen of the party sparked a sensation in her belly.

“You’re going to stand next to your partners, and we’re just going to get used to moving on the count,” Harry announced.

The music played and Marsh stomped forward.

“You glide forward with the left and slide with the right before you bring both feet together.” Cami frowned.

Marsh looked at her and then his feet. “That’s what I’m doin’.”

She liked the southern accent way too much; it was inherently charming and raspy.

“No, you just clomping like a horse. You move with your hips and *glide*.”

“I’m beginin’ to hate the word *glide*.”

Dipping her hip, she swayed forward. Standing on the balls of her feet, she switched the weight of her body to her other foot.

Marsh grumbled. “I’m doin’ what he said. I don’t know what else y’all want from me.”

“You’re doing it, but you’re not feeling it.”

“What the hell do feelin’s have to do with it?”

“Everything!”

Harry cleared his throat. She smiled sheepishly at him, ducking her face as she exhaled. *Get it together, Cami!*

“Just don’t act as if it’s a death march or something,” she said.

Marsh didn’t respond as they danced silently. Eventually, Harry called for them to stop.

“With your partners now. Ladies will go back, and fellas will lead with their left.”

Cami tried not to let the panic show on her face. Everyone paired up easily, chatting excitedly. She danced with guys before; it was no big deal, but her stupid body fluttered with excitement.

Marsh opened his arms. “Let’s get this over with.”

*Grumpy much?* Placing her hands into Marsh’s open palms, he felt like a furnace. Her knees trembled and she was stiff as a board when he placed his hand on her lower back. There was an appropriate amount of space between them, but

her brain was a five-alarm fire. Licking her lips, he smelled heavenly. Mysteriously dark and sexy. God, she was too horny.

The music played, and his foot landed directly on her toes and she yelped.

“My bad.”

“Your bad? You almost took my toes off,” Cami hissed and bent down to rub her toes through her shoes. Wriggling the feeling back, she inhaled shakily and took his open hands.

“Watch out for my toes, please. I would like to keep them.”

Marsh snorted. “You’re pretty funny.”

“I’m not trying to be funny.”

She made it a point to focus on a spot off to the side of him, on the far wall. That would help her not to think of the events from last night. Or worry that he’d pound her toes into mush.

*One, two, three. One, two, three.*

“What did you think you were doin’?”

“Excuse me?”

“Last night, what did you think you were doin’?”

Cami swallowed. Why did she do what she did? Desperation? Survival? Compassion?

“Cause I don’t need your pity.”

She frowned. She didn’t pity him; she felt empathy for him. How embarrassed was she when Wade blabbed in front of everyone in anime club about sleeping together? No one deserved to be broken up with so publicly, on top of the betrayal of it being by someone he was close to.

“I wasn’t pitying you; I was—”

“Then what do you call what you did?” His voice was rough.

They stopped dancing and Cami cleared her throat.

“I wasn’t thinking.”

“That’s obvious.”

*Woah, misplaced anger much?* That wasn’t what she was expecting.

“I don’t think you should be angry. You should thank me.”

“Thank you?”

Cami raised her head and puffed out her chest. “Yes, *thank me.*”

He got out of an awkward situation in front of everyone. She got Wade off her back. *Possibly.* His girlfriend would think he moved on. He could save face to his frat. It was a win-win situation.

“You crossed a line.”

He was back to stomping, not gliding. She watched her toes.

“I thought I was doing you a favor.”

“I don’t need you to do me favor. I had everything under control,” he snapped, his grip tightening on her hand. “I am not some charity case. I didn’t need you spreadin’ lies.”

Cami struggled to find the right words. “Why say yes then? I just thought—”

“You don’t know me to think anythin’ or interfere into my life.”

Cami flinched at his words and lost her footing.

Harry cleared his throat loudly, letting them know he was watching. To the left, she could see Savannah watching

closely. Great. Cami was stuck with her and an ungrateful, grumpy, slight asshole frat boy who was going to make it a very awkward semester for her.

Suddenly she felt a rush of heat. How dare he? She helped him out. Made him not look ridiculous, and he was lashing out at her. She wasn't the one who cheated on him.

"I think you need to redirect your anger to your ex-girlfriend and your so-called friend who are now dating. Maybe Larissa was right. You were a crappy boyfriend, and her breaking up with you was deserved."

Marsh stopped dancing and let her go, but it felt as if he shoved her away.

"Don't forget what I said."

He brushed past her, heading for the door, ignoring Harry calling out for him.



"His ex followed you online?"

Cami sat in the Grab n' Go lounge that evening. Students crowded the booths and tables, studying and chatting. Half-empty coffee cups and packages of instant ramen littered their table as she thumbed through her textbook.

"She did." Cami's mind reran her conversation with Marsh. *I don't need your pity.* Asshole with a cute... ass...

"Block her. No, don't block her. Let her see how happy you and Marsh are. That will totally piss her off," Deja cackled.

There would be no pictures of her and Marsh to post, sadly.

"Why didn't you tell us you were with Marsh?" Winter pushed the coffee cup toward her.

"Winter, don't believe her."

“I told you it was something new.” Marsh had tossed her goodwill in her face, but she kept the lie going.

“You acted like you didn’t know him when you told us about the locker incident.” Deja narrowed her eyes at Cami.

“I-I well...”

“So, you were lying to us?” Winter frowned.

“She is.”

“No. No, no, no. It’s just.” Cami sat up. “It was a lot going on. From Devin and the doctors...”

“What’s going on with the doctors? Still sticking with the viral infection? Or is swine flu this time?” Deja looked her up and down.

*Damn, she’s too perceptive.* “I’m not dying.”

“Then what is it?” Winter pressed.

She thought about the pamphlets in her room. Her vow for her semester. The Marsh situation wasn’t helping.

“You know, they’re still running some tests...”

“That’s serious, Cami.” Winter’s frown was replaced with concern.

“I know. I’m hoping for the best. That’s all.”

“What about dance? Intensified?”

Cami sat up straight. “I’m dancing. No matter what.”

A surge of laughter erupted, and Cami spotted Savannah and Larissa strolling in. Cami had done some internet stalking of her own.

Larissa had been dating Marsh since their sophomore year. Larissa came from an enormous, rich family. Her mother was the first Black chief physician at Mercy Hospital. Her father was the head of the largest Filipino Cultural Association

in the area. The accomplishments didn't stop there. Her brother had won the Breakthrough Prize in science. Another was a pediatrician. It went on and on. The highest honor to Cami's name was that she was the reigning champ of the Chubby Bunny challenge, fitting twenty-five marshmallows in her mouth.

Savannah was to Larissa's right with two girls behind them. They spotted Cami, stopped in their tracks, and narrowed their eyes.

"Who the hell she lookin' at like that?" Deja sat up, frowning.

"Now, what did we say after that incident at In-N-Out?" Winter scolded but gave the girls a sour look.

Cami turned away. Now she was in some mess for an asshole that wasn't even grateful.

"She lookin' like she got a problem. We can fix that shit real quick. I will snatch this wig off with the quickness."

"Off-campus," Winter admonished. "We don't want to get expelled because you started some mess. It's up to Cami, anyway, to decide what she wants to do."

Deja scowled at Cami. "You not about to let the Valley girls punk yo' ass, are you?"

"I just want her to stay on her side, and I'll stay on mine."

Deja sucked her teeth and Winter sighed. "See, decision made. We ignore them."

"You say the word. Ass-kicking will commence. I've been itchin' for a fight."

Cami reached for her ramen and slurped it up. "I know, Dej."

It was hard not to feel eyes on her back, but she managed not to look over in their direction. Instead of doing



homework, they ended up playing *Fuck, Marry, Kill* for thirty minutes. They were in a heated debate over Jason Momoa, The Rock, and Yahya Abdul-Mateen II. Cami loved all the actors, and Deja wouldn't let her use her skip.

“Decide, Cami! Decide!”

“I refuse! I love them all. How can you not like Yahya? I would call Candyman every day if it was him. The Rock is so humble, and Jason Momoa is *the epitome* of a man. I can't decide.”

Burnt popcorn filled the air as the microwave dinged, and the tapping of keys on laptops as a group of guys that were playing a computer game suddenly shouted and high-fived each other as more and more students streamed into the lounge. Winter tried to calm them down when she spotted Wade enter and tapped Cami's arm rapidly. “Oh God...”

Deja looked over her shoulder and tsiked. “He's like a roach.”

Standing, Cami felt the need to use the bathroom and get more snacks. Hopefully, Wade would be gone by the time she returned.

“Gummy worms. Get me the sour kind.” Deja snapped her fingers at Cami as she proposed Brad Pitt, Michael B. Jordan, and Trevante Rhodes for the next round to Winter.

Weaving through the tables, Cami turned down the hall to the bathroom. Once she finished, she sighed, leaning against the bathroom counter. *I need to tell them the truth. Not just about Marsh but also my illness.*

Pulling her pink braids into a half-up style, she splashed water on her face, hoping it would calm her down. It didn't. Staring into the mirror, she pressed her fingers to her face, patting the bags under her eyes that seemed permanent. Feeling sluggish, her shoulders dropped forward. Her head

nearly touched the basin of the sink as she rocked back and forth on her heels to gain momentum to go back. A chill ran through her, and she exhaled loudly before standing, mentally willing herself to get it together. Stepping out of the bathroom, she collided with Larissa and Savannah.

Larissa stepped in front of her with Savannah blocking Cami's side. *So, they were about to do this; okay.*

"Hi, Tammy..."

Cami gave a fake smile. "It's Cami... but close."

Larissa sneered at her and Savannah grinned.

"Savannah says she knows you." Larissa shoved her thumb back at Cami's nemesis.

"We know of each other."

Cami kept her face impassive. From all the movies she watched, she knew this was a typical mean girl tactic. How did you win against mean girls? Kill 'em with kindness.

"Since she knows you, Savannah says she's never seen you around Marsh or vice versa." Larissa watched Cami's face, looking for a hint of deception. "Weird."

"Savannah and I aren't friends. I don't know how she would know what I do in my daily life." She smiled brightly.

Larissa clenched her fist.

"Funny, very hilarious. I just wanted to see the homewrecker for myself."

Cami reeled back. Homewrecker? Crack. Was it crack Larissa was smoking?

"But you and Marsh weren't together ... That's what we all heard at the party."

"Obviously, I made a bad choice because he was distracted."

“That’s not my business nor my concern.”

She should get an Academy Award for the performance she was putting on.

“I don’t trust liars.”

“You don’t know me to form that opinion. It looks like you’re not here to be kind, so imma just go. Excuse me.” Cami started to walk away, but Larissa blocked her.

“I’m not done with you. I like your style, Cami. Very *wanna-be-quirky*. You might pull it off if you weren’t trying so hard, though. It’s kinda pathetic.” Larissa looked Cami up and down.

She was wearing a pink band t-shirt with a long-sleeved shirt underneath, paired with a miniskirt and Doc Martens. It was a cute outfit. She had gotten compliments on it today. Cami guessed that compared to Larissa, who was Instagram-ready in a designer midi dress and heels, her outfit wasn’t exactly *chic*. The two were night and day.

“*Pathetic* is a strong word. Perhaps *avant-garde*, grunge, or even schoolgirl I’d accept.”

Savannah snorted.

“I know what you’re doing.” Larissa took another step closer to Cami. They were face to face.

“I would like to just go back to my table, *please*.”

“He’s not going to stay with you.”

Cami sighed and crossed her arms so they wouldn’t see her hands shaking.

“Any issues you have are with Marsh. Not with me. So, like I said earlier, *move*” —Cami stressed the word now, starting to feel pissed off— “out of the way so I can get to my table.”

“You’ll see how broken he is. You can’t fix him.”

“Girl, bye.”

Someone cleared their throat. The girls turned around.

*Speak of the devil.* Marsh sauntered toward them in a leather jacket and black combat boots he didn’t bother to lace up. It screamed bad boy, and Cami looked to the side to calm her beating heart. Damn her weakness for men. He held Larissa’s glare, and Savannah stepped away from Cami. She managed not to fall out when Marsh placed his arm over her shoulder, bringing her to his side.

*Now, who was saving whom?*

Cami’s knees buckled, and she would have clonked her head on the floor if he didn’t keep her up when he placed a kiss on the top of her head.

“Everythin’ okay, babe?”

Larissa and Savannah shared twin looks of anger. Cami looked from the girls to Marsh. Oh, so now he wanted to walk in and play hero? Fine. She’d let him, for now.

“I’m fine,” Cami dramatically sighed and leaned into him, tossing her head back and fluttering her eyelashes at him. *I could be an actor!*

Marsh turned to look at the girls. “It didn’t look like everythin’ was fine.”

Larissa and Savannah deflated in his presence.

“We were just talking.” Larissa smiled but it was strained.

Marsh looked down at Cami. “Is that true?”

She wasn’t sure how much of their conversation he heard. She was just grateful they would go away now.

“It got a little hostile at the end, but I think we’re done. Aren’t we, ladies?” Cami looked from Larissa to Savannah.

If looks could kill. Pushing Savannah toward the end of the hall, Larissa muttered, “Let’s go.”

Not before tossing one last evil look at Cami, the girls disappeared down the hall.

Cami let out a breath and immediately stepped out of Marsh’s arms, pressing herself to the opposite wall.

“Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not okay. Have you ever been ambushed before? And” —Cami shook her head— “well... let me take that back. Why do you care? I mean. I guess you should. Your ex-girlfriend and her minion tried to strong-arm me.”

“I saw.”

Cami crossed her arms and looked up at the ceiling, her limbs feeling like lead, she exhaled slowly. “I didn’t ask you to step in and help me.”

“You didn’t deny the help.”

“Just like you didn’t deny mine last night.”

Marsh rubbed his goatee and nodded. “You’re right.”

“Funny how the tables turn.”

His gaze roamed over her. “Why doesn’t Savannah like you? I noticed she was givin’ you evil looks earlier in class.”

She tried not to focus on how he filled out the black Henley shirt underneath.

“That’s a very long story and none of your business.”

Marsh nodded slowly. “You’re right.”

Cami eyed him as she shifted from foot to foot.

“Well, thank you for your help. I’m sure we’ll, unfortunately, run into each other again.”

Cami turned to leave, and he grabbed her wrist.

“Wait.”

She eyed the hand gripping her. Blinking rapidly, she inhaled sharply. He released her and she took a step back, placing her hands behind her back and rubbing the skin he touched. It tingled.

“I was rude earlier. I apologize.”

She acquiesced. “As you should.”

“You have a smart mouth when you aren’t ramblin’ about liquor names.”

*I did do that, didn’t I?*

“Blame the people in my life. They’ve negatively influenced me.”

What was she doing? Why wasn’t she supposed to give this guy the bird and walk away? Why was she having a normal conversation with him? Why couldn’t she stop thinking about his butt?

“I think that maybe pretendin’ to date wouldn’t be bad.”

Cami did a double-take. “Huh?”

“I did some thinking. It feels good to piss Rissa off.”

“A change of heart, huh? You want to use me to piss off your ex-girlfriend. Who’s dating your vice-president? Who’s living in your house?”

Marsh glared. “I was there for all that. But... yeah. Somethin’ like that. It goes deeper, but I could use your help.”

“For vengeance.”

“Vengeance sounds terrible.”

“I need more context than what you’re spitting.” She must have fallen and hit her head. This was a dream.

The hallway to the bathroom was empty. Marsh leaned on

the opposite wall from Cami, and she mimicked him. Closing her eyes briefly at the temporary relief it gave.

“Are you okay?”

She blinked and nodded quickly. “Fantastic.”

Only the distant sound of student conversation drifted toward them.

“I have a reputation to keep—”

“Obviously.”

He shot her a look and she clammed up— “If people think we’re datin’, it would piss Rissa off. I get my respect back. Mission accomplished. She won’t affect me.”

“Obviously, she does.”

Marsh shook his head. “Nothin’s permanent.”

*Ouch... Trouble in paradise confirmed.*

“So, she just beat you to the punch? What, you were going to break up with her?”

“Can you help me save face? That’s all I’m asking.”

Cami closed her eyes and shook her head. What in the *Dynasty* was going on?

“Plus, if I’m taken, it would keep the other girls who think they have a chance off my back.”

“If I was considering this, *which I’m not yet*, you blew your chance, buddy. What would I get out of it?”

Marsh lifted a brow. “I saw your... whatever he is... out there.” He nodded his head down the hall.

“Wade...” Cami groaned.

Yes, Marsh could keep Wade off her back. He was terrified of frat guys. He would be petrified of their leader.

“I could let him know you have a boyfriend. Make him leave you alone.” Marsh put his hands in his pockets.

Cami shook her head. “Why would you do that for me?”

“I can be a gentleman.”

She was dumb. A dumb, dumb girl... “If we do this, and I’m not saying I will, how long would we need to pretend?”

She was crazy for considering this. She should be committed.

Marsh scratched his head. “Till the end of the semester. I graduate.”

“Oh.”

“I graduate and move on. Wade leaves you alone, thinkin’ you have a boyfriend who would drop everythin’ on a dime if he tries somethin’. Win-win.”

She was offered the chance to fake date a guy she met less than three days ago. It solved some of her problems. Unless he had the cure for chronic diseases too. *No*, she shouldn’t do it. Just come clean. But... still, she thought about how happy her friends were when she told them. How happy her brother would be. Devin always thought something was wrong with her since she wasn’t dating. It went well with her transitioning to a sophisticated woman. A sophisticated woman with a love life.

“We need to come up with a set of rules. A contract, maybe, outlining the terms and conditions.” The words tumbled out of her mouth.

Marsh nodded. “Of course.”

“We don’t know each other, though.”

“We can set somethin’ up. Get to know each other then.”

Cami reached out a hand to him. “Let’s do it then,



boyfriend.”

Marsh laughed and took her hand. His hand eclipsed hers. Her heart jolted and her pulse pounded as his gaze roved and lazily appraised her.

“Let’s do it... girlfriend.”

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

**“IMMA NEED YOU TO RUN** that back for me, homie. Who is Cami?”

Marsh pushed the cart of fresh linen behind the customer service counter of his job at the gym. He looked at the clock on the wall. Cami would meet him soon.

*Cami.* His thoughts seemed to wander back to her again and again.

Marsh wasn't sure he cracked a grin so much more in the last three days than he had in months since she literally tumbled into his lap. She was a certified weirdo. Bubbly. Talked way too much. Somehow, he was still intrigued. When he caught Larissa and Savannah trying to muscle in on her in the hall, he was pissed. His body reacted before his mind. He told his body not to respond to the feel of her in his arm. Willed himself to not think how completely distracting and stupidly pleasant she felt.

How was it a stranger came into his life and completely shitted on his status quo? When she first *fell on him*, he felt confusion and annoyance? He wrote her off as crazy until he saw her again in that dress in his kitchen. *Serving people drinks.*

Ezra's gray eyes were trained on him, and he cleared his throat loudly. Marsh shook his head, grabbing a towel. “Nothin' else to say about her.”

“Nothing else to say? Don't get tight-lipped with me now; spill everything.”

“Since when do you gossip like females?”

Ezra groused. “Shit’s not adding up in my mind.”

Marsh sighed and sat the towel down, reaching for another.

“I’ll get the ball rolling since you wanna act dumb. Larissa humiliated you—”

“She didn’t humiliate me.”

“She humiliated you.”

Marsh sighed. “Matter of opinion.”

“Lost all of the respect of the guys, but me, so don’t worry about that. Then some girl, a girl I didn’t even know you were talking to, is dating you. I thought we were cool?” Ezra sounded hurt.

“It wasn’t even anythin’ serious to talk about yet,” Marsh lied, stacking another towel. It was better to keep his deal with her between them. Ezra was his friend. He trusted him with his life, but the dude was known to go all Wendy Williams when he learned something juicy.

“I mean... I didn’t know you went for the nerdy, cute girls. Word on the street is she’s a dancer and has a decent following on social media. She’s part of that dance group that’s supposed to be dope.”

Marsh cut his eyes at him. “Don’t you have shit to do? Since when were you *TMZ*?”

“Don’t act like you don’t like me being your ears.”

He was right about that. It was an unofficial duty, but he kept Marsh up to date on the most current goings-on on campus and the frat. Most of the guys knew not to talk about certain things in front of him. The towel slipped out of Marsh’s hand. Bending, pain flared in his leg. He cursed, rubbing his right knee.

“The pain is back?”

Marsh nodded. Ezra knew about the accident. Ballroom dancing wasn't helping either.

“Are you gonna go back to your physical therapist? Have them check it out?”

Marsh shook his head. He'd been to doctors before. They called them phantom pains. His legs had fully healed. The only things left were the scars and memories.

“I'm fine.”

“You know I got you, man. My cousin works at the hospital.”

Marsh laughed, and he held up his fist to dap Ezra.

“Thanks.”

They continued folding towels as Ezra's head popped up and lingered on a group of girls walking by in booty shorts.

“So, tell me about Cami. What's she like? Where did y'all meet? When are you going to bring her out in public? You know, flaunt your new relationship and shit?”

Marsh shrugged. They hadn't gotten that far on things; that's what the meeting today was about. He thought maybe they could just meet up for social functions and leave it at that.

“I don't know.”

Ezra groaned. “Tell me something besides, *I don't know*. At least let me check her out. I need to know she's good for you, dude.”

“You just wanna be nosy and grill her.”

He knew Ezra; he wasn't slick.

“Larissa with Austin? Out of all people...” Ezra frowned.

That feeling that had stirred in Marsh's gut for months

had now been confirmed. It was a fucked-up situation, but he needed to take the reins. Shove down whatever hurt he felt and keep a game face. Cement his authority as president of the fraternity.

“Yep.”

“Are you gonna kick him out, man? Punish him? I mean... what can you do?”

Marsh set his shoulders back. He had a plan. He would show Austin and Larissa their place. His plans after graduation would happen without a hitch. Everything would be fine.

“You know I got dudes from Oakland. They don’t mind rollin’ up and handlin’ business if you need it.” Ezra pursed his lips. “If you know what I mean.”

Marsh thought about it and grinned. “Can I get back to you on that?”

“Fa sho.”

Time seemed to fly as Marsh glanced at the clock again and twenty minutes had passed.

“I guess you don’t want to see them tonight then? There’s a party at the Church of 8 Wheels. Music, skating, and all that good stuff. Could allow you to handle any business you need to...”

“I’m not fightin’.”

Going might actually be a great idea. It would test the waters of how good of an actress Cami was. If this fake relationship was even plausible.

“What time?”

“Nine. Lots of booze. Lots of girls. My kinda place.”

Marsh guffawed and eyed the clock.

“Why do you keep looking at the clock? We don’t get off for another few hours.”

“Cami is comin’.”

Ezra’s eyes lit up, and he chuckled evilly. “Excuse me? The new girlfriend is coming? You’ve been sitting on this information the entire time? I need to make sure my lineup is fresh.”

Marsh rolled his eyes as Ezra picked up his phone, clicking on the camera.

“You have to stop being so damn secretive all the time. That’s not how we roll.”

He found it better lately the more he withdrew from the social scene, the easier it was to break attachments after graduation. Since he didn’t fit into the world he created for himself anymore, no feelings were involved. He’ll be lying if he hadn’t felt that disconnection after his accident, but there was only so long he could lie to himself.

“I’m not secretive. You didn’t ask the right questions.”

“So, you’re gonna tell her about what happened?”

He bristled and his tone went stony. “Why would I tell her what happened?”

“She’s your girlfriend; she has to know.”

“I don’t think—”

Someone coughed. Marsh and Ezra turned. *Cami.*

His reaction was swift and violent. Her slender body was encased in a pink, gauzy dress. It swirled and shimmered against her brown skin as she rocked back on her heels, biting her bottom lip as her gaze flittered between the two guys. Her skin looked like satin, and he held back the urge to touch it to see if it was just as soft. Ezra’s brows rose as he beamed slowly at Cami. Irritation flashed through Marsh when she

responded.

“I’m a bit early...” Her voice was soft and uncertain. It was amusing after the tongue lashing she’d given him in the dance studio.

“No problem, let’s go—”

Ezra stuck his hand out. “I’m Ezra.”

She blinked, casting a glance at Marsh before taking Ezra’s hand.

“Cami.”

“Marsh didn’t tell me he was hiding a pretty lady like yourself.”

She giggled.

Marsh ground his teeth. “Really? Don’t you have to do rounds or somethin’?” Marsh barked.

“Hold up, bro—” Ezra clamped a hand on Marsh’s shoulder “—we’re getting to know each other.”

“Ezra...”

“It’s nice to meet you too. But... I— haven’t we had class together? Probably a long time ago, of course, but you look familiar.” Cami shifted her purse on her shoulder, tilting her head.

Marsh shot them both looks of irritation as they stared at each other. They snapped their fingers at the same time as recognition occurred.

“Existentialism. With Professor Amir!”

They both laughed, and Marsh’s frown deepened as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“A struggle of a semester.” Ezra frowned.

Cami shook her head. “That dude was a drag, I tell you.

He was problematic too. You know they fired him.”

“Nah, you serious?”

“The school found out he was part of some cult or something. Said a bunch of off-the-wall stuff.”

“Damn.”

Marsh eyed his friend distastefully, lifting a hand to rake over his hair in frustration as they chatted happily. He didn’t understand how Cami won Ezra over easily. He had never gotten along with Larissa over the years and made it a point to not be in the same vicinity when she was around.

“Ezra, go do your job,” Marsh burst out and said.

Ezra sent him a sly look. Holding out his arms. “I guess I should act like I’m working. Can I get a hug before I go?”

“No,” Marsh said.

“Sure, why not?”

Sighing loudly, he watched in disbelief as the two hugged. Ezra smirked at Marsh behind Cami’s head before fixing his face into mock innocence when she released him. As Ezra walked away, he stuck his tongue out at Marsh. In retaliation, he flipped Ezra off as he cackled down the hall.

There was an awkward silence. Cami paused for a moment, looking down the hall, and exhaled shakily.

“Hi.”

“Hey again.”

Dammit, she had him smiling, but it happened before he could stop it. He guessed she gave herself a pep talk because her lips split into a grin and her eyes brightened.

“I guess we should get down to business? Are we going to meet here or—”

“Let’s go up to the lounge.”



Marsh closed the shutters to the service desk, grabbing his keys and leading her up the stairs. The lounge was fairly empty this time of day. It was another spot on campus for students to study. Some people napped in between classes, and an older man was reading a newspaper.

You could take the boy out of Texas... It was an ingrained habit from his parents as pulled out her chair for her. She looked surprised, glancing from him to the chair before she thanked him and sat.

“It’s good to see you.” Cami gave him another shy smile. He wasn’t sure why a warm feeling burst in his chest.

“It’s only been two days.”

He would be lying if it wasn’t nice to see her, but this was business. He kept his face impassive.

“Doesn’t matter how much time.”

He couldn’t help but think she was so cute. Dangerously so. This was going to be a problem. Her words were too sickly sweet for him. Like, she actually liked him.

“Mhm.”

She sat forward, crossing her arms on the table. His gaze fell to the bracelet on her wrist. There were a bunch of charms on it; there was barely room for any more.

“Let’s get to it, shall we? I have to admit I’ve watched a bunch of rom-coms and the commonality in all of them is a plan.” Cami pulled out a mini-notebook and pen with a fuzzy ball on the end of it from her purse. “What’s our origin story?”

Marsh’s brows dipped.

“So we can avoid situations where we’d have to come up with spur-of-the-moment lies. Saves us trouble in the long run...”

“We met at a game?”

Cami shook her head. “I haven’t been to any games on campus.”

“You haven’t been to any games on campus?” The sports fan in him was crying out in anguish for her. “Okay, wow.”

“I work in the library. I’m always talking to people. Maybe you had a question for me at the desk, and it started from there?”

Marsh nodded his head, and she jotted it down.

“How about PDA? What are you comfortable with?”

He blinked. Scratching his goatee, his eyes fell to her glossy lips and back to her face.

“What are you comfortable with?”

Cami gave him a look before focusing her gaze on the paper. “What’s going to be required?”

He could smell her from his seat. Vanilla. Sweet. Just like her. Just like the night of the party. He cleared his throat.

“Marsh?”

“It wouldn’t have to be much. Just in public, act like we’re a couple. Hand-holdin’ and some... kissin’. Stuff like that.”

Her gaze dropped to his lips. When her eyes flew to him, they watched each other with heavy-lidded gazes.

“Hand-holding?”

He exhaled shakily. “Uh, yeah. You’ve held someone’s hands, right?”

“I’ve held hands with someone.”

“Hmm.”

“Hold hands. Hug. Kiss. Do couple-y stuff. Dates.”

She tapped her nails on the table. His gaze went to her fingernails, and he snorted. They were painted bright yellow

with smiley faces on them. Since when did he care what was on a girl's nails?

She nodded. "Don't worry, I'm good at couple-y stuff. You can just sit back and enjoy."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes? Why? Do I not sound convincing?"

Marsh sucked his teeth as he sat forward. "Have you ever had a boyfriend?"

"Define boyfriend."

*Fucking shit.*

"A romantic relationship with a male."

Cami cleared her throat and placed her hands flat on the table, focusing on the notebook.

"Then no. I haven't—"

Marsh cursed.

"I'm experienced in other areas, so don't worry about *that*. Okay? I got this."

"Right, because you've watched movies about it."

"Precisely." She grinned.

He shook his head. This wasn't gonna end well. She hadn't been in a relationship before, and her first one was fake, making him even more of an asshole.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about it." Cami jotted something down quickly as he frowned. "This lasts until graduation? The entire semester?"

"If things die down, we can end it sooner."

Four months. That wasn't forever. It wasn't a part of his plan, but it wouldn't be too difficult to keep their distance. It wasn't like they'd be hanging out every day. They both would

walk away with no attachments, hands clean.

Cami sucked her teeth. “I’m sorry but... can we do this? We don’t know each other. I mean, what do you like to eat? What actor do you hate with a passion? What’s your opinion on cryptocurrency? We can’t be a believable couple if we don’t know the basics about each other.”

“You’re right.” Marsh tilted his head. “We can get to know each other tonight. There’s a party at a skatin’ rink. We do our first public outin; while gettin’ to know each other there.”

“That sounds great. Can I bring Winter and Deja? Just for... reassurance.”

“That’s cool.”

“What’s your zodiac sign?”

Marsh squinted at her. “My zodiac sign?”

She nodded. “It would be realistic for us to at least know each other’s birthdays, and Winter wants to see if our birth charts are compatible. It would be good if you knew what time and place you were born. Just helps me to prepare, ya know?”

He looked at her like she was crazy. Sweet. Cute. Weird. Big-time weird. He sighed.

“February fourteenth, I think two in the mornin’? Lubbock, Texas.”

She scribbled it down and grinned at it. “Valentine’s Day and an Aquarius? Aww! That explains the two-word sentences, but we’ll work on that. I don’t think you’ll care, but I’m a Leo. That means we’re compatible. Highly compatible.”

He didn’t know what any of that meant but nodded.

“I think this might a productive relationship.”

Cami stood up and he followed her lead. Her phone

began to buzz rapidly, and he watched her read the message. She frowned and then tapped rapidly on the screen. Shaking her head and muttering under her breath, she huffed and slid the phone into her purse.

“I’m sorry, I gotta go. Savannah’s trying to usurp me, it seems.”

“Usurp?”

“Yeah, there’s a bit of a power struggle going on in my dance group. The details will bore you, so don’t worry. I’ll be at the skating rink on time, and with a smile.”

What in the world was he getting himself into? She gathered her things and was gonna run out, but he caught her by the wrist. Cami’s eyes widened and her lips parted before he released her.

“Let’s meet at the front of the church; nine o’clock?”

Cami nodded and grinned brightly. Her smile made him discombobulated. He didn’t like that.

“Let’s make a scene.”



The Church of 8 Wheels vibrated with life. Tourists, students, and locals streamed in, and from the renovated church, old 70s disco tracks blasted from the inside each time the doors opened and closed.

Marsh waited outside, nodding and dapping up people he knew as he checked his phone for the umpteenth time. She said they were on their way forty-five minutes ago. Growing up in a house full of women, he knew that most likely they were still primping and prodding. He tried to be patient, but he took quick breaths, willing his heart to slow; he never allowed anything to faze him. Another way he coped. If he forced himself into a state of numbness, it made it easier to go

on day by day.

Larissa and Austin were sure to appear. To say the tension in the house was at an all-time high was an understatement. Marsh was counting on tonight.

A car pulled in front of the rink. The first person to get out was a tall, dark-skinned girl with blue hair he instantly recognized from the party. She was the one shouting for a fight. The next girl was a short blonde, complaining to the blue-haired girl. They were going back and forth until the blonde noticed him and waved. He cocked an eyebrow as the blue-hair girl turned and her mouth dropped.

Cami appeared. His shoulder fell in relief as her eyes took in everything before falling on his. She'd swapped the pink dress for another pink ensemble. *What is it with her and pink?* The girls had a strangeness about them, but something told him they were harmless.

He pushed himself off the wall as Cami pushed the girls over to him.

“Hi.”

There was uncertainty in her eyes that made him crack a smile.

“Hey.”

They stood there when he realized her friends were watching them intently. Placing his arms around Cami, he pulled her into his side and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“I missed you, pretty lady.”

Cami looked as if she was about to faint. He smiled at her friends.

“Nice to meet y’all officially. I’m Marsh.”

The blonde seemed to have it more together than the blue-haired one. Their eyes ping-ponged back and forth before

the blonde cleared her throat.

“I’m Winter.”

Then she looked at the blue-haired girl and nudged her.

“Deja. Just so you know, I know people that make shit happen. Bad shit if need be.”

“We said no threats,” Cami hissed.

He noticed Deja had a slight twang in her voice.

“I hear an accent; Mississippi?” He squeezed Cami’s shoulder and felt her arm circle his waist. *Good girl.*

“Louisiana. Just outside New Orleans.” Some of the hostility disappeared from her voice.

“Cool. I got family out there.”

Deja’s eyes lit up. “Really? Where?”

*That was too easy.* He led them inside the rink. Deja was pretty funny when she wasn’t giving him the stank eye. He pushed Cami’s hands away when she went to pay for her skates. It was technically their first official date. He couldn’t let the lady pay. He ignored the girls when they all grinned and tittered with each other.

“Was this really a church? It’s so cool! I’ve always wanted to come here. Did that guy have a glowing cane? Do you think we can come back and take lessons?”

Strung lights covered the ceiling; neon strobe lights bounced off the disco ball, and mirrors cast everyone in hues of blue, pink, and red. Donna Summer blasted from the speakers as skaters moved in unison around the rink. Rows of colorful arcade machines lined one wall as kids slammed their fists into the machines in frustration.

“It’s bangin’ up in here,” Deja observed.

Cami squealed, her head darting from side to side. “Can

we play air hockey? I'm a pro at air hockey.”

He steered her away from the arcade machines. “After we talk to a few people.”

“Do you promise? Promise me. Ooh, there's a zombie shooting game. Let's do that instead. Well... it'll scare me and I'll have nightmares for a few days, but it's fine. The shooting games give more tickets.”

“We're not here to win prizes, remember?” Marsh bent and spoke in her ear.

It was easy to spot PGU students. Most wore college shirts, his frat logo, or their school colors. Cami, Marsh, Winter, and Deja found a spot off to the side to put on their skates.

“Can you skate?” Marsh asked Cami as he watched her fumble with the ties.

The bass kicked in loudly, and people screamed as “Boogie Wonderland” by Earth, Wind & Fire played. He was worried if her wearing a skirt was a bad decision and she'd moon the entire rink if she fell.

“A lil' bit but don't worry; you won't have to pick me up like them over there.” Cami pointed to a group of guys falling right onto their backs.

Marsh winced.

“Just a hypothetical question; do they have those walkers like they do for the ice rinks?”

She tied the knot but it came loose. He watched her fumble with it before he huffed impatiently, pushing her hands away and tying her skates for her. Twice.

“Thank you.”

A silly grin took over her face, and she fiddled with her hands. Their eyes locked and his fingers ached to reach over



and touch her cheek.

“Marsh! Cami! Wassup!” Ezra glided toward them, wearing glasses that flashed multi-colors. “You actually came out for some fun.”

Ezra held out his fist to dap Marsh then opened his arms for a hug from Cami.

Cami smiled and Marsh gritted his teeth. “You don’t need to hug her.”

“And it’s always a pleasure to see her more than you.”

Cami laughed and hugged Ezra. Marsh kept a hand on the small of her back as she wobbled dangerously. Ezra’s eyes went wide as he spotted her friends.

“You have beautiful friends, Cami. Care to introduce me?”

His gaze lingered on Winter, and she scowled at him. “I have a girlfriend.”

“Too bad, baby.” Ezra glanced hopefully at Deja.

“You’re too pretty for me. I like my men ugly.”

He pouted and Marsh gathered some semblance of order. “C’mon y’all.”

Intertwining his fingers with hers, they merged into the throng of skaters. She gasped, clutching onto his arm as she took baby steps and clenched her eyes shut. He chuckled before his eyes scanned the crowd. An older woman blasted past them backward.

“Woah, she got skills,” Cami muttered.

Someone tried to mimic the woman, falling straight on their ass as their friends pointed and laughed.

“Do you see her yet?”

*Larissa.*

Cami leaned her weight onto Marsh and extended her other hand out. “Not yet.”

“Good, good... now, if you could only watch one movie for the rest of your life, what would it be?”

“Huh?”

Marsh studied her, trying not to focus on how the spot she held him tingled like a live wire. Or the brief disappointment he felt when she released him, growing confident in each step. Was this what he was going to have to deal with? Her wreaking havoc in his life? He thought he put all of that chaos behind him, but Cami was going to stir it back up.

“We need to get to know each other, duh. We talked about this earlier dumb-dumb.”

Deja, Winter, and Ezra disappeared into the crowd, either skating or hanging out with other students from campus.

Marsh sputtered. “Did you call me *dumb-dumb*?”

“What movie?”

Cami clomped her feet rapidly as they turned the corner, and he bit his bottom lip to stop from laughing.

“*The Godfather*.”

Cami made a face. “*The Godfather*? Is that really a good movie or are people just hyping it up because it’s all about the mafia?”

“You’ve never seen *The Godfather*?”

Cami shook her head, suddenly leaning forward too far, and he pulled her back.

“You’re from Texas. Shouldn’t you like *The Lone Ranger* or *True Grit*?”

“First of all, just because I’m from Texas doesn’t mean I

like cowboys—”

“So, you don’t like cowboys?”

He didn’t bother to fight the smile as he shook his head in amused frustration. For the last few years, he felt as if he’d been stuck in limbo, and just a few days with Cami was like he’d been struck back down to earth. Exposed and feeling things he didn’t want to. Emotions he tried to escape from.

“I do.”

Cami snorted.

“That’s beside the point. You’re stereotypin’ me. You know what; not just me but all Texans.”

“You sound all country when you say it like that.”

He rolled his eyes and she giggled.

“Anyway... *The Lone Ranger* is a TV show. Not a movie.”

“But Johnny Depp was in it.”

His head began to hurt.

“*The Godfather* is an all-time classic. You have to watch it.”

Cami made a face. “I don’t like violence. I like happy things.”

“What’re happy things?”

Marsh pulled Cami to his side, gathering her snugly to avoid the group of girls in front of them that went down. Her soft curves molded to the contours of his lean body, and he had no desire to release her.

“Animation. Color. Happy endings...”

“So, cartoons?”

Cami gasped in horror. “Animation is not cartoons. It’s an art. Imma need you to respect that.”

Her mouth pinched and she pointed a threatening finger. He grinned, not the least bit intimidated.

“I’m sorry.”

“You better, but don’t worry. I’ll fix you before this is over. You’re gonna love happiness and sunshine, not bullets and gore. The one movie I think you need to watch, and my all-time favorite, is *13 Going on 30*.”

Marsh’s lips thinned. “It sounds like a chick flick.”

“Totally early 2000s vibes. Jennifer Garner and Mark Ruffalo? Can I just mention how hot Mark Ruffalo was? Or rather *is*. It’s the perfect movie. A thirteen-year-old makes a wish that she is older and chaos ensues. Perfect cinema.”

That was not his type of movie.

“You have to watch it! I swear you’ll love it.”

“I don’t know.”

Cami huffed. “C’mon, what is going to thaw that cold, stoic heart of yours? If I watch *The Godfather*, then you have to watch *13 Going on 30*. It’s only fair.”

Marsh ignored her comment about his ‘cold, stoic heart’; he was hoping they didn’t have to watch the other’s favorite movie. “If it comes to it, I’ll do it.”

The music changed to “Rock with You” by Michael Jackson. To his surprise, she released him; feeling herself, she moved her shoulders to the music and sang.

“Don’t act like you know grown folks’ music.”

Cami rolled her eyes before laughing. He loved the way her smile brightened her face.

“*What do you know about it?* My mom used to wake my brother and me up with it when she cleaned on Sunday mornings.”

He could relate.

“Really? My mom played gospel music at the crack of dawn. It got to a point where my sisters and I dreaded hearin’ it ‘cause we knew we weren’t goin’ outside to play. I know every Kirk Franklin song word for word.”

Cami snickered.

“Now don’t distract me, sir. Let’s say... if you were forced to leave your home and move to a country you’ve never been to before, what three things would you take?”

“What’s with these questions? What’s wrong with just askin’ my favorite color? Or favorite animal?”

Cami made a face.

“That’s boring. We need to really know each other. Why, what do you have to hide? You’re secretly a serial killer?”

He didn’t answer. An uncomfortable feeling formed in his chest, and he tried to search for words but ended up coolly saying, “I’m fine with surface-level information.”

The bite in his tone was obvious. They fell into silence, the music intensifying the awkwardness, it seemed. The backward skating woman zoomed by again. A glance at her alerted him to the down look on her face. He immediately felt like a dick.

“I’ll take mostly food. Probably a year’s supply of Raisinets and Milk Duds,” he huffed, hoping that fixed things.

Cami’s face brightened. “What are you? An old man?”

“I like those snacks.”

“They’re gross!”

Now, he was offended. Somehow, they got into an argument about the best candy ever invented. Of course, she was wrong. Laffy Taffy? What was she? Four? No one in their right mind would think that was the best candy. Debating

about candy made them realize just how hungry they were, and Cami clung to him as he led them off the floor and to the concession stand.

To prove his point, he bought her popcorn and Rasinets, forcing the box in her face as they stood near the entrance of the rink.

“Eat it.”

“They’re raisins,” she whined, but he shook the box in her face. “If you don’t eat, then I won’t watch Fifteen Going on Twenty.”

Cami sputtered. “First of all, you got the title all twisted.”

They argued about his random love for chocolate-covered raisins when she finally plucked one out the box. Using her two front teeth, she nibbled on the edge of it.

“You’re so dramatic.” Despite not wanting to, he found himself enjoying spending time with her, completely forgetting the reason they were there.

“Okay, okay. I’ll eat it.” Her face was still turned as if he asked her to eat shit. Shaking his head, he glanced up, body stiffening. Larissa had walked in. With Austin.

Closing her eyes, she tossed it back like a pill, chewing loudly and shaking her head.

“God, that’s awful!”

Humor gone, he nudged her. “They’re here.”

Cami spat out the Rasinets, looking left and right. “What? Where? Now?”

He felt his emotions rising. Threatening to erupt, he struggled not to visibly show his discomfort at seeing Larissa and Austin hugged up on one another. Flirting. Kissing. It stung. Like a swarm of killer bees. They watched the couple greet some of his friends before strapping on their skates and

moving onto the rink.

“Let’s go.”

The Raisinets forgotten, she squealed as he dragged her onto the rink floor. Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” began to play, bringing a flood of people back onto the floor. Cami couldn’t spot Winter or Deja yet. Everyone belted out the song. Especially those going through a breakup, who sang it with a passion. Marsh pulled Cami in closer. Placing his arms around her waist, he took her arm and placed it around him.

“This should be enough, right?”

They had to time this right. He wanted the first thing Larissa saw to be the two of them. Cami spotted the couple and placed her hands on his face, jarring him. A rush of adrenaline flowed and his skin tingled. She brought his face closer toward her, stopping them in the middle of the rink.

“Look at me like you’re interested in what I’m saying.”

Larissa and Austin were rounding the bend, and he was trying like hell to focus on Cami’s words.

Marsh licked his lips. “Like this?”

“Yes.”

Larissa and Austin were on a direct collision course. For a second, he made eye contact with Larissa. Next, he did the unthinkable. He pulled Cami forward; her body flushed against his. He bent down, bringing her face inches from his. His large hand cupped her face, holding it gently as shivers of delight seemed to run between them. Her breath hitched, and he noticed for the first time the light caught the flecks of glitter in her lip gloss. She leaned forward; the music faded to static as their eyes lowered.

“Cami—”

She closed the distance. Pressing her mouth against his,

the touch of her lips was a magnetic sensation. Surprise held him immobile; he inhaled deeply, tilting his head as his mouth parted. His other hand cupped the back of her head as he slipped his tongue along her teeth. She tasted like the buttery popcorn and chocolate, and he couldn't help but kiss her with vigor. A sound somewhere between a moan and a whimper escaped her, and he lost the fight for control.

He devoured her in a hungry kiss, his hand going to the back of her neck, clamping down as he drew her closer. He couldn't help as he bit down on her lips, soothing the sting with a languid lick of his tongue. Her eyes closed as she submitted to him. Tugging on his shirt, she let out a needy whimper as he tilted back her head for a better taste. There was a delightful buzz that fogged his brain as he broke their kiss. His heart crashed against his ribcage.

"Fuck," he mumbled, licking his bottom lip. He eyed her now swollen lips as she kept her eyes closed for a few seconds more. Slowly she opened her eyes. Something indecipherable was in her gaze as he felt his hand tremble and her nails dug into his waist.

This was a huge mistake.

*Bam!* Someone knocked into them, speeding by. Marsh cursed and Cami yelped his name as she held onto him on the way down. Pain flared in his back and leg. Her soft weight fell on top of him, intensifying the pain as he hissed out a breath.

"Um... are you okay? Was the kiss good? Did I do well?"

How could he answer her right now?

"Did you do well?" Marsh repeated slowly. His knee was throbbing. All the blood had rushed from his brain and went to other... regions of his body. He wanted to do that again. He wanted to get the hell away.

There was an obnoxious cough that caught their attention.



He looked up and to his right to see Larissa and Austin standing there.

Smug amusement flowed through him at the look on Larissa's face, which would have struck them down where they stood. He gave an award-winning smile with Cami's gloss still on his lips as a dazed Cami stared at him and then Larissa.

“Are we blocking the way?”

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **"ARE YOU OKAY?"**

Cami blinked and realized Marsh had been talking to her for the last five minutes. She wished she could be all cool and aloof like him — not like the dork she was that was still in a daze from their kiss but... it was in public. In front of Larissa. He didn't give her some grandma kiss either. Heart-stopping. Secret, fantasy-type kissing.

*And she loved it.*

Her head was so twisted that even when Larissa accidentally "bumped" into Cami as she exited the bathroom, sending her careening to the floor at the rink, she wasn't mad. Her lips still tingled from his bite.

Cami had the last laugh, though. She caught Larissa staring at her and Marsh several times throughout the evening. At Deja's encouragement to be petty, Cami went the extra mile and proceeded to act extra lovey-dovey with Marsh, kissing him on the cheek as they played arcade games and smoothing down his sea-sickening waves when she and Larissa would lock eyes. Her heart couldn't take it if he kissed her on the lips again.

"I'm fine."

They were back in the dance studio for more of the waltz. It was tough, trying to get Marsh to not act like the Tin Man, but it was only so much she could do through subtle urging. He watched the other partners dance before his shoulders

slumped.

“Should we get started again?”

They had been going at it for thirty minutes. She had Goliath-sized patience, however, as she stepped back into his arms.

“Let’s take it from the top.”

There had been no preparation for the kiss, just... straight lip and tongue action. Not that she complaining. Cami thought they would need the defibrillator to resuscitate her. Death via kiss sounded like such a good epitaph. Marsh Lincoln was dangerous for her health.

“Are you sure?”

His expression was between amusement and curiosity. He knew what he was doing to her. Heat rushed to her face as her eyes fell to his lips. She was so lame!

“I’m cool... I’m all right.”

Marsh laughed and it was infectious. She hated him at that moment. Why did he have an attractive laugh?

“Cause you look like you rather be anywhere else than here.” Marsh stepped on her foot again and she grimaced. “Sorry about that.”

Cami let out a shuddering breath as she waited for the blood to return to her toes. “I would like to have feeling in my toes when I’m done. If that’s possible, of course.”

Marsh sighed. “Dancin’ isn’t my thing.”

“That’s obvious.”

She took the lead as she slowed their movement.

“Not runnin’ for the hills yet?”

“We’re not good at anything we do the first time.”

*Except kissing! 'Cause Lord Jesus...*

“Shit just seems pointless. I’m not gonna use ballroom dance at any other point in my life,” Marsh grumbled as he watched their feet.

“Eyes up.” She cupped his chin, bringing his eyes to hers.

He sucked his teeth.

“How long have you been dancin’?”

That question was a bucket of cold water. How long had she been dancing? Cami eyed him, his gaze falling to their feet as she tried to form a response.

“I started dancing when I was maybe... three or four? I was a part of a dance group back home. Eyes up.”

Marsh’s head snapped up, and he looked at her admiringly. Her chest swelled in... pride?

“Really? That long?”

Dr. Aguilar. Last semester. Her sickness. It all came crashing in a big mess right all at once.

“Apparently, my dad... he knew when I was born that I should be a dancer. I can’t say that the universe or an angel told him this. Secretly, I just think he wanted to be a dancer but had terrible stage fright. Or, at least, that’s what my mom told me. When I could stand on my feet long enough, he put me in classes.”

Marsh laughed and it lessened the tension inside her.

“You stuck with it? Then you must really like it.”

Marsh’s eyes drifted back to their feet.

Cami smiled. “I love it. It’s my life. Eyes up.”

Dance was her life. There was nothing else she could imagine doing. She had so many dreams when it came to dancing. Dancing in shows. Possibly in a Vegas show.

Eventually becoming a famous choreographer or owning a dance studio. The possibilities were endless.

“Your dad must be proud.”

Cami shrugged and fixed her gaze behind his shoulder. “I think he would be proud. He’s dead.”

Why did she still get emotional over mentioning her father? It had been years. She should be over this. Strauss’s “Voices of Spring” filled the air between them.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Cami shook her head. Blowing out a breath, she flashed him a smile even as he stepped on her foot again.

“Oh, it’s fine. I can’t remember when he died. All I know is from what Devin and my Mom told me. No harm, no foul. That’s death, or rather... life. I guess.”

Marsh cleared his throat, and she felt him tense up.

“All we have left of the ones who pass are memories. You keep their memory alive by speaking their name. You don’t want to forget them.”

She felt scolded by his words.

“How’s your family? Siblings?” Cami said in a forced chipper voice that rang hollow.

“I have three older sisters.”

“The youngest and only boy? I bet they dressed you up a lot.”

Marsh laughed and rolled his eyes. “Yep. Lots of pictures that will never see the light of day. My parents had a thin’ for namin’ all of us with the letter ‘M’, which makes things worse.”

“That must be fun, being in a big family.”

Marsh made a face, and his gaze went back to their feet.

“You never have any privacy. Someone is always allergic to or doesn’t like somethin’. Somebody’s stealin’ your stuff. Or bein’ nosey. Or feel the need to give their opinion when you didn’t ask for or need it. It gets old after a while. I’m glad to be away.”

Longing hit Cami’s heart. What would her family have been like had her father lived?

“I could only imagine. It’s just always been my mom, brother, and me. The three amigos we used to call ourselves.”

His brows drew together. “Where are you from?”

“Minnesota.”

“That’s the twang I hear?”

Cami laughed and slapped his shoulders as he chuckled.

“Go back much?”

“I don’t have an accent! At least not like yours. Don’t ask me about when I was ten and I went through a phase where I only spoke in a British accent.” She rolled her eyes. “I don’t go back often. My mom is cross-country riding with her motorcycle gang. My brother moved out here to be with me after—” Cami’s voice caught, and she cleared her throat loudly.

“After what?”

“Nothing. He lives in Oakland.”

Fearing she had ruined the mood, she asked, “Do you go back to Texas often?”

Marsh paused, almost making her trip. It was as if the color drained from his face. “No. There’s nothin’ there for me.”

“Your family still lives there, don’t they?”

His expression hardened. “It’s not somethin’ I want to talk about right now.”

*Okay then...* Harry called the class to attention to introduce the next step, but judging by the look of horror on Marsh's face, you would have thought Harry was spinning on his head.

It was a simple waltz step forward, and instead of taking a break like everyone else, Cami forced Marsh to continue practicing. Savannah gave them the stank eye, and Cami just smiled and waved. The girl scoffed and rolled her eyes as she left. Her reaction was satisfying, and she watched Marsh as she sipped from her water bottle.

"No rest for you. You're as loose as a steel pipe. Eyes up! You have to keep your head up—" Cami felt some vague fatigue in her legs, but she pushed through it. This wasn't the time or place— "You step forward with the left foot. Yes... to the side with the right foot. No! Not the reverse. Keep your back straight. No slouching."

Groaning, she set her bottle down and rushed toward him. Standing in front of him, she grabbed his arms, moving them into place.

"You're a bit of a drill sergeant about this, aren't you?"

"I'm peaches and cream compared to some of my dance coaches. Miss Lori made us run laps and do jumping jacks. And then Charleston steps across the floor for thirty minutes."

Marsh grumbled. "What's a Charleston step?"

"Don't worry about it right now, just know it isn't fun. Again. Waltz step."

Cami called out the count and snapped her fingers. Marsh struggled to keep up, and she wasn't sure what she was going to do to get him out of his head.

"One of the keys to making your Waltz look... *better* is to do a rise and fall motion. Ya know? Basically, you're doing an exaggerated glide." Cami stood next to him. Why did she



suddenly feel so small? Why was she liking it?

“I don’t know what that means.”

Cami rubbed her temples, and Marsh waved her off. He leaned down, placing his hands on his knees. She noticed he was favoring his right leg, rubbing it gently. It didn’t bend quite as well as the other did.

“Are you okay?”

Marsh gritted his teeth and sighed. “I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“I said I’m fine, Cami.”

That made her stomach flip. Flinching slightly from his tone, she tucked a braid behind her ear. She hadn’t wanted to upset him. Looking for a way out of the awkward situation, she plastered on a fake smile.

“Are you busy tonight?”

The limp was obvious now as he glanced at her and made his way to the nook. Marsh reached for his water bottle. “Not too busy, why?”

“I think I know something that will get the stiffness out of you.”

“Stiffness out of me?”

Cami nodded and bit her lip. “Don’t look at me like that, I’m not being dirty. That’s why you can’t dance. You’re too uptight. Too much on your mind.”

She thought she knew the real reason, but she went with this point. You couldn’t truly dance if you were worried about everything else going on.

“I’m uptight?”

“Believe me, it’s gonna be fun. Just prepare for loud noise and drinking.”

He snorted. “I think this is gonna be a bad idea.”



The Fillmore District, known for having the largest jazz scene on the West Coast, was a second home to Cami. Jazz still dwelled in the culture and people who lived there. It was the perfect escape for her in her down moments. They disembarked the MUNI bus and headed for one of her favorite places in not just the city but the entire world.

“I come here all the time, and I think you’ll like it.”

Marsh shivered and pulled his leather jacket closer. She tried not to notice how hot he looked as he eyed her.

“Is that so?”

She smiled softly and looked ahead. The bass thundered from inside, and she bounced on her heels as they arrived in front of H20. It was the go-to to spot for live funk, jazz, and blues by the hottest musicians on the scene. Marsh chuckled at her as she chatted excitedly as they entered. The room was cast in a beautiful red glow; people filled every nook and cranny, from the bar to the tables. A saxophonist burned up the stage as he played his solo, and Cami found an open spot, snapping her fingers to the music.

“What do you think?”

“Underdressed.” Marsh glanced around then leaned forward. “You should have told me there a dress code or somethin’. I coulda worn somethin’ nicer.”

“You’re fine; no one will notice.”

*You would look fine as hell in a potato sack.*

People filled the dance floor, swaying and gyrating to the beat. Cami couldn’t wait to get up and show them how it was done.

“What are we doin’ here?”

“This is a great immersion experience for you. Jump into dance with both feet. Literally.”

“Immersion?” Marsh frowned.

“The waltz can be a little uptight. I get that. So, let’s try something less rigid. Get the blood flowing. Build you from the ground up.”

He smirked before scratching his goatee. “I’m not convinced, Cami.”

“What do you have to lose? You’re stuck with this class. Why not make it fun?”

“I feel like a science experiment.”

Cami licked her lips and then grinned. “Want a drink?”

It was more for her than him. She felt as if he could hear her heart beating through her chest, and the way he stared at her lips made her subconscious. Was it something on her lips? Too much gloss?

“On a Monday night? You’re wilder than I thought, Cami...?” he trailed off and leaned back. She never even told him her last name. A pleasant reminder they barely scratched the surface in getting to know each other and cemented the fact that fake dating was an insane idea.

“Clinton. My last name is Clinton.”

“Do I dare ask about a middle name?”

She huffed. “Carly.”

Marsh’s eyes lit up in amusement. “Three Cs?” He licked his bottom lip to stop from smiling.

“Shut up. You and your siblings’ first names all start with the same letter.”

Cami ordered a spiked lemonade that was a cool color

with a cute umbrella. Marsh ordered Hennessey. She balked as he drank it straight.

“That’s literally the devil’s juice.”

“You want some?” He offered his glass.

It was something about the way his eyes glinted at hers that sent a shiver through her.

“Try some.”

Not that she needed it. Marsh needed it more than her. He looked as if he’d disappear if you said ‘boo’ too loudly. To her surprise, he slid from the other side of the booth and into her side. His left thigh hitting her right one caused her to suck in a breath as he sat the drink in front of her.

“You try mine; I’ll try yours?”

*Did the Hennessey get to him that quick?*

She gripped her lemonade as he bit his lip, watching the emotions war on her face before she nodded, sliding her drink toward him.

“Fine, I’m not gonna fall out or start acting Kanye crazy, am I?”

He smirked, taking her drink. She watched as he drew her straw into his mouth. Exhaling quickly, she closed her eyes and said a quick prayer before drinking the brown liquor. The burn was immediate. Clenching her teeth, she shook her head as he gulped more than half her lemonade.

“That was disgusting!”

He placed one arm behind her on the booth and smacked his lips.

“Not bad. A bit too fruity for my taste.”

“Marsh! You drank most of it,” she whined, lifting her glass and pouting at him.

His deep, spicy scent filled her space. “Sorry, pretty lady.”

Her eyes fell to his mouth and back up again. Turning her head, she finished off his Hennessy with a wince. “Are you ready for the full dance experience?”

“I am ready for whatever that is.”

Nodding, she motioned for him to stand up, and she grabbed his hand as she stood. “I was thinking what’s the easiest to learn how to dance and lighten up? A group setting, so you can hide. Then it hit me. Group dancing. There’s no way you can mess up when they literally sing the moves.”

This would be a walk in the park.

The first chords of the jazz version of the “Cha Cha Slide” played. More people from the bar streamed onto the small dance floor, forcing Cami and Marsh smack-dab in the center. The heat from bodies and the alcohol made a light sweat break out on her skin. The warmth of his body and proximity made her nerves flare.

“Are you ready?” Cami shouted.

Dance was a pleasant distraction from all the tingly feelings in her body. Then she wouldn’t want her fake boyfriend to take her by the hair and land another soul-sucking kiss on her lips. It was great she didn’t hear his response as everyone clapped their hands.

*“Are you ready to dance?”* the emcee shouted into the microphone.

Cami should have taken a picture of his facial expression as the song began. What black person could say in their life *they had never done the Cha Cha Slide?* Not at a wedding, family reunion, or birthday party? Hell, school dance?

“Don’t embarrass the culture, Marsh!”

You literally could not do this dance wrong, but

somehow... somehow, he was ruining it. Cami didn't know whether to laugh or wince as she watched him. The emcee told them to go right, *Marsh went left*. Two stomps, he was doing three. Get funky? He was dancing like Martin Lawrence as his "Jerome" character from *Martin*.

People around them heckled him and Cami booed them off.

"Don't listen to them; you'll get the other dances." Cami patted his shoulder. *How can a man this damn fine be this damn uncoordinated?*

Marsh grunted as "The Locomotion" played. That caused some of the young people to walk off the floor. Mostly the older people hooped and hollered. Rubbing her temples, she moved with ease, picking up the steps. It wasn't simple for him, but she'd give him that one. He watched her and the other dancers, tapping his fingers to the beat on his thigh.

"You start off slow. Forward and back... Yep, just like that. Forward and back, now jump and turn!" Cami placed her hands on his arms, forcing him to move with her. His brows drew together, and he stomped slow. Stepping on her foot a few times, she encouraged him to keep trying, and he grabbed her hand and squeezed.

"Keep going..."

They were going slower than the song intended, but happiness soon burst in her chest as she saw the grin spread across his face when he finally got the movement.

"You got it!" Cami grinned.

"Do I?" He leaned down to speak in her ear as they swung their hips.

"Absolutely!"

It was subtle, but she noticed he wasn't favoring that right

leg too much. The song went on, and it was probably due to the liquor, but he grew more confident. He was so into the dance he high-fived the older woman next to him as they swung their hips and spun.

“I told you it was easy!” His fingers intertwined with hers. Marsh could do the steps; he just had to get out of his head. It was the twists and turns along with making everything look seamless that was the struggle, but nothing they couldn’t work on.

To her surprise, “Conga” by Miami Sound Machine played, and he turned to her. Eyes widening, Marsh took her hand, spinning her around, and they moved back and forth to the beat.

He needed some work, but her cheeks ached from how hard she smiled. He placed his hand on her lower back, and she placed her hand on his shoulder. Their bodies dipped and gyrated. She was even more pleasantly surprised when he could even do a little awkward salsa move here and there. Any nervousness from earlier evaporated. Marsh looked so sexy in a laidback state. She squirmed as her body responded, and she clenched her thighs. Eventually, the bodies, heat, and dancing made it too much to keep going.

Cami motioned that they head back to their booth, and she picked up the menu to fan herself.

“Wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Marsh let out a breathless laugh. “I don’t think I’ve danced like that since Yara.”

“Yara?”

Tension rippled through the table like an icy wave, and she knew she said something wrong. Just as the smile appeared, it had vanished. The silence at the table felt suffocating and awkward.

“She must have some good moves to teach you—”

Marsh held up a hand.

“Oh...”

A muscle ticked in his jaw, and he clutched the table. “Is she your cousin? Is she a friend? An aunt? Or—”

“You’re nosy as hell. You know that, right?”

Cami held her breath as she looked at him.

“Marsh, I’m sorry—”

He stood up. “I’ll catch you later. Thanks. For this.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you.”

It was too late. Marsh was up and heading for the door, leaving Cami all alone as the crowd sang about all the fun at the YMCA.



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## CHAPTER NINE

**“MARSHALL, IT’S GOOD TO SEE** you again. It’s been a while.”

Slouched in his chair, he hadn’t spoken a word, as Dr. Lake simply smiled. She was a beautiful woman who reminded him of Lupita Nyong’o. The doctor exuded femininity and grace, crossing her legs daintily as she tapped her nails on her armrest, not at all bothered by the sullen giant across from her.

He hated that no matter how many times they met, he had to fight the tightness in his chest and tame the urge to flee.

“It’s your senior year. Are you excited?”

Marsh snorted. “What’s there to be excited about?”

He kept his gaze focused outside; Dr. Lake’s office overlooked the central courtyard of campus. Students hurried to their next class, laughing and talking, some on skates and bikes. It was just another hindrance in his effort to keep his visits away from the nosy eyes of the public.

“Marshall...” Dr. Lake began in that soft voice that irritated him at the moment.

He didn’t want to be coddled.

“Normally, you’re not like this. What’s going on with you?”

She was right. He felt bad immediately. His mama didn’t raise him to be disrespectful. What had gotten under his skin

was *Cami*.

It wasn't her fault; he knew that now, but she just didn't know when to leave things alone. She had a million and one questions. Questions that would unearth memories he wanted to keep hidden.

"Nothin' really."

"Marshall. We're past this, aren't we? Please tell me what's going on."

His gaze shot over to hers and he gave up. "I got into a mess. A big mess really—" Marsh scrubbed his face "—somethin' of my makin', though. You warned me. About Larissa."

Dr. Lake made a knowing sound in the back of her throat.

"I see. So, it did come to fruition."

Dr. Lake warned him; he'd been so ready to move on that he jumped into the relationship with Larissa. Dr. Lake's words were clear in his head: *You will withdraw or act distant for some time. That doesn't establish a healthy relationship, Marshall.*

"She broke up with me, but now she's with Austin if you can believe that shit. It's fucked up, but I can't say it wasn't deserved. Larissa always plays dirty."

"Go on."

Marsh sighed. Sitting was killing his leg.

"I have a new girlfriend now."

He didn't need to see Dr. Lake's face go wide with shock. "Already?"

"Came out of nowhere. Literally."

"Perfect timing. This is... interesting."

He grunted. That was a polite way of saying it.

“It was... confusin’. Embarrassin’. Frustratin’. At that moment, Doc, I couldn’t help it, but I wanted to choke the shit out of both of them.”

It was easy to be in a relationship with Larissa. She didn’t ask questions or wonder why there were days he didn’t speak. She didn’t like long conversations. As long as he did what she wanted, things went well.

“Confusion?”

Marsh picked up a slinky on a table and pulled it apart.

“At Larissa. Myself. The jackass she’s with. I felt myself goin’ back...” Marsh shrugged. “The guilt. Anger. It all came rushin’ back, and I was drownin’. I thought about Yara— so, this new girl and I... we’re pretendin’ to date. To get back at Larissa.”

He pulled the slinky out of shape.

“You’re pretending to date this new girl. To make Larissa jealous?”

Marsh nodded.

“Is there a deeper reason that you’ve done this, Marshall?”

“No. Purely to piss Larissa off. It’s payback. Pettiness. I’m also lettin’ Austin know where his place is. Below me.”

Dr. Lake raised an eyebrow.

“I mean it. That’s it; that’s all, nothin’ deeper than that. We have a deal. No confusion about what’s goin’ on.” Marsh dropped the worn-out slinky on the table. “It’s purely business.”

“Business? Tell me about this new girlfriend of yours; what’s she like?”

“Cami? She’s okay so far. A dance major. Talks too damn much and wears a lot of pink.”

Rolling his eyes, he crossed his arms across his chest. Their kiss at the Church of 8 Wheels floated in his mind. Then it was that damn glittery lip gloss again. Who knew that was a weakness of his?

“Marshall?”

This... attraction or whatever was happening too quickly. He hadn't felt this way about Larissa that fast. Of course, he was physically attracted to Larissa. She was a gorgeous girl. For so long, he kept those emotions, emotions that could let him become attached again, but with Cami, it was reeling them in full force.

“She's nice. Meg would like her. Definitely Mama. They both seem like girlie girls and would bond over shit like that. After last night—”

Dr. Lake tilted her head.

“We got into an argument or somethin' last night. It was my fault.” He eyeballed Dr. Lake. “She just didn't know when to stop askin' questions.” He knew he was trying to justify his decision, but it fell flat. “I said her name. I don't know why I said her name.”

“I would consider that progress.”

“Progress?” Marsh frowned. “It's not progress. Lately, I been feelin' myself gettin' upset more easily. Frustrated. Distracted. I can manage most of the time. You know I can manage—”

“Acknowledge how far you've come and appreciate everything you have achieved. This is the time when your accident happened. You were hurt and your girlfriend died,” she stated bluntly, and Marsh closed his eyes.

“Remember, at one point you couldn't even say her name, but now, you can. I don't want you to ignore that wonderful accomplishment. I want to challenge you.” She sat forward.

“Hiding from the past does not change it. Guilt cannot fix it. You need to voice and acknowledge head-on what is coming up. The anniversary of Yara’s death.”

He exhaled shakily and leaned forward.

“The accident was not your fault, Marshall. Would Yara want this for you?”

“What the hell would you know about what Yara wants?” Marsh spat.

“You want to be forgiven, but only you can do that for yourself. I can tell you right now it won’t happen if you continue this way.”

“It’s not that. It’s just I have to do this stupid dance class and now deal with the drama from Larissa,” Marsh stubbornly refuted. “I’m fine; drop it.”

“Intellectually, you know it’s just an accident.” Dr. Lake ignored him. “The rain, the semi-truck, and the argument were a random occurrence. A bad mix at the wrong time. Would this be the quality of life that she would want you to have if she lived? Your physical scars have healed, but the emotional ones haven’t, and they devastate you, Marshall.” She took his hands and squeezed reassuringly.

“I asked you when you began your relationship with Larissa if that was something you truly wanted to do, or if it would cause you more harm than good?”

“It had been a year when I finally got with Larissa.”

“In your mind, you had a guilty verdict when the judge rendered you innocent.”

Marsh frowned and snatched his hands away. Dr. Lake didn’t flinch.

“You have to rid yourself of the survivor’s guilt. You lived and Yara died. Releasing this guilt can be a chance at healing. I

admire you wanting to go into law to honor Yara—” Marsh rubbed his temples “—but what about future clients of yours? Can you represent them when you continue to live as if you’re guilty of a crime? How can you truly love or care for someone else, if your mind and heart are split and you treat every relationship as disposable and meaningless? How do you think this fake relationship with Cami is going to play out? What if you or she develops genuine feelings for one another? Are you going to hurt her the same way Larissa hurt you?”

Narrowing his eyes on his therapist. He didn’t want to hurt Cami. He didn’t know why he had the strange urge to protect her, even if it was from himself. They had a deal. They were helping each other out, that’s all.

“I won’t hurt her. We have a deal.”

Dr. Lake closed her notebook and set it on the table.

“I’m sure you do. You know better than anyone that life doesn’t happen the way we always want it to. Cami sounds sweet, and I don’t think she deserves the less than substantial parts of you. You’re a talented young man with a bright future. If I were you, I’d check my motives. Are you doing this truly to assert dominance? Are you pursuing law school for Yara? If you let these emotions run unchecked, you will inflict more pain on others because you will never feel worthy of your second chance.”

He blew out a breath, and Dr. Lake leveled her gaze at him. “Consider writing that letter I suggested to Yara’s parents. I’m sure they would love it.” The alarm went off. “I think that’s time today.”

Marsh stood to leave, lifting his bookbag. It felt as if all the wind had been sucker-punched out of him.

“Think about the letter. You don’t have to write it today or tomorrow. Give it a chance. You lost a girlfriend, but they lost a daughter. I want to see you thrive.”

Her words echoed in his ears as he left. *You lost a girlfriend, but they lost a daughter.*

By the time Marsh stepped into the frat house, he was exhausted. Mentally and physically. The smell of weed drifted from the living room, and he peeked his head in to find Ezra with Jonathan, another frat brother. Eyes low and red, Ezra waved Marsh in, releasing a cloud of smoke.

“Sup, Prez, shouldn’t you be in class or something?”

Dapping Jonathan, Marsh took a seat on the couch across from them. Putting his feet on the table, he sighed.

“What I tell you about smokin’ in the house?”

“Shit, I don’t know. What you say?” Ezra leaned forward, passing the blunt to Marsh. He didn’t smoke often, but with the day he was having, he accepted it.

“Why the long face? You and Cami not arguin’ already, are ya?”

Yara’s face appeared. It felt like so long since he had let himself picture her face. To imagine her voice.

“Nah, we’re fine.”

“You sure?”

Marsh went rigid before passing Jonathan the blunt. “Why are you worried about her? She’s not your girl.”

Ezra threw his hands up. “Calm down, dude. I’m just askin’ a question. My name ain’t Austin.”

The sting of his words couldn’t be helped. Cursing, he apologized, and Marsh waved him off.

“Sorry, you know I didn’t mean it—”

“It’s fine.”

The memory of Yara stung. Even years later, it felt like it was only yesterday he lost her. It should have been him six feet



under instead of her.

Ezra turned the conversation around, going on about a hook-up of his. "...her ass was clapping!" Hand on his chest, he threw himself out of his seat for dramatic effect. "Shit, I felt I needed a holy bath after she put that thang on me!"

Jonathan rolled his eyes, leaning forward to take the blunt from him. "Really, bro? All that with her roommate in the next bed."

Marsh settled down in his seat again, tuning into their conversation as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah, sounds like some bullshit to me."

"*Bullshit?*" Ezra deadpanned, mimicking Soulja Boy's dramatic Drake comment. "Ya boy ain't gots ta lie. You know how I roll!"

They laughed when Ezra got upset, grumbling and clapping his hands to prove his point. "Shit happened!"

Marsh laughed. "If you say so."

The front door opened and closed, heavy footsteps heading their way. Austin walked in, saw them, and then stalled. "Hey."

Ezra gave a mirthless laugh as Marsh and Austin gazed at one another. This was probably one of the first times they'd been in the same room with one another for longer than a minute. Clenching his fist, Marsh focused forward, taking the blunt as Jonathan passed it to him. He was brewing, fist balled tight, digging into his knees.

"Marsh."

Ignoring him, Marsh let the weed relax him as he sunk further into the couch.

"Marsh!"

Sitting back in his chair, Marsh cut his eyes toward

Austin. This was not the place he wanted to have his first conversation with Austin. Not when everything in him wanted to beat this guy's ass, but frat rules went against it, and he had to uphold the code as president.

“Huh?”

Ezra snickered. Jonathan licked his lips, eyes flittering between the two guys.

“I need to ask you something.”

“What could you possibly need to ask me?” He pulled his gaze from Austin, taking another pull from the blunt. Passing it to Ezra, he placed his hands behind his head. “Didn't need to ask me anythin' while you were fuckin' Rissa.”

“Ding, ding ding! Them's' fightin' words, bruh.” Ezra rubbed his hands together excitedly as he bounced in his seat.

Austin took a step forward, scowling. Their gazes clashed again, and he didn't hide his irritation. At one point, they had been friends. Good friends. Now, Marsh wouldn't spit on his ass if he was on fire.

“I thought you were supposed to be in class,” Jonathan said a little too loud and fast, his effort to deescalate the situation clear.

“If you would have done your job as her man, then maybe I wouldn't have had to fuck her.” Austin ignored Jonathan, and Marsh took the bait. Standing to his full height, all the guys got up too. Ezra took the joint from Jonathan as he tried to wedge himself between the former friends.

“I'm cool, E.” Marsh shrugged him off. There wasn't going to be a fight or anything else. He'd come too far. Accomplished too much to lose it to the likes of Austin. “Since when did you become the relationship expert? That's kinda ironic, considering you like to fuck your friends' girls behind their backs.”

Ezra still stepped around Marsh, blocking him with his body.

“I can’t break up something that was supposedly already happy. You knew you weren’t handling business. Admit it, you only stayed because you were comfortable. Instead of pointing the finger at me or even Larissa, you should look at yourself.”

Jonathan and Ezra’s eyes fell on him. He made sure to keep his face impassive.

“Don’t want to end up in the same situation with the new girlfriend Cami? Huh?”

He was messing up things already with her, wasn’t he? No call or text all day. What if she left him before they were done? He wanted a chance to get to know her, in any way possible, even if she talked his head off.

“That’s nothin’ you need to worry yourself about.”

“Let’s hope.”

Ezra cleared his throat.

“I came to get your permission about—”

Jonathan offered the blunt again to Marsh, but he declined.

“I gotta go.” Marsh dapped up Ezra, who gave him a look before grabbing his bag. Leaving as his one-time friend called out his name.



It was easy to find her.

He remembered she said she worked the night shifts at the library, but it proved harder to find her friends. It was sheer luck that he ran into them outside the cafeteria. Apparently, they weren’t aware of the tension between the couple. He was grateful for it, but it made it much harder to

play off forgetfulness when he asked what Cami's favorite ice cream was.

"You know she loves bubble gum ice cream." Winter raised a brow.

Deja narrowed her eyes and sucked her teeth.

"Right... just wanted to make sure."

He grabbed the last pint of bubblegum ice cream and wandered the aisles of the library. He nodded at people who called out his name, and after wandering the first floor for twenty minutes, he headed for the student assistants behind the front desk.

"Can you tell me where to find Cami?"

The guy with a name badge that said Simon typed on his computer.

"She's shelving the classics downstairs in the basement; take the stairs to the right and go down one flight."

He had never gone down into the basement, and it was creepy as hell. Dead silence, not a soul in sight. He found her. With headphones on that looked like cat ears, she bobbed her head and danced to the beat. Why he felt better seeing her, he couldn't put into words. She wore a white camisole and tennis skirt, her hair in two cute buns with slick baby edges.

"Cami?" He took a step forward. She bent for another book and placed it on the shelf.

"Hey," he called her name, but she didn't turn. Placing a hand on her shoulder, she jumped and screamed, almost bashing him in the face.

"Jesus! What are you doing? You can't just come up on somebody like that." Cami pushed her headphones off, placing a hand over her chest.

"I called your name. You look nice." Nice? *What am I? In*

*sixth grade?*

Frowning she shook her head. “Jesus, I’ve lost some years in my life.”

He was noticing a lot about the way she styled herself. It wasn’t something he was used to. She peered up at him, lips parted. He eyed the plump flesh, feeling enticed to suck on them.

“Can I help you with something?”

He studied her profile, her high, regal cheekbones, and the graceful curve of her neck. She would not make it easy for him. He could respect that.

His hand roamed up her exposed neck and lightly squeezed it, forcing her to move closer to his body. The white stretchy material of her top hugged her breasts. An irresistible invitation.

“Marsh?”

“I have a peace offering.” He released her. Her hand went to the area where his hand had been. She kept her eyes fixed on him as he waved the bag and she grabbed it, opening and gasping before smiling brightly at him.

“Bubblegum ice cream? That’s my favorite! How’d you know?”

“A lil birdie told me.” He offered her a spoon.

Cami grinned. Opening the container and snatching the utensil, she spooned the creamy ice cream into her mouth. Letting out a moan and closing her eyes, she leaned against the bookshelf. “Oh my god, you don’t know how good this is.”

He nodded dumbly, only knowing he had to kiss her. Right now. His thoughts pointed to the way she licked the spoon. How her lashes fluttered and color saturated her cheeks. She was definitely becoming his most dangerous

distraction.

“Do you want some?”

Cami offered her spoon.

“I’m fine.”

“C’mon, try it.”

Cami waved the spoon in his face. He looked at the spoon and then her face. Biting her bottom lip, deep dimples appeared.

“Are you sure?”

Cami nodded her head.

Marsh opened his mouth and Cami fed him the ice cream. It was sickeningly sweet, a strawberry-banana-punch type of flavor that was sure to give him cavities. He swallowed slowly. Cami smiled up at him.

“Good, isn’t it?”

“I feel as though all my teeth will rot and fall out.”

Cami laughed and focused on the carton in front of her. He stepped forward; cupping her chin, he forced her to meet his gaze. She curled her hands into fists, her eyes flittering between his throat, over his collarbone, his lips...

“I just wanted to say I’m sorry.”

Cami blinked.

“I was rude to you. You didn’t deserve it.”

She didn’t deserve to deal with his shit. That was his burden to carry alone. The memories of those nights alone in the hospital. Physical therapy. Knowing that for some reason his life had been spared while Yara was dead.

She nodded and ate more ice cream. “You’re right. I would like more groveling, but I’ll be nice this time.”

Marsh laughed. “Not modest at all, are you?”

“I know when I’m wrong and when I’m right. My brother taught me that.”

“He sounds like a good guy.”

Cami murmured an agreement.

“I guess I should apologize too. I should have just left it alone and not pushed you.” Her big brown eyes shimmered a little.

“I brought it up. I can’t blame you for wanting to know more.”

“Another thing... my dad died putting out a ship fire. Saved a bunch of people before he got trapped himself. There’s not a day I don’t think about him or that I don’t feel the pain from his loss.”

Marsh nodded his head, totally understanding what she went through.

“You still have to learn how to live and heal. Right?” She grabbed his hand. Her thumb stroked the back of his palm. His throat tightened. “All I’m saying is whenever you’re ready. You can talk to me. I’m a good listener.”

He cracked a smile, removing his hand from her grip. “Good listener?”

The urge to flee and protect himself was strong. At the same time, a feeling he hadn’t experienced before surfaced. Vulnerability. Wanting to connect with someone.

“I’m deeper than you think. You can trust me.”

Trust formed attachments. He trusted Larissa. Yara trusted him. Every person he trusted or trusted him ended up getting hurt. Yet the darkest parts of him wanted to expose himself to her. It was troubling.

“Will you still be my fake girlfriend?”

Cami took a step back. She closed the carton of ice cream and placed it back into the plastic bag. “Of course; we have a deal, right?”

He watched her force an expression of polite regard and tucked a braid behind her ear. His lips quirked, and he stepped forward, crowding her against the shelf. He shouldn't feed into this new interest, but he still came forward, his mouth inches from hers. Barely there. Lightly touching. He cupped her chin gently.

“Right.”

Her lower lip quivered, and she exhaled shakily. His lips brushed past hers. He gave her a soft peck on her cheek, lingering a few seconds before her body grew taut as he retreated.

“I heard there's a science to stackin' books. Is there one or are people just lyin'?”

It took her a second to gather her bearings as she nodded. Marsh picked a book off the cart. *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin.

“If you're talking about the Dewey decimal system, then yes. There's a science.” Cami snatched the book from him.

Marsh murmured in the back of his throat as he watched her pick up a book. She cut her eyes toward him before she shook her head. He wondered what she was thinking at that moment. Mouthing the numbers on the spine, she observed the shelf before she placed it in between two thick books.

“You wanna see something cool?”

Marsh cocked a brow. “I've heard that many times before. Most of the time, they don't end well.”

Cami giggled, forcing the ice cream carton into his hands



and pushing the cart forward. "Follow me."

They walked down a hallway. Pressing her ID badge to a scanner, the doors opened. Eyes widening, he stepped inside a part of the library he'd never seen before. She led them down another hallway, setting the cart off to the side. She typed in a passcode for another set of doors.

"Are you taking me someplace they won't hear me scream?"

"Ha!" Cami said before she opened the door and paused. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Why? If you tell me, you'll have to kill me?"

"Something like that."

Snickering, she pushed open the door, and he opened his mouth to retort as he sucked in a breath.

"This is where we keep first edition books."

All four walls were lined with shelves of books from floor to ceiling. A table sat in the middle of the room with a lamp and other tools. There was a ladder connected to the bookshelf, and Cami pushed it to the far left before she climbed up with ease.

"Be careful up there," Marsh warned and placed his bookbag on the floor.

"I'm fine. I've done it a million times."

That worried him slightly. She jumped down. Blowing the dust off a thick book, he took a seat as she placed the book on the table. Pulling out gloves he didn't know she had, she pushed the book toward him.

"*Elfin Hollow* by F. Scarlett Potter?" Marsh said. "You like fantasy and fairy tales? Somehow, I'm not surprised."

The book was brown, with frayed edges and gold trim

faded by time. An ornate vine covered the front of the book.

“Don’t you like an escape now and then?” Cami sat and opened the book. “You want me to read it to you?”

He shouldn’t have thought it was cute at the unsure look on her face. As if he could walk away from her right now.

“You won’t get in trouble with me in here?”

Cami grinned brightly and shook her head. He scooted and lowered himself in his seat, getting comfortable as he listened. It was hard to focus. Especially when she moved in closer. Her reaction to him was fueling an itch inside him that he feared would never go away.

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## CHAPTER TEN

**“SO, YOU’RE AVOIDING ME NOW?”** I wiped your snotty nose and changed your shitty diaper.”

Cami groaned and fell back on her bed. It was hard to get her crazy, exciting, and overwhelming feelings under control. Marsh. He was... She bit her lip. What was he? He could be sweet and gentle one minute and then harsh and cold the next. Yet, insanely hot regardless.

“Cami!”

“Sorry, Devin. Just thinking.”

She should be getting dressed to go to dance practice, but she just sat there with a goofy smile on her face.

“Don’t *sorry* me, brat. You hear what the hell I’m saying to you?”

“If I say you’re the best brother in the world, would that help?”

Devin grumbled and then she heard a bang and kids running and screaming. He yelled at them, and Cami winced, pulling the phone from her ear.

“Don’t try to sweet-talk me—*What I tell y’all about that runnin’ in the house?*”

“Leave them alone.” Cami couldn’t help but defend her niece and nephew. They were too cute and had her wrapped around their fingers.

“How about you come get them then? They miss you and

been askin' where you been. You better not be running behind some ugly little boy."

She rubbed her temples. Talking to Devin always sapped her strength. Not that she would tell him that. She most definitely didn't want to ignite the boy conversation again.

"Oh, I miss my babies. How are they doing?"

"Bad as hell. Demi punched a little boy and made him cry. Caleb is eating glue."

Cami cackled, her mood softening as she wrapped a braid around her finger.

"That's what kids do at that age."

"I had a job at their age."

Cami rolled her eyes. *God, please no! Not the job story again.*

"I was up at five in the morning with my little wagon—"

"Helping Dad cut the grass and selling newspapers..."

"Every day! Never missed a day."

Frowning, she sat up, her legs dangling off the edge of the bed. "I know."

"That's why you kids nowadays are weak as shit. Don't know nothing about hard work."

"Please. Let's not get you on your old man soapbox."

Highly offended by her "old man" remark, he grumbled as she was forced to listen for the next five minutes about the late-thirties not being old, completely proving her point that he was a grumpy old man.

"Are you taking your medicine?"

Cami rolled her eyes. "Devin..."

That was a nice reminder that she woke up with back and joint pain and bone-deep exhaustion from bending and lifting

books all night. As she rotated her wrist, the ache seemed to flow from one joint on her body to another.

“Are you? Don’t lie to me. If you lie to me, you’re lying to —”

“*Dad.* I know, I know.”

“As long as you know that.”

Devin meant well, but he would never know what it was like. Night after night in the hospital alone. The countless tests and medications.

“Not today...”

“Take it now.”

“Devin.”

“*Take it now.*” There was no room for disagreement in Devin’s tone and Cami groaned. Stomping to her desk, she opened the pill bottle that she hadn’t touched in a week and downed the tablets with leftover water in her water bottle.

“I took it. Are you happy now?” Cami smacked her lips at the after-taste on her tongue. She looked at the pamphlets on her desk disdainfully.

“I am. Why are you fighting this so hard? You hard-headed. I bet you haven’t gone to that support group yet.”

“How did you know about the support group?” Cami asked, and Devin went silent. “What happened to patient confidentiality?”

She looked at the clock. She needed to get out of there soon.

“As your family, Dr. Aguilar gave us some tips on how to help you—”

“You are intruding on my privacy.”

“I’m tryin’ to keep yo ass alive.”

More than anything she wanted Devin to understand her struggle. How hard it was to go from seemingly healthy and able to bed-ridden for months. To constantly feel as if your body was plotting against you, waiting for that perfect opportunity to strike.

“I’m fine. I don’t feel tired or anything like before. I’m eating. No lethargic feelings or nothing. It could be a fluke, Dev,” Cami lied through her teeth.

Devin sighed deeply.

“Cami, you know I love you. That means I want you to be well. You are sick. You need to accept the shit and learn to live with it, not fight it.”

“Devin, you just don’t get it, do you? This is not the Marines. We’re real people with emotions.”

“You need to cut the emotional shit out and do what’s best for yourself. You keep playin’ and imma tell Mama.”

Cami rolled her eyes. She didn’t want to argue with him about this.

“You are a big baby.”

“You need to get serious about this, Camille. I love you too much to see you laid up in a fuckin’ hospital bed again—”

“If I don’t talk about it, then it doesn’t seem so real,” she admitted.

Her brother got quiet. Yes, Devin was rough in his mannerisms, but she never doubted his love for her. She remembered hearing outside her hospital room. It was the first time she heard him cry. It crushed her, even now.

“I just want things to go back to how they were before.”

This was the first time she voiced it out loud. If she kept herself busy and independent, then she wouldn’t be the burden she felt to her loved ones.

“You need to go to the support group; they can help you cope with this.”

She knew he meant well, but every time she opened her mouth to talk about her sickness, he turned into a brick wall. Letting him rant, she got dressed.

“I want my kids to have their aunt around. I want my sister.”

Cami gripped the back of her chair, closing her eyes.

“I know, and I love you, Devin.”

“I can’t say I understand what you’re going through but listen to me.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Look, just give the group some thought. That’s all I can ask you to do. I don’t want to upset you.”

Too late for that.

“I have to go to my meeting. I’ll call you later.”

“Maya says you need to come over and help her with her hair. She wants to do some braiding shit she saw on Facebook, but she can’t reach the back of her head or somethin’.”

Cami laughed at the mention of his fiancée. How Devin’s ogre-acting behind got her was a complete mystery.

“Tell her I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

The line went dead.

Despite what Devin said, she was going to continue to cope the way she had been: acting as if everything was normal. Dancing. Being the perfect fake girlfriend she could be. Her achiness faded to the background.

Pretending to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as she stepped into the dance studio, everyone called her name, running to her to hug her.

*Where were you? How have you been? It's so good for you to be back!* The questions and compliments overwhelmed her like a wave.

"Cami!" Sean, the president of the club, called out.

That caused her team to scatter. Cami ignored the way Savannah sneered from the corner, but she could sneer all she wanted. She wasn't club president. *Or vice-president.*

"Sean, good to see you!"

Tanned skin, curly hair black hair, and dark eyes, he lifted her off her feet as she laughed.

"I've heard you've been shaking the campus up lately."

Cami blushed and ducked her head. Intensified practices didn't start till about three weeks into the semester. Sean wiggled his brows and laughed. Of course, he would know.

*"Sean..."*

"I'm just hurt I didn't get a heads up. It's not like we haven't been friends for years."

"Believe me, I wasn't expecting it either."

He teased her a little more before he sighed. "Where is the ol' ball and chain anyway?"

According to his last text to her, Marsh had something to handle with his frat, but he'd call her as soon as he was available.

"He's busy," Cami settled for saying as she focused on the floor.

Sean gave her a knowing laugh and let it go.

"Are you ready? We're going to start with some warm-ups."

"Absolutely."



*My body is strong. I can dance. I can dance.*

Taking her position in front of the group, hyping herself up, she jumped when the music came on. Sean called out the count, and she moved. Popping and locking, dropping low and bringing it up, her limbs flowed to the beat.

The group whistled and clapped as she danced, and it gassed her up more. She put an extra bit of sassiness into each hip roll, and her hair swung wildly. With each move, she burned off frustration from her conversation with Devin and the aches in her joints.

Once warm-ups were done, they began to practice their new routine.

Sean and Cami talked over the summer about choreography for the semester. It was different practicing the moves in-person versus over the screen, and she started to feel a bit winded, but she sucked it up.

The pressure of her team watching her, looking to her for guidance, was a bigger kick in the butt than her achiness. Pushing the exhaustion creeping in her body, she let the anxiety fall and called out the count, sliding, gliding, swaying, and bringing it back to the top when someone missed a step. The team began to dance with confidence slowly, and an hour and a half passed before she knew it. She hadn't taken a break yet, and her body screamed for a it.

“Let's take fifteen, okay?”

Her body screamed out in dehydration as she finished helping a few others get the moves as other dancers dispersed into the hallway. Pulling at the waistband of her leggings, she inhaled deeply, bending over to exhale and expand her ribcage.

“Cami, I got some news for you.” Sean walked up to her, breathing heavily after dismissing the club for a break. Savannah watched them before disappearing into the hallway.

She stood up and smacked her lips, trying to drive away the cottonmouth.

“There’s a meet-up in Oakland right after Halloween. The Knights will be there.”

“What?”

The Maple Grove Knights were their biggest competition. Not to mention, they were PGU’s arch-rival from the baseball field to the dance floor. There had been worse blood since they lost their last competition to The Knights last year, right around the time of her sickness.

“You think you’re up for it?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? We have to restore the natural order of things.” Cami playfully punched his shoulder.

“This isn’t officially on the books, so we’re keeping it lowkey. But now that you’re back, I’m not worried that we won’t win.”

Sean turned. That was a reminder of Savannah’s words to her weeks before.

“Can I ask you a quick question?”

He paused and raised a brow.

“Why did you make Savannah my alternate?”

A stern expression crossed his face, and she crossed her arms.

“It was a just in case.”

“It can’t be her; it just can’t.”

Sean wet his lips. “Cami—”

“Out of everyone on this squad, you picked her? When you know how I feel about her and vice versa?”

“We always have a backup, you know this.”

Cami stiffened and her mouth went dry. That's all he had to say about it? Savannah was the worse person ever to be her alternate.

"You know she wants my spot; she's said it!"

Sean held up his hands. "Every dancer wants to be in front."

"This is different and you know it, Sean. Savannah isn't qualified to lead. No one likes her. Hell! You barely tolerate her."

"Cami, I know you both have bad blood, but she stepped up a lot for the team last semester."

She had no idea how to handle things like this; they hadn't enforced the alternate ruling in the past. Her throat tightened.

"You know she wants to replace me; she isn't doing it out of good intentions."

"Look, Cami. I know last semester was rough, and I know you're just coming back, but it's better to be safe than sorry. You're doing great. Just keep doing that and you won't have to worry about her."

She could do nothing but nod.

"It's fine, okay? Don't worry."

Sean left, the door slamming creating a hollowness within her. Rushing to the cubby, she pulled out her bag. Exhaling, she looked over her shoulder before she pulled out the pamphlet she brought with her. Devin's words replayed in her mind.

"Cami."

She stiffened and turned; Wade smiled.

"Wade, not now."

She couldn't handle Devin, Savannah, and now Wade back-to-back with no reprieve. She didn't like being alone with him, even if they were in public. He moved closer.

"We have to talk."

She held her water bottle in front of her defensively.

"How many times do I have to tell you to leave me alone?"

He took another step, and she frowned, backing away. Anxiety filled the pit of her belly.

"But that's it. You tell me to leave you alone, but you won't talk to me!"

"I have nothing to say." She began to move past him, and he caught her arm. The strength in his grip rocked her, and she tried to tug away, but it was a bruising hold. "Wade, let me go!"

His hand tightened even more. "No, you must stay here and listen to what I have to say."

Should she scream bloody murder? Wade had never gotten physical with her, ever. Just annoying like a gnat but now, fear raced up her spine.

"If you don't let me go—" She shoved against his chest, and his grip lessened for a second before tightening once more. He yanked her forward. She stumbled and his other hand clamped onto her shoulder.

"Just let me talk and I'll go." There was an almost crazed look in his eyes.

"You get your damn hands off of me before you get your butt kicked."

The door opened followed by a feral growl. "*You heard what the fuck she said.*"

Wade and Cami turned to see Marsh standing there. It

wasn't the right time for the

butterflies to start fluttering in her stomach. Wade paused, and Cami began to twist away, but he caught her by the arm again.

"Take your fucking hands off of her." Marsh managed to grab her arm, pulling her into his side as he raised his right fist. Wade winced, cowering and covering his face.

"Man, get the hell outta here. You not even worth it."

Wade cracked open an eye, wearily watching Marsh. Cami's heart thundered, and she felt slightly turned on by Marsh's pissed-off demeanor.

"Why the hell are you lookin' at her? Are you slow?"

Taking a step toward Wade, he flinched, stumbling back before he headed toward the door.

"Don't let me catch yo' ass here again!"

The door closed, and she felt Marsh's muscles flex and tense under her. Licking her lips, she peeked up at him, and he glared at the door a little longer as if he expected Wade to return for a second round.

"You okay?"

She gave a small, jerky nod, still rattled, but said unconvincingly, "I'm peachy—now."

He kept her against him, and she loved it, leaning in to absorb his scent and the hardness of his body and the beating of his heart.

"Don't worry; he won't come back. I think you put the fear of God in him."

"He touch you like this before?"

"No, no. That was the first time. He's not normally... aggressive."

Marsh grunted; his jaw flexed, and he still hadn't released her yet. Not that she wanted him to.

"Are you sure you're fine? I'll find him for you and rock his jaw."

Laughing shakily, she ducked her head. That's when she noticed he was wearing gray sweatpants. She wondered if he knew what gray sweatpants did to her and wore them on purpose? They sculpted his lower body and made other things... bulge. Things her eyes should not be creeping back to but they did.

"I'm glad you came when you did."

He kept her tucked in his arm, and his hand grazed her face. It didn't look like he was soothed by her words, and she cleared her throat, trying to lighten the situation.

"What are you doing here anyway?"

He was silent for a few seconds, and she thought he was going to ignore her before he sighed.

"Working out. Thought I saw people wearing shirts with your dance team on them. I followed, hoping you were here."

"You saw me dancing?"

Marsh nodded. "I did. You dance amazing, pretty lady."

She laughed, feeling giddy at the compliment.

"You say that like you're surprised." She finally stepped away from him, no longer able to tolerate his big hand on her back, sending tiny shockwaves down her spine. She grabbed a hand towel, dabbing her face and neck. Her arms ached from where Wade gripped her. Massaging the flesh, Marsh frowned.

"Are you okay?"

"Just sore. Don't worry about it." She hoped she didn't

bruise from this.

“I know I shouldn’t have doubted your dance skills. Especially after the Cha-Cha slide.”

“Ha! How could you doubt me after that?”

She found herself liking this too much. Well, it wasn’t a matter of fact if she could, she was becoming interested in him. She couldn’t let her relationship with Marsh become the center of her world. Her fling with Marsh was just—an arrangement.

“So, any sign of your vindictive ex today? I’ve been dealing with her henchman.” She tried to look impassive and not panting like a sun-tired dog as he put his hands in his pockets. Observing her intently.

“Speaking of that, I need you.”

*I need you.* Why did she like the sound of that so much?

“For what?”

“Austin. We’re throwing a little kickback. Mostly just the frat, but Larissa’s going to be there.”

He didn’t need to say anything else. She already understood the assignment.

“Say less. I’m sure we have time to get ready and plan our battle strategy.”

He smiled and shrugged.

“The party’s tonight.”

“What?”

He nodded.

“Hopefully you can come up with a plan in seven hours.”



Preparing to see Larissa again, she made herself as polished as possible. How was she going to take Cami seriously if she gave off the *girl-next-door* vibes rather than *confident-sexy-bad bitch* vibes? Of course, those weren't her words. Nothing screamed sexy and confident like a little black dress. It was strapless with a sexy slit that she stole from her brother's fiancée a year or two ago. She wore her braids in a loose updo, away from her bare shoulders, because in Deja's words, she had to *show some clavicle*.

It all felt worth it when Marsh stepped out of his car to open her door and he ogled her appreciatively.

"Trying something new; what you think?" Cami spun around and blood rushed to her cheeks. The corners of his eyes crinkled as his lips tugged to the side in a sexy grin.

"I'm likin' it, but no pink?"

That made her heart grow two sizes bigger knowing he recognized her fondness for the color.

As they walked up the steps to the frathouse, her nails dug into Marsh's palms. Tonight would be slow and painful if things went the way they did in the hallway outside of the bathroom. She wasn't going to let Larissa get the best of her this time. If she wanted a fight, then she was ready to unleash her inner Laila Ali.

"You know the plan. We have to pull out the big guns tonight. The whole fraternity will be watching us." Marsh leaned down toward her.

"I understand."

Small-talk and mingling with popular people she didn't know wasn't her forte, and there probably wouldn't be a punch bowl that she could stand and serve at again anyway. Cami squeezed his hand and pulled strength from him as they stepped inside. It was definitely more laid back than the



chaotic energy from before. The house was still packed, though, as people lingered in the foyer and on the stairs, drinking and laughing. Marsh held her hand tight and led her through the throng, stopping to greet people he knew.

“Lincoln.” A curly-haired guy clapped him on the shoulder. “The president has arrived!”

“Jonathan.” Marsh dapped him up and turned to Cami. “He’s the chancellor. So, everyone hates him because he texts us all the time.”

Cami raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like a thankless job.”

“It is, but I know everything there is to know. Like, you’re the new girlfriend I heard all about—” Jonathan looked around, leaning forward in a conspiratorial whisper, and said, “Nice upgrade, man, no offense.”

To her shock, Marsh didn’t look upset, and she used that moment to stand a little taller. “Thank you.”

They laughed, and the knot in her stomach loosened a notch. Feeling bold, she started to ask Jonathan questions about himself. She glanced up at Marsh when his arm snaked around her waist and he drew her close, but he continued to address his friend without meeting her eyes.

“Let’s talk more about the fundraiser later, ‘kay? Everybody here?”

“Yep, in the front.” Jonathan thrust a finger over his shoulder.

“We got this,” Marsh whispered in her ear as he led them out of the kitchen.

Some people were up near the wall talking, others on the couch and floor. When they saw Marsh, everyone cheered. Larissa and Austin were there, and Cami saw the moment her face fell.

“What’s up, everyone,” Marsh greeted. There was an empty spot on the couch, but it wasn’t enough space for both of them. Before he could react, Cami pushed him down into the seat.

“Can I sit on your lap?”

Consent was key. She was acting reckless, but after Winter and Deja’s encouragement, she decided to release the claws. Before she lost her nerve, she planted her bottom in his lap, resting her arm behind him.

“Yeah,” he squeaked before he cleared it. “Uh, yeah.”

Aware of eyes on them, Cami crossed her legs demurely. His arm circled her waist to steady her, and she had to bite back the groan that threatened to erupt as her behind made contact with his growing manhood.

*Oh mah God...*

Ezra shouted, “Hello, my new favorite couple!”

“Ezra,” Marsh returned.

He gave them a sneaky smile and handed them beer bottles. Needing some liquid courage, she tossed the beer back and gagged immediately. Marsh sat up and patted her back.

“What’s wrong?”

“Why is it so bitter?” Cami’s face was pinched, and she squinted at the bottle. They were drawing the wrong type of attention. Aware that the frat’s eyes were on their entire interaction, she tried to get back that bad boss energy.

“That’s an English beer. I’ll take it.”

He laughed when she pushed the bottle toward him and shook her head.

“Ew, that was disgusting.”

“They might have something else.” Marsh drank hers with

ease.

“We have some wine coolers,” Ezra offered.

Cami nodded. “Please?”

“I didn’t know we had little kids in here,” Larissa retorted.

*Shots fired.*

Cocking her head to the side, Cami observed Larissa. Marsh squeezed her thigh as everyone in the room grew quiet, watching the two couples, eyes darting back and forth as if it was a tennis match.

“Oh, Larissa, I didn’t see you there. Nice shirt; is that from JC Penney? My grandma likes that store.”

There was a murmur as Cami pinned her with a sweet smile. She may or may not have been taking, in Deja’s words, of course, “bitch lessons”; all the comebacks and nice-nasty ways to let someone know *I don’t fuck with you*.

Larissa smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“No, it’s from a high-end designer that my family knows. Something you may know nothing about. What’s that? Forever 21? TJ Maxx? It’s very sweet. Plain, like you.”

“You’re right, since I’m not materialistic. Or shallow. Or have to wear over-priced, sweatshop attire to feel important or be liked.” Cami thanked Ezra as he handed her a wine cooler. Darting his eyes to Marsh, he raised a brow.

*Thank you, Deja!*

Cami could see the invisible smoke oozing out of Larissa’s ears. Her hands gripped the red cup and someone turned the music up louder. She felt Marsh shift and rub his knee. Cami looked in concern.

“Knee pain still, Marsh? Have you gone to the doctor about that yet?” Larissa asked.

Austin was silent next to her, watching the two with a look Cami couldn't decipher. Or he could have just been confused. Cami didn't want to give the guy too much credit. Any frat brother who could screw their *president's girlfriend* with zero remorse was a snake.

"Why do you care?"

"I'm just concerned. Especially with the annual frat trip coming up. Wouldn't want your 'ailment' to ruin that for everyone else, but I know you're just selfish like that."

The surrounding crowd murmured as Marsh took a deep breath before sending a scolding look.

"Really? From what I know of Marsh, he's a very sensitive and caring person. He surprised me with my favorite ice cream at work yesterday. We even went dancing." Cami looked at Marsh.

"You dance, prez?" Jonathan asked in curious amusement.

Marsh flipped him off and people hooted.

"Ice cream? Dancing?" Larissa spat as if she just tasted dirt.

"Yes, or can you not comprehend that since it isn't about you?"

"Don't act as if you know me, sweetie, because you don't."

"I know beauty isn't everything, and when you want to be out of a relationship with someone, you woman up and voice that. You don't screw his friend behind his back and embarrass him, so I would say I know you well enough."

The words fell over her teeth. Her heart raced, and the adrenaline made her hands shake. Swallowing, she leaned back, steeling her gaze on Larissa as she stood. She looked hotter than fish grease and looked ready to steamroll both of them off the couch.

“Hm, you’re acting really bold for someone who was a non-factor until she scooped up my sloppy seconds. That’s suspicious.”

Austin tugged at Larissa’s hand, but she slapped it away. Cami placed her arm around Marsh’s shoulder, pulling him in closer. *I should be a bitch more often.*

“How would you know? Clearly, you were occupied with other *things*. But if you must know the dirty details, Marsh saved me.”

“Saved you how?”

“What can I say; I’m clumsy! Fell right into his lap—literally. A real-life knight in shining armor, and hardly anyone’s sloppy anything.” Cami gave a fake laugh. She was laying it on thick, but she felt emboldened by the deepening scowl on Larissa’s face. A weird sense of... *protectiveness* filled her. For Marsh.

“It’s easy to be that way with you, baby.” Marsh’s eyes darted down to Cami’s lips, and she licked them.

Temperatures rose as someone cleared their throat loudly.

“It’s good to see heartbreak didn’t stop our beloved president,” Austin added lamely.

Marsh narrowed his eyes at him. It was the first thing he said, and Cami instantly disliked him.

“You’re coming to our annual fall retreat then?” Ezra interjected.

Cami looked over at Marsh, who nodded, then to Ezra.

“Of course. I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

“Oh?” Larissa looked around at the crowd, ensuring she had their undivided attention. “I’m guessing he doesn’t have therapy that day.”

Cami watched Marsh grip the bottle. His body stiffened under her, and everyone's eyes went wide.

“Therapy?”

A shit-eating grin formed on Larissa's face. Pouting, she pointed between the two of them.

“Oh, you didn't know? You didn't tell her? Marshall...”  
Larissa tsked under her breath.

Marsh ignored Cami staring at him; his nostrils flared and he finished the beer.

“His court-ordered therapy. It was that or jail, but who wants to spoil the mood with talks of jail, court, and police and all that good stuff, huh?”

Cami would have fallen if she didn't grab the couch as Marsh sat up. “Larissa, you better watch your damn mouth—”

“Or what?”

Cami stood up. Her body was moving before her mind could catch up.

“Do you sleep well at night? Knowing that people think you're a ho?”

Larissa eyes narrowed, and she tossed the contents of her cup at Cami. The liquid splashed onto her face and down her dress. Cami gasped, shock freezing her body. It took her a few seconds to realize she was dripping, and then she lunged for Larissa.

“Whoa! Stop!”

Marsh grabbed Cami, pulling her back. She felt as if she was floating above herself, watching as she pushed at Marsh to get to Larissa. Never in her life had she experienced such blatant disrespect. Effortlessly, he pushed her behind him, glaring at Larissa. Austin stood, doing the same. The two men stood there, breathing hard as if they had just sparred ten

rounds. Ezra immediately got between them.

“You both know fighting is against frat rules. We’re brothers before all of this.”

Larissa gave Cami a bored expression before rolling her eyes and taking Austin’s hand. Marsh didn’t blink, and Austin took a step back.

“He’s no brother of mine. You remember your place, *vice-president*.” Marsh then turned to Larissa. “And you of all people should remember who really calls the shots. Disclosin’ my personal business and that shit you just did to my girl was foul and won’t be forgotten.”

Larissa glowered then pulled Austin up with her toward the backyard. Austin didn’t glance back.

People stared silently at Marsh, and Cami fought the urge of fleeing. He didn’t cower, meeting the gaze of everyone till they glanced away. Ezra stood and clapped his hands. “There’s beer pong on the back patio; we got a game of Uno going on in the kitchen. This is a party, after all!”

Everyone was dismissed. Ezra sent Marsh a knowing look before he smiled sadly at Cami. Some people lingered, hoping to catch more of the drama, but they were pushed out. Tugging her hand, Marsh led her through the front room and up the stairs.

“Court-ordered therapy? Jail, what is she talking about, Marsh?”

He pushed her into the bathroom, locking the door behind them. He grabbed a hand towel, forcing her to sit, and dabbed the liquor off her. The noise from the party below dimmed to a hum, and she tried not to think about how close he was to her. She bit her lip as she watched the veins bulge in his forearm as he knelt in front of her, causing her to squeeze her thighs together.

“Marsh?”

“It’s nothin’.”

“Nothing?” Cami’s voice raised as she looked at him as if he had fallen off the crazy bus. “Your ex-girlfriend just threw a drink on me. She said *court-ordered therapy*. You don’t casually bring up getting a court-ordered anything. Unless you did something to warrant it.”

His brows knitted together. Exhaling, he stared into her eyes and then did the unexpected. He presses a kiss on her forehead. His lips were warm and soft. Sitting the towel down, he placed his hands on her thighs. Her skin tingled at his touch, and she couldn’t help but jump when he squeezed them gently.

“Marsh? You’re not a felon, are you?”

Marsh’s lips thinned.

“Oh my God, you are a felon.”

“I’m not a felon.”

“Then what happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

Their heavy breathing filled the room. Cami’s thoughts were tossing and turning in a sea of confusion and despair. What had she gotten herself into? Who exactly was Marshall Lincoln? She cursed her touch-starved body as his hands rubbed up and down on her thighs. Her belly fluttered when his dark eyes connected with her pretty brown ones, and her thighs parted slightly.

“You don’t want to talk about it?” She cleared her throat, blinking away the lust. “Marsh, there’s no way to avoid it.”

Of course, Larissa would get the upper hand. She had gotten control, and now Cami was looking at him as if he was some serial killer or something. Cami pushed him away,



standing when he didn't say anything.

“Wait—”

He grabbed her, backing her up against the sink. Holding her breath, his hands went to her waist. His thumbs rubbed small circles, digging in slightly, forcing her to stand on her tippy toes. He was intoxicating, and he cupped her chin, tilting her head up to him.

“Tell me, Marsh.”

Licking his lips, he glanced at the door. Her eyes were big, and her bottom lip jutted out as she watched him swallow hard. Then he shook his head as if he was reliving something.

“I got into an accident back home in Texas freshmen year. Ran straight into an eighteen-wheeler.”

Cami gasped and placed a hand on his chest. He didn't react.

“It was my fault and... I was a mess afterward. The judge thought I was a threat to myself. Ordered me to go to therapy. I've been doin' it since.”

She gripped his shirt. It tugged him closer, but he still didn't look at her. His eyes were fixed on a spot on the wall.

“Marsh—”

“So, no, I'm not a felon. You don't have to worry about that.”

He let her go, and she was instantly cold. Unlocking the door, he left her alone in the bathroom without another glance. Cami slumped against the sink, feeling guilty for some odd reason. Who *in the world* was *Marshall Lincoln*?



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**IT WAS A RARE HOT** day in October. The entire city didn't know how to deal, which was why Deja and Winter were blowing up her phone. Cami lay on the floor in her room with a miniature fan and wiped her face with the back of her hand.

*Ninety-five degrees.*

Since the temperature in the city rarely reached above seventy degrees, the dorms didn't have central air. It was torture, and she would have been grateful for some AC because at least one of her problems would be solved. Her phone buzzed with a text.

This heat is pre-hell. The beach, anyone?

Winter responded:

That sounds great. Ocean Beach?

Cami groaned. Everyone and their mama would be there. They would be lucky to get a spot in the parking lot, and Cami typed:

Too many people.

Deja then replied:

Marshall Beach?

Winter sent a frown emoji:

That's a nude beach.

Cami wasn't interested in seeing people's butts. Except for a certain somebody's butt. She touched her forehead, imagining his lips still there.

Let's head over to Marin. Muir Beach.

Rarely did Cami go to Marin County. Right across the Golden Gate Bridge, the beach was quickly accessible by car unless you wanted to take the two-hour bus ride. Marin would be much quieter than the city and a chance to get out and into nature. The girls agreed and made a plan to leave in an hour. Cami sat there for a moment, looking at the ceiling as she thought about inviting Marsh.

What was he doing right now? Were Austin and Larissa over there? Was he suffering in this heat?

She thought again about what he said: *I was a threat to myself*. Talk about a bomb drop. She needed to find out more. She was hooked on this story; there was more than she originally thought and ... Words couldn't describe what this emerging feeling was, but she had grown to enjoy his company, and she needed to know the truth. She sent the text:

Beach day, wanna come?

She placed the phone on her stomach. Gosh, she shouldn't be this nervous. She looked at her phone. No response yet. Cami set the phone back down on her stomach. Ten minutes passed before it buzzed.

Sure.

Jumping up, she couldn't help but look in her mirror and smile. It was just a trip to a beach. That's all it was, and she'd ask him more questions and hopefully her curiosity would be cured. Time flew and she wrapped her braids into a high bun. Under her spaghetti strap tank and shorts, she wore a bikini she hadn't worn in nearly two years. She prayed she wasn't busting out of it too badly.

Marsh sent her a message that he was outside. Cami squealed as she grabbed her beach bag and sunglasses, sparing herself one last glance in the mirror.

The minute she saw him, she announced with a goofy smile, “You came.”

Wearing swim trunks and a muscle shirt, he hid his eyes behind a pair of aviator shades. She could feel his eyes roll up and down her body.

“You invited me.”

“Right. Duh!” She slapped her forehead with her palm, and he gave her a boyish smile. Focusing her gaze on the ground, she repositioned her tote on her shoulder. Cami didn’t notice he moved closer until he took her bag from her and then entwined his fingers with hers.

“How are we getting there?”

“Deja’s boyfriend, Spencer, is picking us up.”

“Deja’s boyfriend?”

Cami nodded. “He was her weed dealer.”

“Weed dealer?”

“Long story.”

A loud honk sounded, and a beat-up Jeep Patriot pulled up. Deja leaned out the window. “Let’s go, bums!”

They opened the car door and billows of smoke poured out. Cami coughed and waved a hand in front of her face as she stepped inside. Spencer introduced himself to Marsh. He went to San Francisco State University, not too far from PGU, but Cami never saw him with a backpack. He reminded her of Shaggy from the live animation of *Scooby-Doo*. Messy hair with a perpetually sleepy look on his face.

“Where is Winter?” Cami coughed once again as Marsh sat next to her.

Deja held the joint in one hand as she looked back. “She’s coming with Bria. Apparently, she didn’t want to hotbox on

the way there.” Her eyes slid over to Marsh. “Marsh, looking good. A lil’ smoke doesn’t bother you, does it?”

“Not at all.”

Cami frowned. “Deja...”

“Great. Let’s go, baby.” Deja turned to Spencer and patted his shoulder.

His driving was erratic, but in no time, they crossed the bridge and were in Marin. Cami had a secondhand high by the time they pulled into the parking lot. What shocked her was seeing Marsh smoke. Watching him inhaling and then letting it out of his nose in a thick, white fog was sexy.

“You didn’t tell me you smoked.”

“Every now and then.”

She smiled and looked away, trying to rub the flush out of her cheeks at the low rumble of his voice.

“If you need any more of the good shit, Marsh, lemme know. Spencer has the hook-up.” Deja turned and Spencer nodded.

“Hell yeah, man.”

They stepped out of the car. Marsh helped her out and handed her the tote as Winter call their names.

“We got a good spot!”

The sand glittered like diamonds. Beachgoers with tents and some on towels were braving the sunrays. The greenery of the coast was to their left with elaborate homes peeking over the cliff. The best part of being there was the dogs. There were so many. She laughed watching a chihuahua try to keep up with a lab and a mastiff.

“We brought weed and drinks. The bare necessities.” Deja pulled off her top, revealing a skimpy bikini. Spencer sat a

cooler down and eyed her appreciatively.

Marsh helped Cami spread out her blanket under the umbrellas Winter and Bria set up.

“Well, I brought food. That’s definitely an essential.” Cami sat cross-legged.

Deja flipped her hair over her shoulders. “Gimme a sandwich then.”

“‘Gimme’ isn’t polite.”

Cami’s stomach growled, and Marsh looked at her before his grumbled too. He smiled sheepishly at her.

“Can I have a sandwich?”

How could she say no to him? Cami passed out cold sandwiches, chips, and fruit. They gobbled it down in no time, and she felt Marsh’s eyes on her as she stood, stripping off her top and shorts. She caught her breath as he stood, not breaking their stare as he lifted his top over his head.

*Woah.*

A fine thatch of hair covered his chest. Muscles on muscles on his biceps and torso. She stood there gawking at his chiseled abs that gleamed with sweat as she resisted the urge to lick him up and down. Eyes traveling down, she jolted at the sight of the nasty, jagged scar on his right leg. Electricity buzzed between them as she watched his chest flex, taking her hand as they walked to the water’s edge.

“I don’t know about this.”

Cami hissed at the coldness of the water as a wave rolled over her feet. She took a step back.

“Scaredy cat.”

Cami opened her mouth to retort as Deja and Spencer blew past them into the water. “Come on, it feels nice!”

They fell under the waves, laughing as Winter and Bria walked by, giving them a thumbs-up. They were too cute as they held hands, rushing into the water together.

“C’mon, just get in.” Marsh began inching in.

The sun caught his waves, causing them to glisten, and a tingling started in the pit of her belly as he gazed at her intensely with an outstretched hand. Cami shook her head and crossed her arms.

“I’m gonna let it warm up a bit.”

“Warm up?”

*Oh lord, the happy trail and butt!* The ho in her wanted to feel those sleek, hard muscles, but she settled for just eying his butt and breathing like a creep. *Man*, it was too hot out here, and her heart beat way too fast.

“Just get in and get used to it.”

Cami lifted her feet as the waves splashed against her legs. “This is nice enough for me.”

She should have been paying attention, but the chihuahua from earlier darted by. Then the world turned upside down and her arms dangled as Marsh threw her over his shoulder, caveman-style.

“Marsh!”

Jolting as he ran forward, she wiggled as hard as she could, and when that failed, she began flailing her legs and arms. The water splashed on her face, and she dug her nails into his lower back, hissing as they tumbled into the ocean. Yelping, she fought to escape his grasp, feeling suspended in the water as the coldness engulfed her. Marsh released her, and water flooded her ears; she closed her mouth, holding what little air she had, kicking her legs and feet, heading for the surface.

“I hate you!” she gasped, breaking the surface and spitting out water.

Marsh popped up a second later, grinning. Slapping the water, it splashed into his face and straight into his mouth. He gagged, and she cackled before suddenly a water tide was in her face.

“My eyes!”

“Don’t be a baby!”

They laughed and splashed each other. He was right. She adjusted to the water quickly, but she wouldn’t tell him that.

It took her breath away for a second, to witness his bright smile. Splashing him again, she screamed and tried to run as he chased her. It became a trend. Deja, Spencer, Winter, and Bria were all playing and splashing one another. Amid flying water, she lost track of Marsh until she felt his arms circling her waist from behind. He loomed over her, and she let herself melt into his embrace.

“Hold your nose!”

They were falling backward. Keeping his grip on her as they went under, they re-emerged seconds later.

Marsh laughed loudly as Cami spit out water, twisting in his grip as she pushed him down into the water. She cackled as he flailed for a second, spraying Deja and Spencer.

“Watch it!” Deja splashed Marsh. He sputtered and splashed back.

Cami grinned and she thought how perfectly he fit in with her life. In their hotbox ride across the bridge, Marsh meshed easily into conversation with Spencer and Deja with his arm thrown across Cami in the back seat. His fingers traced little patterns on her shoulders, and for a moment, she believed it was real.



“Let’s play chicken fight!” Deja hopped on Spencer’s shoulders.

Snatched from her fantasies, she had to remember he didn’t belong in her world. This was all a part of a deal. She didn’t belong in his world of fraternities and future lawyers and stuff. He couldn’t stay in her world or *with her*.

“You comin’?” Marsh lifted her and she yelped. Her legs curled around his waist as he carried her to the circle her friends formed. Winter and Bria would be the judges, and Marsh set her down and then helped Cami onto his shoulder. Gasping at the sudden height, she clamped her nails into his skull.

“Ow!”

He pried her fingers out of his head.

“Sorry! I’m just—jeez, you’re a giant. How do you get oxygen?”

“Focus, girl. We gotta win.”

The competitiveness was another surprise. She didn’t like the look in Deja’s eyes as she rubbed her hands together, urging Spencer forward. Cami opened her mouth to switch just as Winter shouted to start.

Spencer and Marsh barreled toward each other. Cami bounced crazily, gripping Marsh’s hair as she slid back and forth across his shoulders.

“Push her down! Get her!” Marsh’s shouts were overpowered by Spencer and Deja’s screaming. Deja came at her, and she was freakishly strong. Twice Cami teetered dangerously off Marsh’s shoulders before he stepped back, allowing her to gain her balance before rushing back into the fold. Deja and Cami locked hands, pushing with all their might. Cami’s arms shook like a geriatric woman on a walker. They drew the attention of beachgoers who joined in the

cheering. Cami was growing tired and used the last bit of strength to give one great shove, sending Deja and Spencer tumbling into the water.

“Yes!” Cami reached down, exhausted and muscles throbbing but excited, to high-five Marsh. “Who’s next?”

Cami and Marsh reigned as chicken fight champions until they were usurped by an older couple from the beach. That old lady had the strength of Hercules; she didn’t stand a chance. By now, Cami was thoroughly pruned and thirsty. Leaving the group to continue to fight it out, she collapsed onto her blanket, reaching for her sunglasses and a water bottle. The heat leveled off, and a breeze kicked up as she laid back, taking a sip of water and closing her eyes.

Flexing her fingers and toes, the exhaustion made her limbs feel like lead. She stifled a groan lifting up one arm before it fell into the sand with a thud; maybe playing chicken wasn’t the best idea after all.

“Hey.” Marsh’s voice made her jump.

Pushing her glasses up, she bit her lip. “Hi.”

His heated gaze bore into her, and without thinking, she crooked her finger and wiggled it, beckoning him forward, and he obeyed. She watched him closely, stretching out beside her, but her heart jolted when Marsh plucked the water from her hand.

“May I?”

Cami nodded and Marsh licked his lips, her body growing taut as she held her breath watching his Adam’s apple bob as he drank. She felt electric, and on a crowded beach, they weren’t the only ones sharing a blanket. With wearing next to nothing, it felt even more intimate.

“Having fun?” Marsh handed back the half-empty bottle.

Cami was glad for the sunglasses. She had no control over herself, and her face was showing everything she felt internally. She placed a hand on his chest, feeling his heart pump steadily, and she was ready to risk everything to feel him on her skin.

“Yeah,” she squeaked.

He grinned as if knowing the effect he had on her.

“What are you thinking about?”

She was curious about his past but decided against asking her questions. This moment felt like magic to her, and she couldn't bear to break it. She shifted her body up and groaned loudly. She winced and Marsh caught it, looking at her with alarm.

“What's wrong?”

“Fine, just moved the wrong way.” Cami waved him off but sat up much slower. What if she told him about... her situation? Maybe he would feel comfortable telling her his.

Marsh didn't appear to be convinced, opening his mouth to protest. She cupped his face with both hands. His breathing slowed, and his eyes lidded as she lowered his mouth to hers. The kiss was slow. Tentative. Swinging her leg over his hip carefully, she ignored the flash of pain. His fingers gripped the flesh of her hips, pressing their pelvises together; he let her take control.

Her body trembled, excitedly and nervously as she touched her tongue against his. A gasp fell from her when his lips moved against hers softly; his hands snaked around her waist and then down to cup her behind. Her body sang as the kiss deepened; he raised a hand to clasp the back of her neck. She purred against him, hips rutting forward slightly when his teeth sank into her bottom lip.

Marsh slowly laid back, bringing her with him, and she

braced one hand on the other side of his head, allowing her body to meld with his. This was paradise, and she never wanted to leave.

His hands slid over her backside, gripping and kneading her; she broke the kiss to exhale shakily. Marsh touched her slowly as if memorizing every curve and dip of her body. He trailed his fingers up and down her spine languidly as their tongues tangled and danced until it made her lightheaded. Cami let her hands travel down his chest, over his flexing abs, and she couldn't have placed this kiss into any category if her life depended on it.

Marsh drew back and pressed his forehead to hers as they both breathed raggedly. He tugged on the tie at the waist of her swimsuit.

“Did I tell you look hot as fuck in this?”

“Mmm?” She was still trying to come back to earth from the kiss.

“You do, baby.”

Cami licked her lips. She didn't want to talk. Pecking his lips once again, she closed her eyes, loving the feel of his stubble against her face and the imprint of his arousal on her middle. Marsh turned so that she was lying on her back and him covering her front.

He boldly ground against her, and Cami let out a small moan. He removed her sunglasses, and she opened her eyes; they connected, his gaze smoldering.

Marsh kissed the side of her throat, trailing kisses as he pulled her leg up against his side when she heard her name called.

“Cami!”

The rest of the group was heading back to the blanket. It

was a shock to her system, and she jumped from him. She was just about to bust it wide open on a beach. In public. Scooting up, she let him fall forward with a grunt. Dusting herself off, she was breathing way too fast as she smiled shakily at Winter. What happened to not belonging in his world? That this relationship wasn't gonna last?

“Ooh, were y'all getting nasty?” Deja grinned devilishly, and Cami smacked her teeth.

“Deja!”

Discreetly shifting his shorts, Marsh pressed a kiss to Cami's shoulder, ignoring Deja. She wished she could be as cool as him. Kissing him was amazing, but she had to listen to her head, not her heart. Or other tingling body parts. He would walk away from this unscathed. She couldn't say the same for herself.

This was getting deeper, faster than she realized, especially since her feelings were becoming involved.



His life was going topsy-turvy, and he couldn't get a grip on it. He should be asleep, but Cami dominated his thoughts.

On the car ride back, Cami stole glances at him when she thought he wasn't looking. He couldn't help but think how cute she was. Or how he loved the feel of her lips on his and her body against his.

The way her brown eyes brightened when she laughed. The sweetness of her scent. Why did she have an impact on him? He'd been content simply sticking to the plan. To his status quo of just pretending and then parting ways, but now, he was growing emotions. She intrigued him and unearthed this longing deep within him he thought he buried.

Marsh played with his phone on his chest; he'd been

debating it for twenty minutes. Would she still be up? He looked at the red digital red numbers once again. *When did I ever get nervous like this?*

She had wanted him, and dammit, he wanted her just as badly. He licked his lips as he thought about the way she reacted to him. At that moment, something within him became limber, and the wall he set up crumbled. The desire to show a part of himself, a part he hid, but desperately wanted to reveal to her. To have someone truly know him. Damaged and all.

A mix of trepidation and excitement warred in his gut. Cami Clinton was someone he should keep his distance from. The girl was trouble. Too nice. Too cute. Too addicting. Yet... he still wanted to get closer to her. Figure out more of her quirks. Listen to her rant about some anime plot he had no clue or cared about, but he would listen because it mattered to her. He liked how her eyes brightened as she yakked about dancing. He liked the happy feeling that filled his chest when she was around. She was a bright flame, and he was the moth.

Just as quickly as the happiness came, it left. *Yara.*

He didn't deserve happiness while she was dead. It wasn't fair he was experiencing life and she couldn't. How could he even explain that to Cami? He barely talked about it with Larissa.

He felt guilty because lately Yara no longer dominated his thoughts. It was Cami. He didn't think he would find anyone else that would make him smile. Or laugh. *Or play like a kid.*

He'd turned emotions off and controlled them because they were too damn painful to endure. He had to remember that she didn't really belong with him. He would only hurt her. Ignoring all rational thought, he sent her a text.

Are you up?

His phone dinged, and he opened the message embarrassingly fast.

Yep.

She was typing again, and Marsh didn't breathe until those three dots turned into words.

Can't sleep?

When was he ever at a loss for words? It took him a few moments to reply.

Want to take a drive?

Cami agreed and he jumped out of the bed. Fifteen minutes later, he was in front of her dorm. He let out a tense breath; she came out, showered and changed. He thought she looked too damn fine at that moment. It had to be the way the braids fell around her shoulders. The oversized jacket swallowing her frame. The slow sashay of her walk. He had to order his body to calm the hell down. Yet, the urge to kiss her, to feel her body against his was overpowering. He was having a helluva time willing his dick to behave.

"You got here quick." She flashed him a nervous smile as she entered the car. He breathed in her sugary scent, and all he could manage was a grunt.

It was easy to get through the city at night. Cami turned the music down low, allowing a pop song to play. Stopping at a red light, he glanced at her. Her chest rose and fell gently, her eyes fixed on the city. His gaze fell to her glossy lips. One kiss. It shouldn't have shaken him like this. Her head turned toward him, and her cheeks flushed darkly before she glanced away. He took her hand, fitting her small one into his, and as they drove, he glanced down at the connection. They managed to get on the highway, approaching the Golden Gate Bridge, when she gasped.

"Look!"

Flashing him a cheeky smile, she didn't let go of his hand as she sat forward. Marsh had been over the bridge thousands of times, and crossing the bridge at night was his favorite. A giant beacon in the darkness, they looked up at the powerful architecture before she turned the music even lower to hear the crash of the waves below.

"I don't think I've been here at night."

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

She nodded slowly, the glow of the streetlamps reflecting in her eyes. Across the bridge, he took the exit and pulled into an empty parking lot with a view of the bridge.

"You come here often?"

They still held hands, and he liked the soothing touch.

"When I can't sleep. Or think. Or..." he said.

"Or what?"

After Yara died, he felt as if he moved in a fog. Physical therapy, court, and family were a lot to deal with. A year had passed before he could say her name. Then another year when he didn't feel guilty for living.

"Anyone ever tell you how nosy you are?" There wasn't venom in his voice this time.

She giggled and he turned their hands over. Tracing her palm with his thumb, he heard her soft intake of breath.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He kept his gaze fixed on their hands. "Sometimes, I just need a different type of scenery."

"I understand. That's why I choose PGU." Cami smiled sadly, and his brows shot up. He didn't think he'd ever seen sadness on her face before. He squeezed her hand.

"Is that so?"



Cami nodded. “I mean, nothing’s wrong with the Midwest. I like the freezing winters and summers with crippling humidity.”

“Doesn’t sound bad. So, why move?”

Anger. Frustration. Sadness. It flittered across her face, and he could empathize with her. She released his hand, and he hated losing the connection.

“I was a surprise baby, apparently. My parents always acted like newlyweds, up until my dad died. The story is I came after a long string of miscarriages, and my mom says my dad always wanted a little girl.” She turned to face the window. “They wouldn’t stop trying and were ecstatic when she finally got pregnant with me. My dad would dress me up in pink and bows all the time. Stereotypical, I know, but there’re literally hundreds of pictures of him and me in matching outfits.”

She sighed, and he watched her blink several times. “It didn’t help I was a premature baby too. I was always in and out of the hospital. So, my family’s always been extra protective of me. Especially Devin, my brother.”

“So, you wanted to get away?”

She shrugged. “Something like that. Dad died when I was five. Mom checked out for a while. Devin practically raised me since then even though she’s better now. He still likes to think he can boss me around.”

Cami sniffed and rubbed her face. Her voice was clinical as she recited the memory.

“If I stayed home, then Devin wouldn’t have let up, and sometimes, I think it hurt Mom to see me. I look like my Dad. They say I have his laugh. His walk. His nose. The sad thing is all I have are the memories Devin and my mom have planted.”

His heart twisted. He knew that feeling.

“I don’t know, I feel bad sometimes. I only have the idea of him, but not the real him, ya know? He was the one to put me into dance. Apparently, he just ‘knew’ that was my talent. I sometimes like to imagine him coming to my dance performances. Or silly signs with my face on a shirt. Once I got older, I began making up memories as if he was alive. Just to not forget him. It made me feel closer to him.”

Facing her, he rested one arm behind her and rubbed her shoulders comfortingly. Her lips parted, and she breathed deeper.

“How did he die?”

“There was a fire out at sea. My dad was in the Emergency Fire & Rescue unit. The oil tower collapsed before he could get out.”

Marsh cursed. He tugged her closer, kissing the top of her head. She glanced up at him with watery eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

“I remember bits and pieces. Like catching my mom crying in the kitchen. Devin would drink in the garage. After that, they just... focused on me. I don’t know how to describe it. They wouldn’t let me get sick. I couldn’t fall off my bike. It was smothering, and when I got old enough, I wanted to leave.” Her breath caught. “Is that wrong of me?”

Marsh shook his head. “Of course not.”

She looked back at the bridge and leaned into his embrace.

“I feel bad sometimes. I know my family loves me. They still love my dad, and I don’t know... When Devin does talk about him, he seems so happy, and I feel this disconnect. I don’t want to have it. I look at Dad’s pictures and just think. I can feel down, but I can’t cry. I don’t know my father.”

“I don’t think you’re a bad daughter. You’re wearin’ his color. That’s a form of honor.”

Cami sighed. His mind went back to the words of Dr. Lake. Something she had told him in their very first meeting.

“I think all you can do is to keep listenin’ to their stories. Looking at the photos and trusting what your mother and brother say about your dad will help you form your own connection to him. Don’t compare your relationship with your dad’s memory to your family. Just love him however that looks for you, and know your family may smother you, but it’s all from love.”

“Speaking from experience?”

She was too damn smart.

“Somethin’ like that.”

Cami turned and his arm fell. Her eyes rolled over his face, gauging his expression.

“Does it have to do with this Yara person?”

He felt that he could barely breathe. “Cami—”

“I understand if you don’t want to talk about it, but I’ve been thinking since Larissa said something. Putting things together.”

She shifted in the seat, tucking her feet under her body. He sucked in a breath as her hands cupped his face. Her thumb rubbed back and forth across his cheek, and he closed his eyes.

“I got sick. Really, really sick, and my brother moved out here to be with me.”

He opened his eyes, thinking of her wincing in pain on the beach earlier. At that moment, he wanted to touch her. Run his fingers in her hair. Hold her. Kiss her.

“It’s hard... for me. I can’t talk about it yet. Maybe if I talk about it with you, you can trust me with Yara?”

Marsh moved in closer, tilting his head as he inspected her. Sick? That explained the looks of discomfort he saw. Right now, he couldn’t tell anything from looking at her, but he was the king of facades.

“Are you okay? What does this mean for you?”

“I’m fine. Really.”

His hand went to her wrist, and he squeezed it. Sucking in a breath, he went against his better judgment.

“Sometimes, days go by and I don’t think about her. Not one thought. How can I not think about her?”

Cami pursed her lips.

“I tell myself I can’t forget. If I had paid closer attention to the road, if I wasn’t being an asshole, maybe she would still be here.”

“Some things happen for a reason.”

He rolled his eyes. “You know how many people said that to me? Things happen for a reason. It was her time. Doesn’t make it better. Doesn’t erase my guilt, nothin’ will.”

Cami sighed as Marsh leaned back from her embrace, staring out at the bridge and water tossing back and forth. He had been through this before with Dr. Lake. With his family. His sister.

He was determined to stay aloof. This wasn’t her problem, and he was used to dealing with this emotion alone, but he still found himself reaching out to her.

“I thought that when I got sick. I remember sitting in the hospital crying, wondering why me?” Cami took his hand. “I never got my answer. Never even got a hint, but I think all of us, as people, have a connection to something beyond us.

Something that can't be understood by logic all the time. It's both the beauty and mystery of the world, and allows us to come to peace with never knowing why things happen."

He could tell that she wasn't saying something.

"I guess that's the only way to look at it, huh?"

Cami nodded, and before he knew it, she leaned over the armrest. He stiffened, and she squeezed him tight. Burying her face in his neck, she rubbed his back, and slowly, his arms went around her and squeezed.

"Cami—"

She was... hugging him? He'd felt untouchable most days. Buried in a mound of guilt but Cami was approaching him. He didn't scare her off. Kissing his cheek, she placed her head on his chest and stayed just like that.

It was the first time, in quite a while, that he felt genuinely happy. To be connected. Marsh slowly lifted his hand, stroking her back. She leaned back, eyes falling to his lips. He saw her invitation. Taking her mouth gently, he gave her small pecks. Grinning, she chased him as he retreated, and there was no audience this time. They could go the distance. He felt her tongue graze his lip, and she melted against him, any shyness gone.

His hands traveled down her body, feeling her shiver as his hands met her shorts. His fingers played with the band before he slowly popped the button open. Spreading her thighs wide, she sat back, licking her lips as her hand cupped his face, as his hand dipped inside.

"Marsh..."

He chuckled softly as his other hand touched and squeezed her anywhere he could. She whined softly as his fingers grazed her panties.

She kissed him harder, and he savored her taste. Fruity. Her lip gloss covered his mouth, but he didn't care. Breaking the kiss, his lips trailed down her neck, sucking the delicate skin harshly. His heart was in his throat as he sank his teeth into her flesh, earning a soft gasp from her. He traced the bite with the tip of his tongue, and she clutched the back of his head.

Yanking her panties down, his entire hand cupped her pussy. She felt silky, smooth, and slick, and her breath caught as his fingers slid inside her. Satisfaction took over his face; he had to fight back a groan at how tight and hot she felt. "Uh! Marsh—"

Cami eyes fluttered as he began to work his fingers in and out of her, nice and slow, rubbing her clit with his thumb in a sweet motion that made her moan and hips buck. Spreading her legs wider, she provided better access for Marsh to finger her for his enjoyment. Slow and steady.

"Feels good, baby?" He leaned forward, placing a kiss on her shoulder.

Her wetness flowed, seeping onto her thighs. The fabric of her shorts made it hard to move, and Cami released a noise of frustration. Squirming, she pulled back, shimmied down, and kicked off her shorts. Marsh was greeted with the sight of drenched panties. He yanked the crotch of her panties to the side, watching her body involuntarily contract with need. His dick throbbed like a pulse. He was glad he wore jogging pants; his dick needed breathing room to grow and expand comfortably.

"Your shit is so wet." Marsh slid his fingers back inside her pussy. Cami choked on a moan as he finger-fucked her greedily. His fingers worked her up, and she weakly grabbed his arm, lifting away from the pressure.

"Don't fuckin' run from me." He grunted, leaning forward

to place a love bite on her neck, he applied force on her hip with his left hand, keeping her down so he could hit the right spot with perfect precision.

She cried out, and he pulled his fingers out of her, holding the two fingers high. He parted them, the sticky string of her cum causing both of them to suck in a breath before he licked them clean. The taste of her exploded on his tongue. Breathing heavily, Marsh lifted her tank, exposing her bare breasts. Her eyes rolled, and he leaned forward, placing gentle kisses traveling to her nipples as his fingers went back between her legs.

“You watchin’ me?” he murmured.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?” He curls his fingers further. “Too much?”

“Marsh—”

Increasing his strokes, she moaned loudly, his hand dripping wet from his fingertips down to his wrist as he felt her pussy clench. He felt like a savage, trying to pull more moans and gasps from her. It was so primal and sexy how she couldn’t hold back the whimpers, especially when he sucked her nipple.

“*Oh*,” Cami breathed.

He was drunk on her, and his only goal was to bring her pleasure. He sucked hard and nibbled on the sensitive nipple. Cami squeezed her thighs, trapping his hand in between, but his long fingers circled her clit before dipping back inside slowly, continuing to bring her up to peak. Her pussy instantly clenched around his fingers, and she hissed, grinding against them as he hummed.

“Mhm, baby.” He loved the feel of her feverish skin, her tiny hot pants of breath, and the cooling wetness of her cum clinging to his fingers—he wished he had the pleasure of

tasting her cute little pussy.

“Marsh!”

He pulled his fingers out, sliding a knuckle slowly through her lips. He plucked her clit, and her eyes flew open, and her back arched. A hickey was proudly forming on her neck as she braced her hands on his shoulders.

“Marsh!” she whispered and rocked her hips faster.

“Let it go. Lemme feel it.”

Drawing a lazy circle on her clit, he thrust his fingers as he released her nipple, watching the emotions play across her face.

“Mhm.”

“Yeah? Yeah, come on.”

“Yessss!”

Marsh could thrive on how contorted her face was, how her eyes rolled to the back of her head, and how her lips parted and trembled. He felt a tremor in her leg, her nails digging into his skin. Her pussy pulsed as she held her breath, trying to quiet her moans.

“C’mon lemme hear it.”

“Please.”

“Yeah?” He groaned with her. The squelching sounds of her wet pussy taking his fingers were music to his ears. She moaned his name again. His dick twitched and it took everything in him to keep from cumming.

“I’m about to... I’m about to—”

“Then go ahead, baby. Cum nice and hard for me.” He licked his own lips, nodding at her, wanting to feel her release badly.

Cami exploded, calling out his name as she melted into



him. Marsh massaged her back as she came back down to earth. He stroked her faster, and he heard her muttering something under her breath. His blood thundered in his ears as he leaned forward to steal a kiss from her.

It was surreal how right all of it felt. *Mine*. Nothing could explain the immediate possessiveness he felt. He suddenly cared about everything she had to say. He wanted to see her with a smile on her face always. He wanted to be the reason she smiled.

“Marsh...” Her eyes were sleepy as he kissed her, silencing whatever she was going to say. When they finally broke away, he knew the truth.

He couldn't escape his budding feelings. For her. *Fuck*.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

### WHERE WAS CAMI?

She was never late. He texted and stood by the door of the ballroom studio, waiting for her to stroll in, but once everyone arrived and Harry rolled out the TV to show the foxtrot, he grew anxious.

“I want you all to remember all students participating in PGU dance program classes are required to attend and participate in the end-of-semester showing.”

Marsh’s stomach dropped. Dancing in public? He was barely keeping it together now. How embarrassing would it be for him to get on stage in front of the entire school, and no doubt Ezra would come and bring the entire frat waiting to see him fuck up.

“There are no exceptions. Now, partner up.” Harry clapped his hands.

He didn’t want to dance with anyone but Cami. He hadn’t realized how dependent he was on her in this class, and Harry had to force him to pair up with another girl. It was... weird. She didn’t move the same. Not that she wasn’t a good dancer, but she let him stare at his feet. If he stepped on her toes, she smiled politely and didn’t huff and puff. She didn’t go into the history of the dance and why he should respect it. *Nothing*. He missed his girl.

*His girl?* He needed to get a grip, but he still just wanted to hold her. Thoughts flooded: Was she avoiding him? Did

they move too fast? He would move at whatever pace she was comfortable with.

Savannah observed him closely, typing on her phone; he knew what she was doing. He couldn't give a shit what she was telling Larissa. Once class ended, he sent Cami another text. Another thirty minutes went by and no answer. He remembered she mentioned Winter working in the math department or something like it. Lucky for him, his last class of the day was in the same building. After class, he found Winter behind the desk in the department.

"Marsh! What are you doing here? Do you have an appointment?"

He shook his head. "Nah, have you seen or heard from Cami? I haven't been able to get in touch."

"She's sick."

Some relief trickled through him knowing nothing horrible had happened, but then anxiousness filled him as he thought about her confession last night: *I got really sick before.*

"I talked to her this morning. She said she was gonna try to go to class."

He didn't wait for her to finish. In less than ten minutes, he was in front of Cami's dorm. Students streamed in and out for their afternoon classes, and he managed to slip in with a group entering.

He hadn't been in a dorm building since his freshmen year. He forgot how busy and loud it was. Heavy metal music pumped from a bedroom as an RA banged on the door. Posters about a movie night and other events upcoming littered the walls. As he emerged on Cami's floor, a flock of girls left the communal bathroom and froze in their towels and robes. They squealed, fleeing in different directions as he shook his head. He found Cami's door with her name tag on

it. He knocked. No response.

Exhaling, he knocked again, harder. “Cami?”

Putting more force into his knocks, he didn’t let up, banging and calling her name. The door finally opened, and Cami peeked out wrapped in a blanket.

“Why are you banging on my door like the police?”

Her voice was deep and raspy and half her braids were up, and the other half was unraveled. She touched her hair when she saw him staring. “I was taking down my braids and fell asleep.”

He quelled the pounding of his heart; she was standing in front of him. “Really?”

“Maya, my brother’s fiancée, is going to redo them for me this weekend.”

Her nose was red, and her eyes were low. She looked like hell. The thick, woolen cow-print pajamas she wore made him smile until she shivered and sneezed.

“I didn’t hear from you today.”

Cami’s eyes widened. “So, you came to find me?”

He bit his bottom lip and nodded. Though he knew it was better to keep his distance, he kept coming back. It was maddening for him. Didn’t he declare this relationship was fake? He could probably write a book on his complicated feelings, but he settled on going with the flow—for now.

“You need some help? I don’t mind staying.” He started forward, and she placed a hand on his chest.

“No. I’m gross and I don’t wanna get you sick.”

Rolling his eyes, he grabbed the front of her shirt and pulled her to him. She squealed, and he placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. Wrapping his arms around her, she indeed felt

warm. He felt his anxiousness dissipate.

“I don’t care if you’re gross. I can and want to help you with your hair. Remember, I have sisters. I’ve taken braids down hundreds of times.”

With that, he stepped inside. He should have known. The place was girly and feminine. Stuffed animals filled up most of the bed. Posters were on the wall of anime characters, photos of her family and friends, and string lights hanging like a waterfall. There was a pile of used tissues on the floor, spilling out of the garbage can near the bed, and she grumbled as she staggered past him.

“I feel awful.”

He sat his backpack by her desk. She eased slowly onto her bed, wincing before wrapping herself in the blankets in a tight ball. He placed a hand on her forehead, then neck, his fingers brushing over the hickey he left.

“You’re burnin’ up.”

Cami hummed and closed her eyes. He urged her onto her back as he sat on the edge of the bed. Cupping her chin, she stared back at him through low lids and smiled.

“Did you take some medicine?”

“Ran out.”

“You eat somethin’?”

“Dry Cheerios.”

He sighed. If his mama knew she was living like this, she would have fallen out. Mary Ellen Lincoln taught all her children, regardless of gender, how to properly cook, clean, and handle any type of sickness. Especially her son. She was not for coddling him and being strict with her daughters.

“Probably got sick from the temperature drop.”

She moaned, shifting on the bed and planting her face into the pillow. *Shit, I invited her out. Then fingered the fuck out of her.*

“I’ll be fine tomorrow, you’ll see.”

Marsh didn’t believe that. He stood and shrugged off his jacket. He wasn’t going to leave her here with dry Cheerios and no medicine. “Uh uh, I can’t have you livin’ like this.”

On top of the dirty tissues, her room was messy, and the clean freak in him was spazzing out. He picked up her discarded tissues and placed them into the trash before taking it out. He cleaned off her desk, stacking her books and notebooks in a pile, lined up her shoes, and hung up her jacket. The beach bag was still packed by the door and filled with sand. He found a stack of clean hand towels. Taking one, he went to the bathroom with the beach bag. Dumping out the sand, he placed the towel in the sink and ran cold water over it.

Back in her room, he placed it on her forehead, propping her up on the pillows.

“This should cool you off.”

She let out a sigh of relief at the feel of the cold rag before closing her eyes. Making sure she was comfortable, he spotted her ID card on the desk. He took it to get back inside the building, and not wanting to leave her alone for too long, he ran to the local drugstore. Taking care of her wasn’t in the fake dating job description, but that didn’t matter. He was simply helping a friend in need. Right?

*Keep trying to live in denial. Doesn’t change the facts.*

He went down every aisle, tossing cold medicine, soup, snacks, and vitamins into the basket. He had enough that she could start her own pharmacy. Before he left, he passed a five-dollar movie bin. The first movie he picked up made him laugh

out loud, and he tossed it into the basket.

He made it back to the dorm in record time. Entering her room, he called out, “Cami?”

She hadn’t moved from her position. Sitting down the bag, he lifted the rag, feeling her forehead. She was still hot.

“Where do you store your medicine?”

She didn’t open her eyes as she waved off to the closet, barely awake. “Medicine cabinet in my closet.”

He left out the cough syrup and vitamins. Opening the cabinet, he saw it was bare except for two almost full prescription pill bottles. He picked one up.

*Plaquenil.*

He picked up the other one.

*Mycophenolate.*

He’d never heard of those medications before. Was this for the sickness she had? What was it? Cami began coughing, and as she sat up, the coughing morphed into hacking. Pain flashed across her features, and she held her hip, rubbing it. Placing the bottle down, he hurried to her.

“Shit, what’s wrong?”

“My body aches, that’s all. Nothing to worry about.”

Opening the cough syrup, he thrust it into her face.

“Open up.”

She groaned and swatted at him. “Ew. No.”

“Cami.”

“It tastes nasty.”

Shaking her head, she tried to lean away, but he forced her to sit up. Each way she turned her head, he was there with the medicine. “Take it.”



“Why are you being mean?”

He rolled his eyes at her. Urging her to take the medicine with more force, she eyed him wearily before she opened her mouth. Making sure not to spill a drop, she gagged as he sat the cup on the bedside table.

“Drink all of it. If you spit it up, I’m makin’ you take another dose.”

“You’re so bossy.”

Shaking his head, he laughed at her miffed expression. Cami huffed out a breath and crossed her arms, but she did already look a tad better.

“Drink this ginger ale. My mama says it cures everything from sore throats to heartache.”

Cami laughed then winced, holding her chest. “Black people think ginger ale cures everything.”

“Only if it’s Canada Dry.”

He made sure she drank every drop. He wasn’t the mother hen type, and it had been so long since he had taken care of someone. For the next several hours, he didn’t take his eyes off her. If she moved and winced, he was fluffing her pillows. He wished he would of picked up something for muscle pain. If she shivered, he was checking her temperature.

Marsh would much prefer homemade chicken noodle soup, but the store-bought brand would have to do. Nuking it in her microwave, he managed to maneuver her into a sitting position, and she lay on his chest.

“You need to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Don’t be a brat.”

“I’m tired,” she whined and tried to turn back onto the

bed, but he kept her in a sitting position. He stirred and blew on the soup and brought the spoon to her mouth.

“I want you better. Can you do that for me?”

He shouldn't be doing this, but he didn't want to leave. She had gotten under his skin. He couldn't recall a moment when either Larissa or he took care of the other when sick in the three years they dated. Cami watched him for a few seconds longer before she opened her mouth. In comfortable silence, he fed her, pausing only to pick up the napkin and wipe the corners of her mouth.

Cami swallowed before she said, “I can feed myself.”

“Hush and let me feed you. You know, when I was younger, I used to think when my mama or sisters fed me when I was sick that it somehow put magic in the food.”

“What? That's silly.”

“That's what Meg said, at least. She was always telling me some off-the-wall stuff as a kid.”

“Like what?”

“That the TV lady turned the TV off at six o'clock every night.”

Cami snickered and he smiled.

“She just wanted to watch whatever MTV reality show that was on at the time and not my shows.”

“Smart woman.”

“Or how about when she told me Coke was black water so I wouldn't ask her for some?” He couldn't help himself. He laughed. “Meg is just...”

He never talked about his family so openly like this. Not that there was any bad blood or that he didn't love his family. There was a rolling list of uncharacteristic things Cami was

making him do. *Christ*, why was he letting her get under his skin this way?

“Meg got stuck with me since my other sisters ditched me.”

Cami opened her mouth as he fed her another spoonful. “Are you close with the rest of your family?”

“I like to think that. We are a close family. After the accident...” Marsh sat the soup down and rubbed his jaw. “There just wasn’t a reason for me to go back and see them.”

“So, you abandoned them?”

Her words were harsh, but her tone and expression were the opposite. The air was hot and cold at once. He could hear his mother’s voice in his mind, her pleading with him to come home after the accident. Her face, tear stricken and close to his after he woke up from the accident. Marsh plopped a cough drop in her mouth. “It’s more to it.”

“How so?”

Standing, her eyes widened as she watched him ease her back onto the bed. Tucking her in, his voice was gruff when he said, “Get some sleep.”

He headed for his jacket and shoes when he heard the blankets rustle.

“Where are you going?”

Cami’s arms were around his waist, her head placed on his back. He stiffened for a moment.

“You need to be restin’. We’ll do your hair later.”

She shook her head, and he managed to turn around. She rested her chin on his chest, staring up at him with her pretty brown eyes. He felt his resolve weakening.

“Stay.”

His shoulders fell as he stared at the door.

“Can you... stay?”

He had already stayed longer than he intended, and she was stirring up memories he didn't want. He'd rather leave right now while he was able to still keep it together, as she pressed her face into his chest, swaying them side to side. He closed his eyes and placed his hand on hers.

“You really want me to stay?”

She gave him a soft smile. No words were needed. Sitting his shoes down, she held his hand as they made their way to the bed. She pulled back the cover, scooching over, before patting an empty space. He pulled his shirt over his head, leaving on his wife-beater. He couldn't help but smile as she stared him down. He spotted a rat tail comb on the floor by the bed. He picked it up as he slid into her bed, and she immediately pressed her body against his. Wrapping his arm around her, he picked one of her braids and began gently unraveling it with the comb.

The heat from her body was an inferno to his cool one as she reached for the remote.

“What do you want to watch?”

“Something funny.”

“How about *Final Destination*?”

Cami frowned. “That's a horror movie.”

“It's still funny.”

“Murder and predetermined death are not funny.”

He sighed before he patted her side and got up from the bed. Digging around in the plastic bag, he held the DVD in his hand, and she shrieked and clapped her hands.

“Yes!”

“I told you if we watch this chick flick, then we’re watching my movie next.”

She grinned goofily as she hit the button for the CD player on her laptop that was connected to her TV and returned to the bed.

The opening credits to *13 Going on 30* played. She lay on his chest again as he unraveled her braids once more. When the 2000s pop music played, he rolled his eyes but felt a fresh surge of energy as she went on and on about the scenes she wanted him to see. Shushing him (He wasn’t even talking), she settled and squealed softly as soon as Mark Ruffalo entered the screen.

“Will you come with me to my brother’s this weekend?”

Marsh leaned back slightly, and Cami bit her lip as she glanced up at him.

“Devin has been stalking me nonstop to visit, and Intensified is having its first competition this weekend. I hope it was okay; I told Devin about you. He wants to meet you. Don’t worry! It’ll be very low-key, and I’ll make sure my brother is on his most tolerable behavior.”

Meeting family? It would be better to keep family out of things, but the way she batted those lashes at him, he ignored that gut feeling.

“Of course.”

The movie played, and not too long after, Cami’s breathing turned to a deeper rhythm. He continued taking down her braids. He wouldn’t admit it to her, but the movie was cute. Just like her. He ran his fingers through her hair, detangling it gently. He could leave now, his promise kept somewhat. When her arms tightened around his waist and she snuggled deeper into his chest, he had no choice but to watch Jennifer Garner wake up in her New York apartment and

figure out where her life went wrong. *Remember, this is pretend. You're only doing her a favor. This is all pretend.*



It was pitch-black when Cami woke up.

She wasn't sure when or how long she'd been asleep, but her mouth felt like cotton. One moment she was watching the movie and the next ... complete darkness. She was already feeling much better, and the ache from her hip wasn't throbbing so badly that morning that she felt as if she got ran over by a semi-truck. She was lying on something hard and cool, and she remembered she wasn't alone in bed.

A heavy arm draped over her waist, and Cami pushed it off gently and sat up. Marsh's head was turned to her with one arm behind his head. His chest rose and fell gently, and something in her heart twisted at the sight. He looked so peaceful. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen that expression on him before.

They must've been sleeping well because she drooled a bit on his chest, and he let out a soft snore. She quickly wiped the drool away, totally embarrassed, and tugged the blanket toward her. He was a total cover-hog, but it made her feel happy. He stayed with her. No one had stayed and taken care of her other than Devin. Marsh was so caring and attentive. Even when caring for her, Devin was still a drill sergeant, forcing her to take Robitussin and fish oil like it was the eighties.

Cami placed a hand on her hair. Marsh had taken her braids down and twisted her 4C hair into two French braids. Her thoughts whirred. He stayed with her. Skipped his other obligations to be with her. *Was taking care of her a part of the contract?*

The call of nature was too much to ignore. Gently climbing over him, she made it to the bathroom and back, and

he was still asleep. Her mind tried to find the answer and meaning to this, even when she tried not to.

Cami heard a phone buzzing. It was the same sound she thought she had heard in her sleep. Looking around for her own, most likely it was Devin or her girls.

Nope. It wasn't her phone. It was Marsh's.

She found it facedown by the bed. It had fallen when she went to the bathroom. She paused. Was it her place to pick up his phone? She didn't want to seem like some creepy stalker or something, but what if it was his sister Meg?

She sucked in a breath. *Larissa.*

There were five missed calls and multiple text messages. *What?*

Shaking her head, she glanced at Marsh, feeling iciness descend on her body. They were talking? Common sense told her to sit the phone down, that she wasn't going to like what she saw, but his phone was an older model without a lock, so it opened easily. It was the last two messages that rocked her.

You know I still love you, Marsh.

Please just talk to me.

Cami knew it wouldn't be easy for them to cut ties. There was just too much history and bad blood but... Marsh wasn't stupid. He shouldn't want to talk to her after such a public betrayal. It wasn't logical. Cami's eyes watered. Marsh had responded: *Maybe.*

*Maybe?*

Her heart slammed into her ribcage. Curiosity indeed killed the cat. She was tempted to wake him up and demand answers. The other part of her didn't want to know. He didn't technically owe her any explanation. She didn't want to break the spell of one of the best days in her life, sickness and all. *Did he want Larissa back? Had he changed his mind? What about*

*their deal?*

She thought about the night at Golden Gate bridge. It was crazy, exciting, and dangerous, all at the same time. He didn't even demand that she do anything in return. He just helped her get herself back together and gave her another searing kiss that had her staring up at her ceiling until dawn broke.

Cami exhaled shakily, searing emotional pain and anger heating her.

She set the phone down. This wasn't the time to become pessimistic. There could be a logical explanation, still, dark thoughts whispered to her. *He would go back to her. I wasn't Larissa. I wasn't the cool girl. I was awkward and weird.* Did Cami think they could ever be in a sustainable relationship after this deal?

Crawling into bed, she lay, staring at the ceiling. Marsh mumbled, rolling over and snuggling into her side. She didn't want to, but that weak part of her allowed herself to press her body against him. It couldn't be true. He wouldn't hold her, kiss her, or be with her if he wanted Larissa back. She opened her arms, and Marsh pressed his face into her neck, his soft breaths caressing her skin, and her eyes fluttered.

She wanted to get lost in the fantasy that those messages didn't exist. That Larissa wasn't trying to steal him back, and that their relationship wasn't one-sided. She needed to get a grip.

If she didn't, she was going to come out of this situation for the worse.



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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**CAMI SNUCK ANOTHER GLANCE AT** Marsh as they sat on the noisy BART train heading to Oakland. He was going to meet her family. Her brother. *Devin*. This was a disaster waiting to happen, and she desperately wanted to hop off the train and head back to the city.

“Tell me about your brother again?” Marsh’s breath brushed her ear.

She shivered and glanced at him. Arms around her shoulders, his finger left a trail of fire in its wake as he brushed it softly back and forth on her arm. It was cruel how dependent she was becoming on his touch. To unsuspecting outsiders, they looked like a couple in love. She had to blink a few times to remember his question. The dance competition between Intensified and The Maple Grove Knights had snuck up on her, and nervousness filled her belly.

“Uh, Devin? Well, he’s big on order and respect. He used to be in the service. Make sure to remember that.”

“So, answer ‘yes sir’ and ‘no sir’. I gotcha.”

Cami cleared her throat when a sly look passed his face. Why did he always smell so good? Why did she like all his attention on her? She desperately wanted to confess her feelings, but discovering Larissa’s texts left a bitter taste in her mouth.

September and October came and went, and November was already here. There was only a month and a half left before he graduated and the deal was over.

“He’s into politics, but I suggest you stick to the safe topics like sports. No, not sports. He gets testy about that too. The weather. Yeah, that’s safe.”

Marsh raised an eyebrow. “He can’t be that bad. What? He’s into government conspiracies or a die-hard Oakland fan? Which just means he has bad taste.”

“No... but he gets *passionate*. Also, don’t ever say that about the As in front of him. Devin’s already going to be highly suspicious and looking for a reason to hate you.”

“He’s your big brother. I do it with my sisters’ partners all the time. It’s expected.”

“We’ll just play it by ear. Follow my lead and we should come out somewhat unscathed.”

“I’ll turn on the southern charm. Don’t worry.”

Cami’s nervousness intensified as they walked up the steps to Devin’s house. There were children’s toys strewn throughout the lawn and in the rose bushes of the Spanish-style home. She inhaled deeply and pressed the doorbell. Chaos erupted inside. Children screamed and there was a thunderous stampede of feet. Someone yelled and it sounded like the TV was turned up as gunfire and explosives sounded. She started to knock on the door as it flew open.

“Why are you knocking on my door like you the damn police, girl?”

“What are you wearing?”

She giggled as she eyed Devin. He was still fit and bulky, so it was comical to see him with a food-stained towel thrown over his shoulder and a pink frilly apron. Almost a complete replica of Cami, he shared the same almond-shaped eyes and button nose; the only difference was tattoos covered his entire top half, and there was flour or... something in his cornrows. Barbeque sauce or ketchup was smeared on his apron. He

looked like a domesticated mountain man.

Cami grinned and launched herself at her big brother.

“I almost forgot what you look like, girl. You don’t come around anymore.” Devin held her tight and planted a kiss on her forehead.

“You say that all the time and we video chatted yesterday.”

“It’s not the same as seeing you in person.”

Devin’s eyes landed on Marsh, and he gave the universal expression *Who the hell is this?* “Who’s this?”

*Here we go...* Cami took a step back, aware that her brother was watching her intently. She took Marsh’s hand. For her or his benefit, she wasn’t sure. Devin frowned at the gesture.

“This is... my boyfriend. Marsh.”

Marsh smiled at Devin and outstretched a hand. “Nice to meet you, Devin.”

“Like the wetland? It’s Major Clinton to you.” Devin looked at his hand before taking it roughly. Cami watched Marsh wince slightly before pulling his hand back.

“Ignore him.” She glanced at Marsh. “Devin is fine.”

“So, you’re the one dating my sister?”

Marsh nodded, and to her relief, he didn’t show fear. “Yes.”

“Is that an accent I hear?”

“Yes, Texas. Lubbock, Texas, to be exact.”

Cami wanted to hide under a rock.

Devin sucked his teeth. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-three, sir.”

“Twenty-three? Nigga, you damn-near look thirty.”

Cami gasped. “Devin, that’s rude! He didn’t mean it, Marsh.”

“I meant that shit. You ever been to prison, youngblood?”

*He couldn’t be more embarrassing!* She was going to scream, but luckily, they were saved by her five-year-old nephew barreling past his father to get to her. “Auntie Millie!”

Cami kneeled to catch his little body. She picked him up as she swung him side to side, nuzzling her face into his tight curls. “Ooh, you getting heavy.”

He leaned back, showing the little gap in the front of his teeth. “I lost a tooth!”

“Really?”

“I’m waiting for the tooth fairy, but Demi says she’s a bloodsucker. What’s that?”

Cami made a face and looked at Devin.

He shrugged. “You the one that got her started on *The Vampire Diaries*.”

“Who are you?” Caleb blinked at Marsh.

He laughed. “I’m Marsh. Cami’s boyfriend.”

“You’re my new uncle?”

Devin, Cami, and Marsh made noises, varying from disbelief to awkwardness.

“You regard him as any other stranger on the street,” Devin said.

She rolled her eyes at him. “Just think of him as a friend.”

They heard Devin’s name being screamed from the back of the house, and he groaned.

“Here I come!”

Cami spared a glance at Marsh as she stepped inside. Luckily, he didn't look like he wanted to run the other way.

The smell of something delicious filled the air. Her stomach growled as she navigated the home easily. A sectional and recliner took up the center of the living room with pictures of the family lining the wall.

“What?” Devin asked Maya, his fiancée.

They entered the kitchen in time to see Maya enter from the patio. For years, Devin begged her to marry him. (Though Devin would say he didn't beg. Just consistently and persistently asked.) Their parents' harmonious marriage till their father's passing made both the siblings want that someday. Maya didn't necessarily believe in marriage after her parents' own tumultuous relationship.

As long as she was a mother, she was content. Until her breast cancer scares and Devin's lack of legal rights over her care. Cami never told Devin of Maya's confession to her, but she knew that Devin was the one for her. Even with all his flaws and Maya's fear that marriage would ruin the chaotic beauty of their relationship, she couldn't die and leave what-ifs.

Maya was healthy now, her hair hidden by the tribal scarf that glowed against her dark skin. Two huge gold hoops clanged as she shook her head, holding a fork with a shriveled, burnt hot dog.

“Some meat burned.”

“What? I just asked you to turn it over.”

Maya placed a hand on her hip. “I told you I didn't know what I was doing.”

“I ask for one simple thing,” Devin mumbled under his breath as he took the fork from her.

“I ask you for a lot of things, and you disappoint me all

the time, but you don't see me complaining." Maya narrowed her eyes on him before she turned to Cami. "You're here!"

Setting Caleb down, she hugged Maya.

"With a guest too." She glanced at Cami with interest before she reached a hand out to Marsh. "Nice to meet you."

He introduced himself, and before Maya could ask another question, Cami said, "This is my boyfriend." She enjoyed saying that too much today.

"Boyfriend? This is the one!"

"You say it like I have a harem of them."

"You stayin' with us tonight? Should I break out the champagne?"

Cami ducked her head and winced. He probably thought she came from a nuthouse.

"Auntie Millie has a boyfriend!" Caleb sang and danced.

Maya snapped her finger at him, giving him that Black mama stare-down, and pointed to the front. "This is grown folks' business. Go play with your sister."

"Demi's on the tablet!" Caleb stomped his foot.

Maya sent him a sharp look, and he stamped his foot again before running out the patio door.

"Let me get you both something to drink. You look stressed. Nothing happened on the train, did it?" Maya went to the wine cooler and brought out a bottle.

"No, no. It's just... your fiancé. I don't know why you wanna marry him." Cami pulled out a seat and motioned for Marsh to sit.

"The benefits of being a spouse to a veteran," Maya grinned and winked as she found glasses and poured wine. They each took one. "He's gonna be a total pain in the ass

about this but don't worry."

"He's annoying."

Maya eyes twinkled as she held the glass to her lips. "When did you two meet? How long has this been going on? Cami was tight-lipped with information."

"A few months now?" Cami looked at him and then into her glass. Right. They prepared for questions.

Marsh nodded. "At a party."

"Aw, that's so romantic."

"You think everything is romantic. You watch too many Hallmark movies."

"I got you hooked on them; don't front for your man."

*Her man.* That sounded good. Cami peeked at Marsh, and he was watching them with interest.

"What are your plans after graduation, Marsh?"

"Law school in Chicago. My sister is a partner at her firm."

She focused on the linoleum as the two continued talking. Lawyer. She could definitely see him as some big attorney one day. While she'll be... wherever, still fighting time until her body completely gave out. She rotated her neck and flexed her joints; the achiness hadn't completely subsided yet, and she lifted her right leg. Marsh had brought her some rub-on muscle relief that she packed in her bag. Kicking her leg back and forth eased the tightness.

"Not too much longer, huh? What are you two going to do after graduation? Long-distance?" Maya pushed the glasses toward them.

The couple shifted in their seat, and Cami fiddled with her glass.



“I’m sure no matter what we decide, we’ll make it.”

It was scary how easily the lie fell from his lips. He laced his fingers with hers across the table. Pinning her gaze to the wine bottle, she nodded, flashing a quick smile before pretending to read the ingredients.

“Did you bring the stuff for your hair?” Maya thankfully changed the conversation.

Nodding to Maya, she clapped her hands. “Great, I’m ready. Marsh, you’re more than welcome to hang out in the living with us. Devin’s grilling in the backyard, and he needs more help than he thinks, so you can help him if you decide to have mercy.”

Cami didn’t want to leave him with Devin. “You don’t have to—”

“I’ll step outside and see if I can help.”

He squeezed her hand and placed a brief kiss on her cheek while Maya swooned. Taking his glass, he disappeared. Maya waited for a brief second before she started with the third degree.

“Oh my God. He’s so nice—and fine. *Southern and a gentleman*. And who’s going to be a lawyer. That means money...”

“I’m not with him because of what he’s going to be.” Cami took a big gulp of wine, frowning at the bitter taste.

“Of course not, but it helps. Nobody wants a broke lover.”

“Please don’t call him my lover. What is this? The eighteenth century?”

Taking the bottle of wine, Cami left the kitchen, heading to the living room. Maya followed and handed her a black plastic bag she got from the beauty supply. “This is the only hair they had. Will this be okay?”

Cami lifted the package of hair. Opening it, she ran her fingers through it.

Maya sat down. "It's not pink like you wanted; it's more of a caramel, but it's all they had. Could be a nice change, right?"

Cami loved the color. It was time for a change.

"That's fine."

Sitting on the floor between Maya's legs, they chatted as she parted Cami's hair, and they watched the ending of the movie playing. Maya parted her hair before she cleared her throat and giggled.

"So, have you all..."

"Maya."

"I have to ask. The way y'all kept looking at one another and just the total vibe. I thought I was going to have to hose you both down."

Cami turned, stopping Maya. "We were just sitting across the table."

Maya gave her a look.

"You're in love with the guy. Admit it."

Cami looked over the hair products she bought in her own bags. "I brought some more jam in case we needed it."

Maya tapped her shoulder. "Listen to me."

Cami sighed and dropped her shoulders.

"Do you miss him when he's gone?"

"Yes."

"Do small things remind you of him?"

"Maybe."

"Does your stomach drop and do that butterfly feeling

when he turns the corner?”

Cami pinched her lips.

“It’s love.”

She wanted to tell Maya so badly that it was all just pretend. They weren’t really together. That he was probably going to go back to Larissa. Instead, she sighed and just said, “I wasn’t planning on... catching feelings.”

“Who expects to fall in love? It hits you when you least expect it.” Maya squeezed her shoulder and began parting her hair again. “Now, let’s make you look even more beautiful than before for him.”



Devin and Maya had an amazing patio.

Their trellis was decorated with string lights and expensive-looking furniture. Standing at the grill, Devin grumbled, stepping back as the flame ignited. There was a little girl with two afro puffs on either side of her head. There were two braids with brightly colored barrettes framing her face and round glasses. She looked to be around eight or nine years old, playing on a tablet at the table with Caleb pouting next to her. When he stepped onto the patio, both looked up, and the young girl looked at him suspiciously.

Caleb grinned. “Marshmallow!”

“Close.”

Devin looked at him and grunted. He might have underestimated how tough of a nut Cami’s brother would be to crack, but he wasn’t worried. He hadn’t become president of his fraternity by not developing the art of schmoozing.

“How’s it goin’?”

Devin raised an eyebrow. “What you know about grilling,

youngblood? You fresh off the teat.”

“I’m from Texas.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Barbeque capital of the world.”

Devin tossed his head back and laughed. “You’re funny.”

“It ain’t funny if it’s the truth.”

Marsh took a step closer to the grill. He could see ribs, chicken, burgers, and hot dogs in various stages of doneness, along with corn on the cob, asparagus, and stuffed jalapeños and mushrooms. It all looked so good; they were all going to get *“The itis”* afterward.

“Those are some safe meats, ain’t it?” As he expected, Devin’s face morphed into irritation.

“What do you mean *safe meats*?”

Marsh shrugged and placed a hand in his pocket. “You know, *easy meats*. No brisket? Pulled pork? Steak, pork shoulder, or lamb chops? A challenge?”

A vein popped into Devin’s neck. “Excuse me?”

“I mean. My daddy taught me how to barbeque a porterhouse steak to perfection when I was what... twelve?”

He tried to hide his grin as a savage look crossed Devin’s face.

“I’ll have you know I’ve been working since I was six—”

“Mmm, impressive. So, that’s why you can’t cook?”

Devin slammed the grill top down. Marsh smirked.

“What kind of grill is this? A char griller? You need a Weber if you really want to up your game.”

Devin vibrated with anger next to him, and Marsh ducked his head, continuing. “What charcoal are you usin’? I suggest

addin' some hardwood chunks, dependin' on the flavor you lookin' for. Oak and cherry are my favorites."

The men stood in silence, and Devin eyed him for a long time before he said.

"Are you normally a wine man?"

Marsh looked at his glass and shrugged. "I'm whatever I'm offered."

For a second Marsh was worried by the wild look in the man's eyes. Devin sat the tongs down and went over to a cooler that was hidden discreetly behind the grill. He pulled out a bottle and shook it at him.

"Since you know so much, try this."

"What is it?" Marsh took the bottle. *T.Y. Harbor.*

"It's from Japan. Had it when I was there; best thing ever." Devin opened the bottle for him, and he took a sip. He exhaled and passed Marsh the bottle.

"Ooohh, does Mama know about that?" The little girl was the spitting image of Maya.

Devin frowned at her. "Stay out of grown-folk business."

Marsh took a sip and gagged, coughing as he beat his chest. It was as if he drank battery acid.

"Strong? It will knock you on your ass if you're not careful." Devin slapped him on the back and he sputtered. Clearing his throat, he braced himself before taking another sip.

"I see you now. Just so you know, I'm an expert griller."

Marsh nodded, trying to rub the burn away in his chest as Devin snatched the bottle back.

"You know what? I don't care if Maya hates eating leftovers. Since you think you know something, youngblood,

let's see you cook. Demi, go get my meat out my special cooler."

The little girl ran inside the house, and Caleb eagerly snatched the tablet. Several minutes later, the little girl came back with a package almost as big as her. He slapped a hand on Marsh's shoulder, causing him to grunt, after unwrapping the meat.

"Tell me what you think about this. I get it from my meat guy, and it's all off the books. I don't do grocery store meats. That shit will kill you."

"Ooohh, that's a bad word," Demi said and Caleb giggled.

Devin ignored his daughter. "You not scared, are you, Texas?"

"I told you I'm a pro at this."

Just as Marsh expected, Devin's wall came down.

He wasn't that bad. An hour or two passed, and they cooked the brisket and steaks in harmony with Devin telling him stories of his service duty. He and Devin laughed as he told Marsh a story about Cami as a baby.

"Are you serious?" Marsh laughed, now on his third beer and feeling it.

"Naked as the day she was born. Hopped out of the tub, ran bare-ass through the house and into the street. Daddy had to chase her and bring her back in." Devin flipped over the meat and took a sip of beer. "Do you mean right by my sister?"

"Absolutely."

Without a doubt, Marsh cared about Cami. Pain and guilt had haunted him for so long that he thought sentimentality led to loss. He lost Yara. He lost Larissa. He couldn't go through another loss, and he told himself to keep logic and reason with her. Yet being with her family proved his

resolve was slipping.

“You probably already know this, but she got really sick last semester. At first, we thought it was just the flu or something. She lost thirty pounds in a month. Wasn’t moving or eating; all she did was sleep. One day, she calls me at three in the morning saying she’s coughing up blood and was on her way to the hospital.”

Marsh’s eyes widened and his mouth dropped. She never revealed the intimate details. He thought about her being sick a few days ago and gripped the beer bottle. Should he have taken her to the hospital?

“I was a wreck. Mom was a wreck. She stayed in the hospital for almost two months, only to have to do months of physical therapy. It fucked me up, man. They weren’t sure what triggered it. If you could see her then, it looked like she wasn’t gonna be with us anymore. Like a fucking husk, or shell of herself or something.”

Devin ducked his head, wiping his face. Marsh swallowed, thinking of the mostly full pill bottles in her room.

“She has lupus, but you know that. Arthritis too. I know she hates to talk about it, but I wanna talk to you, man to man, ‘cause maybe she’ll listen to you. I came out here in case of another flare-up.” Devin turned to him. “So, she could have someone closer for support. That first month in the hospital she was by herself. I just felt like the biggest piece of shit that I couldn’t get to her quicker.”

Marsh thought about her behavior over the last few months. He could barely count on his hand her mentioning her illness at all. He definitely noticed her massaging her knuckles at the club. The wincing on the beach. Her sickness afterward. She never uttered a peep, but he saw the pain.

“I love her. More than anything, but she likes to be difficult and shit. She won’t listen to me, but try to convince

her, if you can, to go to that support group. It will help her.”

*Support group?* Devin motioned for him to bring over the aluminum pan with the meat.

“If you can do that for me, I won’t torture you so much.”

Marsh laughed but inside he felt cold. He had lots of questions for her.

“Of course.”

“Also, you’re in the basement. Ain’t no fucking in here tonight.”

Once the food was ready, Devin told the kids to go in and get Maya and Cami. They were setting up the table as Devin grilled the kids if they really used soap to wash their hands.

“Can’t have barbecue without more booze!”

Marsh turned around, and he sucked in a sharp breath. He loved her hair anyway or the color that she had it but... this color on her?

Her brown skin seemed to shimmer against her braids. They were a beautiful caramel mixed with the natural darkness of her own hair; the braids were side-swept, straight-backs, and falling down her right shoulder with the slicked-down, curly baby hairs. Maya did a great job.

She smiled at him, and he was unable to stop the roaring emotions reflected in his eyes.

“Wow,” he muttered when she stood in front of him.

“Do you like it?”

She twisted her hands as he ran his hand lightly over the braids, careful not to hurt her if they were still too tight. Marsh swallowed twice.

“You look beautiful.”

Devin coughed loudly, and the pair looked at him as he



placed potato salad and spaghetti on Caleb's plate. "There are young eyes here."

"Oh, hush." Maya nudged him.

"Daddy, I want a boyfriend too." Demi bit into her hotdog.

"You can have one when you're eighty."

She pouted and turned to her mother.

"You can have one at sixteen."

"Maya!" Devin shook his head at her.

While the couple bickered, Cami and Marsh helped themselves to the food. A pang of longing for his family hit him. He missed moments like this. Everyone together, having fun and relaxing. He'd forgotten about the plate of food in front of him as he watched the family interact with one another. He felt Cami's hand touch his arm, jarring his thoughts. They stared at one another, and words didn't need to be said.

The potato salad was perfect and the meat expertly seasoned. Biting into one of the heavily sauced ribs, he couldn't hide his moan. It tasted almost like barbeque home.

When Marsh was finished, there was still food on his plate, but there was no way could eat another bite. Cami snagged his last rib, biting into it with gusto, and he wondered where she put it all.

"I'm stuffed." Marsh rubbed his belly.

Maya, Devin, and Marsh looked equally sleepy. Cami was the only one still munching.

Devin yawned. "My eyes were bigger than my stomach."

"What about the park? You promised us the park!" Caleb slammed his fist on the table.

“Yeah!” Demi instigated.

Maya sighed and looked at Devin. “Your kids are talking to you.”

“Now they’re my kids?”

The kids began chanting “the park”, and the parents sighed before setting their gaze on Cami and Marsh.

“It’s down the street. Do you mind taking them?”

Cami glanced at Marsh, licking the sauce off her thumb and he nodded.

“Sure.”

The kids cheered, launching themselves from the table and into the house. Maya managed to get them into jackets as they jumped up and down at the door. “Mind your auntie; don’t let her tell me you were actin’ a fool.”

The kids gave unconvincing agreements to behave, rushed out the front door, and Cami followed them, shouting at them to slow down. Maya grabbed Marsh’s arm before he could step out.

“You’ll make sure they’re all safe?”

“Of course.”

Demi and Caleb ran full steam ahead of them as Marsh and Cami walked slowly, their hands brushing as they walked.

“So, did my family scare you off yet?”

Marsh shook his head. “Nah, it was a walk in the park.”

“What’s your family like? I’ve only heard you mention Meg?”

Cami’s shoulder bumped into his, and he thought the setting sun made her look lovely.

“It’s a stewpot of personalities. Daddy is outgoing and

loves being the center of attention. He'll talk to anythin' with a pulse. Most of his stories are made-up, but he'll swear they're all true. Mama is the perfect hostess, always makin' sure cups are filled and bellies full."

There was that look from her again. Innocent yet alluring, and he had to will away the urge to kiss her.

"Miranda is in Oklahoma gettin' her doctorate. She'll probably tell you some horrible fact that will leave you up at night. Marissa is teachin' English in China. She's dyed her hair enough wild colors that always damn near send Mama to the hospital. "

"No way!"

Marsh nodded. "They're twins, but Miri and Marissa are always arguin', even thousands of miles apart. Meg is the most levelheaded and patient of us all."

The park was closing in now. The kids took off across the grass, shouting at them to hurry. He smiled as a fresh memory resurfaced.

"I remember one day, we had to go to school. The bus stop was at the end of the road from our house. I swear I don't know how it started, but someone threw a mud pie, and it ended up on the back of Marissa's head—"

Cami gasped, and he chuckled as she grabbed his hand.

"She wore this nice purple dress because it was picture day. I think it was Miri, to be honest, or Meg, but she thought it was me. I told her it wasn't, but she didn't believe me and dug her fingers into the mud and flung it in my face."

Demi and Caleb ran straight for the empty playground set.

"It was a full-out battle. Somehow, we all were tusslin'. There wasn't enough time to clean up, and we had to go to

school like that. Muddy and sweaty. When Mama saw the pictures, she had a fit. Whooped all our butts.”

Cami cackled as they made it to the swings. They sat down on them as they watched Demi and Caleb yell and play on the jungle gym.

“That sounded like fun.”

He was telling himself that he shouldn't touch her again. He shouldn't be telling her childhood memories. He needed to keep his distance, but whenever she was near, the rest of the world ceased to exist, and she made him talk effortlessly.

“We've had our moments.”

“What about Thanksgiving? Are you not going home?”

“Meg's comin' to visit me. I don't make my parents fly.”

Cami pouted. “Still... it's family. They're the only ones you've got.”

They swayed back and forth before Marsh cleared his throat. “I know you said your dad passed, but what about your mom? Where is she?”

Cami let out a breath as she pinched her face, trying to remember. “Last time she called me she was driving through Colorado? She's part of a biker gang.”

Marsh eyes widened. “Biker gang?”

She shook her head. “Biker gang is harsh. Let's say biker club. They're doing a cross-country trip right now.”

Marsh blinked, and she bit her lip.

“My mom had empty nest syndrome once I left. She got laid off from her job at the hospital, and then she met someone at the grocery store. A bunch of things happened and then she was on the road, but she calls us, letting us know where she is. We talk multiple times a week. She sends me

little souvenirs from each of her stops.”

Marsh didn't know what to think. “That must be... fun?”

“If you ask me, I think it's just still a part of her grief process, you know? I don't think she ever properly mourned Dad. I remember bits and pieces, but according to Devin, she struggled after my dad died and with being a single parent. Devin did what he could, but she sacrificed a lot. Then being left home with no one to distract her, the memories overwhelmed her. She was going to stay here with Devin and Maya when I got sick, but I told her no.”

“Why did you tell her no?”

He thought about Devin's words. Cami was stronger than she realized. When it came to Winter and Deja, or her brother, or even Intensified, she was always putting them before herself. Why she chose to struggle with her sickness alone didn't make sense.

Cami shrugged. “I didn't want anyone else to see me... weak. Both of them always took care of me. I want to take care of myself, you know? Prove I could do it and not be a burden.”

She stared at him with wide eyes, and he gritted his teeth.

“They don't see you as weak.”

“I just wanted to handle it. To finally be an adult, but I couldn't, and now Devin's here.”

Marsh nodded slowly. “You're not mad about that, are you?”

“Devin is very persistent. I couldn't fight him if I tried, but he treats me like another one of his kids. I'm an adult and I want to be treated like one.”

“Your brother told me you have lupus and arthritis.”

Cami sucked in a breath. It looked as if she wanted to run from him.

“Uh, yeah...”

“Do Deja and Winter know? Your teachers?” Marsh extended his legs and pushed himself back, letting the force pull him back and forth. She shook her head.

“Why not?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Then explain it to me.”

Cami sent him a look. “Well, it’s not complicated. I don’t want anyone else to see me as weak. I’m okay. Honestly. Nothing has happened since, just some achiness. All I want to do is dance and have everything be normal again! If they knew about my illness, they would treat me differently. Savannah would become vice-president, and I refuse to let that happen. If I just keep doing what I’m doing now, everything will be fine.”

Marsh sucked in a deep breath and struggled to find the right words to say. It felt like looking into a mirror. “You know if you need help, then you should get it.”

“Is Devin trying to get you to convince me to go to the support group? No.”

He stood up and walked over to her swing. Standing in front of her, he grabbed the chains and stepped between her legs, forcing her to look up at him.

“It could help.”

“I bet it can.”

“Therapy has been great for me.” He was exposing the rawest parts of himself, but he continued. “After my accident, I went to a support group for my... grief, but therapy was better.”

She looked at the ground as the kids’ screams echoed.

“I was drivin’ with Yara. She was my girlfriend. We dated all through high school and my freshmen year here. It was late, I was tired. I shouldn’t have been drivin’ at all, but I needed to get her home. We were arguin’. I wanted her to stay at PGU, but she wanted to go back to Texas. I closed my eyes for a second, and then a truck appeared out of nowhere, it seems. All I could hear was Yara screamin’ followed by pain in my leg. All over my body really.”

Marsh closed his eyes as the memory replayed in his mind. Pelting rain. Bright lights. Screeching and crunching of metal. Ejecting through the front windshield and onto the pavement. His heart raced and he had to count back from ten. He felt Cami’s hand on his face.

“I blame myself for her death. It’s my fault, and I live with it every day. Why aren’t I dead? She had much more to live for, and even a few years later, the grief and regrets haven’t faded.”

His heart raced and he leaned back, counting back from ten. “It got to where I wasn’t eatin’. Talkin’. Livin’. My parents brought me to a group session. That helped significantly, and for the first time after six months, I felt somewhat alive.”

He opened his eyes, and he saw an indecipherable emotion in her eyes.

“Marsh—”

“I’m sayin’ we can’t change the past. Find whatever may help you deal with this because it’s not goin’ away. If I can do it, then so can you. You are strong, Cami, and don’t think askin’ for help is bein’ weak. It’s not.”

They stayed silent for several minutes before she stood, forcing him to take a step back.

Cami reached for his hand, threading her fingers with his. He let out a sigh as she wrapped her arms around his waist, laying her head on his chest.

“Cami...”

Cupping her chin, he pressed his lips to hers, unable to resist. Heat rushed down his spine to his toes. He savored her taste as she curled her arms around his neck, standing on her tippy toes. His tongue swept across her lips, silently demanding she open up to him, and he dove deep when she complied. Marsh felt as if he could kiss her forever. Everything around them, the sounds of traffic and the laughter of the kids, faded to nothing.

“Ooohh, y’all kissing! Imma tell my daddy!”

She let out a soft sigh and leaned into him. He laughed and turned to Demi, who stood there with her hands on her hips.

“Demi! Grown folks’ business!” Cami hollered.

Marsh smiled before he returned his lips to hers. She curled her fingers into his shirt when he released her.

“I’ll try. I’m not saying I will.”

“That’s all I can hope for.”



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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**“WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU’RE *going?*”**

Cami looked up at Devin from tying her shoe. He was in his pajamas and robe, and she shook her head and sat back. “Looking like somebody’s grandpa already?”

“It’s almost midnight.”

Tonight was the night. Her body and heart buzzed with energy. This was it. Everything she had been practicing for. Could she keep up? How tough had the Knights gotten? Her mind was whirling. Going to the dresser, she swiped some gloss over her lips. “I know the time.”

“Do you have to go out?”

“Devin, don’t start.”

This was the reason she tried to keep her visits to a minimum. He always treated her as if she was a child. Newsflash: she could do what she wanted when she wanted.

“I don’t care about that. I changed your diapers.”

“As you never fail to remind me.”

Devin frowned as she dusted imaginary lint off her uniform, an all-black ensemble with the group’s emblem, a flame that morphed into a phoenix, on the front. It had been nearly a year since she wore it; she touched it gently as if would disintegrate.

“You know I don’t like you out late.”

“I told you I have a dance competition. Marsh is going with me.”

That was another reason to be nervous. He had seen her ballroom dance, but a full-on dance battle? She didn't want to disappoint him.

“Right... Marsh. What's going on between you two?”

“What do you mean?”

Devin showed Marsh the other bedroom in the basement, giving Cami and Marsh a talking to about fraternizing.

“I don't want him distracting you. Remember what happened the last time.”

Right... The guy in high school who smooth-talked then ghosted her. She had cried for months after that. Cami couldn't prove it, but she was sure her brother did something to the guy because he would never make eye contact with her again and ran in the opposite direction whenever he saw her.

“It's not like that. I only wanna dance and figure everything else later.”

“Maya and I were thinking about moving.”

Cami paused grabbing her jacket. “Where?”

“Georgia.”

Devin broke her stare to look at the floor, and she narrowed her gaze at him.

“Georgia? Why Georgia?”

They had no family in the south. Most of their father's family had passed away or were scattered in the wind.

“I got offered a job in Atlanta.”

Suspicion fled from her. “That's great. I'm excited for you.”

“We want you to come with us.”

Cami’s mouth dropped. *Georgia?* She didn’t know where she wanted to live after college but Georgia wasn’t on the list.

“Devin—”

“We could monitor you and know that you’re safe. Come live with us until you figure out what you wanted to do next. You know I wouldn’t charge you rent or anything, and you wouldn’t have to go until you were ready.”

It sounded nice, a dream situation to most people, but that just seemed like a pretty prison. She loved her brother with all her heart, but if she went with him, she’d never get rid of him as her babysitter.

“That’s nice but... I don’t know.” She tried to find the words to let him know nicely, *I don’t want to be trapped by you.*

“You don’t know? What you mean? Say yes.”

Cami crossed her arms, breaking Devin’s stare by focusing on the wall. “I can’t. I... want to see what my options are for dance in the city.”

She wanted to try until she couldn’t physically move a bone in her body.

“Cami—”

“I can’t just say yes right now.”

“What’s wrong with moving with us? We’re your family.”

“I understand that, but I want to figure things out and see what happens.”

Devin shook his head. “You sound dumb as hell.”

“Seriously, bro?”

“Stop playing, girl. Just say yes.”

Cami licked her lips before shaking her head. “No.”

If she said yes, and she wouldn't, she'd be dependent on him for the rest of her life like he wanted her to. She was tired of being weak. She wanted to prove she could handle herself without his interference.

Devin mean-mugged her. "Whatever."

"Devin, c'mon..."

He stormed out of the room, and Cami followed him. Now she was feeling guilty about not going to Georgia. She followed him down the stairs.

"You obviously know what's best. You don't need me." Devin brushed past Marsh, who stood by the foot of the stairs.

"Devin!"

"You grown. Do what you want."

She smacked her lips. *Now he's going to make this a full-blown thing.* "I'm ready; we can go."

"Is everythin' okay?" Marsh rubbed her shoulder comfortingly, and she gave him a small smile.

Cami could hear Devin muttering and slamming things in the kitchen.

"Yeah, let's go."

She slammed the front door with more force than necessary. Marsh let Cami stew as they traveled to the dance meet. She cooled down by the time they arrived at Telegraph Avenue. Cami led them to a side door, off the alleyway, and into the warehouse. Her heart began to beat as she followed the familiar path. For the last four years, they held all their competitions not officially "regulated" by the college here.

"This is givin' me serial killer vibes," Marsh whispered.

They could hear music thumping as she pushed through the plastic divide; the closer they got, it felt as if the beat

vibrated her joints.

A crowd roared as they emerged onto the landing overlooking a mosh pit of people. A DJ played a mix of hip hop and rap songs as lights flashed erratically. Some students began clearing people off of the makeshift dance floor in the center.

“*Wow.*” Marsh gasped as he took in the room.

Cami grinned. “I know, right?”

She grabbed his hand as they made their way down the steps, pushing through the crowd where the Intensified members were gathered. Cami screamed when she saw her favorite people. “Deja! Winter! Y’all made it.”

Deja, Winter, Spencer, and Bria appeared from the crowd. They told her they had to work late that night, and seeing her besties made her feel a hundred times better.

“You know we had to support you.” Deja squeezed her, shaking her side to side till she gasped for breath.

Winter waited patiently. “You like the surprise? I love the hair!”

She turned to see Marsh and Spencer talking animatedly, and her heart jumped.

“Are you ready?” Deja shouted in her ear.

Cami nodded. *She was ready.*

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sean. Moving through the crowd, she got his attention as they met in the middle. “You’re here. Ready?”

Cami nodded, glancing across the room to the Maple Grove Knights. They were dressed in their signature gold. A few members from the Knights watched them, and Sean placed a hand on her shoulder.

“We got this, Sean; don’t be nervous.”

Sean eased up slightly. “Are you okay?”

This would be like any other time she performed in the past. She just had to forget about the achiness in her joints. “I’m perfect.”

“You sure?”

“I said I’m good, Sean.” Her voice was final.

At that moment, she did feel achiness and the onset of pain, but that was a future problem to deal with.

Cami slapped Sean on the shoulder, excitement bubbling heavily in her stomach. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

The DJ hit the microphone, and a local dancer, someone Cami had seen around the area, called everyone’s attention. “Welcome to our first dance battle!”

The crowd screamed. Cami and Sean pushed to the front of the crowd to be with their team. She stood on her tippy toes, trying to catch a glimpse of Winter, Deja, Spencer, and Marsh. When they caught her eye, they grinned and gave her the thumbs-up.

“As you know, each team will perform their routine. At the end, the crowd cheers the loudest for who they love the most. The winning crew gets bragging rights and a nice wad of cash,” the DJ continued.

The entire room murmured. That was money that could go toward new uniforms.

“You know the rules. No interfering with another team’s performance. Nothing explicit or offensive, got it?”

Everyone screamed. With that, he called the community college’s dance team to the floor. Everyone backed up, forming a circle around them. Marsh had pushed through the crowd next to her. He leaned down and asked her, “Who are they?”

“Static Moves.”

They were the most diverse dance group in the room. Their members ranged from Cami and Marsh’s age to forty-year-olds. What she admired the most about them was they drew a lot on Hindu influences in their dances.

The music started, and the dancers held their hands out in offering and moved slowly toward the crowd. The opening chords of Raga Bihag began. It was melodious, smooth, and hypnotic. It rendered the crowd silent as they watched the dancers continue their approach before stopping. One dancer slowly emerged from the center, creeping back and forth with the music like a panther.

Marsh squeezed her hand. “This is cool.”

“Wait for it...”

The music stopped before suddenly it beat fast and all the dancers moved. They were a rhythmic tide, in sync, flowing back and forth. The lull of the music lured the room to sway with them, and for a moment, they were a sea of bodies. A popular hip-hop beat was layered over the classical Indian music, and everyone that recognized the beat cheered. The team transitioned from classic steps to modern contemporary moves. Cami clapped and cheered, even if they were the competition. In the end, they were all passionate about dance.

When the group was done, everyone hooted and whistled, and the crew bowed before exiting the floor. Cami made eye contact with Sean. The announcer called the next group up.

One by one, each team went. Her nerves churned dangerously, and she was wringing her hands; the competition was steep. Through it all, Marsh stood by her side, and it gave her some comfort. He asked questions about the different styles of dance each crew pulled from. There were influences of the Lindy hop and Rock N’ Roll, Bachata, contemporary, and ballet. There was no end to the creativity, and the crowd loved



every single one of them. When their group was called to get ready, Cami swallowed hard.

Above all else, she was proving to herself she was still the same dancer as before. That her body could move and do what she needed it to. Marsh squeezed her hand before she left to join Intensified, filing onto the floor in formation.

The crowd became a blur of faces; the lights twinkling and flashing were blinding, and her heart crashed against her ribcage as she tried to pick a point to focus on. Standing at the front of the formation with Sean, he gave her a subtle nod, and the message was clear. *It was time to wreck shop.*

She glanced behind her to spot Savannah. Her expression wasn't the friendliest, but she gave Cami a nod of confirmation. Despite what went on between them outside of the team, there was solidarity on the dance floor.

Going to that place she always did when the music started, she swayed and gyrated. The team was one as they executed each move on beat and with precision. Like the holy trinity, three things needed to come together to make a performance amazing: the moves, the music, and the crowd. Each one fed off the other, and if one was lacking, it could all fall to pieces.

A hyped tempo began, and it got the place jumping. Sean and another teammate moved toward her, lifting her high into the air, and the venue thundered with roars.

The lights suddenly changed, blinking rapidly, and the song sped up. Dropping her safely to the floor, Cami wasn't worried about her body. She felt high.

Forcing her joints to move and pop into different positions, she took center stage. There was no hurt, ache, or pain. She controlled the crowd. Deja screamed her name over Nicki Minaj's rapping. The crew circled in around her, and as if they were playing Simon says, she did one move, and they

repeated it.

*I can do this. I can do this.*

They split into two separate groups. Sean led the other half as her side paused. It was as if they were in a dance battle. Sean's side moved. Then Cami's. Back and forth. Every move she made had a ripple effect on the rest of them. If she missed a move or was one second behind, it was over.

When the song blended into a 21 Savage tune, the crowd sang along. The crew formed a single line as they whined their hips with the guys behind them. It wasn't just about performing the moves. It was also the facial expression; she was performing a character. She tried to convey all the emotion and turmoil within her. She thought about her time in the hospital. The physical therapy. The tears. The determination. All those nights she fought, she conveyed in every movement.

Once they hit the last move, the screams were deafening.

Blinking rapidly, she had to stop tears of joy from falling. Inhaling and exhaling quickly, she found Marsh. He moved to the front of the crowd, clapping and whistling as he yelled her name.

"You were fucking amazing!" Sean grabbed her by her shoulder and screamed in her ear.

Rubbing her ear from the ringing, all of Cami's teammates circled her, hugging and patting her on the back. She would have lost it right there, but the host caught the attention of everyone in the room. The Knights still had to perform.

They filled the floor in formation as their music played. Cami was starting to come off her adrenaline high. They were always the team to beat, but it seemed as if their team had gotten better overnight. Each move was crisp. Each song was

perfect. Not a single member fell out of line. The entire place was vibing with them, and they not only lifted their team members—but did backflips and cartwheels? Cami wasn't so sure about their chances now. It took the crowd several minutes to calm down once they finished.

The host asked all the crews to stand on the dance floor, side by side. When the light landed directly on her, that's when it hit her. She was tired. Like *exhausted*. Her limbs felt like lead, and soreness seeped into her knees. She tried to grimace as she rubbed the ache in her lower back as the announcer went through each of the teams to decide a winner.

“If you want Synergy to win, let's hear some noise!”

The room clapped modestly and with a few light screams.

The announcer moved. One by one, he went down the line. When he got to Intensified, the crowd stomped and screamed. Deja looked as if she was going to blow a blood vessel the way she hollered with Winter right behind her. She couldn't help but grin at her friends.

It seemed it was the same reaction for The Knights. The announcer stood between Intensified and The Knights.

“Let's hear that one more time. If you want The Knights, lemme hear ya!”

The room hollered. Cami's heart threatened to burst through her rib cage as she clasped her hands.

“If you want *Intensified*, you know what to do!”

It was *so close*. It was hard for Cami to distinguish a hard difference. The announcer went back and forth between the two teams. He stepped away heading toward the DJ table where a few other people huddled around. Suddenly, the announcer cut the noise.

“I think this is the first time in a while, but we have a *tie*,

people!”

The entire room went crazy. Cami and her team cheered. It wasn't the result they wanted, but it felt good to know they gave The Knights a run for their money.

“We don't share first place.” The room quieted as the leader of The Knights stepped forward. Looking Cami and Sean up and down, she turned to the announcer. “We want a rematch.”

*Rematch?* The room buzzed, and she didn't have time to discuss with Sean when he was nodding along.

“That's cool with us.”

“I think we're having a round two!”

While the announcer tried to get everyone under control, Deja, Winter, Bria, Spencer, and Marsh pushed their way to her.

“You did it! You were amazing! I recorded it, and imma put it on Facebook, and you're gonna get famous!” Deja waved her phone.

She froze when Marsh grabbed her and hugged her tightly. Cupping her face, he pressed a kiss to her lips. “You were amazing!”

Exhaling deeply, she couldn't help but kiss him again. His lips were soft, warm, and tasty.

“Keep it PG, y'all!” Deja yelled in their ear, and they turned to her, grinning.

She felt too good to tell Deja to turn it down or she would blow her eardrum out. Now that she danced, not only the same but possibly better than before, and with Marsh holding her? The world was hers. She was back.



They arrived back at Devin's house close to three in the morning.

Tiptoeing through the house, they shared one last kiss before Marsh descended into the basement and she went upstairs. Thirty minutes later, after a shower, she lay in bed, eyes wide open, her heart still pumping. Every time she closed her eyes, flashes of lights, the crowd, and music replayed in her mind. She couldn't sleep.

Cami thought about everything that had led up to that moment. The frat party. Meeting Marsh. The kisses. It just did something to her that she hadn't experienced before. He was addicting, and now high off her win, she wanted to reap all her rewards. Kicking the blanket off, she padded softly to her door.

Each step sounded like glass crashing to the ground.

Holding her breath, she hurried past Devin and Maya's bedroom. Making sure not to wake Demi or Caleb, she hit the staircase at full speed. Taking two at a time, she hit the landing, cracking the door to the basement open. During the day, it was Devin's man cave. A futon, TV set, pool table, and video games were set up. Toward the back were another bedroom and bathroom.

She navigated through the dark easily, holding her breath as the door of the bedroom creaked loudly.

Moonlight illuminated the room through the small square window. The bed was just a tad bit too small for Marsh. Blankets bunched at his waist as one arm lay over his belly. His chest, bare except for the chain around his neck, rose and fell slowly. She crossed the room, kneeling at the foot of the bed. *I'm a bad bitch, I can do this.* Just like Deja told her months before, she had to channel her inner Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion.

She climbed on, not giving herself the chance to talk

herself out of it, and swung her leg over his waist. His body jerked.

“Hello?” Yawning, he stretched, pushing up to his elbows, his eyes filled with sleep. “What are you doin’ down there?”

Licking her lips, her body heated with awareness. Now, up close with all those muscles? Her body twisted with need as she eyed his basketball shorts hanging low on his hips. She licked her lips as she placed her hand on his chest. It was so small compared to the rest of him.

“I couldn’t sleep.”

Her words trailed off as his gaze heated. Suddenly, she felt vulnerable in her oversized shirt with no shorts. Tilting her head, she slowly traced his chest with her index fingers and watched it still for a moment.

Her gaze was soft as she smiled at him, his big hands lying carefully on the exposed areas of her thighs. Cami felt the muscles in his thighs shift and flex as he stretched his legs, and she exhaled shakily.

“What’s wrong?” Threading his fingers with hers, he rubbed his thumb back and forth on her palm as he observed her.

Her eyes dropped to his chest. She could see the scars better now. *His accident*. Biting her bottom lip, she wiggled back and forth on his crotch, and he sucked in a breath, digging his fingers into her thighs to halt her.

“Don’t do that.” His voice was raw.

“Why?” She grew flustered when he gave her a harsh look. Her fingers traced the scars on his abdomen, and he gripped the edge of her shirt.

“Cami...”

“I’m not sleepy.”

He sighed deeply through his nose. She bit her lip, grinding her hips, feeling his dick harden. If she had any common sense, then she would have known it was dangerous to have sex with her fake boyfriend in her brother's house.

“What you tryin’ to do?”

She knew it was all pretend, but she couldn't help her feelings. She thought about the way he supported her earlier. The way he held her. How passionate he was when he talked about law. How all the guys on campus looked up to him. She didn't care that they were just pretending. What she felt for him was real, and she couldn't deny it any longer. “I want you.”

Marsh held his breath as she lifted the shirt over her head, exposing her bare skin, and he cursed under his breath.

“Are you sure?” His eyes were filled with heat as he focused on her breasts. “Tell me you're serious.”

“I am. I want you. Please.”

Sitting up, his fingers traced her body, down her thighs, before plucking at the band of her underwear.

She breathed heavily as his fingers continued drawing patterns, sending her heart rate through the roof as he dipped a finger inside her belly button. Cami gasped as his fingers trailed up to her breast, circling a nipple before he cupped her neck. Holding her breath, he moved so slowly; she was vibrating when he cupped her face, bringing her forward. Lips barely an inch apart, her gaze dragged over his features as she imprinted this moment in her mind.

“Please, Marsh?” Her eyes fluttered shut, and she kissed him. Lingering. Savoring the moment as their uneven breaths fill the room. He pressed her body against his, and their bodies melded perfectly.

Moaning into the kiss, he returned it eagerly, gently brushing his tongue over her lips. As she opened her mouth,

Marsh deepened the kiss. His tongue slipped inside and began stroking her tongue.

Cami wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. "Please."

Marsh knew what she needed. He pushed his hand into her underwear. He nipped at her jawline as he teased her with his fingers before pushing his finger inside. Though she was nearly naked on top of him, she didn't feel nervous or embarrassed. Marsh's mouth parted slightly as his other hand roamed over her, cupping her breast and rubbing her nipple until it swelled for him.

The pounding between her legs made her squirm in his lap as Marsh drew his lower lip between his teeth before pulling her down to him.

"Marsh—" A soft gasp escaped her as she braced her hands on either side of his head as his hand slid from her under. Running his hands up her body, he massaged her, gradually helping her relax against him. Marsh's hands traveled down to the slopes of her behind, squeezing gently; she yelped when he smacked her butt.

"Oh!" She had never done that before and broke the kiss.

Lips wet and swollen, Marsh raised a brow at her, silently confirming she wanted to go forward with this.

"Yes. I'm ready."

"Cami—" He sighed when she leaned forward, biting him gently on his jaw. Her hands roamed across his muscles and scars, trailing kisses down his bare skin. She was determined this time to be the one to leave a mark.

Marsh mumbled something indiscernible. He lifted her hips and slid her panties off in a flourish. She doesn't have time to act shy because his tongue rolled across her nipple. Cami's laugh turns into a sigh as pleasure rocketed through her



brain. Her body began to move on its own, her hips undulating against his dick.

Passion followed between them as a blur of sensations led to dilated pupils, hushed gasps, and clutched fingers. Wanting him to experience pleasure, she pushed him back, easing him onto the mattress. His eyes were barely open and black with desire, watching as she shifted lower and lower...

Her fingers curled into the band of his shorts, lowering them, and Marsh opened his mouth to speak but groaned loudly when her hand curled around his length.

“Cami...”

He fisted the sheets, and she felt both powerful and nervous.

She was relying on the porn she saw on Twitter and advice from Deja and Winter to not look like a total amateur to him. Wetting her lips, she took him into her mouth.

“Baby...” Marsh exhaled shakily as Cami kept eye contact with him. Her tongue circled the bulbous head, and he groaned loudly, letting his head fall back onto the bed.

What she couldn't fit into her mouth, she stroked, humming in pleasure at the taste of him. She felt him twitch at the vibration as she bobbed her head.

The temperature in the room increased. Her heart raced, and she could feel her juices staining the inside of her thighs. The only thoughts racing through her brain were how much she wanted to please him. He tried to keep his grunts and moans as low as possible, and they emboldened her.

Her cheeks hollowed and she slurped wetly, tongue rolling around the underside of his dick, giving small kisses from the base to the head. His fingers intertwined in her braids, coaxing more pleasure from her mouth.

“Cami!”

Her head bobbed up and down as she cupped his balls, squeezing gently. She didn't want this moment to end. Her eyes drifted shut, and she pressed down further, feeling him hit the entrance of her throat. They both groaned, and Marsh's body stiffened. Never was she this bold, and she didn't want to go back. Ever.

His masculine moans were turning her on, her arousal coating the inside of her thighs, and he rocked his pelvis faster to her stroking. She felt him tense and seconds later, he groaned out her name as his release flooded her mouth. Leisurely pumping his hips, she swallowed every drop he had to give to her.

Cami clenched her thighs at seeing his brown skin, flushed darkly. A sheen of sweat made him glow under the moonlight, and she wanted to lick him all over.

“I need you so bad.” Marsh grabbed for her.

She giggled when he pulled her up, pressing his lips to hers. The taste of him coated both their tongues. He turned her onto her back. She moaned softly when his fingers traveled lower. His hand dug into the joint of her hip to keep her legs open. He kissed her collarbone. Cami's eyes shut as his thick lips pressed a kiss to her throat before darting his tongue out to tease the hollow of her neck. He slid two fingers inside of her, making her whine when his fingers curled. Her hips jerked as he pumped his fingers slowly. Trailing kisses down her body, he placed her legs over his shoulders, and she stifled a scream, her hand going to his head as his tongue curled around her clit.

“Marsh!”

It was too much. He buried his face between her thighs, sucking and nibbling on her as if she were a ripe, juicy peach. She couldn't stop her body from twisting and turning; she

heard him grumble before he released her clit with a loud smack. “Keep yo ass still.”

“I-I’m trying...”

“Let me taste how sweet this pussy is, baby.”

Cami tried to control her breathing as Marsh added another finger. Her mouth opened in a silent cry of pleasure. He placed a light kiss on the inside of her thigh, his hand on her hip, caressing but keeping her spread and wide. The sensation overwhelmed her and warm, slick juices ran down the crevices of her thighs. She tried to close them, but his big shoulders blocked her, and her reactions only encouraged him to coax more pleasure from her. His tongue dragged against her clit in tantalizing swirls, and he sucked her bud back into his mouth.

“I-I’m... Marsh, please—” The stretch of his tongue and fingers was so good, her eyelashes damp with unshed tears of pleasure, and she choked out a wet sob.

Cami’s hands pushed at his shoulders, squirming and trembling, her sensitive walls clamping down around his finger as he fucked her slow. His eyes focused on the way her head fell back on the mattress, and she couldn’t keep eye contact as her lashes fluttered closed, her nails digging into his skin. Marsh mumbled something, his tongue dragging in and out of her languorously. Her breath tapered off into breathy pants. Slurping loudly, he curled his arms around her hips and tugged her closer.

“Ooh!”

“You close?”

She shuddered as he fingered her harder. Oh, how she wanted to bottle this feeling up and take it everywhere she went. Never in her life had a man gone down on her like this. She made eye contact with him again, and the intimacy of it

had her submitting to him. She let out a strangled noise, and he pushed her thighs to her chest. She struggled to breathe, and within seconds, she felt herself clamp down on his fingers as pleasure erupted through her.

Her world narrowed to a pinpoint as her nails dug into the sheets and her toes curled. Her body went rigid as she chanted his name. Her orgasm unleashed, causing her to grind against his tongue, wringing out any last bits of pleasure left in her. “Oh my God.”

He finally released her, and she gazed at him with half-opened eyes. Her thighs still shaking as he reached over, she heard him dig around in his bag before she saw him hold a square foiled packet.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” His thumb rubbed her cheek, and she nodded.

“Hurry.”

He rolled the condom on and lined up with her soaking folds, both exhaling loudly when they connected.

Cami felt protected when he shifted over, placing his hands on either side of her head. Curling her legs around him, she circled her arms around his neck, bringing him closer to her. He set her body aflame once again with a searing kiss.

“Please... please.” She didn’t know what she was begging for. The muscles in his back flexed and rolled as he pressed deeper into her. Catching her moan with a kiss, her body shook and her fingers dug into his back.

She moved her hips rhythmically with him, feeling the pleasure build with each thrust. She whined against his lips, his hot breath fanning her face as he moved back to watch her reaction, his lips curving into a genuine smile. When he hit her newly discovered spot, Cami’s eyes rolled to the ceiling. Her mind lost focus after his hips sank forward. Hiding her

face in the crook of his neck, she muffled the whimpers flowing from her as Marsh's dick forced her walls to spread open just for him.

"M-Marsh."

"Hm? You feel that, baby?"

White heat shot down her spine, the temperature in the room rising, causing sweat to break out on their bodies. She squirmed under him on the bed. He was so long and thick. Bigger than what she'd experienced in the past, and he chuckled when she slid a hand down to his stomach to lessen the intensity. He continued to stir her guts, feeding her his dick slowly so she could feel every inch of him.

"Marsh!"

He pressed another quick kiss to her lips before moving along her jawline to her neck, his teeth latching onto the soft skin. His hips quickened. The bed began to creak under them as her inner walls immediately clenched around him. Marsh's forehead fell to rest against hers, his eyes staring into her as he continued to pump faster and faster. Each roll of his hips made her clit brush against his pubic bone, causing pleasurable jolts to flow through Cami.

"You're so beautiful." Marsh moved a hand to cradle the back of her head as he remained on his forearms. "All mine."

"Marsh." His next thrust had her back arching against him. Her breasts pressed against his hard chest as she continued to grind herself against him, feeling the dam inside her ready to explode.

"You can take it. I've got you."

She felt too full. Shaking her head, heavy, her brows furrowed, inhaling sweet gulps of sex in the room. Her hands went to his waist, seemingly encouraging him forward, meeting his thrusts.

“Talk to me, tell me how it feels.”

“Oh, I can’t... I don’t know.”

“Are you close?” he murmured, his dark eyes gazing into hers as he watched the hazy expression on her face change as she came closer to her climax. Cami wiggled as he thrust deeper, holding it for several seconds until the pressure increased and he thrust deeply again. She couldn’t take the sensations.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” he cooed in her ear, moving expertly through her squirming.

“It’s t-too much.”

He leaned, biting her bottom lip. “You can take it.”

She whined as he kept his steady strokes. Marsh cursed under his breath, and they both looked between their bodies, watching the beautiful art they were making.

“That’s it, relax, baby,” Marsh slurred, his hand pressing her shaky leg open.

“Jesus, Marsh... Oh my God!”

His hand covered her mouth, and he whispered to her, “We have to be quiet.”

Cami’s nails scratched against his back in protest. Her eyes pooled with tears at feeling the pressure in her stomach building up. She clenched her eyes shut as pleasure overwhelmed her; her legs trembled as her orgasm slammed into her unexpectedly. Marsh’s thrusts faltered for a second before he grunted, his fingers digging into her thighs as he fucked her through it.

“Good girl,” he whispered as he coached her through her orgasm.

“Unhh...” She was speechless. Her toes curled as she gazed at the ceiling, feeling her body convulse.

“There you go.” He gave her another kiss, murmuring sweet words of encouragement while he continued to chase his own orgasm. Sensitive, her whines continued to grow louder until he leaned down, capturing her lips with his. He sighed and shifted his hips as they repeated each other’s names like a prayer. Her arms tightened over him as if she never wanted to let him go, and she didn’t.

She wasn’t sure if he would want it, but she wanted something real with him. She didn’t care; they only had a month left. Cami wanted him to know it was okay to release the guilt and pain. She would be there to catch him.

Her mind went blank as she felt her body tighten once more.

“Don’t stop!” Fighting to pull in breaths, he snapped his hips faster, harder, and her heart threatened to explode with pleasure and emotion. Her thighs squeezed against his hips, and their lips connected as they both cried out as their release washed over them. Grunting her name as he came, he bit down on her collarbone in a feeble attempt of concealing his moans of pleasure.

Her mind went blank. She could feel Marsh pulsating within her, and she squeezed her eyes shut as Marsh released her, moving to her side to avoid dropping his heavy frame on her. Intoxicated by the pleasure he’d just given her, Cami stared at the ceiling in shock. Slowly a smile crept across her face as she sucked in a deep breath. Marsh shifted and she felt him place a kiss on her neck, and they both shivered.

Cupping the back of his neck, she massaged him as the feeling returned to her body, and the weight of the moment crashed down. He pulled her onto his chest, planting a kiss on the top of her forehead. Marsh didn’t know the hold he had over her now. She had never felt this way about anyone before and probably never would again. She didn’t want to experience

it with anyone else but him. All rational thoughts fled as a glowing smile lit Cami's face and slowly Marsh returned it. Something shifted between them. As he intertwined their fingers, gazing into her eyes, she knew he felt it too.



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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### "YOU SEEM HAPPIER."

Dr. Lake crossed her legs as she studied Marsh. She'd stated that more than several times over the last few weeks. It was even worse when Cami was nearby. He couldn't stop touching her. Pulling her close. Since Yara's death, he'd become unreachable, but now, he exuded warmth.

"I'm feelin' better."

Dr. Lake nodded. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"There's not much to tell." *Liar*, his mind screamed at him.

"I know you have more to say than that. How is your fake relationship developing?"

It was hard to verbalize what he was feeling inside. He could write a book on all the things he felt but right now, he was barely able to get the words out. Marsh clasped his hand, keeping a poker face. "The plan is workin'. Dance class isn't bad."

"And Cami?"

Licking his lips, he chuckled, and Dr. Lake's eyes lit up. "Cami's great. I mean, as a person, she's great. She's got a big heart, sweet, and naggin'. She's got me... Uh, she's got me watchin' these anime movies. At first, I wasn't into them, but they're not bad. Have you seen *My Neighbor Totoro*? She swore she saw me cryin' but, nah, I don't cry."

He grinned as memories flashed of their time together. It made him feel high as if he was floating. Even when he had to deal with Larissa and Austin, it became static noise if only he could look into Cami's eyes.

The doctor raised a brow.

"I'm showin' her my favorite old gangster movies. She's a punk, though. Who covers their eyes during a shootout? It didn't help she started to bawl when she saw Ricky get shot in *Boyz N the Hood*, but everyone gets sad at that scene. Devin, her brother, thought she was being a punk, too, but even he teared up at the Ricky scene. I met her brother when we went to her dance competition in Oakland..." Marsh cleared his throat.

He was talking way too much. He wasn't a rambler. Cami rambled.

Marsh had been in awe of her dancing skills. He stood there, grinning like an idiot, cheering and whistling as she shimmied and gyrated. He knew she could dance from ballroom dancing, but what she did on that floor was amazing. A feeling of... pride swept over him. Everyone in the room saw that was *his girlfriend* tearing up the floor.

"What else happened in Oakland?"

"I met her brother and family. It was a good time, and we came back."

He liked Dr. Lake, but he couldn't share the rosy feeling when he had opened his eyes to see her in his arms the morning after. Drooling on his chest. The morning kiss, morning breath and all, and then a gasp of horror and elbow to his gut as she scrambled to gather her clothes because it was sunlight.

"Meeting family? That's something real couples do. So, that means you aren't pretending anymore?"

He opened his mouth and then closed it. *They were pretendin'*. That's what he wanted to believe, but he was feeling all types of ways. Racking his brain, he wondered how things would be different in his life had he met Cami before Larissa.

"No, we still have a deal."

No matter if he wanted it to last, graduation was coming soon. He was moving forward with his plans for Chicago. He couldn't deny their night together didn't feel like a casual hook-up. It was... anything but casual.

"Are you sure about that?"

He pressed his lips together and nodded.

"I'm glad to see everything is going well. I think you still need to have a conversation with Cami. We plan all the time in life, but those plans don't always come to fruition, and sometimes, it's for the best. Most importantly, be honest with yourself."

Marsh's well-laid-out plan had fallen through the cracks. He had gotten attached. Caught feelings. Emotions were involved, and it was going to be messy when it went up in flames.

"I'll keep that in mind, doc."

Their session ended for the day, and he felt like a walking contradiction. He barely made it two steps out of the office when his phone rang.

"Don't call me and see if I'm alive."

Meg's voice came out aggravated and loudly. What sounded like the blare of trucks and cars in the background made him pull the phone from his ear.

"I'm sorry."

"You always say that, and then it's weeks until I talk to you. What the hell has been goin' on?"

“I’ve been busy.”

She sucked her teeth. He imagined her rolling her eyes as he heard her tell someone to keep the change. Then a door slammed.

“No shit, Sherlock. With what? You were complain’ about the dance class. I’ve called multiple offices, tryin’ to get you out of it, but you been busy?”

“I don’t want to change class now, but I love you.”

“Miss me with that bullshit. I’m tired of bein’ used for your benefit.”

His sister brought a smile to his face. Placing his hand in his pocket, he strolled down the block. “How about I send a box of chocolates and flowers as an apology?”

“Hmm. I guess, but since you’re poor, you don’t have to get nothin’ expensive. Just so you know, when you’re makin’ the big bucks? Best believe I’m runnin’ through your pockets.”

He laughed. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Why you don’t wanna change classes now?”

He ran a hand over his waves.

“I like it, that’s all.”

“So, who is she?”

“Huh?” He paused on the side. “She?”

Meg sighed. The sounds of phones ringing and clicking of keyboards echoed loudly.

“Just stop it, all right? You told me you broke up with that last lil’ fast tail girl I couldn’t stand. Now, there’s another one? Did I get you this internship for nothin’?”

“Stop bein’ dramatic; it’s not that. Her name is Cami, okay? She’s not like Larissa—”

“Thank God. I know that was your girl and all, but when she wouldn’t eat my peach cobbler at Thanksgivin’? You shoulda tossed her back to the streets then.”

He started walking again. He wasn’t in the mood to rehash the past. “*Meg...*”

“She was for the streets! Let’s not forget the whole pregnancy scare when you told her about gettin’ accepted to Loyola? You haven’t had anyone decent since Yara.”

A coldness settled in his stomach.

“Let’s not talk about Yara.”

Meg continued to bulldoze the conversation, ignoring the way the enthusiasm left his voice.

“Isn’t that the reason you’re seeing this therapist? To move on and accept it? The anniversary is comin’ up, Marsh. Mama and Daddy want you to come back home. How long are you goin’ to keep punishin’ them?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m not punishin’ Mama and Daddy.”

“You are! Mama still sets a place for you at the table durin’ the holidays. I mean, she understands, but her and Daddy ain’t never flown on a plane, and they ain’t comin’ to San Francisco if it’s not by car. You know Daddy’s eyes are bad.”

Marsh groaned. “I know this.”

“You know I ain’t never wanted to rush you because we all handle our grief differently. I’ve always been in your corner—”

“You have been.”

“Are you mockin’ me?”

He’d been coping fine, and everything going on was a nice distraction. Feeling himself getting pulled back into the dark feelings about the past, he fought to keep his mind focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

“I didn’t wanna tell you til later, but Mama told me Yara’s daddy fell and messed himself up somethin’ serious.”

“What?” His eyes widened. “Mr. Jordan fell?”

Meg murmured, “Yeah. They sellin’ that big house and movin’ somewhere else. Mama told me she’ll tell me when she finds out, but she hoped, you knowin’ this... You’ll come back home at least once after graduation. With them not bein’ here, it shouldn’t be a problem anymore? She knows you won’t live there again, but you can’t pussyfoot around anymore. I remember you tellin’ me about writin’ Yara’s parents a letter. It’s time to get to it.”

His mind was moving at a quarter of the speed as she yammered on.

“They would love to hear from you, I’m sure. A final goodbye, but you aren’t off the hook yet; now this Cami chick... am I gonna see her when I fly in for Thanksgivin’?”

He gazed blankly at the concrete.

“Hello?”

Marsh swallowed. “She won’t have a problem with it. You’ll like her, and I mean that honestly. She works at the library, so she helps people all the time. She’s the one teachin’ me to dance, and I kinda got rhythm now.”

Meg was quiet for a moment. “She sounds good... You also sound happier.”

“I’ve been gettin’ that a lot lately.”

He had to arrange his thoughts and feelings to stop himself from tipping over into that black hole. He wasn’t back in that car. He wasn’t pinned under the truck. Yara didn’t fly through the windshield.

“You do,” Meg chuckled. “I don’t mean to harp on you or get in your business, but you’re my baby brother and I love

you. I'll be nice to the new girlfriend. I know sooner or later you'll wake up and realize that you're actually alive, and it's okay to live. You deserve to love—and be loved—again, Marshall; don't you forget that.”

He was now standing in front of the frat house. Marsh talked a bit longer with his sister before they hung up. He couldn't help but feel guilt at Meg's words. *You're punishin' Mama and Daddy*. Once upon a time ago, Cami had said that same thing. That wasn't his intention but...

The house was silent as he stepped inside. Pressing his back against the door, he sighed. His brow furrowed as if in pain, and his eyes fluttered shut for a second before he forced them open again. A glance in the living room revealed Larissa with her legs folded under her with a textbook in her lap. He managed to avoid her, especially after the text messages she sent. He was no longer interested in reconciling with her. He ignored her and began walking up the stairs.

“Marsh—”

He shook his head and continued to walk.

“Marshall!”

He felt her hand grab his arm, and he snatched it away. Turning, his eyes bore down into hers as she took a step backward.

“Why are you talkin' to me?”

She seemed shocked at his coldness. “I... Well, how are you doing?”

“What do you want, Rissa? We aren't old buddies catchin' up.”

Larissa folded her across her chest as Marsh leaned against the railing.

“I mean, what's going on with you? What about my



texts?”

“Look... I didn’t respond because I’ve been busy. Right now, you’re holdin’ me up.”

“You’re busy with her? Cami?”

He turned, leaving her standing on the stairs. Her flip-flops clacked furiously behind him as he headed for his room.

“It’s like you don’t have time for me anymore. Literally, all you do is hang out with her.” Larissa’s face sneered at the mention of Cami as they stood in front of the door.

“Are you hearin’ yourself right now? Don’t you have a “man” now? She’s my girlfriend.”

Despite what Larissa did, she deserved someone else. The time they put in was only what held their relationship together. It helped them to ignore the red flags waving violently in their faces about their *situationship*. Now that he’d met Cami, he wanted something deeper. He wanted to be better, and Larissa should want that too.

“Look, I’ve been doing some thinking, and Austin... seriously, he’s not like you.”

Marsh couldn’t help but smirk. “He won’t ever be.”

“She’s not coming on the Lake Tahoe trip, is she?” Larissa frowned at him as he stood in front of his bedroom. His head was throbbing now.

“What does it matter? You have a boyfriend.”

“Yeah, but... I might not have one by then.”

Marsh chuckled and began to open his door. “You can’t do this to me. Not now.”

Why did she choose this moment out of all to do this? Why was she doing it? Larissa wasn’t dumb; she was calculating.

“Where did we go wrong, Marsh?”

“You want to go there? Really?”

Larissa made a noise in her throat. “Don’t act high and mighty like you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“At least I didn’t fuck your friend.”

She pressed her lips together.

“That’s not nice.”

“I had that much respect left for you that I didn’t cheat. You shouldn’t have strung me along if you didn’t want me.”

“I... I was confused. Is it my fault I wanted a boyfriend who wasn’t living in the past?”

“Look, you holdin’ me up.” He started to step inside, ready to slam the door in her face. He couldn’t do this. Not with the news from Meg. Not after Dr. Lake.

“Did you tell her about that night yet?”

Marsh closed his eyes.

“You didn’t, did you? Hmm, that’s interesting.”

“Mind your business.”

She grinned and shrugged, shifting on her shoulder. “Very interesting developments indeed.”

“You doin’ all of this for what? I’m doin’ me. What—”

Shaking her head, Larissa smiled as she took a step backward. “How will your little girlfriend feel about knowing the real truth?”

“Keep your damn mouth shut.”

“Oh really? What are you going to do for me? Hm?”

He started to walk away, only for her to grip his arm. Pushing her away from him, she stumbled before she charged

forward.

“Don’t touch me, Larissa.”

“I’m talking to you—”

Frustrated and exhausted already, he tried to keep his voice even as he spoke. “You look desperate as hell right now, Larissa.”

“Oh really? Again, what are you going to do for me? Hm? So, I don’t talk to your little girlfriend.” Larissa blinked innocently at him before she snorted.

“*Again*, keep ya fuckin’ mouth closed.”

She turned on her heels and tossed him the finger before she disappeared down the hall. He stood there for a few more minutes. Resisting the urge to go after her, he pushed open the door, slamming it so hard the walls vibrated. He stewed as he changed, lying on his bed, NNAMDĪ played softly in the background, but it did little to calm his nerves.

As soon as things started to go right, life threw him a curveball. The pen and notebook were on the bed next to him, and the writing on the paper was *Dear Mr. and Mrs. Jordan*. He willed his brain to keep writing, but he couldn’t. There was a knock at the door, and irritation flashed through him. Larissa was coming back?

“I know you’re not knocking on my door—” He snatched it open ready to lay into Larissa when he heard laughter and a soft weight launching itself onto him. Catching himself, Cami planted a kiss on his lips.

“Hey, you.”

His anger instantly deflated. She squeaked when he tightened his arms around her, spinning her in a circle. He hadn’t seen her all day, and he missed her. He needed her calming presence to chase away the negative emotions. She

kissed him again, pressing herself against him and making him groan.

“Hello to you. You look cute.” He forced his voice to sound normal. Clearing his throat, he held her with ease and tugged at the bottom of her skirt.

“Something wrong?”

“Why does somethin’ have to be wrong?”

Cami reached up and rubbed the crinkles in between his eyebrows. “You just look upset.”

His nostrils flared for a moment before his mind had switched to other important things. Like how good she smelled. How she felt against him. How she bit her bottom lip and batted her eyelashes seductively at him.

“I brought some snacks for the movie.” Cami entered his room. Tossing her bag on the floor, he didn’t let her take more than two steps before he was snatching her back and pressing her against his bedroom door. “Even your nasty old man candy.”

“Raisnets aren’t *old man* candy.”

His hands slid up her skirt, cupping her ass. Marsh needed her to be his distraction. She exhaled when she felt his dick press against her wiggling in his grip.

“Yes, they are. I still think you need to come from the dark side into the light.” She kept talking, but he wasn’t listening.

He trailed kisses down the side of her neck before he sucked hard at the base, and she moaned softly.

“Marsh?”

Whimpering as he French-kissed her neck, she blossomed open for him, threading her fingers through his hair. It was unfair how much control one person could have over another.

He wanted to bare his soul to her at that moment, but fear held him back. What if she didn't like what she saw?

He cupped her breast; the air filled with heat and desperation, and he took her lips and licked them, tasting her cherry lip gloss.

"We can watch the movie in a minute."

He peeled down her underwear and unbuckled his jeans. Letting himself get lost in how dainty, soft, and small she was compared to him, he managed to fish a condom out of his drawer. His body salivated for her, wanted to drown in her till the world felt right again. Placing her legs into the crook of his arms, he gripped the base of his dick. Putting the head against her entrance made them both pant in anticipation, and Cami's head thunked softly against the door as her eyes dropped. The way he shook in anticipation, you would've thought he was a crackhead.

"I want you," she whispered as he sank inside of her.

Her toes curled and her grip grew tighter around his neck. His breath hitched at how her pussy gripped him like a vice. She was his kryptonite. It was heaven and hell because now he yearned for her, and he wasn't satisfied until they shared the same air. She tried to rise, muttering how it was too much at once. He didn't allow that; he needed her. All of her.

"Fuck." He rolled his hips into hers.

His fingers clenched her ass. The sound of skin clapping made him feel intoxicated. It was too addicting, and with each thrust, he forgot how he was ready to put hands on Larissa before Cami showed up. Pressing his hand against the door, he dug deeper into her guts. Her torso eased up and down the wall gently; the strap of her tank top falling down her shoulder. Sweat breaking on her upper lip, she pulled back from him. He didn't give her a second. The view of her small breasts jiggling had him nearly ripping her shirt off. Locking

his lips with hers, she chanted his name in between kisses. He didn't care how loud she got or if anyone else in the house could hear them. All he cared about at that moment was tearing the pussy up.

"You like that?" Marsh grunted and pressed wet, sloppy kisses against the apex of her neck as he struggled to draw in a breath.

"Yeah," she whined, her hand moving to the back of his head and her nails dragging against his scalp as he felt her inner walls begin to clench around him as he felt his release building up.

"Yeah?" His lips curled into a smirk, watching her face contort in pleasure as she teetered on the edge of her bliss. "Then cum all over this dick."

She gasped as the coil inside her broke, her climax surging through in harsh waves. Cami's legs quivered from the intense sensation, and she managed to cry out a jumbled mixture that sounded like his name. Her whimpers and moans were euphoric, and he was gasping, grinding his waist as they pumped hard against each other.

"Shit!" Marsh's knees buckled, and he tilted his head back as his release overtook him. Neither able to form words, he pressed his face into her neck as he let her heartbeat bring him back to earth. He kissed her temple sweetly, overwhelmed with how much he felt for her and how far he would go to keep her from discovering the truth.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**CAMI WASN'T PREPARED FOR THE** beauty of Alpha Eta Phi's chalet.

"What do you think?"

She shivered as Marsh ran his fingers through her braids, tucking a few strands behind her ear. Stepping out of the van, she had to restrain herself from blurting out her emotions.

"It's beautiful. How can the frat afford this?"

His arms circled her waist, and he placed a kiss on her cheek. She closed her eyes, inhaling his cedarwood cologne.

"Our chapter has the fundin'."

The lake in November was so serene and beautiful. The rest of the frat and their partners climbed out of the van, chatting excitedly. The chalet was on top of a hill surrounded by lush pine trees. It was rustic-styled with floor-to-ceiling windows. Marsh led her inside to reveal a modern, chic living room with high wood-beamed ceilings coupled with a stone fireplace.

It took everything in her not to grin like some supervillain when Marsh revealed they'd share a room. Especially not at the king-size bed in the center. Instead, she focused on the unbelievable, clear view of Lake Tahoe outside their window.

The more time she spent with Marsh, rather than just hanging out, watching movies, or forcing him to make bread with her from scratch, the more her attraction to him grew. How was she going to handle four days in close quarters



without being a horny mess? Or without confessing her feelings prematurely?

“Funding’ is code word for rich parents paid for this?” Cami turned from the window as Marsh sat the bags on the bed.

There were times he would stare at her as if he wanted to say something, but then he would shake his head. She never wished more that she had powers like Edward Cullen when he did that. He was still a grump but also more relaxed than before. He’d let her in. Yet, she still felt as if she was running into one final invisible wall with him.

Marsh laughed, disappearing into the bathroom before he returned. “I think I left you enough counter space. How many hair products did you bring?”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she observed him. He looked too fine in a black turtleneck, jeans, and combat boots. His gaze dragged over her slowly as well, in a thick flannel jacket and hiking boots, she squeezed her legs together.

“Do you think she’s here yet?”

They knew who *she* was. Cami wasn’t sure she was prepared to face Larissa again. Their last duel left her with a sour taste. She hadn’t mentioned the texts that she found. She hadn’t looked at his phone since, respecting his privacy, but she did wonder. It made her belly churn knowing Larissa was still trying to get back with him now.

“She could be, but I’m not worried about it.”

The husky bass of his voice made it sexier than it needed to be. Moving closer, she had to lean back or his crotch would have smacked her dead in the forehead. Leaning forward, he kissed her cheek. Then her throat. Shivering at the wet glide of his tongue against her skin, Cami wished she could act as cool

as him as he leaned back. He was a complete menace to her sanity. It wasn't fair.

"She ain't worth takin' up space in your mental."

"You must've forgotten what happened the last time."

"We have a plan, right? Do all the couple things. Smile and shit. Just like we've been doin'."

"You're right."

Marsh's eyes never left her. He gripped her hand, entwining their fingers. "What's wrong? Are you not feelin' well?"

"I'm fine."

"Seriously, Cami, don't worry about Larissa. You're not worried about the dance rematch? You know you have that in the bag."

Right, her dance rematch. She had been practicing like crazy with Intensified for it. So much that her body had been aching for days after with no relief. The Knights weren't even on her mind. That was still a pleasant (not) reminder that her appointment with Dr. Aguilar was coming up soon. Or the fact Devin was still creeping with his demands she move to Atlanta. Cami faked a laugh. "Do I?"

"Don't doubt yourself because I don't."

She shifted forward to steal a kiss and pain flared through her right knee, a pain that hadn't gone away in days. She couldn't hide her expression quick enough, and Marsh's eyes widened in concern. "I asked if you were in pain."

"I'm fine."

"Don't lie to me."

Unable to resist, she claimed his lips, pulling him down slowly so his body pressed hers into the mattress. She mewled

in approval when his hand cupped her backside. Panting, she released him and licked her lips.

“Just some inflammation. I have the muscle relaxer.”

“You sure?”

*No...* The pain in her knee was throbbing, but she resisted the urge to rub it. She didn't need him being scared for her.

“Like you said, we got this.”

All eyes turned on them as they entered the living room. Larissa was plastered to Austin, who looked as if he'd rather be anywhere but there. Marsh sat down and pulled Cami onto his lap. Larissa shot her a look.

“Hello, my favorite couple,” Ezra muttered under his breath as he emerged from the kitchen, handing Marsh and Cami a bottle of cider and winking.

Cami shook her head as Marsh said, “You're such a shit starter.”

Ezra chuckled.

Austin sucked his teeth. “Nice place.”

Cami looked at Larissa as everyone murmured *nice place* before they all turned to the two couples. Clearly, they were expecting a part-two from the last showdown.

“I'm surprised to see you here, Cami. I'm sure you would have backed out.”

Marsh eyeballed Larissa. Cami felt his fingers curl in her waist.

“No. I'm here and excited.” Cami smiled sweetly at Larissa. Memories of the text messages she'd sent Marsh flashed through her mind.

“Oh really?”

“Yes.”

Larissa looked annoyed. “I hope you’re able to keep up on the hikes. Marsh and I were always the first to make it to the summit.”

This girl was a certified weirdo. Everyone gave her a look and then glanced at Austin. He didn’t even blink.

“Well, I hope you and *Austin* make it there before us.”

Cami turned and smiled at Marsh. She shook subtly as the adrenaline coursed through her and she hid her hands behind her back.

“Is anybody hungry?” Ezra cleared his throat.

“Starving; what’s good around here?”

Austin forced himself from Larissa. Cami didn’t break eye contact with Larissa as everyone began chatting. *It was going to be a long weekend.*



Cami fingered the menu as she sat at the bar and grill. The lemonade she drank calmed her as Marsh talked with his frat brothers. Awkward wasn’t the best word for what she felt. The other frat guys’ partners smiled and grinned at Larissa and gave Cami curious and pitying looks. Some tried to engage with her, but the conversation eventually fizzled out.

She would need something stronger than lemonade. A burger and whiskey looked delicious right now.

“What are your Thanksgiving plans?”

Cami regarded Larissa and the other girls observing her. She thought it was a girl named Gina who spoke.

“Excuse me?”

“Thanksgiving, or do you not celebrate that?” Larissa asked and raised a brow.

Cami narrowed her eyes. “Why do you need to know?”

“Just curious...” Larissa shrugged and took a sip of her cocktail.

Gina looked between the two of them and laughed nervously. “Do you make—”

“It’s just that this time of the year Marsh and I are usually at my parents’ house. I know how he loved my mother’s cooking.”

Cami swallowed her growing irritation.

“We haven’t talked about it, but I’m sure it’ll work itself out.” Cami forced a smile as she slammed her cup down with more force than necessary, lemonade sloshing over the rim.

“It’s almost November, right? I wonder what happens this time of the year.”

That caught Marsh’s attention, pulling him from his conversation. Cami felt him stiffen, and the look on his face let her know he wanted to throttle Larissa. She grabbed his hand under the table.

“Austin, how have you been?” Cami asked with faux curiosity.

Marsh and Larissa looked at her in shock. She didn’t give a damn about Austin, but Larissa wanted to play.

“Uh, I’m fine.” He looked at her sideways.

“I don’t think I ever got your major?”

The server began taking orders, and Cami sipped her lemonade, sparing Larissa a glance.

“Politics.”

“Oh, so you have similar classes to Marsh?”

“I guess.”

“That means you’ve been around him a lot. Probably Larissa too? Hmm...” she trailed off when the server took her order. Marsh placed his hand on her thigh.

“Is there a reason for your questioning?” Larissa asked in a flat tone.

“I’m just curious. I don’t think Austin and I have spoken before, that’s all.”

Larissa squeezed the handle of her fork so hard that the bones of her knuckles almost ripped through her skin.

There was awkward tension as Austin looked at her wearily. Gina cleared her throat. “I can’t believe graduation is so close. Are you ready, Marsh?”

That was a sucker punch to Cami.

“More than ready.”

“Will you two keep dating?”

Gina was being nosy, but she was raising some fruitful concerns. They both glanced at one another, an indecipherable expression on his face. Cami couldn’t hold his gaze, reaching for her drink instead.

“I’m surprised you two lasted so long,” Larissa piped up. Austin cast an irritated expression at her.

“When it’s real, it lasts.”

It was Marsh who responded. Cami bit her lower lip, feeling entirely exhausted already. Drama and pettiness were not a part of her DNA; she didn’t see how Larissa and other girls could do this twenty-four hours a day.

“I guess I can say the same.”

Marsh snorted. Larissa looked as if she wanted to say something but didn’t. Conversation leveled off with the other girls ignoring Cami. Never in her life had she wanted Deja

and Winter anywhere more than in that moment. Luckily the food came, and time eased the butterflies in her stomach.

Stepping away from the table, she headed to the bathroom. Once outside the stall, Larissa was there. Cami shook her head; what was it with Larissa cornering her in bathrooms? She immediately backed into the stall.

“I know you’re in here.”

“Obviously.”

“I think we need to finally have a conversation about what you’re doing with my man.”

Cami’s eyes widened. *Her man?* Cami stood there for a moment, her mind spinning. What?

“What do you mean *your man?*”

Frowning, Cami pushed a braid behind her ear.

“I don’t know where you came from, but you and I—” Larissa pointed between them “—aren’t the same. Clearly, we aren’t in the same league.”

Cami’s frown deepened.

“I made a mistake, and I’m going to correct it.”

“You don’t get to come back because you realized the grass isn’t greener on the other side.” Cami’s heart beat fast as stepped toward Larissa. Squaring her shoulders back, she told herself to keep her voice strong and steady. “However, you can’t erase the damage you’ve caused. It’s done. You have to face the consequences of your actions instead of harassing someone else who values what you tossed away.”

Larissa narrowed her eyes.

“You need to check yourself ‘cause you aren’t living in reality. I can’t be scared away. Frightened away. Or bullied away.” Brushing past Larissa, Cami opened the door and

stopped. “If I were you, I’d worry about the man you have now. Doesn’t look like he’s too happy. We don’t want history repeating itself, do we?”

A smile spread across Cami’s face; it felt good to stomp on Larissa’s ego. One point for her and zero for the crazy ex-girlfriend.



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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

**“C’MON, GET A MOVE ON; let’s go!”**

Cami gasped with each step. Clinging to a tree on the path, she looked up at him, sweat pouring into her eyes. Hanging her head, she whined, “*Are we there yet?*”

After last night’s ordeal, he thought it would be better if they spent a day alone. Watching her huff and pushing herself from the tree, he couldn’t deny how good it felt to be out in nature. That’s one thing he missed about home.

“We won’t be if you keep bein’ dramatic and slowin’ us down,” he joked and climbed down the path with ease, holding out his hand. She clutched it, and he pulled her along easily.

“Why are we up so early? When did birds become so noisy? Why is the sun so bright?”

“You’re just hungover and cranky.”

She had hit the bottle that night kinda hard, ignoring his warnings about the aftermath in the morning.

“Why did you let me drink that much?”

Marsh smirked as he watched her in silence. Gina’s question about graduation lingered in his mind. How would it end between them? Just a nod and a handshake? A *thank you for your fake dating services and bomb sex* and just bounce?

“Marsh?”

He shook his head as he led them down. “I asked if you

had Jack Daniels before.”

Cami groused about never doing shots again. Marsh swallowed the lump in his throat. He had to stay on task and go forward. In a month, this would all be over. He had to figure out a way to end things amicably. She’d go her way and he’d go his, even if part of him hated the idea of letting her go.

The morning on the lake was absolutely beautiful. The sky was bright blue with not a single cloud. All the trees hadn’t fully changed yet. Their leaves were a mix of oranges and browns amongst the lush green. The shore appeared as they treaded onto the rocky beach, and she hooted and turned. “A kayak!”

Marsh grinned. “Have you steered one before?”

Dropping their bags, he set up the kayak as she looked around. Chatting aimlessly, he stripped off his shirt, down to his swim trunks. He bit back a groan as she shimmied out of the cover-up gown to reveal that same pink bikini from before.

“In middle school, we went to summer camp and had kayaks. Didn’t really do anything, though; the lifeguard just pulled us around in a circle and told us to get out,” Cami said.

“That’s not real kayakin’.”

“Can you help me? I don’t wanna burn and peel.” Cami held out a tube of sunscreen.

He stared at the tube as if it was a snake. She was trying to kill him, and he wasn’t trying to fall deeper than he already was. Wiggling the bottled at him, she raised a brow. “Hello?”

“Sure.”

Pushing her braids over her shoulders, she turned and undid the back clasp of her top. The sand felt like hot coals under his feet. Time slowed down, and a single bead of sweat rolled from his temple. Like a robot, his limbs jerked as he

opened and poured the cream into his hand. You would think the amount of times they'd been intimate, his desire would have lessen, but no. It burned hotter than the flame of the sun. She flinched and giggled when he placed his hand on her back.

“It’s cold.”

He grunted. Starting at the curve of her neck, his hands slid down her shoulders. His touch grew hot against her skin, and it was all he could do to stop himself from taking her on the sand. Like a gentleman, he forced himself back, studying her and biting his lip till it almost bled.

Hauling the kayak to the water, he passed her an oar. She almost smacked him in the face with it when she spun it like a nunchuck.

“Some golden rules before we embark.”

“Is that your instructor voice?”

“Instructor voice?” He scolded her as he plopped a life jacket on her, double-checking that all her straps and buckles were tight and secure.

She giggled, and he rolled his eyes. “You sound all official and stuff.”

“Focus, silly.”

He explained the basics. How to get into the kayak. How to hold the paddle. The proper posture she should have, and that she shouldn’t tip the kayak over to do a barrel roll. They were off in the kayak, moving silently, only the splash of the oar dipping cutting the air.

Cami leaned over, letting her hand trail through the water. “I think I’m in love with kayaking now.”

Marsh stared at her for a few seconds, letting the electrified air float around them.

“Yeah? After less than two minutes?”

Rolling her eyes as he teased her, she abandoned rowing, opting to be a tourist instead. The water was crystal clear with shimmering waves of blue and green. They could see the staggered rocky bottom of the lake. Soon enough, he was steering them to a set of stone rock islands where swimmers were jumping off into the water. Cami waved as some sat on the rocks while others jumped and waved back.

“The water is so blue. Lake Michigan is dark, murky, and polluted. You know I’m facing my fear right now.”

Marsh slowed his paddling. “Really?”

“I’m afraid of deep water. Well, not afraid... I don’t prefer being in a flimsy, man-made contraption with no land to save me.”

“A lake isn’t that deep.”

“You don’t find the huge bodies of water completely frightening? You don’t know what’s down there waiting to gobble you up. Snatch a toe.”

Marsh rolled his eyes. “You sound like Meg. We used to go swimmin’ all the time in the gulf. A seaweed wrapped around her foot, and she thought it was a dead body. Made such a fuss that they made everyone get out of the water as they combed through it.”

Cami tossed her head back, laughing, and he admired how her brown skin glowed under the sun.

“All the kids hated us that day.”

“A sensible woman.”

“Paranoid woman is more like it.” Marsh steered the kayak away from the rocks. “She’s comin’ for Thanksgivin’.”

“Really?”

“If you’re not busy, I don’t know...you could come by and meet her?”

Cami turned around, and her mouth formed a perfect “o”.

“I’m going over to Devin’s, but, of course, I would love to meet your family.”

They were silent as he continued to paddle, both lost in their thoughts. Kicking her feet up, she closed her eyes. “I’m not mad at you anymore for waking me. The view is breathtaking.”

She looked beautiful, his own personal goddess there in front of him. She was everything to him at that moment.

“You’re right,” he gazed at her. “It’s beautiful.”



“Waffles for lunch is an amazing idea. You sure you don’t want to try them?”

Marsh raised a brow as he observed syrup running down her arm as she sopped the syrup up with her waffle.

“I’m good with my burger.”

Cami frowned and offered a half-eaten waffle. “Live a little. Have a waffle.”

“Eatin’ a waffle is livin’ on the wild side?”

“For you, at least. I’m not the one with a sugar phobia.” She rolled her eyes and bit into it with a dramatic moan. He sat back in the chair and shook his head.

They left the beach and arrived at the historic Red Hut Waffle Shop. The place was crowded with the lunch rush, and outside under a plastic umbrella, he was hot and sweaty but having the most fun he ever had.

“How can you not like sweet things yet you like Rasinets?”

That is a horrible life to live.”

Marsh made a face at that.

“Sorry, not horrible, just... unpleasant. Bland.”

“Yara used to say that too. She tried so hard to get me into sweets, but she always failed.”

He was surprised that fell out. He didn’t casually bring her up, and Marsh knew he had to tell her before Larissa did.

“She sounded like a smart woman.”

“She was.”

She reached for a napkin. “Do you... miss her?”

“Every day.” He would always miss her. Nothing would stop that fact. It was just now, the more he remembered, Yara and Cami were blending in his mind.

“Just like your father. You don’t ever stop missin’ the ones you lose. Am I still in love with her? No.”

She watched him for a few seconds. “You know what I’m afraid of?”

He shook his head.

“The final dance festival.”

He tilted his head, and she sighed.

“I mean, yes, I know we did amazing in Oakland, and that we’re gonna kick the Knights’ butts at our rematch. But the final dance festival is more than that. You know recruiters come there. Lots of lights and cameras.”

She plucked at the tablecloth covering the table.

“I didn’t tell you before but... I have lupus. Well, I know Devin already told you, so what am I saying?” Cami rolled her eyes. “It means my body will never stop attacking itself. I guess the messed-up part is my version specifically attacks my

kidneys, so essentially, I'm on borrowed time."

Cami didn't look at him as she spoke. "Dance companies come all the time to the festival. Some dancers have been recruited by the best and have amazing careers. It's a great start to a career compared to going to LA and hoping to get a dancing spot on a commercial about bladder control."

Marsh couldn't help but laugh, and she cracked a smile.

"I'm serious. It's hard to explain. It's like living in a ticking time bomb. I don't know when, but eventually, I won't be able to dance."

Marsh looked at her seriously. "You can always keep dancin'."

"What dancer with lupus and arthritis is out there with a thriving career?"

"There are probably some."

She rolled her eyes.

"When you can name one, you tell me. It's bad enough Savannah is my replacement."

"Have you been takin' your medicine?"

She cast a glance at him. Sitting back, she shrugged. "Not today."

"Cami—"

"I'm fine."

He rubbed his chin, watching her face. There was pain there. The same he felt for so long after the accident.

"I just want to do my best until I can't anymore."

Marsh could understand that logic. "Have you told Devin about not takin' your medicine regularly?"

Cami rolled her eyes. "No. He wants me to move to



Georgia with him.” She folded her arms. “He just wants to be controlling.”

*Georgia?* “I’m sure he just wants to know you’re safe.”

She smacked her lips and gave him a squinted glare. “He’s just being controlling. I don’t need him dominating my life.” Cami hit her fist on the table, jarring the dishes. “I just want a chance to prove to myself that I’m strong.” She patted her heart. “I love my brother, but it won’t happen if I go with him, but... I feel guilty if I don’t.”

“That’s your family. You’ll love each other anyway.”

“You don’t know that.”

*Faith.* It’s what someone told me.” He grabbed her hand from across the table. “You will dance till you’re a little old woman, Cami. You’re going to do amazin’ against The Knights. You’ll get recruited by a dance company.”

“Why do I want to believe you?”

“You should because I believed you when you told me.”

Their eyes met, and he wiped the tear that fell down her face.

“I don’t wanna be out here crying in public...”

He smiled. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell.”



It was official; *she hated hiking.*

She might have been pushing herself too much, but declined when Marsh offered to let her take the day off. They were hiking again, and the stress wasn’t great on her body, but she pushed through.

To satisfy him, she allowed him to watch her take her medication, and rub all her joints with a muscle reliever. She

still walked stiffly, but the tingly sensation of the medication let her know it was working. Making sure to control her breath and not twist her ankles on any rocks, she made it, and the group walked in a single file down the trail of a windy path. She yawned for the fifth time within a minute.

“Someone didn’t get any sleep last night?” Ezra nudged her and wriggled his eyebrows as he passed her.

Sparing a glance at Marsh, she admired his backside in his jeans and boots. The whole country boy side of him was an incredible turn-on.

“I slept. *Well.*”

“Yeah, right.” Ezra grinned and Marsh turned and gave him a warning glance.

Larissa whined from behind them. “How long do we have to keep walking?”

Marsh paused at a small river in the path and held out a hand for Cami. Helping her across the rocks, they shared a secret grin reminiscing on the previous night’s festivities. Once Cami crossed, he turned his back as Larissa arrived.

The path opened itself up to a landing and a jagged walk down to the beach. Mt. Rose loomed in the distance, and everyone chattered excitedly, splitting into separate groups and exploring the land. The water was clear, and the sun sparkled off of it, blinding Cami. *Okay, this might be worth waking me up at the buttcrack of dawn.*

A few from their group took a chance by climbing down the jagged coast. Others ventured back on the path. Cami wasn’t sure about climbing down, and nature was not her forte. She shook her head when Marsh suggested she come along.

“I’m just going to enjoy the view.”

Marsh squinted at her, and she gave him a reassuring

smile.

“I’m fine. You saw me take my medicine.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He cupped her cheek, tilting her head up. “Smile for me.”

She blushed, the huskiness of his voice making her too easy for him. Rewarding her with a chuckle, she smiled brightly.

“That’s my beautiful girl,” Marsh whispered and planted a kiss on her lips.

She watched him leave and crossed her arms as she watched everyone around her. Walking close to the edge, she saw Marsh and Ezra racing to the bottom. Gina was off to the side with Larissa taking a photo, her hands up in front of the mountains. There was a rock situated for the perfect sitting spot, and Cami stuffed her hands into her pocket, giving in to the urge to text Deja and Winter.

Shooting off a *wyd* text, she glanced up to notice Larissa climbing down the cliff.

Cami sat up, watching as Larissa got close to Marsh, who turned.

His face was impassive as she smiled at him and Austin. She kept touching his bicep, smiling in his face and giving him complete eye contact whenever he spoke. Cami bit her tongue so hard she thought she tasted blood. That naggy voice in her brain whispered, *he will probably go back to her anyway*.

That’s how it always ended up. It was her fault that she fell for him too easily when she knew the score. Texting Winter and Deja she said:

SOS Larissa is pulling out the big guns. What do I do?

It didn’t look like he was paying attention to her. Larissa stood around for a few moments longer, and Cami looked

around for Austin. He glanced at them, but he also had an unpleasant expression on his face. Larissa said a few more words, and Marsh turned his back before she headed back up the cliff.

Austin approached her, but she held up in his face.

*What was going on there?*

Sucking in a deep breath, Cami tensed when Larissa approached her. The girl smiled at her, taking the empty spot next to Cami.

“A nice view, isn’t it?”

Cami made a noise in the back of her throat.

“It’s always beautiful this time of year. I absolutely love it.”

The silence dragged on for a while, and Larissa turned to her. “How are you enjoying the trip?”

“What do you want, Larissa?”

She had the nerve to feign innocence, but Cami wasn’t falling for it.

“I just wanted to say I think it’s so brave of you to come on the trip. Truly, it’s incredibly nice of you.”

Cami’s eyebrows dipped. “What are you talking about?”

Larissa looked at her. “I mean, his ex-girlfriend is also here. People you don’t know. Marsh and I had all our firsts here.”

She felt her phone buzz with a text message. Balling her fist, she took a calming breath.

“I mean, I could never do it. I would just die. So, you’re a stronger woman than I could ever be.”

Cami rolled her eyes; the sooner the girl got away from her, the better.

“I mean, I know you and Marsh are together, but what you have could never replace the history we share. I hope you know that.”

Cami’s heart beat erratically as Larissa stood up.

“Because when it comes down to it, you’ll never be enough. He’ll come back to me; he always does.”

With that, she sauntered over to her friends, laughing. Cami sat there as the sunrise looked bleaker by the moment.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

**MARSH SANK INTO THE JACUZZI.** It was just past midnight, and he couldn't sleep. He held the notebook above the water.

*Dear Mr. and Mrs. Jordan*

That's all he had written. Closing his eyes, he tossed the notebook on the deck and let the water soothe his aching muscles. He drank straight from the bottle. Who was he kidding? He couldn't write this letter. He'd never be able to. The doors to the patio creaked open. Covering the notebook with his robe, he heard the soft patter of feet.

Cami stood in a fluffy robe. "I thought you could use some company."

An electric feeling was in the air as she shifted off the robe. It fell in a pile at her feet, and he had to bite back a groan when he saw she was wearing his now favorite pink swimsuit. It was his kryptonite. Hissing at the heat, she eased her body in alongside his.

"Your company is the best company."

He bit his lip as he felt her leg graze his.

"I've never been in a Jacuzzi before."

"A ton of firsts for you this weekend, huh?"

Cami's lips pinched and she nodded. "Can I have some wine?"

He gave her the bottle and drew closer as she took a sip. "That was good. I'm gonna miss it here." She looked out at the

forest.

“So am I.”

“Can I ask you something?”

Marsh licked his lips and took the bottle from her. He loved the almond shape of her eyes, her button nose, small waist, and petite frame. As long as he focused on her, he could avoid writing the letter.

“Can we do what we did at my brother’s house again?”

Marsh’s mouth went dry. “Are you tryin’ to kill me?”

He was more than willing, but that was beside the point. He spotted something in her expression. Something sad and he wanted to know why.

“Are you scared?”

Placing his hand on her hip, he trailed it slowly down her thigh. “You are tryin’ to kill me.”

“I just wanna remember.”

“Remember?”

His mind and body were screaming for sex, but he controlled himself. He needed her to unpack that sentence.

“Are you in pain?”

Cami shook her head. They gazed deep into each other’s eyes, seeing desperation reflected in them.

Pushing him back, she straddled his lap. He couldn’t wait a second longer as goosebumps rose on her skin in the wake of his fingers tracing light patterns on her back. He placed his hands on her hips to steady her.

“I want to... bury myself deep inside of you, but we’re in the hot tub. Anyone can come out here.”

“Are you scared?” Cami raised a brow; he saw the



challenge in her eyes.

Licking his lips, he looked around as nothing but darkness and the thicket of trees. A glance at the patio doors revealed no signs of life.

“What about protection?”

Cami reached around him, into her robe, to reveal a foil package.

“Have I corrupted you?”

“Shh...” She placed her lips on his. Marsh’s hands tightened around an expanse of her hips, fingers dipping into the soft fat there. She squirmed against him. She tasted like the sweet merlot, and he tried to commit it to memory.

Marsh kissed her all over, his hand clamping down onto the back of her neck to draw her even closer, and she ground slowly in his lap. His tongue flicked and teased, desperate to possess her. Her fingers clutched the back of her head before a sharp tug had Marsh parting from her.

“Make me feel good, please?”

“Always.”

Her hands trembled as she leaned back, unclasping her top. Hot and heavy, she gave him another kiss that threatened to rock him to the core as she ground against him.

He pulled back, leaving her inhaling shakily. He leaned forward, leaving a trail of kisses down her chest.

“Marsh—”

She hissed as he sucked his favorite nipple. She stiffened, clutching his hair to the point of pain as he worked his hand between her legs, his thumb rubbing her clit.

“Mmm yes!”

“Cami...” he gasped, briefly checking to see if her noise

drew any attention.

His fingers slipped deeper; he watched a myriad of expressions play on her beautiful face. She moved with him, both in tune with the other as he teased her, and she whined, digging her fingers in his shoulders. Her hips bucked, moaning desperately in an attempt to get him deeper.

“Marsh.”

He laughed and she hit his shoulder slightly. Teasing her, he trailed his fingers through her damp folds, urging her closer to her climax. Her eyes clamped tightly, and he shoved his fingers in deeper, curling them until her back arched. She exhaled shakily, struggling to keep eye contact as he felt her walls clench down.

“Shit, you about to cum?” His voice was a raspy tenor that made her whimper. “I feel it. So fuckin’ tight I can barely move my fingers.”

His balls were heavy with cum. The only thing prohibiting him from exploding was his sheer willingness to draw out her pleasure as long as possible. He fingered her steadily as she moaned in ecstasy. The desperation and lust clouded his vision as she licked her lips before interlocking with him, their bodies pressed against each other. He loved watching her fall apart in his arms because he would be there to catch her. Her orgasm hit her like a tidal wave, chest heaving, and her body jerked and twitched.

She clamped her thighs on his hand. He didn’t stop as he dragged out her pleasure. He pumped in and out slowly, and she gasped for air as she opened her eyes.

“Shh...” He leaned back to watch her slowly come down to earth.

Reaching behind him, he tore open the foil packet with his teeth, sheathing his length.

“Don’t you want a break?” March’s hard shaft was already rubbing up against her pussy. They both simultaneously moaned at the sensation as she nodded.

“No breaks for you,” he chuckled as he pulled her in for a kiss.

“Marsh—”

He shushed her, inserting the tip of his dick inside her slit before retreating quickly.

“God,” she moaned, pressing her hips into him, needing to be closer. He obliged as he guided her slowly down onto his dick.

Their breaths left both their lungs. He was thankful he was sitting; otherwise, she would have brought him to his knees, she felt that good. His eyes fluttered as she hissed, smoothing her palms up his broad chest and around his neck. His hands wandered up her sides, gripping her waist to steady himself as a low sultry laugh escaped his lips. He was high on everything about her.

Water from the Jacuzzi splashed off to the sides onto the wooden floor as he rocked his hips, making her moan low and long. Cami’s hands clawed at the skin on his shoulders with each hard, deep thrust, tits bouncing and the steam of the Jacuzzi inducing sweat to break out on their skin. She shivered against him with a lusty sigh as he rotated his hips.

“Is it good, baby?” His head bowed to taste her nipple, twirling his tongue around it and pulling it deep into his mouth.

“Yes!”

“You’re so tight... and good.” He stammered, stopping only halfway. Marsh clenched his teeth to prevent himself from releasing prematurely. He was so lost in her that it didn’t register the building tingle at the base of his spine, making

him dizzy.

“Can’t get enough—fuck, stop tightening like that.”

“Faster—” Cami breathed, and her wish was his command. His pace quickened, and the sounds of his skin slapping and water spilling filled the air. “Yes, thank you!”

She matched him thrust for thrust until all semblance of rhythm escaped them. His vision blurred as his dick perfectly hit her g-spot and her legs wrapped around his hips to adjust the angle. Marsh lifted his head, seeing stars.

“Tell me; do you like it, baby?”

“I love it.”

He slammed into her again. She held onto his broad shoulders as she shook her head in disbelief.

“Stop moving and keep still.” He grabbed her hips and hammered harder.

“Oh,” she whined, grinding on him with equal force. They worked themselves over and closer toward the edge. “Faster.”

Neither cared at this point, both too far gone in their pleasure to care about anyone hearing—or seeing them. He stroked her, holding her deeply as she gasped and tried to ease off his dick.

“Don’t run. I’m only giving you what you begged me for.”

Hanging her head, she obeyed his command, letting him pound her little pussy out.

“Good girl. Mhm... Take this dick.”

“Marsh!”

His slick dick twitched in her, yearning for release. Marsh didn’t know how much longer he could hold it in, but he needed her to come undone first—his goddess, his everything. Her hands cupped his face, forcing him to gaze up at her.

“Everything about you is made for me. Your spirit and body are mine.” His stomach flipped at her words as the fire burned higher. His toes curled as he was moments away from his approaching orgasm.

“I am yours and you are mine, understand, baby?”

Spreading her legs wider, she lifted her hips, undulating like a wave as his hips snapped into her. He felt like he was burning alive from the inside out, brain fuzzy from the pleasure as his eyes rolled back into his skull. She clamped down on him, and the sight of Cami falling apart on him, drooling as she spasmed around his dick had him thrusting once, twice, before tossing his head back in ecstasy.

A shriek escaped her lips, and her bones seemed to melt as she slumped forward. He clamped his teeth into her neck, her walls tightened up as a mini-orgasm tore through her, sending him over the edge.

Cami whimpered helplessly as the last tendrils of pleasure escaped her. Hips clumsily rutting into the other, exhausted, they slid down into the hot tub, with Marsh barely keeping their heads above water. Heart hammering, he stared up at the sky, his gut swirling with emotion. They sat there in silence before he blinked and gathered what little strength he had. “Let’s get out of here before one of us drowns.”

“I love you.” She swallowed hard. “I do, Marsh.”

*Love.* Did he deserve her love? After everything he’d done, he didn’t deserve to be the receiver of her love. Staring at her, she looked at him and then back to the water. His body stiffened.

“Uh, yeah, Cami, I have to tell you—”

“I just want you to know that.”

He slowly pulled her against him, locking his arms around Cami so tight that there was no hope of escape, showing with

his body what he couldn't voice in words.

"Can we stay here just for a few more minutes?"

He nodded, a sheen overtaking his eyes. "Just a few more minutes."



They were fly-fishing today, and Cami was feeling the "uniform". Wader boots and overalls made her feel as if she was dressed in an astronaut's suit. She had to focus on that and not the fact that Marsh never responded to her declaration from the night before. How embarrassing was that? Did she throw herself into traffic now or later?

"Are you listenin'?"

Cami's breath caught as she looked up into his eyes. Damn, she was worse than the first time! She did just drop a heavy confession on him. What was she expecting?

"I am."

"No, you're sittin' there, grinnin' and frownin'. You need to be focused on the fishin' so you don't take someone's eyes out."

"I swear I am."

"Then what did I say?"

Cami made a face before she said, "You said to toss it back and throw."

Marsh gave her a bland face, and she tried to keep her face neutral before she laughed. He stared at her for a second before chucking.

"See, you weren't listenin'."

He explained how to toss the line again. She watched him, closely lingering on his face. She wanted him to say something, *do something*. Anything to let her know she wasn't

the only one feeling things. Unshed tears pricked her eyes, but she blinked them away.

Once their lines were ready, she held onto him as they waded into the water. She definitively didn't want to twist her ankles on the rocks. Though, the idea of Marsh carrying her back to the truck like a princess held a certain appeal to her, but right now, she wanted to keep as much distance as she could from him. The sting of his rejection was still fresh.

"Do we have to keep the fish?" Cami flicked her pole, but she didn't hold the line. She had to do it again.

"You want to eat, don't you?"

"Can't we just buy something from the store?"

Marsh turned to her. He flicked the cast out onto the water with ease she did not have. "How did you think those fish got there?"

"By someone with way more experience than a five-minute lesson."

They laughed before beginning to fish. Marsh got frustrated with her just tossing the line out willy-nilly. He stood behind her, fisting her grip on the pole as he explained the technique—again.

"You're not supposed to just toss it out there. There's a rhythm and art to it."

He moved her body in the motion of the current. She nodded as she allowed her body to move with his.

"Now, on three," he said into her ear.

She couldn't help the shiver that went down her back.

"Are you cold?"

Cami shook her head. His head appeared next to hers, and she turned as he placed his lips on hers. She knew it was

wrong, but she closed her eyes, leaning into his touch. *I'm an idiot.* Why was she kissing him back, and why couldn't she stop herself? She didn't even have time to get into the kiss because water was suddenly splashed on them, forcing them apart.

“Sorry, did we interrupt?”

Cami turned to see Austin and Larissa.

“I didn't know we would be out here interacting with nature like this. It's unclean.” Larissa splashed water and Cami pressed closer into Marsh.

Marsh's frown deepened. “That's why it's called a nature retreat.”

Larissa and Austin secured a spot on the rocks close to them.

“Still, there should be amenities.” Larissa snapped her fingers at Austin. He passed her the rod.

Marsh finished quickly explaining how to toss her cast out into the water, moving to her side. She tried not to mourn the loss of his heat. Larissa attempted to do the same, but ultimately, she failed. Stomping her foot into the water, she whined about how difficult it was.

“Then you should have stayed home.” Marsh gritted his teeth.

Everyone was silent, and they stood there awkwardly before Larissa stomped her foot again.

“This is boring.” For someone who bragged about the retreat, Larissa didn't seem into it. That pissed Cami off more knowing she lied before to antagonize her.

“You are welcomed to do anything else than stand here complainin’,” Marsh sighed. Cami blinked, uncomfortable, and she chanced a look at Austin. He just sat there looking out



at the wilderness, seemingly unaware, or he just didn't care.

"We can play a game to make it more interesting."

Marsh shook his head. "No, we cannot."

Cami sighed and pulled him away.

"Let's play a game. Cami, do you like games?"

She shot Larissa a look and then at Marsh. "Fishing is fine."

"Don't be a baby. Let's play a simple game. Truth or Lie."

Cami could feel her patience dwindling. She had dealt with Larissa throwing a drink on her, antagonizing her at every turn. Enough was enough.

"I said I'm fine—"

"I'll go first," Larissa beamed at them both.

"Larissa..." Austin warned, and Larissa sent him a sharp look, instantly silencing him.

"Unless, Marsh, you want to go first?"

Marsh focused on his line, tugging the string.

"Okay, I'll go first." Larissa smiled at everyone. "I have a pet dog named Muffy. I am captain of the cheerleading squad. The ex-girlfriend I killed might have been pregnant."

*Pregnant?* Everyone sucked in a deep breath. Cami gawked at Marsh, and his hands were tight over the pole.

"Which one is the lie, Marsh?" The way Larissa said his name made Cami's skin crawl. She wanted to punch the girl in the face.

"You've gone too fuckin' far!"

Marsh took a step toward Larissa, but Cami caught his arm. Austin stepped forward to drag Larissa back.

“I wish you would put your hands on me!”

“You talk too fuckin’ much—” Marsh’s voice was dark, and he vibrated with unshed anger, sending fear flashing down Cami’s spine.

“Calm down Marsh, please.” Cami tried to comfort him by caressing his arms, but he shrugged her off. *Ouch*. That hurt more than last night.

“I think it’s obvious what the lie is. Or should I make it simpler for folks in the room?”

“Shut the fuck up, Larissa,” Marsh demanded.

Cami went still. A ringing was in her ears and a knot in her belly. Too many thoughts swirled in her mind as she tried to keep up with the conversation in front of her.

“Don’t be mad at me. You’re the one who killed them.”

“Larissa, come on now,” Austin said, tugging at her arm to head back to shore. She shrugged him off.

“Do I look like I’m done? You can go.”

Cami fought the sense of vertigo as her heartbeat thundered in her ears. The blood rushed in her veins, causing her hands to twitch lightly. Her gut tightened as she forced out all breath she could. Pregnant... Yara was pregnant?

“You thought I forgot? Did you just forget when I supported you when you almost went to jail, and now you just show up on *our* trip with a complete stranger? That’s the reason you won’t go back home and face her parents; you killed their daughter and grandchild.”

“I won’t tell you again, Larissa. Shut. The. Fuck. Up. and go about your business.”

She placed her hands on her hips. “Or what? You’ll want to take me on a drive?”

*This heffa needs her ass slapped! Enough, I'm tired of hearing this.*

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” The words sliced through the air, stopping Larissa mid-rant, and it took Cami a second to realize they’d come from her.

“You’ve been acting like a jealous bitch since we arrived. I’ve dealt with your petty comments, the arguments, and the ugly looks. It stops right now, Larissa, or I’ll be the one with the court-ordered mandate for beating your ass.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You left him, and now that you see that he’s moved on—and that he’s happy—you want to turn around and try to crawl back. News flash, you can’t!” Marsh placed a hand on Cami’s shoulder, and she shrugged it off. The words buried for so long were now rising like a divine resurrection.

“You’re the one who broke it off, not only to date—but also fuck—his friend. It doesn’t get more trashy than that. Now, you want to bring up the dead? Have you no decency?”

“Who are you calling trashy?”

“You, heffa. I’m so sick and tired of dealing with you. You need to shut the hell up and go fish.”

Larissa moved toward Cami, and Austin grabbed her. Marsh stood in front of Cami to shield her from Larissa swinging on Cami. She, who wasn’t even worried about that. More than anything, she was tired.

“I don’t care if you don’t respect me because your respect does nothing for me, but you will respect Yara. She’s not here to defend herself, and I won’t have you bringing this up in front of the entire fraternity. Let it go, Larissa. I don’t care what you say about Marsh because I ain’t going nowhere. Face it. You lost the best thing that happened to you.”

“What happens between my boyfriend and me—”

“Your *ex*-boyfriend,” Cami corrected as she pointed to Austin. “I thought your boyfriend was standing right there?”

They all turned to Austin. He looked severely uncomfortable and wouldn’t make eye contact with Marsh. He tugged at Larissa, trying to get her to move, but she brushed him off.

“Let’s go, Larissa.”

Larissa opened and closed her mouth, pinning Cami with a glare.

“So, you’re going to stand by a murderer?”

“If he’s a murderer, then why do you want him back so badly? But that is my man, and I’m gonna stand beside *him*. I suggest you listen to yours before he picks you up off the ground.” Cami placed her hands on her hips.

“First of all—”

Cami pushed Marsh to the side, standing directly in Larissa’s face. Her voice remained calm as Larissa’s eyes widened at her.

“If you think throwing this fit is going to get you the results you want, you must be smoking rocks. You’re vindictive, jealous, and spiteful. No one even likes you, your little cronies included. You’re asking how Marsh sleeps at night; I wonder how you do, knowing how awful a person you are.”

They were now drawing the attention of the others who were slowly moving toward the shit show. She grabbed Marsh’s hand and squeezed it reassuringly. Even if things were uncertain between them, she couldn’t let Larissa continue to walk all over her—or him.

“Well, you could have tried harder to be a better boyfriend, Marsh,” Larissa spat. “It isn’t fair she gets this new

you. You didn't fight hard enough for us! You're still in love with a dead girl."

"Look, I know I could have been better—" Marsh started, but Larissa shook her head.

"Just admit you didn't love me, so I know you won't love Cami."

They stood there, and he didn't try to argue her point.

Cami opened her mouth when something tugged hard at her line. She caught a fish! She panicked, not knowing what to do when Marsh immediately helped her to reel it in.

"Easy! Be easy."

Cami pulled the line back, her hands clammy and fumbling. She couldn't believe that she actually caught a fish during all the chaos.

"Pull but be gentle; you don't want it to snap the line and get away."

Cami pulled the line in as he instructed. The fish got closer with each tug. When she finally pulled the fish in, a catfish revealed itself. Though, the joy of catching her first fish was dead. Anger seethed beneath Cami's skin, igniting a flame that burned in her heart.

"We're not done."

Cami and Marsh watched Larissa silently, her dark eyes filling with unshed tears as she pointed to the two of them. "It's a shame you're involved with Marsh now; he's just going to do the same thing to you that he did to me. No one can compare to Yara. Remember that, but something tells me you're already aware."

Cami inspected her. Marsh wouldn't do something like that to her. Not after everything they've shared.

"Believe that if it helps you sleep at night," Cami said.

“Marsh wouldn’t do that to me. He’s changed.”

“Oh, he will. But you, unfortunately, are in denial and won’t get the message until it’s too late.”

“So, is that why you’re still texting him, begging him for a second chance?”

“If you were smart, then you would see that I’m trying to help you out.”

“I’m officially tired of you, Larissa.” Cami swallowed.

“He will never be better. Just remember that when you get in the car with him.” Stalking off toward the shore, she brushed past Austin.

Cami stared after her, trying to calm her erratic pulse. *No*, Cami told herself firmly. She was not going to let her win. Larissa’s a liar. Marsh placed a hand on her side, squeezing it. That didn’t ease the troubled feeling in her gut, and she wasn’t sure what would.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

**“HOW ARE YOU DOING TODAY, Camille?”**

It was a week since their return from the Lake Tahoe trip, and only now did she finally feel back into the groove of things. They hadn't spoken about Larissa's accusation, and frankly she didn't want to. Was Yara pregnant when she died? That magnified the situation times a million, and it was becoming hard to look him in the eyes.

The closer they got to the end of the semester, the more things picked up—and the more she thought about the end.

She hadn't forgotten that she had to give Devin an answer about moving to Atlanta, but during her calls with him, she managed to avoid that conversation so far. Since their time at Lake Tahoe, Marsh had been in her dorm almost every night, as if he was trying to comfort her... or himself?

They watched movies, studied, made love, and every time he left to go to class or work, or she for practice, her heart twisted because she wanted to be with him. And there was still no response to her declaration of love. No answer to her burning question about Yara.

Deja and Winter were even getting pissed off that she was spending most of her time with Marsh and less time with them. They were her girls; she would never completely abandon them, but they had to realize that she was just savoring what little time left she had with him. To placate them, they were going out for their favorite tonight, Korean BBQ.



Cami managed to pull her thoughts away from Marsh and look at Dr. Aguilar. The older woman sat on the rolling chair and looked at her with a smile.

“I’m fine.”

“Just fine?”

Cami nodded, and giving a small grin that didn’t reach her eyes. “That’s all I’m capable of right now.”

Dr. Aguilar raised a brow. “Are you feeling old symptoms?”

She did feel sick as a dog this morning. Her hips locked up so bad that she tittered side to side slowly until she reached the bathroom. The hot water didn’t relax her muscles, and no amount of muscle relief could.

“It’s more emotional than physical,” she said. That wasn’t a lie.

Cami sighed; Larissa’s words always circled like a vulture. *He won’t get better. You didn’t love me and you won’t love her.*

“I do have some concerns that I wanted to talk to you about; your lab work came back with some inconsistencies.”

She stiffened.

“Your vitamin C and D levels are severely low, and so are your anemia levels. Are you taking all your medications and vitamins as prescribed?”

Right. She tried to take it when she remembered, but she was fine.

She honestly did take her medicine—just not consistently. It wasn’t like anything had happened to her so far. She hadn’t taken her medicine in a week, and she was feeling it, but it would go away like it always did? Her dancing wasn’t suffering yet.

“I haven’t been very consistent,” Cami admitted, and Dr. Aguilar frowned. “I’m fine, though! Just a few aches here and there. I feel better today than I have since before my diagnoses.”

The lie fell flat, and Dr. Aguilar sighed, disappointed. “Now, Cami, I know that your diagnoses have been difficult for you to process, but I want you to know that your health is my ultimate concern and nothing for you to take lightly.”

“I know, I know...”

Dr. Aguilar came forward in her chair and grabbed Cami by the hands. They felt warm in her cold ones.

“Do you, Cami?”

The hair on Cami’s neck stood up.

“If you continue down this path, you’re going to end up back in the hospital. This time, I’m not sure if you’ll bounce back as quickly as you did before.”

That was a bucket of cold water on her. No way was she going back to the hospital, not now or anytime soon.

“You will be back in this hospital, confined to a hospital bed, if you do not take your medication. You’re playing a dangerous game, young lady, so you need to consistently take your medicine as prescribed. Only bad things will come from you not listening to medical advice. Are you going to that support group?”

“Not yet.” Cami bit her lip and focused on the tiled floor.

The doctor exhaled loudly and rolled back to her desk and pulled out a few gloves. “How about we check your joints? Just to make sure there is no inflammation there.”

Cami leaned back onto the bed as Dr. Aguilar pressed her fingers to Cami’s knees, moving them back and forth. Cami sighed and she needed to get it together, especially with the

upcoming dance performance.

An hour later and with a firm warning from her doctor, Cami was in Japantown with Deja and Winter as they bickered over who managed the grill. For the first time in a while, Cami felt free but at the same time dread. Her life appeared to be picture perfect. She had a boyfriend, close friends, and her dance group was going perfectly. It would all go up in flames if she didn't get this sickness thing under control.

"Just get the meat off the fire before you burn more of it. They won't be generous this time around with a fresh batch." Winter stuffed rice and veggies into her mouth.

Cami munched slowly on edamame as Deja grumbled and turned the meat. "I'm a professional, okay? Don't worry about what I got going on over here; you need to worry about our dear friend over here. She's the one that is dickmatized."

Cami raised a brow as they giggled in agreement.

"You are right. I'm surprised she's here. If Marsh calls her right now, she'll ditch us in a hot second." Winter sent her a look.

"That's wrong from both of you." Cami pointed at them and then reached for her glass of water. The bitter memory of her argument with Larissa at the lake still fresh in the front of her mind.

Deja shook her head. "Don't get mad at us because you got finally some steady dick and don't know how to act."

"I'm not that bad."

Deja frowned. "I would believe you if you could say it with a straight face."

"It's cute, Cami! We've never seen you like this before," Winter gushed, leaning onto the table with her elbows.

“You both are making a big deal out of nothing.”  
*Pregnant. Yara was pregnant.*

“Says the one with the hickeys all out in the open.” Deja pointed a chopstick at her, and Cami’s hands flew to her neck. Her turtleneck had lowered at some point, and she quickly readjusted it.

“Ooh, does Devin know you’re walking around with hickeys?” Winter wiggled her eyebrows, and Cami rolled her eyes.

“I don’t have to report everything to him.”

“That’s what you think.” Deja smacked her lips. “If you got hickeys then I wonder what else is going on, huh? Is he bustin’ it wide open every night? Nobody in your dorm has complained yet? Wait, have you had to buy a Plan B yet?”

Cami threw a napkin at Deja’s face as she cackled. “You’re not funny.”

“Hmph. We all go through it. I bet it’s so good you wanna cry? I can just tell! The same thing happened to me when I got with Spencer.”

“Just be careful, okay?” Winter turned to Cami, and she ducked her head. She loved and hated her girls at the same time.

“You know what? I can’t stand you two. Can I get my food to go?”

“Hush, we’re just having fun with you. Are you sure everything is going all right between you two?” Winter leaned forward and placed her hand over Cami’s.

“If he’s acting up now, all you gotta do is say the word. I’ll have someone run up on his ass and handle him.” Deja stabbed her meat aggressively and raised a brow.

“I like Marsh a lot.” Cami wanted to confess the entire

deal. The fake relationship. Her sickness. The sudden news about Yara. Her fear of her future.

“I... this takes a lot for me to say, but I love him, okay? I’m in love with Marsh, but at the same time, I’m so scared everything is going to go downhill soon.” *It already is.*

Winter and Deja frowned; Winter spoke first.

“What? You do know that Marsh is madly, crazily in love with you, too, right? We can see it in his eyes.”

“I don’t know.” *You didn’t confess your love after boning him only to have him look at you like a deer in the headlights.* Since her showdown with Larissa, things had been silent on her end.

“Girl, he loves you, all right? It’s sickening to watch.” Deja placed fresh meat on the grill.

“I want to believe that but... I’m not his usual type.”

“You just now figurin’ that out?”

Winter pressed her lips together. “Please don’t tell me you believe that lie.”

“Look—”

“He’s piping you down. You cancellin’ plans on us. We don’t see one without the other. I don’t think he cares you aren’t his usual type. After what you told us happened on the trip, Larissa is lucky I don’t beat her ass.” Deja stole some rice from Winter’s bowl.

“How I feel about her, please do.”

“No violence,” Winter interjected. “I think you both may be that college sweetheart couple. One of those cheesy love stories.”

Cami half-smiled at that.

“I didn’t want to be the bearer of bad news, but I think you should know, and I wouldn’t be your girl if I didn’t tell

you.” A serious look flashed across Deja’s face, and Cami inhaled. “My sources told me Larissa and Austin broke up.”

From the way they acted the rest of the trip, it was bound to happen.

“I know she’s still a scandalous thot, but be on the lookout if what you said happened at Lake Tahoe is true.” Deja smacked her lips, eating.

“Don’t listen to her, Cami. I’m sure he’s not stupid enough to ruin a good thing.”

“We still want her to be smart. Women and men can be dirty. It’s obvious Austin wasn’t what Larissa thought he was gonna be, and now she’s trying to backpedal,” Deja countered, and Cami’s appetite disappeared.

Cami wanted to think there was no way he would go back to Larissa. What about those text messages he never told her about? Had Larissa started again? Probably. Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

Still coming over tonight?

Cami sighed and Deja peeked over. “See, what I tell you? Completely dickmatized.”

Of course.

She forced a smile. “Don’t worry, guys. Everything is going to be fine.”

“Yeah, I’ll believe that when Tupac and Biggie rise from the grave and become friends,” Deja muttered.

Dinner went smoothly with talks of Cami’s love life out of the picture. They decided to stop to get ice cream when she felt her phone buzz with an incoming email. A glance showed it was from Harry.

Dear Cami,

I hope this email finds you well. A colleague of mine just

mentioned the LeBlanc Troupe will be here in San Francisco with open tryouts! I gave him your name, and I don't have to tell you how great of an opportunity this is, especially with your history. This doesn't happen often, and I hope you consider auditioning.

Cami screamed, jarring Deja and Winter. Placing a hand on her face, she blinked, trying to process what she was reading.

"You almost made me drop my ice cream!" Deja grumbled as Cami shook the phone in their face.

"You won't believe what just happened."



"Yo! What the hell are you doing, man?"

Marsh waved Ezra away as he stood at the bench on the side of the court. Despite what she confessed at Lake Tahoe, he and Cami managed to co-exist around the huge elephant in the room, but for how long was the question.

"Marsh, man! We're playing basketball."

At least every other week the frat was on the public court for some friendly competition.

He ignored Ezra calling his name as his fingers hovered above the keyboard on his phone. It had been a while since Marsh played a game of basketball with his friends, and while his knee wasn't bothering him so much today, he wanted to take advantage before another flare-up. It was the perfect distraction from his thoughts of ending the pretend relationship with Cami.

"Marshall!"

"Huh?" Marsh turned to Ezra, dripping with sweat and hands on his hips.

"I've been callin' ya, man."

“Yo, my bad, I’m just textin’ Cami.”

I’ll change and be right over.

Ezra groaned and Marsh prepared himself for this lecture once again. “You’re texting her again? Come on, bro, where are your balls?”

He knew he didn’t deserve her or her love, but like the greedy bastard he was, he wanted to soak it all up. Larissa was right. He didn’t love her as he should have, and he would fuck it up with Cami.

“Maybe once you’re in a lovin’ and committed relationship, you’ll change ya tune.”

“Never. See me? I’m not only a client, I’m the playa president.” Ezra popped the collar of his shirt, and Marsh raised an eyebrow.

“Ok, Biggie...”

“And you know this...”

Ezra shook his head, and Marsh laughed. He could only laugh to keep from succumbing to the emotions that warred within him. He didn’t want to let her go, but it was time before Cami turned into Larissa and threw his mistakes in his face.

“You ain’t shit.” Ezra bumped him, and Marsh lost his footing. Pain flared in the middle of his right knee and traveled up his back. He gritted his teeth.

Of course, when he thought he was feeling better, something would happen to make things worse.

“I’m the best player on this team. You betta recognize.” Marsh walked the pain off as he moved back to the center of the court.

*“What’s taking so long? Y’all over there doing each other’s hair?”*



*"We'll probably be here all night waiting on these two!"*

Unfazed by his frat brothers' taunts, Marsh was just ready to get back on the court then and whoop Ezra's ass when the doors to the court slammed open.

Everyone stopped and turned, except Marsh, initially. Austin was more than two hours late, and Marsh had to conceal his anger. He had always been a little flakey in his duties as vice president, but now he was missing meetings, work, and class responsibilities.

"Hey, Austin, you're late!" one of the guys shouted. Austin flipped him off, stomping over to the bench where Marsh stood.

Ezra looked at Marsh then muttered, "Who pissed in his cereal?"

"Shut the fuckup, Ezra," Austin snarled.

Not at all deterred, Ezra laughed. "Aww...what's the matter, little man? You didn't get none last night?"

Austin took a step toward Ezra and Marsh intervened.

"This ain't the time or the place."

Slapping Marsh's hand away, Austin looked him up and down. "Don't touch me."

He was getting real tired of this mothafucka. They had now drawn the attention of most of the other frat members in the room. Through narrowed eyes, the guys watched one another until Austin broke their standoff and stomped onto the court, ignoring the stares.

"Asshole," Marsh muttered, and Ezra patted his shoulder.

"Took the words right outta my mouth. Why do you think he has his panties in a twist?"

"Hell if I know, but leave him alone."

“I’ll try, but I can’t help but aggravate treacherous assholes like him.”

Rolling his eyes, Marsh pushed Ezra toward the court. He would have words with Austin about his behavior later, not wanting to stir up more shit than necessary. On the court, they took their positions. Marsh stood off to the side as the shooting guard. It was the best position, and the guys didn’t make him do too much running. Ezra stood as point guard, and when their makeshift ref blew the whistle, the game began.

Shit-talking commenced, as it usually did when they played. He didn’t think much of it as Ezra caught the ball and they began to run back and forth down the court. At the far end of the court, Ezra passed Marsh the ball.

Even with his athletic career cut short after his accident, Marsh had to admit he still had skills. Dribbling left and right, he was about to dodge his opponents until Austin came barreling toward him.

“You got this, Marsh!” Ezra shouted.

Marsh faked a right, and Austin followed, then left before quickly ducking right again, spinning on his toes and slam-dunking the ball in the hoop. The crowd went crazy, and Marsh grinned, slapping hands with his team as Austin was red-faced, embarrassed, and glaring at him.

“Let’s make this basket, Austin!” someone shouted as the players moved forward down the court.

Marsh’s heart thumped in his chest as he slowed and turned, gauging Austin’s next move. For a moment, Marsh remembered when there wasn’t the tension between them. They used to be good friends, but something, somewhere, went wrong. How many friendly games had they played together, nights out partying, or even studying?

It was normal to get rough while playing a sport, Marsh knew that. Ducking forward to snatch the ball, Austin managed to dodge Marsh's steal. Instead of just moving to the side, Austin kicked his foot out, catching Marsh's bad leg, causing him to careen toward the ground.

"You tripped him, asshole!"

The sound of heavy feet stomping toward him was all Marsh heard. His arms went forward to brace the impact. He tried to turn and allow the impact to land on his shoulder, but his injured knee caught the brunt of his descent to the hardwood floor. Stars burst behind his eyelids, and Marsh clenched his teeth to prevent screaming in agony.

"Marsh, man, are you okay?" Ezra kneeled beside him.

Rolling onto his back, Marsh closed his eyes as he brought his right leg to his chest, curling around it as he rocked from side to side on the ground. The pain synced with his heartbeat and throbbed steadily, and he took a few calming breaths as the other guys swarmed him.

"You think you need to go to the hospital?" Ezra placed his hand on his shoulders, helping him sit up.

"No, I'm fine," he gritted.

*"Marsh!"*

The entire room turned to see Larissa scurrying toward them.

"What the hell is she doing here?" Ezra blurted as he took the words right out of Marsh's mouth. Austin lingered with an indecipherable look on his face and frowned when she got closer.

"Are you seriously helping him?" Austin said through clenched teeth.

"Marsh! Marsh!" Larissa ignored Austin and pushed

through the crowd to get to him. Marsh groaned and tried to move away from her as Austin yoked Larissa up by the arm.

“Did you hear me?”

“Let go of me!”

Marsh did not care about what was going on between them at all. He tried to push himself up, but the pain knocked him back to the ground.

“That’s it. You’re going to the hospital, bro.” Ezra shook his head and nodded to the guys around them to help him up.

“I’m fine. Let me get up; I can do this.” He tried to push himself up, but they sat him back down.

“You need an ambulance,” Ezra began.

Marsh didn’t want any doctors or ambulances. “Don’t make a big deal outta this.”

“Let me help.” Larissa took a step forward, and Marsh pushed her away. Why was she here? What did she want?

“Larissa,” Austin called out, and she turned to him.

“It’s over, Austin. I told you this already.”

“Hold on, I should be beatin’ yo ass right now for what you just did to Marsh,” Ezra said, advancing toward Austin.

That sent the entire room buzzed, and Marsh tried to grab Ezra back.

“Don’t do it—”

“Shut the fuck up, Ezra. Your lame ass is not about to do anything.” Austin looked Ezra up and down.

“Oh really?” Ezra grinned, and before any of them could react, Ezra swung his fist, and it connected with the side of Austin’s face.

“Both of y’all!” Marsh yelled, and even though he felt

some satisfaction from Ezra hitting Austin, he wasn't about to let his man get penalized for it. The two dudes went at it as more guys jumped into the fray, attempting to pull them apart. Marsh watched the mess unfold, his pain intensifying before he let out an ear-screeching whistle.

"Now, let's get him up," Larissa directed the guys around him. He couldn't protest as they lifted him to his feet. Pain shot through his nerves, and he crumpled forward. Damn, Austin really fucked him up good. He needed to get home and ice his knee.

Austin, face swollen, stood there for a second before flipping off Ezra.

"We're not done," Austin threatened.

"Yeah, yeah, get yo' ass outta here lil' boy."

"I can help myself," Marsh grumbled, but Larissa managed to wiggle her way into his side.

Ezra shot him a look before he whispered in a low voice, "Cami wouldn't like this."

He didn't need the reminder, but he couldn't get himself out of her grip as they managed to escort him off the court.

"I know you might not wanna talk with me but we need to, please," Larissa said, and Ezra gave him a sharp look.

After everything that went on between them, the humiliation, and the games they played emotionally with one another, Marsh shouldn't give her the time of day. Common sense dictated that he should turn around and keep walking. Flip her off and say deuces, but somehow, he found himself nodding and saying, "Ok."

Larissa grinned victoriously, and he felt Ezra's cold stare on the side of his head. She bounced on her heels and shared a *You know you just fucked up, right?* look with Ezra before she

disappeared down the hall.

“What the hell are you doing, man?” Ezra muttered and helped him hobble toward the entrance.

“I don’t know... blame it on the pain.”

“This shit is gonna backfire.”

How right Ezra was.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

### "ARE YOU OKAY?"

Cami wasn't stupid. She knew something happened. She'd gotten back to her dorm, showered and changed, waiting for him. Not just one, or two, but more than three hours passed with no phone call, text, or messenger pigeon. Ezra, who'd been no help whatsoever, only mentioned he was in an accident. *Accident?*

"Cami?"

Why didn't he call, or hell, at least text, to tell her at some point during the night? Cami tried to keep her face neutral to not tick off everyone else in class about the overwhelming emotions she felt brewing in the pit of her stomach.

"I'm fine." Her voice was dull and dry.

Marsh gave her a look as they moved left and right to the music. His leg was still jacked up, but he hobbled along. Today was the Viennese Waltz, which meant being close to him, and it was torture.

"Really? It doesn't sound like it."

"I said I'm fine." Her tone left no room for conversation, and they continued in silence.

She didn't even correct him when his form wavered or he stepped on her foot. Her mind was racing. *He's distancing himself. After everything, he's distancing himself and still hasn't said I love you back he wants Larissa.*

“Did you want to grab somethin’ to eat after this to study? Your place or mine?” He ignored all of the “leave me the fuck alone” signals she was emanating.

Cami shook her head. “I’m busy.”

“Busy with what?”

Exhaling shakily, she let her eyes fall to his. “Plans I have tonight.”

She didn’t, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Cami.” He stopped moving, forcing her to glance at him.

Memories of their time together. She had waited for him to say *Hey, it’s over* or *We’ve accomplished our mission*. Or even something where he messed around before he finally admitted the truth. *Anything*.

Instead, his eyes searched for something in hers. If he found it, she wasn’t sure.

“You need to slow down on the steps. This is the Viennese waltz, not the Mamba.”

Cami forced them back into the motion of the dance as they moved around the room. The rematch with The Knights was two days away.

*Why can’t you tell me it’s over?*

He followed her movements back and forth, stiffly. When the music stopped, she finally let out a sigh of relief as Harry dismissed them for the day. Cami quickly went to her cubby to grab her things and head out when she felt Marsh grab her forearm. “Wait a second—”

“I called you all night and you never answered.”

Marsh’s brows crinkled. He licked his lips, looking away from her.

“Why didn’t you answer? Or at least text back?”



Why was it that even now she still wanted to kiss him? When you're mad at someone, you should be able to cut off all the lovey-dovey emotions you had before, but no; she still wanted to jump his bones.

"I stayed up all night waiting for you."

"Look, I'm sorry."

Cami shook her head. Glancing around, her classmates filed out of the room.

"No." Cami shook her head. "A 'sorry' doesn't cut it. I had to find out from Ezra you were in an accident. What happened?"

He sighed deeply, rubbing his beard. "I fell."

"You fell?"

"I was playin' basketball. Austin came in, upset, and things got rough. I landed on my..." He pointed to his leg. "Ezra made me go to the hospital. It's nothin' serious."

"There are so many things wrong with what you just said, it isn't funny." Shaking her head, she grabbed her bookbag roughly from the cubby.

"Look, I know we're just faking," Cami lowered her voice, glancing at Harry who was cleaning the studio, "but I thought we were now friends if nothing else. You could have at least told me yourself you were fine, but I guess I stepped out of my place."

"Place? You're not in any place."

"I am. Everyone has a place in someone's life. It's obvious where mine stands in yours."

She didn't need him close, especially since he'd become her new weakness.

"Cami, you mean a lot to me."

“You never responded to what I told you in the Jacuzzi.” Her voice was soft and trembling. At least he had the decency to look guilty.

“Look—”

“You don’t have to spare my feelings and say it back. I get how you feel; it’s all good.” Cami waved her hand as if flicking away a fly. Her throat closed, and she swayed slightly on her feet as a brief feeling of nausea and dizziness hit her.

“Are you okay? Are you takin’ your medicine?” His voice dipped as he rushed to keep her steady. Cami pulled away from him.

“I’m fine.”

Marsh looked irritated. “Cami, wait—”

“I told you, Marsh, you don’t have to say it back.”

His eyes roamed her face then down her body. She covered her chest, shifting from foot to foot. Never in her life had she wanted to crawl under a rock than she did right now. All she could hear was the thundering of her heart as he raised his hand and smoothed his thumb across her cheek.

“I—”

“Hush.” He placed his thumb over her mouth, halting her speech.

“You mean to me more than you think, Cami.”

She was such a weak dork. Those words were enough to make her melt. He held her with quiet desperation as if she would blow away if he let her go. Her logical mind still noticed that he hadn’t said *I love you*, but how she wished she had mind-reading powers to know what he was thinking at that very second.

“Do you understand that? I care, Cami.”

Glancing away, she allowed him to pull her into his arms. Claiming her mouth, they both groaned, and he grabbed her butt. *Let him go, Cami! What are you doing?* A soft cough let them know they weren't alone, and she pulled away from him quickly, shooting Harry an apologetic look.

"Do you have anything else you need to tell me?" she stated bluntly.

One little kiss didn't erase what he did. She placed her hands on her hips and cocked her head at him.

"Not that I know of."

Cami made a face. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

Cami just turned and began to pack her things as quickly as she could.

"Wait, Cami."

She shoved her jacket on and turned to him. "Don't... I'm just gonna go. Okay?"

"I can order us a pizza or somethin', just please—"

"Look, it's nothing all right? I need to get ready for the competition." Cami took another step away from him.

Marsh made a face. "We're still takin' the train over together."

"I'm gonna go the day before. Just to clear my mind, ya know?"

He looked as if he wanted to question that when Harry walked up. "Am I interrupting anything?"

Marsh said yes as Cami said no.

Harry raised a brow. She looked at Marsh, and it took him a moment before he got the message. He grabbed his things, exhaling deeply through his nose. He stopped by

Cami, leaning down to whisper in her ear.

“We’ll talk later.”

She didn’t bother to respond. The door shut lightly, and it was only when she was sure he disappeared that she glanced at Harry. Forcing the growing nausea down, she closed her eyes for a second, gathering herself before she pinned him with a tired smile.

“I assume you got my email.”

“I did, and I’ve been literally freaking out ever since.”

The Leblanc dance company was renowned. They were based out of Las Vegas, and some of the best dancers Cami had come to admire got their start at Leblanc. A Leblanc dancer was all but guaranteed gigs like Vegas performances, choreography opportunities, Broadway, and music videos. If she joined them, success was virtually at her fingertips!

“You know that we’re getting closer to the dance festival, and that’s always stressful, but I want to make sure you can handle this. If you don’t think you’re ready—”

“No, I can do it.”

She had to do this. She wanted to prove she was strong. No longer did she want to be viewed as weak. Beating the Knights and acing an audition with LeBlanc would prove she didn’t have to change her lifestyle or be “sickly” anymore.

“It’s Monday morning. You’re one of our top dancers, Cami. I know you’re gonna represent PGU well.”

Harry grinned and patted her on the shoulder. Wait until she told Deja and Winter! Then her happiness deflated. Marsh. She wanted to tell him, but he didn’t deserve her good news right now, and she wasn’t the only one who could keep a secret. The further she kept her sickness under control before meeting with the Leblanc company, the better everything

would work out in the end.

It had to.



Marsh was already regretting his decision.

Pacing the inside of his room, he was going to meet Larissa at a coffee shop. Somewhere public and after that, they would be done. He was a total fucking idiot. All Larissa deserved was to kiss his ass and directions off the nearest cliff.

They were probably doomed from the beginning. Dr. Lake warned him, that at some point, however, like in all relationships, things shifted and were never quite the same again. Marsh wasn't a robot; he had feelings, and her betrayal had cut even if he refused to show it. He had to do this, just for the clarity of *why*.

His phone rang. "What's up?"

All day, it felt as if someone stabbed him in his heart. He'd wanted to say *I love you* back, but he didn't want to ultimately disappoint Cami. The words couldn't tumble over his teeth. He still had his half-written, unsent letter to Yara's parents.

"Hey, I'm sorry, but could you meet me in the library?"

Sighing loudly, he said, "Sure."

Fifteen minutes later, he was walking into the basement of the library.

"Larissa."

She jumped and turned to face him. Normally, she wouldn't leave the house without a beat face and laid edges. Perfection and Larissa went hand-in-hand. Instead, she was dressed down in a baggy sweatshirt; her hair was in a sloppy ponytail, and her eyes were red. She gave him a half-smile.

“Marsh.”

They stood in silence, both watching the other, and it was the first time they'd stood in each other's presence without drama in three months.

“What's wrong?”

Pursuing her lips, she sniffed, looking at the ground.

“Thanks for coming. I didn't think you would.”

Marsh's brows dipped. He inspected her closely, noticing how pale she was.

“I'm still thinkin' about just walkin' away.”

“That's fair.”

Grunting, he tried to calm his breathing as his heart thumped against his chest. Thousands of questions wanted to erupt from his lips, but he settled on silence. Larissa bit her lip and focused her gaze on the ground and nodded.

“Where's Cami?”

“Why do you care? I didn't come down here to make small talk. Why would you tell Cami about Yara's pregnancy? You've more than proven that you can't be trusted—not only with my feelin's, but my most deepest secrets.”

“I—”

“She never even took the test.”

She cut her eyes at him and exhaled shakily.

“I was angry.”

Marsh growled in frustration. “I get angry, but I don't go speakin' on shit that I don't have any business. Half the shit I know about you I could have told, but I didn't. Why did you do this? All of this?” Turning the frat upside down. His emotions. His plans.

Larissa wiped her face and focused on the floor. “I wasn’t happy—for a long time—and I just wanted to get a reaction out of you.” She pulled on her sleeve.

How fucking crazy had Larissa become? Did he make her this way?

“I need to apologize, Marsh. I know you’ve moved on and you’re happy with Cami. I miss you, and I fucked up. Royally. I thought things would be better with Austin, that you would see that I’d moved on and would come after me.”

“You strung me along, then fucked my friend, and you thought I would come after you?” Marsh repeated. It was the audacity for him.

Larissa’s eyes ducked from his when they made eye contact.

“It’s just... I don’t know when we stopped being us. We had a good relationship, and then it was gone. Austin made me feel like what you and I used to be.”

He rubbed his jaw, trying not to fly off the handle. “Obviously, that didn’t work out.”

“Yeah,” she said quietly.

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Yes, I cheated, but I wasn’t happy, Marsh. I deserve to be happy.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he counted back from five.

“I just had to give you some closure.”

In the end, she was still justifying her behavior instead of admitting that their demise was her fault. The emotions and words she desired weren’t there, and if he told her anything different, it would be a lie.

“I gotta go.”

Marsh started to turn around, and he heard her steps before her hand circled his wrist.

“Wait!”

Staring at where her hand touched, she removed it, and he took a step back from her.

“It’s just... I know what today is.”

It was like a brick through a window. His breath skipped, and he took a shaky step back.

“I know today is Yara’s... you know. I’m sorry; how are you feeling?” Larissa asked quietly, and Marsh shook his head before looking at the ground.

“I’m fine.”

“That’s a lie.”

His head shot up to her, and Larissa nodded. “I know you, Marsh. This day always takes it out of you.”

Larissa was right about that. It felt as if he was walking through quicksand, and his eyes felt grainy. That letter was burning a hole through his desk in his room. Dr. Lake had told him to get it over with, but something stopped him every time. But what was it?

“Yeah.” He nodded quickly. “Rissa?”

“It’s just...you asked me earlier and I lied. I failed my nursing exam, and now I may not get my degree, and my parents announced their divorce—”

He had only seen Larissa break down twice—once when her grandmother passed, and when the stress of her family’s expectations and responsibilities grew to be too much. She never showed weakness, and for her to break down freely in front of him had him admitting it tore at something in him.



“Don’t cry.” Before he could stop himself, he pulled her into his arms and gave her a firm squeeze. Larissa clutched him tighter, the sobs racking her body and he patted her back. “It’ll be okay.”

“I don’t have anybody right now.” She sobbed and pressed her face into his chest.

“It’s okay.”

He held her, and Winter had turned onto the aisle with a stack of books in hand. She stumbled back out of view. Shifting her books into her other arm, she pulled out her phone, leaned into the aisle, and snapped a photo.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

**“I TOLD YOU I’M GOING** to spend the night. I’m not trying to take the BART and don’t feel like getting robbed with everything else going on in my life right now,” Cami groaned as she packed her bag.

She had more than enough to worry about than Devin’s nagging. Well, she wouldn’t be alone. Marsh was coming if he ever responded to her text. It was after class on a Friday night. The rematch with The Knights was tonight.

“Do you have an answer for me yet?”

Cami rolled her eyes to the ceiling, pausing in her packing. “About Thanksgiving? Just make sure Maya makes the mac and cheese this time, not you. Last time it tasted like paste.”

Devin roared in her ear, and she winced, pulling the phone away.

“Funny, but you know that’s not what I’m talking about.” His voice deepened with the seriousness of his tone.

That caused Cami to deflate and her shoulders dropped.

“Devin, I’m still thinking about it.”

There was a knock on her dorm door, and she rushed over to answer it. Cracking it open, she was met by the somber faces of Deja and Winter. Placing a finger over her mouth, she ushered them inside.

“What is there to think about? Just say yes so I can make

the necessary arrangements. You know you coming anyway.”

Cami rolled her eyes at her brother’s assumption. Now that Harry had told her about the Leblanc company, that was all she could think about. Living and working in Las Vegas. That was a dream, along with traveling the country... the world? How could she pass that up to go live in Georgia?

“Stop being stubborn.”

“I’ll stop being stubborn when you stop being so pushy.”

“Camille—”

She cut him off before he could begin his rant; he was too protective for his own good. “Devin, I said I’m thinking about it.” She couldn’t tell him about the audition yet. She would wait until after she knew if she was accepted. Then there would be no way he could talk her out of it.

“Is Mom coming for Thanksgiving this year?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Winter and Deja were talking in hushed tones and pointing at Winter’s phone.

“Last I heard, she’s up in Canada in Petersburg,” Devin chuckled. “I know that cold weather is kicking her ass, but you know Ma—”

“Well, I guess that answers my question. Look, I have to go,” Cami announced as she glanced at her best friends and stuffed the last of her clothes in her bag. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

Not letting Devin steer the conversation back to Georgia, she hung up the phone and turned to her girls. “What’s wrong?”

Winter and Deja looked at one another. A chill went down her spine as Deja nudged Winter with her elbow. “Go on, tell her.”

“I thought we said we’d tell her gently?” Winter hissed.

Crossing her arms, Deja tilted her nose up at the ceiling.

“You said that shit, not me.”

Winter sighed. “Well, I—”

“What’s wrong?”

Winter ran her fingers through her short, blonde hair and looked at Deja. Swallowing uneasily, she gave a half-smile. “I don’t know how to tell you this…”

Cami crossed her arms.

Winter bit the inside of her cheek, and Cami grew more nervous as they stalled and looked at one another.

“Just say it; you’re starting to scare me.”

“I saw Marsh and Larissa—”

Deja stood up. “Girl, your man is cheating on you with that skank ass hoe!”

Winter gave Deja a sharp look.

“I thought we were going to put it more delicately!”

“It’s better to rip off the Band-Aid. You’re welcome.” Deja sat slowly.

Cami blinked as Winter stood, rubbing her shoulder, as she placed her phone in Cami’s hand.

“Let’s not assume anything just yet.” Winter gave Deja another evil look.

Cami’s posture crumpled. “W-What?”

Time slowed down. Zooming in on the picture, it was as clear as day. Marsh and Larissa were holding one another as if they were still lovers, his arms around her and her face in his chest.

“I’m so sorry, Cami,” Winter said again, as she and Deja crowded her on both sides.

She hunched forward as though someone had sucker-punched her, lips parting but no words escaping. Winter and Deja's voices faded into nonsensical chatter.

"Don't worry, I told you I know some people who will trash that frat house and beat Marsh's ass like the dirty dog he is. They'll never know who was behind it." Deja squeezed her arm comfortingly.

Winter glared at her. "Of course, Marsh would know it was us."

"How you sound? It could be rival fraternity. A stalker or someone who hates people with names that start with *M*; it could literally be anyone. Who knows what else that fool is hiding from Cami?"

"Deja..."

"I'm saying the worst thing you can be in life is a liar and a cheater. Murderer, but we won't count that here. Marsh is at least one of the two, and why should we wait around to see if he's both?" Deja shrugged.

"I'll admit it looks incriminating, but there could be a reasonable explanation," Winter rationalized.

Every nerve ending in Cami's body felt alive. She wanted to scream. She wanted to hit something. She wanted to cry.

"He's hugging the bitch. What explanation do we need? I don't go around hugging my exes all lovey-dovey and shit."

"Cause half of them have restraining orders against you." Winter sucked her teeth.

Cami took a few steps toward her bed and sat down.

"What should we do? Slash his tires, put sugar in his tank, or jump his ass?" Deja listed each item with a finger.

A sob tore from Cami. This, on top of his avoidance of telling her he loved her, Yara, Larissa, her sickness, and

Devin's pressure brought everything to a breaking point. Deja and Winter were by her side within a second. They cooed and rubbed her back.

"You ain't even gotta say nothing. Marsh is getting his ass beat. On sight."

"Don't worry about it." Cami sniffed loudly, willing herself not to shed a tear. Clenching her eyes shut for a second, it felt as if a gaping hole had just been fired into her chest.

"Why are you so easy on him? You caught him in the act! Let's unleash some whoop-ass on him, and I guarantee he won't forget that shit or cheat on another woman afterward."

"Thanks for letting me know; I'll handle it from here," Cami murmured, mustering up whatever strength she could in the face of her friends.

"Why are you so calm about this? I would be fucking flipping tables over." Deja frowned and shook her head.

Winter nodded. "Well, that's great; you'll handle it. She's handling it."

"That sounds like bullshit. How are you so calm after seeing this?" Deja continued, and Cami closed her eyes.

Inside, she was raging. Sadness and anger were mixing into a sloppy concoction; she recognized that the entire relationship was a ruse from the jump. She knew deep down that there was a possibility that Marsh and Larissa would reconcile, she just wished like hell it wouldn't transpire.

"I said I'll handle it." Cami stood up and zipped her bag. Deja made an affronted sound of anger and muttered something to Winter.

"Soooo... we're still meeting you in Oakland for the competition tonight?" Winter asked brightly, looking at a

stewing Deja before Cami.

“Yeah, you know—”

Cami was cut off as Deja burst out, “I’m sorry, I can’t sit here and act like shit is all gravy. How can you be calm? Your eyes ain’t deceiving you!”

“I saw the photo, Deja.”

“Then get pissed; show some emotion!”

“I’m not you, okay?!” Cami exploded, and the room went silent. “I don’t have to justify how I feel to anyone.”

Deja pursed her lips and sucked her teeth. “Fine, handle it your way. I apologize for caring.”

“Don’t be like that,” Cami said, and Deja stood up, gathering her things and walking to the door.

“Deja!” Winter and Cami called after her as the door slammed shut. Sighing, Cami hung her head as Winter turned.

“You know she doesn’t mean that; she’s just passionate and cares about you.”

“It’s fine, you can go after her.”

“Cami—”

“I just need a moment alone; is that okay?” Cami looked at Winter and then to the floor. Sighing, Winter stepped forward and grabbed her hand.

“We’re here if you need anything. We’ll be there tonight to cheer you on.”

Cami tried to calm herself, but her phone buzzed with a message from the subject of her emotional turmoil.

I’m outside.

Praying that Deja wasn’t still lingering around, she

gathered her things and slowly made her way out of the dorm. Marsh stood in front of his car. She didn't even give him a moment to speak.

Shoving her phone in his face, his eyes crossed. "Why were you with Larissa yesterday?"

Confusion and shock crossed his features, and he swallowed.

"What?"

"Why were you at the library with Larissa?"

He was quiet as he looked at the ground before he nodded. "You were spyin' on me?"

"Don't turn this around on me. Why, Marsh?"

"You're takin' this the wrong way."

"I'm taking this the wrong way?" She laughed drily. "You were hugged up on your ex-girlfriend. The same one who screwed your friend and tried to make my life a living hell!"

He took a step closer to her, trying to touch her, but she flinched. She shook her head, and he knew couldn't fix this with a touch, a kiss, or words.

"I know it looks bad—"

"Damn right, it looks bad. You know what else looks bad? The fact that you're still texting her."

His face dropped, and something flickered in his eyes. Cami dropped her head, rubbing her forehead wearily. "How did you—"

"When I was sick. I woke up and saw them. You never said a word."

Marsh frowned, sighing heavily; Cami bit her bottom lip. He didn't deny nor admit to anything, and that made her feel even worse.



“Listen, she’s texted me in the past, but nothing happened. Larissa was upset yesterday about some things and wanted to talk. That’s it.”

“That’s it? Do I look like boo-boo the fool to you? I know I act naïve at times, but I’m not stupid.”

A cold breeze swept past them, and she pulled her jacket closer. She was grateful that no one was walking into the dorm at this time to see her arguing publicly with her supposed boyfriend.

“I went to confront her about some things. She needed someone to talk to about some personal issues. I left right after.”

“Regardless of what she wanted to talk about, you shouldn’t have been there in the first place.” Tears of anger prickled at the corner of her eyes.

Marsh tried to take her into his arms, and she pushed him away. “I’m tellin’ you the truth, Cami.”

“I knew you probably didn’t feel the same way I did, and I knew deep down that you could get back with her, but I thought you would be smarter than that.”

“Are you listenin’? I’m not back with her—”

Heart pounding, she paced as she felt herself helplessly falling apart.

“I don’t compete with anyone unless it’s on the dance floor; I didn’t sign up for this.” Another breeze blew and lifted Cami’s braids from her shoulders. “When it comes to me or her, you will pick her.”

Marsh shook his head. “That’s bullshit, okay? Since our arrangement, you’ve been the only one I’ve chosen.”

“Until last night.”

He threw his hands up in frustration. “Everythin’ we’ve

done has that not been because I picked you? I choose you. I kissed you. I told you thin's I haven't even told my therapist—" Cami's eyes widened. "Stuff I hadn't even talked to Larissa before. It's only been you, Cami."

"Be honest, Marsh; should we break up? The deal is done." It didn't matter what he said; he was still going to get back with her, and Cami wouldn't compete.

"We said until graduation."

"There's no bulletin we have to post on about the end of the relationship. Do you want to break up with me?"

Marsh sighed heavily; his lips pulled into a thin line.

"Why didn't you tell me Yara was pregnant?"

"Don't listen to Larissa—"

"She's the only one being honest!" Cami threw her hands up. "You've done nothing but withhold information from me these entire three months. I've tried to be nice. Smile. Act dumb. That stops today." Coldness seeped into her voice; she was drowning in misery and she couldn't get her head above it.

"I never wanted to hurt you, Cami."

She looked at him with accusation and heartbreak, and he couldn't handle her stare.

"Don't give me that tired line."

He took a step toward her, and she flinched.

"Be honest for once, Marsh. I deserve that."

He placed his hands in his pockets, dropping his head to the ground. It was several moments before he lifted his gaze to her.

"Yes. We need to break up."

Everything inside Cami shattered at that moment. She had fooled herself into thinking that he would profess his love

to her. Get down on his knees and beg for forgiveness. Tears were streaming down her face.

“You’re right. I’m not good for you. Larissa was right.”

*Stop crying! Don’t waste another tear on him.*

“I would only bring you down in the long-run, Cami. You’re so bright, fun, and loving. You deserve someone who returns that same energy. I can’t. I don’t think I could ever forgive myself for what I’ve done. I won’t dare make you suffer that with me.”

Cami didn’t say a word. The ringing in her ears dulled any external sensations she felt.

“I didn’t intend to make you fall in love with me, Cami. I’m sorry I couldn’t be the man you deserved.”

“You *made* me fall in love with you!” Cami’s voice broke as she yelled it. “You can’t even say the words.”

He had the decency to hang his head, and Cami sniffed, wiping her face with the back of her hand as she took a step back.

“I need to go.”

Cami turned and began to walk to the bus stop. Her vision blurred as she kept her head down. It was only when she held her hands in front of her that she saw them shaking. She sobbed. It was followed by another, and then another. Ignoring the curious looks from the other riders, she let the tears fall, wishing she never fell on Marsh Lincoln.



Several hours later, Cami stood in formation against The Knights.

The venue was just as crowded as it was when they had the first competition. Winter and Deja were there. They made up;

Deja apologized, respecting whatever decision Cami made. She didn't have the heart to tell them she broke up with Marsh hours before.

Even now, she tried not to let Marsh's absence bother her or the memories of him in the crowd, shouting her name and cheering her on. Even Savannah's presence was a painful reminder. The host for the night stepped onto the stage, drawing deafening screams from the audience, and Cami felt like she was a zombie in the crowd.

Sean nudged her from the side.

"Are you paying attention?"

"Huh?"

Rolling her eyes, Savannah stepped forward, pointing over at the other crew. "Get your head in the game, *vice-president*."

The music cut as the announcer began explaining the rules. Savannah's tone was sarcastic, but she was right. Cami had to set her personal issues aside and be a leader. Straightening her back, she couldn't show how she was feeling. She would deal with it behind closed doors later on.

"Are you ready, Cami?"

Sean appeared next to her, and she nodded.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

She felt a bit stronger when Sean clasped her shoulder as the announcer turned to Intensified.

"Heads or tails?"

It was time. Looking across to The Knights, Cami made eye contact with several of the other team members as Sean stepped forward. "Tails."

The announcer flipped the coin. "Tails it is; Intensified is up first!"

The crowd cheered and clapped. Cami followed Sean, and her team moved into formation. All the drama happening in her personal life faded into the background. This was where she thrived. This was her place. *Always.*

When the music began, Cami let herself go. Moving to the left and the right, she let her body take over and her mind step back.

It didn't matter that her relationship with Marsh crashed into the wall at a high speed. All that mattered was this competition and acing her audition with the LeBlanc company. It was at that moment that she realized she wanted to go to Las Vegas more than she wanted to breathe now. She wanted to dance until she no longer could. She was putting herself first from this point on.

She felt it slightly at first. The slight dizziness in her mind. She chalked it off as just being hungry because she hadn't eaten anything yet. Pain then reverberated in her temple, shooting down to her knees. She waited for it to fade as it had before. Instead, it doubled, a thought hitting her hard. *No.* Not now. Now wasn't the time. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to blink it all away. Her stomach cramped, causing her to step off-beat. She quickly got back on track with the music. She was fine. Everything was fine.

Cami dropped low and came back up slowly. She spotted Sean and Savannah glancing at her out the corner of her eyes.

She was in agony, but she would dance through it. Her skin went ashen, and she stumbled forward. Her joints ached, and it was as if her heart had suddenly stopped beating. All the blood had rushed down to her feet.

Cami swayed, then in a flash she saw everything: Marsh and Larissa. Devin asking about Georgia. Deja and Winter. Kissing Marsh. Holding him. Sean and Savannah. Her mouth went dry, and Sean was speaking to her, waving his hand in

front of her face. Deja and Winter called her name. Then it all went black as she hit the ground with a thud.



For the first time in years, Marsh stepped into a hospital.

His feet felt like lead as he forced himself down the halls. Memories he tried not to remember flickered like an old family album: him on a stretcher, bright lights, voices clamoring over one another, and pain. Pure pain. He stumbled, clinging to the wall. It took him a moment, and he leaned against it, exhaling deeply. Cami was here. He needed to get to her.

Willing himself to move, he did in a daze.

Shock was the first emotion he felt when Winter called him. At first, he almost didn't answer her call, assuming it was to give him hell. The alcohol he consumed those hours afterward to numb the pain put him in such a deep sleep, it was only when she said the magic words *Cami's in the hospital* that he sobered immediately.

*Was it an accident? A fall?* His gut clenched when he thought about the medication in her room.

More memories surfaced: Yara lying unconscious on the road. The paramedics. The glass he could feel in his face and arms. Regret. So much regret.

He started to breathe faster until Ezra clamped a hand on his shoulders, bringing him back to the present as they walked through the halls of the emergency unit.

"Come on, man, you got this."

Nodding, they pushed back the curtain to her alcove; as long as he lived, he wouldn't forget the sight.

Cami lying in the bed. IVs in her arm. Her ashen brown

skin and eyes closed. Chest rising and falling slowly. Devin's thumb traced back and forth over Cami's hand. The rest of the room turned to him, and Winter looked relieved as she spotted him.

"Where the hell have you been?" Devin's voice was rough, and the chair squeaked under his weight as he leaned back.

His voice woke Cami, and she blinked slightly. Devin's attention went to her immediately, and she turned, pinning Marsh with a look. She was still in her dance uniform. He felt guilty he wasn't there.

"Devin..." Cami's voice was scratchy, and Maya stood up, rushing to the small bedside table for the cup of water.

"What happened?" Marsh took a step forward.

Cami frowned. "Why are you here?"

"I invited him," Winter spoke up.

Cami squinted at Winter, the tension in the room rising slowly.

"She fainted," Winter said.

Marsh stood at the foot of the bed. "Fainted?" He shot Cami a disappointed look as she focused her gaze on the thin bedsheets. "Cami, you didn't..."

Winter grimaced. "What did you do, Cami?"

Realization dawned on Devin and Maya, and fury blazed Devin's features. "I can't believe you did this!"

"Devin, lower your voice," Maya hissed.

"You fucking did this, Cami, really? Not taking your medicine?"

Ezra coughed loudly. Fury etched in Devin's face. Cami didn't look at her older brother.

The curtain flew back, and Deja came in with a fast-food

bag. She looked around the room, her eyes narrowing on Marsh. “What I miss?”

“I’m an adult; I can do what I want,” Cami told Devin through clenched teeth.

Devin pointed a finger at her. “You’re an adult when you can pay your own bills and not live off my insurance.”

Maya sighed. “Let’s not do this now.”

“No. She wanna get smart, we can do this now.”

“Nobody is scared of you, Devin.” Cami balled the sheets in her hands. The siblings stared one another down as footsteps approached and a middle-aged doctor in scrubs looked up and smiled. “Big family?”

No one laughed at the joke, and Ezra spoke up to break the tension. “Something like that.”

The doctor cleared his throat, fixing his small spectacles, and examined the chart in his hand. Marsh made eye contact with Cami, and she averted her gaze.

“I understand you have lupus, Ms. Clinton—”

“*What?*” Winter and Deja screeched.

“Holy shit, this gets more interesting,” Ezra said.

Deja and Winter began talking at once as Devin exploded again. Marsh’s temples throbbed as he listened to the chaos. The poor doctor didn’t know what to do.

Winter exhaled as calmly as she could. “You have lupus and didn’t tell us?”

Cami looked up from the bed and plucked at the sheets. She opened her mouth before Deja jumped in.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? What is that? Something deadly, something not? We asked you over and over again if you were okay. Was this what happened when you



were in the hospital?”

Winter’s features were downturned as she let Deja rant and rave. Marsh wanted to interject, but he held his tongue. He watched Cami swallow hard, eyes darting to all the angry faces in the room.

“I can’t believe you’ve been lying to us for months about something so serious! We woulda been clueless if you would have fallen out or something? I can’t believe you. We are your best friends and would’ve held you down no matter what.” Deja looked deeply disappointed, and Marsh wasn’t even sure she was capable of that emotion.

“I shouldn’t be surprised you were lying to me too. I told your ass to take your medication because this would happen, but you wouldn’t listen! Now you got us all up here looking crazy because you so damn hardheaded,” Devin snarled.

“Devin—”

“Why the fuck can’t you comprehend you’re sick? Do you want to die from this?”

“Of course not—”

“That’s what the fuck you’re doing! I can’t believe you did this shit. After everything I’ve sacrificed—”

“You don’t know what it’s like not to feel normal anymore!”

Everyone in the room fell silent. Both siblings’ chests were heaving as tears fell down Cami’s face.

“I will never, ever be normal again! Do you know what that’s like? To have to take medications for the rest of your life when you’re only twenty-one? Huh?”

“Cami.” Devin’s face cracked, and she shook her head.

“You fucking don’t!”

There was a sharp inhale. Cami rarely cursed, and Maya placed a hand on her leg.

“I just want to be fine! I want to be normal!” Cami beat her fist on the bed to every sentence. “I’m tired of being weak!”

Marsh swallowed as Maya squeezed Cami’s leg, whispering comforting words to her.

“I’ve prayed. I’ve cried. I’ve wished for it all to go away. Why did this happen to me? Why?”

Devin remained silent. Feeling helpless, Marsh wanted to prevent the tears that were soaking her shirt. His mind was tangled in the web of deceit they’d both spun, and he stepped away from the bed.

“You don’t know what it feels like to have your body betray you. I need to dance and move! That’s who I am. I refuse to be anything less.”

“Cami,” Devin started. His hands fell uselessly at his sides.

“Do you know how bad I felt that you uprooted your entire family to be here with me? Or that I have to be on your insurance so that I can get the care that I need? Or do you think I wanted you, Winter, and Deja, to look at me with pity? Can you just shut the hell up for once and comprehend that?”

Cami’s nose was red and splotchy, the tears falling steadily onto the blanket at her waist.

“Maybe I wanted to pretend I was normal. Is that a crime? That maybe I didn’t have an incurable condition. That I didn’t feel the ache in the muscles of my legs every morning as I wake up. That I don’t get winded from taking a shower. That my hair isn’t thinning. I just wanted to go back to who I was before all of this.”

Devin placed a hand on Cami’s shoulders and she

shrugged him off.

“We knew this could happen and it did. You wanna be mad about that, then so be it.”

This was the first time Marsh saw empathy on Devin’s face. Maya moved between the siblings.

“I just didn’t want all of this to be real. I’m sorry I lied.”

“Look, Cami.” There was an exhausted look on Devin’s face.

“Just leave, everyone. Please.”

“Cami—” Devin started and she shook her head.

“Go. Now. Please.”

Devin didn’t look like he wanted to go before Maya shot him a look and said, “I’ll make sure she’s okay.”

Marsh looked over at Ezra, and they dapped each other up before Ezra followed the rest of the room out. Leaning back on the wall, he made eye contact with Maya, and she gave him a look of relief. The doctor cleared his throat finally, making them aware he was still there.

“Well, simply put, your body is exhausted. Your iron and Vitamin D levels are extremely low. With the strain you’ve been putting on your body, you need to rest and get your levels back to normal. You’ll be in here for a few days so that we can monitor your progress.”

Maya squeezed her leg again. “We’re going to make sure she gets all the rest she needs.”

“Miss Clinton, I know that this is hard for you to accept, but you need to accept that you can’t continue to put this kind of strain on your body. It won’t end well.”

“I understand.” Cami sniffed.

“We will give you some medicine to get you up and

running, but it's up to you in the long run that you take your prescribed medication regularly and listen to your body when it tells you that it needs to rest. It's obvious that your friends and family love you."

Cami didn't say anything else as the doctor listed her orders for the next couple of days. After a few more tests, she would begin getting said rest. Once the doctor left, Maya stood up and announced, "I'm going to head to the cafeteria. I'll be back."

The two women smiled at one another before Maya headed to the exit. She reached out and squeezed Marsh's shoulders before she disappeared, leaving the two of them alone together.

Marsh felt pain for her at the moment. Memories of waking up in the hospital bed, his entire family there, and the news that Yara didn't make it. The frustration he felt. His own guilt. Devin could be an asshole, but in this case, he was right.

He took Maya's vacant seat. "Why weren't you takin' your medicine?"

Cami closed her eyes, lying back. "Please..."

"I know you're mad at me, but I still care."

"Do you?"

"I'm here, ain't I?"

"I thought you would be more concerned with Larissa."

He sucked his teeth as he briefly closed his eyes.

"You didn't need to waste your time coming here." Cami turned to face the wall.

Marsh ran a hand over his face. "Let's focus on you." The words were right there. Despite everything, he loved her with all his broken parts, but all he could do was give a curt nod. *Say it... Say it!*

“Why did you have to hug her, Marsh? That looks like you were sneaking around to me.”

“I wasn’t sneakin’ around.” His world was diminishing to a dull void. The longer he glanced at her face, the more he imagined Yara. Bloodied and cut. Cami’s face reappeared and he imagined Yara’s, cold and full of life. What if she would have fallen and severally hurt herself?

“Why were you with her?” Cami turned to him. She was searching for something in his eyes, but he wasn’t sure if she found it.

“I told you. She was upset because some things were happenin’ with school and her parents, and she just wanted to talk to someone who would understand. That’s it.”

“This is the last chance I’m giving you Marsh. That’s it?”

“Fuck that, all right?” His voice came out harsher than he intended. He should have done a million things differently. Maybe then, he’d still have Cami in his life. “You don’t have to compete with her for anythin’.”

“Larissa was right then; I’m competing with Yara.”

Emotion lodged itself in his throat, but he kept his cool. He knew more than anything, and despite his resistance, that he loved her. For that, he wouldn’t make her deal with his demons. It would be unfair to ask that of her. “You can do better than me, Cami. You’re so much fucking better than me. Why tie yourself to a man who can’t even admit what he’s feeling?”

Sighing, he sat back in the seat. Cami closed her eyes, and he watched her lift and thump her head on the bed a few times before she let out a breath of air.

“I love you, and I can’t turn that off. No matter if you don’t love me back.”

He had to leave. He wouldn't be able to hold on much longer.

"That's not true."

"Stop! Stop playing with my feelings. If you're not going to say it, just go and don't come back. Our deal is done."

He felt a piece of himself crack at her declaration.

Her voice was a broken rasp. "You should go."

"I care more than just a little about you, Cami."

Cami turned on the bed, giving him her back. He rose to his feet.

"I'll do anythin' you want in a heartbeat. Anythin' to make you smile."

She closed her eyes, tears sliding down her face. He tried not to let the deafening cracking of his heart devastate him so that he couldn't put one foot in front of the other. He made it down the hallway, into the elevator, and out of the hospital.

Ezra had been standing by his car, talking with Winter and Deja when Ezra noticed him. Concern was etched across his face. Marsh shook his head as he sat in Ezra's car, feeling the ghost of the past and present submerge and suffocate him all at once.

"You okay, man?" Ezra asked as he slid into the driver's seat.

His Adam's apple worked to swallow. "No." His voice was thick and rough. "I won't ever be."

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

**“YOU LOOK LIKE A SAD-ASS** case, boy.”

Marsh lifted his face from the mattress. Shifting, he blinked, trying to clear his vision to see who was standing above his bed.

“What are you doin’? I’ve been callin’ you since I got off of the plane!” His sister Megan peered at him with amusement and annoyance, her hand gripping her suitcase with her purse perched on her elbow. She looked immaculate in her designer pantsuit and her curly hair pinned in a bun after a six-hour plane ride from New York.

Frowning, she looked around the room, stepping over the junk in her high-heeled boots. She knocked over the beer bottles, and they clattered onto the floor, causing him to hiss at the sound.

“You makin’ too much noise.”

It had only been over three weeks since he last saw Cami, and his world had collapsed into nothing. He couldn’t eat. He couldn’t think. He barely slept. Marsh was operating at a barely functional level, and he merely endured it.

Kicking her way through his mess, Meg frowned as she squatted to sit on the bed, slapping at his legs to get him to move over.

“What are you doin’ here?” he grumbled, closing his eyes again, wishing for sleep he knew wouldn’t come.

“Did you forget tomorrow is Thanksgivin’?”



He did amidst the chaos of the semester. It threw off his concept of time. Meg pinched his behind, and he swatted her hands away. She continued, and with a groan, he sat up.

“How did you get in? Where’s Ezra?”

Meg looked at him like he was stupid. “He’s been gone for three days. Everyone in this house is gone. You’re the only one left.”

He thought he dreamed Ezra was saying goodbye to him. “Oh.”

“All you have to say is ‘oh’ and nothin’ else?”

“Should I say the day got away from me then?”

Lightly punching him, they looked forward, and there, sitting in the corner, was a stupid shirt Cami had forced them to buy when they stopped by Japantown. It was a cheesy couple’s shirt. His said *I don’t do matching shirts* while Cami’s half said *I do*.

The smile fell from his face, quickly turning his focus on his sister instead. Meg’s presence was cool and calming to him. It almost felt like being back home.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you fall this low in a long while; what’s goin’ on? Where is the new girlfriend that has you not answerin’ my calls?”

Marsh sighed, and placing his feet on the floor, he counted to three before standing. He staggered lightly; the room tilted and his mouth grew watery before he gathered himself. He went for a shirt in the drawer.

“That’s over with.” Marsh turned to her as he slid the shirt over his head.

“That quick? I don’t even get the chance to meet her, that sucks. What did you do that she broke up with you?”

“Why do you assume it’s something I did?” It was all his

fault but still...

Meg rolled her eyes. "I'm a grown woman, Marsh; don't play with me."

"I thought you were supposed to be here two days ago?" Marsh smoothly changed the subject.

"I would have been here sooner, but you know, one of my partners, Cassian, is preparin' to run for governor, so he's out the office. That reminds me, we need to elect a new partner in his place when he leaves the firm. It was left to me to soothe some whiny clients we're representin'. You know how that goes." He leaned against the drawer as his sister rolled her eyes. "You know I would never miss our tradition. We always do Thanksgivin' at The Westin and then our boat ride. I swear The Westin has the best cranberry sauce, and you betta not tell Mama."

"You sayin' that stuff at the hotel is better than Mama's food?"

"Never. Just the cranberry sauce. You know she put cinnamon in hers, and I ain't never been a fan." Meg twisted her lips, and he smiled, thinking about the arguments Meg and Mama would get into during Thanksgivin' time over food.

"Don't worry, imma tell her."

Picking up some of the crap on the floor, he started with the empty containers and tossed them in the trash.

"It would be better if you go back home and tell her."

Silence stretched between them, and she cleared her throat.

"Now, answer my question. What happened that has you lookin' like someone stole your puppy? What did you do to this poor girl she's tossed you out on your ass?"

"It's a long story."

“Check-in for the hotel isn’t until three, so spill it, boy.”

He didn’t realize how much he’d been keeping in, and he let it all come out. Meg let him come clean without judgment. It felt like old times when they would lay in Meg’s room talking for hours.

When he was done, it was quiet for a second as she soaked it all in. With his room now in somewhat of a decent order, he went to the kitchen, bringing back two beers and handing one to her.

“Hmm, that’s quite a tale.”

“Somethin’ like that.”

“What about Larissa?” Meg cocked an eyebrow and tilted her head.

“There’s nothin’ left between us to say.”

Meg’s lips thinned. “You know you fucked up by seein’ Larissa.”

“Duh...”

“You obviously just can’t end it this way. What are you goin’ to do to get her back?”

“I don’t know,” Marsh groaned, covering his face with both of his hands. “Fuck, Meg. I pushed her away. I didn’t tell her I love her.”

“Do I have to teach you everythin’ about women?” Meg pulled his hands from his face. “Calm down, drama queen. Relax. That’s what your big sister is here for.”

Words jammed in his throat like a traffic jam.

“Now you’re in a mess because you wanna play White Knight, and you’re both bein’ dramatic. If you don’t tell that girl you love her, you think it will haunt you forever, but you’re young. Shit seems like the end of the world when it really

isn't." Meg took another sip of beer. "It's better to give her space for a lil' while before you tell her how you feel. If she didn't say you weren't good enough for her, then why should you think that?"

"I failed Cami. Larissa. Yara. The best thing I could have done was to let her go."

"Don't make this seem like you're being noble. What you're bein' is a scared piece of shit. You hurt her. She probably wants to beat your ass, but I doubt her feelin's for you are completely gone."

Shock filled his features.

"You know I tell it to you straight. If you said you felt this deep connection with her, and she felt it, too, then it can't be easily severed. You aren't savin' her because you're afraid you'll fuck it up, you're scared something beyond your control will take her away from you."

*Damn...* Meg hit it right on the head.

"You make it sound so simple."

"It is." Meg pinched his cheek, and he swatted her away. "Get on your knees and beg that girl for forgiveness. I loved Yara. She was a sweet girl, but she is gone. You have a future with someone who loves you and the old-ass candy you like. She's made you smile, laugh, and so much more than I've seen you do in years. Admit it to yourself; you love her. Stop runnin' scared, we can't control life and it's unforeseeable events. We just have to endure."

"You don't know everythin' that's happened," Marsh said weakly, attempting to deflect once more.

"Bullshit. You've been playing this Yara guilt trip for the last three years. Larissa got tired of it, and beyond your control, she cheated. Cami has lupus. Yara died, and I don't think you're Jesus raisin' Lazarus. You can get hit by a bus

tomorrow and there ain't shit you can do about it. You have to decide if Cami is worth the risk."

Meg starred at her brother, but Cami's words echoed in his ears. *I love you. You made me love you.*

"Y'all are all angsty and horny. Makin' shit seem like World War III is comin'. This drama y'all have ain't nothin' new under the sun."

Marsh ducked his head as she placed her hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

"You've been runnin' for a long time, Marsh." Meg cupped his face, forcing his eyes to connect with hers. "If not, it will continue affectin' every single relationship after, and you'll never have peace."

Meg didn't mince words, and he nodded, sucking in a deep breath.

"How do I just let go?"

"By just lettin' go."

He shot her a look like she was crazy, but Meg only nodded.

"It's really that easy. When you decide to forgive and let go, it's done."

"You don't understand—"

"I do, Marsh. Only you have the power to control your destiny. If you want to be free, you will be. If you don't, then you'll stay stuck."

For so long, he'd tucked his heart away, not believing he deserved love. Wasn't that the ironic thing about life? Only the good die young? Then Cami appeared. He hadn't wanted nor did he expect her to coax his heart out from the dark recesses it lurked. He'd stepped out of the shadows and back into the sun.

He couldn't go back into the shadows. He wanted to live.

He was so fucking terrified of being with her and ruining everything. Yet, he failed. He ruined the relationship by not admitting his feelings. By pushing her away. He loved Cami with all his heart. His whole being. He didn't believe he was worthy of her, but her strength. Her spirit teased him to wanting to step a toe over the line. To be brave. He couldn't let the past rule his life.

"Did you finish that letter?" Meg asked, and their eyes, carbon copies of the other, met. He nodded his head toward his desk.

"Not yet."

"Get on that. Do it."

"Why am I scared then?"

"Just take a leap of faith." Meg's voice was soft. "No guilt. No shame. Give honor but don't keep torturin' yourself."

Marsh smiled; he loved his sister so deeply at that moment.

"It's that simple?" Marsh repeated, and she nodded her head slowly.

"It is. Don't be like me and learn the hard way and that person gets away." Marsh looked up to see a dark look on his sister's face he hadn't seen before. Just as quickly as it came, it disappeared.

"I've seen many other people's regrets. Don't be like us." Meg stood, pushing Marsh's head. "Now, pack your bags. I booked us a nice suite. Given what's goin' on with you, let's see if they can let us check in early. I need a massage."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." Marsh got up from the bed and headed for the closet to grab his duffle bag when he turned and lifted a brow. "Okay, but you never gave me a solution to

my problem.”

Megan looked at him like he just came off a crack binge. “Boy, didn’t I just say the answer was simple?”

“I know that. What I meant was what do you think is the best way to get Cami to give me another chance? Somethin’ romantic?”

“Well,” Meg hummed, lolling her head from side to side. “There are no guarantees that bein’ romantic is gonna win her back. If she says it’s over, then it’s over and you have to accept that.” That wasn’t what he wanted to hear, but he nodded.

“First, you need to establish some clear boundaries with Larissa. Nip that shit in the bud. No more communication if it’s not necessary. Be transparent in your intentions with Cami.”

“Right.”

“If you’re honest and admit you fucked up, that will go a long way,” Megan continued. “Gettin’ on your knees or standin’ outside her bedroom window with a boombox might help too.”

Marsh rolled his eyes. “You’re bein’ ridiculous now.”

“You’ll know what to say when the time comes. Just be honest. You can walk away knowin’ you did your best, and it can be a lesson for you in the future.”



“Pass the salt.”

Cami zoned out as she chopped the celery for the potato salad. Blinking, she glanced to her left at Devin, now just speaking for the first time in a week. He stood in front of the stove, seasoning the turkey for tomorrow. He didn’t turn to look at her, simply holding his hand out toward her, gesturing

with his finger for the salt shaker.

Focusing again on the celery, she chopped it slowly, ignoring the loud huff of breath from him. She hadn't smiled, laughed, or felt like dancing since she had been released from the hospital. To make matters worse, she missed her audition with LeBlanc. For days, she lay in bed, crying or moving through the house like a zombie. Luckily for her, Thanksgiving break came quickly and she could escape campus.

Sean had texted her with the news that Savannah would take over leading the dance festival. More salt in the wound, she hadn't answered. Not only had she been avoiding going back to Intensified dance practices, but she also skipped all ballroom dancing. She wasn't ready to see Marsh again, and she definitely wasn't ready to dance in his arms.

Devin huffed once more, and being petty, Cami reached for the salt and passed it to Maya.

A small smile creased the corners of Cami's lips, but she held it together as Devin glared at her.

Her petty victory was short-lived.

Maya looked between the two of them and then sucked her teeth. Devin was aggressively seasoning the meat, and Cami finished cutting the celery before moving to the sink to peel the eggs.

"Devin, can you check on the kids? They've been quiet for too long," Maya spoke up.

He stopped over-seasoning the turkey. "They should be good."

"I want you to go check on them. *They may need help,*" Maya insisted, but he didn't get the hint.

"For God's sake, Maya, they are just painting hand



turkeys—”

The look Maya gave him shut him up, and he dropped the seasonings in his hands.

“Lemme go wash my hands and see what they’re up to.” Brushing past Cami, the tension decreased slightly as Maya went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of wine. Reaching into the cabinet, she grabbed two glasses before offering her one. “Wanna take a break?”

Grateful, Cami followed her as she led them to the patio. The evening air was a blessing from the steamy, hot kitchen they had been stuck in.

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“I understand.” Maya traced the rim of her glass with her fingertips. “Can I just give you some words of advice?”

Cami nodded.

“I don’t know what happened between you and Marsh, but you should give him another chance.”

Cami sighed. “I dunno about that.” He couldn’t tell her he loved her. She couldn’t be in a relationship without love.

“Different how?”

“Just... everything. My life is a mess.” Maya began to laugh and Cami turned to her. “What’s so funny?”

“Do you know how many people wish that same thing? Hoping and wishing for a different beginning or to go back and change past mistakes? Life doesn’t work that way, Cami; we can only work with what’s dealt us.”

Rolling her eyes, she just wanted to whine and vent.

“Don’t get mad at me. It’s the truth. Are you going to be a victim forever, or are you going to take action?”

“Why can’t I just be the victim right now?” Cami scrunched her face up, looking away.

“You’re not the victim... Baby girl, listen—” Maya sat her glass down on the table between them and pushed Cami’s long tribal braids over her shoulder— “you know I’ve never told you a lie a day in your life. What you did was dangerous, and we love you too much to see something bad happen to you. Especially if it was preventable.”

Cami looked away from Maya.

“That’s not to say what you feel is invalid. I don’t have a disease, and I don’t know the trauma that it inflicts or how you cope with it, so I won’t take that away from you. But did you think of how your actions would affect your family? We’ve never, and never will, see you as a burden.”

Guilt weighed heavily on her shoulders as she listened to Maya’s words.

“Devin and I agreed to come here because we love you. It wasn’t a hard decision to make, and not many people have family that would do that for them. We want you to come to Georgia with us, not to baby you, but because we love not just the woman you’re becoming, but who you are now, and yes, we would take comfort in knowing that if anything happened to you that you wouldn’t be alone.”

Devin and Maya were night and day, but Maya was sneakier than Devin. You saw him coming, but Maya played on your emotions.

“You’re my little sister. I’m hurt that you couldn’t come to me about how you were feeling. We could have gotten you someone to talk to if you didn’t feel comfortable speaking with us.”

Cami looked at her hands and then at Maya. “My doctor suggested a support group, but I haven’t gone yet.”

“Why not?”

“Marsh tried to convince me to go too.”

Maya let out a puff of air. “He did that for you?”

Cami didn't need to say anything as they sat in silence.

“Do you really think he would have gotten back with his ex-girlfriend?” Maya asked softly.

Cami closed her eyes, trying to keep her nerves in check.

“I don't know... No? I don't think so.”

Maya shifted in her seat. “What do you mean? Has Marsh ever made you feel like you were the second choice? Did he ever compare you to her? If Marsh can't appreciate you for who you are, then you don't need him and you aren't missing anything.”

“No, he's never done anything like that.” Cami took another sip of her drink.

Maya sighed. “So, you're just scared?”

“I mean, I let her have him, and I'm sure he had been thinking about that the whole time.” Cami took another sip of her wine, trying to convince herself she wasn't scared.

“Camille, both you and I know that's a lie.”

“I'm not lying.” Cami shook her head. “I'm over him. I'm over this entire situation.”

“That's what your mouth says, but is your heart in agreement?” Maya muttered.

Both women continued sipping their wine, and Cami glanced up at the night sky, with the crickets chirping loudly, wishing what Maya said was true.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

**“ARE YOU GOIN’ TO SIT** there like a grump the whole time?”

Marsh didn’t turn as he sat on the edge of the boat. His arms holding onto the railing, he watched the boat crash through the waves. The weather matched his mood. Gray skies and fog caused a looming overcast.

After a delicious dinner with all the traditional fixings, the fresh air was welcomed. They were sailing past Alcatraz, turning now, so the East Bay peeked out in the distance. He looked down at his distorted reflection, the letter burning a hole in his pocket. Meg groaned as she sat down next to him.

“You gettin’ old over there?”

“Once you hit thirty, your knees are the first to say *adios*.”

He chuckled and Meg looked down at the water, exhaling shakily before leaning back and clutching her life vest. “I like the water but not this close.”

“Don’t tell me the city replaced the country girl in you?”

“I have to admit I prefer my Prada now to my trusty old rubber galoshes.”

He looked at his phone as if there would be a call or text, possibly a meme, but nothing. The one person he wanted to talk to the most, he couldn’t. At least not yet.

“Doesn’t it look beautiful? It’s not Texas but still; doesn’t it take your breath away?” Meg murmured.

Marsh sighed as they studied the sprawling view. Rolling

hills almost as big as mountains stood mightily in the distance. The Bay that seemed to go on for miles, the staggering view of the city. She was right. He always thought Texas had a raw, natural beauty that couldn't compare to any other, but California was a tough contender.

"It does."

"When I finally decide to retire, I think I'll come back here. Buy a condo and put a few chickens in my backyard."

"Chickens?"

Meg smirked. "You remember Peanut?"

How could he not remember Peanut? Her one-eyed pet chicken that she took everywhere. Her name was cute, but Peanut was the literal devil. For some reason, she had a vendetta against Marsh. She chased and pecked him anytime he was within her sight. Peanut was tolerant of some strangers, but for the most part, she liked no one else but Meg. That was until Peanut met her unfortunate end with a fox.

"How could I forget that little demon?" Marsh muttered, and Meg slapped his arm.

"Don't be like that. She didn't like you because you squirted her with that water gun."

"That was once."

"Animals don't forget thin's." Marsh sighed as he let his sister ramble on.

"I think it would be nice to just take thin's slow, ya know?"

He looked her up and down. "You don't like workin' with Cassian?"

"Of course, I love workin' with him. You'll understand once you've been workin' nonstop for years. Sometimes, you just need a break."

Murmuring his agreement, he was going to miss the beauty of this place. Lifting his hand, he let the moist wind cut through his fingers.

“Are you excited? Loyola School of Law? Then, after graduation, you’ll be workin’ with me.” Megan nudged his side. “I can’t wait for you to come to Chicago. It’s beautiful, except for the harsh winters, not gon lie.”

“I’m nervous about law school. Was it hard?”

“Hell, yeah it’s hard. It can be gruelin’ and lonely.”

Marsh gulped.

“You’ll make it. I don’t doubt that. You’ll definitely realize how easy undergrad was.” Meg smiled at him. “Sleepless nights, stress, and all that good stuff, but it’s worth it.”

He rubbed his chin. “I feel bittersweet about it.”

Megan looked at him, waiting for him to continue.

“At first, I just wanted to graduate on time. Get thin’s over with. Now I just want more time.”

He looked at his sister, and her eyebrows furrowed as she processed what he was saying.

“That’s how I’ve been functionin’ since Yara died. I thought that by goin’ into law, I could make a difference and right my wrongs.” Marsh rubbed his eyes hard. “I’m the reason she died. I know I can’t change that, but I’m afraid if I move on, it’ll be disrespectful in some way.”

Meg laid her head on his shoulder.

“You’re right; I feel this guilt. It eats at me, and then Cami comes and I...” He sighed. “I knew Larissa and I weren’t going to be in it for the long term. I just got comfortable with havin’ her around. She was right. I sucked as her boyfriend.”

Marsh bowed his head. Their boat was heading toward

the Golden Gate Bridge.

“I have to let it go. That doesn’t mean forgettin’ Yara.”

“Marsh, you’ve always been carin’. That’s what makes you so special, but you need to know, yes, you won’t ever be the same, but that’s what life is about, evolvin’. Our mistakes and traumas either build or break us.”

He took a shuddering breath.

“Would you want Yara to feel this way about you if it were the other way around? Knowin’ she had another chance but was still livin’ in the past?”

He shook his head. He would want her to go out and move forward with her life.

“Then you have to be willin’ to take risks. Otherwise, you won’t be a very successful attorney. How can you help families and victims get justice but then not move on in your own life?”

Meg was right.

“You’re an amazin’ person, but only you can change the mess you’ve made.”

Marsh reached into his pocket. It was the letter he wrote to Yara’s parents.

He offered it to Megan. “I started the letter...”

“Then that’s the beginnin’,” Meg said.

Pulling out the piece of paper, it fluttered in the wind as he held it. A sense of solemnness fell on him as his eyes rolled over his scrawling handwriting. Then he let the paper go.

“What are you doin’?” Meg’s eyes went wide, and she looked from him to the letter that floated out into the wind.

“That letter wasn’t good. I know what I want to say now.”

He didn’t have the words for what was in his heart before, but he did now. He knew what he needed to say to Yara’s



parents. To Yara. It took him losing someone who meant the world to him again to find the words that had been locked up. Dr. Lake was right. He needed to rewrite the letter from his heart and move on; he was ready.

“Will you take it to her parents for me?”

Pressing her lips together, Meg gave him a small smile and nodded. “Of course.”



“The food was great, Maya.”

The family sat, stuffed but happy. Maya stood up, gathering the plates. Cami started to stand to help, although some pain still lingered in her joints, but Maya quickly helped her sit back down.

“I got this, just sit.”

“It was tasty, Mommy!” Demi said with cranberry sauce on the corners of her mouth, and Caleb made a face.

“The red stuff was yucky.” He pointed at the cranberry sauce that had been Cami’s only task of the night—just opening the can.

Devin frowned. “Boy, don’t disrespect your mother.”

Caleb pouted as Demi laughed at him. The kids began arguing, and Maya shook her head.

“Don’t you two start. It’s okay if you didn’t like the sauce, Caleb.”

Taking a chance, Cami glanced at Devin. They made eye contact before he averted his gaze to his plate.

“Who wants dessert?” Maya offered, and the kids screamed in excitement, raising their hands. “Demi, help your brother with his plate then help me bring the pie and cake in.”

Cami wasn't stupid. She knew what Maya was doing but she bit her lip. As Maya took away her and Devin's empty plate, she leaned down, whispering something into his ear, and kissed him softly on his cheek as the kids ran into the kitchen. Devin rubbed his untrimmed beard, blinking wearily.

"How was the food?"

Cami nodded, pulling at the napkin in her lap.

"It was good." Silence. Then she added, "Your macaroni was delicious."

A smirk came across his face. "Better than Maya's?"

The siblings looked at each other, and twin smiles erupted on their faces before she made her face impassive. "Something like that."

"You wanna take a ride?"

Cami lifted a brow at him. They use to take car rides together all the time back home in Minnesota. Nodding, he pushed himself back from the table as the kids ran in with their plates with Maya.

"Where y'all going?"

Sitting the plates down, she looked between the two of them as Cami stood to follow her brother.

"Out. We'll be back later."

Devin placed a kiss on her cheek as he left. Maya reached out and squeezed Cami's hand, smiling at her.

Cami wasn't sure where they were going as she hopped into the passenger side of his GMC Acadia. Putting the SUV into drive, he navigated toward downtown Oakland. Eventually, he merged onto the expressway, and the silence was too much. She turned on the radio, and Cami couldn't help but laugh when she heard the first chords of Nelly's "Hot in Herre" play.

Devin made a face. “Really?”

Laughing, she couldn't help but rap along as Nelly complimented the woman in the song about how big her behind was. When she was in middle school, she had been obsessed with the song, but her mom wouldn't let her play it in the house. She made Devin play it every day when he took her to school, and he never told her secret. He tried to hold out, but she saw him starting to bop to the music. His fingers began to tap on the steering wheel as they merged onto the highway back to San Francisco.

Once the chorus hit, they both began to sing until Cami nudged him on the shoulder. “He does not say *I speak English but baby I can't talk it.*”

Devin shook his head. “That's what he said. That's the lyric.”

“You don't know what you're talking about.”

“I know what I'm talking about. You don't know what you're talking about, youngin'.”

Nostalgia overtook her. She remembered Devin would always allow her to eat all the sugary cereal she wanted after their mom left for work or how they piled into his crappy car and headed to school, or the mall, or whatever place she managed to convince him to take her to. They always listened to the early 90s and early 2000s radio station or the oldies station because he felt that Cami needed to know her “roots” aka Al Green, Teddy Pendergrass, and more. She held those moments close, and it made her yearn to close the disconnect she felt with him now.

She relaxed into her seat as the Bay Bridge came into view. It was always something about crossing this bridge. Coming from mostly plains and cornfields to now seeing mountains, water, and dips and valleys of the landscape was always breathtaking.

“Beautiful, ain’t it?” Devin turned the music down.

“It is.”

Nelly soon turned into Ashanti, which started a debate between them about Murder Inc. Records versus Bad Boy Records, and the drama that came with the music industry. Pulling into the city, they parked the car and walked to the Cupid’s Span, a large, contemporary sculpture that had a view of the bay. This evening there were only a few joggers and tourists walking down the path. Taking a seat on the bench, Cami stretched her legs as they looked over the water. Yerba Buena Island was standing mighty tall in the distance.

Devin sighed. “You and the youngblood over?”

“Do you have to talk like a seventy-year-old man?”

He ignored her. “Are y’all over?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm.” Devin didn’t say anything else, and Cami narrowed her eyes at him.

“Is that it?”

He nodded. “Yup.”

“*I’m sorry.*” They said at the same time. Laughing gently, Cami let him go first.

“I was an asshole.”

Cami snorted and Devin gave her a strong look. “Can I say what I need to say?”

“Go ahead.”

Devin looked at his hands, and she was surprised to see him fidget. “You know I love you.”

Cami nodded.

“Ever since Dad died... You don’t remember, but Mom

was a mess. I don't think I've seen her break down like she did that day." Devin paused and she saw tears building in his eyes. "I promised Dad that I would take care of you. Both of you. I've done it and will continue to do it to my dying day."

Cami's heart twisted, and she looked down at her hands, pulling at her cuticles.

"I won't apologize for how I take care of you. I remember wiping your snotty nose and changing your shitty diapers. Making sure you got to school and all those fatherly things. I've done anything I can to make sure you were happy, and I've never felt like it was a burden. You have never been a burden." Devin's eyes were misty. "When you got sick and you called me from the hospital, my heart just stopped. I've never felt so helpless."

They never talked about what happened after the first time she fell ill. He was just there, taking care of things, making sure she was okay. Everything was focused on her; she didn't think to ask how it affected him emotionally.

"I lost it. I thought I failed you. *Dad*. I thought I lost another loved one, and there was nothing that I could do about it."

Cami felt tears fall, and she wiped her face. "Devin, stop; you're going to make me cry."

"I thought I would have to go on in life knowing that I failed you." Devin leaned forward, his elbows on his knees.

She moved closer to him and threw her arms around him. He was breaking her. Devin was always the strong one. The one that couldn't be moved. He placed his arms over hers and held her just as tightly. "I prayed. I asked God to take me instead if you lived."

Cami frowned. "How could you say that? Maya and the kids..."

“They would be straight without me. You all would be able to keep each other safe. Yet, you made it. Through the grace of God, you made it, and then I find out you’re not taking your medicine...”

Cami hung her head. Devin scoffed and sat back on the bench. Then, he looked at her. It made her feel smaller than she had ever felt before.

“Why? Did I say something that made you feel as if you were a burden? Could you not trust me? Why do that?”

She closed her eyes. “It’s hard to explain what I felt. What I feel right now. You’ve done so much, and I did feel like a burden. I’ve always been a burden to you.”

Devin made a face but he let her continue.

“You’ve always taken care of me, and I appreciate that. You still have your own life and family; I can’t ask you to put me ahead of them. I needed to prove myself useful, to you and everyone else. Who wants to be bothered with someone who can’t take care of themselves?”

He didn’t say anything as she spoke. Now, the tears fell uncontrollably.

“I thought by not talking about the illness it wasn’t real. I tried doing things to distract myself. Dance living as if I didn’t have it would make it go away. It’s stupid, I know.”

Devin placed a hand on her arm.

“You don’t know what it’s like to be told you’ll be on medication for the rest of your life.”

Cami began to cry, and Devin put his arms around her shoulders as he rocked her. She let all the frustration and anger she felt at her diagnosis go. For herself, not being strong enough. She cried for Devin and his sacrifice. For Marsh because she really loved him, more than anything. She cried

that she wasn't be able to do that audition. It was all over. *Everything was just... over.*

She was pretty sure people were staring, but she didn't care. When she'd finished crying, she felt exhausted but relieved. "Then, I screwed things up with Deja and Winter. They hate me; I'm just a mess."

Devin laughed. "We've all been a mess at some time. Just your turn."

She didn't want it to be her time, though.

"Now lemme give you some tough love. Apologize to your friends and take whatever shit they give you. Then, go after what you want. You can still dance, and if you don't want to come to Georgia with us, that's fine." Devin squeezed her shoulders. "I'm gonna love you wherever you go. Las Vegas, New York, or to the moon and back. I'm gonna be there for you, but you have to take care of your body. Do you hear me?"

Cami nodded as she looked at her brother and then sniffed and smiled. "When did you get so wise?"

"Girl, I've always been wise; you're just hardheaded."

"Will you come to my support group with me?"

"Of course," he said immediately.

Cami squeezed her brother's hand, and they stood up. She hoped everything would be all right. No, scratch that. Everything was going to be all right.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

**CAMI WAS FREEZING AS SHE** stood in front of the Freedom tower in Japantown.

Looking at her phone, she was worried they had stood her up. Tucking her hands under her armpits, she kicked at a stray leaf on the ground. It took courage that she didn't have to send a text to Winter and Deja. She spent thirty minutes crafting the perfect text: Matcha ice cream?

She was prepared to suck it up and walk to the campus bus stop. She spotted Deja and Winter behind her. A small, hesitant smile crept across her face.

“Hi...”

Cami's heart hurt looking at her best friends. It felt as if she hadn't seen them in years instead of weeks. Deja and Winter shared a look as they stepped forward.

“I bought you both some ice cream. Our favorite. Only if you want...” Cami held the cones up. Silence stretched for several seconds before Winter stepped forward, taking a cone. She gave Cami a half-smile, but Deja narrowed her eyes.

“Ice cream can't win me over; I'm not that cheap.”

Her tone was sharp, and Cami nodded.

“I know.”

“I'm at least worth an expensive meal. A lil' wine and dine.”

“I understand, but can ice cream be a start?”



Cami offered it again. Holding her breath, Deja stared at her and then the ice cream before looking at Winter. Exhaling dramatically, Deja finally took it from her. Licking it, she muttered, "It's all right."

That was a small step. Deja wasn't going to make this easier on her in any sense of the word, and that was all right. "How have you both been?"

Deja raised a brow.

"You didn't have to come, but you did. Thank you. It means more than you know."

"You're welcome." Deja smacked her lips as she ate her ice cream.

"I'm sorry."

Winter only nodded and Cami continued.

"I should have told you guys the truth. I should have had more faith in you, and I'm just totally stupid."

Deja gave her a sharp look. "You sound dumb as hell."

"Deja, calm down," Winter hissed.

"No, she's right... I was dumb. I didn't want to believe what my doctor told me, and I just wanted to be my old self. It's no excuse to lie, but I didn't accept the truth then."

"You've been lying to us for months." Winter's disapproving tone cut deep.

"Yes," Cami said, "I have, but I promise never to hide anything again. This is my body and the only one I'm going to get; I have to care for it, condition or not."

They were silent, and Cami looked at the hustle of the square.

"I couldn't trust anyone and was in denial. I'm deeply sorry."

Deja shook her head. “How do we know you haven’t lied to us about other things? How do we know if your name is really Camille?”

Cami smiled. “I didn’t lie about that.”

“My momma said once a liar, always a liar.”

“What Deja is saying is it just hurts more than anything that you didn’t trust us,” Winter spoke up.

“Damn right; we love your stupid self.” Deja finished off her ice cream cone.

Cami laughed. Deja cracked a small smile, but she immediately covered it up.

“Remember when Winter got sloshed and tried to bobsled down the hill at Mission Dolores?” Deja looked at Winter and rolled her eyes.

“Of course, you would remember that,” Winter muttered.

“You’re Little Miss Perfect; I have to bring up your flaws.”

“Actually, it wasn’t just Winter; it was all of us,” Cami said and Winter laughed at Deja’s perplexed face.

They had been freshmen and convinced a guy to buy them Coke and tequila. What an awful mix, but they were buzzed and thought it would be a great thing to try to ride sleds in Mission Dolores Park. Only they had no sleds, and they all just ended up rolling down the hill like school children.

Cami rocked back on her heels. “The point is, Winter sprained her wrist and we had to take her to the hospital. Remember she cried about her parents finding out? We all had major hangovers, but what did we do?”

“Skipped class and went to an all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet.” Deja nudged Winter.

“Right.”

Winter's brows furrowed. "What is the point of this story?"

Sighing loudly as if they weren't the sharpest tools in the toolbox, Cami explained, "We took care of one another. We trusted each other, and that's what we've been doing since. It's what I should have done, and I don't expect you to absolve me immediately but please; I just want my girls back."

"You're right. You and Deja are like sisters to me. Not having you around was torture." Winter sniffed.

"I know I have a certain brand of crazy I live by that's dope and addicting; of course, you'd miss me," Deja shrugged and rolled her head.

Winter and Cami laughed, and after a few seconds, Deja joined in too. The tension left the air, and Cami felt like for a moment, everything was all right again.

"We missed you, too," Winter said.

Cami wasn't going to cry, but her eyes teared up anyway.

"We can't blame you for what you decided to do. If we were in your position, we wouldn't have known what we would do either." Winter looked at Deja who nodded.

"I probably wouldn't have done what you did, but, otherwise Winter's right. Just be honest with us, you hear?"

They stood together for a moment before Deja cleared her throat. "All right, bitches, let's hug and forgive and get this over with as long as Cami promises to keep us updated on what we need to know."

With their squeals drawing the attention of some of the locals in the square and being mindful of the ice cream they were holding, they hugged one another. Pulling back, Cami looked at the two of them. "Never again."

"Damn right or we're kicking your ass," Deja muttered,

sniffing as she ducked so they couldn't see the emotion on her face.

"How about we go to a Japanese BBQ while we're here? I'm starving and this sweet ice cream made me want something savory." Winter rubbed her belly and they nodded. After a ten-minute walk, they were sitting in their favorite BBQ restaurant as Cami placed the meat on the grill.

"Hold up!" Deja said, freezing Cami and Winter in place.

"So, have you talked to him?"

*Marsh...* She had gotten all his calls and text messages, but she couldn't find it in her yet to talk to him. It would just hurt too much.

"Not yet."

Deja frowned. "Did he explain everything? What's the news with Larissa, or will we have to kick her ass too?"

Winter pinched Deja and she hissed.

"I don't know. I haven't talked to him. We're done."

"*Cami, no...*" They both gasped and Cami nodded.

"He's graduating next month; long-distance isn't going to work, and Larissa—"

"Did he say that?" Deja scowled.

"Didn't you just say you wanted to kick his ass?"

"You both were so cute together." Winter leaned into Cami, placing her arm around her. Deja's eyes widened.

"You took the picture and gave it to her!"

"I know that, but I didn't know she was going to break up with him."

Visions of Marsh flittered through her mind. Each day felt as if she had no focus or objective, and more than

anything, she was afraid of seeing him in the flesh in class. Deja's face darkened, eyes glittering with one hand on her hip. "You're both still in the same class. What you gonna do?"

Cami shrugged. "What can I do? Besides grin and bear it?"

Deja and Winter looked at one another as Cami flipped the meat on the stove, trying not to burn it.

"So you just gonna let him walk away?"

Cami squinted her eyes at Deja. "Since when are you Team Marsh?"

"Since I've gained a new look on life."

Deja shook her head as Cami sat back in her seat. Her girls gave her looks ranging from pity to confusion. She didn't want to look back on the past right now. She'd just gotten her friends back. She didn't want to ruin it with negative emotions.

"Did you love him?" Winter said.

Tears prickled Cami's eyes, and Winter reached over to place her hands over hers.

"Yes, but he never said it back."

Deja cursed and Winter sucked her teeth.

"Maybe he was afraid?"

"Yeah. Or he's still in love with his ex-girlfriend who passed away. He has his own issues, and it's my fault for thinking I would be different."

Being alone for the first time after spending every minute with Marsh, awake and asleep, made her feel her loneliness that much more.

"We only have a few more weeks to go. We do the final performance, and then we're done."

“Have you talked to Larissa?” Deja sipped her water, and both girls gave her strange looks.

Winter’s green eyes widened. “Why on earth would she do that?”

“Talk to her. Woman to woman. Let her know what’s up. I bet you’ll get some closure that way.”

All of Cami’s stress had come from Larissa. Why would she want to sit down with her? What closure could she get from her? Still, her mind turned at the thought. Who knew the things she knew about Marsh’s past? About Yara.

“How about we just eat the food? I didn’t burn it this time,” Cami said, shifting the dark mood that fell over her. She could put on a brave face for the next couple of weeks. Whether she wanted to or not.



Sitting at his desk, Marsh set the pen down as he held up the letter. It had taken him almost three years to finally write it; now it was done.

He ran his hand across it as he looked at the words that tumbled out of his core.

*Dear Mr. and Mrs. Jordan,*

*I know you haven’t heard from me in a while. I’m sorry I didn’t stay and speak with you after her funeral. I couldn’t look you in the eye knowing that I played a part in your tragedy.*

*I couldn’t stay in Texas. I couldn’t drive down that road Yara and I took so many times to school and town. I tossed everything Yara gave me, but my mom salvaged them. All the mementos from holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries Yara and I shared. The picture of us fly-fishing when you, Mr. Jordan, told me what you would do if I hurt your*

*daughter. Then we laughed and you shoved a beer in my hand. Or Mrs. Jordan, how you always had your famous peach cobbler ready when I stopped by.*

*You both were family to me, just like Yara was.*

*If I let myself be still, I can feel her presence. When she passed away, I kept expecting to see her pop up on our porch. Or wait for her call. I called her phone, listening to her voicemail for months till it disconnected. The aftermath is the hardest, and I failed you both. You were hurting just as I, and I... disappeared. I hope you can forgive me for my selfishness. My irresponsibility.*

*Meg tells me you're moving soon. I hope wherever you go that you forgive me and be at peace finally. I wish you well.. I know we all are still dealing with her death in different ways, but if we lose contact, please have this closure in your heart.*

*Love Always,*

*Marshall*

Folding the letter into the envelope, he addressed it to Yara's parents. Marsh didn't feel sad. He felt free. *Finally free after so many years.* Meg and Dr. Lake were right. It felt good releasing his pent-up emotions. He wasn't sure about it at first, but the weekend was a pleasant distraction from all the turmoil of his life. Standing, he shifted the duffle bag onto his shoulders as he headed to the front door where Meg waited.

"Do you have to go? You're gonna come back for graduation in a couple of weeks; why not take an extended vacation?"

She was finishing up a call. Tucking her phone back into her purse, she was dressed back into her attorney attire. He forgot how much he missed hanging out with his siblings. They video chatted with the rest of the Lincoln brood while

they were in The Mission at his favorite taquería. Seeing his family renewed energy within. He knew he had to go back soon.

On their way back, he passed the dance joint that Cami first took him to. For a moment, he thought he'd seen her inside on the dance floor.

"I have to make sure my client's documents get to where they need to be. It seems no one knows how to work when I'm not there." Meg rolled her eyes, and she stepped toward him. Flicking lint off his jacket, she straightened it out. "I'm glad you're doin' much better."

"I feel better."

He handed her the envelope and Meg's features raised in surprise as he said, "For them."

"Are you sure?"

"I am. You'll make sure they'll get this?"

"No doubt about it."

Meg placed the letter gingerly into her purse. "Come give me a hug."

Rolling his eyes, he grinned and his arms circled his sister. By now, he had surpassed her in height, and he lifted her off her feet. She squealed in surprise before he set her back down.

"I'm gonna miss you, but I'll be back for graduation before you know it. When you come to Chicago, everythin' will be ready for you."

Marsh nodded, and he didn't feel any anxiety, just excitement for the future.

"You're not goin' to forget what we talked about will you?" Meg pointed a finger at him, and he shook his head. "All right. I don't have time to come bail you out of more emotional issues now."



They laughed as they left the room. Once they were checked out, he helped Meg get her bags into the taxi. “You did good. Trust yourself and everythin’ will work out.”

Before he knew it, he was back at the frat house. Four days away seemed like a lifetime, and most of the guys were either still at home with family or out doing whatever. He made it to the top of the stairs when Ezra stepped out of his room.

“Waddup, man? You outta bed now, I see.”

Marsh rolled his eyes at him as he stepped into his bedroom, dropping his bags on the floor. Ezra followed and plopped on the bed. “Any news from Cami yet?”

Marsh shook his head and Ezra sucked his teeth. “Don’t worry. She’ll come around.”

“That’s what people have been tellin’ me to do a lot lately.”

“It’s good advice then, so use it. But let me tell you about what went down during Thanksgiving dinner. You know I got relatives from Arkansas...”

He let Ezra rant about the flight back from Florida, and the cute babes he saw on the plane. Marsh sat and listened, and for the first time in a long while, he felt peace settling in. He received a text message from an unknown number. Grabbing his jacket, he left Ezra sitting on his bed.

“Where are you going?”

Twenty minutes later, Marsh nervously stepped inside The Rusty Dragon, a bar not too far from Oracle Park and the Bay Bridge. Pulling out his chair he said, “How you doin’, Maya?”

She turned, her hair wrapped in a beautiful green tribal print scarf and her ears adorned with large hoops.

He was shocked when he received a text from her asking to meet, but in the brief time they had gotten to know one

another, there was something deeply likable about Maya.

“You made it.”

In front of her sat a half-empty cocktail glass and a bowl of nuts. Maya reached for the bowl and offered it to him. “Want some?”

To calm his nerves, he nodded and grabbed a handful. Hundreds of questions sat on his tongue. Did Cami ask her to talk to him? Was she nearby? How had she been doing? Had she recovered? Would she forgive him?

“Thanks for meeting with me. I know you’re busy.” Maya leaned forward on the counter as she watched him.

“I think I should be sayin’ that to you instead.”

They laughed and Maya took a sip of her drink. His gaze went to the door as if Cami would suddenly appear.

“Order a drink or something, on me, of course.”

Marsh shook his head. “I couldn’t do that.”

“I insist. It also may help you with this conversation.” Maya’s voice lowered and he nodded before flagging the bartender and ordering a beer.

“I’m assumin’ Cami and Devin don’t know that you’re here.” Marsh lifted a brow and Maya nodded.

“They don’t. The two of them are blood relatives through and through. Stubborn as hell.”

Marsh could agree with that, and they grinned.

“I’m here because you and Cami belong together.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen. Cami said we were over.”

“It has to.”

“It won’t. Believe me, and I’m beatin’ myself up because of

it.”

Maya placed a hand on his arm. “She’s just hurt and angry.”

“Isn’t that more than enough reason to believe what she said?”

“Cami... Well, she’s stubborn, but I can see she misses you. I don’t think I’d ever seen her smiling as much before you came along.”

Marsh looked down into his beer, needing time to gather his thoughts.

“I don’t think I’ve seen her have a zest for life since she left us in Minnesota.”

He thought about Cami in the hospital room. Their argument and subsequent demise of the relationship.

“I’m sure you know all that happened to their father.”

Marsh nodded and Maya continued, “Devin and Cami are close. Especially since their mother decided to hit the road. I know he can be... a dick, to put it bluntly. Over-protective. He shelters Cami from things that she should be allowed to experience, but with you, she blossomed.”

His heart began to race, hope building with Maya’s words.

“All I can do is ask. I can’t force you together... I’m sure you know she was insecure because of your previous relationship with Larissa.”

“I told her not to be,” Marsh said, and Maya rolled her eyes.

“You can’t just say things to people and think they’ll not feel some type of way. I don’t know all the nitty-gritty details, but I know what I saw. I saw two people, both recovering from trauma, healing together. You two were good for each other, and finding someone you can connect with on a deep level is

rare. Don't let that go."

Marsh sucked his teeth.

"Why let it all go to waste over a misunderstanding? You still have the rest of the semester together—"

"Which is only a month for me."

"That's still time."

Marsh sat back in his seat. "My sister just left. I'm leavin' and movin' to Chicago. I'm thinkin' about skippin' my graduation altogether."

A sad expression formed on her face. "Sounds like your mind is made up then."

"That was always the plan." It killed him to say those words.

Nodding, she sucked her teeth before finishing her drink. "I want to say thank you then."

What did she have to thank him for?

"I know you didn't expect that." Maya laughed. "You're right. Maybe you served your time. You and Cami shouldn't get back together."

Maya seemed to fumble for the words.

"I know it's cheesy and cliché, but you both found one another. Don't reevaluate this breakup between you too. I like to think things happened for a reason. Sometimes, we get into these things with hopes and dreams, but life quickly shows us that isn't the intention."

Was she using reverse psychology on him?

"Did you love her?"

Shock hit him in the chest, and he stared at her like she had grown another head.

“Did you hear me? Did you love her?”

“Love?” Rubbing the back of his neck, he finally admitted, “Yes, I love her.”

“You decide how to go about it next. Walk away and not say anything or make it known and have some peace.” She placed her hand on his. “Peace is sometimes hard to come by, but that’s the least you can give yourself.”

Lifting their glasses, they both took a sip.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

**CAMI PLAYED WITH THE SOY** sauce container as she sat at the sushi bar. Maki's Magic sushi bar had been recommended to her by a friend of hers, Vassa, that used to visit the library all the time. The last Cami heard, she moved to Boston with her boyfriend after graduation last year.

She looked at the clock on the wall. Now that Thanksgiving was over, it was all hands on deck to the end of the semester. She was feeling much better. She had been taking her medicine every day and incorporating some of the exercises she learned from her physical therapist. Next up was registration for the upcoming semester, the final dance concert, and finals. Before she knew it, it would be Christmas. Then New Year's. Marsh would be gone; she would still be here.

The bell to the restaurant dinged, and she sucked in a breath. Pushing the soy sauce away, she turned to give a strained smile of sorts.

"Larissa."

Not looking any better than Cami, Larissa's hair was pulled back from her face, and she wore simple jeans and a shirt. Larissa's face was filled with uncertainty as she sat down next to Cami.

Luckily, Cami had the foresight to order some Saki. Pouring herself some more, she offered the bottle to Larissa and she nodded. Both girls tossed the drinks back, and the bitterness was a jolt to their system.

“Thank you for coming. I know it was unexpected,” Cami said.

“I was surprised you wanted to speak with me.”

“Yeah...”

Larissa crossed her arms. “I guess you want to gloat. Say you won?”

“No, I didn’t actually.”

Cami tapped her fingers on the counter as edamame floated by on a boat. “I wasn’t being honest with myself.”

Larissa raised a brow.

“Marsh and I broke up.”

To Cami’s surprise, Larissa didn’t grin or do backflips.

“Part of the reason was... Well, because when he was with me, I was convinced that he was never really gonna get over you.”

Larissa exhaled slowly.

“I realized that you will have a bond. You were with him during his darkest, and I can’t compete with that. I still love him even though it’s over.” Cami’s voice didn’t waver. “I’m sorry things didn’t go the way you wanted. I don’t hate you anymore. I don’t want to fight anymore. I just want some sort of truce.”

They were silent for so long she thought Larissa was going to ignore her. “You’re wrong about him.”

Cami looked at her with a frown and Larissa nodded.

“He’s crazy about you. He told me that himself when he talked to me.” Cami’s eyes widened at the fact he called her. “The reason that I called him was not to hurt you. Just... Um, I didn’t pass my final nursing test and my parents are splitting up.”



Cami let out a breath. He wasn't lying then.

"Marsh knew how much nursing mattered to me. You might think I'm a bitch, and that's fine. He knows my family, and I just wanted someone who would understand and also apologize to him. For what I did."

Cami nodded, and Larissa bit her lip.

"I shouldn't have thrown Yara in both of your faces. There wasn't any confirmation she was actually pregnant, and it would be shitty for me to bring it up if she was. I was angry. If I'm being honest, it's been over between us for a while. We just stayed together out of convenience. But seeing both of you together made me long for what we once had."

Larissa's eyes darted from Cami's, and she leaned forward to snag a plate of sushi off the belt. "I'm sorry for everything I did. I shouldn't have done it. I... I think we can call a truce."

"What about Austin?"

Larissa rolled her eyes. "It was a rebound thing to make Marsh jealous, but that didn't work out, thankfully, because he was annoying as hell."

Cami grinned and cleared her throat. "I know, right? Sorry, I couldn't say anything because... ya know." She waved a finger back and forth between them.

"I think he just liked to hear his own voice."

"Don't you hate when guys do that?"

They settled into a comfortable conversation.

"You're not bad," Cami said.

Larissa raised an eyebrow. "You aren't either. Even if I don't get the pink obsession. Or the nerdy chick style; not my taste."



“Are you going to go in?”

She'd come this far, but she couldn't get her feet to move. It was the meeting for the lupus support group. *Why did I let him talk me into this?* The meeting was being held in the hospital's basement, and her thoughts traveled to being so close to the morgue. Cami shivered. What if they came alive like zombies? Anyone down here would be the first to go.

Devin nudged her forward. “Just go in.”

“I am.”

“Then why aren't you moving?”

She took a deep breath; relax.

“I'm going in.”

After avoiding it for so long, she was here. It was funny how life turned out. Part of her wondered if she should have lied and said she went, but that wasn't right. Devin wouldn't let her out of it. Her phone vibrated, and she jumped.

Be brave.

Winter and Deja.

Turning toward her brother, he stood, crossing his arms as if he expected her to dart past him or something. They heard footsteps and turned to see an older woman walking down the hallway. She looked like a businesswoman in a pantsuit and with a coffee in hand. She smiled at both of them.

“Oh, are you here for the support group?”

Devin took a step forward. “She is.”

The woman smiled at them both, opening the door. “Are you coming?”

Devin squeezed her shoulder. “I'll be out here waiting.”

He pushed her with a little bit of force toward the woman. She frowned at him before following her inside.

The room looked like a spare storage space. Shelves of books and other knickknacks adorned the wall. A circle of chairs in the center. A table off to the side with snacks people hovered around. Cami took the first available chair, curling into herself as she sat.

A young woman approached her.

“Hi, my name is Mary.”

Cami took her hand. “I’m Cami.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen you here before. You must have just gotten diagnosed?”

Cami nodded, and Mary clapped her hands enthusiastically. “We are just about to begin, so please, get comfortable. It’s all pretty easy.”

“What do you do?”

“You just share. How you’re feeling and doing right now. That’s it. No pressure if you don’t feel like sharing.”

Mary called everyone to the center. An older woman, probably around her mother’s age, sat next to her. To her left was a young man. As she looked around the circle, there was a hodgepodge of people from all walks of life.

“Katie, let’s start with you. How are you feeling about lupus today?”

A woman with a shaved head and septum piercing stood up. Cami was surprised to see that Katie didn’t look that much older than her.

Katie smiled slowly before she said, “I hate lupus today.”

The room erupted into laughter, applause, and murmurs of agreement. Mary nodded to her before Katie continued. “Some days are better, but lately they haven’t been. I wanted to go to dinner with my friends, but I felt so bad, I couldn’t get out of bed.”

A few tears sprouted in Katie's eyes. Several members of the group comforted Katie, and she nodded, grasping the hand closest to her.

"I don't give up. I know I will get through it, and tomorrow can be a better day."

The circle clapped, and Cami found herself clapping along with it. Mary turned to the next person. "Alissa, you're next. How are you feeling about lupus today?"

Cami sat patiently as they went from person to person. She didn't know what to think about being here. She was nervous. Scared. Awed by the strength of those around her. As it got closer to her, what would she say? She was numb and fighting the urge to run as the woman next to her cried.

"Cami, your turn."

The room looked at her. She shifted in her seat. *I need to leave.*

"Hi, I'm Cami."

The room greeted her back. Taking a deep breath, she looked at the room and then down at her hands. *If I say it out loud, I'm admitting I have an illness. I'm accepting this.*

"This is my first time here, and I'm feeling fine today."

That was good. Great actually? The circle murmured, and Mary leaned forward.

"Fine; can you define *fine* to us?"

Cami let out a shuddering breath. "Fine, as in I'm neutral. Not happy, not sad, just fine."

Shifting in her seat, she felt everyone's eyes boring into her skin.

"In my experience, when we've said 'fine', deeper things were going on below the surface. This is a safe space where you

can talk. Nothing you say here leaves here.”

Cami pulled at the flesh around her nails.

Mary raised a brow. “You can’t just be fine with lupus—”

“Well, you’re right. I’m not fine.”

Exhaling, she let herself count back from five.

“I’ve been lying to the people I’ve loved for months about taking my medication. It got so bad I ended up back in the hospital.” That wasn’t hard admitting. The room went silent, and Cami let the words tumble out. “I used to think I was fine. No aches, no flare-ups or rashes. It’s like I don’t even have it at all.”

She sat back in the plastic seat.

“I used to think it could have been just a fluke. How do I know if I really have it? Why me? Why did it have to happen to me to be here?”

Mary made a murmur of acknowledgment.

“If I really had lupus, I would be like you all. Wouldn’t I feel sick all the time? So, I didn’t tell people I was taking medication for an illness. I couldn’t face the truth, and because I didn’t, I almost lost the ones I love. I’m nowhere near fine accepting it, but I want to be.”

Cami made eye contact with Katie, who nodded.

“I want to be normal, but this is my new normal.”

“That’s brave of you to say, Cami.” Mary sat back in her seat for several seconds and nodded.

“So, today, my lupus is fine. Tomorrow, it might not be and that’ll be fine. Who knows? The day after that might be better, but I’ll keep taking it day by day.”

The tension began to lessen, and Cami started to chat. It was fun actually. Mary led them to the next person.

Mary led the group through group meditation. They talked about ways to cope both physically and mentally. Once the meeting ended and they folded up the chairs, Cami gave a small smile to someone who passed her by. If she left now, she could still make it in time to Marsh's place.

"Cami—" She turned to Mary.

"Thank you so much for attending our meeting today."

"No, thank you for allowing me in. Truly. It was eye-opening."

Mary gave her a charm. Cami's eyes widened as she read the writing engraved into the body of the angel. *Choose Strength.*

"I want to say that I understand how you feel. I've had lupus for years now. I found out when I was about your age. I was a mess."

*Wow.* Cami's mouth opened and closed.

"It was devastating. At that age, I thought I was invincible. I didn't take it at all seriously, because how could I go from being so healthy to someone who could barely move some days and had to take medication for the rest of my life?"

Cami was silent.

"I didn't take it. I stayed angry and in disbelief until I had a flare-up that was so bad, I ended up back in the hospital."

Her eyes widened. "Really?"

Mary nodded. "I was there for months. I came out worse than I went for it, but I could have prevented it if I believed—" She took Cami's hands. "I know we all take our time with acceptance. We can help and support you doing this time. It gets better, and I say that from experience. I hope this charm is a reminder."

Giving her hands a final squeeze, Mary let go and walked

past Cami, out of the meeting room, leaving Cami to stand there in the room in silence. Devin peeked his head in.

“You ready to go?”

Glancing at the charm, Cami smiled.

“Yeah.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

**CAMI COULDN'T AVOID IT ANYMORE.** Standing outside the ballroom studio, she opened the door, and all conversation stopped.

Ignoring the looks from her peers, she hurried to the cubby, putting her things in.

Looking over her shoulder, her heart jumped at the sight of Marsh talking with Harry. She felt like someone escaping the desert and finding water for the first time. Why did he have to still look so handsome? His waves were growing out, and his beard was slightly unkempt but rugged and sexy.

“Cami! You’re here!”

Harry had spotted her and waved her over. Her eyes locked with Marsh’s, and *God*, how she missed the sight of him. Pulling at her tank, she made it to the two men and nodded and said, “Hi Harry...”

*This is so awkward!*

“It’s good to see you’re doing better.”

Cutting her eyes to Marsh, she gave an awkward laugh. “Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks for asking.”

*I just want to hide under a rock!*

“Let’s talk after class, all right?”

She glanced at Marsh, her brows pinched together, but the rest of her softened with a quiet sigh.

“Sure.”

“Well...” Harry began looking at the two. “Let’s get started with class. We have one last dance to learn before the final concert, the rumba!”

Calling the attention of the room, Harry told everyone to partner up. Cami and Marsh stood there, and the words she wanted to say got stuck in the back of her throat.

“So, you wanna...” Marsh started and pointed between them.

“Yeah!”

It felt like torture to be this close to him and not be able to do more. Clearing her throat, she felt as if a spark set off as she touched his hand. She thought about him holding her, being near, and talking all night on the phone until the sun came up. It hurt too much, so Cami couldn’t keep prolonged eye contact with him.

“Keep your head up.”

Automatically her hands came under his chin, lifting his head. A smirk played on his face, and she looked off to the side.

“You think I would know that by now.” His voice came out sexy and rough with that southern accent she’d grown to love.

*There are so many things I want to say...*

“Yeah...” she trailed off; now it was her turn to look down at their feet. To her surprise, he hadn’t stepped on her feet. He was learning. The rumba didn’t prove to be the best dance to try to maintain a conversation. It was only after Harry let them break that she was finally able to peel herself away from him and catch her breath.

“Hey... I—”

Cami looked at him. “I thought we covered introductions

already?”

His brows dipped, and she tried not to think about how cute he looked befuddled. The words were there, but it seemed to be a waiting game of who was going to break first and say what needed to be said.

“You’re right,” he chuckled.

Her mouth was dry, and she was determined not to let her tears fall. They both stood there, and she gripped herself with trembling hands, her pulse roaring in her ears. *Just breathe.*

“Marsh—”

“When you said we were done, I just lost it. The thought of not havin’ you in my life was makin’ me crazy.”

“It was?”

Marsh nodded solemnly. Then gazed at her sadly. “It was too hard. But I knew that you would be better off without me. You will be.”

“Marsh...” she whispered, wringing her hands.

“I’m messed up, Cami. You were right. I don’t want to hurt you further than I have already.”

Cami blinked at him. “Is that it?”

Marsh stepped forward, and she closed her eyes as he placed his hand around her waist, kissing her forehead. “I love you.”

*He said it.*

Warmth ebbed through her limbs as her pulse quickened. She fought to find the words to say.

“I love you, Cami. I’ll never stop loving you.”

She was such a fool in love. She wanted to launch herself in his arms. Tell him all was forgiven, but he took a step back from her.

“I’m asking for your forgiveness. I don’t deserve it, and if you can’t accept it, that’s fine. I know we didn’t plan for this, and I would love to spend every day trying to find all the ways I can make you smile.”

Cami didn’t say a word, but the tears were building in her eyes.

“Whenever you can forgive me, I’ll be here. My heart is yours, and I’m sorry I couldn’t be the man you deserved before, but now, I’m going to try to be the best one for myself.”

She managed to hold back the tears as he stepped around her, his back straight as he marched out the doors, leaving Cami to wallow in her anguish.



Cami was nervous as she peeked beyond the curtain. The auditorium was packed. She shouldn’t be nervous; she had danced in front of crowds all the time, but right now, she was shaking so bad she’d probably jump if you said boo.

“Are you ready?” Deja asked.

Spencer, Winter, Bria, and Ezra were standing there. She stood in her costume. Winter snapped a photo of Cami in her multi-tonal blue gown, draped with hand-placed lace that faded beautifully into the ice blue skirt, completed with Swarovski gems. Making her spin, she did as they cooed at her.

“You look hot as hell. Didn’t I slay on her makeup?” Deja turned to the others.

Cami took down her braids. Instead, she pulled her natural hair back into a chignon. Her tight curls framed her face, making her seemingly delicate. “Y’all aren’t supposed to be back here.”

“Hush, how do you feel?” Deja stepped into Spencer’s

arms.

“I got something to relax you...” Spencer patted the front pocket of his shirt, and Cami’s brows dipped.

“No, thank you.”

“We have time.”

Winter spoke up. “I saw Devin and Maya in the crowd. We’re all ready to see you do your thing. Where’s Marsh—Oh, I’m sorry, sweetie.” Placing a hand over her mouth, Cami didn’t speak, only giving a short smile.

She hadn’t seen him since that last day in class. How many times had she stared at his phone number but couldn’t force herself to dial? She peeked beyond the curtain again. It was full, and she gasped at seeing who was in the first row. It was the LeBlanc company. Rick LeBlanc was sitting there speaking with Harry. They talked animatedly, and her heart clenched. She missed the audition, and now, she would have to dance with him directly in her face.

“I’m fine.”

Deja shook her head. “Are you sure?”

“I am.”

“You look beautiful,” Marsh said.

Cami stiffened and slowly turned to him. He looked stunning in his dress top and pants.

“Thank you,” she said.

The pair was quiet. Their friends began to mutter amongst themselves, but she ignored them. Being this close to him, she realized how much she missed him. Wildly and irrevocably. She wanted to run into his arms. Kiss him or hold him like she used to. It would only make their parting worse than it already was. Instead, all she did was nod and turn her head when the announcer began to speak.

“Well, this isn’t awkward...” Deja said sarcastically.

Ezra snorted. “You telling me.”

There was a cough behind them, and she turned to find Savannah. Winter and Deja narrowed their gazes on her, but Savannah kept her focus on Cami. “Good luck, you deserve it.”

Cami blinked; she wasn’t expecting that from her.

“Thank you?”

Savannah made a face. “Don’t take it too personally. I’m glad you’re better; we’ve missed you at practice. See you after Christmas break.”

She walked away, and Cami watched her.

“Who would have thought?” Deja muttered.

Thinking the same thing, Cami shook her head. “Not me.”

She pulled the straps of her dress up and glanced at Marsh. She hated the steady thump of her broken heart. She hated his beautiful presence. The hollow, cold feeling that had taken permanent residence in her soul shook at the chains of her heart. Was she ready to take the plunge and trust him again? Could she be strong for herself?

“Just know we’re here. You’re going to kill it.” Winter hugged her and shot Marsh a smile.

Feeling better from her friends’ encouragement, they all hugged her, wishing her the best and making plans for dinner and drinks later. The announcer began to speak.

“Welcome to the Pacific Grove University Dance Festival!”

The crowd cheered and clapped as the dean of the department stepped on stage. Everyone behind the curtain

bristled with excitement as she began to speak.

“We are excited to show you the best this campus has to offer, from all facets our dance classes have to offer; you will be more than pleased this evening...”

Cami glanced at Marsh, and he placed his hands into his pockets. “Look, Cami—”

“All right, this is your big moment.” Harry appeared suddenly. Sweating profusely, he fanned himself with a program. “If you go out there and remember everything you’ve learned over the semester, I know you will succeed. Trust that you know the moves, the choreography, and the timing. You’re not individuals right now; you’re a unit. A team.”

Cami sucked in a deep breath. This was it.

“You got me?”

The entire class nodded.

“Great!”

Harry disappeared as quickly as he came. The lights dimmed once again, and Cami sucked in a deep breath. It was finally time!

“Ladies and gentlemen, Pacific Grove Ballroom Dance Class!”

The entire class walked onto the stage. It was hard to see with the blinding lights the crowd in front of her, but when Cami heard her name being yelled, she saw the outline of Devin and Maya. Winter and Deja, and the rest of their friends. She gave a small wave before she took her spot on the stage.

Harry put her and Marsh in the front. They would be leading the entire group.

Taking one gulp of air and praying her body did what it needed to do, she looked into Marsh’s eyes. The music began

to play, and Cami let herself move with the flow of the music.

Nervousness. Butterflies. Tingles. It was just the two of them on the dance floor. There were no missed steps or awkward postures. He didn't step on her toes.

She didn't worry about her body. Or her broken heart.

Marsh looked exquisitely handsome, his eyes never leaving hers as the stage seem to fade away. She held her breath, never breaking eye contact as they began the Viennese waltz.

The music picked up, and they moved in a circle round and round the stage. Her dress formed a perfect circle in the air. He broke her heart but everything within her screamed to taste one last kiss. Hear one more laugh. The dancers around them moved like water, flowing in graceful arcs. The music changed once more as they moved from the waltz to the tango.

Applause and cheers from the crowd. Cami grinned as lights flashed from cameras. He pulled her closer, her body flush with his. She shivered, entranced by Marsh's presence and the tears fell furiously. His hand on her back was a steady guide, ebbing strength into her with each movement. All she felt was joy and laughter. Marsh dipped her as the final chord played, and cheers erupted.

When they were done, Cami took in several breaths as Marsh eased her to a standing position.

"Not bad?" she asked.

Marsh shook his head. "Not bad at all."

It looked as if he wanted to kiss her, but she pulled back a bit.

"I... do you have a second to talk later?"

Cami's brows raised. "Talk? I—"

"Hey! Take a bow!" Harry hissed from behind the curtain.



She bowed before they were ushered off the stage. She still had to perform with Intensified later that evening. Marsh stepped back as another class began to walk out on the stage.

“Talk? Talk where?” she asked.

“Anywhere.”

She heard someone calling her name, and she turned around. It was Harry. “Cami! Cami! Wait.”

Annoyance flashed through her, and she gave Marsh an apologetic smile. He was out of breath as she stopped.

“I have some great news for you. Ricky LeBlanc saw your performance. He wants to schedule another audition with you!”

Cami blinked and pointed to herself. “Me?”

“Yes. He wants to make a time...”

She opened and closed her mouth. She didn’t know what to say. Finally, she found herself saying the words.

“Of course, when?”

Her heart was thundering. She was getting a second chance.

“I’m sorry, Marsh, but this is news—”

“Just meet me in the studio afterward, okay?” Marsh nodded at her, turning on his heels. Exhaling slowly, she watched him disappear out the back door into the hall.

Harry snapped his fingers, calling her attention. “Yes. Audition tomorrow; can you do it?”

Her mouth flapped like a fish out of water. She was rendered speechless.

“Of course!”

Harry smiled victoriously. “I’ll make the arrangements.”

The final dance festival was a whirl of energy and emotion. Hours later when she finally was changed back into her regular clothes, it was nearly ten pm. Would Marsh still want to meet? She rushed from behind the stage and into the main auditorium.

Devin approached her with Maya. “Where are you going?”

“I need to meet Marsh.”

Devin made a face, and Maya squeezed his side. “Really?”

“It’s just to talk.” She saw the smug look on Maya’s face and rolled her eyes.

Winter and Bria appeared. “You did amazing!”

“Thank you.”

“How about we go eat now?”

Deja groaned loudly with Spencer and Ezra trailing behind her. “About damn time; my stomach is eating its own lining.”

Winter rolled her eyes. “That’s impossible—”

Cami cut them off. “I have to go see Marsh first.”

Everyone around her grinned, and Cami rolled her eyes. “Look, I’ll meet you all at the restaurant okay?”

Rushing out of the auditorium, she high-tailed it across campus to the ballroom studio. The building was creepy at night. A few lights were on to illuminate the hallways, and she hadn’t run into anyone but a janitor with headphones on that were blaring music loudly. Taking the stairs two at a time, she approached the door as her heart beat against her ribs.

*I can do this.*

Snatching open the door she stepped inside. “You’re here...”

The relief made her shoulders sag as she dropped her bag to the floor. He leaned against one of the mirrors in the room as a smile crept over her face, and before he could stop her, she launched herself onto him.

“What are you—”

She didn't give him a chance to ask any questions. It'd been too long since she felt his lips on hers. It felt like no time had passed, his body melting into hers. She rained kisses all over his face, causing him to laugh as he spun her around.

Cami was breathing heavily when she released his lips. “I've missed you.”

He blinked as he looked at her, his own eyes misting slightly.

“I didn't know that I needed you in my life, but every day is hell because, without you, it's boring. I even like your old gangster movies. The way you don't like sweets. How you don't have rhythm—”

He made a dismissive noise in his throat.

“It's true and you know it. My toes haven't completely healed from the impact of your giant hooves.”

“I'm not that bad.”

“Jury's out on that. I did what you said. I finally went to a support group. It wasn't bad.”

Cami knew she would never get tired of the way Marsh looked at her. Or touched her. The way he loved her without saying the words. She needed that more than her next breath. This time without him made her realize that yes, they had been pretending, but at some point, what they shared became real.

Marsh cleared his throat. “I have to tell you somethin'.”

“Marsh—”

“Shh... I know you don’t think you were my first choice, but you’re wrong. You are my first choice. I want to be with you if you’re in Las Vegas, New York, or Georgia. I finally found someone who understands me. Someone told me that’s rare to find in life.”

He grinned.

“You know I don’t dance, but I’ll dance for you. I’ll do whatever you want me to do. I’ll even watch more of *The Office*, even if I think it’s corny—”

“It’s not. It’s a classic.”

“Whatever.”

The sincerity in his eyes sent a tiny ripple of that familiar warm sensation through her.

“You were right. I shouldn’t have hidden the texts from Larissa. I should have been honest.”

His gaze met her.

“So... you love me?” He grinned, and Cami rolled her eyes.

“Unfortunately.”

Cami giggled as Marsh squeezed her sides, tickling her as she screeched, trying to break free.

“I love you. I should have said it when we were at Lake Tahoe. I do. Every weird, cute, and quirky thing about you. I don’t want to stop lovin’ you.”

“I love you too.” Cami smiled shyly, feeling like the earth, moon, and sun had all shifted. She held her breath, and she felt an audience.

Devin, Maya, Winter, Spencer, Ezra, and Bria all peeked through the doorway. Rolling her eyes, she waved at them and they all stumbled in. Devin made a fist and put it to both his

eyes before pointing to Marsh. “That’s what’s gonna happen to you if you break her heart again.”

“Yes, sir.”

Music began to play, and she recognized it was the waltz. Deja was holding up her phone and waving it.

“Encore performance!”

Her eyes flew to his, a question in her eyes. He put his arms around her and pulled her close.

“May I have this dance?”

He gazed at her affectionately, then tucked her in against his chest. She could hear his heart beating a steady, solid rhythm, and it soothed her. Marsh lowered his head; his lips hovered over hers, and she grinned.

“For you, anytime.”

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# EPILOGUE

Some years later...

**“NOW, YOU’RE COMIN’ DOWN HERE** for Christmas, right? No respectable Christmas can be held in the desert,” Devin complained over the phone.

Cami rolled her eyes as she stepped out of her car. Balancing it with her shoulder, she grabbed her groceries out of the back seat. She had gone to a farmers’ market to stock up on some groceries for dinner tonight.

“I will be there for Christmas. Then I’m going to Louisiana to meet up with Deja and Winter, and then we’re heading to Florida since Ezra’s family just opened up their new hotel.”

The years were flying by. Winter was rocking it as a social worker. Deja had taken over her family’s business and was expanding it as fast as she could. Ezra was off doing Ezra things... Then Marsh.

No one said a long-distance relationship would be easy. Between his studying and interning at the law firm and her at dance practice, there had been missed calls and texts, missed video chats. It was hard when they both were working at their careers and when, many times, they barely had the energy to take care of themselves. Yet, through it all, they never missed that goodnight call.

“I wish I had lavish friends like you do,” Devin said. She could hear her niece and nephew screaming in the back.

“You could if you weren’t so mean. I don’t know why Maya decided to marry you.”

Her brother finally tied down the woman he loved. Their mother even came, wearing her chaps and her gun on her

waist. Cami was honored to be Maya's maid of honor, and Devin surprised her when he asked Marsh to be his best man.

"Considering she's pregnant again, I know she just wants my benefits."

Cami laughed out loud as she walked toward the steps of her condo complex. "Don't let her hear you say that."

Her dance troupe was amazing. They were headquartered in Las Vegas, but they had been traveling extensively lately. She had just gotten back from Sydney a few weeks ago. It was her first international trip ever.

Climbing the stairs, she fished in her pocket for her keys as Devin continued to ramble on.

"She loves me; she ain't going nowhere."

Cami rolled her eyes. "Yeah, okay..."

She stopped in her tracks when she noticed the door to her apartment was cracked open.

"Devin! Shut up and listen!" she hissed into her phone. Devin shut up.

"What?"

"I think someone broke into my apartment."

Devin immediately sprang into action. "Are they still there?"

"I don't know?" Fumbling for her mace tied to her keychain, she held it out from in front of her like a weapon.

"Call the police; you have renter's insurance?"

"Who really needs renter's insurance, Devin?"

"I told you to get it. Las Vegas is a drug runner's hot spot. Your apartment is probably an old trap stop."

Cami rolled her eyes. "Shut up. Stop watching *Breaking*



*Bad.*”

She toed the door open with her foot. She didn't hear any movement from the inside. Stepping inside, she shut it quietly before setting her bags on the floor.

“What's going on?”

“Shh!” she hissed to him.

The floor creaked under her carpeted floors as she walked in. Her living room was left how she had it before she headed to practice. The light from above her stove was on, illuminating the small space. That's when she heard some rumbling in the kitchen. She caught her breath, closed her eyes, and sent a quick prayer up above.

Cami jumped into the kitchen, startling the person who was rummaging through her fridge. They turned around, and she sprayed to high heaven as she screamed.

“What the fuck, Cami!” the voice boomed, and Cami gasped as she looked down at the intruder lying on her kitchen floor, writhing in pain.

“Marsh!” she said, overjoyed. She squealed with happiness and dropped to the floor as Marsh opened his arms for her, still blinded, as she gave him a tight hug.

“Goddamn, you went heavy with that spray,” he said, still blinking. She pulled back, helping him up to sit at the table before she went to get a cloth and some water to wipe his eyes.

Devin was still talking into the phone when she told him she'd call back and hung up on him.

“You didn't tell me you were coming. I thought we were meeting in Georgia?”

She wiped his face as he blinked at her, seeing the outline of herself. She forgot she gave him a set of keys to her apartment when he came to visit during his spring break.

“I wanted to surprise you... Surprise?”

Cami grinned when finally, some of the irritation came down.

“Now get over her and properly kiss me, girl.”

Cami sat in Marsh’s lap as he said, “I’ve been thinkin’ about you, Cami.”

Her heart was speeding up, and it was becoming harder and harder to resist the man before her, especially with how one of his hands was creeping up her shirt. She whimpered Marsh’s name breathlessly and grabbed onto his wrist, stopping his hand from climbing up her stomach.

“Been waitin’ for this moment all week, baby. I missed you.” He squeezed her sides tightly.

She squealed, unbearably ticklish on her sides, and abruptly pulled away from his embrace. “Wait, tell me, how did you do? What’s the final grade?”

Marsh sat back in the seat, his eyes still slightly red as he rubbed his chin and looked at the floor.

Cami frowned. “No! I thought you studied?” She came closer to him.

A grin passed his face. “Passed. Top of my class.”

Cami screamed and jumped on him.

“How was the show? Did you rock it?”

Cami was starting a new show on the strip.

“It’s my first time leading, but I did it.”

Marsh kissed her again. “We’re killing this adult thing, huh?”

“Barely.” Cami shrugged before Marsh stood up and she let out a scream as he carried her to the bedroom.

“I have somethin’ to tell you.”

Marsh huffed before he rolled his eyes and maneuvered her in his arms. “Hurry up, woman.”

“Well, two things.” She held up her fingers.

He blinked at her.

“I have groceries. We can make that zucchini spaghetti I wanted to try.”

Marsh made a face, and she rolled her eyes. “It’s not that bad! I’m trying to eat healthy since it’s what my doctor ordered.”

Cami had been taking her health seriously. Taking her medicine, going to a new support group, and when she had a flare-up, she immediately told her boss she needed a break. Never would she end up back in the hospital.

“What’s the second?”

She took a deep breath before she said, “We’re doing a tour in Chicago in July. We should be there for a few months, and I need a place to stay...”

Marsh raised an eyebrow at her as he swung her side to side. “So, what does that mean?” he asked, knowing damn well where she’d be staying.

“I mean if you have an opening in your apartment—”

Marsh pressed his lips to her before he shifted her up in his arms.

“I’m a terrible landlord. I demand home-cooked meals and kisses on-demand all the time. You think you can pay that?”

She grinned as he walked her to her bedroom before he kicked open the door and tossed her onto the bed with a laugh. “I think I can handle that.”

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## ABOUT TINIA



Tinia (TUH-NIA) Montford is a Pisces who's a sap for romance, especially when there's (tons of) kissing. Loves eighties sitcoms and will consume anything with chocolate. She graduated from the University of San Francisco with a degree in English and Graphic Design.

She is a world traveler having climbed a volcano in Nicaragua, scaled Angkor Wat in the blistering sun, and roamed the Acropolis of Athens. Oh, she also dabbles in short stories occasionally.

If you can't catch her writing, you can bet she's overindulging on poke bowls, listening to the same four songs, or chilling with her adorbs doggie. She is currently pursuing her MFA in Fiction. You can find more information on her books on her [website](#).

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