



PERFECT

ANNAPOLIS  
HARBOR SERIES

FOR

YOU

LEA COLL

**PERFECT  
FOR  
YOU**

**LEA COLL**

*Perfect for You*

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## BOOKS BY LEA COLL

All I Want Series

*Choose Me*

*Be with Me*

*Burn for Me*

*Trust in Me*

*Stay with Me*

*Take a Chance on Me*

Annapolis Harbor Series

*Easy Moves*

*Only with You*

*Lost without You*

*Perfect for You*

*Crazy for You*

With Me in Seattle Universe Novella

*Lucky Catch*

*Trick Play*

Download a free novella, Swept Away, when you sign up for her [newsletter](#).

To learn more about her books, please visit her [website](#).

*To my grandmother.*

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# CHAPTER ONE

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## DYLAN

“I WON A BLIND DATE WITH REID EVERSON!” THE TIGHT END and newest captain of Baltimore’s football team. I jumped out of my chair, wiggling my butt as I spun in a circle, performing a little dance in the middle of Champagne Friday, our weekly firm meeting we used to discuss upcoming cases, client issues, and our nonprofit, Kids Speak.

I paused, gripping the table tightly with my hands to steady myself, breathing hard as I faced my law firm partners, Hadley and Avery. “His personal assistant emailed to confirm.”

“How did you,” Hadley placed air quotes around the word, “‘win’ a blind date with him?”

“The usual way. I bid the most money.” We’d planned a silent auction for a Kids Speak fundraiser a few weeks ago. One of the items I’d wanted in the auction was a blind date with a Baltimore football player. The head of Baltimore’s public relations team, Lena Vickers, readily agreed. She loved the idea.

Avery sighed. “How will it look that one of our own won the auction?”

“You said you wanted to make a connection with professional athletes. This is our chance.” I sat, excited that our plan was coming to fruition.

Hadley created Kids Speak to help kids who needed speech therapy because they either couldn’t afford private therapy or didn’t qualify for services through the schools. Hadley’s younger brother, Colin, suffered from a stutter

growing up. He'd suggested the idea, implementing the program in the original location for Kids Speak, New Orleans. As a college baseball player himself, he thought it would be good for the team to volunteer. It also gave the kids someone to look up to. The team routinely met them at parks to throw the ball around, engaging them in conversation where they had a chance to practice what they learned.

"Why does it have to be this guy?" Avery asked.

"There's something about him. I think he'd be the perfect spokesman." Part of my interest came from the hours of film I'd watched. I'd researched every player on the Baltimore team. Something about Reid Everson drew me in. His voice was gravelly like he rarely used it, his cap pulled down low over his eyes, his shoulders hunched as if he'd rather be anywhere than in front of the camera. He answered the questions in as few words as possible. He was gruff when reporters tried to draw him out with jokes. He was uncomfortable. He had all my lady parts tingling.

The most intriguing thing I'd discovered in my research was the number of interviews Reid granted over the years decreased the more famous he became. I would have thought it would have been the opposite. Most players love the spotlight.

Hadley gave me a pointed look. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Any connection with a player helps us." Every nerve in my body was telling me this was a game-changing development.

"That's true." Avery acknowledged.

"I'll let you work your magic," Hadley said.

The one thing I excelled at was convincing people to support a cause whether it be through time or money. When Hadley moved here, telling us her plan to expand her successful Kids Speak program to Annapolis, I'd immediately offered my help.

"If it's a blind date, how are you going to bring up Kids Speak?" Avery asked.

I'd thought extensively about my options, looking at the possible ramifications from every angle. "The way I see it, I have two options. I can be up front, telling him the date was an opportunity to meet with someone from the organization."

"Pitch to him," Hadley said, her eyes full of respect.

"Exactly. Or I can act like it's a date. I can bring it up when he asks the obligatory question about what I do."

"You're assuming he'll ask." Hadley tilted her head.

I rolled my eyes. "Isn't that dating 101? What do you do for a living? I'm an attorney, yada yada, and by the way I'm part of this amazing organization that helps bring speech programs into schools that don't have them or to schools where kids don't qualify for services."

Avery smiled, shaking her head. "You could sell to anyone."

Growing up, my parents were part of a lot of charitable organizations. I'd grown up watching them schmooze people. I'd learned from the best. I enjoyed helping others.

Hadley shot me a pointed look. "What if you end up liking him?"

I stilled, uncertain of her meaning.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "What if you're attracted to him?"

My face heated. I *was* looking forward to meeting him. I wanted to know if he would be as gruff in person like he was in those interviews. I wondered if his gravelly voice would rumble in his chest, ridding me of my no relationship rules.

"Yeah, what then?" Avery asked.

"Kids Speak comes first. You want a spokesman. I'll get one."

Hadley pursed her lips. "What if he likes you but he's put off by your sales pitch?"

"It's a risk I have to take if we want Kids Speak to be successful." Hadley no longer had her father's financial

backing. We needed to find another way to draw attention to the organization one that would bring in a guaranteed source of funding. Our firm was relatively new, we didn't have the time to promote Kids Speak the way it deserved.

Hadley grimaced. "I don't know about this. It has bad idea written all over it."

Avery pointed at her. "That's what you said about me helping Griffin."

I laughed. "Yeah, look how that turned out."

Griffin came to Avery asking for help with his brother's estate. Now they were in a serious relationship.

Hadley narrowed her eyes. "I have a feeling this is going to be a whole lot messier."

I ignored her ominous prediction. Kids Speak was as important to me as it was to her. What I hadn't told either of them was it was personal for me too. My mom was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis when I was in high school. Recently she'd begun having issues with her speech. Other than her mobility, her inability to form words or say what she wanted was deeply upsetting to her and me. Not being able to talk to her whenever I wanted, the thought of never hearing her voice again was devastating. My parents kept their health issues private, so I hadn't confided in my friends.

I wanted to help people who had similar issues. I wanted to take the stigma away from it. I didn't want my mother or anyone else to feel ashamed of their symptoms. I hadn't been able to convince her to seek the help of a speech therapist. Maybe I'd be more successful with the kids in Hadley's program.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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## REID

“WITH NUMBERS LIKE YOU PUT UP TODAY, DO YOU EXPECT TO get more passes this year?” asked the reporter during the post-game press conference.

My fingers tightened on the podium. The bright lights blinded me, my collar tight, the rapid-fire nature of the questions froze the words I’d prepared to say on my tongue. Mentally shaking my head, I reminded myself I’d been doing this for years. I had to breathe deep and focus.

Playing football and dealing with reporters went hand in hand, no matter how much I’d avoided it over the years. I’d taken the captain position this year with the expectation I’d need to be more vocal, get involved in the community, be a leader. My contract was up the end of the year. If I wanted to prove to the owner, Lincoln Aldrich, that I wanted to be here, I needed to try to be more of a leader. A multi-year contract equaled endorsements and financial security for me and my family.

Standing in front of a room of people, the heavy weight of expectation crushing my chest, I wasn’t so sure about the intelligence of taking more of a leadership role this year. I thought it would solidify my role on the team, making me a franchise player. I wasn’t sure anything was worth this.

“Coach is in the best position to comment on that.”

“Chase is throwing you the ball more often. Does he not trust his other wide receivers?” A reporter sneered.

Anger surged through my body, clearing the fog from my brain. “Chase and I have a good connection. He has faith in all of his teammates.”

I tapped a finger in time with the beat of my heart on the podium. Maybe I needed to channel anger. That seemed to help my focus.

“That’s enough questions.” Lena stepped in.

As the head of PR, it was her job to keep the reporters on task, asking relevant questions. She put a stop to it whenever they went off course. I unwrapped my fingers from the podium, taking a step back, drawing in my first deep breath since the conference began.

My personal assistant, Callie was at my side instantly, her hand on my elbow, guiding me out. “You did good.”

Her voice was soft and soothing.

One of the assistants handed my bag to me. I nodded in thanks. “I’m just glad it’s done with.”

“You did great.”

I exchanged a look with her. “I didn’t take too long to answer?”

“It was fine. No one noticed.” Callie squeezed her hand around my arm, reassuring me.

I hope no one had. After stumbling over the *r* sound during a few press conferences in college, I’d worked on techniques to calm myself in stressful situations. When I was nervous, I was more likely to mispronounce words. Thankfully, I didn’t have an issue with all *r* sounds.

When I was in college, I’d overheard a woman I was dating laughing about how I must be slow because of the way I spoke. It reinforced my father’s opinion that I must be stupid. The rational part of my brain told me that my father was a loser who abandoned my mom and siblings. The insecure part of me worried others would view me the same way.

Callie paused at my car, letting go of my elbow. “We need to prepare for the blind date Lena set up with a fan.”

“I was hoping Lena would pick Chase or Jonah.” One of the other more affable guys, who loved the attention.

“Lena said it had to be you. She wants you to do more publicity. She wants the fans to get to know you. The owner loves it when his fans identify with his players.”

“I just want to play football.” I told her multiple times a day.

She patted my arm. “I know. We’ll go through possible questions. You’ll do fine.”

I ground my teeth together. I took the captain position knowing I’d have to do the things I’d avoided over the years. If I wanted to solidify my position on the team, I had to be a leader. Fan events were part of it. I hoped this woman wasn’t a crazed fan.



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## CHAPTER THREE

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## DYLAN

ARRIVING EARLY AT THE RESTAURANT TO REHEARSE MY strategy for the evening, I followed the hostess to a two-person table in front of the windows. The Rusty Scupper was located three stories above the Inner Harbor Marina in Baltimore boasting impressive views of Harbor Place, the Inner Harbor, and Fell's Point.

The fresh flowers on the table, the pianist playing softly in the background, and the lights of the city reflected on the water was romantic.

“Ms. Gannon?” asked a familiar gravelly voice.

I rose from my chair, taking in the way Reid's thighs strained against his suit pants, his trim waist, broad shoulders, and his dark hair. His chin held a delicious amount of scruff though his brown eyes were wary.

I'd seen pictures of him in uniform, even the head shot they used for games. I wasn't prepared to see the man in a suit. My heart picked up, pounding in my chest, roaring in my ears.

He stopped in front of me, his eyes flickering down my body to the red evening gown which I knew clung to every curve. I licked my suddenly dry lips, my head light at his proximity and his impressive size.

“Nice to meet you.” I held out my hand as if he was a potential business associate even though the tumbling of my stomach indicated attraction.

His large hand closed firmly around mine, engulfing me with warmth and strength, sending tingles up my elbow.

When he released me, I cleared my throat, moving to sit as he pushed the chair underneath me, smoothing my evening gown over my legs to quell my sudden nerves. My plans to pitch Kids Speak flew out my head. This felt like a date with a man I very much wanted to impress.

I was adept at social interactions, speaking engagements, and charming anyone in a room. Meeting him unsettled me.

He sat across from me, his large body filling my view. His leg brushed mine under the table, his steady gaze meeting mine. “You won a date with me.”

“I did.” My lips curled into a smile when he moved his leg so it wasn’t touching mine anymore. Was he as affected as I was?

His brow raised. “Am I what you expected?”

I wanted to say something witty and funny, but I couldn’t. My gaze fell to the tablecloth covered table between us. I’d called the front office to request him. I couldn’t tell him that.

I lifted my eyes, attempting to infuse my voice with a teasing tone. Instead, I sounded breathless. “You’re more than what I expected.”

He regarded me for so long I shifted in my seat. Had I admitted too much?

“You love football?”

I hated to admit I didn’t, especially when I needed his help. I placed my elbows on the table, leaning toward him. “I don’t. I’m embarrassed to say I don’t know much about it.”

His eyes dropped to my cleavage. The move was like a caress, heating my bare skin.

He slowly lifted his gaze, tilted his head as he considered me. “Then why did you bid on the date?”

*There was something about you. I found you attractive. I wanted to get to know you better.* “I wanted to help out Kids Speak.”

He let out a breath. “I’m happy you’re—” he cleared his throat, “not an enthusiastic fan or a cleat chaser...”

His voice dropped on the word *chaser*. I snorted, covering my mouth with my hand to cover the unladylike move. “I don’t know what that is. I’ve never chased anyone.”

His eyes sparked. “Is that so?”

I nodded, a smile playing on my lips.

I’ve never been attracted to athletes. Their size or large muscles never did it for me. It was his turbulent brown eyes that intrigued me. I wanted to sift through the shadows, weighing each one before turning them over in my hands.

I wanted to know what he thought of me. I hadn’t anticipated the attraction flowing through my veins, hot and heavy. Did he feel it too?

“I’m glad you’re the one who’s here.”

He arched a brow, leaning back in his chair to consider me. “Why is that?”

“You’re interesting. You’re a bit of an enigma. You don’t grant many interviews. You’re a man of few words.”

His gaze was steady on mine. “If you don’t watch football how do you know all of that?”

“I looked you up online.” I shifted in my seat, hoping he never found out I requested him tonight.

His shoulders relaxed slightly, his lips tipped into a smile. “I’m at a disadvantage because I don’t know anything about you.”

I was certain the team had done a background check on me, but otherwise he was probably being honest. “Like I said, I bid on the date because I wanted to support Kids Speak. It’s such a great organization. Do you do much charity work?”

He looked away before his gaze returned to mine. “Honestly? I don’t. I’m focused on football. Lena insisted I come.”

I hid the disappointment that he didn't want to be here. "Why is that?"

"I don't like the attention." He looked at the window.

He was a professional player, famous at least in this city. He should have erected a wall between us. Instead, he'd given me honesty, a glimpse into him.

It made me want to know more about him. Why was he so private? "I would think that would be a requirement for your job."

His jaw tightened. "I want to play football, collect a paycheck, and live my life away from the media."

"That's understandable."

The way he held his shoulders stiff, his eyes narrowed on me, felt like a warning.

He probably wouldn't be amenable to my desire for him to be the spokesman.

The waitress paused at the edge of the table. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Water please." I needed to be sharp for this evening. I thought it would be easier. He'd be an egotistical player. I'd flatter him, promise him positive media attention in return for his name, a few occasional appearances. Instead, I wanted to know why he craved privacy, why his eyes were haunted.

"Same." Reid's eyes never left mine as the waitress turned to leave. "Do you want something?"

I swallowed to cover the dryness in my throat. Suddenly, I wanted something else like his calloused hands on my skin, his lips on my neck. "Why do I have to want something?"

He flipped his hand in the air. "They all do."

Guilt seeped through my skin, making me itchy and uncomfortable. He cut to the chase. I would too. "I was hoping to meet a professional athlete who could help me with Kids Speak."

“Why?” His elbows rested on the table, his chin in his hands.

I couldn't get a read on whether he was merely being polite or he was genuinely interested. “I work with the organization that hosted the silent auction for the blind date—Kids Speak. The founder, Hadley Winter, created the organization to help kids like her brother, Colin, who had a stutter growing up.”

“Colin is a college baseball player. It was his idea to have athletes work with the kids. The program has been successful in New Orleans. We want to expand into Annapolis. It takes a lot of money to run a nonprofit. We're hoping the association with professional athletes will bring more awareness, more funds.”

“You want money.” He tilted his head as if he'd figured me out. He wasn't disappointed. It was like he was confirming his suspicions.

I flushed, not used to someone being so blunt. “No. We'd like athletes to mentor the kids, meet with them after school, talk to them, maybe throw a football. Some of these kids are embarrassed by their speech. They have low self-esteem. We're hoping to build their confidence.”

He cringed before he caught himself, smoothing his expression. “You said it's been successful?”

“We do everything in our power to get them the services they need to minimize if not eliminate their speech impairment. Then we build their confidence through sports. Colin identifies with him because he had a speech impediment. One of his mentees is on the debate team now.”

“Ready to order?” The waitress stood next to the table, a pen and pad ready.

I sighed, frustrated at the interruption. I hadn't had a chance to look at the menu during our conversation. I quickly scanned it.

After placing our orders, Reid considering me, the silence deafening.

I resisted my natural instinct to fill the space with small talk.

“Tell me something about you.” His tone was soft.

I’d hoped to pick up where we’d left off, maybe giving me an idea of his thoughts on Kids Speak. “I grew up close to Annapolis. I went to a private school, then college and law school locally.”

He arched his brow.

I was used to the respect I received when I mentioned my profession. I was proudest of my charity work. “I recently opened a general practice law firm with three friends.”

“That’s—” he paused, “commendable for someone—so young.”

“Thank you.”

“What you do is impressive.” I’d researched everything I could on him. The only thing available was his football success. Little was mentioned about his family. My parents were intensely private outside of their business and charity functions. It made me wonder if Reid was in a similar situation.

His eyes narrowed. “I don’t want anything we discuss to end up on social media.”

“I know you don’t trust me, but I have no intention of telling anyone what you’ve told me.”

The waitress set our plates in front of us asking whether we needed anything else. When I shook my head, she left.

He cut his steak, putting a large piece in his mouth. Was that to avoid conversation or was I being paranoid? Maybe it was a mistake to orchestrate this dinner. I was at a loss as to what to say now that he’d shut down any conversation about him.

We ate in silence for a few minutes while I contemplated the best course of action.

After a few minutes, he said, “A few guys on the team might want to help you.”

I put my fork down, keeping my gaze down so he wouldn't see my disappointment that he wasn't volunteering to help. It shouldn't matter if I got a connection to the football team. “Are you serious?”

“I'd like to look into it more, maybe talk to—”

“Hadley? That can be arranged.”

He nodded.

“I'm happy to answer any questions you have.” I wanted to tell him why the organization was personal, but my mom was adamant I not tell anyone about her situation.

“You have my assistant Callie's cell. She'll help you.”

My heart pinched. Something about this evening, the depth of his eyes, the careful way he spoke wrapped around my heart. Now he was distancing himself. I couldn't blame him. I'd come here to ask for help and he was offering it.

Reid finished his food, pushing his plate slightly back. “Did you get what you needed?”

I studied his handsome face. He was forced to be here because of his front office. I'd detected something else the minute his eyes rested on mine, a flicker of interest in me as a woman before I'd ruined everything with what I needed from him.

If this was a real date, I'd talk about myself, ask him questions to show I was interested. But it wasn't. I'd bid for this time with him. The time, date, and location were set up through his assistant.

I'd gotten what I wanted. That was all that should matter. If there was something between us it was gone now, snuffed out with my request for help.

“Yes. Having a few players volunteer will be amazing for Kids Speak. It will solidify our position. Hopefully bringing in more money so we don't have to spend as much time fundraising. It will be amazing for the kids too. Instead of



being embarrassed by their speech, I hope they'll feel special that professional athletes would take time to meet with them. Thank you." I barely refrained from cringing at my professional-sounding speech.

He nodded, his face carefully stoic. "Good."

I should have taken a more personal angle.

I should have been happy but there was a hollow feeling in my chest. I wanted to reach my hand out to him, ask him to stay, tell him more about myself. I didn't.

He reached for the bill.

I opened my clutch. "I can pay. This was a business dinner."

He placed his credit card in the billfold, resting it at the end of the table. "No. I got it."

I wanted to argue with him, insist that I pay at least for my half. I didn't. I sensed it was a source of pride for him to pay for a woman's dinner. I liked it.

"Thank you for this evening. It was nice meeting you." I couldn't say it was nice to get to know him, because I didn't know him any better than the moment he walked in. A pang of regret shot through me that it was a missed opportunity to make a personal connection with him.

Everything I knew was contained in articles that revealed next to nothing about the man who was Reid Everson, where he came from, how he got here, what motivated him, why he was so private.

When the waitress returned his card, he signed it with a flourish, tucking his card in his wallet. He rose to leave.

"Nice meeting you, Dylan. Good luck with Kids Speak."

I rose from my seat. Any hope he would walk me outside so we'd have a few more minutes together vanished. He'd fulfilled his obligation, accepting my request to talk to the team. I'd probably never see him again. "Thank you so much. If you change your mind about volunteering with Kids Speak, let me know."

He nodded curtly.

I knew he wouldn't.

Then he left me standing next to the table. The usual surge of success when I landed an investor or crushed a meeting wasn't there. My stomach was hollow, my throat tight.

I grabbed my clutch, wound my way through the tables, out into the night. I imagined if we were on a date, we'd walk along the Baltimore Harbor in the evening, remarking on the stars in the sky, the beauty of the moon reflecting on the water. Instead, I headed to the valet stand, waited for my car, then drove home to Annapolis.

I couldn't wait to tell Avery and Hadley I was successful. Things were looking up for Kids Speak and our law firm. I pushed any thoughts of what would have happened had I never brought up Kids Speak. If I told him about my family, my life, would he have opened up to me? Would he have asked to see me again?

Unfortunately, I'd ruined any chance of that. If Reid Everson was interested in me as a woman, he wasn't anymore. I was one more person who used him for something he could provide.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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## REID

I DROVE THROUGH INNER HARBOR, THE TOURISTY AREA OF Baltimore, to get to my condo building in Harbor East, the trendy area younger players lived for its proximity to restaurants, bars, and nightlife. I greeted the security guard at the gate to the underground parking, taking the elevator to the twentieth floor to my three-bedroom condo. I dropped my keys in the dish on the table by the door, toeing out of my shoes.

I left the lights off to look at the view of the city lights reflected on the water. I sank into the deep leather cushions of my couch. Tonight, I'd expected to meet a woman who wanted to hook up with a player or a diehard fan who'd want an autograph. Nothing prepared me for Dylan Gannon. Her honey-colored hair fell in waves down her back, the red gown wrapped tightly around her curves, emphasizing her breasts. I'd felt drawn to her as if there was an invisible line pulling me to her.

Sitting across from her, my skin hot under my collar, my heart beat rapidly in my chest, I couldn't remember the last time I'd gone out on a date with a woman.

She made me nervous, making it harder to avoid words with *r* in them. I'd cleared my throat when I realized I'd used the word *you're* and dropped my voice on the word *chaser*. Thankfully, she'd snorted, her embarrassment taking the heat off of me. Being around someone like her, someone I was attracted to, made a slipup more likely.

When she admitted she wanted to discuss her nonprofit I was almost relieved. She didn't want me. She wasn't a threat to my solitary existence. I could help her. Lena and Callie would be pleased.

During our discussion, I resisted the urge to tell her more about myself. As beautiful as she was, as intent on me as she seemed, it was because she wanted what I could do for her. She didn't want Reid Everson, the man.

I'd pass her information onto the team, forgetting about Dylan Gannon. She'd admitted she didn't chase men. She didn't need to. She was magnetic, the kind of person you wanted to stand near to feel the warmth of her gaze, the sound of her laughter, and maybe if I was lucky, her hand on my arm.

Given the way she held herself, she was the kind of woman who cared about appearances, who probably thrived on the limelight.

Since my dad left, my goal was to protect my family, to earn enough money so that we'd never have to worry again. Being in the league for a few years, I'd made enough money to secure my future. I'd shifted my expectations this year to renewing my contract with Baltimore, solidifying myself as a franchise player.

My phone lit up with a call from Callie.

I hit answer. "Hey."

"You're home already?" She sounded surprised.

"You must have thought I would be, or you wouldn't be calling."

Callie sighed. "I hoped you'd like her."

I scoffed. "You thought I'd like a woman who won a date with a player? She could have been a crazed fan."

Callie was quiet for a few seconds. "She wasn't, was she?"

Her tone was knowing as if she had some idea who Dylan was. "Am I missing something?"

Not answering my question, she said, "How did it go?"

I should have said Dylan was a fan so Callie would let this go. “She wants us to support her nonprofit, Kids Speak. They provide speech services to kids in schools.”

“She mentioned that to me.” Callie’s tone was cautious as if she was worried about my reaction.

“You didn’t think to warn me?” She knew I liked to be prepared as much as possible when I went into a publicity event or a press conference.

“I didn’t think I’d need to. It’s a great cause. I thought you’d be interested.”

Dylan was so earnest, passionate about it, I couldn’t help being mesmerized when she spoke about Kids Speak, her hands flying in time with her words. As much as I admired what she was trying to do, it probably wasn’t a good idea for me to be involved. “I told her I was sure a few other players would be interested.”

“You should do it.” Callie’s response was immediate.

Irritation shot through me. “You know I don’t want people to know.”

Callie knew because she was around me all the time. I tried to watch what I said, but I slipped a few times. She’d finally asked me about it. Coming clean with her wasn’t as awful as I thought it would be. She’d been nothing but supportive.

It was nice letting my guard down around someone else besides my family.

“Why would it be so bad? I think people would sympathize with you. Remember that basketball player, what was his name?” I couldn’t see Callie through the phone but I could see her as if she was standing next to me, her hands on her hips. “It’ll come to me. He came out, saying he had severe anxiety before games. Not even his teammates knew about it. Everyone was surprised because he was so good at hiding it.”

“Kevin Love.” I was aware he’d come out a couple of years ago. Everyone was shocked, including me. I kept waiting for the fall out. It never came.

I heard the snap of her fingers through the phone.

“Yes. Kevin Love. That’s who I was thinking of. Let me see what he said, hold on.” Her voice trailed off as if she’d pulled the phone away from her mouth to look at it.

I waited while she scrolled, knowing I wasn’t going to like what he had to say.

“Nothing haunts you like the things you don’t say.”

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. I rubbed my hand over the spot, squeezing it. I was haunted by many things surrounding my speech. The worst was what I had said, not what I hadn’t.

“Why can’t you be straight with your fans?” Callie’s voice was quiet.

“You know why. I don’t want to be one of those players who makes the news more for his personal life than his work on the field.”

“That wouldn’t happen. I know it’s a big deal to you. I don’t think other people will think anything of it. They might even think it’s cool you’re coming out about it, trying to help other people.”

What she was saying sounded reasonable, but I couldn’t take that risk. “You know what happened in college. I’d get nervous during press conferences, screwing up some words. People said I was drunk or on drugs. They won’t believe it’s a speech impediment. If they do believe it, they’ll want to know why I wasn’t treated for it.”

“Why weren’t you?” Her question was gentle, sympathetic, not accusatory, not like how trolls online would be.

Usually, I shut her down before she could ask this question. Memories of my dad yelling came back to me, fast and furious. His words. The shame that came with them. *What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you stupid? You sound like a baby.* “My dad was hard on me. My mom was afraid to seek help because he didn’t think it was a speech problem. When he left us, she’d tried to get services. Apparently, I didn’t qualify

through the county or school. She couldn't afford private therapy. I didn't want her to feel bad, so I avoided saying *r's* around her."

"You had to be strong."

"Yes." I still had to be strong, putting on a front, not letting anyone in.

"Which is why Kids Speak is perfect for you."

I was stunned by her reaction. She'd always been supportive in the past, deflecting interviews and questions from fans. Why was she pushing this?

"You know the front office wants you doing more publicity. If they find out, they'll encourage you to do it. What exactly does Dylan want you to do?"

If I wanted to keep my position as captain, solidify my position as a leader on the team, I'd have to cooperate with Dylan if Lena mandated my involvement. "Dylan wants a few players to meet with the kids, talk to them, play ball, be a mentor."

"So, you wouldn't even have to mention your speech impediment if you don't want to. I don't see how it's going to be a problem."

"Maybe." Hiding a speech impediment around trained therapists wasn't going to be easy for me. The other question was, did I have time to volunteer? I dedicated my time to training, practice, watching film, and rest.

How would my life have been different if I'd had a mentor as a child? Someone who would have said *I've been in your shoes*. What could I say to them? It gets better, even if it hadn't for me. I was working most guy's dream job, but I still watched every word that came out of my mouth. Would it be too hard for me to be around kids who had similar issues?

Callie repeating Kevin Love's words reverberated in my head: *Nothing haunts you like the things you don't say*. Was the same thing true for me? Was there a possibility I could help other kids in a similar situation, embarrassed that every word



they speak would be picked apart and made fun of? How could I encourage them to get help if I never had?

If I agreed to help Dylan, I'd have to see her again. Her beautiful smile, the hope in her eyes.

For some inexplicable reason, I needed her to want *my* help when any football player would do. I was excited at the prospect of seeing her again.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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## DYLAN

I SLIPPED ON MY HEELS TO VISIT MY PARENTS' HOME ON Sunday morning. They expected a certain dress code for brunch.

I reread the text Reid Everson's assistant, Callie Goodwin, sent to me after I'd gone to sleep last night.

**Callie: I want to set up a meeting with a few other players to get more information about your program.**

Relief and hope soared through me in equal measure. Was Reid Everson one of the interested players? My fingers twitched with the desire to type the question. I didn't.

I sipped my coffee before typing a response. **That would be amazing. Thank you so much.**

**Callie: I see you're based in Annapolis. I can have them meet you at the Annapolis Yacht Club on Friday for drinks.**

**That's perfect.**

Excitement surged through me. I grabbed my clutch, walking out the side door to the tiny parking pad next to my historic home.

It was finally happening. Ever since Hadley moved here from New Orleans, Avery and I vowed to support her endeavor to expand her program into Annapolis, using the firm's name to support her.

I had a knack for fundraising, organizing, getting people to champion a cause. Not only that, I loved speaking to potential

investors.

I parked in the driveway of my parents' deceptively modest home. I looked forward to seeing them every week. At the same time, I was on edge, worried Mom's symptoms had worsened. I opened the door, calling out to my parents.

"We're on the porch," Mom called back.

I walked through the kitchen, down the hall, to the sunroom they'd added on after I'd moved out. Mom rose, her gray hair dyed brown, her makeup carefully applied, dressed in a sweater set and slacks. I hugged her before taking in the floor to ceiling windows with spectacular views of the bay. A large white deck and an expanse of green grass stood between the house and the water. "Even though I grew up here, I can't get enough of this view."

It was especially calming after meeting with Reid last night. I needed to think of it as a business meeting. Otherwise, I'd reminisce about how handsome he looked, how my heart fluttered when he spoke, how I wanted to know more about him.

"Sometimes when you grow up with something you take it for granted."

She poured tea into a cup, her hands steady. The lines around her eyes and mouth indicated she was fatigued, a common sign of MS between relapses. I didn't ask how she was sleeping because she was always tired no matter how many hours she logged.

"Where's Dad?" I sat next to her, subtly taking in her movements. I was relieved her symptoms didn't appear to be worse than last week, but the fear was always there, simmering under the surface.

She worried so much about possible relapses that we weren't always sure if she was experiencing symptoms or she was being paranoid. After she was diagnosed, she researched every possible symptom, the trajectory of her disease continuing, and searched for new developments. She questioned her doctors to the point where I felt bad for them. I

finally talked to one of the hospital's social workers when I was an adult. She said Mom liked the illusion of control over the uncertain disease. It helped me understand where she was coming from, not how to deal with her. The social worker recommended she go to a therapist. I'd never been able to get her to go.

When she was first diagnosed, she went on with life as usual. She wanted to plan an annual charity event. She didn't seem to know how to go about it. Her doctor said part of the illness was difficulty planning and problem solving. I helped her as much as I could, letting her think she was in control. Thankfully, she was able to attend that event when it was scheduled.

Dad and I compared notes often to make sure she wasn't taking on too much.

When she didn't respond, I touched her hand. "Mom, where's Dad?"

"He's making some calls. He'll be down in a minute." Her voice was smooth, not wavering like it sometimes did when she was having an episode. Her difficulties with her speech made Kids Speak that much more important to me.

Her lips tilted into a smile. "How did your date with the football player go last evening?"

I barely restrained an eye roll at her depiction. "It wasn't a date."

"It wasn't? I thought you said you won a date with a football player?"

"I bid on a date. I wanted to see if he'd be interested in volunteering with Kids Speak. It was more of a business opportunity." That's what I told myself anyway.

"Oh." Her shoulders sagged as if she was disappointed.

I was surprised she seemed disappointed. Usually, my parents discouraged any serious relationships because it took time away from how much I could help them. My last boyfriend, Pierce, hadn't liked when I dropped whatever I was doing with him to help my parents.

“He thinks several of the players will be interested in helping. We’re meeting with them on Friday night.”

“That’s great, dear. I hope it works out.” She smiled, though it seemed hollow as if she’d hoped for a different answer.

Dad walked in wearing a suit. Though he was older he was still fit from playing tennis with his friends. “Oh good, you’re here.”

I smiled at our weekly joke, rising to kiss his cheek. “I’m here every Sunday, Dad.”

The housekeeper, Darlene, walked in. “Brunch is ready.”

Officially, Darlene helped around the home, cleaning, cooking, and gardening. She served the dual purpose of keeping an eye on Mom when Dad worked. She’d been working for them for a year now.

“How’s the law firm doing?” Dad asked as we walked into the dining room where brunch was already spread out.

“It’s great. Our affiliation with Kids Speak is bringing in a lot of education cases. We represent parents who are trying to get services, or parents who want us to help them force schools to comply with existing individualized education plans. I had no idea it was such a needed area.”

Dad sat at the head of the table. “It’s always nice when your charity work benefits the business.”

“She’s raising funds for Morrison Rebuilds too, the nonprofit that remodels homes, making them handicapped accessible,” Mom said.

Dad wanted my firm to be a success. He saw the importance of involvement in the community. Although work, the ability to earn an income, was the most important since he’d grown up poor.

“Are you sure you have time for that?” Dad smoothed a cloth napkin over his lap as Darlene poured coffee in his mug.

His insinuation was subtle, he didn’t like anything that detracted from my ability to help Mom.

Dad's reminder reinforced the guilt that never went away that I should always be available in case she needed me.

"I do. Like I said, the work I'm doing with the nonprofits has brought in a lot of clients. It was an unexpected side effect." One I was incredibly proud of. It allowed me to pursue my passion for helping others while building our client list at the firm, making it a success.

Dad considered me. "You're good at bringing in clients."

Warmth spread through me at his words. "I'm good with people."

"Just like your father." Mom smiled at Dad.

"I was lucky enough to inherit both of your best qualities." I took a sip of water, hoping my words were enough to keep the peace. As an only child, they liked to boast of my accomplishments, taking credit for the origin. It was sweet. Sometimes it caused strife between them I liked to avoid.

"Well said, darling." Mom tipped her head in my direction.

Love for them simmered in my chest.

"If you need anything at all, let me know. I'm happy to help," Dad said.

He owned several different businesses in the area. He was active in local politics and rotary clubs. One thing he wasn't adept at handling was Mom's diagnosis and her reaction to it.

"Thanks, Dad." We were quiet for a few minutes, eating the waffles, fruit, bacon, and sausage Darlene made for us. It was delicious. When I finished, I slid back from the table, my belly full.

"I'm proud of you for working so hard. Your firm will be a success if you keep focused on that and family of course."

I sighed. He mentioned the same thing every week.

We chitchatted for a few more minutes while Darlene cleared our plates. Then Mom said she wanted to sit outside to enjoy the breeze. I joined her, enjoying the quiet, the sounds of

the birds flying over the water. When she mentioned taking a nap, I kissed her goodbye.

Dad walked me to the car which was out of character for him. Usually, we emailed to compare notes on any interactions we'd had with Mom that week. Was she experiencing any symptoms or was it merely her anxiety when she said she had pain, double vision, or trouble remembering something she needed to do?

Dad's calm face fell the last few steps.

My stomach rolled. "What is it?"

As Mom aged, I expected the relapses to worsen until the inevitable happened, she'd lose her ability to walk, her independence. The constant anxiety and unpredictability made the mental stress almost as bad as the physical.

Dad's shoulders hunched. "I have a feeling we're in for a bad relapse. It's been too long since the last one."

His words somewhat relieved me. He hadn't mentioned any physical reasons for his concerns, only paranoia. His fear was reasonable but I didn't want him consumed with worry.

"You can't think like that Dad. You have to be positive."

"I know. It's just your mother's anxiety is worse lately."

"Have you seen any physical weakness? Anything she used to be able to do that she struggles with now?"

"No. Nothing new."

My shoulders sagged in relief. "Has Darlene said anything?"

"No. She's become a good companion for her."

I laughed despite my frustration. "I'm glad Mom found a friend."

Mom had plenty of friends. The fact she never told them about the MS told me they were more acquaintances than true friends. They interacted with her when there was a charity event. They didn't socialize with her otherwise.



I said goodbye to my dad, promising to drive carefully.

Driving home, my focus on the road, my fingers tightened around the steering wheel. Mom was diagnosed at a time when I should have been ecstatic about homecoming, prom, graduation, and college. Instead, I was researching symptoms, quizzing Dad on each doctor visit. The ups and downs of the various tests finally gave way to a tentative diagnosis. Knowing was a relief. The way the doctor laid out her life was overwhelming in its unpredictability.

Over time, it became more manageable. My parents' palpable fear of a severe relapse kept me on edge. Growing up, they were the ones reassuring me. Mom's diagnosis changed everything. I had to be strong for them.

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# CHAPTER SIX

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## REID

CALLIE DISCUSSED DYLAN'S IDEA WITH LENA. THE PLAN WAS to send a few interested players to meet with Dylan. When Jonah and Chase said they'd go, I figured the matter was closed for me. I could go back to focusing on what I loved, football. I was relieved yet at the same time strangely disappointed.

After practice on Tuesday, Coach Ackerman pulled me into his office. "Lena needs to see you."

"What does she want?" I shouldered my bag.

He waved a hand at me. "Something about a new nonprofit we might support. Speak Kids or something."

I stilled. "Kids Speak? I thought Jonah and Chase wanted to help?"

Coach Ackerman sat back in his chair. "You need to get your name out there more, be involved with the community. It's what's expected of a captain. The more the fans identify with you, the more jerseys you sell, the better contract you get, the more endorsements you're offered. Tight ends are a hot commodity these days. This will be good for you."

Of anyone on the team, I worried he knew something was up with my speech. I rarely spoke more than a few words at a time to my teammates. With him, I'd had long discussions regarding players, games, strategies over the years. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"I don't have to remind you that we're a team. We do what's best for the team, regardless of personal feelings."

Over the years, I'd considered telling him about my speech issues. I didn't want him to look at me differently. He was the closest thing to a father figure I'd had. I smoothed my face, so it was blank. "Yes, Coach."

He gestured for the door, dismissing me. "Head on up to her office. She's waiting for you."

I sighed, gathering my things from the locker room before meeting Lena. It was after office hours, so her assistant wasn't at her desk. I knocked on her slightly ajar door.

"Come in," Lena called.

I pushed the door open the rest of the way as she looked up from her computer. Her sleek chin-length black hair cut in a sharp line, the dark color a contrast to her blue eyes. She always looked well dressed and put together.

She gestured at the chair across from her. "Oh good, it's you. Have a seat."

"I brought you in to talk about Kids Speak. I have to say I'm excited about the program."

I'd researched it after I talked to Callie on Saturday night. Kids Speak was successful in New Orleans. They hadn't gained traction in Maryland. The most recent article mentioned start-up business owner, Griffin Locke, investing. From what Dylan said, they needed more than an investor, she needed a name behind the organization.

I admired Dylan's grit and determination. She knew what she wanted, not hesitating to go after it. She wasn't cowed by my fame or my unwelcoming demeanor. She was charismatic, maybe even accustomed to getting what she wanted. For some reason, I didn't want to be one more person falling for her charms, even if she made my cock twitch.

"Why do you need me?"

Lena shifted away from her screen to face me. "You seem to have a rapport with Ms. Gannon. I need you to convince her to expand into Baltimore. I think what they're doing is great, but I don't want you guys traveling an hour to Annapolis

during the season. The kids in the city could benefit from the same program.”

I settled back in the chair. “Wouldn’t expanding into Baltimore be too much?”

Lena’s smile widened. “If she agrees, the team’s on board with whatever players or money she needs. We represent Baltimore, we have a strong tie with schools in the city, Lincoln would like to see the program here.”

I leaned forward, bracing my elbows on my knees, my muscles tensed. “Why would they want to do that?”

A co-sponsorship of the program. It wasn’t unheard of even though a new partnership hadn’t happened in a while.

“In New Orleans, Kids Speak was successful on its own. When the college baseball team became involved it garnered national attention.” Lena leaned her elbows on the desk, folding her hands together, her gaze focused on me. “This pairing will be advantageous not only for the team, but for the city and Kids Speak. You know how important education is to Lincoln.”

Lena fell silent for a few seconds, searching my face for a reaction. “We’re always looking for ways to give back to the community.” She paused as if for maximum effect. “You have to admit, Dylan Gannon has balls bidding on a silent auction to meet a player to pitch her program. What was your impression of her?”

“She was intelligent and passionate when she talked about Kids Speak.” She was also beautiful and magnanimous. The kind of woman I steered clear of because their very presence attracted attention.

Lena sighed. “I don’t understand why you’re reluctant to do this. It’s for a good cause. You were obviously impressed with this woman.”

My head ached. I had to tell her something close to the truth to get her to back off. “I don’t think I’ll be able to convince Dylan to move Kids Speak to the city.”

“You must have given her some reason to think you’d be amenable to working with her organization. Otherwise, why bring it up?”

“She needed a connection to the team. It would have been the same if she’d gone out with Chase or Jonah that night.”

“Are you sure about that? You’ve already met with her. You know her the best.”

Her question had me thinking about whether Dylan would have had a connection with one of those guys instead. If she had, they would have readily agreed to help her. Chase or Jonah would be in my seat agreeing to work with her. Would something have happened between them? I didn’t like the thought.

I was delaying the inevitable. If Lena wanted the team to partner with Kids Speak, we would. My contract dictated my participation, my role as captain demanded it.

Lena’s always present confident smile slid off her face. “Reid. You’re a captain on this team—”

“I’ll do it.” I was ready to be done with this conversation.

Lena nodded once before smiling. “Good. I’m glad to hear it.”

“I have one stipulation.”

Lena raised her brow.

“I don’t want to be a spokesman. I’m not smooth like Jonah or Chase.”

I hated the weakness in my voice. I was so confident about football, my ability to catch a ball, block a player, contribute to the team, in any way except for this.

“I don’t think that’s necessary. From what I understand, you’ll mentor kids with speech disorders, giving them confidence and hope.” Her eyes shined with excitement. When she predicted something would be a success, she was usually right.

She made things sound doable. How could I say no, even if the thought of being in a room with Dylan made me sweat?

“You need to convince Ms. Gannon to expand into Baltimore. If not, we won’t partner with Kids Speak. It’s nonnegotiable. Callie scheduled a meeting with everyone at the Annapolis Yacht Club on Friday. I already spoke with Jonah and Chase. I want you there, too.”

I ground my teeth together. Why would Callie have said that? What did I tell her that would indicate I had some pull with Dylan? “I’ll do anything to help the team.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” Lena smiled before turning her attention back to her computer.

I headed home, trepidation for this joint venture setting in.

I couldn’t get Dylan’s face out of my mind when she was talking about Kids Speak. She had a way with words. I was caught up in the moment, hanging on to every word that fell from her red lips. In that moment, I wanted to help her. I wanted to do whatever she asked.

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# CHAPTER SEVEN

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## REID

RIDING WITH CHASE AND JONAH TO THE MEETING WITH THE other owners of Kids Speak was a welcome distraction. If I was alone, I'd fixate on what to say.

I couldn't argue with my father's assessment that the way I spoke affected people's opinions of me. If it altered my father's impression of my intelligence, what would strangers think? Online trolls were quick to strike down a perceived weakness of an athlete or celebrity.

"You ready for everything your title of captain entails? More responsibility? More interviews?" Chase turned his face to me briefly before turning his attention to the road again. The three of us were team captains this year. Chase as the starting quarterback and Jonah as a wide receiver were veterans in this position. They were used to this leadership position, seemingly taking on all responsibilities in stride.

Chase knew me better than anyone else on the team. He knew I was apprehensive about taking this position even though I wanted it badly.

"As much as I can be." Which was to say not at all. As proud as I was to be a captain, a leader on the team, it hadn't escaped my notice that it was tough to be a leader when you were afraid to speak, afraid of the inevitable judgment.

"This is the fun stuff." Jonah leaned forward in his seat to talk to us in the front. "Speaking to beautiful women about what they need from us..."

I twisted my neck to see his face in the dim back seat. “How do you know?”

“Lena showed me the picture of the women at a fundraiser—a red head, a brunette, and a blonde.”

“I have to say I’m partial to the blonde. There was something about her,” Chase added.

“They might not be single.” My lips pressed into a tight line, knowing what he was referring to. Her vivacious personality came out through a photograph. Unease unfurled in my stomach.

What would I do if Jonah or even Chase was interested in her tonight? I had no intention of making a move on her. I didn’t want them to either.

“I only need one.” Jonah leaned back in his seat, comfortable and relaxed.

Jonah was focused on the field, easygoing off. Would he be more Dylan’s type or did she take chances on guys who were quieter?

“You already met with one of the women, didn’t you? What was your impression?” Chase asked.

I shifted on the leather seat. “I met Dylan Gannon. All I know is that she won the blind date in Kids Speak’s silent auction to pitch to us.”

“Gutsy. I like it.” Jonah’s voice was full of admiration.

“She could be manipulating the situation.” I couldn’t ignore the fact that people usually wanted things from us, whether it was attention, time, or money. Dylan wanted to be associated with the team, not me. I was a means to an end. It was disappointing because there was a moment when we met when I thought there might be something between us.

Chase glanced at me briefly before turning his attention back to the road. “That’s harsh. She owns a nonprofit. She’s not some groupie you met at a club.”

She wasn’t. At least not from what I was able to glean online. Her family was involved in the community. Her father

owned several local businesses. Her mother was head of various local committees, helping the disabled, sick, and needy. Her family appeared to be kindhearted. Was it because they were nice people or was it to further their businesses?

Had Dylan learned that particular skill from them? Dylan and her partners were trying to start a new law firm too. If the firm was affiliated with a professional football team, it could help her get more clients. Was that her goal or was she solely focused on Kids Speak?

Chase pulled in front of a brick building with an awning over the entrance, the words Annapolis Yacht Club etched on it. The valet opened my door. The breeze smelled like the bay. My nerves kicked in as soon as I stepped out of Chase's car. Despite my misgivings, I was excited to see her again. I wanted to see if that chemistry I'd felt when we shook hands was still there.

"Ah. I love Annapolis. Wish I made it out here more often." Jonah moved to stand next to me as we waited for Chase to round the hood, nodding to the valet.

"Ready to go in?" Chase stuffed his hands in his pockets.

Jonah took a step toward the door. "Let's go. I'm dying for a drink"

It was our bye week, so we had the weekend off. We could drink if we wanted to. But I needed to keep a clear head. Alcohol made my brain less sharp, my speech issues more noticeable.

We walked inside, heading toward the bar where Callie said we'd meet the women. After a quick scan of the room, I noticed her.

I tried and failed to ignore the way Dylan slowly turned, taking us in. Her black cocktail dress clung to every curve, her hair fell in thick waves over her shoulders. Dylan's gaze paused on me, her lips tilted up into a knowing smile as if she knew a secret. One I desperately wanted to discover.

Chase held his hand out to Hadley, then Dylan. "Chase Crawford. It's so nice to meet you."

Dylan turned her attention to Chase, her smile widening as she greeted him.

Dylan shook my hand last. When our fingers met, a slow buzz started in my ears, making it difficult to remember what I'd planned to say.

Her words came to me as if from far away. "It's so nice to see you again, Reid."

I nodded, my face growing warm. I sensed Jonah and Chase watching our interaction.

"Would you like a drink?" Hadley asked.

"I'll order." Chase stepped up to the bar.

I needed something to occupy my hands so that I didn't reach out to touch Dylan, seeing if her skin was as soft as it looked.

When we had our drinks, Chase said, "Whatever Dylan said to Reid must have impressed him enough to forward your information to the front office. Tell us what we can do for you."

I was grateful he took the lead. It not only saved me from speaking, it allowed me to observe Dylan. When she turned slightly to face Chase, I noticed her dress dipped low in the back. My fingers itched to caress her bare skin.

I ripped my eyes from Dylan as Hadley launched into her plans for Kids Speak. She spoke with the same confidence Dylan had. I was a little surprised Dylan didn't take the lead as the group's self-proclaimed public relations representative. But it made sense to hear from the creator first.

Jonah took a long sip of his beer, considering her over his bottle. When he lowered it to his side, he said, "That sounds great but don't kids already have assistance through school, like an IEP?"

My eyes snapped to Jonah, surprised he knew what an IEP was.

Hadley's smile was knowing. "It sounds like you know something about education. Our program is after school. We're

not confined by the limitations of an IEP. We don't place limits on how far behind you have to be to obtain help."

Jonah nodded. "I had an IEP for dyslexia. My mother was an expert at getting the services I needed from the school. Obviously, I turned out fine, graduated from college, played ball. It didn't hold me back."

I didn't know that Jonah struggled with any aspect of schooling. He was always so sure of himself, confident.

"That's the thing. Not everyone qualifies for services. In Maryland, if you're less than twenty-five percent delayed you won't. If you can't afford private assistance, there might not be any help for you."

"So, you help the people who aren't already getting services?" Jonah asked as if for clarification.

"Sometimes parents are unhappy with the services the schools are supplying. Not every school has a full-time speech language pathologist. It's not consistent enough to encourage improvement. We supplement on a case-by-case basis. Our priority is for the kids who fall short of qualifying."

I loved that they were helping kids who wouldn't get it otherwise. The kids who fell through the cracks. If this had been offered in my school, would I have gotten the help I needed? "How do you..." I thought carefully about my words, "identify each child if they haven't been tested?"

I wanted to ask if they didn't have parents that advocated on their behalf. Instead, I fell silent knowing I couldn't say the word *parents* without faltering. When I was nervous or people's attention was on me, my impediment was worse. The more time I spent with Dylan the more nervous I was in her presence, exponentially increasing my odds of slipping up.

Hadley exchanged a look with Dylan I couldn't decipher. "That's the hard part. We work closely with the schools to identify those who need help but don't qualify for more robust services. But there are kids who might not have parents advocating on their behalf. We haven't figured out a way to reach each child yet. We're open to any suggestions."

Her implication was clear. She wanted to know if I had any idea how to reach those kids. I couldn't say anything without revealing my history. I wasn't prepared to do that now or ever if I could help it.

Jonah jumped in, saving me from responding. "I come from the perspective of parents fighting to get what their kid needed. I can see how some kids wouldn't have that."

"Oh good. Avery's here," Hadley said, nodding toward a petite brunette making her way to us.

"Avery handles most of the behind-the-scenes organizational things, fundraisers, money, the silent auction," Hadley said.

Dylan tipped her head toward Avery. "She's the one who procured the last investor."

"I thought you brought in the investors?" I quickly lifted my beer bottle to my mouth to cover the *r* which came out sounding more like a *w*. Hopefully, no one noticed.

Hadley smiled at her. "Avery had a way with this particular investor."

Avery shifted on her feet, her eyes shifting away from us.

It made me think there was a story between whoever this investor was and her.

"Avery Arrington, nice to meet you. Sorry I was late."

Dylan touched her arm. "You weren't. We were early."

Dylan turned her attention to us. "I'm excited that you're interested in being involved with Kids Speak. I don't have to tell you how much it will mean to these kids that you took time out of your busy schedules to meet with them."

I was ashamed I was more worried about what volunteering meant for me, not the kids.

Chase leaned against the bar. "We enjoy meeting kids in the community but we're in season right now. There might be scheduling issues."

“Of course. We’ve thought about that. We’d definitely work around your schedule.” Dylan smiled at me.

When she smiled it did something to my insides, something I wasn’t ready to acknowledge. It made me wonder if she’d been researching me, or even watched our game last Sunday. The prospect excited me.

Lena wanted me to convince her to expand their program into Baltimore. I didn’t want them to get excited about a possible partnership if the location wasn’t something they’d be interested in. “The team’s involvement comes with one stipulation. They want you to expand into the city.”

Hadley’s eyes widened. “Are you serious? We hadn’t planned on opening a new location so quickly. We wanted to solidify our position in Annapolis first.”

“If you expand into the city, the team will back you financially to make it feasible.” I’d practiced this at home, so I knew the words I could use without any issues. The key to this was to make it sound relaxed, not rehearsed. I wasn’t sure I was successful. My words sounded stilted.

Hadley’s brow furrowed.

“It will be easier for us to meet with kids closer to home,” Jonah said.

“Obviously, you should discuss it more with Lena Vickers. She’s the head of marketing,” Chase said.

“She wanted me to let you know the team’s position. You don’t have to make a decision now.”

“This is an amazing opportunity,” Avery said carefully as if she was mulling over the new development.

Hadley’s face fell. “Would you be able to work with the other kids off-season? I hate that the kids in Annapolis would miss out.”

If Hadley wasn’t interested in moving Kids Speak to Baltimore, I wouldn’t have another reason to see Dylan. Seeing her again solidified that I hadn’t been wrong, there was

an attraction there. Whether it was one-sided remained to be seen.

“I don’t see why not.” The words were out of my mouth before I could censor myself.

Dylan looked at me, a mixture of surprise and respect on her face.

I preferred her admiration as opposed to her disappointment when I told her I didn’t want to volunteer at our first meeting.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to volunteer at all until I listened to Jonah and Hadley speak about how much it would mean to the kids. It was their reluctance to take Baltimore’s money if it meant the Annapolis kids missed out. It was admirable they wouldn’t compromise their program or the kids for a promise of money.

“I think we can manage that. Other players might be interested as well. Maybe we could do a little clinic for them.” Chase rubbed his chin, thinking of other options.

I was proud to be part of a team that wanted to help kids. I was excited about teaching football, something I was confident I could do.

“That would be amazing. Let me know what you’re thinking, we can work on it together.” Dylan addressed Chase, which I didn’t like.

Panic filled me that Chase or Jonah would step up. Working together meant time alone. Dylan was seemingly immune to our fame. She was unique in our world. Another player would recognize it sooner rather than later.

I preferred she work with me. “I can take lead on that.”

Chase looked at me, his brow raised. “You can?”

“Yeah. I don’t like the idea of the Annapolis kids missing out.”

Chase seemed to accept that.



“Thank you guys, so much, for meeting with us. I really appreciate your enthusiasm. I think we should discuss it between ourselves before we make a decision,” Hadley said.

“Did you have any more questions for us?” Dylan asked.

I almost thought she didn’t want the evening to end, that she was angling for a way to lengthen our time together. I’d gone from dreading this meeting to wondering how I could see her again. Would I be her contact in Baltimore to set up the program? My heart rate picked up at the thought.

Jonah moved closer to Dylan and Hadley, asking questions about how the program worked in the schools, describing his own difficulties in school, feeling like he wasn’t smart because he didn’t learn the same way other kids did, the relief when he was finally diagnosed.

Chase shifted from his spot at the bar to me. “Dude. What was that about?”

“What do you mean?”

“You not wanting to volunteer, then jumping at the opportunity to work with Dylan?”

I shrugged. I had no defense for my actions. I hoped he didn’t notice my attraction to her.

He considered me before nodding toward Dylan. “You like her.”

“She’s beautiful, intelligent and motivated. Anyone would be lucky to have a shot with—” I wanted to say *her*. My face heated as the seconds ticked. I finally settled on, “Dylan.”

“You say that when *you’d* be lucky to have her.”

Chase had an uncanny ability to read between the lines. I turned my back to the women so they couldn’t hear what we were discussing. “I don’t want to date in season.”

That was the excuse I told the guys even though I didn’t date in general.

“I get that. If these women are single,” he nodded toward Hadley, Dylan, and Avery, “the other guys are going to snatch

them up. They're either not sports fans or unimpressed with our fame. They're classy and sophisticated.”

I chuckled without any humor.

“You better make a move before someone else does.” He gestured at Jonah.

I turned to find Jonah's hand landing lightly on Dylan's bare shoulder as they shared a laugh. Panic filled my chest. Chase was right. Not making a move was risky. Taking a step back was easier even if the thought of her being with someone else made me slightly ill.

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# CHAPTER EIGHT

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## DYLAN

WE MET SATURDAY MORNING FOR BRUNCH AT A LITTLE French restaurant in town. The heat of the wood-burning fireplace in the middle of the room warmed the room, making it cozy.

I was anxious to hear what Hadley and Avery thought of the location stipulation after having a chance to sleep on it. I thought it was as exciting as it was scary. Was it the right decision or were we moving too far away from our original mission?

“We can’t lose sight of what we’re trying to do. Help the kids here first. This is where the firm is based.” Hadley sipped her mimosa.

“I agree. We can’t discount that it’s an amazing opportunity.”

“One we might not get again.”

Hadley nodded. “I agree.”

“What do you think? This is your nonprofit.” Avery asked Hadley.

“I don’t think we can pass it up. Look how amazing it’s been for Colin’s team to be involved in New Orleans. The kids blossomed under their attention. It really helped with their self-esteem. They encouraged the kids to try out for sports, one kid tried out for the debate team, one kid even auditioned for the school play. Something that never would have happened without his mentorship.”

“I had no idea. That’s amazing.” My excitement picked up at all the possibilities of what we could do with Baltimore’s team backing us.

Avery’s nose scrunched. “We haven’t had any luck in securing a college or other professional connection in Maryland. This is it.”

“If we take it, what do we do about Annapolis? Do we table it, or do we open both at the same time?” Hadley asked.

“Is that even feasible with the firm being so new? Are we trying to do too much too soon?” Avery asked, ever practical.

I was the more impulsive one. “I think we do both. We have Baltimore’s backing financially. I get the impression they’ll do anything to help us. The momentum of that program should propel Annapolis, too.”

“Once word gets out that Baltimore players are involved, that they’ll be helping as mentors it will hopefully encourage more donations.” Hadley poked a fried potato with her fork.

“It will be easier to convince superintendents to give us a chance.” Some schools were wary of allowing an untested program in.

“That’s true,” Avery said carefully as if she was siphoning through the pros and cons in her head, putting them in their respective columns.

“I think we have to do this.” My intuition about these things was usually spot on. I attributed it to having to juggle my crazy schedule between work, court, the nonprofits, and my mother’s illness.

Hadley sighed. “I do too. I hope we’re not overextending ourselves.”

“I can take lead on Baltimore’s project.” I wanted more responsibility in Kids Speak. Between helping Hadley’s organization and her boyfriend, Cade’s, nonprofit, Morrison Rebuilds, I’d noticed I felt more passionate about the nonprofit work than my work at the firm. I wanted to explore my options, see if helping nonprofits was what I was supposed to be doing.

“Are you sure?” Hadley’s head tilted as she considered me.

“Positive.” I’d never been more positive about anything.

Avery smirked. “Is this about that date you had with Reid? He was quick to offer to help you out with the clinic.”

I swallowed. He was quick to offer to take the lead on it when he’d been so reluctant to do anything the first time we met. I was cautious to read too much into it even though my heart soared when he’d said *I’ll take lead on it*.

Hadley pointed her fork at me. “What was that about? He seemed conflicted last night.”

“I have no idea. He was adamant he wouldn’t be involved when I first brought it up. I’m not sure what changed his mind.” I sipped my coffee, the heat soothing me.

“Jonah was talking to you, touching your shoulder, laughing,” Hadley observed.

It was easy to talk to Jonah. He was open, talkative, amicable.

“I think Reid was jealous. He didn’t want to see Jonah or Chase stepping in to work with you.”

I rolled my eyes even though I secretly liked the idea of him noticing me, maybe even being jealous. “I don’t want someone to like me because another guy does.”

“Maybe he needed a little push.” Avery ate a bite of her eggs.

“I don’t want a guy who needs a push.” I was intrigued by him, his reluctance to be in the spotlight, even his reluctance to work with Kids Speak. There was a story there, one I desperately wanted to hear. It had nothing to do with him being the spokesman.

“It will be interesting to see how this plays out.” Hadley exchanged a look with Avery.

“I say we call on Monday to request a meeting with Lena,” I said.

Hadley touched her chin with her finger. “I don’t think we all need to go. We’re pretty busy the next few weeks in court.”

“I’ll do it. If I’m going to take lead on Baltimore, it only makes sense.”

“Are you sure?” Hadley asked.

I nodded, pushing my empty plate away. I was restless, excited for what this might mean for the organization, for me. It had been a long time since I focused on anything besides my mom’s illness, my dad’s anxiety. I was looking forward to the future, to seeing Reid again.

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## CHAPTER NINE

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## DYLAN

ON WEDNESDAY, I SMOOTHED THE SKIRT OF MY DRESS IN THE reception area of Baltimore's front office, trying to calm my nerves.

I crossed and uncrossed my legs on the black leather chairs. I tried to still my swinging foot.

The team's name hung on the wall behind the sleek reception desk. Large pictures of players in action lined the other walls. Glass doors stood between us and the conference room, with an impressive view of the downtown harbor area.

Everything hinged on this meeting going well. We didn't have any connections with any other teams, professional or otherwise. Anticipation flowed through my veins.

I needed to stand. I needed to move.

A woman walked out in a pencil skirt and silky button-down blouse, her sleek hair skimming her chin. "Dylan Gannon?"

I stood. "That's me."

"Let's go into the conference room, shall we?" Lena paused to shake my hand, inclining her head toward the glass doors to exit the waiting room.

I followed her through the doors. A large table surrounded by black leather chairs filled the room. The walls were covered in framed photos of players wearing a Baltimore jersey over suits, shaking the owner's hands.

“I’m so glad you could meet with me.” Lena sat at the head of the table.

“We’re intrigued by your offer.” I wanted to play it cool, not make it seem like we’d already made our decision.

“We like to partner with local nonprofits working in the community. The issue is you’re not based in Baltimore. Education is a priority for the owner, Lincoln Aldrich. We represent Baltimore first. We’re prepared to fund a branch of your program in the city. If you’re interested, we’d like to see your proposal for what it would take to open here.”

“Our business is in Annapolis. Our homes. Managing a branch in both places might be overreaching at the moment. We were hoping to get the Annapolis branch running before expanding further.” Hadley wanted me to stress our position, make sure Lena understood this was not our first choice.

“I can understand that. We’ll do whatever we can to ease that burden for you, whether it’s hiring staff or procuring players to help the Annapolis branch in the off-season. If it’s easier, you can manage the Annapolis office and someone else can manage the Baltimore office. We can vet people for you if that eases your burden. We have experience in the area with various nonprofits.”

“If we decide to take your offer, I’d be the one heading up the Baltimore branch.”

“It will mean working closely with the players,” Lena said. “The men you met with on Friday, the team captains, will take lead on this.”

Chase, Jonah, and Reid.

The idea of working closely with Reid sent a shiver of anticipation down my spine.

Excitement pumped harder through my body. What they were promising was huge, almost too good to be true.

“Working with nonprofits is in their contract. The captains are expected to do more than the other players. Anytime you need them to appear, let me know. I’ll run it by Coach. He has the final say on their schedules. It’s my job to get them there.”

I wondered if that was a big part of her job or if it was something she had to do often, cajole unwilling players to volunteer with groups they didn't want to be involved in. Remembering the look on Reid's face when I mentioned Kids Speak, it made me wonder if he was generally reluctant to participate. Something told me he was.

"You shouldn't have any issues with the players. Chase and Jonah love projects like yours. Reid is a little more reserved. I think this will be good for the team. If it's a success, we'll have you come out onto the field with the kids during a game to introduce the program."

A tingle of excitement shot through my body. We couldn't ask for better publicity than a nationally televised football game. This deal made me feel like I could tackle anything, a new law firm in Annapolis, the nonprofit in Baltimore, my mother's illness, whatever came my way.

It was like everything I'd worked for my entire life culminated in this moment. Graduating from law school, starting my own firm, nothing felt as good as this opportunity with Kids Speak.

"Thank you so much for meeting with me, Lena. I'll need to discuss it with my partners. We'll get back to you."

Lena stood, gathering her files. "Let me know if I can answer any questions. The owner is excited to move forward with this project. If we partner, he'll want to make an announcement soon."

"I understand the need for expediency. I'll get back to you by Friday."

"Perfect."

We shook hands. I parted ways with her outside the conference room, excited to discuss it with the girls. We'd planned to meet for lunch afterward.

I took the elevator down to the garage, heading toward my car.

A large SUV pulled into the spot next to my smaller sedan. When the man exited, walking past me, I drew up short.

“Reid?” He wore a black jacket over a black T-shirt, jeans, sneakers. His eyes were covered in aviators even in the parking garage. I’d recognize that set of shoulders anywhere.

My heart rate picked up.

He paused, taking a deep breath before pulling his glasses off.

His eyes were the same as the night we’d met at the yacht club, a mixture of uncertainty, possibly mistrust. “Dylan. What are you doing here?”

Then he coughed.

“Are you okay?” His face was red, whether from trying to catch his breath or embarrassment, I wasn’t sure.

He held a fist to his chest, trying to catch his breath. “Yeah, just need something to...”

Grabbing his bag around, he pulled out a water bottle from the side pocket, taking a large sip. I watched his throat work, his Adam’s apple moving up and down. Reid made drinking water sexy.

Flustered, I gestured behind me, toward the elevator. “I met with Lena about Kids Speak.”

He swallowed. “Okay.”

“She said you’ll be one of the volunteers if we agree to the partnership.” I wanted to gauge his reaction.

“That’s what she wants.” His mouth tightened.

“You’re not excited about that.” He’d offered to take lead on Friday night. Why was he backing away from that declaration?

He shifted on his feet, adjusting his bag on his shoulder. “I wouldn’t say that.”

I waited for him to say more, but he didn’t. I tilted my head slightly, considering him. “I don’t understand. You seemed interested on Friday. Did something change?”

“I keep to myself. I don’t like publicity.”

“You’ll be working with kids. Nothing to be afraid of.” I liked that he seemed more interested in volunteering directly with the kids as opposed to everything else surrounding it.

Reid’s lips straightened into a thin line. “I have a meeting with Lena. I don’t want to be late.”

I sighed, disappointed he was ending the conversation. I wanted more insight into what was going on in his head, why he was so against publicity. “It was nice seeing you, Reid.”

He nodded before replacing his aviators then walking away.

I watched him go, his jeans encasing his ass, his jacket tight around his shoulders. Reid Everson was a bit of a mystery. I’d seen the videos. He was amazing on the field, his moves confident. Why did he shy away from attention?

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# CHAPTER TEN

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## REID

I SLOWED MY BREATHING AS I WALKED AWAY FROM DYLAN. I kept my gaze on the elevator, resisting the urge to look back at her. Over the years, I'd perfected my ability to avoid problematic words in conversations, not drinking alcohol in public, and getting enough sleep so I wouldn't slip up. When I was around Dylan, my mind was jumbled. I worried I'd make a mistake, expose my secret.

I'd coughed to cover up how I'd mispronounced the word *here*. Then I'd wanted to say *water* or *drink* but couldn't even think of a word without an *r*. My inability to think clearly around her was more of a reason to avoid her.

Once the elevator doors closed behind me, I rounded my shoulders, tilting my head from side to side to ease the tension in my neck. I knew what this meeting with Lena was about, her expectations for me. She'd allowed me to fly under the radar at the beginning of my career. There were always players who thrived on the attention, all too eager to do interviews, make appearances. I'd allowed them to take lead, fading into the background.

I knew things would change when I became captain, even if I wasn't ready for the expectations or speculation that came with it. I preferred to go to practice, watch videos, work out, returning to the seclusion of my apartment at night. Unfortunately, my career would be stagnant if things stayed the way they were. If I wanted to go to the next level, be offered a better contract when it expired at the end of the year,

gain endorsements to ensure I'd never need to worry about money again, I needed to do whatever she asked.

Success meant moving forward, meeting new challenges. I couldn't avoid it forever. Dylan was the one disrupting my carefully orchestrated existence, pulling me out of my shell. I wasn't sure I liked it even if being near her made my blood pump harder.

The elevator doors opened, the view of the city through the conference room immediately visible. It was the very space I'd signed my contract with Baltimore, where my dream of supporting my family and playing football professionally came true. The familiar weight of that moment, knowing the ability to support my family was within reach, hung around my neck.

Knocking lightly on Lena's doorframe, I nodded hello. She stood, gesturing at the chair across from her desk. "Come in, Reid."

I pulled the aviators off, sitting. "Lena."

"How are you?" Her smile was warm and professional.

"Good." I was anything but okay. I couldn't admit that to Lena. Her job was to drum up excitement for the team, to set up interviews, specials, and exclusives to feature us as individuals. She wouldn't be sympathetic to my fears, especially when it was my job.

"I met with Dylan Gannon from Kids Speak. Assuming they accept our offer, I want you to be the main point of contact for them here in Baltimore. Jonah and Chase can volunteer but they are working primarily with other organizations. This one can be yours." When I remained silent, she continued, "You're the one who first met with Ms. Gannon. Chase said you volunteered to help with a clinic. Maybe this organization means something to you?"

I paused, considering my words carefully. If I told Lena the truth, she'd exploit it. She'd want me to be the face of Kids Speak, the last thing I wanted. "I wouldn't say that exactly."

"Either way, I think it makes more sense for this to be your focus." Her tone was dismissive as if she'd already decided.



My skin prickled with irritation. Before I could argue, she held up a hand. “This isn’t up for negotiation. As long as it doesn’t interfere with your practice or your game schedule, you’ll cooperate. Dylan Gannon will be heading up the organization here.”

“She will?” I felt like I was parroting her, unable to keep up with the pace of the conversation. Excitement that I’d be spending time with Dylan coursed through my veins.

“That’s what she said. Will that be a problem?” Lena’s gaze settled on me.

“No.” I couldn’t admit that the mere presence of the woman unsettled me, that she slowed my brain, made my tongue tangle.

“It’s not just Kids Speak, it’s time we add in more interviews with you, maybe even offer an exclusive get to know Reid Everson to the media. Who are you? What do you do when you’re not on the field? That kind of thing. You said you wanted more endorsements. This is how you get them.”

Lena’s eyes were on her computer, so she didn’t notice me tugging at my collar, feeling like the air had been sucked out of the room. I had broached the idea of endorsements with her. I’d seen other tight end careers take off like the quarterbacks and receivers. I wanted the money for my family. It meant security, providing a good life for them.

“Is that—”

Her face tightened. “Necessary? Absolutely. You don’t have kids or family to protect, so I’m not sure why it will be a problem.” Her jaw was tight. “You’re still looking for endorsements, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” It was a necessary evil. I just hoped I could hide my speech impediment.

“Good. You’ll make yourself available to do more interviews after the game. You’ll work with Ms. Gannon. I’ll be available to assist you.”

I wanted to say I didn’t need someone to hold my hand even though I did. For some reason, I wished it were Dylan I

was having this conversation with, not Lena. Lena wanted what was best for Baltimore. Dylan's eyes in the garage were filled with interest. Maybe it was my imagination, but I'd thought it might be projected at me. Other than my family and Callie, I had no one looking out for my best interests. Finally, I said, "Okay."

"You're a man of few words, Reid. We need to change that if you want to appear likable to the fans. We want Lincoln to see your future with the team."

Tension coiled in my stomach and dread slid down my spine as I straightened in my chair. "I'm not going to change who I am but I'm dedicated to staying here."

Lena leaned on her desk, focused on me. "I'm not asking you to change. You just need to be you. Whoever that is."

"Got it." I swallowed down my answer. I was a guy hiding a speech impediment who wanted to be known for my play on the field. More interviews meant increased my chances of making a mistake. If I did, the media might speculate I was on drugs, drinking, or like my dad said, stupid. None of the options placed me in a favorable light. It wouldn't be good publicity for Baltimore either. I couldn't warn her. It was way too late for that conversation. I should have told her in our first interview when she asked if there were any skeletons in my closet she should know about.

"It's not as scary as you think." Lena smiled before turning her attention back to her computer. "I'll let you know when I have things scheduled."

Knowing I was dismissed, I stood. Change was daunting. If I wanted to prove to Lincoln I wanted to be here, that he should offer me a long-term contract at the end of the season, I needed to play my part. "Thank you."

She nodded. "You're welcome. Lincoln loves the idea of pairing with this nonprofit. Don't screw it up."

"I won't." Impressing my bosses was at the top of my priority list. I had to do whatever the front office wanted if I wanted to solidify my position here. I wanted to be a franchise

player, someone like Chase or Jonah, someone they could count on. Someone they'd invest in.

As I walked away, a sense of foreboding settled on my shoulders. Kids Speak, Dylan, they all equaled change.

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# CHAPTER ELEVEN

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## DYLAN

ON THE WAY BACK TO ANNAPOLIS TO MEET THE GIRLS FOR lunch, Dad called.

“Hello.” The high I’d been on since my meeting with Lena dissipated with the sound of his voice bringing me back to reality.

“Where are you?”

“I’m headed back to Annapolis. I just met with Baltimore’s PR representative to discuss the team’s offer.” I bit my cheek to stop myself from saying celebrate. I wasn’t sure he’d be happy about my change in focus.

“Hadley will take lead once you finalize the deal?”

“Actually, I volunteered.”

There was a long pause.

“Is everything okay? Did you need me?”

“Can you stop by one evening so we can discuss switching doctors? Your mother doesn’t think this one is listening to her.”

I sighed. We’d been through this before. Mom was searching for a doctor who could tell her what to expect with her illness. There wasn’t one out there who could because that was the nature of the disease.

The last thing I needed on top of Kids Speak was researching a new doctor, scheduling an appointment, driving

her wherever the new one was located. “What’s wrong with this one? I thought she liked him?”

“You know how your mother is.”

I did. I wanted the best for her, which included her medical care. We’d been through this so many times. I had to remind myself it was her way of controlling the unpredictable.

“I’ll be at brunch on Sunday. We can discuss it then.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, Hadley.” It felt good to feel appreciated even though sometimes I wished they didn’t rely so heavily on me.

“I’m here for you guys. Whatever you need.”

Saying goodbye to my dad, I pulled into the parking lot, eager to see Hadley and Avery to tell them the news.

I could tell him to see a therapist. He’d say she didn’t need it. The argument would take longer than agreeing. “Sure.”

“Great. Congratulations on your deal.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I hit end on the call, pride coursing through me for the partnership. Some of it was luck, some of it was timing. At the end of the day, it wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t taken a risk.

I parked the car, feeding the meter, before heading inside the restaurant. After we discussed my conversation with Lena, the girls laughed and chatted. The mood was light and happy. I was excited too. Although, something held me back from being as carefree as them.

A part of me was worried about my parents, whether this new focus on Kids Speak would interfere with the promises I’d made to my father to be there for them.

A part of me was back in that parking garage, deciphering the mystery that was Reid. There was something under the surface that made me want to dig deeper. I suspected there was more to him than a football player who wanted to win games.

“Are you sure you’re okay with handling things here? It’s a bit of a commute from Annapolis.”

Hadley's question brought my attention back to the table. "It's not that far."

"Do you feel comfortable working with the schools directly?" Hadley asked.

"Yes." I excelled talking to people.

Hadley smiled. "You'll probably do a better job than me. I don't want to overburden you though. We should scale back your cases until Kids Speak is up and running. I have a feeling Lena will push us to move quickly so they can make an announcement."

"I get the impression she's eager, too," Avery said.

Hadley covered my hand briefly with hers. "Thank you, Dylan. If it wasn't for you, we wouldn't have had a meeting with a professional football team. It's surreal."

"We haven't signed the papers yet." My words were cautious despite the pride I felt being the one who set this up.

"It feels great to have a professional team consider us, offer us a partnership." Avery took a sip of her wine.

"Shall we toast?" Hadley raised her glass. "To Kids Speak possibly coming to Baltimore."

"To Kids Speak," Avery said.

I paused, filtering through all of my swirling emotions, success, happiness, excitement. "To us. May we always be this close. May we never forget why we started this, why we can't stop expanding to reach as many kids as we can."

Hadley smiled at me, clinking her glass with mine. "Couldn't have said it better myself."

We took a sip of the wine. We were quiet for a few seconds, admiring the view of the harbor outside the window.

"I think this is what you should be doing," Hadley said softly.

"What do you mean?" I asked her.

“Fundraising, championing people to your cause. I think if Kids Speak does well in Baltimore, you should take lead in each city we expand into.” Hadley’s smile widened, excitement for the future of Kids Speak evident.

I shifted in my chair, uncomfortable with the idea of traveling away from my parents when they needed me. “We’ll see. I might be terrible at it. Plus, we just started the firm. I don’t want to walk away from that.”

Avery shook her head. “Your heart’s not in the firm like it is in the nonprofit.”

It was validating she’d noticed it too. “I do love working for Kids Speak.”

“Avery’s right. You’re amazing.”

“Thanks, guys.” Their praise was everything. I wasn’t sure I wanted to travel around bringing Kids Speak to other cities. Locally I was fine. I couldn’t stray far from home. I wanted to be local in case Mom needed me.

I checked my phone to make sure I hadn’t missed a call from Dad. Not seeing any, I said, “I don’t want to get ahead of myself.”

“Think about it.” Hadley opened her menu.

Anytime I thought about leaving, the worry about my mother’s condition, thoughts of how my father needed me crept in. My place was in Annapolis, supporting my family. Anything that took me away from them wasn’t an option. No matter how good I was at something.



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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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## REID

I HESITATED IN THE DOORWAY OF CALLIE'S GRANDFATHER'S room at his nursing home, for our weekly meeting, making sure I wasn't interrupting his lunch. He sat in his chair, looking out his window. The room was tidy, the floors clean. The bed had been made, the bathroom door was ajar, smelling of disinfectant.

The first time I visited his old home, I was appalled at the facility. The room was dirty, the nurses were slow to respond to calls for assistance. There was little to no physical therapy or exercise offered.

I discreetly spoke to his case manager, pulling a few strings to move him to a better home. I never told Callie I'd orchestrated the move or paid the difference in price. But I think she suspected.

I'd made it a habit to visit, checking in with him whenever I could. I enjoyed talking to him.

"How are you doing today, Frank?" I shoved my hands in my pockets, looking out the window. The patio was empty today despite the warm weather.

"Fine." His voice was gruff. He didn't turn to greet me.

"Has Callie been by recently?"

"I haven't seen her this week yet. Her boss keeps her busy." Frank's tone was dry.

I laughed. "Unless she has another boss, I don't demand too much of her time."

I turned to face him, resting my hip against the dresser. His face was relaxed, his lips were tilted into a smile. He loved giving me a hard time.

“Would you like to sit outside? It’s a nice day.” I nodded out the window. He had a view of one of the many courtyards here, the brick patio, gardens, and gazebo.

His grunt was his only answer, so I moved behind his wheelchair, unlocking the brake.

“The sun is shining, the birds are chirping.” Any time I visited I took him outside if the weather was nice. It was good for him to have a change of scenery.

“You know I don’t care about that.”

“Come on now. Everyone loves sunshine.”

“I don’t. I love gray clouds. If it’s raining even better.”

“I can’t say anyone’s ever told me that before,” I teased.

His head bobbed with his words. “I do. I tell you that every time you come here.”

I smiled, waving at the nurses as we passed the station. “You just like giving me a hard time.”

I held the door open as I pushed his wheelchair onto the patio. “Do you want to sit in the rocking chair?”

“No. This is fine.” He indicated his chair.

I pushed his chair to the edge of the patio, so he had an unobstructed view of the fields. It stretched as far as we could see. “Okay. Let me know if you change your mind.”

I sat next to him, breathing in the fresh air. I loved getting out of the city to visit Frank. We’d developed a relationship of sorts over the two years Callie worked for me. She didn’t take me to visit him until we’d known each other for about a year. I’d relaxed enough not to watch my words around him. If he noticed any issues with me mispronouncing words he never mentioned it. Although, it was rare for him to miss anything.

“How’s Callie?” he asked.

Callie came to visit on Tuesdays, so I usually avoided those days, wanting them to have their time together.

“She’s good.” I lifted my chin to feel the sun on my face.

He nodded, pleased. “Good. I want her to be happy.”

“I know you do.”

“Has your sister heard back from any colleges?”

This was the other reason I enjoyed talking to Frank. He listened. “It’s still early.”

“You plan on helping her out with tuition?”

“I do. It’s why I work so hard.”

His eyes bored a hole into the side of my face. “You the reason I’m here?”

“I’m sorry?” My neck heated. I’d wondered if he was going to call me out on it. It had been a few weeks since the move from the old nursing home.

“You heard me.” His voice was stronger this time.

“Is it a problem if it was?”

He shook his head, a hint of pride in his tone. “Not for me. I’m grateful. Callie might take issue with it.”

“You’re welcome. I’m happy to help in any way I can.” Callie had become like a sister over the years, her grandfather an extension of that relationship.

We were quiet for a few minutes, taking in the view, watching people walking on the path past us.

“You’re distracted today. The only time a man’s got a look like that on his face is when there’s a woman involved.”

Dylan’s face a couple of weeks ago when I ran into her at the parking garage popped into my head. “No.”

“But there’s someone you like?”

“Possibly. It doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?”

“She’s too different from me.”

“Sometimes opposites keep things interesting.”

“I’m actually meeting her for dinner tonight. It’s a business thing though.” Callie and Dylan had arranged it. Something about discussing my role with Kids Speak. Even though it was purely business I was looking forward to seeing her again.

He raised his brow. “Maybe it will turn into something more.”

I shifted in my seat. “What about you? What was Mrs. Goodwin like?”

“Don’t think I don’t know you’re changing the subject. I’ll allow it this time.”

I smiled. I’d asked this question many times before. Frank loved talking about his late wife.

He smiled, his eyes distant as if he was remembering it. “We met in high school. I knew immediately she was the one. We grew up together. I loved her.”

I wanted to say I was sorry she’d died, leaving him alone but I didn’t. He didn’t like pity. He was grateful he’d had her as long as he had.

“I hope Callie finds someone like that. For a while I hoped it would be you.”

“No, sir. We’ve only ever been friends. I look at her like a sister.” One I had to protect when she let me. She never once came onto me or gave me any indication she felt any different. It was probably the reason I was so comfortable with her.

“I still expect for you to look out for her.” His voice was stern.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “That’s the plan.”

“Good.”

We sat for a while discussing the season, my last game, until he became visibly tired. I wheeled him back to his room.

I'd never had a male to look up to or a father figure. Like Coach Ackerman, Frank had become that for me. I enjoyed talking to him, making things easier for him. Sometimes I wondered what it would be like to have a significant other in my life. Would they visit Frank with me? Would they come to the games to cheer me on? Would they respect my need for privacy?

My mind drifted to Dylan. She wanted something from me even if it was for a good cause. Maybe she wasn't like the other women, but I didn't want to let my guard down.

My nerves kicked in with each mile traveled from the county to the city. The fields slowly gave way to city buildings. We'd be alone at dinner, the setting intimate. Would the lines between business and dating blur or would Dylan keep things strictly professional? Did I even want her to?

She sparked something in my chest, something that had long been dulled. I parked, heading up to my condo to get ready, determined to resist her even as I was looking forward to seeing her. I showered, putting on cologne, changing into black slacks and a blue V-neck sweater.

When she knocked a few minutes later, Callie having sent her my address, I reminded myself it wasn't a date before opening the door. There was a pressure on my chest, a feeling tonight would change things.

Dylan wore dark wash jeans that clung to her legs like a second skin, short boots, a black sparkly top that draped suggestively over her breasts. Her eyes sparkled with happiness.

Was she happy to see me?

"You look—" she hesitated, taking me in from head to toe, drawing in a shaky breath, "—

handsome."

She looked sexy but I couldn't say that. This was a business meeting. I'd need to pinch myself periodically during the evening to remind myself.

Instead, I settled on, "You look beautiful."

“Thank you.” Her eyes lowered as she smoothed a hand down her jeans. I wondered if she wasn’t as confident as she sounded. If I took a step into her space, touching her chin, the back of her head, would her skin flush? Would her breathing hitch? My fingers itched to touch her. Instead, I took a step back which she took as permission to step inside.

“This is an amazing view.” She walked past me, her floral scent flowing behind her, to the large windows, taking in the view.

If she were my date I’d step behind her, skimming her shoulders, then her arms with my hands, kissing that sweet spot on her neck. I’d enjoy making her tremble at the sensations of my breath, my lips, my touch.

She looked over her shoulder. “You’re lucky to have this view to come home to every day.”

I hoped she couldn’t see every thought on my face, the lust in my eyes.

“I guess.” It was an amazing view. Now that she was standing here, I realized how much better enjoying it with her was.

She faced me, smiling. “Are you ready to go to dinner?”

Was she unaffected by me? Did she see me solely as a difficult player she had to coddle to get me to do her bidding? I didn’t like that. I wanted her to be here because she wanted to, not because I was a good business move.

No. Yes. “Okay.”

“You’re a tough one, you know that.” Her lips twitched as she touched my shoulder lightly before she breezed past me to the door.

Her touch lingered, the warmth seeping through my sweater. “Do you have a place in mind?”

“I thought we’d go to one of the restaurants on this side of town so we could walk.”

We walked side by side until we were in the elevator. Her lips tugged into a teasing smile. “Are you single, Reid

Everson?”

I licked my suddenly dry lips, not sure where she was going with this. “Yes.”

I wasn’t sure why I said yes so easily. I was perpetually single as a rule. It wasn’t a secret.

She leaned against the wall, considering me. “Is there a reason for that?”

Her question felt like a challenge. “I don’t want people in my business.”

She tilted her head slightly, a naughty gleam in her eyes. “You can date and keep it from the media. It’s not like they’re stalking you outside your condo.”

I nodded in agreement. I wasn’t known as one of the troublemakers on the team. They followed me in the beginning then quickly stopped when they realized I went to the stadium, the grocery store, then home. There were a few rumors I was dating Callie, but we ignored them.

“Then why not? There has to be another reason.” The door opened to the lobby on the street level. I covered the opening with my hand so she could exit before me.

“I don’t know.” My heart was pounding in my chest. Was she asking because she was interested? I was too nervous to ask.

I moved to open the door to outside. She walked under my arm, brushing my side as she passed. I almost wished she was mine. That we were together so I could guide her with a hand on the small of her back. Whether she was trying or not, everything about her was seductive, drawing me in.

She gestured across the traffic circle at the new seafood restaurant.

I was surprised. “You need to call ahead to get in.”

“I asked Callie to make a reservation for us. She’s your assistant. I couldn’t get one on my own.” She shrugged.



She hadn't done anything wrong. I couldn't help but think I would have preferred to handle it. To drop my name and get a reservation at a restaurant where you had to call a month in advance. I'd never done that before. I wanted to do it for her.

"Was that okay?" She stopped on the sidewalk facing me. "I just thought it would be convenient. You have a game tomorrow, so you can't be out late."

I wanted to tuck her hair behind her ear. I resisted. "No. It's fine."

It was more than fine. It was sweet and thoughtful.

"Let's eat." I held the door for her, my hand dropping to the small of her back because it was so crowded. I felt the gentle sway of her hips.

I gave my name to the hostess, saying Eveson, skipping the *r*, and deepening my Louisiana accent to cover it.

She smiled in recognition. "Right this way, Mr. Everson."

"Thank you."

"It must be nice to be important." Dylan smiled with no hint of jealousy.

I didn't feel important. It was a status I actively fought against. "I don't usually do this."

"You never use your name to get a reservation?" She tilted her head.

"If my family visited I would." I dipped my head down, so I could speak into her ear.

The hostess paused by a secluded table. I'd have to thank Callie later for the request.

I pulled the seat out for her.

"Do they visit often?" Dylan asked as I sat.

I accepted the menu from the hostess, not answering until she was gone. "Only on the holidays when I'm in season. My siblings are still in high school so games when school is in

session can be difficult. Off-season, I stay at my home in Louisiana.”

I couldn't find a way to avoid saying *are*. I watched her carefully but her head was bowed as she perused the menu.

“A family man.”

I should have been relieved she hadn't asked any follow-up questions. Instead, I had this urge to tell her about my sisters, my mom, how I missed living near them.

I forced myself to look at the menu. When I decided, I placed it on the table, watching her, the way she scanned the menu, the arch of her brow, the sweet curve of her lips. “What about you?”

She smiled politely, but her shoulders tensed. “What about me?”

“Tell me about you.”

“I was born and raised in Annapolis. Went to school there. Stayed. I love it.”

Dylan was usually so engaging. It wasn't my imagination questions about her family made her uneasy.

“You don't like talking about family.”

She shook her head, her eyes narrowed. “No. It's not that. We're here about you, not me.”

“I want to learn things about you since will be spending time together.” My words came out in a rush, my desire to know something, anything about her, made me speak without thinking first. I held my breath, hoping she didn't notice the slip.

She chewed her lip. “Okay. What do you want to know?”

“Do you have any siblings?”

“No. I'm an only child.” Her tone didn't have its usual lightness, her gaze slid away from mine to a spot on the table.

“It's not so comfortable when the focus is on you, is it?” I gentled my voice so it didn't sound like I was criticizing her.

She rolled her shoulders back, straightening. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t mind.”

“I think you do.”

The waiter paused at the end of our table, reciting the lengthy list of specials. We ordered then the table fell into a silent awkwardness.

Dylan sipped her water. “Are you ready for the game tomorrow?”

“I will be.” I was relieved for the change of subject to something I was more comfortable discussing.

“Is it exciting to be on the field? Everyone watching you, cheering you on?”

“I guess. I focus on getting the job done, not the fans. The yelling can make it difficult to listen to the play calls.”

“That makes sense.”

“Have you been to a game?” I hadn’t invited a woman to watch me at a game since college. The thought of her watching me, cheering me on, was appealing.

Her shoulders relaxed. “Just college. It was fun in the student section of the games.”

“Would you like to go? I get tickets but only Callie uses them.”

She leaned her elbows on the table. “That would be amazing. Can I bring Avery and Hadley, if they’re available?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll text them.” She glanced down at her phone before asking, “If you don’t mind?”

“Go ahead.” I loved that she was so excited about going to the game she had to ask her friends right away.

She’d picked up her phone, nibbling her lower lip while she texted.

I knew the exact moment she got a response because Dylan’s face brightened. “Hadley’s available.”

Dylan placed her phone back in her clutch, resting it on the table next to her. “I’m so excited to go. Thank you so much for offering.”

“You should be able to get tickets from Lena now.”

Her eyes dulled a bit. “Oh yeah. You’re probably right.”

I immediately felt like an ass for saying anything. She was excited that *I’d invited her*. I wanted to rectify my mistake, erase the disappointment on her face. “Do you have a team jersey?”

She shook her head. “I’m not a fan, remember? Do they have stores in the stadium? Maybe I can pick one up tomorrow.”

I wanted her wearing my jersey, not Chase’s or Jonah’s. I didn’t want to tell her in case I couldn’t make it happen before the game. It would be a nice surprise.

“Seriously, thanks for offering the tickets to us.” She covered my hand with hers, squeezing lightly before removing it.

I nodded, clearing my throat, the feel of her soft skin imprinted on my hand.

The waiter dropped off the appetizers we ordered.

“The reason I wanted to meet with you is that I’d love to have you speak at the kickoff event. The local media will be there—”

“No.” The word came out harsher than I intended. I was seriously fucking this up with her tonight.

“I’m sorry?” Her voice was uncertain, shaky.

I softened my tone. “I want to work one-on-one with the kids. I don’t want to speak.”

It wasn’t anything I hadn’t said before. I hoped she’d respect my wishes.

Understanding and determination flashed in her eyes. “Lena said you were available for whatever I need.”

Despite my irritation, the thought of being available for Dylan's needs took over. The blood rushed from my head, lower. I imagined her saying those words while she lay spread eagle on my bed, waiting for me. "That's not the case."

My words came out strangled.

"I know you're media shy."

"I'm not shy." I'd never described myself that way. It sounded weak.

"The team is on board with this. They want to announce their involvement. This is the best way. Almost like a ribbon cutting ceremony."

"Yeah, I don't do those." Irritation crept into my tone. What would it be like if she wasn't asking me for things I couldn't provide? What if she was here because she wanted to get to know me, the man under the uniform?

She was quiet for so long, concentrating on finishing her appetizer, I thought she'd let it go. "Why don't you want to speak? All you have to say is how excited you are for the program."

"I can't." I wanted to beg her *please don't make me explain, please don't make me speak in front of people*. I didn't want to beg.

I kept my eyes on the table because she was potent in person. I was afraid she'd use her charm on me, she'd have me agreeing to whatever she wanted before I realized what was happening. I was helpless to resist.

She sighed, her presence like a tangible thing, as if her warm soft breath were coasting over my skin, her hair tickling my cheek. "Reid."

One word. My name on her lips. I liked it too much.

"I wish you'd reconsider."

"I'd like to avoid publicity if I can. I'm happy to spend time with the kids." My tone brooked no argument even though I knew she could get Lena to force my hand if she wanted.

“There’s no way I can change your mind?”

I shook my head. If anyone could, it would be her. I wanted to help her, but this affected more than me. If the public reacted badly, the team, my reputation, my family’s stability hung in the balance.

“I see.”

I was happy she let it go for now.

We ate our entrees in silence when they arrived. I finished before her, satisfied with the meal. “I don’t get out often. This was nice.”

“What do you do in your spare time?”

I opened my mouth to mention Frank then stopped, not sure I wanted to share something so personal with her. “I’m low-key. I play football, study videos. In the off-season I visit my family.”

“You have no vices.” She said it like it was a fact.

I took that as a compliment. “I guess not unless you think maintaining good fitness is a vice.”

She laughed softly. “I don’t.”

“Jonah or Chase would be the best bet for the event.”

Her lips turned down in an adorable frown at the suggestion “I think you’d be perfect for it.”

I wanted to ask her why she thought that, but she looked uncomfortable, like she’d said something she shouldn’t.

“You probably need to rest for tomorrow’s game.”

“Yeah.” I did need to get back even though I wanted to talk to her about anything besides Kids Speak. What did she like to do in her spare time? Was she dating anyone? What were her dreams? All questions that weren’t relevant to our arrangement.

I got the check even though Dylan reached for it at the same time.

“This is business. I can get it.”

She'd said something similar on our blind date. "It's not business when I'm out with a woman."

Her face flushed but she didn't argue.

I wondered if she felt the same way I did. Was she wishing this was a date?

I walked her to her car which was parked on the street by my building. We paused at the driver's side.

"It's not safe to leave your vehicle..." I gestured at her car parked on the street, instead of saying the words. It might be a trendy area but it was still Baltimore. It wasn't safe for a woman alone at night.

She shrugged. "It's fine. You're with me."

"I'll have Callie get you a guest pass, use one of my spots." I gestured at the garage to my building. "It would ease my mind."

She smiled softly, her eyes shining with admiration and something else I couldn't decipher. "Thank you."

"You should get going. It's late."

She went up on tiptoes, brushing my cheek with her lips. "Night, Reid."

Her hair tickled the scruff on my cheek as her breath warmed my skin and her scent surrounded me. I wanted to grip her hips, hold her in place so I could kiss her. The desire was so intense, so strong, I stepped back, curling my fingers into fists.

She smiled, soft and easy, before slipping into her seat. Her expression wasn't practiced as if she'd planned it. Why had she kissed me?

Hopefully, speaking fast covered the words I couldn't replace. She hadn't said anything or looked at me in pity. She must not have noticed.

As soon as her taillights disappeared, I went up to my condo determined to get jerseys for them. I asked Callie to get mine for Dylan and Chase's for Hadley and Avery. As a

quarterback his jersey was the most popular. Hopefully, Dylan wouldn't recognize the significance of wearing my jersey. I arranged for Callie to meet them at will-call to give them their tickets. Telling her at the last second to get hats, too.

I went to bed excited for someone to see me play. My phone buzzed when my head hit the pillow. I reached for my phone on the nightstand, sitting up when I saw Dylan's text, **Avery can't come tomorrow, but Hadley and I will be there. I can't wait!**

Her excitement was evident. I wasn't practiced in flirting via text only because I'd avoided dating since college, ever since that one girl said I was slow. I wished I was better at it. I wanted to be smoother. The good thing was I didn't have to worry about my pronunciation or the words I used when I was writing.

I wanted to let her know I'd invited her because she was special. I wanted more than her lips on my cheek. I wanted to see her again, just her and me, no talk of business, nothing between us.

I finally settled on, **It will be nice to have a fan in the stands cheering for me.**

I waited for her to respond, settling under the covers. I hoped she didn't think I was lame.

**Dylan: You've got me. 😊**

I closed my eyes, wishing I did. It was a while before I was able to sleep. I kept thinking of what she looked like under her clothes. Did she wear lacy thongs or silky panties? The thought of slipping my fingers underneath had me groaning, pulling my cock from my briefs to alleviate my lust for her.



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# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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## DYLAN

I'D DROVE FROM SUNDAY BRUNCH TO HADLEY'S HOME wearing jeans for the football game this afternoon. I should have been stressed about the conversation we'd had about finding Mom a new doctor. The thought of traveling to a new doctor wasn't something I realistically could fit into my schedule right now. Realistically, she needed a therapist not a new doctor. My parents firmly believed it was a health issue even though the unpredictability of her illness prompted episodes of panic, doubt, and indecision.

I'd always sympathized with my father, wanting to ease his burden. Lately, I wished he could handle some of this.

I pushed their worries out of my head so I could focus on the football game this afternoon.

It's not that I don't like football. I just never had a reason to watch it before. Reid Everson was a very good reason.

Ever since I kissed Reid last night, I was vibrating with energy. I didn't know what possessed me to kiss his cheek other than it felt right. I'd touched his chest to steady myself as I went up on tiptoes, feeling his warmth, the steady beat of his heart through his soft sweater. I'd shivered at the sensation of the scruff against my lips. I'd wanted to step closer to him, breathe in his scent, I wanted him to wrap his arms around me. I hadn't kissed him for any other reason than pure impulse.

I pulled into Hadley's driveway, texting her I was here. It was the home Cade was fixing up when they met. They'd kept

the old farmhouse on the water because it was beautifully refurbished and held lots of great memories for them.

She ran out of the house, pulling open the door. “Are you excited to see your first football game?”

“I am.” It had a lot to do with who I’d see at the game, not so much the game itself.

“Cade is so jealous. Tell me how you got tickets.”

“I met with Reid last night. He offered them to me.” I hoped she wouldn’t think it was anything other than a cool perk working with the team like Reid said.

“Why did you meet with Reid?”

I felt her staring at the side of my face, so I kept my face carefully neutral. “We discussed Kids Speak. I suggested a ribbon-cutting ceremony to kick things off. He was resistant.”

“So, it was a business dinner. Nothing else happened?” Hadley’s sounded disappointed.

“Nothing happened.” I didn’t mention the kiss on the cheek because it was innocent. I wanted to keep the warm feeling it invoked in me to myself.

She shifted in her seat to face me. “How was brunch with your parents?”

“Good.” I was glad she’d let the topic of Reid go.

The desire to unload on someone was strong but I held back. I hadn’t known Hadley as long as Avery. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust her. Pressure to keep family matters private had been instilled in me at a young age.

The desire to ask someone for help even if it was just an ear to listen was all-encompassing.

“It’s nice you’re so close to them.”

“It is.” Hadley’s mother died when she was younger. Her father wasn’t there for her. It was just her and Colin. She probably wouldn’t understand not supporting my loving parents who’d always been there for me.

“Are you comfortable meeting with the principals the rest of the week? I have court but if you’re not ready we can reschedule them for a time when I can be there.” Hadley asked me as we were leaving the city’s superintendent’s office a couple of weeks after we signed the contract to partner with Baltimore.

“I can handle it.” It was a chance to prove myself.

“You’d tell me if it was too much?”

I shook my head. “No. I moved my cases to you so that I could handle it.”

“Do you want to rent an apartment or get a hotel in the city to make the commute easier?”

“No. It won’t be an issue.” It was about a forty-five-minute drive, so it wasn’t too bad. The thought of being in the city if my dad called with an emergency caused my stomach to tighten when it was no different than being in court.

“Okay. If you’re sure. I feel weird leaving Kids Speak entirely in your hands. It’s not because I don’t trust you, I do.”

I straightened with her praise. “It’s hard putting someone else in charge of your baby.”

“It is. I did it in New Orleans. I’m thrilled with how Winnie is managing it. It helps that my brother is there too.”

“That was different. The New Orleans’ location was successful before you left.”

“Yeah, maybe that’s it.” She looked a little uncertain as if relinquishing control was difficult for her.

I glanced over at her before turning my attention to the road. “I believe in what you’re doing. I won’t do anything to tarnish what you’ve already started. I want it to be successful.”

“I know you do.”

Energy hummed through my fingers. Opening this branch of Kids Speak was a way to prove I could handle more than raising money, finding donors, and publicity.

She leaned her head back on the headrest, quiet for the rest of the drive.

I pulled into one of the parking garages near the stadium, brunch forgotten as I allowed the excitement of the crowd to propel us forward.

Fans walked with us on the sidewalk decked out in purple and black. “We’re supposed to meet his assistant, Callie, at will-call.”

She smiled softly. “It must be nice to have an assistant.”

“Right? It’s a whole different world.”

Reid said to look for a short blonde woman near the ticket window. I found her leaning against the wall. “Callie Goodwin?”

She pushed off the wall, smiling at us. “That’s me. Dylan and Hadley?”

“Yes.”

“Here are your tickets. Oh, Reid wanted you to have these.”

She handed each of us a package wrapped in brown paper. “Let’s get through security, then you can open them.”

I took the package wrapped in brown paper, holding it to my chest, wondering what Reid had gotten us.

We followed the crowd, going through security. Callie led us to our seats. There were a large number of people wearing black and purple and face paint. The excitement was overwhelming. It was like nothing I’d ever experienced.

“Are you sitting with us?” I asked Callie.

She smiled over her shoulder at us. “Yes. It will be nice to have company for once.”

I relaxed that we wouldn’t be alone. “Reid doesn’t invite people to games often?”

“No. The other guys do but not him.” Her lips settled into a straight line.

“Oh look, it’s a jersey.” Hadley had unwrapped her package, holding up a purple jersey with Chase Crawford’s last name on the back.

“Which one did you get?” Hadley put the jersey on over her sweater.

I carefully removed the tape, unraveling the paper revealing the purple jersey. My heart rate picked up as I turned it around and saw Everson stitched above the number eight-five on the back. He’d given me his jersey. All I knew was that in high school, boys gave their jerseys to their girlfriends for the games. Was it silly I felt like he was making a statement by giving me his?

“Are you going to put it on?” Hadley nudged my shoulder.

I pulled it over my head, tying it in a knot at my waist, grateful for the excuse to hide my face.

“The hat fell on the floor when you pulled the jersey out.” Hadley leaned down, picking something up.

She handed a cap to me.

I pulled it on, feeling like we fit in with the other fans. The crowd surged to their feet as the team ran out onto the field to the announcer screaming, a song blaring over the speakers. I stood, exchanging an excited smile with Hadley.

I searched for Reid when his name was announced. I found him high-fiving his teammates as he ran out of the tunnel. They lined up for “The Star-Spangled Banner”. Watching him holding his helmet at his side, his hand over his heart as a local high schooler sang the song, I felt special to be here, experiencing this.

After kickoff, Callie described what was happening in the game to us. It was exciting being so close to the action, hearing the hits, the calls.

“What position does he play?” I asked her.

She gave me a look.

“I don’t know anything about football. I want to learn.”

“He’s a tight end, essentially a jack-of-all-trades. Tight ends are used for blocking, receiving, sometimes rushing.”

“What does a tight end need? Other than a tight end of course?” Hadley teased.

Callie never took her eyes off the play on the field. “These days tight ends need to be large, strong, have good hands to catch the ball, and be able to block the defense.”

Hadley elbowed me, laughing into her hand, probably over the good hands comment.

Callie raised her finger as if emphasizing her point. “One thing they don’t need is speed. Tight ends are used for shorter passes. Their size makes them a perfect target in the red zone, on third and goal situations for receiving. It also makes it difficult to take them down.”

“I’ll remember that if I’m ever playing football,” Hadley said.

I elbowed her to tone down her jokes because Callie seemed to be taking this seriously.

I wanted to ask what the red zone was. I assumed it was something to do with the end zone. I’d need to watch more games, listening to the commentators talk. When I watched videos of Reid’s interviews I’d paid more attention to the cadence of his voice, the set of his jaw, the flex of his fingers. I’d been captivated by him, not the words coming out of his mouth.

“Essentially, the tight end does more work but gets less credit than the quarterback and the wide receivers.”

I remembered that Chase was the quarterback and Jonah was a wide receiver. They seemed to attract more press than Reid, so that made sense. “I’m impressed you know so much about football.”

Callie’s face went soft for the first time since we’d met. “I bonded with my grandfather watching games. He taught me everything I know. He was so excited when he found out I was working with one of the players.”

I wondered if she'd introduced her grandfather to Reid. He didn't seem like one of those cocky players who'd refuse to sign an autograph.

According to the announcer, Pittsburgh had a first and goal, whatever that meant.

Callie's attention was focused solely on the game.

I didn't want to interrupt her concentration by asking. The stadium speakers pumped out a chant about defense as the energy from the crowd grew.

I imagined it must be motivating for the players on the field to have fans at the home games.

Baltimore's defense held them. The teams were back and forth with the score tied at zero until the clock ran out for the first half.

At halftime, Hadley ran to the bathroom. I went with Callie to stand in a long line for snacks. I wanted to know more about her, if she enjoyed working for Reid, if he was a good boss, a good person. "Do you like being Reid's assistant?"

"He's a great boss. I'm taking classes at University of Baltimore. He works around my schedule. He's considerate. I expected him to be a stereotypical athlete, cocky and demanding, but he's not."

That's exactly what I'd thought before I met him.

She opened her mouth as if she was going to say something, then closed it.

I wanted to know her perspective on Reid. Last night, I thought he was a genuinely nice guy. Gruff at times. I was certain he had a reason for wanting to avoid the spotlight. "What were you going to say?"

"He wouldn't like that I'm talking about him. He's very private."

"I'd never share anything you told me."



“I hope not.” The look she shot me told me she didn’t trust me yet.

“I won’t. I promise.”

“Reid’s a good guy. Please don’t mess with him.”

“Have you two—” I couldn’t bring myself to voice it aloud even though I wanted to know.

“Been together? No. Definitely not. My grandfather asks me all the time but we’re just friends.”

She looked me in the eye. “I promise I’m not interested in him, if that’s what you’re concerned about.”

“Oh, it’s not.” I didn’t want her to think I was interested even though I most certainly was. That kiss on the cheek told me and probably him everything he needed to know. I wasn’t usually an overly affectionate person.

“Sure.” She smiled before stepping forward to give her food order. When she was done with hers, she asked, “What did you want?”

I waved her off. “Oh, I can get it.”

“Reid insisted. He said it’s his treat.”

Warmth slid down my spine. “Okay. Nachos, a hot dog, and a water. Thank you.”

“Thank Reid.” She paid, grabbing the containers of food. I grabbed what she couldn’t, stepping out of line.

The invite to the stadium last night was impulsive. Everything today was planned, the jerseys and hats, the food money. It was sweet. The idea that he wanted to make sure I was comfortable even though I could take care of myself touched me.

We grabbed napkins, heading back to our seats.

Before we reached our section, she paused to say, “He’s a great guy. He doesn’t let many people in. If he lets you in, please don’t hurt him.”

Then she moved down the aisle to our seats. Hadley joined us a few minutes later. We were engrossed in the game again. We didn't have another chance to discuss Reid.

Questions twirled around in my head. Why was Callie so protective of him? Was it because he was a great boss or was there a reason for her to be that way? Was inviting me to the game letting me in?

Reid had given *me* his jersey, not Hadley. Heat radiated through my chest at the idea that it meant something. I had trouble focusing on the rest of the game except for the occasions number eighty-five took the field.

I didn't know much about football despite Callie's explanations. I jumped up and clapped every time he caught the ball. Tears sparked in my eyes when he scored a touchdown. I was so proud of this man I'd only just met. An overwhelming sensation took over, *I wanted this man to be mine*. I sat, closing my eyes, trying to make sense of it.

What was it about him? I barely knew him. We'd only spent a short time together. Maybe it was the jersey I wore, how he'd taken care of me, making me want something more.

When the game ended with Baltimore up by three, I stood, cheering with the rest of the Baltimore fans.

"Didn't take long for you to become a Baltimore fan," Hadley said to me.

"I think that happened when Baltimore wanted to partner with us. It was fun and exciting to be at the game."

"Do you want to say hi to Reid?" Callie asked, as we made our way down the steps.

"Won't he be busy with whatever players do after the game?" Thoughts of Reid naked in a shower came to mind. A towel wrapped around his waist, his skin damp, his muscles bulging from the game.

"I always wait for him afterward. You're welcome to join me."

The thought of Callie congratulating him after the game made my chest burn. “I would like to thank him.” Then to Hadley, I asked, “Do we have a few minutes to stay after?”

Hadley nodded. “Sure.”

My heart picked up the closer we got to the locker room. Though we’d met the players at the yacht club, somehow this was different. As we waited, a few players walked out of the locker room in suits, duffel bags slung over their shoulders, high on their win. They were greeted by wives and girlfriends.

Finally, Reid walked out. His hair slicked back from his shower, his suit tight around his shoulders, tapered to his waist. He was handsome. His gaze slid over Callie, landing on me.

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# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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## REID

DYLAN WORE A BALL CAP OVER HER LONG HAIR WHICH WAS down around her shoulders. When she looked up, I could see her eyes shining with happiness. She'd tied the bottom of the jersey at her waist to make it fit better over her dark jeans. I probably should have bought her a women's jersey but the oversized one looked cute on her.

"Dylan, Hadley. Did you enjoy the game?" I sounded stiff, formal when all I wanted to do was pull Dylan closer to me, greet her with a kiss like the other guys did with their girlfriends and wives.

Dylan stepped close to me. "It was so exciting. Thank you for inviting us and for the jersey."

I felt Callie's gaze on my face, assessing my reaction. I couldn't stop the smile spreading over my face. I stepped closer so people could pass by. It forced her head to tilt back to meet my eyes.

"I'm glad you liked it," I said to Dylan before addressing Callie, "Thanks for spending the day with them."

"No problem, boss. It was fun to have someone to sit with." She smiled. I could see the questions in her eyes.

Last night when I texted her asking her to get the jerseys, she wanted to know why I wanted Dylan to have my jersey. I didn't answer. I wasn't ready to voice my reasons out loud. Especially not to someone who wasn't Dylan.

I never invited anyone to games except family. I wanted Callie's grandfather to come. So far, he'd refused. Logistically

it would be difficult. Still, I wanted to make it happen.

“You have to do press,” Callie reminded me.

“Do you want to meet up when I’m done?” The thought of going home to an empty condo wasn’t enticing.

Dylan’s face filled with regret. “No. I drove Hadley. We need to get back.”

“Maybe next time.” My heart ached to have her here at the next home game, wearing my jersey, waiting for me afterward.

Dylan’s face filled with happiness. “Absolutely. I had no idea I would enjoy it so much. Congrats on the touchdown and the win.”

“She jumped up and down when you scored,” Hadley said.

“Yeah?” I smiled, not taking my gaze off of Dylan. Her face was slightly flushed as if she was embarrassed.

“Let’s get you to the interview,” Callie prompted.

Reluctantly, I thanked them for coming before following Callie to the press room.

Callie’s face turned serious. “They’ll want to talk to you because of the touchdown.”

“I figured.” I mentally prepared myself, calming my racing heart, breathing slow and even. If I stayed calm, talking would be easier. If I allowed nerves to take over, I might slip.

“Take your time. Answer the question asked. Relax. You’ll be fine.”

I hesitated at the doorway.

“You did great last time.” Callie’s voice lowered.

I nodded. She was right. This was routine. No different than any other conversation with my coach or the players.

I entered the room, the bright lights making me wince. Chase was already answering questions at the front of the room. A few reporters turned when they saw me enter.

When Chase was finished answering the question, a reporter called my name. Coach gestured me toward the

podium. My heart pounded in my ears. I flexed my fingers wishing I was anywhere but here.

“Congrats on your touchdown.” The reporter stood with his notebook and pen in hand, waiting for me to speak.

I leaned forward to speak into the microphone. “Thank you.”

My voice rang loud and clear in the silent room.

“Is Coach Ackerman utilizing you more like a wide receiver this year?”

“Coach took advantage of my size and the match-ups today. You’ll have to ask him about upcoming games.”

“Word is you’ll be stepping up as captain, working with an organization called Kids Speak?” The reporter continued, not missing a beat.

“Yes.” The old me would have stopped there. I answered the question asked even though I knew Lena wanted me to step up, be more like the other captains.

“I’m excited to—” I wanted to say work with them. I couldn’t. The familiar panic I experienced in high-pressure situations filtered in making it difficult to think of another word or phrase. “I’m excited about it. I’ll be as hands-on as I can be given the season.”

I hated that I couldn’t use the words that popped into my brain initially. I had to sift through others to find ones I could say. I wished it weren’t always in the forefront of my mind.

The reporter nodded, so I looked around the room for further questions. Seeing none, I stepped down. Callie’s hand wrapped around my forearm, guiding me out. “That was good.”

I raised my brow at her, knowing I’d hesitated. The stress lingered on my shoulders, my neck.

“It was. I promise. Plenty of people pause up there or lose their train of thought. No one will think anything of it.”

Maybe I should have been up front with Lena. If I told her about my speech impediment maybe she wouldn't force me to do these interviews.

A chill passed down my spine. There was always the chance she'd want me to come forward, telling everyone about it. That was my biggest fear. Opening myself up to judgment, speculation, skeptics.

"I hope so." I wanted to believe I could stand in front of a room of people, saying the right thing, except I'd screwed up in the past.

We walked to the exit to the player's vehicles. "Care to explain what that was today with Dylan? And don't say you invited them because of the team's partnership with Kids Speak. You never would have done that in the past."

"It was nothing." The words rang hollow because I felt excitement, anticipation, desire for her.

Callie rolled her eyes. "Dylan asked me to arrange dinner last night, then you asked me for game tickets. You insisted I buy Dylan your jersey. Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Maybe it was impulsive. She'd never been to a game. I offered. She was excited about it."

Callie's face was pensive.

"You think she's using me?"

"Not exactly. She needs the team for her nonprofit. She's fixated on you. I don't know if we can trust her. We'll have to see."

I thought back to our blind date, how she spoke animatedly about her job. She was passionate about her cause. Last night there was a connection, a desire for more. "I think she's okay."

"I hope so." When we reached Callie's car, she squeezed my arm once before releasing it.

On the way home, I tried to focus on Callie's worries for me, instead of how good Dylan looked in my jersey.



Unfortunately, a vision of Dylan in nothing but my jersey slipped through. I was a goner.

*I'd lift her onto my kitchen counter, spreading her legs to stand between them. My hands braced on her bare thighs, then they'd glide under the jersey. She was naked underneath, I'd suck her nipple through the jersey until it was a hard, then slide a finger between her folds to see how wet she was for me.* I adjusted my cock in my pants before getting out of my car.

I slammed my door a little too loudly, walking quicker than usual to the elevator. The desire to grip my cock was strong. It was all I could think about. I wanted Dylan Gannon, in and out of the bedroom.

I enjoyed her company even though she was dangerous. The more time I spent with her the more likely she'd figure out my secret. No matter how sweet and understanding she seemed, I couldn't be sure of her reaction.

I opened the door to my apartment, sliding off my shoes, placing my keys in the dish.

If Dylan found out, would she be supportive or would she mock me like my father? Dylan seemed like a genuine person. She was in charge of a speech impairment program. It was possible she'd be understanding about it. What if she thought it would be a reason for me to be the spokesperson, like Callie did? I didn't want her exploiting my impairment to promote her nonprofit.

How could you be certain someone wanted you for you, not what you could do for them?

It was the question all of the guys ran into at one time or another. Some didn't realize their mistake until they were already married with kids. Others didn't care, screwing whoever offered. I wasn't them. I wanted to be sure of any person I invited into my life.

I didn't want to trust her then have that trust blow up in my face.

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# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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## DYLAN

A COUPLE OF WEEKS AFTER THE FOOTBALL GAME I ATTENDED with Hadley, Kids Speak started officially in the elementary schools. I'd never been more nervous for anything in my life. Not the bar exam. Not my first interview. Not opening the law firm.

A small part of my nerves was that Reid, Jonah, and Chase would be volunteering with various students.

A warm feeling settled in my chest when I kissed Reid's cheek. It deepened when he'd taken care of us at the football game. It lingered, swirling in my chest. Every nerve tingled with anticipation to see him today. We'd been to dinner twice. Each time felt more real than the last. I wanted him. I just hoped it wouldn't complicate our arrangement.

I focused on handing out the welcome packets on the tables. The bell rang, signaling the end of the school day. Kids would be filtering in at any moment.

"Do you need us?" Reid's voice washed over me, waking up every nerve ending in my body.

I turned to face him, handsome in a team polo-shirt and khakis, thoughts of him dropping to his knees in front of me at his word *need*.

"Lena wanted us more casual today." Jonah winked at me before surveying the room.

The three guys stood in front of me. I should have felt dwarfed in their presence. Instead, I felt overwhelmed by only one, Reid.

“You look great.” My voice cracked, my throat dry. How were we supposed to greet each other? Was I supposed to hug or kiss him on the cheek? I dismissed those ideas as unprofessional, especially in front of Jonah and Chase. I felt stiff, awkward compared to how I’d felt after dinner on Saturday night when I was relaxed, happy to be in his presence.

The assistant principal came over, introducing himself to Jonah and Chase.

Reid smiled, stepping closer to me, his shoulders loose, looking more relaxed than I felt.

He placed his hands on my shoulder, leaning close, to whisper in my ear. “It’s going to be awesome. Don’t be—.”

Was he going to say worried, nervous? My heart jumped erratically in my chest.

Then he brushed his lips across my cheek, easing away from me, as if he hadn’t just shocked the nerves out of my system, awareness seeping through me. I was conscious of him, his proximity, the smell of his cologne, the impression of his lips on my cheek.

“I’m not nervous.” Filling in the word he hadn’t said. My voice sounded breathless, giving away how he affected me.

He squeezed my shoulder before repeating, “Tell me what we should do.”

“Why don’t you guys hang out until the kids come in. I’ll get them set up with a therapist. You can walk around, giving encouragement. If one of the kids wants to engage with you, you can sit to talk to him or her.”

“Sounds good.”

I shook any sexy thoughts of Reid out of my head so I could focus on the reason we were here.

A couple of kids walked into the room, looking uncertain. I walked toward them to get their names, marking them present on my clipboard. I introduced myself, guiding them to a therapist, before taking a step back. Once things were set up,

I wouldn't be at each location unless there was a problem. There would be aids. I'd be a phone call away.

I couldn't believe it was happening. I was the one laying the groundwork, hiring the employees. I was optimistic things could run without me present even though I'd never done this before. I didn't want to let Hadley down.

I'd been successful in holding Lena off from a formal announcement until things were in place. I wanted the focus on getting the program running before adding in more pressure. I'd also asked because Reid was so adamant that he didn't want to take part in the announcement. I hoped I could convince him otherwise.

Reid's hand landed on my shoulder, the warmth of his chest indicating he stood close behind me. I shivered, his breath on my ear. "I'd wish you good luck, but you don't need it."

I swallowed before nodding, my throat tight.

I turned to him. His eyes were soft. Based on our first meeting, I thought he'd fight me, refusing to show up, but he was here.

Another student walked in then, so I moved to greet him, relieved to have some space from Reid. The more I thought about what it would be like to be near Reid, the more I worried how I'd keep a level head.

He stood in the doorway, his gaze on the floor, a lunch bag clutched to his chest. I crouched in front of him, glad I'd worn pants. "Hey, are you here for speech?"

He nodded, not meeting my gaze.

"I'm so happy your here." When it didn't seem like he'd talk, I referred to my list of names. "Is it Quinton?"

He nodded again.

"Great. Let's introduce you to Mrs. Sweeney so we can get started."

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# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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## REID

I NOTICED HIM IMMEDIATELY. THE HESITANCY IN HIS STEPS, HIS reluctance to be here. Dylan hadn't hesitated to get down on his level, welcoming him. While I observed the other students in the room, my attention kept returning to him. He seemed to be listening to his therapist but not responding.

I wondered if that's how I would have been had I saw a therapist at school. Would I have been too embarrassed to speak in front of someone after my father's harsh words? Had this child experienced something similar?

The thought had me moving in his direction. Seeing his name tag on his shirt, I took a deep breath, rehearsing my name in my head so I would get it mostly right. "Quinton, I'm Reid. Is it okay if I sit next to you?"

I breathed a sigh of relief that I'd said my name correctly. It was something I had to practice until I could say it with confidence. I couldn't avoid saying my name, not without sounding like an idiot.

The boy remained silent, his shoulders tense.

I wanted to help. I wanted to reach out to him. I didn't want to tell him I suspected how he was feeling. I looked around, seeing the other children working with their respective therapists. Quinton was the only one who seemed reluctant.

"Do you think we could have a moment?" I asked Mrs. Sweeney.

Mrs. Sweeney offered me a grateful smile. "Sure. I'll get something to drink."

What could I say that would make him more comfortable? An assurance of why we were here, some way to take the pressure off of him, his performance? Was he shy or had someone said something derogatory about his speech? “Mrs. Sweeney wants to help you.”

“I know.” His voice was so soft I almost couldn’t hear him.

My heart twisted at the conflict I remembered from my childhood. Desperately wanting to talk, afraid to ask for help when we were continually told I didn’t qualify for any. I was different enough to attract bullies like my father, some in school, not enough to justify services.

It would be good to validate his feelings. “This is difficult. I’ll stick by you.”

He didn’t acknowledge my words.

“No one will judge you.”

Silent, he didn’t move or look at me. Maybe if I told him I was the same. I didn’t want him to struggle to speak, embarrassed he wasn’t able to say certain words. I wanted him to get help now.

I looked around, making sure the other pairs of therapists and children weren’t paying attention. Chase was throwing a basketball with a little girl at a hoop hanging over the door. Jonah sat at a table, legs spread wide, the teacher laughing at whatever he was saying. Dylan’s head was bowed over her laptop at a different table.

I shifted closer to him. “I can sympathize with you. I have difficulty talking sometimes too.”

He looked up, his brows raised. “You do?”

“Yeah, I can’t say my—” Even with a child it was hard to be myself, let someone see my weakness. I had to if I wanted him to open up. “*R*’s. It’s ironic my name starts with an *r*.”

I tried not to wince at the way my *r* sounded like a *w*. I didn’t want him to know I was still ashamed or insinuate that he should be.



His eyes widened further as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Were you scared when you did this?"

"I never got to do this."

"Never?" His gaze was focused on me.

"No. I didn't get this opportunity. I wasn't identified as someone who needed help."

"Why not?"

I decided to use words with *r's* so he understood. "Like you, I didn't qualify even though I struggled to say my letters. There was no program like this. I avoided saying my *r's*. I got good at it over the years but I still slip up."

"If you had lessons like this," he gestured at the table, "you'd be able to say it right?"

"Most likely. Mrs. Sweeny is going to help you so that you don't have to worry anymore."

I didn't want to point out that if he was talking differently, eventually mean kids would point it out, pick on him. I didn't want that for him.

"Really?"

"Yeah, you can trust her. If you want, I can stay with you while you do your lesson. If you'd feel more comfortable, I can leave. It's up to you."

He was quiet for a few seconds, his gaze traveling around the room, the other children engaged with their therapists. Finally, he said, "I'd like you to stay."

I sighed, not realizing until he'd conceded how much his answer mattered to me. "You're very brave."

I motioned for his therapist to come back over.

Mrs. Sweeney returned. "Are we ready to get started?"

I smiled encouragingly at Quinton.

Mrs. Sweeney went through a series of tests, probably to see where he needed help. When we were done, Mrs. Sweeney told him she'd see him next week.

“Good job, buddy. I knew you could do it.”

“Will you be here next time?” Quinton asked me.

I hadn’t wanted to be involved at all. Now he tugged on every one of my emotions. He’d reminded me of what I went through as a child, the struggle, the embarrassment, the shame. I didn’t want that for him.

“When will he have lessons?” I asked Mrs. Sweeney.

“Every Monday at the same time.”

“I can do that.” I’d make sure I was available. I’d talk to Coach. If I had to, I’d tell him why helping this boy was so important to me. Hopefully, he’d understand how important this was to me.

Quinton nodded, a small smile on his lips.

Satisfaction tore through me. For the first time in my life, I’d been honest to someone about my impairment. I was happy that my experience had helped someone else.

When Quinton left, Mrs. Sweeney gathered her things. “Thanks. You really brought him out of his shell.”

“Happy to help.” I tensed, hoping she didn’t ask what it was that I’d said.

Walking over to Dylan, she looked up at me, smiling. “Hey.”

“Did Jonah and Chase leave?”

“Yeah, they said they had another event to attend and didn’t want to interrupt your session.”

I was glad they were gone because I wanted to talk to Dylan alone.

Dylan stood, placing her laptop in her bag. “How did it go?”

“Good. He was hesitant initially.” I was practically bursting with pride, wanting to share my success with her. As usual, fear of discovery held me back. I wasn’t sure I could trust her even though I wanted to.

She placed the strap of her bag onto her shoulder. “Did you say something that helped? I noticed you talked to him for a moment by yourself.”

There was nothing conniving or manipulative on her face, only genuine curiosity. “I told him I’d stay with him.”

A soft smile spread over her face. “Good. I’m so happy your presence made a difference.”

I felt a little guilty I hadn’t told her the whole truth. I wasn’t ready for that. “I told him I’d come to his weekly lessons.”

Her eyes widened. “That’s not necessary. I know your schedule changes—”

“I will, if it doesn’t conflict with my schedule.”

“I know you didn’t want to do this.” She paused as if gathering her thoughts. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to be here every week or work with the same child or anything like that.”

“I don’t feel like I have to. I want to.” I had a connection with Quinton. Something in his reluctance to seek help reminded me of myself. I was willing to help others. Being there for Quinton felt like something I had to do, as if helping him would somehow heal the wounds from my childhood. It was ridiculous because I’d never forgotten my father’s hateful words.

Dylan’s expression was admiring, proud even. “Good. I’m glad you enjoyed it. I think it’s great you’re connecting with one of the children.”

“I did.” That’s what this feeling was, joy at helping someone, satisfaction at connecting with him on something I’d never been able to share with anyone else.

“Thank you for coming.”

I wasn’t ready to leave yet. I wanted to talk to her, share my feelings with her. I couldn’t without revealing everything. “Thank you for pushing me to do this.”

“I wouldn’t say I pushed you, more like suggested it was a good idea.” She sounded a little defensive as if she didn’t like my characterization of what happened between us.

I didn’t like it either. She saw something in me, even on our blind date. It was like she could see through me, my fears, my desires, the reason I hid from the world. I had this overwhelming desire to tell her everything, to let her in, but it wasn’t the time or place.

“Can I walk you out?” I asked, wanting to ride on the high of this afternoon. I’d helped Quinton, made Dylan proud. I wasn’t by myself anymore. My actions affected others. I could make a difference. I was starting to see why Dylan was so passionate about their work.

“Let me check in with the therapists, then I can go.”

“Great.” I waited while she spoke with each therapist going over each case and the schedule before thanking them. She was courteous, professional, and caring. She wasn’t in this to give her firm a good name, she truly wanted it to be a success.

When she was done, she stood in front of me. “Are you ready?”

I paused, her question seemingly asking more than the obligatory *are you ready to go*. It was as if she was asking if I was ready to be transparent. Was I ready to be the man I’d been hiding all these years? “I am.”

The declaration washed over me, making me shaky with nerves.

“Did you want to eat?” I wasn’t ready to tell her everything. I wanted to tell her something. Give her insight into me, why I was reluctant to talk to the media, why I was so closed off.

“I can’t tonight.” She looked flustered.

Disappointment coursed through me.

“Is it a guy?” I’d assumed she didn’t have one because she hadn’t invited a boyfriend to my game when I offered her my

tickets. Maybe I'd been too presumptuous.

"No. I have a case to prep for trial." She looked up at me as if surprised I'd even asked that question.

I'd been so wrapped up in myself I didn't know much about her personal life. I wanted to rectify that mistake.

I fell into step next to her walking out of the building. A man came out of the front office as we passed. "Ms. Gannon, thank you so much for coming today." Then he looked expectantly from Dylan to me as if he expected an introduction.

"Oh, sorry. Mr. Minor. This is Reid Everson. He volunteered with us today."

He shook my hand. "I'm the principal here. It's so nice to meet you. Good luck in the game this weekend."

I shook his hand. "Thank you. Nice to meet you as well."

"Mr. Everson will be here every Monday when his schedule allows. I'd prefer it if the media didn't find out so he can continue to come." Dylan's voice was professional.

"I'll make sure of it." Mr. Minor said with a bit too much eagerness.

"Thank you. I'll see you next week." Dylan said, her shoulders stiff.

When we were outside, I said, "You don't think I'll be an issue, do you?"

It wouldn't change my promise to Quinton. Attention was the last thing I wanted.

"You mean the fact that you're a football player?"

At my nod, she said, "It won't be. I promise. Even if the media gets wind of it, I don't think it will become a problem. At least I hope not."

I walked with her until she paused by her car.

Dylan tilted her face up to me. "Thanks again."

“You don’t have to keep thanking me. I enjoyed it.” A flash of her kissing my cheek popped into my head, the feel of her lips on my skin, the warmth of her hand singeing a hole through my sweater. I wondered if she’d do it again.

“I’m away this weekend for a game, but I’d like to—” What? Hang out? I was out of practice for asking a woman out on a date. “Take you out.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “We have a standing meeting on Friday nights at the firm.”

I couldn’t fault her for being shocked. I’d been so adamantly against volunteering, helping her. The whole time, I was fighting the inevitable. Since the moment we met, there was something between us, an invisible line pulling us together, drawing us closer. I didn’t want to fight the feeling anymore.

“Is it one you can get out of?” I stepped closer, my mind consumed with the need to see her again, touch her, taste her.

She licked her lips. “I don’t think so.”

“I want to see you again.” She tilted her head back further to meet my gaze.

“Could you do something Thursday night?”

“I can do that. I want to kiss you.” The desire to touch my lips to hers ignited, burning a fire through me.

At her nod, I leaned my head down, kissing her cheek, then letting my stubble draw along her soft cheek, as I kissed her neck, drawing out the anticipation. Finally, I cupped her chin, slowly turning her head so her lips lined up with mine. I brushed her lips once, twice, before swallowing her sigh when her mouth opened. Kissing her turned from sweet to all-consuming. I pressed against her body, wanting to get closer, forgetting for a moment we were on a public street. I forced myself to slow my kisses, pulling back slightly to see how the kiss affected her.

Her lips were swollen, her breath coming in short pants. “Thursday?”

My heart drummed in my chest. “See you then. I’ll pick you up.”

She moved to open the door, her forehead wrinkling. “I live in Annapolis.”

“I don’t mind going to you.”

Her face smoothed as she relaxed, smiling. “I look forward to it.”

I stepped back from the car as she got in. I waited until she waved then pulled away from the curb. This thing with Dylan was starting to feel better than the roar of the crowd when I caught a touchdown pass.

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# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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## REID

ON THE DRIVE TO ANNAPOLIS THURSDAY NIGHT, I TRIED TO calm my nerves by telling myself we'd already been out to dinner a couple of times, we'd met for drinks. I knew Dylan. The thing was she didn't know me. She didn't know my deepest fear, my biggest shame. Was it even possible to keep it a secret from her?

I wondered if I was making a mistake. If I should stop pursuing this thing with Dylan.

I wanted to see her. For the first time in my life, I was close to revealing everything to someone I was interested in. I'd have to be careful tonight.

I'd almost convinced myself I could pretend when I pulled up to the curb in front of a row of historic well-maintained homes, complete with wrought iron railings, pots overflowing with fall flowers on the steps. It was as if each resident was trying to outdo the others with curb appeal. I knocked on Dylan's door.

After a few seconds, she opened the door as she was sliding a hoop into her ear, securing the back. She was barefoot in a sleek silver dress. "Hey! I just need to grab my purse. Come in for a second."

Dylan was flustered. I'd never seen her when she wasn't one-hundred-percent put together. I kind of liked that I made her off-center. I stepped inside, surveying the small quaint home. Hardwood floors gleamed, a railing led up narrow stairs presumably to the bedrooms. I waited in the living room where

a couch and two armchairs were positioned in front of a fireplace framed with bookshelves. I stepped closer to see better.

There were numerous photos of a younger Dylan with friends at what looked to be a high school graduation, friends in a dorm at college, her law school graduation. That picture she was flanked by two older people, most likely her parents. They were beaming as if they were proud of her. I was happy she had two supportive parents.

“Hey.” Her voice was soft, a tremor of something in her tone. Nerves maybe?

I turned to take her in. She stood several inches taller with simple black heels, her legs toned, the dress outlining every curve I wanted to familiarize myself with.

“You’re—” I cringed at my wobble on the *r* sound. “Stunning.”

My face burned hot. I looked around scouring my brain for an excuse, a reason to leave, but there was no good reason. Not one that would keep me in her life. I squared my shoulders. I wouldn’t acknowledge the error. If she asked about it, I’d have to be honest.

Avoiding her eyes, I said, “One of my teammates mentioned a sushi place, one we wouldn’t need to call ahead.”

She smiled, stepping closer to me, going up on tiptoes, stealing my breath when she kissed the corner of my mouth. Then she murmured across my lips, “That sounds perfect.”

My hand instinctively gripped her waist, the warmth of her skin radiating through the material of her dress. I wanted to pull her against me, letting her feel how her nearness affected me. I didn’t. I wanted to be a gentleman.

I let go of her, hoping she hadn’t noticed my slip. I’d need to be on guard the rest of the night.

After she locked her door, she asked, “Can we walk there?”

“It’s only a few blocks. It’s up to you.” I nodded toward her heels.

“It’s a beautiful night. Let’s walk.”

“Okay.” When she smiled at me like that, sweet and trusting, I’d do anything she asked. She tucked her hand into my elbow, leaning against my side. The feel of her body against mine was better than handholding, better than anything I’d ever experienced. A sensation slid through my body like drinking hot tea on a cold day, warming me from the inside out.

She tilted her head up at me.

“How do you feel?” I wanted to know what was going through her mind. What made her eyes soft? Was it me?

“I’m happy.”

“Yeah? Being with me makes you happy?” Her words made me feel invincible.

She raised her brow, tensing as if she was prepared to argue with me if necessary. “Yes. Is that so hard to believe?”

“A little bit.” Had the slip of my tongue earlier in her living room broken the dam between us, leaving behind any pretense of space? I wanted to enjoy tonight, letting the night unfold how it was meant to.

“Well, it’s true.” She smiled, more relaxed than I’d ever seen her.

It struck me that despite her outgoing personality, her eyes were usually guarded. Tonight, they weren’t. They were a gateway to her soul, one I hoped to take.

We stopped in front of a sushi restaurant. I was so out of practice I hadn’t asked her if she even liked sushi. I’d mentioned it at her house. She hadn’t said anything. Maybe she was being polite. “This was my idea, but if you don’t like sushi—”

She squeezed my arm. “No. I love sushi.”

I opened the door for her, relaxing. I hadn't realized how much I wanted this evening to be perfect. "Let's go inside then."

She smiled at me before sliding under my arm, asking the hostess for a table for two. There was a small wait. I gave the hostess my name, waiting off to the side. Tonight, I wanted to be anonymous. Just me and her. Nobody else. No favors, no special treatment. Two real people getting to know each other.

It was crowded, the waiters walking by us with trays of food. I braced my legs, pulling her closer to me so they could pass by without running into her. It was a good excuse to feel her body against mine, her ass pressed against my leg, her head under my chin, so I could smell the coconut in her hair. I wasn't just happy, I was content.

I wasn't worried about the upcoming game, whether I'd done enough reps or watched enough plays to prepare. I was in the moment with her.

We stood in silence, the din of the crowd too loud for us to hear each other. When the hostess called my last name, we followed her to a table in the back. Then she handed us the menus before leaving us alone.

"Did you ask for a secluded table?" she asked.

"No. I didn't. I wanted tonight to be about us, not my job, not my name."

A sweet smile spread over her face as she opened the menu. "I like that."

*I like you.*

"People don't know my name outside the city. In Annapolis, we can be somewhat anonymous."

"Do they hound you in the city?" She lowered her menu to look at me.

"Not me so much. But they've followed Chase home. When he stopped to ask why, the fans said they wanted to know if it was his home."

"That's kind of creepy."

“It is. But fans make my life possible. We make so much money playing a game.”

A look of understanding passed over her face. “That’s true. It must be hard to be gracious to people following you though, taking pictures, wanting to know every private detail of your life.”

“Until now, I wasn’t that—” I paused trying to think of the word.

“Interesting?”

I nodded, grateful she’d filled it in for me.

“So, you’re saying that I make you interesting.” She gestured to herself, batting her eyelashes.

“Not exactly. I think you’re fascinating enough for both of us.” I rushed through the sentence, glossing over *you’re*. This was the reason I avoided dates, one-on-one time with women. Screwups were inevitable. It was only a matter of time before she asked me about it.

She covered my hand with hers. “The things you say are so sweet. It’s like you’re not real.”

I let her comment go even though I wanted to know why she thought a man who was up front about his interest was rare. We had plenty of time to delve deeper. Once I knew everything about her, she’d want to know everything about me.

“It’s unlikely anyone’s following us. They won’t expect us in Annapolis.” I gestured around us.

“Not yet. But they might in the future.”

“If the implication is a second date, then I hope so.”

“I think it’s our third, but it’s safe to say, I’d like to see you again.” Her cheeks flushed.

I wondered if it was from the sake she’d ordered or if she worried she’d said too much. “I’d love that.”

We ordered an assortment of rolls for us to share. We spoke about my upcoming game, her progress with Kids

Speak.

“This looks amazing.” Dylan’s eyes shined with appreciation.

We each placed rolls on our perspective plates, commenting on which ones were spicy.

I hadn’t planned for it but it was romantic to share a meal. She’d mention one roll was so amazing I had to try it. Then she’d watch while I picked it up with my chopsticks before biting it. When I agreed it was good, she’d smile, reaching for another roll.

Even if it wasn’t good, I’d say it was to keep that smile on her face. I paid attention to what made her happy, what she liked, cataloging it for later.

I wanted to make this woman happy. Other than looking out for my family, Callie, and her grandfather, I’d never gotten close enough to anyone else to say that. A sense of trepidation formed in my stomach. I hoped I wasn’t moving too fast, making a huge mistake.

Dylan leaned back in her chair, covering her stomach. “Soy sauce always makes me feel bloated. It’s so worth it though.”

I pushed her water glass closer to her. “The soy sauce is salty.”

“You’re right. More water, less sake.” She took a long drink of water before setting her glass down. “Thank you for inviting me tonight. I’m having a great time.”

“You want to take a walk?” It was on the tip of my tongue to suggest we go back to her place. I wasn’t ready for that level of intimacy yet. The more I let those walls down the more I’d let her in. I needed more time to figure out whether I could trust her.

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# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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## DYLAN

“I’D LOVE THAT.” SOMETHING ABOUT REID WAS DIFFERENT tonight. He wasn’t as guarded. He wasn’t as tense. Whether it was taking him out of his element, bringing him somewhere new, or this was the real him, I wasn’t sure.

He held his hand out to me, interlacing his fingers with mine as we walked out of the restaurant. He’d pronounced a word oddly when he’d picked me up. It happened so quickly I wasn’t sure if I’d imagined it. He was probably just nervous.

I’d gone from needing him to be Kids Speak’s spokesman to wanting to spend time with him. If he opened up to me, told me more about himself, the moment would be that much sweeter. I was prepared to be patient. I wasn’t in a hurry to jump in bed with him even if that’s what my body wanted.

I wanted more than a one-night stand or a short affair. I wanted everything. As we walked toward the water, I shivered.

He shrugged off his light jacket, arranging it around my shoulders.

“Thank you.”

He gestured toward the harbor. “You want to watch the boats?”

“Yeah.” The air was cooler since it was fall. I should have brought a jacket. Thought it was nice to be surrounded with the scent of Reid’s cologne.

Instead of holding my hand, he put his arm around my shoulder, tucking me into his side. We were able to maneuver



through the crowd easier. His body heat warmed me up.

Once we arrived at city dock, the benches were filled with couples and families enjoying the evening. Reid walked to the edge of the pier, pulling me in front of him. It was like we were the only ones here. With his arms surrounding me, I was wrapped up in him, literally and figuratively.

I wanted to close my eyes, soaking all of it in, despite the beauty of the boats, the masts decorated with twinkling lights reflecting on the water.

He leaned down whispering in my ear. “The view is beautiful.”

I could imagine him laying me down on a bed, kissing me until I was mindless, worshiping me with his mouth. He seemed like a man who tried hard to please the person he was with. It made me think he’d be attentive in bed. I wanted to be the center of his world. I wanted him to let me in.

I turned in his arms, touching the side of his face. His arms bracketed me, blocking us from curious eyes. I tugged on the hair at the nape of his neck encouraging him to lower his face down so I could kiss him. The kiss was slow and sensual, a promise of things to come. Desire coiled in my belly, my legs weak. When I was about to suggest we head home, he pulled away slightly.

“I have to get up early. I should take you home.”

“Okay.” I didn’t mind the anticipation, waiting for the right moment. I knew with Reid it would come. Eventually, there wouldn’t be anything between us, secrets or otherwise.

We walked home, navigating through the crowd, enjoying the night. When we reached my door, Reid paused. “I’d like to come in—”

“I get it. You have to be up early.”

His face was filled with longing, making our parting easier. I loved that he wanted to be with me as much as I wanted to be with him.

“Text me when you get home?”

He kissed me, soft and sweet. “I will.”

“Good luck this weekend.”

He pulled away to see my face, holding my hands. “Will you watch the game?”

“I have to say it will be the first time I intentionally watch a game on TV. I’ll be cheering for you.”

“I liked having you at my game on Sunday. I like knowing you’ll be watching.” He kissed me once more before jogging down my stairs to his SUV.

Watching him walk away made me wonder if I was the right person for him. If my parents needed me, would he be okay with that? Or would he resent my focus on my family, putting their needs before my own? A professional football player was used to being the sole focus of the people in his life. If he couldn’t get that from me, would he walk away?

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# CHAPTER NINETEEN

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## DYLAN

FRIDAY NIGHT, WE HAD OUR WEEKLY CHAMPAGNE MEETING IN the office. The tradition started when we'd painted the office, celebrating the opening of the firm with champagne. It was more like takeout and wine these days. Our meetings mainly consisted of discussing new clients, cases, the status of Kids Speak's programs. We were so busy during the week we didn't have time to touch base often.

"How's it going in Baltimore?" Avery asked.

I hadn't had an opportunity to speak to her about it in weeks. When I was in the office she was in a meeting or court. I straightened in my seat, excited to talk about the progress. "Great for our first week. We held sessions at two schools with more scheduled for next week."

"Do you plan on being at each meeting?" Hadley sipped her wine.

"I tried to schedule things so I could make the first one at each school. After that, there will be too many for me to attend each one." I didn't mention I intended to attend Quinton's lessons on Mondays because Reid would be there. I love seeing him connect with the boy.

Hadley placed a finger on her chin as if she was thinking. "I don't think it's necessary. You can touch base with therapists, the school, and parents without being physically present. If there's a problem at a particular school, then you might need to."

“I like going, seeing the kids progress. It’s satisfying.” The past few weeks were challenging, but seeing those kids getting necessary services was rewarding. It felt like I was doing something good.

“It is,” Hadley agreed.

“There’s this one child who seemed shy at first. Reid saw something else I think.”

“What do you mean?” Avery asked, getting more comfortable in her chair.

“Reid talked to him by himself. Whatever he said encouraged him to participate in the session. His therapist said she’s worried the boy won’t participate if Reid isn’t there.”

“Is he planning on being at each session?” Hadley asked.

“He said he was. Mondays tend to be rest days for them. They’d watch tape or have a light practice.”

Avery shot me an uneasy look. “Hopefully, he doesn’t change his mind.”

“I’m hoping this connection will make him more amenable to doing more for the organization.” It warmed my heart that he’d connected with Quinton. That he was making an effort to be at his session each week.

It made me think of that moment in my living room when he seemed to stumble over a word. I wanted to bring it up with the girls, but I didn’t. Something told me if he did have an issue with speaking, he was intensely private. He wouldn’t want anyone to know.

Hadley looked down at her notepad as if she was going down her list of things to discuss. “Have you spoken to him about being the spokesman?”

“He’s shot me down every time I’ve brought it up.” I chewed the inside of my cheek, unsure how I was going to be successful when he’d been so adamantly against speaking in general.

“When we met the guys at the yacht club it seemed like there was something between you.”

I put a bite of food in my mouth so I wouldn't have to answer right away. I wasn't sure I was prepared to share we'd gone on a date last night. Not when it was so fresh in my mind. His arms around me as we looked over the water, his lips on mine, his sweet words, promises of another date. When he was vulnerable like he was last night, I wanted to wrap my arms around him, protect him from people who wanted to use him. The thing was, wasn't I doing the same thing by pushing him to be a spokesman?

"Is it going to be a problem to work with him?" Avery asked.

I swallowed, drinking a large sip of wine. "Of course not."

Hadley leaned her elbows on the table, her checklist forgotten. "Did you have a connection with him on that blind date?"

I laughed in denial even as I remembered the moment I saw him, the jolt that traveled through my body at the impact of him in a suit, his eyes, his soft words. He'd wrapped himself around my heart during the one meal, making me want something I shouldn't, a man to date, someone who could potentially be mine.

I'd used him for what he could do for me and the organization. I still wanted things from him that had nothing to do with him as a person. Guilt coursed through me when I remembered how he'd said everyone wanted something from him. "Even if he liked me, which he doesn't, we're business associates, partners, whatever. It wasn't a real date."

Last night was as real as it gets.

"I didn't ask if he liked you. I asked if you liked him."

I thought carefully about what I should say. Should I admit my attraction? Would an affirmation make them back off? I wasn't used to talking to my friends about my relationships. I didn't want them asking why I shied away from anything serious. "He's good-looking."

"So, you are attracted to him?" Hadley's voice was lighter, a smile playing on her lips.

“Anyone would be. He’s a hot football player. What’s not to like?” I shrugged my shoulders as if I hadn’t just admitted to something deeply personal. He wasn’t just a guy who was attractive. Something about him touched me in a way no one else had.

Avery pointed a finger at me. “You don’t care about status or money.”

I didn’t. I had money, a trust fund. It’s not that I wasn’t appreciative of my advantages in life, but I didn’t seek it out in other people. I didn’t need or want that from a partner. I hadn’t spent much time thinking about what I did want, because being with someone meant letting them in, telling them about my parents. It wasn’t an option. Family came first. I’d made that mistake with my last boyfriend, Pierce. When it came time to take the relationship to the next level, I couldn’t without him asking more questions I wasn’t prepared to answer.

“He intrigues me.” Honesty made my limbs loose, my words flow freer. “We’re very different. I’m outgoing and social. He’s quiet and avoids people.”

Even after our date last night, I worried we were too different. That in the end, he’d decide I was too much for him. He’d retreat to his lonely existence, only hanging out with his teammates, Callie, and his family.

Hadley rolled her eyes. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

Annoyed she dismissed my concerns so easily, I asked, “What are you talking about? That’s everything. If we have nothing in common, if he doesn’t like the core of who I am as a person, how could we work?”

Hadley looked around, probably to make sure no one was listening, before she lowered her voice. “Does he know who you are?”

“We had dinner together. We talked.”

Her eyes narrowed. “So, you told him about yourself, your friends, your family, your dreams and hopes on the first date?”

I felt slightly ashamed that I'd treated our first date as a business meeting. Had Reid gone into that date with a different mindset? Even last night I hadn't opened up about my family. We'd kept conversation light, surface level. "Not exactly. We talked about Kids Speak."

"You showed him your passion for Kids Speak, which is something, it's not everything. I'm not even sure I've seen all the sides of you yet." Hadley seemed so sure of herself.

Had I shown him myself last night? I hadn't talked about my family. Was Hadley right? Would he like me if I told him everything?

Hadley exchanged a look with Avery before addressing me, "This is good."

"What is?"

"You working with Reid. You can get to know him, see if something's there."

"I don't want a relationship." I hadn't dated since Pierce. He didn't like it when I'd leave when my father called. He didn't understand why I needed to visit them each week. At the time, my mom's speech had deteriorated because of her MS. She couldn't meet him then. He wouldn't wait. Part of that was I couldn't explain why he couldn't meet them yet. He assumed I wasn't as serious about the relationship as he was.

Avery shrugged. "Who said you need one? Maybe he's just what you need—a fling, something fun. No pressure."

"Maybe." What would they say if they knew we'd gone out last night? It hadn't felt like a fling, it felt like the beginning of something huge.

"You never know when you're going to meet someone who changes everything, your perspective, your focus," Avery said thoughtfully.

I shivered at her words despite the warmth of the sun on my face. "I'm focused on Kids Speak and the firm."

Hadley pointed a finger at me. "Those things are important, but it's nice to have someone to come home to,



share your day with.”

When Avery changed the subject, asking Hadley a question about a case she had, I allowed myself to imagine what it would be like if I had someone to call on the way home to talk to about my day. If I had someone to talk about my worries concerning my parents. Would the tension in my shoulders ease? Would I feel lighter, better able to handle things?

My phone dinged with a text from Reid.

**Reid: Hope you're having a good night. I'm headed to bed. We're traveling early tomorrow.**

**Dylan: Champagne Friday's in full swing. Good luck this weekend. Let me know when you land.**

**Reid: I will.**

I smiled, placing the phone faceup on the table in case he messaged again.

He knew nothing about my family or how much they needed me. I'd have to keep him at arm's length. I shouldn't be drawing him in too far.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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## DYLAN

I HEADED HOME AFTER BRUNCH WITH MY PARENTS TO CATCH the game. Settling on the couch in Reid's jersey and leggings, I propped my feet on the coffee table, texting him, **Good luck in the game today. I'll be watching.**

I wasn't expecting a response.

**Reid: I was just putting my phone in the locker when you texted. I'll be thinking of you.**

**Dylan: You should be thinking of football.**

**Reid: Even if thoughts of you make me play better?**

**Dylan: I can't argue with that logic.**

Was he being cute or was it true? Did I make him play better? On our blind date, he'd mentioned not wanting to lose focus on football. That's why he didn't let anyone get close. I didn't want to be the reason his priorities changed any more than I wanted him to change mine. Or did I?

Then I texted Avery and Hadley, telling them my parents had an interesting idea for Kids Speak. They said they might come over to talk.

I watched the pregame commentary, hoping to learn a few things while I waited for Avery and Hadley.

An hour later, they knocked.

I answered the door to find them holding grocery bags. "Wow. You brought a lot of food."

Avery arranged things on the dining room table, opening a large tray of cannoli. “I wasn’t sure what to get, so I got everything. Nachos, fruit, veggies, fried chicken.”

“I’m not super hungry. I just had brunch with my parents.”

I leaned on the dining room table as Avery opened the containers of food.

I wondered if I should talk to them about my parents, and Reid. The conflict I felt between my obligation to them and my relationships. “I told them I was seeing Reid. It was only one official date, but we’ve spent time together because of Kids Speak, we text and talk otherwise.”

“You are? When did that happen?” Hadley placed a hand on her hip.

“You were holding out on us.” Avery reached over to smack my arm.

“He kissed me on Monday after the session at school then asked me out to dinner. We went to a sushi restaurant on Thursday. I didn’t want to say anything Friday because it was so new.” I had a few days to process. Now I wanted to share with friends.

“We’ll forgive you if you tell us everything from now on,” Hadley said.

“What did your parents’ think?” Avery piled a paper plate high with nachos before taking a seat on the couch, the announcers speaking in the background.

“That I should be careful. They don’t want our relationship interfering with my job, Kids Speak, them.” I grabbed a lime seltzer, having a seat in my armchair.

“What do you mean?” Avery wiped cheese off her chin.

“He’s a celebrity. Any bad press will affect Kids Speak, the firm.”

“He doesn’t seem like one of those guys who’s in the press for the wrong reasons,” Hadley said.

I sighed, debating whether I should tell them everything. I could trust them. I needed to talk to someone about it. “It’s not just that. My parents don’t like me talking about what’s going on with them. They keep everything private. My mom has a health issue, one that’s unpredictable. It causes them a lot of stress. I visit them weekly to check in, make sure they’re doing okay.”

Hadley moved to sit on the edge of the couch nearest to me. “I’m sorry. We had no idea.”

“It’s something that bothers you?” Avery asked.

“Yes.” The weight of shouldering their health issues, both physical and mental were exhausting. I already felt lighter talking to them.

“You’ve never talked to anyone about it?” Avery placed her plate of nachos on the coffee table.

“No.”

“Wow. That must be tough. We’re here for you if you want to talk about it.”

“Thanks guys. I appreciate it.” Somehow, I felt less guilty not telling them the specifics of her illness.

Avery gave me a pointed look. “That’s what friends are for. That’s what you told me when I started trusting you with personal stuff.”

It was a reminder I needed. I couldn’t shoulder everything myself. “It’s not something I’m used to.”

Avery’s gaze met mine. “I get that. I didn’t trust anyone until recently either. But I found that things are better when you can share them, talk it out with someone.”

I already felt better, some of the tension eased from my shoulders. “My parents mentioned they have holiday galas for their charities each year. It’s a way to thank your investors and volunteers, drum up excitement for the progress you’ve made, even get more donations.”

“That’s an interesting idea,” Avery said.

“It would be a lot to plan, especially with the firm being so new,” Hadley said.

“It could be amazing.” I wasn’t sure why I was pushing it when it was adding to my responsibilities. I’d seen how successful the galas were for my parents. It could be the same for us.

“We’ll help you plan it.”

I held up my hand, feeling bad. I wanted to talk to them, not make them feel like they had to offer their help when they were busy with their own things. “No. That’s not why I brought it up. I don’t want you to shoulder the responsibility.”

“We’re in this together.” Hadley briefly touched my shoulder as she walked to the table for more snacks.

The idea of someone helping me plan the party was attractive.

“The game started.” Avery pointed at the TV, settling back on the couch.

Baltimore kicked the ball to Cleveland. Reid wasn’t on the field yet, so I went to get a plate of food since my stomach had settled. It would be nice to have help, to have someone to talk to.

“I wish Callie were here to explain things to us,” Hadley said.

“We should have invited her.” I enjoyed her company at the game.

“She doesn’t travel with Reid to the game, does she?” Hadley asked.

“I have no idea.”

“If not, we should bring her into the fold. She seemed cool,” Hadley said before turning her attention to the TV.

We watched the game in silence for a few minutes, watching Baltimore’s offense march down the field.

When Reid scored a touchdown, I threw my hands in the air, proud of him. I watched his end zone dance with Chase

before pointing at the replay. “Did you see that? He’s so big he just ran over those guys.”

Avery covered her face. “Oh my God. Not only do you have it bad, you’re turning into one of those crazy fans. Next thing you know you’ll be wearing face paint.”

I’d be happy to sit at the game cheering for Reid. I wanted to be there for him. “I’m only crazed for Reid.”

Avery smirked. “You and a football player. I never would have guessed.”

“Me neither. I haven’t exactly been available the last few years. My parents don’t want anyone to know about Mom’s illness so I can’t bring anyone home. Eventually, men want to meet your family, come to the brunch I attend every Sunday.”

“So, you don’t let anything get too serious?” Hadley asked.

“Basically. I also haven’t met anyone I’d consider changing those rules for.”

Avery shifted on the couch to face me. “Is Reid the guy?”

“I want him to be so badly. I want to lean on him. I want to tell him everything going on in my world.” After admitting my issues with my parents, I felt freer talking to them about Reid. It felt great.

When I researched him, all I discovered was that he was raised by a single mom and has two younger sisters,” Hadley said, her attention on the game.

A chill ran through me. “That’s all I know.”

Should I know more about him by now? Although it probably wasn’t fair to judge when I’d told him nothing about mine.

“Maybe if you open up to him. He’ll open up to you,” Avery said.

“You had trouble opening up to Griffin, right?” I remembered her struggle when she started dating Griffin, how he’d eased in slowly, touring Annapolis with his nephew, getting to know her before asking her out.

“Every time I’d push him away, he was so patient and understanding. If Reid is the guy for you, he should give you a little time.”

“You need to know things about each other to have a good relationship. You can’t keep stuff from him either,” Hadley said.

“I know.” I wanted to tell him but I was worried how he’d react.



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# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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## REID

I'D SHOWERED AND EATEN DINNER WITH THE OTHER PLAYERS quickly, wanting to get back to my room to talk to Dylan. My roommate Jonah went out with the rest of the guys to a club. I rarely went out after dinner, preferring to stay in. Settling on my hotel bed in a T-shirt and athletic pants, my phone buzzed.

**Dylan: Good game today.**

My heart picked up seeing her name on my screen, knowing she'd watched the game as promised.

**Reid: You watched?**

**Dylan: I told you I would. The girls came over with food. It was fun.**

**Dylan: I was so proud of you when you scored.**

Happiness surged through me that not only had she watched, she'd cheered me on. **I told you I play better when you watch.**

**Dylan: You have millions of fans. Surely, one more doesn't make a difference.**

**It does.** I wondered what she was doing. If she was in bed. We were a couple hours ahead of her in Seattle, so it must have been ten p.m. at home.

**Reid: Can I call you?**

The response came and went with the appearing, disappearing bubbles before she finally said, **Yes.**

Dialing her number for a video call, I hoped she'd accept. I needed to see her.

"Hey," she answered with a happy smile on her face, her hair up in a messy bun, her face devoid of makeup. Cocking her head, she asked, "Video call, huh? I pegged you as a text only guy."

She wore a barely there tank. I was distracted wondering whether she wore a bra under it. "Why is that?"

She chewed her lip as if she was thinking of an answer. "Most people are these days."

"I'm not most people."

"I'm getting that. You're not a stereotypical football player, you care about the kids. What else don't I know about you Reid Everson?" Her lips tipped up into a smile.

I loved when she said my full name. It rolled off her lips, almost always accompanied a smirk, as if she knew everything there was to know about me and she liked it. "Not much to tell. Single mom. I check in with my family often."

"What about Callie?" Her tone was softer.

Was Dylan asking because she thought we'd dated at some point? Was she jealous? "What about Callie?"

"You're close to her."

"We haven't dated."

"She told me the same thing."

"She's like a sibling. Callie's mom and dad died when she was in high school."

"That's sad. I'm sorry. She's lucky to have you looking out for her." Dylan's voice was filled with sympathy.

I wanted to mention that she went to live with her grandfather, Frank, but it was too many *r*'s. I wanted to tell her about him even though I'd never told anyone about my relationship with him. I'm sure Frank told Callie I visited even though she never mentioned it.

“This is going to sound crazy—” She bit her lip as if she was uncertain whether she should finish her sentence.

“What?” My cock twitched in my pants when she shifted. I saw her nipple through her tank top.

“I missed you.”

*I missed you.* I don’t think I’d ever heard a better combination of words. Her blue eyes darkened.

“I missed you too.”

“Thursday night was so amazing.” Her tone was wistful.

“I’d like to see you again.” I liked seeing her in a casual setting, like she was now, soft and relaxed.

“I would too.”

Hope surged through me that she was real, she wasn’t out for something, she wanted me. “Maybe we could toss a football.”

The words were out of my mouth before I could think about them.

“Okay. Did you want to meet at a park? I can pack some casual clothes when I come into the city or would you prefer the weekend?”

“Monday’s my light day. I join Quinton at his speech lesson, then I’m available.”

“That works.”

“I’ll handle the details.” I’d thought of an idea while I was warming up today for the game. I was excited to share something that was important to me.

“Sounds good.” Then she yawned, tipped her head back. “Sorry, I didn’t realize how tired I was.”

“Go to sleep, Dylan.” Tenderness for her wrapped around my heart. I wished I was with her, that we were at the point where I could cuddle up in bed with her.

“Kay. Night.” She smiled before sinking down under her covers. With one last wink, she hung up.

I wanted to pull my cock out of my pants, fisting it. The only thing holding me back was that Jonah could walk in at any moment.

This thing with Dylan made me feel like I was in high school, excited to talk on the phone with my first crush. I wanted to give in to the feeling, enjoy every moment.

I pushed any negative thoughts out of my head like I did when I was preparing for a game. I visualized us together, kissing in front of her car, holding her by the water, watching the boats going by, listening to the sounds of the water lapping on the dock. I wanted to hold on to those moments. Each one more perfect than the last. When we were together, it felt right. I wanted it to stay that way.



WE LANDED AT BALTIMORE'S AIRPORT AFTER LUNCH ON Monday. I rode the team bus into the city, driving my car back to my condo to unpack. I showered so I didn't smell like an airplane. I was eager to see Dylan. It had been a long five days.

I'd thought about Quinton on the plane, trying to come up with ways to motivate him. I saw myself in him. I wanted better for him than I had. I didn't want him living in fear of people finding out or making fun of him. I wanted him to be proud of who he was, never afraid to speak.

I stopped in the elementary school's office to get a visitor pass before walking to the cafeteria where the program was held after school. Anticipation hummed in my veins to see Dylan.

I paused in the doorway to the cafeteria. Quinton stood uncertainly in front of his therapist. I walked toward him, hunching down next to him, lowering my voice so Mrs. Sweeney wouldn't hear my *r*, "Hey, buddy. Sorry I was a little late. We flew in today."

He turned to me, a smile on his face. "You play football. I saw your game."

“Yeah.”

“I saw your touchdown. It was so awesome. You plowed over those guys.” Quinton felt more comfortable with me each time I saw him. I wondered if talking about football made talking easier.

Dylan came to stand next to Mrs. Sweeney, in a silky button down top tucked into a tight skirt, heels accentuating her toned legs. Dylan’s lips twitching into a smile.

Happy to see her, I wanted to reach over to kiss her. I wished we were alone. That I could show her how much I’d missed her over the weekend.

“Quinton, congratulate Mr. Everson on his win then let’s get to work,” Mrs. Sweeney said.

I pulled out a chair for Quinton.

“I’ll let you get to it.” Dylan walked away.

I wanted to watch her go. Instead, I kept my gaze on Quinton. I wanted him to know he was important to me. He was my priority when I was here.

I listened to their back and forth, prodding Quinton when he seemed scared to speak. When Mrs. Sweeney said we should take a break, I asked if it was okay if we tossed a football around for a few minutes out back. There was a door from the cafeteria to what looked like a playground. A bin of balls by the door, presumably for when the kids went out for recess. She said it was fine if Dylan agreed.

I stood. “Get a coat. Let’s see if we can go outside.”

Dylan sat at a long table, her fingers tapping on the keys.

I leaned over, bracing one hand on the back of her chair, one on the table in front of her.

“Do you mind if I take Quinton outside to play? He could use a minute.”

Dylan blinked up at me. “Sure.”

I winked at her, my eyes dropping to her lips which parted in surprise. Then I stood, placing a hand on Quinton’s shoulder

to head outside.

Knowing I could speak freely in front of Quinton, I relaxed. I grabbed a basketball from the bin, handing it to Quinton, then dug around for a football. “Can you believe this? There’s one football.”

I tested it in my hands, throwing it from one to the other before tossing it in the air. It was really beat up. I’d need to buy some balls and leave them the next time I came.

I pushed open the door, the fall sun warming us as we stepped outside. “Basketball or football?”

Quinton smiled. “Basketball.”

“You’re killing me, kid. Alright, let’s play basketball.” I threw the football off to the side, walking toward the net. Quinton dribbled the ball, squaring up for a shot.

I hadn’t played basketball in a long time but I knew the basics. I watched his teeth bite his lower lip as he focused.

The ball hit the rim bouncing wide. I grabbed the rebound tossing it lightly to him. “Great job. This time don’t be afraid to jump. You’ll get more power from your legs.”

Quinton nodded, his face one of concentration. He shot for a few minutes while I ran around the court grabbing the rebounds. When his last one swished through the net, I walked the rebound to him.

“Great job, buddy. That was awesome.” He held his hands out for the ball.

I kept it tucked on my hip. “I’m going to tell you a secret.”

He looked up at me with a solemn expression. “Okay.”

“When I prepare for a game, I visualize catching the ball, weaving through coverage, running for a touchdown.” I gestured with my hands, realizing the jargon was probably over his head.

“You do?” He cocked his head as if trying to figure out if I was telling him the truth.

“It sounds silly but it really helps. It’s like saying to yourself...” I tried to think of something that would motivate him when he was playing sports or worried about saying a letter wrong. “I’m brave. I’m strong. I can do it. If you say you can’t, you won’t. It’s that simple.”

His eyes widened as if he wasn’t sure if he could believe me.

“You’re brave. You’re strong. You can do it.” I lowered my voice, emphasizing each word.

“You ready to head back inside?”

Quinton’s face filled with determination as he nodded.

When we approached Mrs. Sweeney’s table, she asked, “Are we ready to continue?”

“Absolutely.”

Quinton seemed to pull himself together, turning to Mrs. Sweeney. “I’m ready.”

The rest of the session went smoothly. When he was finished, I told him I’d see him next week. While I waited for Dylan to change so we could head out for our date, I leaned against the wall, scrolling through my phone.

“Are you ready to go?” Dylan asked.

I looked up, tucking my phone into my pocket. She wore black leggings that clung to her legs like a second skin, a purple Baltimore T-shirt peeking out of a light-colored jean jacket. She looked adorable. I wanted to ask her if she’d bought the shirt because of me.

The thought made my fingers tingle with the need to pull her close to me.

“You look good.” It was an understatement when I was picturing her like this all the time. Casual in my condo, wearing nothing but my jersey in bed. I swallowed hard, trying to erase that image since we were standing in the hallway of an elementary school.

“I wasn’t sure what to wear for our football date.”



“This works for what I have planned.” I’d thrown a team hoodie in my SUV in case she got cold. I kind of hoped she would so I could offer it to her. Maybe she’d even steal it, adopting it as her own. The image of her in nothing but my hoodie popped into my head.

“You buy the hoodie—?”

She flushed. “After we met.”

“I would have gotten you one if you’d asked.” Something twinged in my heart that she wanted to buy my team shirt. She was proud of the team and hopefully of me.

We walked side by side, not touching on the way out. I held the door open for her, my gaze dropping to her ass when she passed in front of me.

“What did you say to him?” She stopped on the sidewalk in front of the school.

“Say to who?” My mind was still on the way her ass was outlined in her pants. I nearly groaned. Was she wearing a thong or nothing at all?

“Mrs. Sweeney said Quinton did amazing during the second half of his session. She wondered if you’d said something to him.”

“I think that’s between me and Quinton, don’t you?” I teased, falling in step next to her.

“I’d love to know what you said that helped.”

“I told him I visualize the play before it happens. I told him to say—” I paused, practicing in my head before I continued, “I’m brave. I’m strong. I can do it.”

I hadn’t realized how cheesy it would sound to an adult as opposed to saying it to a seven-year-old. I was just happy the words came out mostly right. I held open my SUV door for her, hoping she wouldn’t make fun of me.

Her eyes shined with admiration before she climbed into my SUV. “Wow.”

I closed the door, rounding the hood to get in the driver's seat.

"I'm impressed. You're great with him. You have experience you can pass on. Hadley was right. The work ethic and determination it takes to play sports translates into tackling these kids' speech issues."

Pride filled my chest at her words. "I hadn't thought of it like that."

"I know I said this before but thank you for taking an interest in Quinton. Mrs. Sweeney said it's making a huge difference. She's had other kids like him who refuse to participate. Obviously, they don't get anything out of it."

"I'm enjoying it too. I'm happy you pushed me."

She smiled. "I like to think of it as encouragement."

We laughed.

"Where are you taking me?"

I knew she was wondering which city park I'd take her to at dusk. None of them were safe. It was a surprise but I didn't want to press my luck with another *r* word. "I don't want to tell you just yet."

"Oh, a surprise. I like that."

I turned the ignition, pulling away from the curb into traffic. I wanted to take her to my happy place, maybe impress her in the process. We crossed town, pulling into the stadium lot.

"The stadium? Are we going inside? I'm getting a tour?"

I smiled, every muscle in my body vibrating. "Is that okay?"

"That's more than okay." She pulled open her door, stepping down before I could get out.

I grabbed my duffel bag, slinging it over my shoulder before meeting her on the sidewalk.

I held my hand out to her, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

When her fingers interlaced with mine, I felt like a high school kid walking down the hall holding his girl's hand for the first time.

"This is so cool. I can't believe I'm going to get to see the stadium."

"Not just the stadium, the field. You'll get the full effect." There was a lightness in my chest. I loved that she was excited as I was.

I led her through the player's entrance, nodding at security before heading through the tunnel onto the field.

We paused at the entrance. The lights were on as I'd requested. No one was in sight.

"This is amazing. There's no words." She stepped a few feet onto the field, turning in a slow circle, with her arms out. "It's huge."

Her head was tipped back, her eyes closed. I wanted to wrap my arms around her, never letting go.

Instead, I dug the football out of my bag. "Do you want to play?"

She opened her eyes. "I'm warning you, I'm no football player."

I threw the ball in the air, getting a feel for it. "Did you play anything in high school?"

"Softball."

"You'll be fine then."

"Am I supposed to run for it, yell go long or something?" She teased.

I chuckled. "No. We can toss it."

"Oh, okay."

She actually looked disappointed. I wouldn't mind throwing the ball long to watch her run for it. Was she

competitive? Would she go all out, diving or jumping to catch it?

I lobbed the ball to her. She caught it, a triumphant smile on her face. When she threw it back, it wobbled before falling short. “Let me show you.”

I picked up the ball, jogging over to her. I placed my fingertips on the white laces, showing her how to hold it. “This is the way to hold the ball. I know it’s difficult because—”

“My hands are tiny compared to yours?” She chewed her lip, her eyes clear with determination.

I swallowed hard, an image of my hands gripping her hips to pull her onto me or her ass while drilling into her from behind. I pushed the dirty thoughts out of my head, focusing on her.

“You want to do it again?”

“Yes.” She nodded seriously.

I was thinking about getting her naked. She wanted to learn how to throw a football. Handing her the ball, I stepped behind her so I could guide her. I moved closer than I needed to, wanting to feel her heat.

Her hair tickled my chin as I leaned down to cover her hand on the ball with mine. “Just like this.”

“Okay.” Her voice was soft, her breath hitched as if she was as affected as I was.

“Now you do it.” I stepped back, crossing my arms over my chest.

She drew the ball back before letting go.

“Good. Now with some muscle behind it.” I ran to get the ball, bringing it back to her.

She placed a hand on her hip, giving me a sassy look. “Really? Muscle?”

“Let’s see it, Gannon.”

I stood across from her, giving pointers, until she threw the ball in a tight spiral. Then I stepped back further each time. “Looking good.”

“I played center field in softball.”

“I can see that.”

“Thank you. I’m glad I’m not embarrassing myself too much.”

This beautiful woman could never embarrass herself. She was strong, confident, good at whatever she put her mind to.

“You want to go long?”

She nodded eagerly. I checked her feet to make sure she was wearing athletic shoes before pulling my arm back, nodding at her. She took off. I had to force my gaze from her bouncing chest before I threw it. At first it was ahead of her, then she sprinted harder, diving at the last second. It bounced just beyond her fingertips.

I ran to catch up to her. “That was amazing.”

She’d rolled onto her back, gazing up at the sky. “Not catching the ball is amazing?”

I dropped onto my knees next to her, unable to look away from her beautiful face.

Her gaze flicked to me then back to the stars. “This is beautiful.”

I laid next to her, one hand behind my head, the other over my stomach. “It is.”

We laid there, content in the moment.

“Thank you for bringing me here. It’s been the most amazing night. Better than any date I’ve been on.”

I turned my head to her, thinking this girl could be it for me. “It’s not done yet.”

“It’s not?” She stared at me in disbelief.

“Yeah, I got food too.”

She sat up, looking down at me. “You are a romantic. You’re ruining me for anyone else.”

I reached up to stroke her face. I wanted to ask why there would be anyone else, but I couldn’t.

Her gaze was full of sadness, yearning. She leaned down, touching her lips to mine, her hair covering us. I let her take the lead, tentative, exploring, before her tongue tangled with mine, taking the kiss deeper. I wished she’d straddle my hips, but we were in the middle of the field. Anyone could be watching.

She pulled away finally, her eyes soft. “Thank you.”

I raised my brow in question.

“This evening. You.”

“Could you eat?” I’d never wanted to be able to say *you’re welcome* so badly in my life. Every time she thanked me, I nodded in response. It was lame. I hated it.

“Yes. Actually.”

I stood, pulling her with me, gesturing at the to-go bags. “I had Callie get food.”

“Obrycki’s. My favorite. Their crab cakes are the best.”

I led her to the benches on the side of the field meant for the teams during a game. I pulled out the still-warm containers, arranging the food on paper plates.

Once everything was situated, I placed the bags on the floor, sitting next to her.

Crab cake sandwiches weren’t fancy. I’d been craving them. She took a large bite of her sandwich, closing her eyes as if savoring it.

After chewing and swallowing, she opened her eyes. “It’s been a while since I’d eaten their food.”

“I’m glad you like it.” I dug into my own sandwich. I was in my favorite place with the person quickly becoming my favorite person.

We ate quickly not talking about much of anything. “Do you want to get going? It’s getting late. I know you have a long commute home.”

Regretful, I said, “I wish we could stay but Callie said we needed to be out by eight. If you want, we can play again sometime?”

“We could go to a park. I’d love that.” Her tone was wistful.

“Good.” I’d completely misread Dylan when we met. She wasn’t high maintenance. She was real. She wore evening gowns, went to fancy events. She wore sweatshirts and leggings. She was comfortable throwing a ball. When we’d cleared the trash, I grabbed my ball which was still sitting on the turf, tossing it to her.

An image popped into my head of a little girl catching my toss, one with long wavy blonde hair and big blue eyes. It was so real, I had to look away from her.

“Hey, where’d you go just then?”

I wasn’t sure she was ready for where my mind was at. Part of being with Dylan, was taking a risk. Putting myself out there, hoping she’d catch me. Lowering my voice, I said, “I was imagining what things could be like between us.”

“Oh yeah?” Her voice was breezy as if she didn’t mind the serious turn I’d taken.

“Yes.” I managed to say.

She smiled up at me. “I like that.”

“I like it too.” I wasn’t entirely honest with her. I didn’t want to freak her out. This woman was the only one I’d ever let in. It was so easy with her. Almost too good to be true.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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## DYLAN

I WAS TRYING TO FOCUS ON PREPPING A CASE, BUT I COULDN'T get my mind off of last night. It was the best date I'd ever been on. It beat any charity galas, dinners, and walks along the harbor.

I could easily see myself falling for him. The thing holding me back was that we didn't talk much about our past, our family, our hopes and dreams. We had time, but I wanted to probe a little deeper the next time we were together.

Or like Avery suggested, I'd need to open up to him first. If I wanted something with Reid I needed to do more than I had with Pierce.

An email came through from Lena. Opening it, she mentioned bringing the kids onto the field for the Thanksgiving Day game. I tempered my excitement and what it meant for Kids Speak. Instead, I started cataloging what had to be done: get permission slips signed, see if parents would be willing to come with them, or drop them off.

My phone dinged with a text. I smiled seeing it was Reid.

**Reid: How's your day?**

**Dylan: Good.**

**Reid: I wish you lived closer.**

Annapolis was a forty-minute drive from the city depending on traffic. It wasn't easy for him to pop over after practice. **Me too.**

It was a good reminder that my life would always be in Annapolis. His would be in Baltimore or whatever city his career took him to. He couldn't be traded to another city. He was from Louisiana, he admittedly lived there during the off-season. What if he moved there or was traded to another city?

I stood, closing my office door, then video called his number wanting to see him.

"I want to be with you," he said as soon as his face filled the screen.

The sentiment wrapped around my heart, squeezing it. "Me too."

"When can I see you again?" His tone was mixed with frustration and longing.

I tilted my head, trying to remember our schedules. "Thursday night or Saturday night? You're home this weekend."

He smirked. "I didn't know you paid attention to my schedule."

"I pay attention to everything about you. If that makes me seem desperate—" I shook my head. I was falling head over heels for this man. If he backed away now or thought my family was too much, I'd be crushed.

"It doesn't. I feel the same way."

I closed my eyes, reveling in the words I longed to hear. "How's that?"

His eyes filled with emotion. "I want to spend all of my time with you. Even then it still wouldn't be enough."

*I was falling in love with him.* My head felt fuzzy, my fingers tingled. We hadn't even had sex yet, but this man had my heart. I carefully smoothed my expression so he wouldn't see the love on my face. It was too soon for those kinds of declarations, especially when we'd only shown each other what we wanted the other to see.

"You have a way with words."

A dark cloud passed over his wistful expression. His tone was bitter. "I wouldn't say that."

I wanted to confront anyone who'd ever said differently. "It's true. You're sweet and considerate." I wanted to add amazing and loving, but I couldn't, not yet. Not when so much between us remained unsaid.

"I'm not what you think. I'm not someone's ideal guy."

*You might just be perfect for me.* I swallowed down the words. It was too soon. He didn't know enough about me. I knew nothing about him. We were mysteries to each other. It was easy to love when you only showed people your good side, carefully covering the bad, pretending it didn't exist.

I finally settled on, "None of us are."

Reid watched me thoughtfully. "I want to fly my family to a game."

Dread swirled in my gut. If he wanted me to meet his family, he'd want to meet mine. "I thought they couldn't travel because your sisters are in school?"

"We have a game on Thanksgiving. It's a good time since school's closed."

Thanksgiving was still a few weeks away. Introducing me to his family seemed like too much too soon.

"I want you to meet them."

Words most women probably longed to hear. My family made me dread them. "I'd like that."

The words felt wrong on my tongue. Panic filled me. I wanted the easy middle not the complicated long-term relationship issues like spending holidays together, mixing families. I wanted to know what he was hiding yet I didn't want him to know everything about me. I felt unsettled with the realization.

"You're close to your family." He stated it like it was a fact.

There was a roaring in my ears making it difficult to focus on his exact words. “That’s true.”

“Do you spend Thanksgiving with them?”

I saw nothing but genuine interest in his expression even though his questions seemed like a well-executed interrogation. “I do.”

“Do you eat a big meal on the holiday?” Each question, no matter how innocent or well-meaning poked a hole in my armor.

It was traditional, meaning our housekeeper prepared a huge meal the three of us couldn’t eat if we tried. It had always felt lonely, like we were missing something important even if our family was present. What was he working up to? He couldn’t possibly want our families to meet. We’d only been dating a few weeks.

At my nod, he said, “It might not be possible then. I was hoping you could go to the game with them to watch.”

“That’s still a few weeks away. Don’t you think it’s too soon to spend the holiday together?” My face on the screen was deceptively calm yet there was a storm raging in my body with my stomach churning, my palms damp. At the same time, I hoped my resistance to his suggestion didn’t push him away.

“Would they want to come to the game too?” His expression was hopeful.

“They’ve never been before.” That’s when it hit me. I wanted to take our relationship to the next level. I wanted to meet his family. It was my parents holding me back, making me afraid to do something like meet his family.

My dad’s warnings filled my head. What if one of the media outlets picked up on our relationship, our connection through Kids Speak, and tried to make it sound like our relationship precipitated the partnership or that I manipulated him somehow?

“Would you find out if they’d like to come?” His question was so sweet because he didn’t know what his question meant to me.

He didn't realize that he'd asked for the one thing I couldn't guarantee, now or in the future.

I chewed my lip, not ready to tell him. My parents were rigid in their traditions for a reason. Keeping their routine was easier, more predictable. Mom's disease wrecked their carefully constructed life, they didn't want it touching anything else. "Don't you think meeting the family is too soon?"

"The way I feel about you, it's inevitable."

"It may be inevitable but does it need to be now? We just started seeing each other." My words came out strangled due to the panic coursing through my veins. I knew this would happen eventually. I wasn't ready. I wanted to live in our own bubble for a while longer, enjoying each other.

"I suppose not. I thought you might like to." His expression was pained, full of regret as if he was questioning his decision to ask.

My hands felt clammy, the walls were pressing in as I tried to salvage the closeness we had. "I would like to meet your family, learn more about you. I'm not ready for you to meet my family. For them to meet each other."

"Why not?" He looked confused by my answer.

Every muscle in my body tensed, I had to ease my tightly clenched teeth apart to speak, "There's things you don't know —"

He was quiet for a few seconds considering me. "You don't know all the things about me. We can—" He paused as if thinking of the right words.

"Figure it out together?" My chest was tight.

He nodded.

I remained stubbornly silent, not agreeing or disagreeing with his statement. How could he be so sure?

The holidays were coming up. It was foreseeable he'd want to spend it with his family. He had a home game on Thanksgiving Day so they'd probably travel to him. With my

family living nearby it made sense to include them. It was sweet. Any normal girl would probably see it as a sign of his commitment, a confirmation that he was serious about me.

All I could remember was when Pierce wanted more, I couldn't give it to him on his timetable, so he left. The cold uneasy truth slid down my spine, cooling the storm that had been raging.

"It will be okay." His expression was soft, he was leaning forward so his face filled the screen.

"I believe you." I was saying the words, softening toward him. I wanted to believe him more than I wanted to hold on to the way I'd been existing these last few years. The love welling up inside of me threatening to burst, wanting to give him everything he asked for.

"Great. I'll talk to my mom and let you know if they can come. I should let you go. Oh wait, we didn't pick a day yet."

"How about Thursday?" I didn't want to wait until Saturday to see him again.

"That's becoming our night."

The *our* came out sounding like *ow*. Carefully smoothing my face so he wouldn't think I'd noticed I said, "It sure has. Bye, Reid."

I thought he'd said something a little off on our sushi date and now this. It might be nothing. Maybe he was tired. Or it could be a speech impediment. Is that why he was so reluctant to volunteer or be the spokesman? Or was I jumping to conclusions because I worked with speech therapists?

I wanted him to be comfortable to be who he was with me, not who he showed the public. I wanted to know the man under the uniform, the one with flaws, one who could speak freely. The one who'd love me despite my flaws.

I couldn't help imagining what it would be like if my mom didn't have MS, if I was free to make plans. I'd be at his game on Thanksgiving, cheering him on. We could have a big family dinner on a different day. Together we'd make new traditions. It was a world where I'd be available to travel to away games

with him, not worrying about what was happening at home, not braced for the inevitable emergency call.

The desire to have him for myself was all-encompassing. If my parents were in good health and emotionally independent, I could be the woman he needed. The one by his side. The one he needed. The one he deserved. But I wasn't.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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## REID

HANGING UP, I WONDERED IF IT WAS TOO MUCH TOO SOON. Had I pushed Dylan before she was ready? At the football stadium it felt like she was in this with me. After our conversation I wasn't sure. I wanted to see her again, hold her in my arms, reassure myself and her that what we felt when we were together was real. I didn't like the physical distance between us. There seemed to be something else there too.

Then I'd screwed up *our*. Had she noticed? I hated being on guard all the time around her. I should clear the air. I wanted to dispel any doubts she had about me. I wanted her to know everything there was to know about me. Maybe then she'd relax, letting me know what was going on with her.

I vowed to tell her the next time I saw her, regardless of my fears. I'd know if she was the one for me. There was no more delaying the inevitable. It was time for her to know so she could decide for herself if I was worthy of her.



ON THURSDAY EVENING, I WAS MORE NERVOUS DRIVING TO Dylan's house than I was before a playoff game. Everything was at stake. Our relationship. Our future together. If she reacted badly, I'd never recover. I didn't think she would, yet opening myself up was terrifying. She could tell the media. She could tell Lena. She could insist I come forward.

Before our relationship went any further, I needed to tell her, to make sure she was in this for me.

I used her heavy wrought iron knocker on her door to announce my presence. Footsteps came down the hall before the door opened. Dylan was barefoot, her toes painted a pale pink, in skinny jeans and a simple white-T that hung loosely off her one shoulder revealing a flesh-toned bra strap. I'd never seen her more beautiful.

She smiled, transforming her face.

I stepped into her, cupping her cheeks, kissing her like I'd imagined all week when we were separated. When I finally pulled away, she said, "Wow."

"I missed you."

She closed the door behind me. "I missed you too. I'm making dinner."

I'd told her I'd be at her place at six. We hadn't made any plans. It was sweet she'd made dinner. No one had ever cooked for me besides my mother. "You didn't have to do that."

She smiled over her bare shoulder as she walked down the hall. "I wanted to. I wanted a night in."

Every nerve ending in my body tingled as I followed her. The smell of seafood and garlic permeated the small space. The older home had been renovated but none of the original walls knocked down, so each room was separate.

"It smells amazing," I said entering the modern yet cozy kitchen.

"I'm making a seafood medley. I hope you like it. I figured since you ate crab cakes the other day, you weren't allergic to seafood."

"Mmm." All thoughts of telling her the truth, being the man she deserved fell away, until all I could see was her. Her bare neck as she pulled her hair over one shoulder, the dip in her waist, the curve of her hip. I moved until I stood behind her, my hands gripping her hips, tucking my face in her neck, kissing the space next to her bra strap.

She shivered. "You're distracting me."

“Am I?” I murmured, not caring if dinner was ruined.

She tilted her head, giving me access to kiss her neck, to nibble her ear lobe. I gripped her hips tighter, pulling her back against me so she could feel how she affected me. I was already hard and aching for her.

I wanted to take this further. I wanted to lift her onto the counter to feast on her even if the responsible choice was to turn off the stove and talk.

She turned, her arms going around my neck. “I want you.”

Her words were desperate. I should have questioned it, but I wanted her too. My hands cupped her ass as I lifted her, her legs naturally wrapping around my waist. I rocked into her, my cock nestled between her legs, her heat urging me on. Our kisses turned passionate as I placed her on the counter next to the stove.

I ripped my mouth from hers, tilting my head toward the stove in silent question.

“Yes. It should be done.” Her fingers tangled in my hair as she kissed my cheek, the underside of my jaw, down my neck, distracting me in the best way.

I flipped the stove to off, turning my full attention to her. “So beautiful.”

“You are too.” Her hands moved to the bottom of my shirt, tugging it over my head. Her fingers traced my abdominal muscles down to my waistband. She bit her lip, looking up at me under her eyelashes. “May I?”

“Yes.” I wanted to say she didn’t have to ask. I’d give her whatever she wanted, but I couldn’t form any words.

She leaned over, placing light kisses on my torso, then down as she pushed me back, hopping off the counter while unbuckling my pants, tugging them down until I stood in my boxer briefs.

“Do you want to take this to—” Your bedroom. The couch. My cock throbbed with the desire to have her naked.

Her fingers slid beneath the band of my briefs, pulling them down as she slid to her knees. I kicked my briefs out of the way, intending to haul her up even as my fingers tangled in her hair.

She looked up at me, her eyes sultry, her grip firm. She licked the head before taking me in her mouth. My head dropped back, my eyes closing at the incredible feel of her hot mouth on me. Logically, I knew I should be pleasuring her, but I couldn't form a complete thought, much less stop what she was doing.

“Dylan. Please—”

She didn't answer, renewing her efforts, pumping me harder than before, sucking me in deeper until my cock hit the back of her throat. I groaned at the sensation, wanting to let go, to see her swallow my cum. My fingers flexed in her hair as I struggled to regain control, wanting to be inside her.

“Fuck.”

She increased the pressure of her hand, sucking harder.

Shaking my head, I said, “No. You have to—stop. Please.”

I untangled my fingers from her hair, gripping her shoulders, pulling her to stand. She smirked.

“That's not how tonight's going to end.” I grabbed the condom I kept in my wallet.

“Upstairs. Last door on the right.” I lifted her in my arms, conscious that I was naked, she was still dressed. I ignored any thoughts of how I should be baring myself in other ways.

I focused on getting her upstairs without hurting her while she was kissing my neck, her hands on my shoulders as she tightened her legs around my waist, rubbing against my hard cock. I kicked open her door, wanting her to be naked, to be inside her slick heat. I lowered her to the bed, throwing the condom as I followed her down, still kissing her.

Her hands found my ass, kneading, pulling me closer. The desire to touch her, taste her, overruling everything else.

I ripped my mouth away from hers. “Take off your shirt.”

I closed my eyes briefly at my mistake, the *r* coming out like a *w*, the word shaky. Opening my eyes, I hoped she hadn't noticed.

Her lips were swollen, her eyes dark with need, her movements jerky as her shirt flew over her head. Her breasts more than filled her bra. I wanted to savor this moment, the first time we'd be together. I pulled the cups down. Her tits popped out. My mouth watered at the sight of her pink nipples. I latched onto one then the other, sucking until they were hard nubs. Her fingers held me to her even as I worried she'd push me away because of what I'd just revealed.

I kissed down her stomach as she struggled to remove her jeans. I pushed her hands out of the way, easily unbuttoning them, then pulling them off, kneeling between her legs. I gestured at her bra, afraid to say the word. "Off."

She reached behind, unclasping it, throwing it to the side. I kept my gaze on her, slowing things down as I kissed the inside of each thigh, placing a light kiss on her clit, before finally licking her slit. I kept my touch light, wanting to drive her crazy like she had done to me in the kitchen. Moaning, she dropped back on the bed, her thighs quivering. I wanted her to watch but I was done talking. I wanted to show her how I felt, what she did to me. I put every emotion I felt for her since the day we met into every pass of my tongue. Her hips jerked as she tried to get closer to my mouth.

I added my finger, wanting her to forget everything except for the pleasure I gave her.

Her body tensed as I pumped inside her, lowering my mouth to her clit, sucking hard. She moaned, arching up off the bed, tensing before clenching around my finger. She was so sweet, so responsive.

*I loved her and she knew nothing about me.*

Nothing that mattered anyway. I shook off the melancholy, choosing to revel in the feelings I had for this impossibly beautiful woman who was also sweet and caring. I grabbed the condom, sitting back on my haunches as I ripped the wrapper off.

Her warm hands covered mine. “Let me.”

She smoothed the condom down my cock, her hair shielding her face. When it was on, she looked up at me. Brushing her hair back from her face I kissed her, putting everything into it, pushing her back gently until she was on her back, my cock nestled at her entrance.

Every muscle in my body tensed as I fought for control, gliding between her folds.

Her fingers stroked down my back, the sting of her nails adding to the sensation. “You feel so good.”

I hummed in response, too preoccupied to attempt words. Instead, I sucked on her tits until she was writhing under me, begging for more. I finally slipped inside, her tight channel surrounding me as I paused, muscles straining, to make sure she was okay.

“More, Reid.”

I slid all the way in, her tight walls closing around me. Wanting to be closer, I interlaced my fingers with hers on either side of her head, kissing her. I shut everything out, the doubt, the worries, the what ifs until it was just us.

When the familiar tingle began at the base of my spine, I let go of her hand, circling her clit, wanting her to come again. Her breathing came in short pants as she went over again, calling my name. The clenching of her pussy set off an orgasm, bigger than any I’d ever felt before, barreling through my body. I pumped harder before collapsing on top of her, groaning my release into her shoulder.

My head swam with unexpressed emotions, elation, love, desire for more, shame I couldn’t be myself with her.

She stroked the back of my hair, kissing my shoulder, my cheek before I rolled slightly off her. “I need to—”

“My bathroom’s right there.”

I nodded, getting off the bed to dispose of the condom. I closed the door, throwing cool water on my face before toweling off.

Watching every word I said in bed was exhausting. I rarely got this close to another woman. The odds of screwing up were high. Not saying a word during sex was the easiest solution. It was difficult in the moment.

I opened the door, nervous she'd confront me about my speech. She'd pulled down the covers, laying underneath. I wanted to see her naked. I wanted to stay in bed with her, never getting out.

She lifted the covers when I got close, inviting me in.

Relief flooded my system as I slid underneath, wrapping my arms around her, nuzzling my face in her neck. "I don't want to leave."

"Me neither. I should put the food in the fridge."

"Not yet."

I closed my eyes, letting the exhaustion take over, drifting to sleep. When I woke the other side of the bed was cold. Seeing the time, I groaned. I hadn't meant to sleep that long. I wanted to spend time with her. I searched the house for her, remembering I'd left my pants in the kitchen.

I found her reading on the couch in sweatpants and a T-shirt. She looked adorably ruffled, well-loved.

Seeing me, she came to me, wrapping her arms around my neck, pulling me down to kiss her. "I like seeing you naked in my house."

I smiled against her skin, wondering if she'd be understanding about my speech issues.

"Are you hungry?" She pulled away, her face relaxed and happy.

"Yes." I was hungry but I wasn't sure I could eat until we talked. I needed to tell her everything I'd held inside.

She dropped her arms, taking her warmth with her. "Let me heat it up."

I couldn't read her, whether she'd noticed my slip or not. My stomach knotted. I had to tell her. I didn't want to be on

guard all the time. She deserved to know. It would be easier when I didn't worry about each word that left my mouth. I could be myself. I ignored the thought that she might walk away or decide it was too much for her.

Dylan pulled the food out of the fridge, plating it before heating it in the microwave while I pulled on my pants, sitting on a stool at her counter.

My heart pounded in my ears. "We need to talk."

She turned, her forehead wrinkled. "About what?"

"I need to tell you something." I felt slightly nauseas as I held my hand out to her, drawing her close.

"Okay." She drew out the word, her brow furrowed.

I wanted to pull her into my lap. I wasn't sure she'd want that after she heard what I had to say. "I haven't told you..."

She tilted her head, looking up at me. "Tell me Reid. You're scaring me."

I took a deep breath, knowing after I'd said what I needed to say, nothing would be the same. I was revealing my innermost secret, my greatest shame. I was laying myself open for her to accept me or reject me like my father had. "I have a speech impediment. Not all, but most of my *r*'s come out sounding like *w*'s. I avoid saying words with the letter *r*."

I waited for her reaction to my admission. I'd purposely used a word that would highlight my deficiency wanting her to understand she was dating a man who couldn't enunciate letters correctly.

The old familiar shame washed over me, making me feel like I needed to leave, to run as fast as I could back to the safety of my condo where there was no one to judge me.

"Is that what this is about?" The microwave beeped. She ignored it, stepping between my legs, wrapping her arms around my waist, laying her head on my chest.

"You don't care?" I breathed into her hair, unable to eliminate the skepticism from my voice, holding my body stiff.



“Of course not. I suspected after last night. I just—” she looked up at me with tears in her eyes. “I’m happy you told me.”

I tucked her hair behind her ear, confused she’d so readily accepted me. I searched her face for any sign of insincerity. There was none. If I wasn’t mistaken, there was love on her face, love for me. The feeling was overwhelming, so all-encompassing I couldn’t speak around the tightness in my throat.

She waited patiently for me to regain my composure, her finger stroking the back of my hand where she held it.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I’ve never told anyone. Callie guessed.”

“What about your family? Surely they know.” Her eyes were focused, hard as if she’d go to battle for me if she needed to.

“They do. You’re the only one I’ve felt comfortable telling. I’m used to avoiding certain words especially when I’m tired. I avoid alcohol. I don’t speak in public if I can help it. I’m good at hiding it. With you, it’s hard because I drop my guard.”

Her mouth dropped open slightly as if she just realized something. “You never had speech therapy?”

“No.” My face felt rigid.

“Why not?”

Could I tell her everything? What I’d never told anyone before? She’d reacted better than expected to my speech impediment. I wanted her to understand, to know everything. I never wanted her to know what my father had said about me.

“I didn’t qualify for services. My mom couldn’t afford private therapy. I didn’t want her to feel bad, so I learned quickly to avoid saying the letter *r*. I became an expert at hiding it, even avoiding saying my name if I could. After my father left, she had enough to worry about with my sisters being so young, much younger than me.”

She caressed my face, bringing my attention back to her. “You became the man of the house, you took on what you could to ease her burden.”

“Yes.” I wanted to ask how she knew, but she had this inane ability to see me, all the things that made up me, the good, the bad, the redeemable.

“I’m sorry you felt like you couldn’t be yourself.”

That was the core of it. I was hiding myself, had been for what seemed like forever. Relief flooded my brain, making my limbs weak. I pulled her into me, tucking her into my chest. This woman was precious. How did I get so lucky?

I wanted to tell her I loved her even though it wasn’t the time, not when I’d just revealed so much to her. She needed time to process it, to decide if she could really be with me. Even if she thought it was okay now, she might change her mind.

“Thank you for telling me. I can’t think of a greater gift anyone’s ever given me.”

Something dislodged in my chest at her words, rattling around before dissolving, easing the tightness in my chest. “Thank you for understanding, for being here for me.” *For being you.*

It struck me then that she’d heard my slipups but didn’t acknowledge them. She hadn’t left, she hadn’t ridiculed me, she’d wanted me to tell her.

“I don’t want anyone else to know.” As amazing as her reaction was, I still didn’t trust others.

She looked up at me, uncertainty filling her blue eyes. “Are you sure? I thought you hated hiding it.”

“No good will come from revealing it. People will say things, they’ll speculate it’s a cover for drug use, addiction, or a cry for attention.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “I don’t think people would think that.”

I wanted to lighten the mood, erase the shame thinking about my speech issues brought on. This night should be special. I wanted her to look back on it with fondness, not pity. “Let’s eat. Then I have plans for you.”

Her face smoothed out and her shoulders lowered. “Can you stay the night?”

Happiness filled me that she wanted me to stay. I didn’t have to worry about each word I said. I could relax. “I can. I have to leave early in the morning to get back for my workout.”

“Thank you.” She eased impossibly closer, wrapping her arms around me, filling every nook and cranny of my heart.

“For what?” I murmured into her hair, breathing in her scent, wanting to stay in this moment forever, hiding from the world, reveling in her.

“For staying, for telling me, for being the man I thought you were.”

*For being the man I thought you were.* The idea that hiding my secret made me less of a man settled in deep. Was that true? I knew I was scared to come forward, but did it make me a coward? Should I have told her what my father said, why I was so reluctant for anyone to know? Saying his words aloud made them real.

I pushed out any negative thoughts, wanting to get lost in the person she saw when she looked at me.

She eased away, pulling the plate out of the microwave, setting it on the counter. We ate off the same plate, feeding each other pieces of seafood.

After we finished, we cleared the dishes, then she led me upstairs. She laid down on the bed, showing me where she had an unopened box of condoms in her nightstand drawer.

She smiled. “I hadn’t expected anything to happen. I hoped.”

“Me too. I’m glad you were prepared.” I took off her clothes, worshiping her body. Every touch, every kiss was a

thank you for accepting all of me.

When I finally slid inside her, she was so wet, slick with desire, I savored the feeling that she was mine. After, we fell asleep without talking. I woke her once, grabbing another condom, thanking her for being so thoughtful, then slid into her from behind, her gasps and moans guiding me, her body luminescent in the moonlight filtering through her window. I wanted to show her how I felt.

I knew I'd be exhausted at practice tomorrow, but she was worth it.

This woman was everything. She was everything good and light in this world. I wanted to hold on tight, never letting go.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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## DYLAN

REID LEFT EARLY IN THE MORNING, WAKING ME ONLY TO KISS me. He'd whispered sweet things in my ear, how beautiful I was, how much he enjoyed last night and would miss me today. I'd been so close to telling him everything, how I thought I was falling for him, but it was so much more. *I loved him.* I wanted him to know how I felt, everything there was to know about me, but something held me back.

I stretched, my fingers gliding over the now cool sheets, his scent lingering, remembering everything from last night, his touch, his kiss, how I felt loved even without the words.

I loved that he confided in me. I hated that he felt the need to hide who he was. I wanted the best for him. Hiding who you were couldn't be good. It had to wear on his soul. I couldn't imagine censoring everything that came out of my mouth. When he told me the truth, my heart broke for him.

I wanted him to be able to tell everyone, his family, his friends, his teammates. I had this burning desire for the world to see who he was, amazing to his core.



“HOW’S KIDS SPEAK IN THE CITY?” HADLEY ASKED AT OUR Champagne Friday meeting.

“Great. All of the programs commenced.”

“Are you able to start picking up more cases now?” Avery asked.

She was the office manager who kept track of our calendars.

“I think so. I’d like to be free in the afternoons in case I need to stop in at one of the schools.”

Hadley made a note on her legal pad. “That’s fair. So, she can handle any hearings and district court trials in the mornings. We’ll handle circuit court and afternoon cases.”

I took a bite of pad thai, hoping that we were done with the business side of the evening. I was bursting to talk about Reid.

“How are things going with Reid?” Hadley sipped her wine.

I finished chewing before answering. “We had a picnic in the stadium under the stars.”

Avery touched her chest. “That sounds so romantic.”

Hadley leaned in closer. “I can’t believe you were on the field. Was it as amazing as it sounds?”

“It was surreal to be there. I felt so tiny. I can’t imagine playing with all of those people watching.” It made me realize how brave Reid was. He had no idea. He judged himself based on whether he could speak in front of people when he played in front of seventy thousand people. If he could do that there was nothing he couldn’t do.

“I can’t even imagine. Were you the only ones there?” Avery took a bite of her food.

“There must have been someone there to turn on the lights and Callie delivered dinner. It felt like we were alone. He showed me how to throw a football, we ate on the benches where the players sit during a game, laid midfield staring at the stars.” It was impressive to be on a professional football field. That wasn’t the reason I loved that evening. It was the simple things, him showing me how to throw a ball, eating a meal together, staring at the stars, that kiss.

Avery sighed. “I’m so jealous. That sounds unbelievable.”

Hadley gave her a pointed look. “You don’t even watch football.”

I listened to them banter for a few minutes, discussing their most romantic dates. Nothing topped what I'd described. When they quieted, my nerves kicked up.

I wish I didn't have to worry about meeting Reid's family so soon, but it was important to him. I needed to talk to them about it.

"The problem is Reid's inviting his family to the Thanksgiving Day game."

"Oh. Don't you usually spend Thanksgiving with your family?" Avery's forehead wrinkled.

"Yes. The game is scheduled when we normally eat. That's not even the problem. He wants my family to go to the game to meet his mom and sisters."

Hadley's eyes widened. "He wants your families to meet? That is serious."

"It's too soon, right?" I looked from Avery to Hadley, trying to figure out where they stood.

When they remained quiet, panic filled me. "I'm not ready for this. My parents aren't ready for this."

"Have you ever brought a man home to meet them?" Hadley twirled her noodles on her fork.

"No." I shifted in my chair.

"Never?" Avery asked. "My parents don't care who I'm dating. You're so close with your family. I would think they would like that."

"I told you they're intensely private."

"Even if you're serious about someone?" Hadley's brow furrowed.

"Yes." Dad always told me to keep quiet about the family. Since my mother's illness in high school, I stopped inviting friends to the house too. It wasn't something that we'd discussed. I just hadn't felt comfortable having people over.

I was invited on dates. I'd accept, always meeting the guy out. It was never an issue. High school guys weren't eager to



meet the parents. No one in college had been interested. Most were from other states, so they flew home to see their families on the holidays.

“The one guy I was serious about—”

“Pierce?” Hadley asked.

“Right. He broke up with me because I was always running to help my parents. He wanted to know why. He felt like they were more important to me than him. Eventually, he demanded an introduction. That was the end of that relationship. Looking back, maybe he was more serious about it than I was.”

The difference was I wanted to make this work with Reid. I dreaded the moment I had to tell him my parents needed me but I couldn't give him details.

Last night Reid bared his soul to me. I needed to do the same. “I need to tell him that my parents are different. That he might not be included in family events.”

“How do you think he'll take it?” Hadley asked carefully.

Knowing how close he was to his family, how private he was, he would have a problem with it. I just hoped it wouldn't be the end of us. “Not well.”

“I think you need to talk to your parents first. Maybe they would open up if it was someone you were serious about?” Hadley pressed.

Avery nodded. “I think that's a good idea. Don't you always see them on Sundays at brunch?”

At my nod, she continued, “Perfect. Do it then.”

They didn't take it well when I mentioned we were dating. My phone buzzed.

**Reid: Still at the office?**

I smiled. **Yes.**

**Reid: Can we play football this weekend like we talked about? Maybe a park out your way?**

“Ooh I see that smile. It must be Reid,” Avery said.

I looked up from my phone. “He wants to get together tomorrow. Maybe play football at a park.”

Avery’s eyes widened as she exchanged a look with Hadley.

“We were planning on having a cookout at the park with the guys. You should come,” Hadley said.

“I don’t know if he’s ready to meet friends yet.” I chewed my lip, wondering if he’d be okay with meeting their boyfriends.

“He’s already met us,” Hadley said pointedly.

Avery nodded. “He wants your families to meet, so I think it will be fine. Ask him.”

Maybe meeting my friends will be a good first step. Then I could figure out if my parents would be amenable to meeting him.

**Dylan: Avery and Hadley have plans to cookout at a park with their boyfriends. They invited us to go.**

Finally, the bubbles popped up.

**Reid: Okay.**

I shrugged, a little surprised he’d been so quick to say yes. “He said it was okay.”

Avery clapped her hands. “Yeah, this will be so fun. Griffin will love meeting a professional football player.”

Griffin sold his successful start-up company in California to return home to spend more time with his brother, Julian, and his nephew, Declan. Soon after, Julian died in a boating accident, naming Griffin as Declan’s guardian. Griffin stepped in to care for him, making Annapolis his home.

I pointed my finger at them. “Tell the guys to treat him like anyone else. Reid doesn’t like the attention. When we’re together it’s just us. He’s not a famous football player.”

Hadley’s eyes widened. “Really? He’s not cocky at all?”

“No. He’s very down-to-earth.”

“This will be fun. Let me tell Cade.” Hadley picked up her phone, texting him.

The game sounded fun but it meant less time with him when our time together was precious during the season. My mind wandered as they talked about their weekend plans. What would happen after the season? Would he still go back home to Louisiana even though we were dating? I took the opportunity to text Reid. **Will you stay overnight?**

**Reid: I’ll have to get up early the next day but I want to spend some time alone with you.**

The warmth that flowed through my veins continued to pump harder, reminding me that I loved him. I couldn’t share it with the girls when I hadn’t said it to him yet. But I would this weekend, maybe, after I got a feel for where his head was.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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## DYLAN

“ARE YOU READY TO PLAY SOME FOOTBALL?” REID ASKED with a boyish smile when I opened the door on Saturday. He wore a gray Baltimore shirt, the emblem stretched tight over his chest, his cap backward.

He threw the ball in the air, catching it without looking away from me.

“Absolutely. Are you ready to get your butt kicked?” I crossed my arms over my chest, leaning a shoulder against the doorframe. I loved that he wasn’t watching what he was saying around me anymore. He’d slipped up before but now he spoke freely. He was more relaxed. I wanted him to be himself. I wondered if he would be more careful around the others.

“I wasn’t aware this was going to be competitive?” He kissed me lightly before moving passed me into the house.

I licked my lips. “Isn’t it?”

I closed the door, turning to find him standing so close I tilted my head to see him.

The smirk slid off his face, replaced with wonder then desire, need. “I love when you wear these leggings.”

He moved closer, cupping my ass, lifting me so that my legs wrapped around his waist. His lips met mine, his tongue dueling with mine for control.

With one last squeeze, he eased me down to the floor, tugging my ponytail. “I want you, but we have a game to play.

We're going to have fun.”

I grabbed my things. “You don't mind that my friends are coming?”

“No. I'd love to spend time with your friends.”

“Right.” I searched his face, seeing nothing but sincerity. His stance was relaxed. Maybe he was trying to show me that our parents meeting wasn't a big deal.

“Ready to go?” He gestured toward his SUV.

“Of course.” I preceded him out the door, locking it before heading down the steps. He'd gotten a prime spot in front of my house.

The sun was warm on my face, yet there was a slight chill to the air. It was the perfect fall day. I wanted to enjoy the day, not thinking about the holidays coming up or what else I needed to do

“Where to?” he asked, opening the passenger side door for me.

“Quiet Waters Park.”

I settled in my seat so that I could admire his profile as he drove, one hand on the wheel the other resting on my thigh, solid and warm. I wanted to thank him for coming into my life when I didn't expect it, for opening my eyes to something I almost never allowed myself to have, a relationship, but I didn't. It was too soon for those kinds of declarations. Instead, we'd have a nice easy day at the park playing football with friends.

“Having deep thoughts over there?”

I shivered at the way he'd relaxed with me, letting me in. I wished I could do the same. “Not really. I'm happy.”

Content. That was this feeling wrapping around me like warm mist on a hot summer day, settling me, relaxing me.

“I am too.” His voice rough, squeezing my thigh as if emphasizing his words.

We turned at the sign for the park. “Where to?”

I pointed to the area I'd mentioned to Hadley last night. Near the water yet further away from the parking lot in case people recognized him. I wanted him to be able to relax today. Nothing we were doing was meant for cameras or fans.

We parked, meeting at the hood of the car to walk to the field. "It looks like they're already here."

"Are you nervous?" He reached for my hand, interlacing our fingers.

My shoulders tensed. "What? No. Why would you think that?"

"There was a tremor in your words."

"You're very observant." I tried to smile as if it wasn't a big deal. He read me so easily. This seemed like an important moment, a test for meeting my parents.

"I pay attention to people speaking."

"That makes sense." He was so hyper-focused on himself, he did the same with others.

"I can't help it. So, why are you nervous?" He paused, turning to face me, holding my hand in his.

"It's a big deal to meet each other's friends." It came out more like a question than a statement. I wasn't exactly sure of the reason.

He smiled as if I was cute. "I met them at the yacht club, remember?"

I gestured over at the group where Cade playfully tackled Hadley who held the ball. "Yeah, but this is their boyfriends too."

"It's important to you that we get along."

"Yes. They're all friends." I paused, trying to pinpoint the cause of the butterflies in my stomach. "Maybe it's because I've never brought a guy around."

He raised a brow. "Seriously?"

"Yeah."

“I’m honored to be the first.” He smiled, his shoulders relaxed, his face soft.

I shot him an irritated look.

He held up his free hand as if to ward me off. “No worries. I won’t screw it up.”

“Hey.” I stopped him with a hand on his forearm before he continued walking. “You can be yourself with them.”

He tensed. “Did you tell them—”

I shook my head. “No. I would never do that.”

“Okay. I’m not really comfortable revealing that side of myself.”

“It’s not a side of you. It’s who you are.”

“I’m glad that you don’t think less of me. But some do.” A shadow passed over his face, a mixture of anger and disgust.

My eyes narrowed on him. “Who thought less of you?”

His expression, the depths he went to cover up his impediment, never seeking help told me it was someone significant in his life. Someone I’d like to confront. Who would ridicule a child for something they couldn’t control?

“Are you guys coming?” Hadley called.

I smiled, waving at her, before turning my attention to Reid. “Who would do that Reid?”

“I’m not talking about it here.”

“Okay. Will you tell me later?”

He finally nodded. I went up on tiptoe not caring who was watching, kissing him, my way of telling him I loved him.

I dropped down on my feet, hiding my face in his chest, hugging him tightly. I knew if I looked at him, he’d see every emotion on my face, love, desire, hope.

“Let’s go play some football, okay?” His words drifted over my hair, tickling my scalp.



“Yeah.” I pulled away from him, continuing to hold his hand as we approached my friends, who were watching us with smiles on their faces.

Cade held out his hand first. “Cade Morrison. Hadley’s boyfriend. Nice to meet you.”

“Cade, this is Reid Everson. My boyfriend.” We hadn’t discussed it officially, but we were having sex. The boyfriend label served the benefit of taking their attention off of him.

“Boyfriend, huh?” Hadley bumped her shoulder into mine.

“Yup.” I smiled at her, proud to be next to Reid, happy to be with my friends on this gorgeous fall day.

“Griffin Locke. I don’t believe we’ve met before. You won the blind date with this one, huh?”

Reid shook his hand, then winked at me. “I was the lucky one.”

“Aw. That’s so sweet,” Avery said as my face grew hot.

Cade rubbed his hands together. “Alright who’s ready for some ball?”

Reid’s face turned serious. “We have to set some rules—” he paused looking at me, “tackling is allowed.”

“How’s that fair?” I placed my hands on my hips. They were huge compared to us. I wondered how it would feel to be tackled by him.

“Trust me, you won’t get hurt. It will make things more fun.” Reid was completely relaxed.

“We’ll see.” I loved seeing this side of him. He looked boyish, somehow younger.

“We’ll split up three on three.”

“Girls versus boys?” Hadley asked.

“That’s not fair,” Cade said.

“Are you scared?” Hadley asked him.

Cade wrapped an arm around her neck, pulling her close to whisper something in her ear that made her blush.

“We could do couples, Hadley and Cade on one team, Avery and Griffin on the other, split us up, so I get a chance to tackle you,” Reid suggested.

Reid said Avery’s name a little slower. I don’t think anyone noticed it wasn’t quite right.

“Is that what this is about?” My whole body flushed at the thought of Reid chasing me down field, tackling me. I trusted him not to hurt me despite his size.

“It’s a competition, baby.” He winked again. “We can switch it up too.”

I secretly loved that he called me baby whether it was only because of the game or not. “Okay. Game on.”

We huddled with our respective teams. I was on Cade and Hadley’s team. I listened to Cade’s strategy which was essentially to keep the ball from the professional football player at all costs. The odds were definitely stacked against us. Cade slapped us on the shoulder before lining up across from the others.

Of course, I was across from Reid who looked larger when he was in his football stance even without all of his gear.

“Are you worried?” His lips tilted up in a smile, his eyes held a challenge.

I was worried that we’d lose, not that he would hurt me. Adrenaline coursed through me as I tried to remember what Callie told me about his position on the team. How speed was the one thing tight ends didn’t possess. It was more important for them to be imposing with good hands. “Tight ends aren’t fast.”

I smirked when his eyes widened. “Who told you that?”

“Callie.”

He scowled. “Callie’s clearly a traitor.”

“You’re so big, laden down with—” I gestured at him “—all of those muscles. You’re no match for someone smaller. I led in bases stolen my senior year of softball.”

He looked at me with newfound respect. “Huh. I had no idea.”

“Well, now you know.” I slapped his chest, enjoying myself.

“Are you two going to stop trash talking so we can start?” Cade asked.

“Oh, we’re done,” I said.

Reid nodded in agreement.

Cade called hike, stepping back with the ball, I pivoted first right then left trying to get past Reid which was harder than I thought. I really did think I’d have an advantage because he was so big, he’d be slow. He wasn’t. I growled in frustration.

“Not so easy is it?” His breath felt like it was on my neck.

I couldn’t shake him.

I pivoted again, taking off at full speed when Cade threw the ball down the field. Reid was on me the whole time. I launched myself in the air wanting to get at least a finger on the ball. I closed my eyes as my hands wrapped around it, falling to the ground before Reid was on me, his arms wrapped around me as we rolled. We came to a stop with him on top, his knees on the ground on either side of me.

I held the ball tightly in my hands, blinking as I looked up at him, the thrill of the moment tempered by my surprise. “I caught it.”

His lips twitched before he finally smiled wide. “You did.”

“Huh.”

My eyes narrowed on him. “You better not say you let me catch it.”

His hands lifted, holding them in front of him as if warding me off. “I’d never.”

Then he stood, holding his hand out to me.

Hadley ran over to me, hugging me hard. “That was so awesome!”

When she let me go, I looked around me, getting excited. “Did I score?”

“No. First and goal,” Cade called, lining up again.

I tossed him the ball, getting into position. I wasn’t sore at all. Reid must have taken the brunt of the fall with his arms around me. He got into his football stance again, his eyes focused on me. I’m sure he was thinking about the next play when all I could think about was how much I loved him.

Loved playing football with him, loved working with him, loved everything about him. His protectiveness, how private he was. I had to tell him tonight.

Cade yelled hike. We were jockeying for position again. This time, Cade handed it off to Hadley who ran the few feet past the trees we’d set on the goal line. She spiked the ball before doing a little dance.

“What is that?” I laughed.

She looked at me like it was obvious. “My touchdown dance.”

Then Cade lifted her high in the air as she looked down at him, pure happiness radiating from both of them.

Today was the first time we’d hung out all together when it wasn’t just a meal or something related to our charities. It was nice doing something fun.

When Cade let her slide to the ground, I high-fived her.

“Should we bump chests?” Hadley asked.

“No. That’s kind of lame. Something those professional players do. We’re so above that.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Totally lame.” Hadley nodded in agreement.

Reid growled, lifting me from behind, flipping me so I fell facedown over his shoulder. “Lame, huh?”

“So lame. And those touchdown dances lack imagination.”

“Too bad we’ll never see yours since you’ll never score.”

I patted his butt. “Oh, I’ll score all right.

He chuckled, causing me to bounce on his shoulder. He eased me down to the ground, his eyes happy. “No more trash talk.”

I shrugged. “I can’t help it.”

His lips twitched until he finally let go, until he smiled wide. “I can see that.”

I was vaguely aware that the others were at the picnic table we’d claimed as our own taking a water break.

I sobered, the feelings I had for him wrapping around me, threatening to burst out. “Thank you for coming.”

“Thank you for inviting me. This is fun.”

“It is.” I couldn’t put it into words what it meant to spend today with my friends and him. It was unprecedented, groundbreaking, yet beautiful at the same time. I wanted to tell him I loved him, but I was conscious the others might be watching. I wanted that moment for ourselves. Instead, I touched his neck, bringing his mouth closer to mine.

I closed my eyes, kissing him lightly, sweetly, pouring all of my feelings, my happiness into that kiss.

“Hey, no fraternizing with the enemy,” Hadley said.

“Our turn with the ball. Are you ready for this?” Reid asked.

“So ready.” The rest of the afternoon was filled with trash talking, touchdown dances, surrounded by my friends and the man I loved. Nothing could be better than this. I didn’t think about anything other than being in the moment. Reid seemed to relax too, saying words with *r*’s. I hoped it meant he felt comfortable with my friends. It was perfect. He was perfect.

We parted ways before dinnertime, everyone headed back to their respective homes to eat. I loved that no one had mentioned Reid’s job or asked him about the upcoming game.

On another day, I might have suggested we all hang out, but I wanted Reid to myself.

On the drive back, he suggested we order pizza. I ordered delivery on my phone. I didn't want to waste time going out to eat or cooking dinner when I wanted to take him to my bedroom, and show him what I felt.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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## REID

“WHAT TIME WILL THE PIZZA GET HERE?” I ASKED WHEN Dylan opened her door.

She checked her phone as I closed the door behind us. “Thirty minutes.”

“Good. I’m starving.” I moved to the kitchen, grabbing a bottled water from the fridge. Holding it up to her first, I asked, “Did you want one?”

She shook her head no. I kept my gaze on her as I twisted off the cap, taking a long pull. The cold water felt great going down.

It had been a long time since I’d played football for fun. I couldn’t even remember the last time. College maybe? Some kids on the quad throwing the ball, getting some girls to play with us so we could cop a feel, flirt a little.

She wrapped her arms around my waist, resting her head on my chest. I put the bottle on the counter, an arm around her, pulling her closer into my side, kissing the top of her head.

This woman was mine. All I had to do was be honest with her, give her whatever she wanted from me emotionally. For the first time in forever, I wanted it, I wanted her with every beat of my heart. “Are you sure you want to be this close? I probably stink.”

She looked up at me, her eyes dark with desire. “We can shower together.”

“Yes. After the pizza.”



She nodded. “Can we talk about what you said before the game?”

My chest tightened. The whole afternoon was good, letting go with an ease I almost never allowed myself. But we couldn’t go on like that forever. She needed to know me. “Let’s go sit on the couch.”

I led her to the couch in her family room, with a view of a small yard. Her fingers intertwined with mine, she sat next to me. I couldn’t speak, I couldn’t push the words out. I didn’t even know where to start.

“You said someone said something about your speech? Who was it?” Dylan was perched on the edge of the seat, her muscles tensed, as if she’d spring up at the mention of a name to confront whoever it was. I liked it too much. When had I ever had someone in my corner?

My mouth felt dry despite the water I drank, my lips parched, my mind whirling with thoughts of revealing something to her I’d never spoken aloud. What pushed me to finally say the words was that I trusted her. “My father.”

Her eyes widened, she tightened her grip on my hand, but she didn’t say anything.

“My father said I must be stupid to talk like I did.”

She sucked in a breath, placing her free hand on her stomach as if my revelation physically hurt. She winced. “I’m so sorry, Reid.”

I’d braced myself for the shame that usually accompanied his words. Instead I felt relieved to share it with Dylan. “It was a long time ago. He’s not in my life anymore.”

Her gaze lifted to mine, her eyes filled with a mix of pain, sympathy, and understanding. “It makes sense why you never came forward. Why you feel the way you do.”

“Yeah?”

“You were embarrassed, but there’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“He’s not the only one who thinks that way. Some of the women I dated said I was a dumb jock for talking the way I do. It’s why I don’t date often. I keep to myself.”

“Sure, there’s a lot of mean people. That doesn’t mean the majority of people would be that way.”

I wanted to ask her how she could be so confident yet I couldn’t. My brain felt a bit like a cement mixer, rotating my thoughts slowly, trying to come out with a different reaction to her words but I couldn’t. The old thoughts in my head solidified, hardened into cement. *If my father thought I was stupid, so would everyone else.*

“My dad was an asshole. He said I was stupid. That there was something wrong with me.”

She shook her head, disbelief in her eyes. “There isn’t anything wrong with you. You’re not stupid. I can’t imagine saying that to a child.”

I looked over her head, not seeing her, but remembering what it was like to be six years old, having my father call me stupid. The cold shame, the realization that what I’d suspected all along was true, there was something wrong with me. I’d never be like the other kids no matter how hard I tried.

She moved closer, touching my shoulder, kissing my cheek. It was as if she couldn’t get close enough. I wanted to push her away then pull her to me in the same motion. I was torn.

Finally, she straddled my lap, taking my face in her hands. “I love you, Reid Everson. I love all of you, your thoughtfulness, your sensitivity, everything that makes you unique.”

I shook my head. There was no way she loved me after what I’d just revealed.

She held my face tight. “I love you. You can’t tell me how to feel or who to love, because I love you.”

She emphasized each word, stronger, more forceful than the last.

She kissed me. It was like a dam bursting inside my chest. Emotions were fireworks scattering through my body, singeing everything in their path. She moved closer, tightening her thighs against mine. Anticipation built, my cock hard, I needed to be inside her, closer to her.

I stood as she wrapped her legs around me, never breaking our kiss. I carried her to her bedroom, laying her down, following her so I covered her, fully clothed. Tenderness for this woman threatened to escape my lips in words if I didn't touch her, kiss her, slide inside. I needed to be closer but I wasn't ready to bare my soul to her. Not today. I'd never taken that step with anyone.

She tore her lips from mine. "What about the pizza?"

It took me a second to figure out what she was talking about. I felt sluggish, slow, drunk on her. "You paid for it, right?"

She nodded.

"Then forget about it. It'll still be there when we're done."

It was going to be very, very cold, because I had no intention of letting her go until we'd made love thoroughly, until my soul was so entangled with hers I wouldn't know where she ended and I began. I kissed her neck, her shoulder, lifting up to pull my shirt over my head. She followed suit, unsnapping her bra, her nipples already hard nubs. My cock twitched at the sight.

I groaned as she bit her lip, tugging her panties down her legs then off. She was laying on her bed naked, her eyes full of love and desire for me.

Contentment washed through me because being myself was enough. I didn't need to put on a front, watch my words, or pretend to be someone I wasn't.

"Reid." My name on her lips was an invitation.

I stood, shrugging off my workout pants, grabbing a condom from my wallet.

She moved to kneel on the end of the bed in front of me, her hand covered my fingers.

“Do we need that? I’m clean.” She looked up at me under long lashes, her eyes dark with desire.

“I am too.” I didn’t let go of the wrapper, wondering if I could trust this woman with my body, my heart, my love.

I’d never foregone a condom with anyone. It represented so much more than the physical barrier.

Her hand moved from the condom to cup my cheek, her nipples brushing my chest. “Do you trust me? Not to hurt you. Not to betray you.”

I nodded. It wasn’t even a question. I trusted her. I dropped the condom, buried my hands in her hair, kissing her like my life depended on it.

This woman was everything, the one I’d been waiting for, the one I never knew existed. My brain was screaming *I love you*, but I was too practiced in holding my words inside.

She moved, kissing my chin, my chest, her fingers trailing lower, wrapping around my cock.

She leaned down, licking the head of my cock then sucking me down deep. “Fuck. That feels so good.”

I thrust my hips, careful not to choke her, steadying my hand on her shoulder. Her mouth on my cock sucked all rational thought from my head.

I groaned. “I’m supposed to be showing you—”

She popped off my cock, her lips swollen, her eyes wide. “Showing me what?”

Tenderness for this woman washed over me in waves as I pushed her gently until she laid on her back. I moved between her legs, spreading her thighs with my knees, testing her wetness with my hand before plunging inside, her soft warmth feeling so different without the barrier of the condom. She arched up, meeting me. “This. How much I want you. How much I need you.” *How much I love you.*

“Yes, yes, yes.” Her words were like a chant, her head tipped back, her hands gripped my thighs, her nails digging into the muscle sending tingles down my spine.

I gripped her hips, moving hard. I meant to go slow, making love to her, but whatever burst out of me earlier made me desperate to feel her, to be as close with her as I could be. My heart was pounding, a burning desire inside of me racing toward release.

“Come here.” Dylan’s voice was soft, her eyes pleading.

My heart pinched at the vulnerable expression in her eyes. She’d told me she loved me. I hadn’t said it back. As much as I wanted my actions to make up for it, words mattered. I moved so that I was resting my weight on my forearms. Staring into her eyes, the intimacy was almost too much. I’d stilled my hips, my body rigid from restraining my base desire to move, to chase the release we both craved.

“This is better. I love feeling you bare inside me. I love the way you fill me up. I love you.” She caressed my face.

It was too much yet not enough. Instead of saying the words on the tip of my tongue, I kissed her, telling her with my tongue and my cock. I hope she understood I felt the same way. I just couldn’t express myself, not as easily as she could. Even though there were no *r*’s in those three words, it was the emotion, the show of trust it represented.

I wanted to be normal. I just wasn’t sure how. I’d been locked up in my head for so long, unused to this level of intimacy with another person. I’d never felt this way about anyone. The orgasm built steadily as I moved slowly, out to the tip, then plunging inside, savoring the way her walls gripped me, swallowing her cries when she went over.

I loved her. I just hoped actions were enough for now.

I thrust harder until the orgasm crashed over me, chasing my thoughts with it. I buried my head in her neck until I caught my breath. I rolled to the side, bringing her with me. Her head rested on my chest, her leg slung over mine. I felt my

cum leaking out of her onto my thigh. I didn't want to move to clean up.

I kissed her temple as her breath evened out. I was glad she was asleep because I felt torn between holding onto the man I was, the one who kept everything inside, and the one I wanted to be with her, vulnerable.

Telling her about my speech impediment was a huge step, but she deserved more. She deserved all of me, every worry buried deep inside. Every feeling I was too scared to reveal.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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## DYLAN

THE SHOWER RUNNING WOKE ME EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, the sheets next to me still warm. My stomach rumbled, reminding me we never ate last night. The pizza was probably still on the porch.

My thighs were sticky from last night. I must have fallen asleep before cleaning up. Last night was amazing. He was tender, loving. I'd told him I loved him, not expecting him to say it back. It still hurt that he didn't.

My heart throbbed with the need to be loved by him. The realization that he might not feel the same sliced through me, opening a raw aching need I never knew I had. The need to be loved, to be taken care of. I was always the one taking care of others, no one had ever taken care of me. Was he capable of the emotion or was I asking too much?

I needed to lower my expectations, taking whatever this was between us one day at a time.

He seemed to feel the same way but was fighting the words. I knew he had difficulty trusting others. I'd hoped after everything we'd shared, he'd let go. I couldn't ignore the nagging thought that he didn't know me as well as I knew him.

I slid out of bed, testing the doorknob to the bathroom, letting out a breath when it turned easily. I hesitated to push it open. How would he react this morning in the light of day? Did he want me in the shower with him? Did it denote a level of intimacy we didn't have? Or was I overreacting?



If he cringed away from me, I'd have my answer. I pushed the door open, the steam of the shower hitting my face. I quickly closed the door so the cool air couldn't penetrate the cocoon of warmth he'd created.

I saw his ass through the open wall of my shower. I moved closer, ignoring the mirror, knowing my hair was probably a tangled mess. Stepping behind him, I kissed one shoulder blade, lingering when he startled from my touch, then the other, placing kisses down his spine. My hands went around him to steady myself, my nipples aching as they rubbed against his slick back, his abs flexing under my fingers, the water sluicing over them.

I pressed my nipples against his back, my hand gripping his semi-hard cock. I pumped once, twice, before he turned in my arms.

“Good morning.” My words were shy, uncertain as I looked up at him through my eyelashes.

He moved me so that I was under the water, he stood slightly outside it. “Good morning.”

He kissed me, his hands in my hair like last night except this time, his lips and tongue moved leisurely as if he had all the time in the world to savor me, to love me.

He stopped kissing me, leaning past me for my bottle of shampoo. I watched with rapt attention as he squeezed out a dollop, turning me so that my back was to his front. He lathered the shampoo in my hair, I leaned my weight on him, dropping my head back slightly, closing my eyes at the sensation of his hands in my hair kneading, caressing, massaging my scalp.

“That feels so good.” The sensation sent tingles down my spine. No man had ever taken the time to wash my hair or massage my scalp.

“Better than my tongue on your pussy?”

I nearly groaned at the visual of him dropping to his knees, licking me in the shower while I balanced myself. “I wouldn't say that.”

My voice sounded raspy, needy as if we hadn't satisfied ourselves last night.

"I want you, Dylan. I want to take care of you." He turned me, continuing to caress my strands as the water washed the soap out of my hair.

My eyes stung from unshed tears. I wanted that too, more than anything. Before I could answer, he'd lathered his hands with body wash, caressing my body, starting at my shoulders, arms, my stomach before turning his ministrations to my breasts, saving the nipples for last. He rubbed my nipples with his thumbs until they were hard nubs begging for more. The sensation an electric shot to my throbbing core.

"Reid." There was a deep ache between my legs only he could satisfy.

"Not yet."

I groaned in frustration as he moved from my nipples to my back, kneading my ass, then kneeling to wash my legs, my calves, lifting each foot to clean them. "You're very thorough."

I gave him a pointed look because he'd missed the dirtiest part of my body, the most needy, aching part. "I'm still dirty though."

"You're very, very dirty."

He moved me so that my back leaned against the cool tile, the water still warm washing over us. I clenched my pussy in anticipation of him touching me there. He didn't. He washed the soap from his hands, then braced his hands on my hips. "Hold on tight."

Anticipation shot through me, making my core heat, my nipples pebble, my limbs liquid with want. My hands grabbed onto the tile behind me as he lifted one leg over his shoulder. When he licked my center, I grabbed onto him for balance. My foot slipping on the slick tile as he bore my weight. Letting go, trusting him, was this weird free-fall feeling sending my head spinning, my desire barreling out of control. His tongue circled

my clit before plunging inside. Fuck. I wanted more, his fingers, his cock, more, more, more. “Reid.”

“Yes.”

“Please. I need you.”

One of his fingers slipped inside as he sucked my clit, when his second finger entered me, the orgasm hit me hard, making my limbs shake as I clenched around his still pumping finger. He kissed his way up my stomach, his hands on my ass, paying special attention to each nipple before lifting me off my feet, thrusting inside in one smooth motion, easing the ache.

My arms looped around his shoulders as he kissed me, tasting myself on his lips, his tongue. He held my ass in his hands as he continued to thrust, my breasts bouncing. I felt his cock swell impossibly bigger as he shifted my weight against the wall, pressing a finger against my clit. My head fell back against the tile as my pussy clenched around him.

My pussy was still spasming when he thrust the final time deeper than before, biting my shoulder. The pain, the reminder of him marking me there satisfied something inside of me.

He slowly lowered me to my feet, my legs shaky, as he soaped his fingers, cleaning my sensitive pussy. He turned off the water, grabbing one of my large towels, wrapping it around me. He rubbed the towel over me, drying me, caring for me. He kissed me before grabbing a towel to dry himself.

I wanted to say something to break the silence. I wasn't sure what. What we'd experienced this morning and last night was nothing I'd ever felt before.

I was needy, exposed. He hadn't snuck out early or turned me away. I still felt like there was something between us, a barrier, a part of him he was holding back.

I wrapped the towel tighter around me, my hair a tangle around my face. “About last night.”

He stepped closer, his towel dropping to the floor, droplets of water clung to his chest. “Last night was amazing.”

I tilted my head to keep his gaze.

“I feel closer to you. I—” He pulled a wet strand of hair from my cheek. “I feel everything with you.”

Was he going to say the words? I was more afraid he was going to tell me every reason why he couldn't say it or didn't feel the same. “I don't need the words.”

I couldn't blame him for not saying the words when I hadn't been entirely open with him.

His eyes widened in surprise.

I was a liar. I needed the words more than my next breath. An ache formed in my chest, radiating out until I curled my fingers against the pain.

His face relaxed, the tension easing from him. “You're amazing. You're everything I ever wanted.”

If he never said the words, would I be okay with that? I wanted to think our relationship was still new, that we had time. “You're enough.”

“What did I do to deserve you?” He smiled, his love for me shining in his eyes.

He acted like a man in love. I was overreacting. He'd say the words when he was ready. I shouldn't push him when we'd only just started dating. I hadn't been entirely honest with him either. I was asking for too much.

“Let's get dressed. I have to leave soon to get ready for the game.”

“Right.” The game. That's what he should be focused on, not me.

“You're coming, right?”

We'd discussed the game over texts this week. I loved that he wanted me there. I tied the towel around me, running my brush through my hair. “Of course. I have brunch with my parents first.”

“Are you bringing anyone with you to the game?”

“No. It's just me this time.” I was nervous going alone, but I knew Callie. I was excited to see Reid afterward.

“Will you stay at my place after the game?”

This felt like a relationship, one where spending time with each other was expected. There were none of the usual dating games, waiting on someone to call or text. I could get used to it, the expectations, the support, loving and caring about someone.

I turned, watching him pull on boxer briefs then pants from the bag he'd brought, the muscles in his back rippling.

“I'd love to.”

His hands landed on my bare shoulders, his eyes meeting mine in the mirror. My breath caught. Would he say something now? Then his eyes shuttered, he dropped a kiss on my shoulder. “I'll make coffee.”

I smiled to cover my disappointment. “Okay.”

I finished with my hair, pulling on a bra, T-shirt, and leggings before heading downstairs. The smell of ground coffee beans filled the house. He stood at the coffee machine, pouring it into a to-go mug. “I have to run.”

I touched his back as I passed him to grab a mug. “You have a big game.”

“We're one game out of first place,” he said over his shoulder.

Other than watching his games, I didn't pay attention to stats or ranking. I wanted to understand though. “Is that good?”

I pulled a mug from the cabinet filling it with coffee from the carafe.

“If we're in first place we get a bye the first week of playoffs, but it's still early.” He left the lid off his coffee, the steam billowing out.

We leaned against the counter, him talking about what he was worried about with today's matchup. I gathered there were several teams in each division. Baltimore was playing the first-place team.

I placed the mugs in the dishwasher while he grabbed his bag. I met him at the door. “Good luck today.”

I felt like I needed him to return the sentiment. I was prepared to go to battle with my parents today. I wanted to convince them that this thing with us was serious. It was worth fighting for.



IF I WANTED REID TO TRUST ME, I NEEDED TO GIVE HIM ALL OF me. I wanted to support my parents but there were limits. There were things they could do to help themselves allowing me to have some semblance of a personal life.

I squared my shoulders before I walked into my parents’ home, prepared to argue if they wanted to travel to a new doctor. If they insisted, I planned on telling them I needed to stay here. Kids Speak was a priority. If they wanted to explore other clinics across the country, they could. I’d help as much as I could without traveling with them. Satisfied I had a plan, I stepped inside.

Dad was pouring a cup of coffee. “Morning.”

“Hey, Dad. How are things?”

I tensed, waiting for his response.

“Your mother wants to go to a new doctor. Have you had a chance to go through the list?”

“I have. I don’t see anyone that is worth seeing nearby. If you want to visit a doctor at the clinic in Texas or Minnesota, you can.”

“You’re coming.” It wasn’t a question. He hadn’t even looked up from his coffee as he stirred creamer into it.

I took a deep breath, wondering if I had the strength to refuse him. Remembering how I felt in Reid’s arms this morning, protected, cared for, I gathered my strength. I wanted that for myself. I couldn’t risk him walking away because I

couldn't express my needs. "No. I have responsibilities here. I'll call to set it up, but I can't go with you."

"Your responsibility to your family comes first." Dad's tone was hard, unrelenting.

"Dad, you know how important it is for me to be present when starting a new business. The first few years are crucial."

He was silent, hopefully considering my words.

"You don't need me there."

"We do. We need you. You know how your mother gets. You're able to calm her more than me."

Guilt flowed through me thick like maple syrup, making my limbs feel heavy. He was right. I had to be calm to ease their anxiety. "You can be that for her too. I think you need to see a therapist. I think it might be helpful for you too."

His lips settled into a straight line. "I don't believe in that stuff."

"But it could help."

"I'll talk to your mother. She won't be happy you won't come."

I bristled at the word *won't*. I guess he was right.

I wasn't going to give in this time. It wasn't just missing a few days, it was establishing boundaries, lines in the sand, outlining everyone's roles and responsibilities. If Dad could do it then he should. No more guilt trips about how only I could handle things.

I poured a cup of coffee for myself before joining him in the sunroom. I'd handled the first issue that worried me. It was time to discuss Thanksgiving. "What are you planning for the holiday?"

"Darlene will cook. We'll eat here."

It was lonely just the three of us. "Doesn't Darlene have family she'll want to visit with?"

"She eats with her family on Saturday."

“Still. I’m not sure it’s fair to ask her to cook for us.”

“Is there somewhere else you want to be?” He propped a hip against the bar that lined the back wall.

I took a shaky breath, feeling like I was finally taking a stand, being honest about what I wanted. “I’m dating Reid. You know, the football player. He has a game that day. His family is flying in. I’d love if you could come too.” My heart beat hard in my chest as I waited for his response.

“You’re going to a football game on Thanksgiving Day?” Mom asked as she came into the room.

“We were just discussing it.”

Mom pursed her lips in disapproval. “It sounds like you already made up your mind.”

“I haven’t decided. I suggested it because he invited us to join them.”

“Don’t you think it’s a bit early to mix families?” Her lip curled up as if she didn’t like the idea.

“It’s early in our relationship but we’re serious.” Having someone to support me would make things even better for my parents. They’d have two people on their side.

Dad shook his head. “It must be if you’re suggesting we meet his family.”

“They live out of town. They happen to be coming in for the holiday since he has a game. He wants to be with me on the holiday too.” I always saw a boyfriend asking for this next step as being pushy. Now I saw it as the opposite. He might not be able to say the words I longed to hear, but he was showing me through his actions.

“I don’t know. It’s hard to know what I’ll be feeling by then. I might not be able to walk. I’ve had some tremors, pain,” Mom said.

“You are?” I exchanged a look with Dad wondering if this was the first time she’d mentioned it. Was this an excuse to get out of meeting Reid?



“I didn’t want you to worry.”

Frustration spurred me on. “If Reid knew about your condition then he’d understand if we needed to cancel at the last second. We could also get a wheelchair or a walker, whatever you needed.”

“I will not meet your future in-laws in a wheelchair. I’d rather have them come here. Why don’t we wait for an official engagement?”

“I have no idea if he even wants to get married.” Disappointment deflated me like a pin in a balloon. They kept raising the bar, making the criteria for being honest with whoever I was dating higher.

“Then it’s not that serious.” Her tone was dismissive. The discussion was over.

It was way too early to think about marriage but she was right in a way. I hadn’t discussed my family or what we wanted from our futures. But he’d told me about his struggles which made our relationship deeper somehow, more meaningful.

“You’ll be coming here like always.” Her tone didn’t leave room for argument.

“I have to talk to Reid about it. See if we can work something out. Do you think we could move dinner to another time, maybe another day, so Darlene could have the day off? I could be with Reid and his family?”

“I don’t know why you keep pushing this. Your mother likes to keep things the same.” Dad’s voice was filled with irritation.

“You can’t predict MS. No one can. We can still live our lives though.” The truth I’d held back for years burst out.

My parents stood in stunned silence.

I’d never allowed myself to say what I was thinking. I immediately regretted my outburst.

“We *are* living our lives. You’re being dramatic today.” Mom sipped her tea as if she’d already dismissed my feelings

as inconsequential.

Her words belittled my feelings. I wasn't sure how I could convince them that it was serious or if I even needed to. Maybe I should start living my life without as much deference to theirs.

I'd be risking my relationship with them or I'd be setting much needed boundaries, paving the way for me to have a serious relationship, maybe even marriage and kids. They'd see eventually that I could do both. I could care for a significant other and them. They'd become too dependent on me over the years. It had gotten out of hand.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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## REID

ADRENALINE COMBINED WITH IRRITATION COURSED THROUGH my body, increasing my speed, making my hits harder. I was frustrated with myself, my inability to say what I needed to. I needed to tell Dylan I loved her. There wasn't any question she was the woman for me.

When we won the game, I celebrated with my teammates. Desire to see Dylan coursed through me. I hurried in the shower, mentally preparing for the necessary interviews. I asked Callie to entertain Dylan in the lounge significant others usually waited in.

I channeled all of my frustration about not being honest with Dylan into the press conference.

"You were on fire out there today. Three touchdowns, one-hundred fifteen yards receiving, one-hundred yards rushing. What do you attribute that to?" The first reporter pushed his glasses onto his nose.

Love for Dylan, frustration I couldn't express myself the way I wanted, anger at everyone who said I was stupid. "I felt good today."

It was an understatement. I'd been motivated like never before to prove all the naysayers wrong. I'd answered the question, but Lena wanted more. "Chase and I connected. We've meshed well the last few weeks."

A second reporter jumped in, eager to ask a question. "You can say that again. Does it have anything to do with your personal life?"

“How so?” I arched a brow. Normally, Lena shut down any questions about significant others but it wasn’t clear what he was referring to.

“Volunteering with Kids Speak. You’ve been seen hanging out with the head of the organization.” He glanced at his notes. “Dylan Gannon.”

I carefully sidestepped his insinuation I was personally involved with Dylan. Any declaration of our relationship would need to be discussed between us before I confirmed it.

“Dylan heads up Kids Speak in Baltimore. The team is excited to be—” I hesitated, wanting to say partnering or working with. I finally settled on, “involved. It’s an amazing cause.” It wasn’t the best choice. I was limited in what I could say. The same frustration that motivated me during the game bubbled up inside, threatening to boil over.

I moved off to the side as Lena stepped up to the podium to say a few words about Kids Speak, mentioning the official announcement of the partnership was coming on Thanksgiving. She foreshadowed a heartwarming halftime show where the kids would be on the field with Lincoln Aldrich. When she finished, we moved out of the room.

Lena followed me out. “You did great out there. Keep it up.”

I lifted my chin in acknowledgment of her praise. Hopefully, if I kept improving, I’d sign a multi-year contract at the end of the year. maybe even secure some endorsements. I wanted to guarantee my future financially, secure my family’s.

For the first time, I handled the interviews without Callie’s watchful eye. She wouldn’t have stepped in to stop anything. That was Lena’s job. I’d used her as a crutch over the years. It was time to stand on my own two feet, not using my speech impediment as an excuse, to go after the woman I wanted. When the interviews were done, I strode to the lounge, anticipation for telling her how I felt humming in my veins.

I saw her sitting next to Callie, deep in conversation. It felt amazing having her waiting for me. I felt whole. I stopped in

front of them.

“Hey.” When Dylan’s gaze landed on me, I added, “Are you ready to head out?”

She stood, hesitating for only a second before wrapping her arms around me. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you. It always helps to have you in the stands.” She pulled back but I kept an arm around her shoulders.

“Did you want me to make reservations for dinner?” Callie asked.

“Not tonight. There’s something I need to do.” I looked pointedly at Dylan.

Dylan raised her brow. “What’s that?”

“You’ll see.” Then to Callie, I said, “We’ll walk you to your car.”

We said our goodbyes at Callie’s car before heading to Dylan’s. I held the door for her. “Follow me. I’ll show you where to park in the visitors’ spot.”

“Great game today, by the way.”

“Thanks. The game was great. I would have liked to beat them by a larger margin but we’ll take it.”

“A win is a win, right?” she asked, lips turned up as if she was proud of remembering a sports phrase.

“That’s right. I can’t complain. We’ll look at tapes on Monday, see where we can improve.”

She climbed in her car. “I’ll see you at your place.”

I closed the door, jogging over to my car so she could follow me. Once we were parked in my garage, I met her by her car, walking with her toward the elevators.

“What did you have to do tonight?” she asked when we were inside the elevator.

“You’ll see.” It was what I should have said last night. All day, the excuse that I couldn’t speak as well, or I kept things close to the vest, didn’t sit well with me. She’d said she loved

me. I didn't respond with the words she needed. I might have hurt her. That was the last thing I wanted. The fact that she was patient, willing to give me more time didn't make it right.

The feelings were there. There was no use hiding them or pretending they didn't exist. The elevator doors opened. I knew I needed to talk to her tonight, but I hadn't planned anything. There was no fancy dinner waiting or candlelit table. I hoped those things wouldn't matter as much as what I had to say.

The familiar unease crept through my body until my shoulders raised, my neck ached with tension. Maybe this was a bad idea. She deserved a romantic evening not just me sitting her down to tell her the truth.

As we walked down the hall toward my condo, she placed a hand on my arm. "Are you okay?"

I swallowed over the lump in my throat. "Not really. Let's go inside so we can talk."

I wasn't expressing myself clearly. I was probably worrying her for no reason. "It's nothing bad, I promise."

Her brows furrowed, she nodded grimly. "Okay."

I opened the door, placing my keys on the hook, toeing off my shoes. I dropped my bag on the bench by the door.

She followed suit sliding off her shoes. Her eyes widened when she saw the view of downtown, the glittering lights, the moon reflected on the water. "I'll never get sick of this."

She stood in front of the window in my condo, her arms wrapped around her middle, taking it in.

I laid my hands on her shoulders. "I like seeing you here in my space."

She turned. "Yeah?"

"You fit here. For so many years it was just me. This was the space I wanted to go to be alone, but I like you here. I need you here."

Seeing her here, everything clicked into place, like pieces of a puzzle, or gears in a clock. She was as necessary to me as breathing.

“What did you want to talk about?”

I sighed. “I screwed up last night.”

Her shoulders tensed.

My hands slid down her arms to her hands, taking them in mine. “You gave me a gift last night saying you loved me. I didn’t say it back. I had all of these excuses. I don’t express myself as easily. I haven’t ever felt this way before. It’s too soon. I held myself back when I shouldn’t. I love you, Dylan. I want to be with you. I need you in my life. I was an idiot for not saying it last night, thinking that making love to you would be enough.”

She smiled up at me, the love she felt for me shown in her eyes.

Relief poured through me that it wasn’t too late. “All I could think about today was how I’d screwed up. How I could have hurt you. I hated it.”

She was quiet for a few seconds as if considering her words. “It hurt a little but I suspected you felt the same. You show your feelings other ways.”

I hadn’t planned this conversation, yet it unfolded easily because I was telling her how I felt. It wasn’t contrived. It wasn’t wrong. It was the truth, my truth.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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## DYLAN

HE STEPPED CLOSER, TUCKING A STRAND OF HAIR BEHIND MY ear before cupping my chin. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I loved this because it was Reid. He wasn’t perfect but he might just be perfect for me.

“I don’t want another day to go by without you knowing exactly how I feel.”

The sincerity in his expression, the earnestness in his eyes, made my head light, my knees weak. “Thank you.”

I’d gone my entire life not getting this close to another person. I’d expected to feel vulnerable and lost when I did. Instead, I felt whole. As if this was meant to be.

His forehead dropped to mine. His hands cradled my neck, moving up to the back of my head. “What did I do to deserve you?”

“Nothing. You didn’t have to do anything.” A tingle ran down my spine at his vulnerability.

I was stunned that this man who was so confident on the field allowed himself to be so vulnerable with me. He’d told me about his family, his speech impediment. Things he never entrusted with anyone.

I should have been concerned that I hadn’t been entirely honest with him. He loved me but didn’t know me. I wanted to revel in this moment. I was what he needed. I was who he loved.

A surge of happiness, peacefulness, radiated from my heart. I touched his face, wanting to memorize his expression, remember this moment forever. Even if we didn't work out, if my family was too much for him, we'd always have this.

I closed the short distance between our lips, kissing him, pouring all of my emotions into it, my desperation, my worry, my love for him.

He groaned. "I'll never get enough of you."

I smiled, hoping he couldn't see the apprehension on my face. "I'm counting on that."

He grabbed my hand, leading me back to his room. We kissed as we leisurely took off our clothes, savoring each touch, moan, sigh. By the time he slid inside me, I was aching with need for him, to be close to him, to be loved by him. We professed our love to each other repeatedly. It was amazing.

I did my best to push out any doubts, living in the moment. When he fell asleep, they crept in, discoloring what we'd just shared.

He'd let me in. He'd been honest with me about everything when I hadn't been. I held back the most important part of me, the role of my family in my life. I moved to my side, watching his face, peaceful in sleep, somehow younger, more vulnerable. I touched a strand of his hair on his forehead, testing its weight, before smoothing it back.

He deserved someone who would put him first. I'd always been a little selfish. My family coming before anything else. Was this what love was? Letting someone in, shifting your priorities around?

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## CHAPTER THIRTY

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## DYLAN

THE NEXT WEEK, I WAS GETTING READY FOR SUNDAY BRUNCH as usual. It was the anchor to my week until it became football Sunday. In the past, I couldn't relax until I'd seen Mom was okay, that Dad was handling her needs. Instead, I was anxious to get to Reid's game, to spend time with him after.

I'd been so wrapped up in Reid lately, I hadn't called Dad to check in during the week. He hadn't checked in with me either. That might have been because of our argument last time I saw him. Ever since I stood up to them at our last brunch, I felt good about separating myself, even if it was only slightly.

I picked up my phone. There were several missed calls, voicemails from Darlene.

I checked the voicemail. "Dylan I've been trying to reach you all morning. Your father is away on a business trip. Your mother's vision is worsening. I was hoping you could come over earlier, maybe stay until your Dad returns. Your mother didn't want me to tell you. I thought you'd want to know."

My stomach felt heavy. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten. I had a monthly calendar his assistant emailed me. The fact he'd be gone this weekend completely slipped my mind. I should have been checking up on her more, not wrapped up in Reid.

I grabbed my things, rushing to get there. When I walked in, the sunroom was empty, the slider open to the deck. I walked outside, the view of the water not soothing me like it usually would.

“How are you, Mom?” I kissed her cheek, sitting in the wooden Adirondack chair next to hers.

Her eyes stared vacantly at the water.

Darlene said she wasn't supposed to tell me, so I needed to act like I didn't know.

My shoulders curled forward, my earlier excitement for Reid's game this afternoon seemed trivial. Was she depressed?

“I'm fine.” Her voice was monotone, her eyes blank.

She was clearly not fine.

“Did something happen?” My pulse pounded hard in my ears, my fingers curled into fists.

“I'm seeing double. I can't watch TV, I can't read. I can't see the water.” Her eyes filled with tears.

“I'm so sorry, Mom” My eyes closed against her words, the pain I heard in them, the sheer terror in her voice. I hated this for her.

I leaned forward, covering her cold hand with mine. “Would you like a blanket?”

When she didn't answer, I stood, grabbing a blanket from the living room, carefully laying it on her lap. There was no way I'd be on time for the game. I pressed my knees tightly together, resisting my need to lower my head into my hands. I might not be able to go at all.

The disappointment was dulled by the thought that had run through my head since her diagnosis, *family comes first*. Dad said this to me in high school when I was immature, thinking that whatever was going on in my life was more important.

My shoulders ached with the effort to straighten them. I squeezed her hand. “It will be okay.”

“How can you know that? Do you know what it's like to wake up one morning not able to see?”

I shook my head, tears stinging my eyes. “No. I'm so sorry. It must be awful.”

Maybe I should talk to Dad about not traveling anymore. There was always the possibility he'd say I needed to make myself more available, stop by more often.

Darlene came outside. "Brunch is ready."

I nodded, unable to look at her, to see the sympathy in her eyes. "I'm going to talk to Darlene for a minute."

Mom didn't respond when I stood, walking into the house. Darlene stood just inside the door.

"I'm so sorry I wasn't here. I should have checked on her yesterday. I can't believe I forgot Dad was out of town." My voice was laced with guilt, shame.

"I didn't mean to worry you. I knew you'd want to know. She woke up yesterday, scared out of her mind because she wasn't able to see. She made me promise I wouldn't tell you. I hoped it would get better. When she woke up worse this morning, I had to."

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to hold things together. "You did the right thing. I'm sorry you had to deal with that."

"I hate that you have to run over here. Your father hired me to help."

"He hired you to keep an eye on her, but she's my responsibility." My voice sounded cold even to me.

Darlene opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something then closed it without speaking.

"Can you bring plates out on the deck so we can enjoy the view?"

Mom could hear and smell the water. It was a source of comfort even if she couldn't see it. Or at least I hoped that's why she was out there.

We ate mainly in silence. I wasn't sure what to say that would make what she was experiencing better. When we'd finished, I carried our dishes to the kitchen. When I returned, I asked, "Would you like to listen to a TV show or some music?"

Pain crossed over her face. “I’m sure you have somewhere to be. Don’t you have a football game to get to?”

Guilt overrode any of the disappointment about missing the game. This is where I was supposed to be. “I don’t have to. It’s not a big deal.”

I tried not to see Reid’s face in my head when we’d said goodbye this morning, promising to see each other after the game.

That wasn’t my life. My life was here, taking care of my mother, making sure she was okay. I felt awful I’d let Reid and the promise of a relationship lead to my neglect of my responsibilities. I’d wanted my parents to handle things on their own, but the terror in my mom’s voice erased that determination.

I leaned back in the chair, closing my eyes, trying to imagine what it was like for her. “I just want to sit here, listening to the water.”

“Okay.” She didn’t argue with me or tell me to go to the game. I wouldn’t have anyway. I felt enough guilt about forgetting Dad was out of town, and not being here when she needed me.

I glanced at the time, seeing it was close to kick off. I texted Reid, knowing he probably wouldn’t see it prior to the game starting. He didn’t carry his phone with him out of the locker room. Then I texted Callie to let her know I was dealing with some family issues. I couldn’t make it.

**Callie: Is everything okay?**

My fingers hovered over the keyboard. **It’s nothing to worry about.**

My phone rang, indicating Callie was calling me.

I stood. “I’m sorry, Mom. I have to take this.”

She didn’t respond, so I took the phone into the house. “Hi, Callie.”

“Is everything okay?” Worry tinged her voice.



I bit my lip not wanting to tell her when I hadn't talked to Reid about my family yet. "I can't be at the game today. I texted him. I'll call him tonight too."

She was quiet for a few seconds before she responded, "I don't want him to get hurt."

"You're a good friend to him, but I can't talk about it."

"Have you explained it to Reid?" Her voice gentled.

"Not yet."

"You need to."

"I will." It had become clear today that hiding it wasn't good for us. He needed to know. He had a right to back away if it was too much.

"Whatever you're dealing with I'm sure Reid will want to help."

"It's my responsibility."

She was quiet for so long I thought she hung up. "I'm almost positive Reid paid for my grandfather to be moved to a better nursing facility. The social worker claims there was a special program. I know Reid visits with my grandfather on his own."

I remained quiet, not sure what to say. She was revealing something personal.

"I'm glad he visits with my grandfather. He loves talking football with Reid. They've developed a relationship. It's special. I'd never call him out on what he's done for him. I know Reid doesn't want to be thanked. Let him be there for you too. He's not the type to run from problems."

He only ran from his own. My heart ached with longing. I wanted someone standing next to me, someone to confide in, to talk to, but was it fair to ask Reid?

I heard a cheer go up in the background, reminding me she was at the game. "I'm really sorry I'm missing the game. I'd love to be there."

"He'll understand if you talk to him."

“Thanks, Callie.” I hung up with her, spending the rest of the day with Mom. I couldn’t blame her for being melancholy.

Only when she was asleep did I feel comfortable leaving. Dad would be home in a few hours. I’d call in the morning to see if I’d need to stop by.

On the way home my back ached from stress. I was exhausted. My phone buzzed.

“Hey, are you okay?” Reid’s voice rang through the speakers, reassuring me, making me want to talk, to tell him everything.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I was dealing with some family things. I’m really sorry I missed your game.”

I’d checked in the afternoon. They’d lost by a lot.

“It sucked. I was worried when I saw your text after the game. Callie said she talked to you too.”

“There are some things we should talk about. You might think differently about me once we talk.”

“Are you cheating on me?” His voice was harsh.

Surprise made me speechless for a second. “No. Why would you ask that?”

“That would be the only thing that would make me think differently of you at this point.”

Some of the tension released in my neck. Callie was right. He was a good guy. The best. “It’s nothing like that. It has nothing to do with us. It’s my family.”

“Do you want me to come to you?”

“No. You must be exhausted from your game.” I wanted him to come over but didn’t want to ask that of him. Not when he was tired.

“I want to see you. I need to know you’re okay.” He sounded worried.

“I will be. I always am.”

“I’ll pack a bag. I can be there in an hour.”

“Reid—” But he’d already hung up.

I parked in my spot, unlocking my door. I had time, so I showered. The warm water felt good on my aching muscles. I hadn’t done anything physical but stress tended to cause backaches. I remembered the last time we were in the shower together, how he’d washed my hair, making me feel cared for, cherished.

I tried not to think about what Reid coming over meant. I tried to numb myself to the possibilities. I wrapped my hair in a towel, lathering lotion on my body before slipping into silky pajama pants and a white tank top. I secured my still-damp hair in a bun, heading downstairs to wait for Reid.

He knocked on the door while I was preparing tea. I opened the door, the numbness sliding away at the concern evident in the lines on his face. He rushed to me, shutting the door with his foot as he wrapped me in his arms.

Burying my face in his chest, I breathed in his scent, reveling in the strength of his arms. Was this what it felt like to rely on someone even for a second? To let their strength hold you up?

“I missed you.”

“I missed you too.” My words were muffled by his chest.

“Can you tell me what’s going on?” He leaned back a few inches to see my face. “Please. Will you let me in?”

The need to tell him everything was a heavy pulsing weight on my heart. “Yes.”

“Let’s sit.” He led me into the living room, throwing some logs into the fireplace before lighting it with the igniter I kept on the mantle.

The tears in my eyes made the fire blurry. “I was making tea.”

When I made a move to go into the kitchen, he stopped me with his hand.

“I’ll get it. You sit.” He pointed to the couch.

I sank onto the couch, my body suddenly weak with exhaustion. A few seconds later, he brought me a steaming mug of tea.

“Thank you.”

He sat next to me, his knees brushing mine. “What happened today?”

There was no censure in his gaze, no disappointment that I’d missed his game. Tears welled up in my eyes that he might be understanding as to why I was absent. “I haven’t talked much about my family.”

“You said you’re close to them.”

I took a deep breath. My parents wanted me to keep things a secret, but I couldn’t lie to Reid, not when he meant so much to me. “It’s more than that. My mom was diagnosed with MS when I was in high school. The diagnosis was a relief, but there’s a lot of uncertainty that came with it. She doesn’t handle it well. My father doesn’t either. I help out as much as I can.”

He cradled my hands in his, bringing them to rest in his lap. “She needed your help today?”

“She needed me to be there.” It was hard to talk about things I’d rarely mentioned to anyone. I told the girls a little, but not all of it.

“I came over to see if you were okay, to see if you need me. I want to know what’s going on with you. I want to help if I can.”

My spine straightened. The ache that had dissipated slightly with the shower returned. “There’s nothing you can do. She has MS. She was diagnosed when I was in high school. Her symptoms are unpredictable, coming and going.”

“What did you do today?” His voice was reasonable, not reacting to the edge in mine.

“I sat with her, made sure she was okay. Sometimes the mental health aspect is harder than the physical. Although the physical was pretty scary today. She woke up with double

vision. She wasn't able to see the water, the TV, or even read." The shock from her pronouncement from this morning was still there.

He moved one hand from mine, rubbing my back. "That must have been hard for both of you."

Reid's comforting touch gave me the space to let out what I normally kept stored inside. "She's the one who can't see, who has to face it. My father was out of town."

"Does she have anyone that cares for her when your father is gone?"

"We hired someone. Although, she's more of a housekeeper. She keeps an eye on Mom but she's not a nurse. I'd forgotten my dad was out of town this weekend. Darlene called to tell me what she was going through. I feel guilty for not being there yesterday."

"Darlene handled it until you got there."

"She did, but it's my responsibility." I'd called my dad this afternoon. He was livid that I hadn't come over on Saturday.

Reid pressed his lips tightly together as if he was trying not to give his opinion.

"Anyway, that's what happened. I'm really sorry about missing your game. I would have loved to have been there."

"You didn't miss anything. We lost."

"I don't care whether you win or not. I just want to be there to support you."

"It's okay. I love when you're there, but family comes first." His face was genuine, his words sincere.

Telling him was opening something inside of me. Instead of feeling guilty, I felt relieved. My limbs felt loose, the tension in my neck and back slowly released, the tears that threatened before came back to the surface. "Exactly. Family comes first."

"Next time, please let me know what's going on so I can help." His tone was slightly chiding.

I tilted my head. If my parents allowed it, I'd love to have someone to share the burden with, even if it was someone to lean on or to be a support, like he was doing now. "How can you help?"

He leaned back on the couch, pulling me into his side. "Even if this is all I can do, it's still something."

I nuzzled into his chest, letting his warmth soothe me from the inside out. I couldn't deny that him being here was nice.

After a few seconds of silence, he asked, "Do you have any other family in the area that helps?"

"No. My mom doesn't like anyone to know."

"She never told her friends?"

"No. When she eased back from those relationships, they didn't inquire, as far as I know. It's not like they've shown up at the house to make sure she's okay. But I don't know what she told them exactly."

"She's private."

"Very. She's embarrassed. She doesn't want people to think less of her." It was similar to how Reid felt about his speech impediment.

He tightened his hold on my shoulders. "That means you bear the brunt of it."

I stiffened, feeling guilty talking about it being a burden even though it was how I felt. "My father helps."

"Maybe you should talk to him about having a nurse come in."

"I don't think we're at that point yet. Maybe when she has difficulty walking."

"If she can't see that would create mobility issues."

I chewed my lip, thinking about his suggestion. "You're right. I'll talk to my dad."

Silence fell between us. I thought back to the day, wondering if I could have handled things differently. "I

shouldn't have been thrown off by today. We know relapses are possible, but they are hard to accept, if that makes sense. I felt guilty for being happy when I should have been with her."

"You feel guilty for what we have?" His words ghosted over the top of my head, sending tingles down my spine.

I nodded against his chest, the shame covering me like a blanket I wasn't even sure he could penetrate.

"Why do you feel that way?"

"I forgot my dad was out of town. I should have been checking in on her more. I was distracted." The words fell easily from my lips. This I understood. Guilt. Shame. Censure for not being more.

"You were distracted by me?" He seemed a little surprised by my insinuation.

I eased out of his arms. "It's not your fault. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. This is on me."

He watched me carefully as if he was trying to figure something out. "There's nothing wrong with being happy."

"Of course not." It wasn't being happy that was the problem, it was letting things or people distract me.

"You feel guilty though." His words were carefully measured.

I shrugged. "Yeah, I can't help it."

"Come here." I sank back into his arms, grateful for his presence after a long emotional day. I was filled with guilt over disappointing my family and Reid. I wanted to be there for both, even though I wasn't sure it was possible.

With one hand on my back, the other played with the strands of my hair, it was soothing. "Thank you for coming. I really appreciate it."

I didn't even know what it was like to unburden myself on someone. It was a feeling I could get used to. I had to be careful not to rely on him too much. He could walk away, decide it was too much to deal with.

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# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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## DYLAN

REID SPENT THE NIGHT, COMFORTING ME WITH HIS understanding, his need to be there for me. I almost believed the illusion that I could have it all, family, my career, and Reid. There was still this nagging feeling that it could all go wrong.

We drove to Baltimore separately in the morning because Lena called me in for a meeting. The fact that Reid wasn't included made me edgy. Lena gave me the freedom to get Kids Speak off the ground but it was time to officially announce our partnership.

Lena turned her attention from her computer, clasping her hands together on the desk. "Thank you for coming in this morning."

"Of course."

"Next week is Thanksgiving. As we previously discussed, we're going to announce our partnership with Kids Speak. We'll invite the kids on the field, make the announcement, provide them a feast to eat during the game."

"That sounds amazing." I'd be able to see Reid's game, meet his family. Maybe I could convince my parents to come.

"Also, Hadley mentioned you're having a holiday gala for Kids Speak in December. We'd like to host that here at the Press Box. Invite the kids and their families, make it a big celebration."

Excitement flowed through me that she was offering up the swanky lounge in the stadium. "I'll need to talk to my partners

about it, but it sounds like something they'd be fine with."

Lena leaned in closer, her eyes filled with excitement. "I think we need a player to speak that night, to present him as the spokesman for the team."

My mind whirred with possibilities, Reid's teammates were already able and willing to do something like this. They'd be great. "Were you thinking of Jonah or Chase?"

Her smile widened. "Reid Everson."

"I'm sorry?" My stomach dropped.

"Reid Everson. Coach Ackerman said he's been volunteering consistently. He's even bonded with one of the kids. The organization is clearly important to him. He needs the publicity. This is the perfect solution. It will allow the fans to get to know him better."

"He won't want to," I said carefully.

"You seem to have a rapport with him. You got him to volunteer when he was reluctant. I'm confident you can convince him."

Tension crept up my shoulders. It was because of our unique relationship I didn't want to convince him to be the spokesman. The irony was I'd orchestrated our blind date with the sole purpose of asking him to be the Kids Speak's spokesman. Now Lena wanted the same thing. I couldn't do it.

"I thought you'd be happy. When you asked me to set you up with Reid Everson on the blind date, you said it was to ask him this same thing. We both want this."

Shame filled me that she was right. I had orchestrated our first meeting for this very outcome. How could I possibly explain it was something I wanted, but he didn't. Remembering how he drove to my house to ensure I was okay last night, there was no way I'd feel comfortable asking him now.

She tilted her head slightly. "Has something changed? Do you not think he'd be the perfect choice?"

He would be. She had no idea how perfect. “I do, but I don’t think he’ll change his mind.”

“I want him to speak at the holiday gala to describe what he’s been doing with the program. His contract is up at the end of the year. If Reid wants to show Lincoln this is where he belongs, this will help. This is the reason you wanted to partner with us, isn’t it?”

I nodded, the knot in my stomach twisting more at the mention of Reid’s contract being up at the end of the year. He could be traded to a different city. “Yes.”

“I was impressed when I met you, Dylan. I saw myself in you. You’re tenacious. You go after what you want.

I always thought I was good at getting what I wanted. To have her spell it out like this, calling me an opportunist, didn’t sit right with me. Did I take advantage of people to get what I wanted? The means justified the ends? I felt numb as if she was talking to me from the end of a long tunnel. I didn’t want to reach the end to hear what she had to say. I wanted to cover my head, hiding from her demands, her implications.

She made it seem like my relationship with Reid was a means to an end. When it was the realest thing in my life. “I don’t feel comfortable doing this.”

“The contract allows us to pick the spokesperson. If you can’t convince him, I’ll remind him it’s an obligation.”

The contract did say that. It wasn’t something I’d thought about before now. The organization had been hands-off since it began. The only demand was the move to Baltimore.

“You don’t have a choice in the matter. That should ease your conscience.”

Except it didn’t. Any respect I had for Lena dimmed. She was cutthroat. She was nothing like me. I didn’t trust her enough to tell her what was really going on with Reid. He wouldn’t want me to talk about him anyway.

I left her office, the unease twisted into a knot in my stomach, turning until tension crept up my back to my shoulders, my neck. My head throbbed with pain.

I'd be up front with him. I'd tell him the truth. It was the team's ultimate choice. It was in his contract to cooperate.

He'd only care that I was betraying him. That I was advocating for someone who wasn't him.

I wanted to be there for him like he'd been for me last night. I wanted to be the person he could count on, but I wasn't sure that was the case.

Lena hadn't demanded I tell him immediately, so I could wait until after Thanksgiving. I could meet his family, see how the announcement on the field went, maybe Lena would change her mind or Reid would be more open to the idea.

I'd focus on Thanksgiving, push the task for another day. I wanted to bask in the illusion of Reid and me for a little longer.

On the drive to work, I called my dad. I couldn't put off telling him about my Thanksgiving plans.

"You calling for an update on Mom?" he immediately asked

"Yes. I had something else I need to talk to you about too."

"She's hanging in there. She has an appointment with an eye doctor. I know there's not much they can do..."

"It's tough. Hopefully, this episode doesn't last long. I know she won't want to miss all of the holiday celebrations." If she couldn't see the ornaments on the tree it was going to be a depressing Christmas for all of us.

She wouldn't want to decorate, attend church, or possibly celebrate at all.

"What did you want to talk about?"

"The team is announcing its partnership with Kids Speak at the football game on Thanksgiving Day. It's during your dinner."

"Do you need to attend?"

My stomach tightened at his implication. "I'm the one organizing it."

He was quiet for a few seconds. “I’d never tell you to choose family over work or even a nonprofit.”

I’d hoped he wouldn’t but I wasn’t sure. “Is it possible we could have dinner another day?”

“I don’t know. You’re mother’s pretty set in her ways.” His words drifted off by the end.

I racked my brain trying to think of an alternative. “Would she want to come to the game?”

He sighed. “What’s the point? She won’t be able to see it.”

“That’s true.” The line was quiet for a few seconds. “I’m sorry, Dad. I feel terrible about missing it, but I can’t get out of it.”

“I know. I’ll talk to her.” His tone was defeated.

Between her vision issues and me not being there for the holiday she was going to have a tough time. “We can celebrate it on Friday. Make it extra special.”

I infused as much brightness as I could into my voice.

“We’ll see.”

I said goodbye, promising to stop by soon.



THE NEXT WEEK, THE KNOT IN MY STOMACH NEVER WENT away. It only grew larger, collecting more concerns, until my stomach was tight with it. I touched my stomach as I drove to the stadium for the Thanksgiving game, pressing as if I could break it up, make it go away, but it was no use. I needed to talk to Reid soon or it would eat me up.

Mom refused to come to the game, her vision issues making it impossible for her to enjoy it. She didn’t want to meet Reid’s family when they’d be blurry.

Reid understood. He said there would be plenty of time for our families to meet, but I wasn’t so sure. I wasn’t positive he would want to see me after I talked to him about Lena’s plans

for him. I was nervous about meeting his family especially on a day I was already preoccupied with Kids Speak. I'd never taken that step with anyone else.

I pulled into a spot Lena reserved for me so I could arrive early to make sure things were set up. Reid was so excited to see Quinton and all the kids, but the players couldn't join them for the ceremony at halftime. Instead, Reid asked if the kids could visit with them before the game outside the locker room.

It would be easier to let Lena break the news to Reid. She could be the bad guy but she didn't know about his speech issues. I figured he'd feel more comfortable discussing the logistics with me versus her. I had his best interests at heart. She didn't.

Callie took me through the side-by-side boxes where the kids would watch the game with their parents. Each room was identical with plush executive-looking seating inside, stadium-seating on the balcony, a kitchenette along one wall, a table where the caterers were setting up the food on the other side. A large screen TV hung above the table, a smaller one in the corner so you wouldn't miss any of the action. They'd been decorated with purple and black balloons and streamers to make the room more kid friendly. It looked exactly how I hoped it would.

I stepped closer to the window looking out on the field where I'd thrown a football with Reid. It seemed so much bigger up here. Like Reid, it was larger than life, making me feel small, almost insignificant.

I turned to Callie. "Everything looks great."

Lena opened the door. "Oh good. You're here. I wanted to talk to you about the timeline."

I'd been avoiding her as much as possible during preparations. "Sure."

"The players will meet the kids when they leave the locker room. They've allotted ten minutes to greet them, get pictures, then run out the tunnel. It's not a lot of time, but we thought it would have the most impact on the kids. The players are open

to having a day where the kids come to the field after the season is over. They can throw the ball, run some drills.”

My heart soared that the guys were offering their free time to meet with them. “That would be amazing.”

“Have you spoken with Reid about what we discussed?” Her expression was expectant.

I kept my focus on Lena, not wanting to see the questions I’d see in Callie’s eyes.

“Not yet. I’ll talk to him after today. I don’t want to distract him from the game.”

“Make sure it’s soon. I need to speak with him about my expectations.”

“Of course.” I offered her a tight smile before she left. My stomach rolled with dread about what her expectations would entail.

Callie folded her arms across her chest, raising her brow. “What’s she talking about? What do you need to discuss with Reid?”

I glanced around, satisfied we were the only ones present. “Lena wants Reid to be Kids Speak’s spokesperson.”

Callie’s eyes narrowed on me. “Why would she ask that?”

“She feels like Reid would be the best person for the position. She wants him to be more in the public eye. He’s taken a particular interest in Kids Speak, working exclusively with Quinton. It hasn’t gone unnoticed. She’s impressed.”

“Does she know?” Callie broke off. “Do you?”

I lowered my voice, my heart beat faster. “That Reid has a speech impediment?”

Callie nodded tightly.

“He told me.”

Her face was pinched. “He wouldn’t want you to tell her.”

“I know. The problem is that it’s in our contracts. He has to cooperate with whatever the PR office wants. Baltimore picks

the spokesperson. I already told her that Reid wouldn't want to do it but it doesn't matter. I don't have a say. Neither does he." Tension filled my voice as frustration filled me.

Callie's forehead wrinkled. "You want what's best for him, right?"

"Of course. I love him." The words popped out before I could stop myself. Callie was one of his closest friends. I needed her to know how much I cared for him. "I have his best interests in mind. I'm just not sure what I can do."

"When do you plan on talking to him?"

"After his family leaves. I didn't want to ruin the day or the holiday. Any suggestions?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm sorry. I've already told him it would be better for him to come out."

"It would be. He'd be amazing if he told the kids his story." He'd talked to me so I hoped he'd eventually feel comfortable talking to others. I suspected his father's words were what had held him back all these years.

"But he's worried about what the assholes will say, the trolls. He's had a few bad experiences with exes, the press."

I wanted to add the worst one was his father but I wasn't sure he'd confided in her. I didn't think he had. It was too embarrassing for him, too close to his insecurities to admit. It felt good to know that he'd trusted me. He needed me to be looking out for him. I just wished there were more options in this case. "Maybe if we could convince him that this will be good for him, he'll do it."

"He was amazing during his last press conference. He's hard on himself, worried about slipping when he speaks, or what people will think if he pauses to think of the right word. If he talked to the press, he'd get out ahead of it. He wouldn't need to worry. He could be himself."

"There would still be people out there who say nasty stuff."



“Either way, that could happen. It’s a matter of controlling the situation

“We’d better get downstairs. The kids are due to arrive any minute.”

I followed her down the long ramps to the entrance. She paused before we stepped outside the gate. “I don’t envy you. I’m not sure how he’s going to react. Maybe he’s changed since meeting you. I don’t know.”

“What’s your gut say?”

Callie’s forehead wrinkled. “That he won’t take it well. He’ll think you conspired with Lena.”

The knot that loosened while I’d talked to Callie tightened more than before. “Come on. We don’t have time for this now.”

I had to meet the kids, coordinate everything, then meet Reid after the game so he could introduce me to his family. It was scary. It was overwhelming. I needed to get through today. Then I’d figure out the spokesperson issue.

“Let’s do this.” We walked outside, where Hadley was greeting the children and their families. We had them stow their things in the boxes then took them to the locker room. The kids were beyond excited to meet their favorite football players. They wore Baltimore jerseys provided by the team with a Kids Speak patch. Tears threatened at the site of that patch on their shoulders.

This was a dream come true. I was helping people in a significant way. I’d brought attention to an issue that affected not only children, but adults like my mother and Reid.

Reid had to understand that I only meant the best for him. I’d never force or manipulate him to do anything.

When the locker room door opened, a hush fell over the crowd when they’d been animated before. Chase, Jonah, and Reid walked out ahead of the team as the captains, yelling, “Are you ready for some football?”

Then the kids were jumping, shouting, cheering with them. The players greeted the kids, giving autographs, snapping pics.

Reid stepped closer, dipping his head.

It felt good to be with him. I pushed away the guilt for holding something back from him he wouldn't like.

“Good luck today.”

He seemed larger than life in his pads and jersey, his cleats making him even taller. “Thanks. Congrats on this.” He gestured to the kids surrounding us. “What you’ve done is amazing.”

I wanted to bask in his praise, but Callie’s voice rang in the back of my head. *He’ll hate it. He’ll think you conspired with Lena.*

And a part of me knew she was right. I had talked to Lena, even Callie about it before I talked to him. I should have gone to him first. It was too late now.

He touched my face with his free hand, leaning down to kiss me tenderly. “I love you.”

“I love you.” I wanted to deserve his love. I wanted to be worthy of him.

He smiled, turning to Chase when he stood in front of the group.

“It was so nice meeting you guys. We’ll see you after the game. Until then we have a game to play,” Chase’s voice rose with each word until his team was jogging behind him onto the field.

We could feel the energy of the stadium from here. The roar of the crowd growing larger as Chase emerged on the field. The thumping of people’s feet, the yells, whistles, the music that pounded through the speakers. The energy lifted me, buoying, making me determined to focus on making this day a success.

Hadley clapped her hands to get everyone’s attention. “Who’s hungry? We have a Thanksgiving feast for you to enjoy during the game.”

We led the group to the sky boxes, getting everyone settled in. I stood watching the game from the corner of the window.

“This is amazing. Thank you.” Hadley stood by my shoulder.

“This is all you, Hadley. It was your idea to form this nonprofit, to expand to Maryland. It was even your idea to involve athletes.”

“Colin and mine. He may not be a professional athlete but the kids identify with him because he went through something similar. He was bullied. Our father was embarrassed by his speech.”

I remembered discussing her family life when she started dating Cade, how her father treated Colin, how it was her push to open Kids Speak. I hadn't thought about it much until she mentioned it again. How parallel Colin's situation was to Reid's. The only difference was that Colin's father made sure he got help, Reid's shamed him into hiding.

I kept my eyes on Reid lining up for the next play. He switched positions at the last second. He'd told me once it was to confuse the defense. All these little things he'd told me over time made up what I knew about him. That he was hardworking, loyal, and kind.

“That understanding makes a huge difference.”

Reid had that experience too. He could give the kids that same sense of camaraderie, belonging, and understanding.

“I sent Colin a picture of the kids talking to the players before the game. He texted back that our vision was coming to life. This is a dream coming true. You made it happen.” Hadley briefly touched my shoulder before turning to talk to a little boy who was tugging her free hand.

I wanted to talk to her, to ask her how to handle this situation with Reid, but I'd already confided in Callie. Today was a big day for Hadley. She'd be the one on the field shaking the team owner's hand today. She didn't need to be involved in my drama.

I turned my attention back to Reid just as he caught a short pass over the middle. Several linemen tried to tackle him while Reid weaved through them. I don't know why I thought he'd understand why I'd waited a week to tell him. He demanded perfection of himself. He'd demand no less from me.

Before halftime, we made our way down to the field so we'd be able to walk out as soon as the whistle blew when the clock ran out. I couldn't see what was happening. We heard the roar of the crowd, then someone from the front yelling down the tunnel, Baltimore scored.

I celebrated with the kids around me, high fiving them, then waited for the extra kick. When the players cleared the field, Lena led us out. The crowd was standing, some cheering, some making their way to concessions or the bathroom. A podium was placed at midfield so we followed Lena there, the kids standing around us. We directed them to line up facing the home side of the stadium. The parents stayed in the tunnel.

I stood next to Hadley, overcome with pride as the owner started to speak about our organization, why he felt it was important that it be in Baltimore. When he mentioned the partnership, he shook Hadley's hand, inviting her to speak.

She spoke briefly about why she'd begun the organization, to help kids who didn't qualify for services, suffering quietly with low self-esteem.

She was describing Reid.

She ended her portion of the program, saying she was thrilled to be partnering with Baltimore to bring services to the area, looking forward to more amazing things to come. As soon as she finished, we were ushered off the field. We'd used a different tunnel than the team's, so I wasn't able to see Reid as he went into the locker room. I wanted to congratulate him on a good game so far.

I wasn't sure I'd be able to hide what I was feeling if I did. The excitement of the announcement, knowing Reid could do so much good if he came out, frustration at the position Lena

put me in, yet knowing she was right. He was the perfect spokesman for Kids Speak. I just had to convince him.

I needed to push out thoughts of our relationship to focus on how good it would be for the kids, the organization. That's why I was here. To make Kids Speak a success in Baltimore. Reid was an integral part of that.

When had I ever put what I wanted personally before professionally? Only when it came to my family.

Before the end of the game, the kids were directed to the field, to celebrate with the team briefly before being led to their parents. It was a long day for them. They were worn out.

I wanted to help, but Hadley told me to find Reid and his family. I nodded. She was right. I wasn't needed anymore. She had Avery and Lena.

I tried to move from professional mode to girlfriend. I was going to meet his family for the first time. No matter what might happen in the future, I wanted to make a good impression.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO**

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## REID

HIGH ON THE WIN, I SHOWERED, EAGER TO SEE MY FAMILY AND introduce them to Dylan. I hadn't scored any touchdowns so I didn't need to answer any questions with the press.

Lena stopped me outside the locker room. "We need to talk on Monday."

I wanted to ask what it was about but I wanted to get to Dylan and my family more.

"Do you know what Lena wants?" Callie asked.

"No. I'm sure I won't like it though." I dreaded going to her office, mainly because she was always pushing me out of my comfort zone.

Callie nodded tightly, not saying anything. A feeling of dread drifted down my spine. Did she know something that I didn't?

Before I could ask her, she brightened, "Dylan already found them."

I followed her gaze through the lounge to find Dylan talking to my mom and sisters. They were all smiling, happy. She charmed them, like she did everyone. When we'd met, I thought it was a bad thing. Now pride swept through my body.

I quickened my pace, my hand connecting with the small of Dylan's back. "I see you've met my girlfriend."

She smiled up at me as I looked at her. I wanted to kiss her, to tell her I loved her. I'd told my mom I was dating someone, that it was new. I thought it had potential.

“Yes, she’s lovely. I’m so impressed with her organization, what she’s doing,” Mom said.

Dylan turned from me. “Oh, it’s my friend Hadley’s organization. I’m just helping her.”

“Don’t diminish what you’ve done. You were the one who got the team involved, brought the organization to Baltimore.”

Dylan’s face flushed starting at her neck drifting upward until her cheeks were rosy.

I stepped away from Dylan, engulfing my mom and sisters in hugs. “You met my sisters, Izzie and Grace?”

Dylan smiled. “I did. They’re lovely.”

Izzie crossed her arms over her chest, one brow raised. “You hear that Reid? We’re lovely.”

“You’re heathens. She’ll see through you eventually.”

Dylan lightly smacked my arm. “Reid.”

“What? You don’t know what it’s like to have siblings.”

A flash of something went over her face so fast I thought I’d imagined it. Had I said something that hurt her? Maybe she was thinking it would be nice to have someone to share the responsibility for her parents. I wrapped an arm around her, pulling her into my side. I’d have to apologize to her later when we were alone.

“Who’s ready for Thanksgiving dinner? I’m starving.” I moved my gaze from Dylan to my mother, who was watching us with a soft expression on her face. I’d never introduced her to anyone before. I was never serious enough about anyone to fly them home or to include them in the small snippets of time I got with my family. Dylan was different. I wanted to include her. She was my family or at least I wanted her to be.

It took a few minutes to say goodbye, wishing happy Thanksgivings to the remaining players and their families. We finally made it to the parking lot. We parted with my mother and sisters at their rental.

Pausing at Dylan’s car, she asked, “Did you invite Callie?”



“I did. But she spends it with her grandfather at the nursing home.”

Dylan was quiet for a few seconds as if she was thinking something through. “Oh. Do you think we could take him some food? Or did she already have some for him?”

“I think they eat whatever they serve at the center.”

Her nose scrunched. “Is that good though? For Thanksgiving?”

My mind was whirring with possibilities. We could pack up our food, take it to them. Would my family be okay with that? “It’s probably not the best.”

Dylan shook her head. “You want to spend time with your family. It’s probably not a good idea.”

“No. It’s perfect. We’ll pack up the food.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket, pulling up Callie’s contact information.

I hit send then pulled open Dylan’s door so she could slide inside. “Thank you for thinking of them. I want to spend time with family. Callie and Mr. Goodwin are family just as much as you, my mom and sisters are.”

“Yeah?” She smiled, tilting her face up to mine.

I slid my hands under her hair, lowering my lips to hers for a soft kiss. “I’m so happy we’re spending the day together.”

“Me too.”

I watched her get into her car, backing up, before waving. Then I hurried to my SUV so she wouldn’t be too far ahead of me. I called my mom on the way telling her Dylan’s plan. Thankfully, they loved the idea.

Next year, I’d invite them to our meal. It felt right to include them. I loved that Dylan thought of it.

We stopped at the condo to wrap up the food, carrying it in the boxes the caterers had left for cleanup the next day.

We rode together with my mom and sisters to the home, the city giving way to rolling fields before we pulled into the

full lot.

“I’m happy to see so many people here.” Mom said.

“You don’t think they’ll be offended we brought food, do you?” Dylan asked.

“No. We can eat in the room. I’ve brought food before.”

“Good.” We carried the items to the front desk where we checked in then to Mr. Goodwin’s room. Callie sat on a chair next to him. She stood when we entered.

“We brought lots of food. I hope you’re hungry.”

“It’s about time. Dinner is served at five.”

I ignored Mr. Goodwin’s gruff tone. I knew him well enough to know when he was pleased. “This is Dylan, my girlfriend, my mother, Ellen Everson, my sisters, Izzie and Grace.”

After introductions, they made quick work of plating the food while I gathered extra chairs from the common room. The nurses were happy to help.

“This is so good. Thank you for thinking of us,” Callie said.

“It was Dylan’s idea, actually.” I nodded in her direction.

“It was?” Callie asked, she paused her fork halfway to her mouth.

“I thought it would be nice to have company.”

“Next year you can come to my apartment. Hopefully, we won’t have a Thanksgiving game.”

Next year I hoped we’d be with Dylan’s family too. We’d need to coordinate the meals so that we spent time with both of our families. Maybe by then, Dylan’s parents would be okay coming to our dinner.

I saw her in my life for a while. I hoped she felt the same.

We talked for a few hours, cleaned up the trash and leftovers, then said our goodbyes when Frank was tired. On

the way home, Dylan said, “He’s a nice man. I think it’s great you visit him.”

“How did you know I visited with him?”

“Callie told me.”

“She did?” Callie usually didn’t tell anyone about my habits. She trusted Dylan.

“Yeah, she mentioned how you visited him by yourself, secured his spot here.”

“He’s a good friend. I enjoy spending time with him. I wanted him to have a nice place to live.”

She leaned back on the headrest, considering me. “You’re a pretty great guy.”

She’d said it almost wistfully as if she didn’t already own me heart and soul.

“And I’m yours.”

“Yeah?”

I glanced over her, seeing her smile. Her eyes were wary as if she didn’t trust my words.

I tightened my fingers on the steering wheel. I wanted to tell her I’d prove it to her but my mom and sisters weren’t flying out until Sunday. We wouldn’t be alone all weekend. I was content with the win, an evening with my closest family, and Dylan. I had plenty of time to prove to Dylan she was mine.

I reached over to hold her hand not caring if my mom or sisters saw.



WHILE DYLAN SPENT FRIDAY WITH HER FAMILY, I TOOK MOM and my sisters to the Baltimore aquarium then the Babe Ruth Baseball Museum.

We spent the rest of the holiday weekend together. We went to D.C.'s holiday market and to see the ice sculptures at the Gaylord National Resort.

Dylan got along with my sisters, talking about shopping, the holidays, inquiring about their plans after graduation. I loved that she connected with them on their level, encouraging them to think about their future.

She fit.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE**

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## DYLAN

AFTER WE DROVE HIS FAMILY TO THE AIRPORT SUNDAY NIGHT, we came back to his condo.

Reid stretched out on the couch, turning the TV on. “Lena wants to meet with me tomorrow.”

Every muscle in my body tensed. “Oh? Did she say what it was about?”

“No. She didn’t. Are you meeting with her too?”

Maybe the meeting had nothing to do with Kids Speak. Whether she planned to talk to him about it or not, it was time. “I need to talk to you about something.”

His gaze flicked from the TV to me. Whatever he saw on my face prompted him to turn off the TV. “What’s up?”

“Lena approached me last week with an idea.” My stomach was uneasy, but I was determined to get it out.

Reid smiled. “Last time she suggested we go on a blind date, look how that turned out.”

I shook my head slowly, dread building. “Yeah, this isn’t like that.”

He frowned. “What is it?”

“We were planning a holiday gala for Kids Speak in Annapolis. Lena wants to have it at the Press Box in Baltimore. She wants to use it as an opportunity to announce a spokesperson for the organization.”

He rubbed his jaw. “Do you know who she’s going to pick?”

I shifted on the couch. “She wants you.”

Reid leaned his elbows on his knees, turning his head to me, his face incredulous. “What?”

“I suggested Chase or Jonah, but she wants you.” My heart was pounding in my ears.

He stood, his feet wide, his nostrils flared. “Did you tell her about my speech issues?”

I shook my head vehemently. “No. I wouldn’t do that. She’s aware you’ve taken an interest in the organization, bonding with Quinton. Chase and Jonah are focused on other charities that are important to them. You need more publicity. This will be perfect for that.”

“Isn’t it your decision who the spokesperson is?” His words were deceptively calm, yet there was something building under the surface.

I could see it rippling in his raised shoulders, his curled fists.

I crossed my arms over my chest, feeling my heart beating rapidly. “It’s in our contract. The team can name who they want. We don’t have a say.”

He dragged his fingers through his hair.

I wished I’d insisted Lena break the news to him even though it didn’t change the truth.

“Why do I feel like you had something to do with this? This was your plan all along.”

I opened my mouth to disagree but the words wouldn’t come out. “When I won the silent auction, I called Lena to request you,” seeing his angry expression I quickly added, “because I saw something in you when I watched the videos of you giving interviews. I can’t explain it. I was attracted to you. I wanted to meet you but it wasn’t because I suspected you had a speech impediment.”

He took a few steps back, holding his arms out to the side. “You watched videos of me before we met? You specifically requested me and you’re telling me you didn’t notice a speech issue, thinking I’d make the perfect spokesman.”

I swallowed, my throat dry. I wasn’t sure he’d believe me. “I noticed you were a man of few words, you were soft spoken. You didn’t want to be there. I was attracted to you, your voice. I promise I didn’t suspect anything.”

“There’s something else.” His voice was cold, almost flat. I hadn’t heard him like this before, not even the first time we met when he realized I wanted something from him more than a date.

I took a deep breath knowing I had to tell him the truth no matter what his reaction would be. We couldn’t be in a relationship if it was based on a lie. “As I got to know you, I suspected you might have a speech issue. Before we went to get sushi in my living room, then again on the phone when we talked about Thanksgiving that first time. I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable by asking about it. I wanted you to feel comfortable talking to me, and you did.”

“You’ve wanted me to be the spokesman this whole time. You were pushing for it from the beginning.” He started pacing in front of the couch as my heart pounded in my chest.

“I knew you didn’t want to be the spokesman. I wouldn’t push it if Lena wasn’t.”

He stood pacing in front of the couch, pointing a finger at me. “You’re hiding behind Lena and the contract but it’s you. When I spoke to Lena about volunteering with Kids Speak, she specifically said I didn’t have to be the spokesman. You changed her mind.”

I shook my head. “No. I didn’t. She came to me with the idea, reminding me of the contract, that she has full decision-making power.”

“I should have known nothing about you was innocent or real. I was so stupid to fall for you when you had your own agenda.”



I was surprisingly calm despite his increased agitation because I knew he was wrong. I wasn't manipulative. "Honestly—"

He paused, his tone biting. He waved his arm at me as he resumed pacing. "Yes, please be honest."

I stood to even things between us, willing him to listen. "I think if you came out to the public, it would be inspiring. You'd be telling them it's okay to be transparent about the challenges you face. You can show them you're working to improve."

He stopped pacing, turning to face me, his expression one of defeat, acceptance.

I'm sure the nasty words his father said were playing on repeat in his head.

"I'm not working to improve."

"You could be." My heart was beating hard in my chest, my palms sweaty. I believed in what I was saying but was I pushing him away in the process?

He gestured between us. "Is that what this is? You're embarrassed by me? You want me to change?"

I shook my head slowly. "No. That's not it at all."

"You want to change me like everyone else. Lena, Callie, my dad." He spit out the words *my dad*.

His words slammed into my chest like a battering ram. I stepped back from the force of the blow, holding my hands up to stop him. "I don't think your dad wanted to change you."

Reid's mouth twisted into a sneer. "He left because I disgusted him."

Is that what Reid had been holding inside all this time? Guilt because his father left his family because of his speech? "I don't think your father left because of that."

"How do you know? You know nothing about my family."

A weird calm settled over me. I couldn't explain where my certainty came from. "He was probably going to leave anyway."

I bet it had nothing to do with you.”

He took a step closer to me, his face tight with anger. “Just go.”

“What do you mean?” My heart had slowed, my voice cautious, dread trickled down my spine. I’d gone too far. I’d said too much. I’d ruined everything.

“You want out. Just go.” He flipped his hand at me as if my leaving meant less than nothing to him.

I shook my head slowly as if I could negate his flippant words by the motion. “I don’t want out. I’m telling you what Lena wants. I’m on your side. *I love you.*”

“Lena only cares about the organization. She exploits people. She doesn’t care about them.” His voice rose with each word as if punctuating each syllable for effect.

He was so upset, his enunciation was sloppy.

I wasn’t sure what to say to his characterization of Lena. I didn’t know her well enough to contradict him with any accuracy. “Do you think you could talk to Coach? Maybe he wouldn’t want this affecting your play.”

“First, you weren’t looking out for me. Wanting me to be the spokesman is for you, for Kids Speak. That’s what you care about.” He pointed a finger at me, slicing me open without touching me. “Second, we’re not telling my boss that I’m weak.”

I placed a hand over my chest to still the pain spreading from my heart through my chest. “Give the people who care about you an opportunity to help you.”

“I don’t need help. I just need to be left alone.” His words bit through me, sharp and cold, leaving icicles in their wake.

My eyes narrowed on him, not comprehending his animosity even though Callie warned me he’d react this way. My heart was slowly shattering, one piece at a time, falling to the floor between us. “Surely, you don’t mean that.”

“You need to leave,” he repeated.

“Let’s talk about this.” I held my hands out to him, hoping he’d grab onto them, remembering that he loved me.

He turned away from me, his tone dull. “I want to be alone.”

Cold settled over me. Was this him ending things?

“I met with you, hoping you could help me. I walked away from that dinner denying my attraction to you. I resisted you because I can’t have anyone getting between me and my obligations to my family.” The words fell from my lips, disjointed, broken, the emotion interfering with my ability to think straight, to argue my case.

I touched his arm gently, uncertain how he’d react. The muscles under my fingers were taut with tension. I wouldn’t get through to him tonight. “I love you. When you’re ready to talk, I’ll be here for you.”

“Just go.” I flinched at the vehemence in his voice, taking a few steps back.

“Callie said you’d be like this. That you’d accuse me of manipulating you,” I said it softly, more to myself than to him, my anger at the situation building. I’d said I loved him several times. How was he able to dismiss me, what we’d had so easily as if what we had was meaningless?

“She was right.”

“I should have listened to her. I should have approached this differently. I don’t know though. Would it have mattered? Your fallback is to retreat, isolating and protecting yourself. Not letting anyone in.”

“You don’t know me.” His voice was flat as if we were already over.

If he was so quick to dismiss me, this might be my only chance to reason with him. “I do. I love every part of you. I don’t want to push you into doing something you don’t want to.”

“You are. You’re asking for the impossible.” His voice cracked, emotion leaking through, giving me hope.

“You pushed Quinton. You said whatever you had to, so he’d participate in his lessons. You wanted him to improve. Why not want the same for yourself?”

He turned toward the windows, crossing his arms over his chest, the lights of the city blurred by the raindrops falling on the window.

It was a dismissal I felt deep in my bones. He was shutting me out. He was incapable of listening at this point.

I ignored the voice in the back of my head that said he wouldn’t change his mind once he calmed down. He’d never done it before. Why would he for me? Why was I different than every other person in his life that hurt him? “I’m not your father. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with you.”

“Then why are you telling me to improve, to talk about it?”

“You could help others. You could give them a sense that they’re not alone. The process might be healing for you.”

He didn’t respond, keeping his back to me. I wanted to wrap my arms around his waist, bury my face in his shirt, but he wouldn’t want that.

I went to the bedroom to gather the few things I’d left here over the weekend. I tried to compose myself before walking back through his condo, wondering if I’d ever be here again. I wanted to think we could get past this even though it felt final.

He stood in the same position, unmoving, his shoulders tense, his back rigid.

I pulled open his door, unsure if there was anything left to say. My heart pounded in my ears as I waited for him to say something to stop me, to tell me he’d overreacted, but he didn’t.

He let me walk out. My heart felt like it was dragging behind me as I walked to my car. It felt like nothing was ever going to be the same again.

I felt like I was in a fog, my arms held out in front of me, trying to find my way. Nothing was making sense.

My limbs felt heavy. My head throbbed.

Sliding into my car, I fumbled with my phone, dropping it several times, once between my seat and the console before I finally pulled it out. I sucked in a sharp breath when I saw several voice mails and unread messages from my father.

**Dad: Mom fell down the steps. We're waiting on an ambulance.**

A few minutes later.

**Dad: Where are you?**

**Dad: We're in the ambulance on the way to Anne Arundel Medical Center. Meet us there when you get this.**

I threw my phone on the seat next to me, it went sliding off the leather seat onto the floor. I pushed the button to turn on the car, my hands shaking. I backed out of the spot.

While I was busy pleading with Reid to listen to reason, my mom fell down the steps. While I'd been distracted, my dad was frantically trying to reach me.

I was supposed to be available. I was supposed to be there when they needed me. I'd failed them.

I'd never felt lower. I couldn't get the vision of Mom tumbling down the steps, lying in a broken heap out of my head.

It wouldn't have happened if I'd been there. This was the reason I'd stayed closed to home, never moving away. My family was supposed to be my priority, not some guy who'd cast me aside the first time we encountered a challenge.

I refocused my energy, channeling my guilt into getting to the hospital to make sure Mom was okay. They needed me.

I wanted to return Dad's call, but he was probably inside the hospital. When I pulled out of Reid's parking garage, it was raining so hard I could barely see. My wipers squeaked loudly across the windshield in a never-ending battle to clear it.

It took every bit of concentration to see my lane, much less stay in it. The road was shiny, reflecting the streetlights. My head spun with everything that had just happened.

Reid's words echoed in my head. *Just go. Just leave.*

He was lashing out because of what his father did. It was impossible not to feel the weight of his rejection. He'd never trusted anyone until me. I'd blown that trust before we'd even met. We were doomed from the start.

I wanted to dwell, shifting through the argument, wondering how it could have gone differently but my parents needed me. I tightened my grip on the steering wheel, trying to focus on the road in front of me with the pounding of the rain on the roof of the car.

The rain was relentless, punishing, just like Reid's anger in his apartment. My head throbbed from the tension, my chest ached from our argument, my dad's frantic texts, the reality that I'd been distracted when my parents needed me. I screwed up.

I sighed in relief when I saw the sign for the hospital. Finally. I slowed down, turning on my signal for the exit.

I steered my car into the exit lane. A piercing sound split the air. Tires squealed. Before I could react, there was a clash of metal, my car jolted to the side. My body jerked.

I gritted my teeth, pushed down hard on the brake, gripping the steering wheel tightly until my fingers ached from the pressure, mentally willing the car to stop. I continued to slide in slow motion, the pressure of my foot on the brake ineffective as I veered sideways.

"No, no, no." I was going off the road. Trees flashed in my peripheral. I couldn't stop. I had no control.

I gripped the steering wheel impossibly tighter. Pressed harder on the pedal until my calf muscles protested.

My body jolted a second time as my car slammed into the guardrail, my head bobbing around like a rag doll, the car sliding, the screech of metal, one long continuous sound piercing my ears.

My head struck the window hard. I screamed in pain, my body pitching in the opposite direction. I sobbed in frustration. I was powerless.

The airbags burst open throwing me back against the seat. White dust filled the car. My nose burned from the smell.

The car finally slid to a stop. I closed my eyes against the pain, the smell, the reality.

My head hurt, my fingers ached, my chest throbbed with relentless pain. I wanted relief. I wanted oblivion.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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## REID

SHE LEFT.

I sat on the couch, my head dropping into my hands. When she mentioned making me the spokesperson for Kids Speak, I couldn't think straight. All I could think about was my dad's reaction to me talking, the comments from that one interview where I slipped, the heat of the spotlight on me, the weight of expectation. It was too much.

I wanted to eliminate anything that stood between me and anonymity. I'd protected my secret for so long, I couldn't have it come out now. I'd worked too hard. I'd accomplished too much.

The boy I was when my father said those things, when he left, wasn't here anymore. I was stronger. I knew how to insulate myself from people like that. People who wanted things from me, who wanted to exploit me.

I should have known Dylan Gannon would have looked into me. She had an ulterior motive.

Needing to talk to someone, I called Callie, putting her on speaker.

"Hey, boss." Her soft voice rang through the silent room.

"Callie." I couldn't clear the anguish from my voice, the disappointment, the realization that everything good in my life didn't exist after all.

"What happened? You sound upset."

I ran my fingers through my hair. “Dylan wants me to be the spokesman for Kids Speak.”

I bit the words out. They were distasteful in my mouth.

“Ah.” Her tone was knowing.

I paused, looking up, not seeing the rain splattered on the windows. “You knew?”

Callie’s sigh filled the room. “She talked to me about it. You know it was Lena’s idea.”

My heart pinched. A part of me wanted to believe Dylan wasn’t behind it even though she’d specifically requested me for the blind date. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t it?”

I considered her comment, wondering if Lena had told me first if I’d feel differently about it. I wasn’t sure. “Why did Dylan talk to you before coming to me?”

“What happened when she told you?” Her pointed question hung in the air.

“It didn’t—” I swallowed down pain that threatened to erupt. “It didn’t go well.”

“Did you throw her out, break up with her, tell her she was using you?”

I cleared my throat, not liking how it sounded coming from her. “I told her to leave.”

“I warned her.” Callie groaned in frustration. “I don’t see what option she had.”

Frustration burst from me with the force of my words. “She could have said no. She could have stood up for me.”

“Did you ask if she did? You know how Lena is, she holds the power in these situations. The only person who has any say is Coach Ackerman. That’s only if it interferes with practice and games.”

“No.” I clenched my teeth. I hadn’t asked many questions I didn’t already think I knew the answer to.

“Reid. You finally let someone in. Yet you’re so quick to dismiss her. To assume she doesn’t want the best for you.”

I searched my memory for the moment Dylan admitted she singled me out, requesting me for the blind date. I let my body feed on that anger like a balloon filling with helium. “Did you know she looked into me before we ever met? That she requested me for the blind date. She probably suspected I had a speech impediment. It was her goal all along to make me the spokesperson.”

Callie was quiet for a few seconds. “I didn’t know that. What I do know is that Dylan was worried about your reaction. Even if she had an ulterior motive when you met, I think her feelings were real. She cares about you. She loves you. *She told me.*”

I curled my fingers tightly around the phone, focusing on the anger, the frustration, the betrayal.

Callie let out a breath. “You fucked up. I knew you would.”

“You know you work for me, right? A little respect would be nice.”

“I think we’re more than boss-employee at this point. We’re friends. I’ve known about your speech impediment for a long time. I’ve told you I think you should talk to someone, that you should come out to the fans.”

“It’s easy for you to say. You’re perfect on the outside. You don’t have a deficiency people would pick apart.”

Callie was quiet for so long, I thought she’d hung up. “Not all of us have flaws on the outside, sometimes they’re on the inside where it’s harder to see. They still exist.”

A chill ran through me at her words. I wanted to ask if she was talking about herself. I couldn’t. I was too wrapped up in myself. I closed my eyes, allowing the pain of Dylan’s admission, the closing of my condo door, wrap around my heart, squeezing out any bit of softness that remained.

“You didn’t know each other on that blind date. There was more to her than you thought. Enough that you let her in, more

than anyone else.”

“I did let her in. I loved her.” The realization that I’d loved and lost tore through me like a tornado over flat terrain. There was nothing stopping the utter destruction.

“Reid—” Her voice broke. “Go after her. Tell her how you feel, that you’re scared, you’re bound to screw up. Together you’ll figure it out.”

It sounded so easy. Get in my car, follow her to Annapolis, but I couldn’t. At the end of the day, I didn’t deserve Dylan any more than I deserved a father who would stick around. It was better she left now. She wanted too much. She expected too much of me when I had nothing to give. I’d been like this for so long, the odds of me changing, of being a different person are slim to none.

“Reid, think about it. Dylan was good for you. She forced you to volunteer with Kids Speak and you enjoy it. You love working with that little boy. You’re doing so much good.”

It satisfied a need deep in my soul. A need to right the wrongs of my past. To help another child in need. One who could be left behind like me.

She sighed. “I love you, Reid, but you’re stubborn. I hope you change your mind. I’m here to help if you do.”

I couldn’t say anything because I wasn’t ready to acknowledge she might be right. I wanted to hold on to my anger.

“Good night, Reid.” She hung up.

I’d screwed up. I wasn’t sure I wanted to make it right. It was easier to wallow, to assume I wasn’t deserving of her anyway.

Our argument replayed in my head, circling like a merry-go-round until I lay on the couch, throwing my arm over my eyes, hoping the ride would stop.

Pounding on the door woke me. I sat up, disoriented. I grabbed my phone. Scrolling through, there were a couple missed calls from Callie.

Annoyed Callie wouldn't let this thing with Dylan go, I pulled open the door prepared to tell her to mind her own business.

Callie stood there, tears running down her cheeks, her shoulders slumped.

I reached for her, the anger leaving my body so quickly I felt weak. "Callie? What is it? Is it Frank? Is he okay?"

She pushed me away. "We have to go."

Her voice was strained, her hands were shaking.

"Where? I don't understand." I grabbed my keys prepared to drive to Frank's.

"Dylan was in an accident. She's at the hospital. We have to go. I tried calling..."

"Dylan? What are you talking about? I thought—it was—Frank? An accident?" My brain was fuzzy, my tongue thick.

Callie grabbed my hand, tugging me hard. "Dylan was in an accident. We have to go."

"I was asleep. My phone was on vibrate." I felt rooted to the spot, unable to process what she was saying, what I needed to do.

She grabbed my keys from my hand. "Let's go."

I let her drag me out the door. In the elevator, I scrolled through my phone, seeing a voicemail from Dylan. I don't think she'd ever left a voicemail.

I hit play, wanting to hear her voice, needing to know she was okay. I startled when an older man's voice came over the line.

My eyes met Callie's.

"Dylan was in an accident. They're taking her by ambulance to the hospital. She was—" his voice broke, "coming to see us. My wife fell down the steps. It was raining. Someone changed lanes—I'm not sure."

I closed my eyes against the pain. It was my fault. I'd sent her away. She was upset about our argument, driving in this rain.

"It wasn't your fault." Callie's voice tried to break through the thoughts running through my head.

The elevator door opened. More focused, I headed straight toward my SUV. I should have been there for her. If I'd been driving none of this would have happened. I got in the passenger side of my SUV. "Are you okay to drive?"

She pulled on her seat belt, gesturing at me. "I'm in better shape than you."

She'd visibly pulled herself together since she'd knocked on my door. Guilt, shame, regret were flowing through my body fueling my desire to get to Dylan. "We need to get there."

I wanted to urge her to go faster, but I didn't want to be responsible for someone else getting hurt.

Callie backed out of my spot. "We will. Don't worry."

I gripped the edge of my seat, anchoring myself so I wouldn't drift away on the guilt, spiral from the shame.

Once we were on the highway, I asked, "How did you know?"

"Hadley called me. Dylan's father contacted her after he tried to get in touch with you."

Guilt pressed down harder on my chest threatening to suffocate me. "What hospital is she at?"

"She wasn't far from Anne Arundel Medical Center when it happened, so they took her there."

I couldn't speak anymore. My throat was too tight. How badly was she injured? Would I be able to see her? What will I say to her when I see her?

"She'll be alright." Callie's voice filled the interior of my SUV, soft and comforting.

She couldn't know that.

“It’s not your fault.”

“Wasn’t it? She was upset with me.”

“Her dad told me he messaged her saying her mother fell down the steps. They were on their way to the hospital. He feels responsible.” She shook her head. “He was—you should have heard him. He said he always counted on her. Dylan’s accident shook him.”

“I should have been there. I would have driven. She wouldn’t have gotten in an accident.”

“You can’t know that.”

I stopped arguing. I didn’t want to talk anymore. My fingers were curled into fists on my thighs. I had to see her. I needed to know she was alright. The possible scenarios ran through my head, one worse than the other. I wouldn’t relax until I could see her face.

Callie parked the car in the emergency lot. I ran inside without waiting for her. I gave Dylan’s name at the emergency desk. They directed me to the waiting room.

“Only family can go back,” I said to Callie when she hurried toward me, looking like I felt, shell-shocked.

“Is anyone with her? Her parents were here already when she got into the accident. She’s probably alone.”

“I’ll let them know. Maybe they can ask for her permission to let me in to see her.”

Callie stayed by my side as I spoke to the person at the desk again. He must have seen something desperate on my face because he said he’d find out. I wasn’t even thinking about being careful of the words I was using. I probably sounded like an idiot.

When he returned, he looked from me to Callie. “Just one of you.”

“I’m her boyfriend. I’ll go.” I wasn’t sure I was anymore. All that mattered was I loved her.

I followed him to a small room with the door ajar. “She’s waiting for the doctor.”

When he left, I pushed open the door to find Dylan looking small and pale in the bed, a bandage around her forehead.

Shock at seeing her so helpless made me pause before I rushed to her side, grabbing her cool hand in mine. It felt so delicate, fragile. “Dylan.”

Her eyes popped open, wincing at the light or from the pain, I wasn’t sure. “Reid?” Her voice sounded dry, scratchy. “They said you were here.”

I moved to her side, covering her hand with mine. “Are you okay?”

She swallowed. “Can I have something to drink?”

Frantic, I looked around for something, finding a cup with a straw on the side table. I let go of her hand, grabbing the cup, before sitting on the side of the bed. Helping her to sit up, I held the straw to her lips.

When she was done, I held the cup.

“What hurts?”

“Everything. My head, my side, my knee, and my hands. I’ll be okay. I’m fine.”

She wasn’t fine but I had no plans to leave her side today or in the future. “I’m so sorry.”

Her eyes narrowed on me. “It’s not your fault.”

The heavy weight of responsibility on my chest said otherwise. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there when you got the call.”

She touched her temple as if she was in pain. “You’re not always going to be there.”

“I want to.” I wanted to be the one who protected her, was there for her, who erased her pain. The thought of the outcome being different, of her being more seriously injured churned in my gut.

Her eyes shifted away.



It wasn't the time, but I needed to tell her I'd overreacted. "I'm sorry about earlier. I shouldn't have reacted that way."

"Reid. It's fine." Her voice was resigned.

I wanted to argue with her. I couldn't. Not after she'd been in an accident. Not when she looked so pale, so defeated.

"I need to focus on my parents. You have your job."

Before I could say the only thing I should be focusing on was her, the doctor walked in, asking me to leave while he examined her. The nurse came out a few minutes later saying she'd been taken for tests on her neck and back. I could wait in the waiting room or come back later.

I went to find Callie.

She straightened when she saw me. "How is she?"

"She's in pain. Although, it didn't sound like anything was broken. She's undergoing tests now."

"I tried to find out how her mother is. They wouldn't tell me anything. Your best bet is to call her father back, give him an update on Dylan, see if he'll tell you."

I nodded. "You're right."

I called her dad, telling him where we were, asking if he'd give me an update. He said he would once she was examined. It was the longest few hours of my life. I'd seen her. She looked okay, but there could be internal injuries, a concussion. I couldn't stop my mind from racing from one worst-case scenario to another.

Finally, an older gentleman came out of the exam area, his wool jacket open over a sweatshirt, his sandy blond hair so much like Dylan's was disheveled, his eyes bloodshot as he searched the room.

I stood, hoping it was Dylan's father. I approached him, not bothering with the pretense of trying to hide my speech impediment. "Mr. Gannon?"

He nodded in relief, his gaze sliding from me to Callie. "That's me."

“This is my assistant, Callie.”

Mr. Gannon nodded at her, not offering his hand. He looked broken.

“I’m so sorry. About your wife and Dylan.”

“It’s okay. They’re both going to be okay.” He said it as if he was reassuring himself as much as me.

“Her mother had some bumps and bruises. The worst of her injuries was a strained wrist. She was still—” He swallowed hard, his eyes jumping around nervously.

“It’s okay. Dylan told me about your wife’s condition.” I wasn’t sure if Dylan would be happy I told him. He seemed like he needed to talk to someone about it.

“Oh. I didn’t know.” He was quiet for a few seconds as if he wasn’t sure if he could confide in me or not. Finally, he continued, “She was having mobility issues due to MS, so that’s her biggest challenge.”

Mr. Gannon seemed overwhelmed as if he could only handle one injured family member at a time, his wife.

“Maybe it would be good to hire a part-time nurse until she’s feeling better.” I hoped he’d take my suggestion.

“You might be right about that. Dylan’s injuries aren’t serious, just a slight concussion, bruising, and whiplash.”

I knew she’d be taking care of her mother before she was fully healed.

“I’ll take care of her so you can focus on your wife.”

Mr. Gannon focused on me fully for the first time. “Okay. Yeah, that would be good. Thank you.”

He didn’t seem to notice that my speech was off. Dylan already knew who I was. There was no point in hiding from her parents. I hoped Mr. Gannon would consider more help in the future. Not only was it not fair for Dylan to shoulder the burden it wasn’t fair for him either.

“I’ll make sure the doctors know you can stay with her.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” I wanted to apologize for the accident, tell him it was all my fault, but it wasn’t the time or place. He was dealing with his own guilt.



I STAYED WITH DYLAN IN THE HOSPITAL UNTIL SHE WAS finally discharged. “I can drive you wherever you want to go.”

“I’m going home to my parents’ house. I want to be close by. My mother needs me.”

I wanted to argue, to tell her she needed to rest, she needed to focus on her own health. I couldn’t form the words. I’d lost the right to make demands, to be the one she turned to. I regretted telling her to get out, to leave before I’d calmed down.

I wheeled her outside, pulling Callie to the side, asking her to take her time getting the car so I had time to talk to Dylan.

I activated the brake on the wheelchair then crouched down in front of her. “I think you should think about coming with me for a few days until you feel better.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but I held up my hand to stop her. “Hear me out. You can’t help your mother if you’re hurt. It seems like your father is easily overwhelmed.”

My tactics were a bit manipulative because I wanted her to take care of herself. I wanted to take care of her.

She gestured at herself. “This was bad timing. I need to be there for them. I can’t be hurt.”

“Hey. They can take care of themselves. I told your father it would be a good idea to hire a nurse.” Frankly, it was something they needed to look into in general. If her mobility continued to decrease, they couldn’t depend on Dylan as much as they had in the past. I knew she felt responsible, but it wasn’t her role to be her primary caretaker.

“Okay.”

My heart soared. “You’ll come home with me?”

“Just for a few days. When I feel better, I’ll head home to help out.”

I touched her knee, the tension in my shoulders easing. I wasn’t there for her earlier this evening. I was now. I’d have time to fix what I’d screwed up earlier.

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# CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

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## REID

CALLIE DROVE US HOME. I ENSURED DYLAN WAS COMFORTABLE and sleeping before I left Lena a message letting her know what happened. I told her I'd speak to her in a few days when Dylan was feeling better. I had a few things to take care of before I spoke with her.

The way I felt after Dylan left my condo, the sheer terror, then panic when Callie told me she'd been in an accident put things in perspective for me. I climbed into bed wanting to pull Dylan into my arms but worried I'd hurt her. Instead, I moved as close to her as I could get, resting my hand on her hip. I breathed in her scent, letting her warmth fill me.

I woke before Dylan the next morning, calling Callie to come over so I could handle some errands. I didn't like leaving Dylan after our argument yesterday. I had practice, workouts, my speech session with Quinton. I wanted to talk to Frank. I left a note for Dylan on my nightstand.

Callie promised to spend the day with Dylan after she woke up, making sure she took pain medications, ate, then rested. Satisfied Dylan was in good hands, I went to the stadium to work out, then stopped in Coach's office.

I paused in the doorway.

Coach was typing one finger at a time on the keyboard.

"You have a minute?"

"Of course. What's going on?" Coach Ackerman pushed back in his chair, clasping his fingers together."

I sat across from him, wanting him to know everything before I agreed to Lena's demands. "Lena wants me to be Kid Speak's spokesman."

"She talked to me about that. It seems like a good fit. You bonded with one of the kids, you seem invested in the cause. If you want endorsements, the fans to identify with you, aligning yourself with a community organization is the way to go."

"The thing is I've always avoided being in the spotlight."

He gave me a pointed look. "There comes a time when we have to overcome our fears, whatever they are."

It was as good a lead in as I'd ever get. "I think you need to know why."

Coach waited patiently for me to continue.

"I have a speech impediment. My *r*'s sound like *w*'s. I try to avoid saying them, sometimes I pause when I'm speaking. It makes me sound slow."

"I've seen you do press conferences."

"I'm not the best person to represent the team."

He scowled, leaning his elbows on the desk. "Why would you think that?"

"I don't sound educated." That was the nice way to put it.

"Don't you think talking about this will make people sympathetic to your situation? Don't you think admitting that to the boy you work with will help him overcome his struggles? It will give him the strength to conquer his fears."

I flushed. "I have talked to him about it."

"Then why aren't you up front about it with everyone else? How many other athletes are in this same situation? How many people look up to you, athlete or not, who'd be inspired by your story?"

"I kind of think it would be the opposite." I was ashamed to admit it. It was important for him to know where my head was at.

“There’s always going to be stupid people. You aren’t one of them. If you’re sincere, people will sympathize with your situation. The ones that try to tear you down are jealous of your success.”

I hadn’t thought of it like that. Had my father been jealous of me? I’d always been athletic, coaches pushing me from a young age, saying I was destined for great things.

“What matters more to you, the person who’s quick to say you’re slow because of the way you talk, or the child or young person who joins the debate team, who takes that interview, or does a podcast because you inspired them?”

Everything came into focus. The only things that mattered were what people who cared about me or looked up to me thought. I’d block out the rest.

“I think you’re getting it now.”

“Yeah. Thanks Coach.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” He turned his attention to his computer.

I stood, slowly making my way to the door. “Coach?”

“Yeah?”

“How long have you known?” It wasn’t anything he’d said, just a feeling I had.

“Probably since your first year. You do a shit job of hiding it when you’re upset.”

I racked my brain trying to remember times when I’d slipped up in front of him. I figured it had happened. Now I had confirmation.

“It never mattered to me. What matters is what’s in here,” he patted his chest over his heart, “what you bring to the field. You’ve got plenty of heart. Now you need to show it to everyone else.”

I wanted to make him proud. “Thanks.”

He nodded.



I wanted to make sure he was okay with me representing the team.

I had a few things to do before I attempted a speech in front of a crowd, one where I'd bare my soul.

That afternoon, I met with Quinton and Mrs. Sweeney like I usually did. When Mrs. Sweeney asked if we were ready to begin, I held up my hand. "Actually, I have a favor to ask of both of you."

"Quinton, remember when I told you I never got to do this." I gestured at Mrs. Sweeney.

"Yeah." Quinton looked from Mrs. Sweeney to me.

"Well, I'm hoping Mrs. Sweeney will help me now. I have a big speech to give in a couple of weeks for this organization."

"You do?"

"Yeah, I'd love it if Mrs. Sweeney would help me say my *r*'s correctly."

Mrs. Sweeney's eyes widened at my pronunciation.

"I'm hoping she'll work with me after your lesson. Maybe you could stick around for a few minutes, give me some pointers."

"Yeah, okay."

"What do you say, Mrs. Sweeney? Can you help an old guy out?"

Mrs. Sweeney smiled. "I'd be happy to."

"Great. I'd love if both of you could come to the party. It's a celebration of this program and you guys."

"I'd like that," Quinton said softly.

Mrs. Sweeney beamed. "I'll be there."

"Great. Let's get started."

We ran through words to determine if some sounds were better than others. We discovered I was better with words like free or cream but needed help with air and are. We started with

easier exercises like connecting the *r* sound to a vowel. Quinton helped me practice the fun exercises, roaring like a lion and saying argh like a pirate.

I was determined to make some progress before the gala. I wanted to come out to Dylan, my fans. I also wanted to show everyone that even an adult can improve. I had a speech planned, a teacher to help me go over it until it was rote. If I made a mistake at least I was being true to myself.

I talked to Quinton's mom about the gala when she picked him up, and possibly mentoring him outside the program. I wanted to take him to the park, throw a ball when the weather warmed up. I wanted to be there when he had issues at school, with his friends. I wanted him to have a support system when I'd had none.



FEELING LIGHTER THAN I HAD IN A WHILE, I PICKED UP DINNER before heading to the nursing home. I needed validation that I was on the right path, doing the right thing. I wasn't sure I was making the best moves for my career. When it came to Dylan, I knew I was. I needed to prove to her that I'd listened to her, that I loved her.

On the way to see Mr. Goodwin, I called Callie to check in. She said Dylan was still in pain, she was resting in between watching TV. Satisfied they were okay for another couple of hours, I hung up.

My body hummed with purpose, anticipation for what I needed to do. Normally, the only thing that got me this motivated was football. For the first time in my life I made plans that could have a negative impact on my career. Coach supported me but it didn't mean the fans would react favorably.

I pushed open the door to Frank's room, having called ahead to let him know I was bringing dinner.

He turned stiffly in his chair. "Didn't you have practice today?"

I set the take-out boxes on the table in front of him. “I did, actually. We have a Thursday night game this week. Then I met with one of the kids taking speech lessons.”

I made sure he had everything he needed then sat across from him. “I wanted to talk to you.”

He cocked a brow. “Is it about that woman you brought over for Thanksgiving?”

“Dylan? Yeah. It’s about me too.”

I opened the boxes, plating the food before sitting across from him. “You know Dylan runs the speech program, right?”

He nodded.

“The PR person for the team wants me to be the spokesman.”

He paused his fork halfway to his mouth. “You don’t like giving interviews.”

Frank was nothing if not blunt.

“You’re right. I don’t. I’m sure you realized I speak a little funny. My *r*’s sound like *w*’s.”

Frank gestured as if I should go on, as if what I’d said was no big deal.

“That’s why I didn’t want to speak in public. I sound like an idiot.” I leaned closer to him, emphasizing each word. I knew I sounded like a petulant teenager, but I needed him to understand where I was coming from.

“Don’t speak then.”

It wasn’t that cut and dry. I explained what Dylan wanted from me, how she expected it could motivate the kids, how I reluctantly agreed, worried about what my fans would think.

He wiped his mouth with a napkin. “You’re doing this for Dylan.”

“I’m doing this for me too.”

He pointed his fork at me. “Be sure you are. This could have lasting effect on your career, your reputation. Don’t do

something just to impress a girl.”

For the first time in my life, I was doing something to impress a woman, not secure my career. I was making a commitment to my future. I couldn't play football forever. After I retired, I wanted Dylan on my side. “I've always been afraid to talk about it, to admit I'm not perfect. I'm working with a speech therapist. She thinks she can help me.”

“What's your plan?” His face was filled with respect.

His approval spurred me on. “I'm going to get some therapy, hopefully improve, then I'll speak at Kids Speak's holiday gala. I only have a couple of weeks to work on my speech.”

“You're sure a public forum is the best way to break it to the fans?”

“That part is more about Dylan. I want her to know that she's important to me, that I'm willing to be the best version of myself for her. No more hiding.”

Frank leaned back in his chair considering me.

“I was so closed off before I met her. I never would have agreed to do something like this.”

“Women will do that to you. They'll make you question everything. They'll also make you change for the better. It sounds like she has your best interest at heart.”

“I was so caught up in my belief that she only wanted me for what I could do for her, but she's never been like that. She's supported me. If anything, she's the selfless one. She takes care of her parents, wants the best for those around her.”

“What's the deal with her parents?”

I explained her family situation, her strong sense of responsibility, knowing she wouldn't mind I'd told Frank. I trusted him.

“It's best you don't interfere with her family. You can try to guide her to think of other solutions, like nursing care. You can't tell her not to care for them. It's ingrained in her.”

A sense of contentment washed over me that I was doing the right thing. “I’m glad I came.”

He leaned back in his chair, patting his stomach. “I’m a wise man. If only Callie would listen to me.”

I probably should have asked why, but I was too wrapped up in my plans for the future. “Callie’s young. She has plenty of time to figure things out.”

Frank tilted his head. “Shouldn’t you check on your young woman?”

I checked the time, groaning. I’d stayed longer than I intended. “You’re right. I need to see her.”



WHEN I OPENED THE DOOR, CALLIE WAS WATCHING TV ON THE couch.

“She went to bed already. She was exhausted.”

I hung up my keys, slipping off my shoes. “When?”

Callie glanced at the clock over the stove. “It was about an hour ago.”

I sat next to Callie on the couch, allowing myself to relax for the first time today. “How is she?”

“She’s in pain but she’ll be okay. She talked to her dad a couple of times. I think she wants to head home. She probably thought when you offered to take care of her you’d actually be here.” Callie shot me a disappointed look.

“I had practice and a few other things to take care of.” I didn’t want to tell Callie my plans. She was tight with Dylan and I wanted it to be a surprise.

“I hope you know what you’re doing. That girl is hurting. I think she’s wondering why she’s here.”

I hoped I wasn’t screwing things up. I wanted to surprise her. I wanted to show her how much she meant to me. “I’ll talk to her tomorrow.”

Callie stood, gathering her things. “You need me to stop by tomorrow?”

I stood to follow her to the door. “Yeah, while I’m at practice.”

She pulled open the door. “I can be here during the day, but I have classes tomorrow night.”

“That’s okay. I can be here then.”

I closed the door behind Callie, turning off the lights before heading to my bedroom. Undressing, I slipped into bed, moving as close as I could get to Dylan without waking her. As close as I was, I still felt the distance between us.

I should have called to talk to her today. I should have been home more. I hoped my plan to fix things didn’t make it worse. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was on the correct path even if it wasn’t the easiest, even if it could have negative consequences.

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## **CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX**

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## DYLAN

WHEN I WOKE, I WONDERED IF I'D IMAGINED REID'S HAND ON my hip last night, his lips in my hair. I swore I heard him whisper he was sorry. I could have imagined it. I wanted him here with every fiber of my being instead of his cold sheets.

There was a glass of water and a bottle of over-the-counter pain meds on the nightstand. I took them since I was experiencing some pain in my neck with a dull headache. I dressed slowly, heading to the kitchen, hoping to see him. Instead, Callie stood by the coffee maker. She looked over her shoulder, her face filled with an apology. "He had an early workout."

I felt disconnected from Reid. He wanted me in his condo yet he wasn't here. He'd left Callie in his place. Yesterday, he'd left a note saying he'd be gone pretty much the whole day.

I needed him. I wasn't sure where we stood after our argument on Sunday. Did he regret what he said? Were we okay? Or was he assuaging his guilt by having Callie look out for me.

I swallowed the hurt, straightened my shoulders against the feeling that nothing was okay. "I should probably head back to Annapolis."

Callie shot me a panicked look. "I can spend the day with you. I think Reid wants to talk to you tonight."

"I need to check on my mother today. We can talk later." I was feeling well enough to get back to my life, especially



when I wasn't sure Reid wanted me in his.

Callie set her mug on the counter between us. "What happened between you guys anyway?"

I sighed, remembering that awful fight, the one that left a pit in my stomach. I couldn't bring myself to tell her he'd told me to leave. "He reacted like you said he would. He was angry, accused me of using him to get something I wanted."

"He's an idiot."

I smiled at her show of support. "I don't think his feelings have changed. I think he feels some sort of guilt that I was in an accident." I felt oddly detached from what happened between us. A part of me was resigned to the fact that he wouldn't forgive me. If so, it would be for the best. I could concentrate on my parents and my career. The other part of me was avoiding thinking about it because I couldn't handle the thought of never seeing Reid again.

"You love him."

My throat tightened.

"Give him an opportunity to talk, to apologize." Callie braced her hands on the counter, leaning closer to me.

I opened my arms wide, frustration breaking through. "He's not here. I can't do this by myself."

Her brow furrowed. "His schedule is tight during the season. Please give him a chance to make things right."

I shook my head. I couldn't make any promises. He wanted me here when he wasn't. I needed to be with my mom. "I'm going to shower then head home. He won't be back until tonight anyway, right?"

"I think so. I have class so he knew you'd be alone."

"I'll tell him I'm heading to check on my mom. He'll understand." I'd text so I wouldn't have to talk to him. If he expressed concern over my well-being or asked me to stay, I wouldn't be able to say no. I couldn't deny him anything.

From the skeptical look on her face, he probably wouldn't want me to leave. How long was I supposed to stay in his condo wondering what was going on?

I had to protect myself. I'd never put myself out there for another person only for them to tell me to leave, then ask me to stay, then disappear. It was confusing.

I started toward the bedroom. "I'm going to shower then head out. I'm sure you have other things to do than babysit me."

"It's not like that. I want to be here for you too. You're my friend."

I stilled. I figured she'd be on Reid's side, not mine. "Is that how you see us?"

"Don't you? You came to me when you were worried about Reid's reaction to Lena's demands. I defended you when Reid flipped out. It feels an awful lot like friendship to me."

I liked that she thought of me as a friend, but I couldn't help focusing on what she'd said. "You defended me?"

"Yeah, we talked on the phone that night after you left. I told him how conflicted you were. How you didn't have a choice."

I shook my head. "It didn't make a difference did it?"

"Reid is stubborn. You have to understand he's been like this his entire life. It's hard for him to change."

I chuckled without any humor. "I get that."

"On the way to the hospital, he was a mess. He wanted to get to you, to know you were okay. I don't know what he would have done if you weren't."

"I'm fine though. I'm taking that shower now."

Callie's face filled with uncertainty.

I turned on the water in his shower, waiting for it to turn hot. Reid wasn't going to change. He'd hidden his speech impediment his entire life. I was stupid to think that falling in

love with me would open his eyes to other possibilities for his life. One filled with openness, honesty, and growth.

I ignored the nagging thought that I hadn't changed much either. I put my parents first in a way that I was starting to think might be unhealthy.

I was grateful Reid insisted I go with him Sunday night. I was sore, exhausted. I was in no shape to care for my mother even if it was time to go back to my real life.

I undressed before stepping into the shower, letting the hot water slide over my hair, my face, down my body. Was this how we could be together? Me pushing him to go outside his comfort zone, him forcing me to take care of myself?

Tears pricked my eyes. He wasn't here. I knew he was busy, he was in season, that he had an away game this weekend. Selfishly, I wanted him here. I wanted him to tell me everything was going to be okay. That he didn't blame me for what happened with Lena.

Tears slid down my face. I was one-hundred-percent in love with him, but we might not work out. We might not be compatible. We both came into the relationship with considerable hang-ups. Love might not be enough to overcome them.

After my shower, I felt hollowed out, a shell of myself. I needed to check on my mom. I also needed to create some space between Reid and me. If he felt the same way as he did Sunday, I needed to come to terms with us not being a thing anymore.

I packed before hugging Callie. "No matter what happens, we're friends."

I pulled back from her, seeing the relaxed expression on her face. "I like that. I still think you guys—"

I held up my hand. "I don't want to talk about Reid."

She nodded slowly. "At least let me drive you home so you don't have to call an Uber."

“Thank you.” My car would be in the shop for a few more days. Riding home in Callie’s car, I felt as if I was making a mistake, moving away from the most important thing in my life to the one that had always held me back.

I couldn’t help questioning whether I should be demanding changes in him when I wasn’t willing to make any myself. I’d dealt with my parents the same way since high school based on the idea that you were supposed to take care of your parents when they needed you.

Callie dropped me off at my parents’ house. I was relieved they’d hired a part-time nurse to help but I wanted to check in with the new nurse, Darlene, and my mother. I followed Darlene into the sunroom where my mother sat reading next to my father who was on his laptop. When he saw me he closed it, putting it aside.

I walked over to hug and kiss them, asking Mom, “How are you?”

I sat on the couch across from them, searching for any visible injuries.

“I’m doing better. Just some bumps and bruises.”

I smiled weakly, shifting on the couch to ease the soreness in my neck and back. “I wanted to see for myself.”

Mom’s eyes filled with pain, guilt. “I’m sorry you got into an accident on your way to see me.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“No. That’s not.” She exchanged a look with my dad. When he nodded, she continued, “but over the years your father and I have leaned on you, probably too much. We asked for your advice, had you research doctors—”

“I didn’t mind. I wanted to help”

She held up her hand as if to stop me. “You stayed local. You didn’t go away to college, you opened your firm here. How much of that is because of my illness?”

I opened my mouth to respond.

“And don’t say you didn’t mind.”

“I stayed close so I could help out,” I said carefully. The last thing I wanted was for her to feel guilty after she was injured.

“I think subconsciously I knew that. I wanted you close. I needed your help, but I should have backed off at some point, allowed you to have your own life.”

“I have my own life.” I had missed out on a social life in high school and college, a steady boyfriend. Ultimately, it was my choice.

“You’ve never pushed away a boyfriend because we were too much?”

I opened my mouth only to close it, wondering if it was my accident that caused her to reflect.

“That’s what I thought. We kept you close over the years and it was selfish. We have Darlene, a part-time nurse, and if I need more care, we’ll hire a full-time nurse. I don’t want you to think you can’t have your own life, a boyfriend, marriage and a family someday.”

“That’s a good idea.” Tension eased from my sore muscles. The thought of not being the primary means of support was freeing. It made me think they’d be open to me dating Reid.

“We’re both sorry we made you feel like you always had to drop everything to be there for us. We need to handle more on our own.”

“I’m not going to argue with that. It has been stressful at times.” As much as I didn’t want her to feel guilty, her apology was necessary for us to move forward, handling things differently. Our relationship would be healthier now.

“You can still be here for us, but we have help now too,” Dad said.

I was grateful they’d seen how things had been for me over the years and I was hopeful for the future.

We talked about other things, my recovery, Kids Speak’s holiday gala that was quickly approaching, and their upcoming

charity functions.

When my headache worsened, I said my goodbyes, calling an Uber so I could go home to rest. I'd pushed myself, resulting in more pain.

I took pain medication to relieve the ache in my neck, settling into bed when there was a pounding on my door. My heart galloped in my chest hoping it was Reid.

I checked the window, seeing him running his hands through his hair. He was frustrated. I pulled the door open.

"Reid. What are you doing here?" At the same time, he said, "You left. I wanted to talk to you."

I opened my door wider in a silent invitation for him to come inside. "I wanted to check in with my mother."

"Right. How is she?" His hair was disheveled as if he kept raking his hands through it. His eyes darted around as if looking for something before finally resting on me.

"She's good. Dad hired a nurse, so they have help."

"Good. Good. What about you? Are you overdoing it?" He stopped pacing the living room to examine me.

"I have some pain. It's not a big deal. I'll feel better in a couple of days." I sat on the couch, gesturing for him to join me. I waited until he sat next to me, his leg touching mine. He was close yet so far away. After Sunday night, I wasn't sure I had the right to hold his hand or hug him.

"I'd feel better if you stayed in my condo."

"You're never there. I understand you're busy but I have a life too. I don't want to inconvenience Callie. She has things to do."

"She works for me as long as it doesn't interfere with her classes. She said she was able to study when you slept."

I hesitated, not sure it was time to discuss what happened before the accident. "It didn't feel right after Sunday night."

"What do you mean?"

“Reid. You told me to leave. It didn’t sound like you wanted us to be together anymore.” My heart beat loudly in my ears.

“I fucked up.” His voice was harsh, full of recrimination.

“Do you feel that way because I was in an accident?”

“I felt awful when Callie finally got a hold of me. I was sleeping when your dad tried calling.”

I shook my head. “The accident doesn’t change anything.”

“It changes everything.” For the first time since he’d walked into my house looking disheveled and agitated, his shoulders lowered, his eyes focused on mine.

“Reid.” I was in an accident. It was scary but it didn’t change that we had fundamentally different ideas about how we should live our lives. “Our differences are insurmountable.”

“They’re not.”

“They are. You want to hide away forever. I get it. Your dad’s an asshole. Coming out, being authentic is scary. I would never force you to do anything you didn’t want to.”

“I shouldn’t have told you to leave on Sunday. I should have listened to you. I know you didn’t have a choice.”

The balloon inside my chest, the one that filled each day he’d stayed away from the apartment, seemingly avoiding talking to me, deflated at his words. “What are you saying?”

“Lena’s pushing this. I get it.”

“You blamed me.” I couldn’t keep the hurt out of my tone.

“I shouldn’t have. It’s not your call to make.”

“You told me to leave. I don’t think I can explain what that felt like.” Like the floor disappeared under my feet, leaving me in a free fall.

“I’m so sorry, Dylan. I lashed out at you because I was scared.”

He was saying all the right things. I couldn't forget what he'd said. *Just leave.* It was so final, so devastating that he could so easily dismiss what we had. I wasn't sure I could open myself up like that again.

"I know me coming here to apologize isn't enough. I'm going to prove it to you." Reid stood, making his way to the door.

I followed him, my heart dropping that he was leaving me again. I placed a hand on his arm. "Prove what to me?"

He turned to me. "That you're the one. It was so hard to lay next to you the last couple of nights, not being able to hold you tight, to tell you how I felt, because I didn't want to hurt you again physically or emotionally. There's things I need to do."

"What things?"

"It's better if I show you. I need some time."

My stomach dropped. I was lying when I'd said I wanted space. I'd wanted an apology, a declaration of love, a promise it wouldn't happen again, knowing that one of us would probably screw up again.

I wanted him to fight for me. I wanted him to tell me again we weren't fundamentally different. In fact, we might just be perfect for each other. I'd encourage him to come out of his shell, he'd remind me to take care of myself. We'd support each other no matter what.

He opened the door as if to leave. I had the sinking feeling I'd screwed up. I wanted him to fight for me. Instead, he was walking away.

"Where does this leave us?" My tone rose in pitch, sounding almost desperate.

He turned, cupping my cheek. "I love you. I'm going to prove that I deserve you."

"You don't need to prove anything to me. You deserve everything." I hated that his father made him doubt his worth.

He kissed my lips softly, whispering, "Good night."



I didn't want him to go. I wanted to argue with him that he was perfect the way he was. I let him go, hoping he'd come back to me.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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## REID

WALKING AWAY FROM HER WAS HARDER THAN PUSHING MY body to the limits in a football game. The need to be someone worthy of her took over my desire to be with her, to hold her, to sink inside her.

The next time we were together, she'd know that I wasn't hiding behind a fake persona anymore. I wanted to be true to myself. I wanted her to be proud of me. I was determined to be the man she deserved.

I called Callie on the way home, asking her to keep an eye on Dylan. She was uncharacteristically snappy. She said she would because she was Dylan's friend in this situation not mine. I backed off. It didn't matter to me why she did, just that she did.

The next couple of weeks were going to be busy because we had two away games. I wanted to fit in as many speech sessions as I could between now and the Kids Speak's gala.



I KNOCKED ON LENA'S DOOR PREPARED TO DO BATTLE TO GET what I wanted. I'd agree to be the spokesman but I had stipulations.

"Come in." Lena glanced up at me.

I settled into the chair across from her. "Dylan told me you wanted me to be the spokesperson for Kids Speak."

“That’s right.”

“I’ll do it with a few conditions.”

She narrowed her eyes at me.

“I want to do a clinic day with the kids at the stadium. We’ll have contests, give out jerseys to every kid. I want to start a camp for the kids too. Maybe hold it at the practice facility.”

She arched a brow. “Anything else?”

“If I’m the spokesman, it will be on my terms. I’ll speak about my experiences with a speech impairment, my involvement with Kids Speak. My family and my relationship with Dylan are off-limits unless I choose to speak about them.”

Her forehead wrinkled as she slowly shook her head. “You have a speech impairment. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was ashamed. I worried you’d push me to come forward.”

She smiled slightly. “I probably would have. You’re going to be the perfect spokesperson.”

“I hope so. I want to speak at the gala, but Dylan can’t know. I want it to be a surprise.” I already spoke with Hadley and Avery, trusting them to keep it a secret.

Lena’s eyes shone with a newfound respect for me. “I approve.”

I outlined my plan to get some help over the next few weeks. She was on board with my plans. I left her office feeling better than I had in years because I was taking charge of my life. I wasn’t hiding in the shadows worried someone would discover my secret. I was being true to myself.

I hoped that attitude would bleed through to the kids in the program. It would make everything worth it.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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## DYLAN

THE KIDS SPEAK HOLIDAY GALA WAS HELD AT THE PRESS BOX inside the stadium. Reid invited his family, getting them rooms at the hotel. I invited mine even though I wasn't sure they would attend. Mom's legs were still weak. She didn't like going out in public in a wheelchair or using a walker.

Reid was busy the last couple of weeks with back-to-back away games. He'd kept in touch with frequent texts and video chats. My favorite was the sign he'd held up on the bench saying *I miss Dylan*. It was sweet, more so because Reid never brought attention to himself.

I wondered if this was part of his plan to prove himself to me. If so, I wanted to tell him grand gestures weren't necessary. I just wanted him.

"Everything looks amazing," Avery said.

We'd gone shopping for gowns together last week. It had been good to get together with my friends. I hadn't mentioned Reid. He didn't act like a man who wanted to break up. I felt like I was walking on rocky ground, unsure of where we stood.

"Lena handled most of it." I grabbed a glass of champagne as a waiter passed, taking a sip to soothe my dry throat.

The modern club-level room with views of the field had been transformed into a winter wonderland with white drapes, large red flowers, greenery-filled centerpieces, shiny red, green, and gold bulbs were strung across the ceiling and the bar. Christmas trees adorned each corner with a massive one in front of the window that held gift tags people could take with

gift ideas for local families in need, then return them to our drop-off boxes we'd placed around the city.

I took another sip of my champagne, watching the slide show of pictures from our program playing on the largest screen I'd ever seen hanging on the wall.

"You should be proud. You've done an amazing job."

"We've done an amazing job. We wouldn't be here if you hadn't had an idea to start the program," I said to Hadley.

"Let's toast." Avery moved so that we were in a small circle facing each other, our glasses lifted.

"To Kids Speak in New Orleans, Annapolis, and now Baltimore," Avery started.

"May we continue to expand into other cities," Hadley added.

"Helping more children—"

"And adults," Reid's voice came from behind me, making me shiver.

I turned to find him standing behind me, a smile on his face. "Hey, I thought you were going to be late."

"I got done early. Everything looks amazing." Reid's eyes slid appreciatively around the room before resting on me. "You look gorgeous."

I'd chosen the red dress for the holiday. It reminded me of the gown I wore on our blind date. Except this one was sparkly. "Thanks. I want to take credit, but this is all Lena and her design team."

The party was more elaborate, more luxurious than anything we'd done in the past. The Press Box was usually reserved for black-tie affairs. I was grateful Lena offered it to us. I hoped it attracted more donors and possibly even attention to our cause.

"This is my friend, Quinton." Reid put his arm around the six-year-old boy who stood next to him, introducing him to Hadley then Avery.

I hadn't realized Reid invited him. What was more noticeable was he'd used several *r's* in his sentence. His enunciation was pretty good. It wasn't perfect. It was unlikely anyone would notice unless they were listening for it.

I looked up at him in surprise. All he did was shake his head as if to say not now.

I had so many questions as I crouched down on Quinton's level. "Hi Quinton. I'm so happy you're here. Did you grab one of the presents at the front?"

Quinton nodded with a smile.

I'd made sure there was food appropriate for children, and a small gift to keep them busy during the event. "If you need anything, come find me or Reid."

Quinton nodded again as I stood, moving closer to Reid.

Was this why Reid needed time to prove himself? I hoped he didn't think I needed him to speak eloquently for me to be with him when I just wanted him to be true to himself. I wrapped a hand around his arm, wanting to tell him that when Lena stood at the podium telling everyone to have a seat.

"I'm needed up there." He nodded toward Lena and the make-shift stage. "I'll see you in a few."

Why was he going onstage? Was he planning to speak?

"Is he presenting?" Avery leaned closer to ask.

"I don't think so. I went over the program with Lena a few days ago. He wasn't listed." Hadley was due to speak since it was her organization, Lincoln Aldrich as the owner, and a guest speaker. It was my understanding it was someone from the community who'd experienced impaired speech.

I crossed my arms over my chest, my heart thumping wildly in my chest as I watched Reid greet Lena with a smile.

"Does he have a speech impediment? I thought he might when we played football together." Avery lowered her voice, looking around so no one would hear.



“He wouldn’t want me to say anything.” I’d noticed he had been more relaxed that day as if he didn’t care if my friends figured it out. I’d hoped it was him realizing he didn’t have to be so on guard all the time, at least around friends.

Avery nodded. “I can understand that.”

“Have a seat so you can hear.” Hadley led us to our table to the right of the podium before she moved to sit next to Reid on the stage. The team and front office staff took over the rest of the tables toward the front.

Lena welcomed everyone. I kept my eyes on Reid. He looked nervous yet at the same time excited. His fingers curled into fists then slowly relaxed.

I wanted to tell him he didn’t have to do this. He didn’t have to prove anything to me. I wasn’t his father. I should be a safe place for him, not someone who was pushing him to do things he wasn’t comfortable with.

Hadley stood, speaking about her vision for the organization, her satisfaction when kids grow in self-esteem and confidence. Lincoln Aldrich stood next, explaining he wanted to partner with Kids Speak to satisfy a need in city schools.

I couldn’t take my eyes from Reid who finally looked up at me. The audience clapped, signaling the end of Lincoln’s speech. Reid’s face smoothed out as he smiled, winking at me. Then he stood, making his way to the podium.

I fisted my hands on my thighs under the table. My stomach churned with worry for him. I didn’t want people talking about his speech or speculating about him.

“Good evening. I wanted to thank everyone for coming this evening. We’re celebrating an organization near and dear to my heart.”

His *r*’s were nearly perfect. My chest was bursting with pride. I wanted to close my eyes as tears formed. Was he working on his speech with a therapist?

I was slightly aware of Avery moving closer to me, silently showing her support.

“I was resistant to volunteer at first, not because I didn’t want to be involved but because I was scared. You see, I’ve suffered from a speech impediment since I was a child. I never received services. Instead I became a pro at hiding it, avoiding words that caused me trouble, and limiting situations where I’d have to speak. When I slipped up, people speculated that I was not smart.” He looked up from his speech, letting his gaze travel around the room before resting on me, his face filled with admiration and love.

The room was silent.

My heart beat loudly in my ears. I couldn’t believe he was talking about his dad, putting himself out there to be judged.

“A few weeks ago, someone very special to me, Dylan Gannon, encouraged me to tell my story. She said people would rally behind me, they’d support me. She knew there might be people who’d say nasty things. It would be worth it because I could be an example for so many people, young and old. I resisted because I was scared. I was still worried about what people would say, how they’d react.

“I started taking speech lessons a few weeks ago to work on my enunciation. In the last few weeks, I’ve made progress. It’s not perfect, but I’m getting there. A speech impediment can affect someone’s life, lower self-confidence. They might limit themselves, not going to college or taking certain jobs. It’s one of the many reasons why the work that Kids Speak does is vital.”

He sighed before taking a deep breath, his fingers brushing a lock of hair off his forehead. “I lashed out at Dylan when she urged me to be the spokesman for Kids Speak. I’d been encouraging the kids I mentored to be brave when I was a coward. I love you, Dylan, because you pushed me to be a better person. I’m amazed every day how hard you fight for what you believe in, how selfless you are with your family and people you care about. I’m a lucky man to have found the person who’s perfect for me.”

I stood, unsure what I planned to do, just knowing I wanted to be near him. He moved away from the podium,

hopping off the stage before stopping in front of me.

Love for him flowed through me, filling the empty spaces of my heart that were waiting for him to come into my life. My heart throbbed as I searched his face.

Lena thanked everyone, telling the waiters to serve dinner.

When people murmured around us, Reid touched the side of my face, I leaned into him. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. This was all you. You didn’t need to do this. I shouldn’t have pushed you. You were right to suggest it. I can do so much more being honest than I can hiding my truth. How can I be an example to kids otherwise?” He smiled and his face relaxed.

My heart filled with so much emotion, elation, hope, love. It was everything I’d hoped he’d realize. “Is this what you were so secretive about the last couple of weeks?”

“I wanted to show my commitment to you, to us, and myself. I can’t be the man you need if I’m hiding who I am.”

A roaring started in my ears making me sway on my feet. I looked around for a place to be alone. “I’m not sure I deserve you.”

“Why, because you put others first? That’s not bad. You just need to remember to take care of yourself. That’s why your parents hiring a nurse when your mother needs assistance is crucial. You should talk to your parents about their expectations.”

I nodded. “We did after the accident. They apologized.”

Reid told the world that he wasn’t perfect, in doing so made himself the one for me. It was our imperfections that made us who we were. It was how we handled them that defined us. Whether we hid away or revealed it, ignored it or celebrated it.

He was celebrating his differences, using them to be an example for others.

My heart overflowed with love. “I love you, Reid Everson.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Hey, lovebirds, you have families here that want to see you,” Callie interrupted.

“My parents are here?” My heart rate picked up as I looked around for them. I hadn’t expected them to attend. Dad said Mom was too worried about walking in with a walker to enjoy the evening.

“They are.” She gestured toward the middle of the room where they were seated with Reid’s family. They were laughing about something his sister, Grace, was saying.

“They seem to have bonded quickly.” Reid wrapped his arm around my shoulder, pulling me into his side.

“It’s a little overwhelming. I was so worried.”

“You worry because you care so much.”

He was right. I wanted our families to get along. I wanted mine to make the effort to get to know Reid because he meant so much to me. Instead of sitting at the head table, we sat with our families.

I kept a watchful eye on Mom. She seemed happy to be here. I hoped she saw that living life even if you needed a walker or assistance was better than staying home. That wasn’t living at all. Being here, with friends and family, was what mattered.

Later I stood alone watching my friends dance on the dance floor while Reid was talking to some of the kids who’d come to the dinner.

Reid’s mother approached. “You’re good for him.”

She had a knowing smile on her face. “He told me everything you did. How you encouraged him to get up there tonight, to get speech lessons.”

“I told him speaking about his experiences would help the kids he worked with. The organization wanted him to be the spokesman. I thought it was a good idea, but this—” I gestured at the stage where he’d spoken earlier “—was all him.”

She tilted her head. “Would he have done all of this if you hadn’t met?”

Remembering how he was during our blind date, the few interactions after that, I wasn’t sure.

She nodded as if my silence answered her question. “You were the reason he did all of this. I’m happy he met you. He wasn’t really living before.”

Thinking about how he’d played football in the park with abandon, the expression on his face when he helped Quinton, he was happy. “He makes me happy too.”

“That’s all that matters.” She smiled, conveying acceptance and approval in that one action.

It felt like I’d gained so much tonight. It wasn’t just me taking care of my family. I had Reid and his family on my side too.

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# EPILOGUE

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## DYLAN

THE DAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, WE CELEBRATED WITH OUR friends, Cade and Hadley, Avery, Griffin, and his nephew Declan, even Taylor and Gabe were in town from New Orleans visiting her family.

Reid's mother and sisters were here for Christmas Day but flew back this morning because his sisters had basketball practice over their holiday break.

We walked around Annapolis, hot chocolates in hand, with our friends enjoying the decorations in the store windows, the lights wrapped around the street poles, the elaborately decorated Christmas trees on the sidewalks, and the sailboats decorated with lights.

"The bed and breakfast finally sold." Cade pointed to the side street, where a large Victorian home stood. It had been sitting on the market for close to a year because the owner died. Her children were asking an astronomical amount to purchase it.

Nolan seemed upset about that. "Who got it?"

"A realtor I work with, Juliana Breslin."

"Wait, the one whose signs are all over town?" Nolan's expression was incredulous.

Cade nodded.

"They're so unprofessional," Nolan bit out.

"Why are they unprofessional?" I had a knack for not only drumming up investors but an interest in branding.

“Her signs are an image of her and her kids. It’s not a picture, more like someone painted it. Probably her kids.” He shook his head in disgust. “She named her company Annapolis Mom Realty or something like that. I can’t imagine it brings in a lot of clients.”

It was clear from his expression he thought it was stupid.

I wasn’t sure if it was good branding, but I had seen a lot of those signs around town. Maybe it was working for her.

Cade’s brow raised. “You have a problem with her?”

Nolan shook his head. “Just her business plan. I can’t imagine she gets clients that way.”

Cade chuckled. “She’s actually very business savvy. She mentioned she has too many clients. It’s difficult to balance it being a single mom to twin girls. She wanted to try flipping houses, thinking it would be easier.”

“Who is she?” Nolan’s jaw was tight.

“She’s loyal and hard working. Her clients rave about her. She routinely recommends Morrison Construction to her clients, and she needs our help.”

I’d searched her business name on my phone, finally pulling up her site, Annapolis Mom Realty. The pictures of her staged homes were gorgeous.

I tilted my phone toward Cade and Nolan. “Her staging is beautiful. She has a real eye for design. She has an interesting business model. I’d love to meet her.”

Nolan rubbed his chin. “Why does she need our help?”

Cade started the business around the time his wife died. He’d recently partnered with Nolan who was also a contractor, changing the business name to Morrison Brothers Construction.

“She hired Harbor View Construction because he fit into her schedule. He took her money, did some work, left more problems than fixes.”



Nolan shook his head. “Why would she hire him? Everyone knows he’s unreliable.”

“She said he was able to start work earlier than us. Now she’s desperate. She does a lot for us. She refers us clients, she talks us up in the community, plus she directs potential Rebuilds clients to us. I want to come through for her. I’d like you to help her.”

“If she’s so important why don’t you help her?”

“You need to take lead on this one. We’re acquiring so many more clients through Morrison Rebuilds, I need to focus on that.”

The Morrison Rebuilds program was a separate nonprofit Cade ran, renovating homes to make them handicapped accessible. He got funding through government grants and investors I found for him.

“That’s amazing, Cade. Congratulations,” I said, hoping to break through the tension.

“It’s all thanks to you. You promoted Morrison Rebuilds every chance you got, made it possible for it to be funded through investors.”

“The program sells itself. It’s a matter of talking to the right people.” I was considering stepping away from the firm so I could focus on the nonprofits as their director of marketing. Both Kids Speak and Morrison Rebuilds were expanding at a fast pace, making it difficult to focus on the firm.

I hoped Taylor would consider moving back to Annapolis to be with her family, possibly taking my spot. I wanted to mention it to her while she was in town.

“Whatever you’re doing has been huge for us. Thank you.” Then to Nolan, he said, “What do you think about helping Juliana?”

“I’ll think about it,” Nolan finally conceded.

We walked toward the harbor, the crowd heavier near the water, carefully weaving around couples in embraces, families

with little ones running around. We finally find an open spot on the brick dock.

“I want to open a sports center for kids in Anne Arundel County, you know, for indoor sports like football, soccer, and basketball,” Reid said to the group hesitantly.

He was worried what people would think of his plan. He wasn't a local, even if he'd made the area his home since he'd signed with Baltimore.

I was so proud of his plan. He'd gotten several endorsements after his speech at the gala. Like Lena predicted, when he came out revealing who he was, companies wanted to identify with him and his brand.

He wanted to use the money for something for himself for after he retired, something good for the community, something to solidify his legacy in the area. The best part was he was putting down roots here.

Cade looked at him with a mixture of surprise and respect. “We could use one.”

“Would you help me with it?” Reid asked Cade, his tone uncertain.

“Of course. That would be a huge project for us. We might need to pull in other contractors.” Cade's tone was excited.

“Let us know the timing so we can clear our schedules.” Nolan seemed interested.

It would be a huge project for them. We'd researched their past clients which had been primarily residential homes. It would be their first foray into a large complex. Reid wasn't sure they'd be interested. He hoped they would, wanting to help his friends.

“Of course. I'm thinking in the off-season when I have time to supervise.”

“How are you going to manage that in season?” Cade asked.

“I'm going to have to hire someone to manage it. I'm thinking about Callie. She graduates from college this spring

with a degree in sports management.”

“You sure you want someone who doesn’t have any experience?” Hadley asked.

I could see the wheels turning in her head. She’d started Kids Speak and we’d started the law firm without any business experience.

“I trust Callie. I don’t want to hire someone I don’t know. I haven’t asked her yet so don’t say anything.”

He was torn because it meant losing her as a personal assistant. He didn’t really need her anymore because I helped him with anything he needed. He wanted to take care of her, make sure she had somewhere to go. I thought she’d jump at the chance. She loved sports and this would put her in a managerial role.

We stopped at the harbor, admiring the reflections of the Christmas lights on the water, classical Christmas music played softly from speakers.

Reid’s arms wrapped around me as I swayed slowly to the music.

A few flurries floated in the air. “It’s snowing.”

Reid pressed his lips to my neck. They were cold, sending a shiver down my spine.

I held my hand out to try and catch a flake. It melted as soon as it landed.

“Trying to catch a snowflake?”

I turned in his arms. We stood in a crowd of people, our friends, yet I felt like it was just him and me.

He’d maneuvered me so I was facing him and the water.

Each snowflake was unique, capturing its beauty, the uniqueness impossible. “I feel like I’ve been trying to do the impossible for years. Hold everything together. Starting a new business, the nonprofit, and take care of my parents. Then you came into my life and everything came together.”

I figured out what I wanted, how to get it.

He brushed my hair back from my face, cupping my cheek. “Are you saying you finally found what you were looking for?”

“I did. I didn’t even know I was looking.”

“I love you so much.”

“Me too.” My heart was overflowing with it.

Reid dropped to his knee, holding my hand in his.

It was if time stood still, flakes falling around us, the lights of the boats twinkling in the reflection on the water. My heart beat loudly in my chest.

I looked into his eyes, shining with love for me. “Dylan, I love you more than I thought was possible. You filled my life with happiness, opened my life to friends, possibilities. I can’t imagine my life without you in it. Will you love me forever, standing by my side, always supporting me, and I’ll do the same for you?”

Tears blurred my vision. I nodded, unable to speak over the tightness in my throat.

“Will you marry me?” His eyes were shiny.

A sob broke out of me. “Yes. Of course I’ll marry you.”

I tugged him up off his knees, pulling him into me. His hand cupped the back of my head. He kissed me as if he’d never get enough.

The crowd erupted in cheers. It was background noise. We were here with our friends in one of our happy places, declaring to everyone our desire to be together forever. There was nothing more beautiful. Nothing felt more right.

He pulled back slightly, sliding a ring onto my finger. We looked down at it, the diamond shining brightly in the lights.

Our eyes met, my hand cradled in his. “I love it. I love you.”

“I love you, fiancée.” He kissed me again, until my lips were swollen, until everything faded away, the crowd, the

music. It was just us in the cold, snowflakes melting on our skin, in our hair.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Lea Coll worked as a trial attorney for over ten years. Now she stays home with her three children, plotting stories while fetching snacks and running them back and forth to activities. She enjoys the freedom of writing romance after years of legal writing.

She currently resides in Maryland with her family.

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