



PLAYER
NEXT DOOR



ANNA ALBO

Player Next Door

Anna Albo

Copyright © 2023 by Anna Albo

All rights reserved.

Editing: Dana Hopkins

Cover Design: [Angela Haddon](#)

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, place, or events is entirely coincidental.

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Anna Albo](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter One

“**Y**ou look like hell.”

“I feel like hell,” Reese said, reaching for her takeout cup. She didn’t care that the coffee was lukewarm. Caffeine was caffeine. “The people next door moved in a week ago, and it’s party central over there. The music starts around ten o’clock at night and doesn’t end until at least one or two in the morning. I’ve been letting it go because they’re new to the building, but if it starts again tonight, I plan to march over there and let them know how I feel about it.”

“Your building doesn’t have rules about noise?” Daria asked from the other side of Reese’s desk. The executive assistant was organizing paperwork for Reese to sign.

“We have rules, but my new neighbors don’t want to follow them,” she said, followed by what felt like her hundredth yawn of the day.

“Hopefully you can get this sorted.” Daria handed over some files. “You have a meeting with Jack from textiles later. He has samples he wants you to look at. But we can reschedule.”

“I do need to look over those samples even though I don’t think I can keep my eyes open.”

Daria smiled, her deep brown eyes full of sympathy. She and Reese had gone way back, right back to Reese’s skating years. It helped that they were relatively close in age. With the exception of Cam, Daria was Reese’s closest friend. “If you change your mind, I’m happy to reschedule. You know, we

don't have a lot going on this afternoon. Why don't you head home early? I can handle things here. Jack can wait."

Reese stifled another yawn. "I can't do that."

"You *can*. Go home, take a nap, and then talk to these new neighbors. We can tackle everything tomorrow."

She did like the sound of that, but she had work to do. Reese did not take days off. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd even missed an afternoon. And a lack of sleep wasn't going to stop her from seeing those textile samples for their new athletic-wear line. Reese gulped back some more cold coffee and set her attention on the files Daria had given her.

"I'm fine. I need to get this done."

Daria gave a resigned shrug. "Sounds good. Holler if I can do anything else."

Reese nodded, then dove into the files, financial reports she needed to sign off on. Reese's head spun. Usually, she could get through reports like these in minutes, but the headache coming on had the numbers swimming in her vision. There wasn't enough coffee in the world to get her through this day. For a moment, she considered Daria's suggestion. A little afternoon nap wouldn't hurt. Maybe an early evening walk to clear her head?

No. She had work to do.

She lumbered through the day, trying to keep her eyes open as she went through fabric samples with Jack. As the head of production, he kept Reese on schedule, and he also had an eye for cutting-edge materials that would set her athletic-wear creations apart. The second time he suggested they pause and pick up again the following morning, Reese insisted they work on it now. Of course, there was also that little voice in her head telling her that in her present state, she'd need to review her choices in the morning anyway. She told that voice to shut up. Reese Beresford was not a quitter.

As four o'clock rolled around, Reese found Daria across from her once more. Her slim, tall form loomed over Reese's

desk, and by the expression on Daria's face, she meant business.

"All right, now I'm insisting. Go home! All this work will be waiting for you tomorrow and nothing is urgent. Get some rest. And I mean it!"

Normally, Reese would put up a fight, but Daria was right. Slowly, she gathered some paperwork and her laptop and packed it all into her messenger bag. She felt a little bad leaving early. She was usually in the office well after 6 p.m., but her sleepy brain needed a break.

"You will call me right away if something comes up?"

Daria was clearly fighting not to roll her eyes. "We can take care of things here."

"I know, but—"

"Reese!"

Reese cast one look back, but by the scowl on Daria's face, she knew it was time to go. She took the short drive to her downtown condo. The place had cost her a fortune, but it was a sound investment, and the location was worth it...well, until the noisy neighbors had moved in. But she'd take care of that another day. She walked through her door, set her bag down, and headed straight for the sofa. She normally had no time for television, but she switched it on to half listen to the news, and before she knew it, her eyes closed and she was fast asleep.

* * *

She'd been dreaming about a cabin on the lake. Whose cabin, she didn't know, but it had been peaceful. She was sitting on a dock with a book—how long had it been since she'd read a good book?—when the music started. It confused her at first. She was alone at this cabin by the lake. The only sounds should have been loon calls, so who was playing the loud music? She tried to block it out, but it became louder and louder, and worst of all, she felt herself being pulled away from her sense of tranquility.

No, I need more sleep!

Her eyes shot open. The music wasn't from her dream. It was the new neighbors.

She shoved herself up and stared at the television screen for a moment, trying to get her bearings. The six o'clock news was ending, and she realized she'd slept for a few hours. But she didn't feel rested. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and pulled herself to her feet. The music was thudding in her ears, and she groaned at the prospect of listening to it all night. But no, she wasn't going to listen to it all night. She deserved a good night's sleep, and that was what she was going to get. And if the new neighbors didn't want to cooperate, she'd take it to the condo board. The rules were clear: no loud music that would disrupt other tenants.

She stormed out of her condo and marched over to her neighbor's door. She knocked on it as loudly as possible and waited. Twenty long seconds went by with no answer, so she waited for the current song to end. Long minutes ticked past, and her anger ratcheted up. When the song finally faded out, she rapped on the door as hard as she could again, and kept on rapping until, a moment later, she heard the lock unlatch.

The door swung open to reveal a young man. She guessed him to be no older than twenty, twenty-two, tops. A baby compared to her twenty-seven years. He looked at her with eyes the color of the bluest ocean. He seemed a little surprised to see her there, but before he could say a word, she was talking.

"Are your parents home?"

He blinked a few times. "My parents?"

"Yes, are they home?"

"Probably."

"Great. I'd like to talk to them."

"They aren't here. They live in Milton. What is this about?"

It was Reese's turn to be confused. "Sorry, what?"

“They live in Milton. You know, a few hours from here.”

“Yes, I know where Milton is.”

“Okay, cool. So why are you asking if they’re home??”

She pursed her lips, figuring out a way to approach this. There had to be some story here. Maybe he went to the university downtown and his parents had gotten him the condo. And because he was a rich kid with no respect for his neighbors, he played the music as loud as a DJ at a nightclub.

“Who owns this place?” she asked.

He narrowed his eyes and tilted his head just as a hard rock song blasted through the condo and into the hallway.

“Sorry, why are you here? Who are you?”

“I am your neighbor. And for the last few days, I’ve had my sleep interrupted by your music. You aren’t here on some short-term rental, right? That’s not permitted. Condo rules.”

He smirked at that, as if something had dawned on him. “Well, hello, neighbor. I *own* this condo. I moved in last week. I’m not renting it and my parents didn’t buy it for me.”

She was trying to make sense of everything with her sleep-deprived brain. “Look, I’ve lived here for two years. And I enjoy peace and quiet. That peace and quiet was shattered when you moved in because your music is too loud. I can hear it clearly and very loudly from my condo. So I’m asking you very nicely to turn it down because if you don’t, I’ll make a formal complaint with the condo board.”

His light brown hair flopped into his blue eyes, and he nonchalantly brushed it away. She was infuriated by how casually he was taking all of this.

“My name is Grady,” he said, extending his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I wish the circumstances were different, but now that I understand your problem, I’ll make a concerted effort to keep the music down. And thank you for asking so nicely.”

She frowned because she wasn’t sure whether he was being sarcastic. Nevertheless, she shook his hand. “I do

appreciate that, Grady. I get up early for work, so I need my sleep.” She paused for a moment, realizing how that must sound. Did he think she was crazy? “Look, I understand we probably got off on the wrong foot, so I apologize for that. Maybe we can forget this conversation?”

“Sure. Already forgotten.”

She was about to turn and leave but he spoke again.

“You didn’t introduce yourself, or would you rather remain my mysterious next-door neighbor?”

She smiled at that. “I’m Reese.”

His eyes narrowed again. “Why do you seem familiar? Where do I know you from?”

“No idea,” she said. “Anyway, thanks for keeping the music down.”

She headed back to her condo, and for some reason, she couldn’t wipe the smile from her face. She told herself it was because she’d won, and not because she’d enjoyed meeting him. If she’d been younger and single, cute Grady may have been more interesting to her. For now, as long as he kept the music down, that would make her life a lot less complicated.

* * *

Reese had never slept so well— she’d even slept through her alarm. When she did finally wake up, there were a million texts and missed calls on her phone. As she padded to the kitchen for her morning glass of lemon-infused water, she scrolled through the messages. Most were from her agent, but a few were from Daria, and even one from her mother. What was going on? Had she missed an important meeting? She didn’t remember having anything planned. She hit Daria’s name. Her assistant answered on the second ring.

“Don’t go anywhere,” Daria said before Reese could say a word.

“What’s going on?” she asked, then downed half her lemon water.

“You haven’t seen it, have you?”

“Seen what? I was in bed by nine o’clock last night, and I just got up.” Panic gripped her. Who’d died? Her first thought was of her grandmother. Why else would her mother call? “Has something happened? Has someone passed away?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s different, but it’s bad.”

Reese sat at one of the white bistro chairs at her kitchen island. She needed for Daria to get to the point.

“Daria, tell me right now what is going on.”

“Do you remember someone named Jennifer Brennan?”

The name was like a gut punch, and it took Reese a moment to catch her breath. Reese would never forget Jennifer Brennan. That woman—or girl at the time—had made Reese’s life a nightmare.

“What about her?” Reese asked slowly.

“She’s gone to news shows, gossip rags, and trash TV to say that you’re a horrible person. She has texts and emails. It’s a bunch of stuff about you saying that you wished she was dead and some other stuff about you making fun of her being adopted. Does this ring a bell?”

Reese clapped a hand over her mouth. Maybe she had said some of those things, but Jennifer had said and done so much worse. And if Reese had retaliated, it was because she’d been at the end of the rope. Suddenly, the lemon water wanted to make a reappearance.

“I haven’t seen or heard from Jennifer in nearly ten years! All this happened when we were kids.”

“Well, the press doesn’t care, and they’re having a field day. I’d avoid social media if I were you.”

Reese closed her eyes and tried to think, but the only thing that kept coming back to her was that this was just like a death: it was the death of everything she had built.

Chapter Two

“We can’t keep quiet about this. We have to issue a statement.”

Reese massaged her temples. Her agent, her publicist, and Daria surrounded her at her kitchen island. For the last two hours they’d been trying to make sense of this, trying to figure out a way to find anything positive, but it wasn’t looking good.

“I don’t know what to tell you. She kept things from when we were fifteen years old. I didn’t keep that kind of stuff. Why would I? And if you think what I said and did was bad, you won’t believe the kinds of things she said and did to me.”

Marnie, Reese’s long-time publicist, rubbed her arm. Marnie had been around from the days when Reese’s parents controlled her career. And in a role reversal, it had always been Marnie who’d been consoling, sympathetic, and encouraging, while Fran Beresford had been cold and uncaring. Reese had been a business and discussion piece for Fran and nothing more. Marnie had been the maternal one, watching out for Reese and her partner Cam. She’d found their agent, John Gilmour, and then she’d hired Daria to handle the day-to-day skating business. Daria had been Reese’s assistant ever since. Reese wasn’t as close to Marnie as she’d once been, now that John had given Marnie new responsibilities with other clients, but she was still someone Reese trusted.

“Are you sure you didn’t keep emails on an old phone or computer? Is it possible you deleted the old email address, and we can find it on a server somewhere? Or maybe she wrote you notes?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. But Cam would remember all this. He knew what a terror Jennifer was to me.”

“We’ll talk to Cam. Anyone else who would remember anything?”

Reese racked her brain. “Sure, there’d be a few others we skated with. Jennifer had her crew, and anyone who wasn’t in it was a target.”

John took his turn to speak. “Why do you think she’s doing this now?”

“Because I’m successful and she’s not,” Reese said bluntly. “We’re about to launch our new plus-size athletic line, and people are buzzing about it. Maybe that’s pissed her off. This is a woman who never wanted me to be successful. Do you know how many times she cut my laces or poured shaving cream in my skates?” *Or called me ugly? Made fun of my clothes and hair? Laughed at my mistakes?*

She didn’t say that part out loud.

“I guess the question that I need to ask is if you actually said all those things,” John said. “Because if you did, we need to get ahead of this, and fast.”

Reese lowered her head and her shoulders sagged. “Yeah, I said all those things. I’m not proud of myself. I wasn’t proud of myself then, but she was angry, and I was a fifteen-year-old under so much pressure.”

Marnie and Daria smiled sympathetically, but John remained stone-faced.

“Okay,” he said. “We’ll release a statement saying just that. You were a kid when this happened, that you’ve grown up since then, and you are remorseful. You’ll apologize to Jennifer and stay out of sight for a while. It will all go away.”

Reese bristled at that. “Apologize?”

“We need to make this disappear before it gets out of hand.”

“No way! I will not apologize to her!”

John frowned, deep lines forming around his mouth, and when Reese looked to Marnie and Daria, she could see they were firmly in John's camp.

Reese's heart picked up beats. She needed to calm herself down with the breathing exercises she'd learned in therapy. The thought of saying sorry to Jennifer Brennan made her sick. Jennifer had done everything in her power to sabotage Reese's skating career, and if it hadn't been for the fact that Jennifer had essentially aged out without showing more promise, they would have been rivals for years to come. Jennifer had gone on to coach young kids, and it made Reese's blood boil. Jennifer was one of the cruelest people she'd ever known. How would she treat her students?

"You will. We will craft a response for you and find the appropriate way to deliver it to her. I'm suggesting a phone call."

Reese sucked in a huge breath. "Call her? I haven't seen her since we were eighteen. I don't want to ever see or talk to her again."

"Reese, you need to cooperate," John said. "We need this in our rearview mirror."

Reese popped off her chair and paced her long kitchen. The thought of hearing Jennifer's voice, having to grovel...it made her skin crawl. How many times had the other girl left Reese in tears, crying herself to sleep and wishing the world would swallow her whole? Even when Jennifer had pushed her to the breaking point and Reese had spewed how much she'd hated her, she knew it had been wrong. But she'd been so hurt and angry. At fifteen, hormones were raging, the pressure to perform on ice was intense, and having to endure the meanest bully around didn't help matters.

"Fine, I'll do it," Reese said bitterly.

John gave her a perfunctory pat on the back. "Good. This is the right thing to do. In the meantime, I want you to start going through old emails, see if you can find any evidence that Jennifer was mean to you. We'll talk to Cam, get a statement from him and from others who know anything."

“My mom may have kept an old phone of mine, maybe a laptop. I’ll take a look at her house. And I’ll see what I can find.”

“I’m going to hire some people who specialize in dealing with this. It may cost a few bucks. Are you okay with that?” Marnie asked.

“Whatever it takes. I want this to go away as soon as possible. I don’t want it to interfere with the launch.”

Or my reputation.

“I’ll make some calls right away.”

She could see that Marnie and John were ready to leave.

“There’s one more thing.” She bit her lower lip, pained at what she was about to say. “There is more. The few things Jennifer has provided...they’re the tip of the iceberg.”

* * *

Reese tried calling her boyfriend three times. Each time, her call went to voicemail. She knew Jordy was in the office, and surely he’d heard what had happened? Her face was all over social media. She’d gone from the Queen of the Ice to evil villain in a few hours. And right now, what she needed more than anything was a shoulder to cry on. She finally left a message asking him to call her back right away.

Her next call was to Cam. The second she heard his voice, she started to cry. She could always count on him. He’d never let her down.

“Damn, Reese. I saw it all. What was Jennifer thinking?”

“I don’t know,” Reese said, grabbing a tissue and blowing her nose. “After all this time? Holding this grudge?”

“It’s crazy. John and I talked, and he prepared a statement for me. I’ll share it on social media, and he has some interviews he wants to set up. A part of me feels responsible.”

“Responsible? You have nothing to do with it.”

He sighed heavily. “Come on, we both know she had a thing for me.”

And you had a thing for me.

“Still, it’s been more than ten years. You think she’s still pissed off that you wouldn’t go out with her? Even if that were true, why would she blame me? I didn’t stop you.”

“You know that she thinks you did.”

“She’s crazy.”

“Let’s just hope it goes away. Some other scandal will happen, and this will be forgotten.”

“But she has more ammo,” Reese said. “She’s only posted a few things. And of course she omitted all the things she said to me. I didn’t keep any of that stuff because I didn’t want to remember it. Other than your word and maybe a few others we trained with, I don’t have proof. She’s got all the documentation. Plus, won’t people think you’re all just saying that to support me? They would expect you to.”

“People will see through her.”

“I hope so. Until then, I’m on lockdown. Marnie and John want me to keep a low profile.”

“Tell you what, I’ll come down for a few days and keep you company. How does that sound?”

“I’d like that,” Reese said, mustering up a smile.

“I’ll let you know when I’m on my way.”

They said their goodbyes and as Reese stood from her living room sofa, she saw a piece of paper someone had tucked under her door. Her heart began to pound. Was it a death threat? Someone leaving her a nasty note? She thought to preserve it in a Ziploc bag and hand it over to John and Marnie as evidence, but as she got closer, she could see “Neighbor” written in scratchy handwriting. She picked up the folded paper and opened it.

**I'M SORRY WHAT'S HAPPENING TO YOU. I'LL
KEEP THE MUSIC DOWN.**

IF YOU NEED ANYTHING, CALL OR TEXT.

He'd left his number with a smiley face, and it made her want to cry all over again.

Chapter Three

Reese was staring at the login screen of her old email provider. Who remembered a password from ten years ago? Was it Monty, the name of their cat at the time? Was it Cam's dog's name? She'd tried everything and come up empty. This was the email address she used for skating-related stuff. And she'd turfed it years ago for reasons she couldn't remember. As for her old phone, her mother had told her that was probably long gone, but she'd still take a look. The call had been hard to make. Reese hadn't seen her mother in almost a year, and they spoke on the phone maybe once every couple of months. Asking Fran Beresford to do anything was a chore. Worst of all, Reese was subjected to her mother's analysis of the situation.

"How could you have been so stupid? Say it, forget it—write it, regret it. How many times have I told you that?"

Reese had tried to stay calm because angering her mother wasn't going to help matters. So she clenched her fists and put on her most pleasant voice.

"Mom, you know that Jennifer wasn't very nice to me. Right?"

"Who was she again?"

Reese could hear her mother sucking on her cigarette. It was a filthy habit she'd taken up after Reese's father had left. Reese had been so angry at the time, feeling he'd abandoned them, but in retrospect, could she blame him? If Reese could have, she would have left too. And that had been the problem.

Her father had left her behind when she so desperately wanted to go with him.

“Blonde hair, blue eyes, and she was the only skater with breasts.”

“Right, her. Such a beautiful young woman. She had a shape.”

Reese tried to ignore that insult. Reese had always had the body of an athlete, while Jennifer had curves, like the perfect swimsuit model. All the boys followed Jen around, trying to get her attention when all she wanted was Cam’s. Reese wasn’t sure what had prompted Jennifer to target her. They’d gone to the same school since the sixth grade, but they didn’t have any of the same friends. And with the exception of skating, they never found themselves together. Hell, Jennifer skated singles while Reese and Cam were in pairs. Why did Jennifer care?

“Anyway, if you could look around. I can even come to Barrie to help you.”

“No need. I’ll look. If I find anything, I’ll let you know.”

And that had been the end of the conversation.

Nearly six hours after she’d called Jordy, he’d found the time to call her back. She couldn’t help but be a little annoyed.

“Hey, babe.”

“Were you tied up today with something?” she asked as pleasantly as possible. She didn’t want him to know how angry she really was.

“Aw, the usual stuff. I got your message, but I was busy with a few things.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. What could be more important than her life imploding? “You know what happened?”

“Yes, and it’s totally unfair. But it’ll blow over. Do you want to get together on the weekend? There’s this new Thai restaurant that opened near me. We could have dinner and then head back to my place.”

Was she living in a parallel universe? “Jordy, I’m sort of in a public relations nightmare at the moment. More and more people are hating me by the second. I just lost two sponsorships and I may lose the rest if I don’t get this under control. Not to mention my athletic gear company. I have no idea how that will be affected. Do you understand how terrible this is?”

“I get it,” he said with a hint of irritation. “But you can’t just stop living.”

Her jaw dropped, and she was thankful he couldn’t see her.

“No, but I could use some support right now. A shoulder to lean on. I’m dealing with this all alone.”

“I can see if I can come by tomorrow, but I have this golf tournament for work, and you know how bagged I am after those, with all the sun and the drinking. Not to mention the schmoozing. These tournaments are a big deal. How about the day after?”

“How about now?”

He huffed at that. “Why are you being so difficult?”

“Are you serious? Have you heard a word I’ve said? My life is crumbling. My whole business is in jeopardy.”

“Okay, you seem pissed. I’m going to let you cool off, and maybe we can talk tomorrow.”

With that he hung up, leaving Reese staring at her phone. She took a few deep breaths. She wasn’t a crier, but she was starting to buckle under the pressure. And just when she needed her boyfriend...

She set her phone down and went to the bathroom and into her medicine cabinet. She had a few sleeping pills left, the ones she vowed to take only in emergencies. This was an emergency. She popped a pill and crawled into bed, waiting for sleep to come.

* * *

Reese's team came over again the next morning. Thankfully, Daria showed up first. She had coffee and muffins, and Reese realized she hadn't eaten anything since the scandal broke. She grabbed a blueberry muffin and they sat at her kitchen island.

"You okay?" Daria asked. "You look so down."

Reese slowly shook her head. "My life is in shambles. I have a mother who blames me for everything and a boyfriend who can't see me because he has a golf tournament that *makes him feel bagged*. Why do I let people like that in my life?"

"You can't pick your mom."

"I suppose. But Jordy?"

Daria pressed her lips together. She did that whenever she didn't like something. "Can I be frank?"

"Of course. I demand it."

"Dump him."

Reese rolled her eyes. "Now isn't the time to make drastic changes."

"Now is also not the time to make excuses for a guy you've been dating for three years who treats you like shit. He's never put your first. Not once. Let him go."

But he's better than nothing.

"I see a side to him that you don't."

Daria gave Reese a hard stare. "Really? Because right now I think you're making excuses. A good man would have been here for you last night. And where was he? Do you even know?"

That comment caught Reese off guard. "Are you implying something?"

Daria shook her head. "I've dated enough losers to know when I see one. I don't have proof, but I'm sure he's cheating on you. You see the guy once a week, and he trots you out when he needs a photo op or to impress someone. He's an asshole. You can have any guy in this town, but you keep settling for him."

Reese put her hand up. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore. I have enough to worry about.”

“Fine, but think about what I said.”

Reese did think about it, and when Marnie and John arrived moments later, she had to change her focus to Jennifer Brennan. John handed Reese a prepared statement to review. She read it over methodically, scowling.

“No way am I saying this to her. I’m not assuming all responsibility. She’s not faultless.”

“Here’s the thing,” John said. “If we put out the apology, this goes away. If you don’t apologize and she keeps releasing more texts and emails, then it gets deeper for you.”

Reese mulled what he was saying, but she didn’t have to like it.

“Can you give me another day or two? In the meantime, release something publicly that I regret what I said, but nothing more for now. I’m sure I can find some emails or old texts.”

John’s jaw tensed, but he sighed in resignation. “I’ll give you twenty-four hours, but we can’t let it go on any longer than that. And we’ll release a statement shortly. Until then, lie low, okay?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’m off to check in with Grady. I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

He said the name like Reese should know what he was talking about. “Grady? Grady who?”

“Grady Radcliffe. Your neighbor.”

Reese hopped off her bistro chair and followed her agent to the front door. “Wait, how do you know him?”

John raised an eyebrow. “He’s the new star center for the Renegades. They signed him as a free agent this past summer. We negotiated a great deal, and I’m the one who found him the place next to yours. I told him it was a great building with a

convenient location near the arena. Anyway, I've got to run. We'll talk soon."

"Wait, what?" she said to John's retreating figure.

"Didn't you know he was John's client?" Marnie said.

"I had no idea."

"I thought you did. Anyway, we need to head out too. Daria and I have a lot of work to do. See what you can do about those emails and texts. And whatever you do, stay off social media."

* * *

Cam was due within the hour, so Reese did some quick cleanup and prepared the spare bedroom for him. He was like the big brother she'd never had. When she was a kid, she'd often wondered what it would be like to have a sibling, but when she met Cam at the skating academy and their coach suggested that they be paired, it was like they'd known each other for a lifetime. They'd been the best of friends ever since.

He texted her when he reached the building. He had his own key, not that he was in Toronto that much. After he and Reese had retired, he'd moved to London, Ontario, where his girlfriend lived. But when he was in town, he always had a place to crash.

Reese met him at the front door, and when he walked in, she threw her arms around him. Just seeing him made her teary-eyed. He'd always been her rock, and she'd been his. When his grandfather had his stroke, Reese was there every day, helping Cam and his parents set up the house to make it easier for Harry Graham to navigate. Reese helped with cooking, cleaning, and making sure Harry did his rehab. The Grahams were a second family to her, the family she'd always wanted.

"How are you doing?" Cam said, grasping her hand and leading her to the sofa. "Tell me everything."

“I’m trying to find old texts and emails. My mother says she doesn’t have my old phones, but you’ve seen all the junk she keeps. Something’s bound to be there. I was thinking of driving to Barrie tomorrow. Would you come with me?”

“Of course. Your mom loves me.”

“At least she loves one of us.”

Cam frowned at that. “She’s a bit crusty, but she loves you and she’s proud of everything you’ve accomplished.”

The jury was out on that.

“I thought we could go in the morning. In the meantime, I’m trying to hack into my old email address. I contacted the provider, but it’s been a runaround. And I have a few boxes here of some old stuff, but I don’t expect to find anything.” She paused. “Why is Jennifer doing this now?”

Cam sank back into the plush gray sofa. “I may have an answer to that.”

Reese’s light brown eyes opened wide. “You do?”

“I’ve been asking around. Turns out her skating school is in massive debt. She’s been asking people to invest, but who wants to pour money into in a sinking ship? I think she cooked up this idea to gain some sympathy, and it’s not like the two of you didn’t hate each other back then. If she makes you out to be the villain, maybe people will feel sorry for her and invest in her academy? Or maybe she’s trying to get some money out of you.”

“I don’t even know why we hate each other. It just happened.”

“You were shy but confident and everyone liked you. I think that bothered her. She wanted to be the star, and while she was a good skater, she wasn’t world class. And the two of you had intersecting lives. It was just too much.”

“And she perceived me as having a hold on you.”

“That might be part of it, but she was always a bit troubled. She had baggage, even back then.”

Reese sat next to Cam and pondered. “A part of me wanted to be friends with her at first. She was pretty and people gravitated to her. Her parents were always out to see her perform and she had so much support. It was all so alien to me. And then it was like she set her sights on me. Maybe she sensed my weakness. I don’t know. I wish I’d never met her.”

Cam put his arm around his friend and pulled her in close. “You’ll get through this. I’ve already got a few people who will come forward in your defense. And I let John know about it. Even if we don’t find the old emails or texts, it will be okay.”

“Thank you for coming here. It’s been very lonely this last day or so.”

“What about Jordy?”

“He’s busy.”

She could feel Cam tense up. He’d hated Jordy from the moment they’d met. She could see it in Cam’s sea-green eyes. He’d never said a bad word about him, but he’d never said anything nice either. Would today be the day he’d break his silence?

“Then it’s a good thing I’m here.”

Yes, he was exactly what she needed.

Chapter Four

The trip to Barrie took less than two hours, but Reese could feel the tension building. Thankfully, Cam was driving and spent most of the journey talking about happier times. For some reason, he was fixated on their gold-medal performance in Sochi, which had established them as one of the best skating pairs of all time. And everyone had assumed they were more than partners, a ruse that John insisted they keep up. He claimed it made their brand more valuable. Reese had hated lying to the fans, but John gave her little choice.

“Brian nearly killed me when he found me passed out drunk in my hotel room the next morning,” Cam said with a laugh.

“You made Brian’s life very difficult,” Reese said, gently punching him in the arm. “I don’t know how many times I had to beg him to keep coaching us.”

Cam rolled his eyes at that. “He was never going dump us. We were world champs.”

“Not in the beginning.”

“He saw our talent. And I did smarten up.”

He was selling himself short. He worked just as hard as she did, but he liked to have fun too. He was the wild one and she was the bookworm. If she ever saw him going off the rails, she was there to set him straight. And if he thought she needed a good time, he was the first to arrange it.

Thinking of their old coach made Reese think of Jennifer.

“Jennifer really liked you,” Reese said.

“And I really didn’t like her,” he said with a chuckle. “You know me, that I always try to get along with everyone. Well, I tried with her. She was so...prickly and yet flirty at the same time. It was strange.”

“Now imagine being on her hit list.”

Cam glanced over at Reese for a moment before setting his eyes on the road again. “I know. I ran a lot of interference. Maybe too much. When it was really bad, I talked to Brian about it. I wonder if he had something to do with having her removed from the skating program.”

This piqued Reese’s interest. “I thought she aged out.”

Cam took in a slow breath. “She definitely wasn’t talented enough to make it to Nationals again, but I’m pretty sure she was pushed out of the program. She’d rubbed a ton of people the wrong way, and the second she was gone, what happened to us?”

Reese’s jaw dropped but she quickly closed her mouth. “We won Nationals.”

Cam nodded. “I wonder if that’s another reason she’s mad. Maybe she thinks you’re behind her removal.”

“Even if she thought that, she wasn’t ever going to get anywhere. The best she did was, what, twelfth place at one Nationals? She barely qualified for any others. The writing was on the wall.”

“Maybe she couldn’t or wouldn’t accept that.”

“And that’s why we need to find my old phones today. And anything else from that time that’ll help. Maybe something will be buried in there.”

“We’ll find something.”

What she hadn’t told him was that she’d peeked on social media to see that Jennifer had done an excellent job of victimizing herself. The good news—if she could call it that—was that a lot of people were skeptical of Jennifer’s claims. Many former teammates and skating colleagues had quickly

come to Reese's defense, but a lot of others were horrified by what Reese had done and said as a teen. Reese knew time was running out if she wanted to salvage her reputation, but as they pulled into her mother's driveway, all her anxiety came at her in waves. Not only was she dealing with Jennifer, she was now going to have to deal with her mother.

"It'll be fine," Cam said, rubbing her back as they walked up the front steps to the door. "I'll keep your mom distracted."

Reese took one last deep breath before reaching for the door handle. She opened the door and called out to her mother. She got silence in return. Her car was out front, so she had to be somewhere.

"She's probably outside," Cam said.

Right. She'd always been more attentive to her flowers and garden than she'd ever been to Reese. She and Cam made their way through the house and out the patio doors. Fran Beresford was in the corner of the yard, weeding a section of her vegetable garden.

"Hey, Mom," Reese called out.

Fran jumped at hearing her daughter's voice. She stood up and walked over to them, brushing some dirt from her gardening gloves, then gave Cam a huge hug. She didn't hug her daughter as enthusiastically.

"What brings you both by?" Fran asked.

"I was wondering if you had any luck looking for my old phones. Any old papers? Notes? Cards?"

"I did look, but I didn't find anything. Is that why you're here? You don't trust me to look?"

Reese kept a pleasant smile plastered on her face. "No, it's not that. It's just that I know exactly what to look for, and Cam offered to help."

"Fine. Whatever. And I see you've finally cut your hair. About time. It's too bad you didn't get bangs, though. You always looked better with bangs." Reese hadn't had bangs since she was fourteen years old." Fran then turned her

attention to Cam. “Honey, did you want something to drink? I could make you a quick lunch.”

“I’m fine, Fran. Maybe later. We should probably get started.”

“I’ll be out here if you need me,” she said with a smile to her “adopted” son.

Reese ignored it all and grabbed Cam’s arm. “Let’s start with my old room.” They went up the stairs to the second floor. The door to her bedroom was closed, and when she opened it, she gasped. The room was brimming with stuff. Mostly piles of clothes and several stacked boxes. Reese couldn’t even see her old twin bed. The hoarding was getting to the point where every bit of space was filled with random stuff.

“This is a lot of things,” Cam said, his eyes scanning the room.

“Obviously we’ll ignore the clothes. Let’s start on the boxes, then move to the closet.”

Two hours later they’d come up with nothing of interest other than clothes from Reese’s middle school days and boxes of knickknacks.

“Now what?” Cam asked.

“We tackle the basement.”

The most dreaded place in the house. Even as a kid, Reese rarely ventured down there. It had become a repository for old furniture, more clothes, broken or unused appliances, dishes, linens, and, when her father was still around, his tools and books. The one thing that was never around: any of Reese’s skating trophies. If Reese hadn’t taken and stored them herself, they would have been long gone. Fran didn’t like to keep things that were important to other people. That was why she got rid of all her husband’s things the moment he’d walked out. But Reese’s clothes from middle school? Those were keepers. Reese couldn’t help rolling her eyes at the insanity of it all.

She flipped on the basement lights and slowly descended the stairs. Reese groaned. Her old room was a sampler of what the basement was. Boxes and boxes of junk along with rack after rack of clothing. On top of an old glass dining room table they hadn't used since she was a kid, was an old bread maker, a rice cooker, various sizes of unusable pots and pans, and some kind of grill. All garbage.

"Maybe we should offer to haul this stuff out," Cam suggested.

Reese chuckled. "She won't let you. She'll tell you there is nothing wrong with this stuff, and that she can fix it. So don't bother."

Cam grimaced. "All right, then we should stick to boxes."

"As you can see, my mom hasn't labeled anything, so it's all a mystery."

"I love mysteries," Cam said with his lopsided smile.

An hour in, Reese came across a box of her old schoolwork and notebooks. Her heart leapt when she saw an old camera, and then under more papers, a familiar phone.

"Oh my God! My phone," she said, hoisting it in the air as if she'd scored the game-winning touchdown.

Cam jogged over. "Good work! Now we need to find the charger."

She frowned at that. She'd forgotten that phones from long ago didn't use USB chargers. "Damn. I hadn't thought of that. Okay, I'll keep looking through these boxes. We must be close."

Cam found an old laptop an hour later, but like the phone, he couldn't find the charger. They went through each piece of paper and box they came across, but nothing had to do with Jennifer. Reese looked at all the junk around her and realized they'd barely made a dent. Going through the rest of it could take days. Maybe weeks, if she included the whole house.

"Reese, this is huge. We have the phone and an old laptop. These are going to be gold. We'll look online for chargers.

We're bound to find something."

"You're right," Reese said, trying to hide her excitement.

"I'm surprised your mom kept this stuff," Cam said as they climbed the basement stairs.

"She probably thought they had some value, otherwise they'd be long gone."

They reached the landing and found Fran in the kitchen making something. She'd cleared some of the newspapers cluttering the dining room table.

"I made lunch. You can stay for lunch."

It wasn't a question, but an expectation.

Reese wanted to get the hell out of there, but Cam was already saying yes and asking if she needed any help.

So much for that.

"Did you find anything?" Fran asked.

"We think so. We'll see," Reese said. The less her mother knew, the better.

"You must have said some very terrible things for Jennifer to be so angry," Fran said as she sliced a tomato for sandwiches.

Reese's skin prickled at her mother's criticism. She opened her mouth to speak, but Cam was already doing it for her.

"Jennifer deserved any terrible things that were said to her. She has a dark heart."

Fran's brown eyes opened wide. "Is that so? I had no idea."

No idea!

Reese wanted to scream, but instead she took the salad to the dining room table and did some breathing exercises while Cam handled her mother. How many times had she come home in tears because of Jennifer? It was her father who had tried to step in. He'd been the one who'd listened to her,

who'd talked to Brian about the situation. He'd cared until he'd left. Her mother had simply told her to toughen up.

“Yes, Fran. She was a bully. Everyone knew that. I was here when Reese told you about it. I know you told her to develop a thick skin and fight back, so I guess she did.”

Cam spoke to Fran thoughtfully but also firmly. He wasn't about to let her get away with anything, and that was why Reese loved him so much. No matter what, he always had her back. She was never going to have a better friend than him.

“I read all the things Reese said. I would have never told her to say those things.”

Reese bit her bottom lip to keep from exploding. Her mother said things like that all the time. And yet...

“Sometimes people drive you to do things you normally wouldn't. But enough about that. Maybe we should have that lunch.”

Reese ate so fast it gave her a stomachache. And before Fran could pull out a dessert, Reese was dragging Cam to the front door.

“We really need to get going,” Reese said. “I'll call you later, Mom.”

Fran's eyes opened wide in surprise, but she didn't stop them.

“That wasn't so bad,” Cam said as they walked to his car. He then laughed and shook his head.

“Get in the car, wise guy.”

On the drive back to Toronto, Reese searched online for old chargers. She visited websites and buy-and-sell groups. She called a few places and left messages with others. She struck gold with a place in Waterloo. They wouldn't make it in time before it closed, but she told the guy that they would be there in the morning.

“If we get your phone and laptop working, this will free you from this nightmare.”

“I hope so.”

They got back to her condo, and the elevator door opened on Grady. He looked back and forth at them before settling his blue-eyed gaze on Reese.

“Hey, so I’ve been good about the music. Did you get my note?”

“Thank you for the music and yes, thank you for the note. That was very kind.”

“I meant it.” He turned his gaze to Cam. “You’re her partner, right?”

“Skating partner,” Reese corrected, snapping Grady’s attention back to her. She stopped for a second. Why had she clarified that? “And, uh, my friend. Grady, this is Cam. Cam, Grady.”

“Cool! You play for Renegades! So happy they signed you. I look forward to watching you play.”

Reese realized how awkward this was, the three of them standing there and Grady being unable to leave.

“Well, I’ll see you around,” Reese said.

He nodded and got into the elevator when they got off it.

“He’s cute,” Cam said, nudging her arm.

“He’s a child.”

“He’s our age.”

Reese stopped dead. “What? No, not with that baby face.”

“He’s twenty-seven and you have a crush.”

“I do not! And how do you even know how old he is?”

“He’s only dominated the sports pages for weeks. I remember those kinds of things.”

“Whatever.”

They walked to her door and Cam spoke again.

“What kind of note did he leave you?”

“None of your business,” Reese said, pushing open her door.

“Okay, I’ll let this go for now, but he was looking at you like you were a goddess.”

She had enough to worry about, and Grady wasn’t going to be a new problem.

“What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t notice?”

“No. He was apologizing for playing loud music and keeping me up. That’s all.”

“Okay, you can tell yourself that...I suppose.”

She’d had a long day, and the last thing she was going to think about was baby-faced Grady. Besides, she had a boyfriend, and she was perfectly happy. At least, that was what she kept telling herself.

Chapter Five

They drove to Waterloo first thing the next morning. They were there when the place opened, and when the gentleman pulled the cables out, Reese couldn't hide her excitement. She handed over some cash and asked Ping, the shop owner, if she could plug her phone in.

"Sure," he said, pointing to an outlet. "You guys look really familiar. How do I know you both? Have you been here before?"

"I don't know, maybe," Cam said casually. It was probably best they weren't recognized.

Reese plugged in her old phone and waited. She figured it would take a minute or two to fire it up, but after a couple of minutes, the phone didn't come to life.

"Damn," Reese muttered.

"Not working?" Ping asked.

"No, I don't think so."

"Could be the battery. Let me look."

Reese handed it over and Ping examined it. He frowned a little. "Yeah, I don't have one of these in stock. I should be able to get you an aftermarket one. Do you want me to try?"

"Yes," Reese said. "How long will it take?"

"Probably a few days. It's not like I see many of these phones anymore. They are kind of prehistoric."

"And if it's not the battery?" Cam asked.

“I may know someone who can fix it.”

Reese tried to stay upbeat, but her heart was sinking by the second. “Okay, you try to get the battery. You can call me when it comes in.” She took the phone back and attempted a smile as she wrote down her name and number.

Ping looked at the piece of paper and his eyes widened. “That’s it! You two are the figure skaters. My girlfriend is going to freak out that you were here. Can I take a picture of us together?”

“No,” Reese said quickly. The last thing she wanted was a picture of her floating around at a computer repair place.

The shock on Ping’s face set Cam into action. “Tell you what, when we come pick up the battery, how about you get your girlfriend here and we sign an autograph with her? Maybe have a chat? I bet she’d love that. We can even take a picture or two then.”

Ping’s face softened at that. “Sure, that would be cool.”

“Perfect. We hope to see you in a few days.”

Cam followed Reese out and back to the car. She knew he wouldn’t chew her out for acting like an ass to Ping because it wasn’t in Cam to lecture her. And as usual, he’d been the one to save her from herself.

“I know you’re stressed,” Cam said as they drove away.

“The last thing I wanted was this guy posting all over social media that I’d been there, with a picture to prove it. He’s probably posting it right now anyway.”

“Well, I’d like to think he won’t. We *are* customers.”

“I’m also pissed off that we couldn’t get the phone working. But here’s hoping we can find something on the laptop.”

Cam glanced over at her briefly, and a frown marred his face. “You’ll get through this. People will realize that Jen is the troll.”

“I hope so.”

They stopped to grab a quick breakfast at a fast-food joint—not Reese’s first choice—then headed back to her place. She plugged in the laptop and watched the screen slowly light up. Her heart soared when the thing came to life, showing her the Windows symbol. They both waited patiently, staring at the screen, willing it to load faster. When the main menu screen flashed to life, Reese fought back tears.

“Now we find the emails,” she said.

All her optimism quickly evaporated. As they slogged through menus and spent almost an hour trying to connect to the internet, Reese was thrown yet another roadblock. She couldn’t log in to her email because she didn’t remember the password and she hadn’t stored any of the old emails on her computer. Her recovery email no longer existed, so resetting the password was impossible. Before she and Cam knew it, almost three hours had passed and had it not been for her phone ringing, they may have kept on trying.

“Damn. It’s John,” Reese said. She took the call and Reese had barely said a hello when John launched into his reason for calling.

“I’ve talked to some people, and we’ve come up with a script for your call to Jennifer. Can we do it tonight?”

“Tonight? No. I’m on the cusp of finding old texts and emails. If I can find those, there is no need for an apology or statement.”

John was silent for a long moment. Reese took that to mean he was thinking or stewing, and hopefully not both. He cleared his throat and Reese braced herself. “What have you found so far?” he asked diplomatically.

“Well, the phone isn’t working. We’ve ordered a new battery. We’re trying to figure out my old password for the emails. That’s where we are.”

“So you’re nowhere.”

She cringed. “Once I get the new battery for the phone, it could solve all my problems.”

“And how long will that take?”

“A few days.”

“Reese, you don’t have a few days. You don’t even have a few hours. The longer we don’t do something about this, the worse it gets for you. Look, I’ll give you until tomorrow. If you can’t access the emails or the texts, we go with the apology. Okay?”

She knew he wasn’t wrong. “Fine.”

“I know this is upsetting to you,” John said, his voice softening. “It’s a terrible situation. So this is what we’ll do. If you can’t get into this laptop or phone, you give it to me and I’ll find someone who can. And when we find the evidence that proves Jennifer is a piece of shit, we’ll show the world that you were the victim. Okay?”

“Yes, fine.”

She ended the call and turned to Cam. “We have until tomorrow morning to crack this laptop. We better get started.”

* * *

As it neared midnight, Reese was no closer to cracking the password to her emails. She’d tried everything she could think of but kept coming up empty. The frustration was raw, and it made her want to cry. At one point, Cam put his arm around her and gave her a big hug. He had no idea how much he meant to her.

“I think it’s time to call it a day,” he said. “Get some rest, and maybe in the morning something will come to you.”

“I hope so,” she said, shutting the laptop. “I feel bad that you’ve come here to prop me up.”

“That’s what friends do,” he said, putting his arm around her shoulder and giving it a squeeze.

“It’s been all about me. We should spend some time talking about you.”

His eyebrows creased, but he quickly shook his head. “No need. I’m fine.”

She knew him well enough to know that wasn't true.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Everything is fine. It’s been a long day. We should both get our sleep.”

He went to his room and Reese wanted to pursue it more, but maybe he was right. It had been a long day. She grabbed her phone and noticed a few texts from Jordy. How had she missed them? She texted him back, assuming he was asleep.

Hey, sorry. We were trying to get into my laptop to find old emails.

She didn't expect an answer. Jordy usually went to bed early, but when a reply came moments later, she was surprised.

Golf tournament went well. I shot a birdie! Best in my group.

She frowned. It was as if he'd completely disregarded everything she'd texted.

That's good.

It was an important tournament. I talked to some potential partners.

Could you maybe call me?

Sure, babe. But I can't talk for longer than five minutes. I have meetings in the morning.

Her phone buzzed and she answered right away.

“Hey, Jordy.”

“Babe, how are you doing?”

She walked to her bedroom and quietly closed the door behind her. She sat on her bed and took a deep breath. “You may regret asking that question.”

“Before you do that, my boss is having a little shindig this Friday night. He insists you be there. It's not a big deal, just

about thirty or forty people.”

She gasped. “I need to lie low right now. I shouldn’t be going to parties.”

“You’re going to hide away for weeks instead? Maybe months? Over this stupid little thing?”

Her jaw dropped, but she quickly closed her mouth. “I’m not sure you’re fully understanding my situation. People are trashing me for being a bully. I’ve had retailers tell me they’re about to drop my athletic line. I’ve had to put a hold on new projects, including the launch of my new line. Right now, my reputation is in tatters. So maybe a party isn’t a good idea.”

“Look, some other scandal will come along, and you’ll be forgotten.”

She blinked a few times. He couldn’t possibly be this obtuse. “If I don’t sort this out soon, I will always be associated with this. Kids see me as a role model. I don’t want to let them down.”

“It’s a no to the party?” The irritation flowing from his voice singed her like lava.

“I’m sorry, but it’s a no.” She hated herself for apologizing for it. He should have understood.

“I don’t ask you for much, Reese, but this is important to me. I guess you’re going to put yourself first. Fine, do that. I have to go.”

He hung up before she could say another word.

Chapter Six

R Reese didn't sleep for two reasons: the first, her conversation with Jordy, and the second, the fact she couldn't break into her own old email address. She could hear Cam quietly pattering around in her kitchen, likely looking for the coffee. She wanted to get some sleep in, but she knew it wasn't going to happen. She slid out of bed and met him in the kitchen. By then he'd found the coffee and was working on omelets for breakfast.

Cam smiled when he saw her. "I would have made some bacon, but you don't have any. I don't see any potatoes either. I make pretty good hash browns."

"I remember," she said with a smile as she headed for the coffee maker. "I would do groceries, but people will recognize me. I'll do an online order later."

"Why don't I go get some groceries? It won't take me long."

"Thanks, but only if you want to."

"I'll give you some alone time," he said as they settled at her island to eat. "You can ponder the future and your relationships with people."

She looked up and met his gaze. His sea-green eyes were looking mischievous. "You overheard my conversation with Jordy?"

"You know I can hear a pin drop, right?"

Reese set down her fork and massaged her temples. “He’s a little dense sometimes.”

Cam scowled now. “Dense? No. An asshole? Yes. You know I’m going to tell you like it is, so here it goes. He’s never been there for you. He’s never cheered you on, and never been proud of you. You’re like a trophy to him, something he parades around when he needs something. And here is the brutal truth. He’s a lot like your mom.”

Reese nearly spit out her coffee. “No, he’s not,” she said, her voice nearly a shriek. “He’s nothing like her.”

Cam stifled a laugh as he took a bite of his omelet. “Okay, tell me how they are different.”

“Jordy has supported me.”

“Right. Let’s dive into that. When we won a gold medal in Beijing, he said he had meetings and couldn’t come. And your mom? She thought the flights were too expensive even though you offered to pay for her flight.”

She hated that Cam had a point, but she wasn’t backing down just yet. “It was her nerves. He said he didn’t like the tension.”

“Hmm, sounds like the same thing to me.”

“They are not the same.”

“You’re right. Jordy isn’t a hoarder. Or is he?”

“He’s not. And stop this.”

Cam reached out across the island and grasped on to Reese’s hands. “Kidding aside, I want you to be happy, and I want you to surround yourself with people who support you. Who love you unconditionally. You have enough going on right now. Don’t let him add to your stress.”

They let the subject drop and returned their attention to breakfast. While Cam was out getting groceries, Reese attacked her ancient laptop and tried every password she could think of to no avail. When Cam returned, he found her staring vacantly at the decaying machine.

“No luck?” he asked, setting the groceries down on the kitchen counter.

“Nope. I’ve tried everything.”

“It’s time to hand it over to John. He’ll know someone who can get into it.”

“Great. And that means apologizing to Jen.”

She watched him put away the groceries, knowing she should help but too exhausted to get up. She felt defeated. Jennifer Brennan had finally won a game Reese had stopped playing years ago.

“Think of it as two minutes of your life. Before you know it, this will be over, and you can start moving on.”

“With my reputation in tatters. I’ll have to rebuild. Hope I don’t lose my business.”

“You won’t. John’s been pretty savvy about this. He’s already released statements from other skaters who’ve said Jen was the bully. No one has come forward to defend her.”

“Karen Demchuk will. Don’t you remember the two of them? Always plotting. I’m surprised she hasn’t already come out and vilified me.”

“Karen quit skating pretty early. She was the one who didn’t like to work hard, right?”

“She always had an excuse to ditch training early.”

“Her period,” they said in unison.

Reese laughed at that, and it felt good. She hadn’t had much to laugh about.

“Let’s not focus on Jen,” Cam said, putting away the last of the groceries. “I want you to stay as positive as possible. And when John and the gang get here, we’ll practice what you’re going to say, and then rid Jen from our lives forever.”

If only it could be that easy. Reese wasn’t so sure.

* * *

John and Marnie arrived a few hours later. Cam made another pot of coffee, while Reese went over the script. She tried to keep her anger in check as she read it over a few times. She hated every part of it.

“The way this apology reads, I’m taking full responsibility for everything? That she’s the saint, and that I made her life hell? This isn’t accurate at all. Look, I take responsibility for my part in what happened, but this? No, it’s too much.”

John muffled a groan. “We can soften the language, but you need to be contrite. We want to get this over and done with.”

“But I have the laptop and my old phone. There will be evidence that shows she’s the aggressor.”

John frowned. “Right now, all we have are two devices we can’t access. I’m going to hand them over to some tech guys I know, but it could take days or weeks to get the information. Until then, she could make your life even more miserable than it is now.”

Reese read the script again. “It’s too long. We need to cut it back. That’s all I ask.”

John and Marnie exchanged looks. “All right, we’ll do that. And so you know, Jennifer is expecting a call in a few hours. We need to get this down pat.”

They eventually settled on the wording of her apology to Jen. It would be sent via social media, private message, and the phone call. John would be recording the call, and as Reese watched him dial Jen’s number on his phone, a part of her wanted to turn and run. Offering any kind of apology to the person who had made her life hell for years made her sick to her stomach. This wasn’t right. And when John handed her his phone, she wanted to throw up.

“Hit send when you’re ready.”

She took in three deep breaths and hit the button. After two rings, the voice she'd hoped to never hear again answered.

"Hello, Reese." She sounded so smug.

"Hi, Jen. How are you?" Reese said, fighting to keep her tone light and as friendly as possible.

"I'm good. I'm better. I've been doing a lot of therapy, you know, to deal with my childhood trauma."

Reese shot Cam, John, and Marnie a perplexed look, but she soldiered on. She wasn't about to be sucked into Jen's drama.

"I'm calling today to offer my sincerest apologies. I said some things at the age of fifteen and sixteen that were inappropriate, and you didn't deserve it. I'm hoping that you can accept my apology."

"You said a lot of really mean things when we were older too. In fact, you were saying horrible things to me right until I retired from competitive skating. You were an adult by then."

Reese was flustered, but she knew she had to recover. John and Marnie were both furiously writing something down on paper, but Reese didn't have time to wait.

"I really don't remember that. Again, I apologize if that was upsetting. Those were tense times. We were both tough competitors, and as a teenager, stress may have gotten the better of me."

"You told me that you wished my real mother aborted me."

Oh God.

"Honestly, I don't remember saying that." Reese genuinely didn't, but thinking back on that time, it easily could have been something she'd said when she'd snapped. She wanted to be sick again. She wished she'd been a better person, but she'd been a stupid teenager, dealing with hormones she couldn't handle, tough competition, and a crumbling home life. They were terrible excuses, but they contributed to her anger. And despite what Jen had said, Reese was certain they hadn't

spoken after the age of eighteen, and if they had, it hadn't been anything meaningful. Reese was sure of it.

“You told me that I was ugly many times. I find that strange since you're all about body positivity now.”

I said you were an ugly person! You called me ugly! You said I smelled, that my hair was greasy. You gave me a complex!

Reese took a quick breath. She needed to calm down, and it didn't help that John had shoved a paper in her face telling her to apologize for everything.

“Again, I don't remember saying that. But I'm sorry—”

“You told me I'd never amount to anything. That I wasn't a good skater. That I should quit and be a whore like my birth mom.”

Reese *knew* she hadn't said any of that. She'd said some reprehensible things to Jen, but nothing like that. “Jen, I'm sorry if this has affected your life. Speaking from my own experience, I was bullied too. It was hard some days—”

“So I guess you decided to take it out on me? *I'm* the victim here. You ruined my life. You made me quit skating.”

This was getting ridiculous. “No, Jen, that's not how it was. You aged out. A lot of skaters do.”

John was shaking his head now, so hard it was going to give him whiplash, but Reese ignored him.

“No, I left skating because you made the environment impossible. You stressed me out to the point I would go home each night and cry. I would get so stressed just at the thought of seeing you at the rink, wondering what you'd put me through next.”

This was bullshit, and Reese knew it. Jen was putting on a performance, and Reese wasn't having it.

“I applaud you for being smart enough to keep these old texts and emails. I didn't, so good on you. But the way you're reinventing history? You're ridiculous! You made every day miserable for me. You and your crew were always laughing

and making fun of me. Making fun of my clothes, my hair, my crooked teeth. If anyone went home crying, it was me. But the main reason I was a success and you weren't was because I was the better skater, especially with Cam at my side. And maybe you couldn't accept that. And yes, I said some shitty things to you, but why don't you release what you said to me? Why don't you show people who you really are? A nasty, vengeful bitch."

Everyone in her condo gasped audibly. John was running toward her, but it was too late. She'd said it.

Oh God, what have I done?

"You're still victimizing me," Jen said through fake tears. "You will never leave me alone and now everyone will know about it."

And that was when Reese realized she'd been had. That she'd walked right into Jen's trap. Reese didn't have a chance to respond because John had grabbed the phone from her. Reese looked up into Cam's eyes and realized then that she'd lost everything.

Chapter Seven

As the assembled faces stared at her with disbelief, she wanted to run to her bedroom and hide forever. John's expression was a mix of anger and frustration, Marnie looked horrified, and Cam showed some sympathy and disappointment. He'd been the only one to come over to her and put an arm around her shoulder. The others were too stunned to move.

"I'll get our PR firm on this. The fallout will be catastrophic," John said. He looked at Reese and couldn't stop himself from shaking his head. "You are not to talk to anyone. I don't want you going anywhere. Stay off social media. Don't answer phone calls. Consider it solitary confinement, until we can figure out what to do next. I expect Jennifer is uploading this call to social media as we speak." He turned to Marnie. "We have to go now. We have a lot of work to do."

Without a goodbye, they were gone. Reese crumpled to the sofa, wanting to scream at the top of her lungs in anger that she'd been stupid enough to fall for this.

"Why does she hate me so much?" she asked Cam. "What did I do to her? To be this angry ten years later?"

"You have everything she's ever wanted. The gold medals, the praise, the love from fans, a successful business, and what does she have? A kid with some guy who took off on her when the kid was still a baby, and a failing skating academy. Maybe it all came to a head. Who knows?"

"I screwed up, Cam. Really bad this time."

“John and Marnie will figure it out.”

“And if they don’t? I’ll be canceled. Permanently. And I’ll deserve it.”

“There is nothing we can do right now. But I know what might make you feel better. Burgers from Sam’s? Fries and gravy?”

He tried to smile, but it was falling flat.

“I’m not hungry.”

“But you’ve got to eat. And it’s the perfect comfort food. How about I go and pick up a burger with blue cheese. We can share the fries.”

“Okay.” She loved that he knew her favorite burger.

He headed out the door and Reese sat alone for a few minutes. Sam’s was across town and Cam wouldn’t be back for at least an hour. She didn’t know if she could stand being alone that long and not look on social media. Instead, she called Jordy. Of course the call went to voicemail.

“Can you call me right away? This is an emergency.”

She was grateful when he called back less than ten minutes later. She was about to tell him about the call with Jen, but he started speaking first.

“I’m assuming you called to tell me that you’ve thought better of it and will be coming to the party on Friday?”

Her brows knit. “What? No! Jordy, something awful has happened.”

He sighed. “I guess you’re going to tell me about it?”

She paused for a moment and tried to grasp his reaction. Why was he making her feel like she was putting him out when it was her life was falling apart? “Yes, I’d like to. It was awful. John had me call Jen, to mitigate all that’s going on. I was supposed to apologize—and I did—but she kept goading me. Next thing I knew, I said some stupid things and...it all went south. I’m sure she’s recorded the call and is uploading it everywhere as we speak. I’m so stupid.”

“Oh, that’s not good. Hey, I’m sorry this happened. I’d love to have a chat with this Jen broad. Give her a piece of my mind.”

Reese smiled through her tears. This was the Jordy she remembered. The one who would walk through fire for her when they’d first met. Sure, that was the honeymoon period, and it had been good between them that first year. She was still competing, and they didn’t have a lot of time for each other, but he understood. It was only after she and Cam retired from competitive skating and after she’d finished doing all those ice shows that nothing had changed when it should have. They still rarely saw each other, and she couldn’t remember the last time they’d spent a full night together. She’d tried a few times to arrange a getaway together, but he’d always found an excuse to say no.

“I don’t know what to do. John wants me on lockdown. I guess so that I can’t screw up anything else. But I can’t stay in my condo forever.”

“I’m sure it’s only temporary. He’ll figure something out.”

She pulled at a thread on her sofa. “I know you’re busy, but I’m wondering if you could come over tonight? Maybe stay for a while?”

“Isn’t Cam there?”

“He is, but it would be nice to have you here too.”

“Yeah, I don’t think it’s a great idea.”

If nothing else, Jordy had figured out that Cam didn’t like him. Not even a little.

“But it would be nice to see you.”

“And I want to see you too, but the last thing I want to do is create more tension for you.”

She couldn’t blame him for that. “I hear you. What about this weekend? Since I’m now in jail, visitors would be nice. Maybe Saturday night?”

“I’m in a golf tournament Saturday afternoon and I think I’ll be bagged after it. All that sun can be exhausting. I’ll

probably call it an early night.”

“You could unwind here,” she said, hating the pleading in her voice.

“Maybe another time?”

As if her day hadn’t been bad enough, he was rejecting her. A piece of her heart was breaking at the realization. When she needed him most, he was more interested in parties and golf tournaments.

“Whenever you’ve needed me, I’ve been there for you,” she said, the words tumbling out of her mouth. “I’ve never said no.”

“I’m not saying no. I’m just saying I can’t do Saturday night.”

“But you can’t do it tonight either. And I can all but forget about Friday because of your party. And now I’m taking a back seat to a golf tournament. What am I missing here?”

“You’re not missing anything. But you need to understand that I’m busy.”

“And *you* need to understand that my life is falling apart. And that I need you. That I feel like I’m drowning and you’re not here for me.”

“The world doesn’t revolve around you, Reese,” he said with irritation.

“Jordy, I’m not even in your universe.”

He was silent for a long, painful moment. “Maybe we should talk later,” he said. “When you’ve calmed down.”

“I am calm. I’m simply speaking the truth, and I get the feeling you don’t like it.”

“You’ve had a lousy day. Let’s talk in a few days.”

“In a few days? Couples don’t do that. They spend time together. They offer support and a shoulder to lean on. You’re invisible. I’m lucky if I see you four times a month. That’s not a relationship.”

“Well, you’ve never complained before,” he said, the edge audible in his voice.

“I’ve never told you before. But now I’m laying it all out for you. I feel like an exotic animal you parade around when you need me. And when you don’t need me, well, that’s when you are invisible.”

“I think we should end this call before we say something we’ll both regret.”

Reese closed her eyes and swallowed hard. “Yes, we should end this. Permanently.”

He took a second to digest what she’d said. “Excuse me?”

“You’re not good for me. And I’m not good enough for you. So why keep doing this? I know you’re perfectly happy, but I’m miserable. I want a boyfriend who wants to be with me. Not some guy who comes in and out of my life when he feels like it.”

“Wait, we should talk about this,” he said, panic rising in his voice.

“We just did.”

“Maybe I should come down there, because you’re not thinking straight.”

She laughed bitterly. “Now you want to come down here? I don’t think so.”

“We really need to talk about this.”

“I’ve been making excuses for you for a long time. I can’t keep lying to myself. I hope you find your person, Jordy. But I’m not her.”

Something seemed to snap in him. “You know what? You’re right. I am so tired of all your whining, especially these last few weeks. I’ve put up with a lot when it’s come to you. Do you want to know why I don’t spend more time with you? Because you’re cold. I can barely connect with you. You’re also a selfish, mean bitch. I don’t think this Jen broad is far off the mark when it comes to you.”

And then he hung up.

Reese set her phone down on the coffee table. She'd never felt so small, but somehow, a substantial weight had also been lifted.

Chapter Eight

“I wasn’t gone that long,” Cam said, biting into his bacon cheeseburger. “You got a lot done. Definitely took out the trash.”

Reese rolled her eyes and tried not to smile. “I thought I’d be sad, but it’s more of a relief,” she said, dipping a French fry into a mound of ketchup on her plate. “He added to my stress, stress I would like to not think about for at least a few hours.”

“You did the right thing. You need people around you who you can depend on. He’s not one of them.”

Despite ridding Jordy from her life, there was still that lingering dread following her around. She knew at any second, what little normalcy she had left would be thrown out the window. As if reading her thoughts, Cam reached across the kitchen island to grab her hand.

“Hey,” he said. “Whatever happens, you’ll bounce back. You’re the strongest woman I know, and Jennifer Brennan isn’t going to change that.”

“Thank you,” she said, forcing a smile.

Her moment of peace ended less than an hour later when her cell phone rang. The call went to voicemail, and then her phone started ringing again. Moments later, Cam’s phone began to ring. They looked at each other, and knowing each other like they did, Cam did a quick check on social media. Reese watched his face, searching it for a reaction, and when he frowned, she knew exactly what was going on.

“She posted it, didn’t she?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Reese swallowed the lump in her throat and nodded. “Now what?”

“I’m going to call John and see what he says. How about you grab a few beers?”

What she really wanted to do was hit the gym to burn off some energy, but she couldn’t risk going to her favorite gym. She wasn’t even sure the condo gym was safe. Instead, she headed for the kitchen and grabbed two beers, handing one to Cam while he spoke to John.

“John, I’m going to put you on speaker.”

Cam hit the speaker button on his phone and set it down on the coffee table between him and Reese.

“Reese, I was just telling Cam that I’ve already issued a statement on your behalf. We’ve also got a call in to your email provider to unlock those emails, and we’ve contacted the shop in Waterloo to see about getting fast shipping for that battery you ordered. We had the owner sign an NDA as a precaution. We’re sending him some autographs at his insistence as well as some other merchandizing material. I’m going to pick the battery up in the morning and come see you. We need to get into that phone of yours and download all the messages. We need to shut this down fast.”

“Should I be doing anything else?”

“Nothing I can think of. If it makes you feel any better, more skaters have agreed to come forward and detail their experiences with Jennifer. It seems she’s got a bit of a checkered past. Turns out the father of her child was when they were together married, so that could get messy.”

That bit of information stopped Reese cold. “Wait, you’re not going to make that public, are you?”

John sighed heavily. “We need to use anything we can get.”

“Not that. The kid is innocent. We don’t need to start ruining families.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you that part,” John muttered. “Do you care more about your image or this kid you’ve never met?”

That was an easy call for Reese.

“The kid I’ve never met. We can use the other skaters, but not this kid nor her cheating father.”

“Fine. Just be ready to get into your phone tomorrow. I do hope you at least remember the password to that.”

* * *

The next morning, John showed up with Marnie. He handed her the working phone. Reese’s hands shook as she glanced at the main screen. No password. That had been stupid, but this wasn’t exactly the best phone she’d ever had. It was the crappiest one her mother could find, and it also happened to be the cheapest. Fran didn’t even want her to have a phone, but relented when Reese’s father—and her coach, Brian—demanded it.

Reese opened the text message app and scrolled down, searching for Jen’s name. They weren’t best friends, so it took some searching. When she finally found Jen’s name, she tapped it. There were only a couple of dozen texts over the few years Reese had had the phone. Almost all the messages were from Jen. The only texts from Reese were the ones the other woman had used to ruin Reese’s life.

How convenient.

Reese handed the phone back to John. He scanned the texts quickly, then took screenshots.

“Okay, this is good. It’s not going to solve all our problems, but it’s a start. I’m going to have these messages downloaded, then our PR team will distribute them as they see fit.”

Reese let out a breath she felt she’d been holding for days. “So I wait a day or two and life goes back to normal?”

John's brows furrowed. "Back to normal?"

"Yes. This will exonerate me? I can go back to the way things were?"

Reese glanced over at Marnie who had pursed her lips and was now looking at the ground. Reese turned her attention back to John who didn't look impressed, not that he ever looked impressed.

"You said some horrible things. They are documented. Just because Jennifer allegedly started it and said some terrible things of her own, your responses to her were...not great. And your non-apology call didn't help. These texts will give us some breathing room, and somewhere down the line people may forget about you, but this is the kind of shit that sticks. We're going to have to do a lot to rehabilitate your image. I mean, *a lot*."

"But I thought this was all I needed to do."

"It's not that simple. You realize all your endorsements have dropped you, right?"

Reese's brown eyes widened. "When did this happen?"

"A few last night. The rest this morning. The call you had with Jennifer was a bridge too far."

"What about our investors?"

"I'm working on that," Marnie said. "So far, they're still on board, but it's all wait and see. That's why we need to move fast on this. The plan is to release these texts in response, and then have you keep a low profile for a few months. Maybe six. Then we'll see about landing you an interview with some big-name journalist so that you can clear the air. And we'll rehabilitate from there."

"Six months?" The words were like a knife to her gut that just kept twisting. At least she had her Crush athletic-wear line to focus on. "But I can still work, right? Go to the office every day?"

Marnie and John exchanged looks. "I'm afraid not. We think that for the time being, you should step down. Just a

temporary leave of absence.”

Reese shook her head. “No, no, no! What am I supposed to do all day? I’m not used to sitting around and doing nothing.”

“Well, any vacation places you’ve always wanted to visit? I recommend that you start there. Why not take a trip through Europe?” John said. “You’re not as recognizable there. Or Asia. South America?”

“How about Antarctica or Greenland,” Reese said bitterly.

Marnie walked over and gave her a hug. “Look, before you know it, this will be over. Six months will fly by.”

“How will it fly by when I have absolutely nothing to do?”

“Let me put something together. We’ll plan a vacation for you.”

“And who would I go with?”

All eyes fell on Cam. Reese had many acquaintances, but her list of friends was pretty short. It was basically Cam, and he had a fiancée he wanted to spend time with.

“No,” Reese said when Cam was about to offer. “You don’t need to babysit me for half a year. I’m a big girl. I can find things to do. Will I be allowed to volunteer at my old skating club, or is that too much?”

“That would probably be okay, but for right now, we’d like you to hold tight. Let us come up with a plan with our PR team,” John said. “Let’s touch base again tomorrow.”

They left and Reese headed straight for the kitchen. She pulled a bottle of Riesling from the fridge, her emergency bottle. She rarely drank, but she needed something right now. She poured herself a liberal glass and tilted the bottle toward Cam. He shook his head.

“You know I’m going to go crazy,” she said after one long gulp. The sweet burn down her throat was exactly what she needed.

“I can call Devi and let her know I need to hang out here with you for a few weeks. We can take up knitting or binge

watch TV until we go cross-eyed.”

“I screwed up, but that doesn’t mean you have to be punished too. And I don’t want you to stay here forever. You have your own life to go back to. In fact, I insist you go home. You have a job, and your dad needs you working for him, not minding me.”

His face clouded over for a second, but then he smiled. Once again, Reese was confused by that.

“He can spare me for a few days. Even a week.”

“You don’t need to take care of me,” Reese insisted.

“But you need me.”

“Maybe John is right. Maybe I should take a vacation. The alone time might do me good. I could go up to lake country, spend time reading. I’ve always wanted to write a memoir. I could get started on that. I could write several chapters on Jennifer.”

Cam smirked. “Not funny. And being all alone?”

“I can do it. And maybe I need to do it.”

Part of her was used to it. She’d been alone a lot, and if she were honest with herself, she was used to it. And as much as she tried to convince Cam that going home and back to his life was the right thing to do, for the first time in her life, the thought of spending so much time alone with herself was terrifying.

Chapter Nine

John and Marnie spent a few more days formulating a plan. In that time, Cam went back to London. Reese was truly alone. No best friend, no boyfriend...no one at all. Reese avoided all social media and had turned off her phone. She'd transformed one section of her living room into a makeshift gym where she worked out at least an hour or two a day. It wasn't like she had anything else to do.

She looked for reasons to leave her condo, and like most afternoons, she decided to check on her mail. When she opened the door, an envelope dropped to the ground. Someone must have lodged it between the door and the frame. She picked it up and felt a momentary pang of anxiousness. Had some wingnut found their way into her building? But as she turned it over and saw her name printed in a scrawl, it looked familiar, and she smiled. She tore open the envelope to find the note inside.

**HEY REESE, JENNIFER IS A PIECE OF WORK. MY
OFFER STILL STANDS IF YOU NEED ANYTHING.**

GRADY

She stared at the note for a while. She then jogged over to his door and knocked. She did it before she chickened out and hid in her apartment. He opened the door and smiled when he saw her. His blue eyes lit up.

“Hey,” he said.

“I got your note,” she said, holding it up. “Thank you.”

“I figured you were probably taking a beating and could use some words of support. I think we’ve all had a Jennifer in our lives. Except maybe Jennifer?”

Reese chuckled at that. “I’ll take any support I can get. I’ve pretty much removed myself from social media and society. Looks like it will be that way for a few months.”

“Man, that’s horrible. But you go out, right? Do things?”

“John, my agent—our agent, I guess?—suggests that I take a vacation, but it’s not really in the cards. So I’m hanging out in my condo.”

“Don’t your friends come over?”

She frowned at that. How could she tell him she essentially had no friends other than Cam? That anyone she called a friend was merely someone who needed or wanted something from her? She hadn’t had good friends since middle school, but those friendships had faded away when she’d focused on skating. She occasionally thought of Mia and Robin and wondered what they were up to. They’d been special to her, and yet she’d put skating ahead of them. What she’d do now to have them in her life.

“Oh sure,” she lied. “But it’s not the same.”

“Do you want to come in? Instead of talking out here?”

“Sure,” she said without hesitation.

She stepped inside his condo, and it screamed *man*. The place was ultra-modern and nearly void of character. All the furniture and walls were different shades of gray. She couldn’t find a pop of color anywhere. What she also noticed was the soft sound of rock music coming from his living room.

“If the music is too loud...”

She chuckled at that. “It’s fine. And I am sorry for yelling at you that day.”

“That’s totally okay. I had no idea it was that loud. I figured a building this fancy would have better soundproofing. Can I get you anything? A drink? Food?”

“I’m good, but thank you for asking.”

“How are you doing with all this?” he asked, heading for his kitchen. She followed him as he put a platter on the counter, then rummaged through his refrigerator, pulling out all sorts of cold cuts, cheeses, and pickled vegetables. He then grabbed some crackers, fruit, and nuts from various cabinets.

“I could lie to you and say that I’m doing great.”

“So then tell me the truth,” he said, glancing up at her and smiling. Those playful eyes had her fighting back her own smile.

“It’s been pretty awful. It’s amazing how one person and some bad judgment can ruin your life.”

“Bullies suck. I’ve had my own experience with them,” he said, slicing up the Asiago, white cheddar, Havarti, and another cheese Reese didn’t see the same of. “I almost quit playing hockey the year I entered Juniors. I was far away from home and that was tough enough. But a few of the guys on the team...they were jerks. They made life difficult. I can’t tell you how many times I wanted to quit hockey.”

Reese leaned forward on his kitchen counter and rested her elbows on it. “Why do I get the feeling there’s more to this story?”

Grady sighed. “Yeah, his name was Justin. Justin LaChance. You never forget the names of the jerks who made life hell,” he said, arranging the cheese on the platter and moving to the prosciutto, Genoa salami, and soppressata. He folded each slice and placed it along the board next to the cheeses. “He did some horrible stuff to all the news guys, and I was no exception. I don’t drink much—I have an alcoholic uncle—and I guess they fixated on that. When we’d all hang out, he’d try to get me drunk. And when I refused, he’d punch me. All in good fun, at first. Until it left bruises. Thankfully, our team captain at the time stepped in.”

“What an ass.”

“That’s putting it mildly. He stole things too. Things that meant something to people. Then weeks later they would mysteriously reappear. He picked on the guys who couldn’t afford better equipment, made fun of people’s looks. He did other things... Anyway, I had to deal with him for one year before he was cut from the team. Turns out he’s a drug addict now. And I take no joy in that. As much as I hated him at the time, I still wanted him to have a good and fulfilling life. And I forgive him for what he did. He was probably really screwed up.”

“That’s kind of you to forgive. I’m not there yet.”

“It will come,” Grady said with a reassuring smile.

He’d moved on to arranging crackers and fruit along with olives, pickles, and what appeared to be pickled artichoke pieces. He finished the platter off with generous helpings of walnuts and pistachios. He sliced thin wedges from a baguette and put those on a separate plate.

“Are you having guests?” she asked. “I don’t want to interrupt.”

“This?” he asked, pointing to the platter.

She nodded.

“No, this is for us.”

He walked over to another cabinet and pulled out plates, napkins, and utensils.

“What can I get you to drink? We can’t snack without a beverage.”

Reese’s eyes opened wide. He’d thrown this all together in minutes, and for her, no less. She didn’t know what to say or do.

“Whatever you have.”

“Iced tea?”

“Sounds great.”

She helped him bring it all over to his small, round kitchen table. They sat and dove into the charcuterie board. She moaned when she tried the unidentified cheese on a cracker.

“What is this slice of heaven?”

“Fruilano cheese. I got it from this Italian butcher a few blocks away. Actually, I got most of this stuff there.”

“It’s amazing. Thank you for this.” She tried everything on the platter. It dawned on her how hungry she was. The last few days she’d barely thought to eat. But this assortment was exactly what she needed.

“I figured that since I was having a guest, I needed to put something out. It’s something my mother taught me.”

“My mother wouldn’t offer you a glass of water,” she said, placing a piece of prosciutto atop a cracker with another piece of Fruilano cheese. “No, wait. You’re a handsome man, so she would offer you something. She’d let everyone else starve.”

Oh boy, had I just said that? Handsome?

“Is there a story there?” he asked, as her cheeks burned with embarrassment.

“Probably not one you want to hear.”

“Try me,” he said before popping a kalamata olive into his mouth.

Reese sighed heavily. “My mom is all sorts of special. I love her, but...”

She didn’t feel comfortable attacking her mother. She’d been accustomed to saying nothing at all about her. It was easier that way. Reese worried that being honest about her mother would simply put herself in a bad light, making her sound ungrateful. So instead, she’d pretended that Fran was a decent mother, one who cared.

“But?”

She watched Grady place a slice of Genoa salami on a wedge of baguette. He topped it with another olive. She didn’t normally enjoy watching people eat, but Grady was...

different. He had a grace about him, yet looked sexy as hell. And despite her initial observation that he was young, she could see the small lines around his eyes that betrayed that youth.

“She was never there for me. Ever.”

The statement caught him by surprise mid-bite. “Never?”

“Have you ever had people in your life who were always competing with you?”

“Sure.”

“That’s my mom. I think deep down she loves me, but she’s always resented my success. And the more successful I became, the more bitter she got. I wonder sometimes if I was competing against my mom as well. Initially, she seemed invested in my skating career. She came to see all my performances, but when my dad left...she left too. You know, emotionally. If Cam’s parents hadn’t taken me under their wing, I don’t know where I’d be right now.”

“When did your dad leave?”

“A week after I turned eighteen. He said in the nicest way possible that he couldn’t live with my mom anymore. At first I was so angry with him for abandoning us. My mom played up being the victim, and I was too stupid to see what was really going on, so I took her side. And because she was so angry and bitter with my father, so was I.” She paused for a long second. “He was the only positive person in my life, and I cut him out. Because I felt sorry for my mom. A woman who has systematically alienated me for the last nine years.”

Grady put on his sympathetic face. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. Do you have a relationship with your dad now?”

Reese’s cheeks burned with shame. “I don’t even know where he is or how to get a hold of him.”

“Listen,” Grady said, hope rising in his voice. “If he’s the man you say he is, when you’re ready, you can find him.”

“And what if he tells me that he hates me?”

“Is that what you’re worried about?”

“I wouldn’t blame him.”

“Obviously I don’t know your dad, but I doubt that would happen.”

He was giving her a lot of think about. And maybe it was a good time to reach out to him. Maybe.

“Thank you for the talk and this amazing charcuterie board, but I should probably let you get back to your life.”

“You’re welcome to hang out anytime. Other than some training before the season starts, I’m not doing much myself.”

She took a moment to stare at him, probably for too long, but she didn’t care. She couldn’t remember a time when she’d opened up to a new person like that. What was it about him? She didn’t know.

“I would kill for a proper workout facility, but I’ve been told to stay away from public places.”

“You can come work out with me.”

“Thank you for offering, but John doesn’t want me going to gyms.”

“I have access to the arena’s facility. I’ll run it by team management, but I don’t see why I couldn’t bring you along. And it’s all private. Give me your number and I’ll confirm.”

“Okay,” she said, tamping down her excitement. She rattled off her number, and he added it to his contacts.

“I should have an answer for you later today. We can work out tomorrow if you’d like.”

“I’d love it!”

She nearly skipped back to her condo. Despite her rotten circumstances, things were looking up.

Chapter Ten

R Reese thought to call John and ask his permission to head to the Renegades' gym, but since she hadn't heard from Grady yet, and it was nearly noon, she was beginning to think her outing wasn't going to happen. She'd been so excited at the prospect of getting out of her condo, but her excitement was waning by the minute.

She was about to prepare a quick lunch when her phone chirped with a text. She leapt across her condo to grab it. It was from Grady.

All is good with team management. We can leave in a half hour if you're ready. But I did want to warn you that a few of the other guys may be there.

I've been connecting with my new teammates to do some off-season training. Will that be an issue?"

She tried hard to quell her excitement.

It's okay with me. And I'll be ready in 30 minutes.

See you in the hallway.

She called John. The last thing she wanted to do was piss him off and endure more of his wrath. She didn't expect him to answer and was surprised when he did.

"Hear me out before you say no," she started.

John groaned. “What has happened now?”

“Nothing yet. But while in my self-imposed isolation, I chatted with Grady, who happens to also be your client. And he invited me to the Renegades’ arena to workout with him and maybe a few teammates. Will you lose your mind if I go?”

He cleared his throat and her heart sank. He’d told her to go on vacation, but she couldn’t go to a private training facility?

“It should be fine. Do *not* take pictures with anyone. Keep a low profile. I have no idea who these teammates are, but I trust Grady, and he’s a smart guy.”

She was sure she’d burst with joy, but she maintained her calm. “Great. Thank you.”

“I’m glad you called. Marnie and I will be over in the next few days to discuss our ongoing strategy. Let’s hope our plan works...whatever that plan turns out to be.”

“Well, you’ll know where to find me.”

She got off the phone and ran to her bedroom. She had a closet full of workout clothes, mostly samples from her company. She chose her deep blue tights with a matching blue halter with a silver trim. Even though she hadn’t skated professionally in over a year, she’d kept in shape. Breaking her punishing training regime had been hard at first, but now she enjoyed working out, being active, and while she still monitored what she ate, junk food was no longer the enemy. She’d seen so many other skaters—male and female—punish themselves for any misstep, but she’d vowed to love food and love life. And if she put on a few pounds, so be it. As long as she loved herself, everyone else could eat shit.

Once she had her gym bag packed, she snatched her water bottle and headed for the door. It was a gorgeous July day. She doubted anyone was outside waiting to catch a glimpse of her, but she couldn’t take the chance so put on plain sunglasses and the ugliest baseball cap she could find. Grady was exiting his place just as she was leaving hers. They smiled at each other.

“I’m not going to lie, this is the most exciting thing to happen to me in weeks,” she said as they headed for the elevator. “And being out of my condo is a treat.”

“Glad I could help,” he said with a wink.

The wink made her giggle and she caught herself. Giggling? When was the last time she’d done that?

“And your teammates won’t mind me there?”

“They’re cool, and it’s only two guys. I used to play with one in Philly, and the other is an old Junior teammate of mine.”

The elevator stopped at the parking garage, and Reese followed him to a black SUV. She pulled down her cap as they pulled out of the garage. She didn’t expect paparazzi hanging around outside, but she simply couldn’t take the risk of someone getting a shot of her. If anyone saw them together, the gossip would explode.

“I feel like I’m transporting a fugitive,” he said with a chuckle.

“I feel like one.”

“The drive to the arena didn’t take long. And to her relief, he had been assigned underground parking, away from prying eyes.

“And if you’re worried, all arena staff sign confidentiality agreements. If anyone spills the beans that you’re here, the shit is going to hit the fan.”

Grady parked his SUV, and Reese followed him down a series of hallways. She still had her hoodie up because she didn’t trust anyone, and the arena happened to be freezing cold. She’d competed in this arena many times, but she’d never remembered it this cold. Despite the chill, he led her to a room marked Renegades Fitness Center. Reese had been in this arena before, but she’d never been in this room; it was clearly designated for team players and personnel only.

Once inside, her eyes opened wide. The room was decked out with modern fitness equipment from top-of-the-line

elliptical machines, recumbent bicycles and treadmills, to a never-ending rack of free weights. Reese stared at it all in awe and didn't notice that two other men were in the room; one was working with dumbbells, and the other was doing leg curls on a machine. They both waved absently as Reese followed Grady over to them.

“Preston and Dylan, this is Reese. Reese, these are my teammates.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said. They nodded an acknowledgement and finished their rep. Neither had yet given her any indication they cared if she was there or not, so a quiet unease had settled in, at least for her.

“I heard about the stuff going on with you. Crazy,” Preston said. He was easily six foot four, maybe even taller. He played left wing and had been a key player on the team's second line. She'd done a little research on the team since learning Grady was her neighbor. She also had a lot of time to do that research. “Who brings up stuff that happened ten years ago? And I read the crap she was saying to you. She's no saint.”

Reese exhaled some tension. So far, these guys were cool with her.

“Someone's put her up to this,” Dylan added. “There's got to be a payoff somewhere.”

“I don't know. Maybe?” Reese offered. “Until then, I'm supposed to keep a low profile.”

“Well, you're welcome here any time,” Preston said firmly. “And we won't tell anyone you're here.”

Reese wanted to take full advantage of the exercise equipment, but she decided to start with some stretching and flexibility exercises. She hadn't been doing anything mind-blowing, but while she'd been doing the splits, she glanced up to see three awed faces looking back at her.

“You're flexible,” Preston said.

“I used to be more flexible.”

Preston grabbed a mat and set it down next to her. “Teach me, wise one.”

She laughed at that. “Okay, well, maybe we shouldn’t start with tackling the splits.” She walked him through a set of flexibility exercises, and while he struggled with some, he was remarkably flexible for his size. She moved on to core strength, and he joined her for crunches, planks, and V-ups.

“Damn, that was a good start. What’s next?”

“I wanted to hit the weights, since I don’t have access to machines of my own. Then I’d like to finish with one of the stationary bikes.”

“I’m in.”

Dylan and Grady joined in as Reese went through her workout routine. She was well aware that she was preaching to elite athletes who’d trained all their lives, but it was something a little different from their own routines, and they seemed to enjoy it.

“That was fun,” Dylan said, wiping sweat from his brow. “When are you coming to work out next?”

Reese glanced over at Grady. “I don’t know. When I’m invited again?”

“You can come back any day you want. We’ll all talk to management. They can give you a title of some kind and then you’ll have access when you want it.”

“Yeah, like flexibility consultant,” Dylan said.

“I like that,” Preston added.

“Yeah, you two work that out, and I’ll bring Reese back here tomorrow?” he said, looking at her for an answer.

“Sure. I’d love to.”

They walked back to Grady’s SUV and Reese couldn’t contain her happiness. “Thank you so much for the invite. And inviting me again tomorrow? You have given me a reason to get out of my pajamas.”

“The guys liked having you there. I liked having you there.”

Her heart fluttered at that, a feeling she hadn't felt since winning her last gold medal. “Thanks. And I loved being there.”

“Before you know it, these guys are going to demand workout routines.”

“I'd rather be doing that than sitting around.”

They drove back to their building and Reese thanked him one more time before heading back into her condo. She needed some way of thanking Grady, but she couldn't think of anything appropriate. It then hit her, and she called Daria.

“Hey, Reese, how are you?”

“I'm okay. I'm good today. But I need a favor.”

“Whatever I can do without enduring the wrath of John.”

“This won't endure his wrath. I need you to send over a box of samples. The men's line. Some large and extra-large. Whatever we have.”

“For Jordy?”

“No, for a new friend. Someone I need to thank.”

Chapter Eleven

D aria had the athletic wear delivered that afternoon. Reese went through the items and was pleased with what Daria had selected. There were probably too many pieces for Grady, but she wasn't about to pick and choose for him. She folded everything neatly into the box and headed over to his place. Reese had no idea if he had a girlfriend, or maybe friends over, but she was only delivering a box. She didn't expect another charcuterie spread.

She knocked on the door and he answered in seconds. His blue eyes opened wide when he took in the box.

"Long time no see," she said.

"I know. It's been a whole four hours. Did you get one of my deliveries?" he asked.

"No. But this *is* for you, and it's from me."

"It is?" he said, taking the box from her. "You didn't need to get anything for me."

"It's a little thank-you for making me feel like a human being today. I had Daria send me some samples from our men's athletic line."

She followed him inside even though he hadn't invited her in. He set the box down on his coffee table and started rifling through the clothes.

"These are great," he said. "The material is soft. And breathable?"

“Totally. We searched long and hard for this blend. And the cuts are meant to be comfortable and flattering.”

“You gave me way too much stuff.”

“Share it with friends or teammates.”

“This is way too generous,” he said, his gaze falling on her. She felt another heart-flutter she tried to ignore.

“It’s really the least I could do.”

He took out a pair of black shorts with lime-green trim. “These are so cool.” He then grabbed a white shirt with the same lime-colored trim. “I had no idea you even had a men’s line.”

“It’s new. We launched it last fall. It hasn’t quite taken off yet, and with everything that’s been going on...well, who knows if it ever will.”

“I’ll share it on social media and get you a few likes,” he said with a wink.

That wink of his was so incredibly adorable, and if she allowed herself to remember him at the gym...his legs, the way his workout shirt hugged his chest and arms... No. She’d just gotten out of the worst relationship she’d ever been in. She was not ready to lust after a new guy, especially someone as hot as Grady. He was dangerous.

“I appreciate that, but you don’t have to.”

“It will be my pleasure.”

She could sense he had something to do. He was fidgeting a bit and tried to casually look at his smartwatch. “All right, well, if you’re working out again tomorrow, send me a text and I’ll be ready.” She didn’t want to sound too desperate.

“You are definitely invited to our next workout session. The guys wouldn’t have it any other way.”

* * *

Grady texted early the next morning to say that something had come up, but that she was invited to work out with him the following morning. She was a little disappointed, but Daria provided a distraction when she came over, looking to have Reese sign some paperwork and tend to other Crush business.

“You know I’m going to be nosy and ask you who the samples were for,” Daria said as Reese came out of the kitchen carrying two glasses of iced tea.

“I know I can trust you with this info, so I’ll tell you they were for Grady Radcliffe. He’s my neighbor, and he’s invited me to work out with him at Renegades’ arena. And yes, John has approved it.”

Daria’s eyes opened wide, but she quickly recovered her composure. “That’s cool, and it’s nice to get out of this place. And if I remember correctly, Grady Radcliffe is stinking hot. I hope that won’t make Jordy jealous.”

Reese handed Daria her glass of iced tea. “About Jordy... We broke up. Or, rather, I dumped him.”

A wide smile spread across Daria’s face. “That is music to my ears. I know you liked him, but I wasn’t so sure about him. He didn’t...treat you well.”

Reese could sense that Daria was being careful. “You can speak freely, Daria. I know Jordy was an asshole.”

“Good. Yes, he was a royal asshole. One of the biggest assholes I’ve ever met. When he didn’t come to see you win gold in Beijing, I wanted to beat him up with a crowbar. You’ve always been so good to him, and he couldn’t bring himself to return the favor.”

“I know. And if you recall, my mother didn’t come to see me win gold either. I seem to enjoy surrounding myself with people who don’t care about me.”

“But other people were there for you. I was there for you.”

Daria also meant Reese’s father.

“I was happy to have you there, and Cam’s family. It was nice.”

“Well, I’m glad you have a new friend. Maybe I can meet him one day?”

“I’m sure that can be arranged.”

They dove into the paperwork. It was all standard, boring stuff. Daria had already told Reese that they’d slowed or stopped production on some of their lines, and the new plus-size line was on temporary hold while retailers decided if they wanted to cut her loose or not. Reese attempted to distance herself from these thoughts. It only piled onto everything else going on.

Reese glanced down at her phone on the coffee table in front of her. It hadn’t stopped lighting up for the last few minutes. Her heart immediately sank. What could be happening now?

“I’m sorry, I don’t know why my phone is going crazy all of the sudden.”

They both looked at each other. Had Jennifer dropped more incriminating information? Since the scandal had broken, Daria had taken over monitoring all of Reese’s social media accounts, but with Daria here... Daria grabbed her own phone and checked her notifications. She began to blink rapidly, which only panicked Reese further.

“What is it?” Reese asked as Daria tapped on her phone.

“No way!”

Dread engulfed Reese. “What is it!?”

Daria turned her phone to show Reese. And there it was. A picture of Grady Radcliffe, wearing the clothes Reese had given him the day before. He’d posted the picture to his social media accounts, plugging Reese’s men’s line. And Reese couldn’t deny how fabulous he looked in the black-and-lime shorts and matching T-shirt.

“He’s blowing up our notifications. In a good way!”

She was too stunned to speak. Not in a million years would she have imagined it, but at the same time she wasn’t

surprised. She hadn't known Grady very long, but this was exactly the kind of thing he would do.

"It gets better. Preston Dixon and Dylan Parker are also plugging our men's line. Holy crap."

"What do we do?" Reese asked.

"I have no idea. Let me talk to marketing."

Daria got on the phone while Reese paced her apartment. Daria's conversation wasn't long, and when she set down her phone, she couldn't stop smiling.

"They said they'd handle the social media on this. They also just heard from Sports World, Play Hard, and Whitman's, and all have said they've made the decision to stick with us. They've all just placed orders for our menswear!"

Reese crumpled into her chair. Tears were streaming down her face, a rare show of emotion on her part, especially in front of another person. Daria ran over to her, throwing her arms around her boss. Grady may not have single-handedly saved her business, but it was pretty close. His unselfish act had been the nicest thing anyone had ever done for her. And when she was done with Jennifer and the scandal she'd never asked for, she was going to go out and buy the most expensive charcuterie board she could find. Solid gold, if it existed.

As if on cue, Reese's phone rang. John's name popped up on her screen. She hoped he wasn't about to burst her bubble.

"Okay, I've seen it already," he said in his gravelly voice before she could get out a hello. "This is good, but you're not out of the woods yet. Do I need to repeat that?"

"No," Reese said, her voice heavy with tears.

"And how did you get Grady to do this? He's very endorsement shy. In fact, he says no to most deals I bring his way."

"I didn't ask. He did it on his own."

"Like I said, this is not going to save us. We still have work to do. But our marketing team is on it, and I have a call

in to Grady. Maybe we can have him help us some more. As for you, I want you to continue staying out of sight.”

“Got it.”

When she was done her call, she started searching on her phone.

“What are you doing?” Daria asked. “Please don’t post anything. John will kill us both.”

“I’m not. I’m looking for a charcuterie board.”

Chapter Twelve

R Reese walked over to Grady's door a few hours later. Each time she did this, she felt a little uncomfortable, worried that she she'd be interrupting him if he was with friends or a girlfriend. Not that she'd seen a girlfriend, and she certainly wasn't going to ask even though she was dying to know. On second thought, she wasn't sure why she was dying to know. He was hot and had a body that looked amazing in his workout gear, but after the nightmare that was her relationship with Jordy, she needed a break from romantic entanglements.

She knocked on the door and waited a minute. Just as she was about to turn around and head back to her condo, his door swung open. The music coming from inside was louder than it had been the past week or so, but not loud enough that she could hear it from her place. Was that why it had taken him so long to get to the door?

"It's too loud?" Grady said before she could open her mouth.

"No, I didn't even hear it. I'm here about what you did."

He tilted his head in confusion. "What did I do?"

"Seriously? Your social media posts wearing my athletic line."

"Oh, that? Pfft, that was nothing."

Her eyes opened wide. "Nothing? You have no idea what you did?"

“Oh damn, was it bad? Have I made things worse?”

She gently slapped him on the arm and laughed. “No, silly! You saved my bacon!”

He smiled now. “Oh, then it’s good.”

“It’s freaking amazing.”

“How about you come in so all our neighbors won’t hear about this.”

She stepped inside and he jogged to his TV and switched off the music. He headed for his kitchen and returned with a bottle of something and a couple of glasses. He poured a glass and handed it to her. At first she thought it was alcoholic, but it turned out to be a sparkling lemonade.

“I love this stuff, but I don’t drink it often. But this seems like good time to celebrate, right? And honestly, I had no idea that anyone would even see my posts. I’m not much of a social media guy, but Preston suggested that I do it to thank you for the clothes.”

There was a sweet innocence about Grady that made her heart burst. “So let me tell you what happened after the three of you posted those pictures. You probably don’t know this, but my men’s line was tanking, and three major retailers in the country were considering dropping my line. Well, you guys posted your pics, and people went to buy the clothes. And the retailers not only agreed to keep the line, they made orders.”

A huge smile lit up his face. “That’s amazing.”

“No, you’re amazing! And I owe you big time.”

“It was nothing. We loved the stuff. Preston won’t stop going on and on about the way the shirts breathe, how soft they are, and a bunch of other stuff I don’t remember. So let’s toast to this unexpected result.”

The sparkling lemonade was fabulous, and he poured her another glass when she’d drunk it all.

“This stuff is great. Why don’t you drink it more often?”

“Too sweet. I’m trying to avoid the sugar.”

“You’re a health nut like me?”

He grinned in his boyish way. “I think so. Speaking of health nut, it’s time for dinner. Want to hang out? And cheat? I would kill for loaded nachos.”

Her first instinct was to say no, and she had no idea why she’d even want to say no. She decided to shut her brain off and let the words fall freely from her mouth.

“Okay, but only if I pay.”

They ordered from a place Dylan had raved about, and he ended up paying despite her offer. Their food came forty minutes later, and Grady met the driver downstairs so no one would see her. The last thing she needed was gossip starting about her and Grady.

They sat down and dug into the endless order of nachos.

“I was feeling hungry, so I got cheesy fries too!”

“Are you trying to kill me?” she joked.

“Never,” he said with a wink.

Reese piled nachos onto her plate along with a generous portion of the cheesy fries. Everything tasted heavenly.

“I’ve never asked,” she said between bites. “Where are you from originally?”

“I was born and raised in northern Ontario, but my family moved to the GTA about ten years ago. I played my junior hockey in Barrie. That’s where I met Preston. How about you?”

“Born and raised in Milton, but I moved here years ago.”

“Any siblings?”

“I was an only child. My parents tried for more kids, but my mom suffered several miscarriages, so they gave up. How about you?”

“I have an older sister and a younger sister. And both keep me in line.”

“As they should,” Reese said with a playful smile.

“When my parents told me and Sara that we were going to have a sibling, I prayed for a little brother. And then Jodi was born, and I was so bummed. I was nine when she was born, and Jodi was sort of an oops. Anyways, I love the kid to death now.”

“I would have loved to have a sibling. Being an only child is lonely. And my mom is...” She still felt guilty saying anything bad. “Emotionally distant. On a lark, she enrolled me in figure skating, and that’s how I met Cam. We’ve been partners since I was eight.”

“I’ve got to ask,” Grady said, dipping a fry in ketchup, “are you two a thing?”

For years, everyone had wondered. Speculated and gossiped, and Cam and Reese had always let them wonder. So much so that it became a game.

“If I tell you, then I’m going to have to kill you.”

“Well, I’ll be dead, but I’ll know once and for all.”

“Fine. But it should be obvious since Cam is engaged.”

“Ahh, I see. Were you ever an item?”

“For about five minutes when I was sixteen.” They’d tried to date in their teens, around the time that Jennifer had been making her life hell, but by then they were too close, too much like family. It had never felt right.

“How about now? Any boyfriend?”

He was trying to hide his face behind a nacho covered in cheese and meat. Was he blushing?

“Don’t get me started. I just dumped my on-again, off-again boyfriend of three years. It was cathartic.”

“That bad?” he said, popping the nacho in his mouth.

“Let’s just say I was never a priority. He didn’t even come to see me win a gold medal.”

Grady blinked a few times. “Seriously?”

“Yup. Cam’s family was there, and they ‘re like the family I’ve always dreamed of having. And Daria was there.”

“That’s terrible. What about your parents?”

She grimaced. It felt so good to actually talk about this stuff. “Mom said something about her sciatica. Dad was there, showing up even after the divorce...anyway, it was the best moment of my life followed by the reality that the people closest to me couldn’t bother to see me win. In the case of Jordy—my ex—I chose to bring him into my life. I couldn’t pick my mother. And despite the person that she is, and the crappy influence she has been, I made something of my life.” She glanced over at him and saw the pity on his face. “Anyway, enough about that.”

“It’s okay to talk about it. Get it off your chest. I don’t mind.”

“It’s not something I think about a lot. I was in therapy for a long time, to help with my headspace, but it was then I learned that so much of my life has been shaped by my parents and their dysfunctional relationship. There was always so much tension, and I don’t know if that’s because my mom felt bad that she couldn’t have more kids or if they just couldn’t stand each other anymore. And maybe my dad fed into that, I don’t really know. Anyway, to compensate for not having any more kids, my mom replaced that with things. So many things. Which led to fights with my father. Do you know that as a kid, I couldn’t even have friends over? My mom wouldn’t allow it because the house was always such a mess. It’s probably why I had so few friends then. I still have no friends.”

Oh God. Had she said that last part out loud?

“I mean, I do have *friends*,” she said, trying to cover up the admission. “But I don’t have tons of them. I have a hard time making them. You know what I’m saying, right?”

What she wasn’t saying was how difficult they were for her to make, and although outwardly she was bubbly and warm to people—that’s why they loved her—she was always worried they’d leave. So many people had exited her life, especially after skating became her whole world. One day her

fellow hopefuls would be there, and the next day they would be gone: unable to keep up with the rigorous training, not good enough to keep their coach, or unable to pay for all the fees and expensive outfits. She couldn't blame them for any of that.

So now, it was better to maintain relationships with people she could trust. Who would never leave. And essentially, that meant only Cam.

“Sure. Of course.”

She couldn't ignore the subtle pitch to his voice. He didn't understand. She knew his type. He was the kind of guy who had a million friends he could barely keep track of. Everyone wanted to hang out with him because he was fun. When he was growing up, every kid wanted to be at his birthday parties. He was the popular kid at school whose mom participated in every bake sale, who made costumes, and was a lunch monitor. He didn't understand what it felt like to have old clothes that barely fit, or hair that was messy. She'd always been a shy kid until she laced on her skates. And as bitter as she was with her father, he always made sure her dues were paid and that she had the best outfits. It was the rest of her youth he didn't understand.

“Let me guess, you were the most popular guy at school and all the girls loved you.”

“I mean, yes. But no.”

She reached across the table to pat his forearm. “It's okay. Don't feel bad about it. Life changed for me when I started skating. I put my everything into it. I learned how to relate to people, how to make them feel important. And I mean that from a genuine place, because I knew what it felt like to feel unimportant.”

“It sounds like your dad was a good influence.”

“He was. Until he left me with her.” She ran a shaky hand through her hair. “I don't mean to dump on you. Let's change the subject because I want to know more about this place you ordered the food from.”

They chatted some more, and talking to him felt right, felt real and comfortable. Did he get her and understand where she was coming from? She liked to think so, especially when he'd let pass the no-friends comment she'd made. He hadn't embarrassed her or made her feel bad about it.

He's a decent guy. Those do exist.

Reese managed to finish her plate of foods. She offered to help with the limited cleanup, but he declined. What she really wanted to do was go home. She'd revealed too much of herself to him and she felt exposed, not that he'd blab it to anyone.

He walked her to the door.

"Tomorrow at 9 a.m.? That work for you?"

"I'll have to check my very busy schedule," she said in an attempt to lighten her mood.

"Then 9 a.m. it is," he said with a smile.

"Thanks again for dinner. The food was great."

"Well, that's what friends do. They hang out for greasy nachos. It's something we'll have to do more often."

She paused and looked at him, searching for the pity, but there was none. All she saw was the genuine warmth he'd never stopped offering her. And she couldn't help the way it made her stomach flip. He was the genuine article.

Chapter Thirteen

Reese and Grady worked out with Preston and Dylan again the next morning. She thanked them profusely for the social media shout-outs.

“You guys have no idea the impact you made,” she said as they rested between sets. She had them doing one of her workouts back from her training days, and she had all the guys sweating.

“Grady told us about it. We would love to help anytime. The clothes were amazing. I even made an order last night,” Preston said, taking a gulp of water.

Reese’s brown eyes shot open. “You didn’t have to do that. I could have given you more. We have tons of samples.”

“Nah, but I was thinking that maybe you could give some of the other guys some samples? There are a few guys who are social media savvy. If they like your stuff, you’re going to be sold out everywhere.”

“Totally agree,” Dylan added. “And another thing. Have you considered posting some of your workouts to YouTube? They’re kicking my ass right now. And people are always looking for good workout routines.”

A light bulb switched on. Sure, she wasn’t supposed to be online; John had specifically forbidden it. But...if she could come up with some professionally done workouts to post online, it may gain her some favor. She’d run it past John first. It would probably take weeks to come up with content anyway.

“That is a great idea! Thank you. If my overlord allows it, I’m going to do it.”

“And I could join you for one of those workouts,” Grady said. “You know, to give you a bit of a plug.”

Dylan and Preston exchanged looks and a smirk. Reese wasn’t sure what to make of it, but she wasn’t about to call them out and potentially embarrass Grady. “Sure. That would be cool.”

“I’d offer too, but my wife would kill me,” Preston said.

“Ditto with my girlfriend,” Dylan said. “Sounds like more of a job for the single guy around here.” Dylan pointed at Grady.

Reese had an idea what Preston and Dylan were up to, but she pretended not to. “That’s okay. I’ve got you guys working on distributing my product samples and drumming up support.”

They finished their workout and Reese thanked them again for not only allowing her to join them, but for all they’d done. As they made their way to Grady’s SUV, she could see that he had something he wanted to say. He seemed more antsy than usual, and when they got in his vehicle, he finally spit it out.

“I have an idea.”

“I love ideas.”

He cleared his throat. “My parents have a place up in Muskoka. It’s beautiful, right on the lake. My mom pretty much lives there full time now, and Dad goes as often as he can. I was going to go up there for the weekend. Here’s where my idea comes in. My sister is a social media whiz. She’s always making videos and posting them like crazy. She gets tons of likes because she’s pretty good at them. What if we get her to film our workout video? If it’s not up to snuff, you can hire a professional. But I figure it ticks a lot of your boxes. You can have your vacation and make the video.”

She pursed her lips, feeling strangely confused—not by what he was asking her, but by the feelings his offer inspired. Finally, she said “Sure. I have no idea if John will even allow

the video, but it would be fun to make. And I can get you some more samples to wear—that’s if you don’t mind.”

His face beamed. “I’d like that a lot. You’re okay with leaving Friday? Maybe coming back Monday night?”

“My schedule is pretty clear.”

“Perfect. I should probably warn you that my little sister is a superfan. She might dissolve into a puddle when she meets you.”

Reese was certain she was in short supply of those now, and it would be nice to meet someone who didn’t hate her for the whole Jennifer situation.

“That’s sweet. And since I’m staying for a few days, is there anything I can bring? I don’t want to show up empty-handed.”

“Just yourself.”

Reese managed to contain her excitement until she got into her condo. She then did a happy dance. She was going to see people, have fun, and spend time with Grady. And if she were honest with herself, it was the last part that excited her the most.

* * *

John, Daria, and Marnie were over the next morning to discuss the next steps. Daria had brought along a few boxes of samples from the men’s line, and another box of samples from the women’s line. The night before, Reese had texted Grady to ask him what size he thought his sister was. In typical guy fashion, he had no idea, and instead sent a picture of his little sister. She and Grady looked a lot alike, with the same dark blond hair and infectious smile. He’d also sent links to Jodi’s TikTok account, and Reese couldn’t deny that Jodi had some great videos.

“Before we start, I had an idea,” Reese said. “Or, rather, Grady Radcliffe’s teammate had an idea. What if I did some workout videos and posted them on YouTube? Grady’s even

offered to do one with me. You know, like a way of slowly getting back into the swing of things. And apparently, workout videos are popular.”

John narrowed his eyes, something he did when he was deep in thought. He looked over to Marnie, who made a subtle nod.

“I don’t see why not, but before you post it, let me talk to our PR team.”

“Okay. We’re going to film one this weekend. I’m going out to his family’s cottage. If we don’t use it, then I can keep it for myself, or post it later.”

“It would need to look professional,” Marnie said.

“I have someone who isn’t a professional, but she’s done some creative videos. Like I said, if it’s not good enough, I can keep it for myself.”

“Let’s say it’s a go for now, but I’ll confirm later,” John said. “And this has reminded me of something else we should discuss. Your ex-boyfriend seems to be flapping his gums about you. He hasn’t gone to the press...yet. But he’s telling anyone who will listen that you haven’t been nice to him, so he was forced to break up with you. I suppose he’s alluding to other things. That maybe you *were* cruel to Jennifer.”

Reese bit back her rage.

Bastard!

“First of all, I broke up with him. Secondly, if he...” She stopped herself. What was the point of arguing? “What do you we do about this?”

“Let me think about it. We need to come up with something before your ex does any more damage.”

“We’ll have some ideas for you right away,” Marnie added. “Don’t worry about this.”

“Now on to other business,” John said. “It turns out the unexpected publicity from Grady Radcliffe has helped immensely, as has the text messages we were able to obtain from Reese’s old phone. It seems to have silenced Jennifer for

now, but she hired representation and a real sleazeball of a lawyer, so we'll have to see what happens there. More interesting is a gossip blog that seems a little obsessed about the case. What do you know about the *Lowdown* blog?"

"I've never heard of it," Reese said.

Marnie handed over a bunch of papers. They were all stories from the blog, and they were all about her. She skimmed through them and saw that they mostly detailed tidbits about Jennifer's life. They were not flattering to the other woman.

"Do you know who could be behind it?"

"I don't," Reese said. "A guardian angel?"

"Not funny. We don't know if it's a problem yet," John said. "But we need to address it. So read over these blog posts and let me know if you can figure out who is writing them or who is feeding the information to the person writing them. These kinds of things can backfire. The last thing we want to do is gain any sympathy for Jennifer."

"I'll read them over today."

"I'm glad you're taking my advice and getting out of the city. Just remember to keep a low profile. The furor has died down, but let's not restart it anytime soon."

With that, their meeting ended. Daria hung around for Reese to sign more paperwork and to look at some color swatches. Now that the men's line had been saved, production was going to resume on the new plus-size line although a launch date hadn't been set.

"What's the deal with this blog?" Reese asked. "What is John really thinking?"

Daria shrugged. "I think he's worried that you're going to be linked to it, and that it will blow up in everyone's face."

"What do you think about it?"

"Whoever is behind it knows a lot of things. They seem to know a lot about you and a lot about Jennifer. And so far,

you're looking good, so I think John's making a fuss about nothing. But I have to ask: was Jennifer really that horrible?"

Since the scandal had broken, Reese had told Daria a lot about Jennifer. About the bullying, the relentless harassment, the jealousy. It had never seemed to end, and Daria had been receptive. A shoulder to lean on. Reese considered her a friend, but she also had to respect the fact they had an employee/employer relationship. But sometimes that line was hard not to cross.

"When she quit competing, it was the best day of my life! She was finally gone. Before that, I dreaded going to practice. And what made it worse was that we went to the same middle school and high school."

"What do you think it was that drove her jealousy?"

"Two things," Reese said. "I was more talented and that's something she couldn't accept. And the second thing was that she was so in love with Cam, and he wouldn't give her the time of day."

"Because Cam liked you," Daria said with a mischievous smile.

Reese rolled her eyes. "Cam and I were a thing for a minute. Then it was over. We both knew we weren't right for each other."

"Hmm. You both decided that? Really?"

Reese furrowed her brows. "Yes. It was mutual."

Daria gave her a long, hard, and skeptical look. "I know when it comes to Cam, you see him differently. And maybe that means you're not seeing what is really there."

Reese was genuinely confused. Sure, she knew Cam would do anything for her, but she would do the same. That's what family did for one another.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"As long as you promise not to fire me, I'll tell you exactly what I'm talking about."

“I would never fire you.”

“Then I’ll tell you.” Daria settled more comfortably on Reese’s sofa and smirked just a bit. “That man is so in love, he’d take a bullet for you. I know you don’t see it because you don’t feel that way about him. And I’m pretty sure he knows that. He’s accepted that you’ll never be together, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t still have those feelings. Trust me, if I can see it, I imagine Jennifer could see it too. I’ll bet it was even more obvious when you guys were teenagers, with all those hormones raging.”

“For starters, Cam is engaged. He’s in love with someone who isn’t me.”

“That is true. But he can still love you too.”

Reese shook her head. “This is all your romanticized imagination. Cam and I are good friends. That’s it.”

“Sure. Go with that.”

“Don’t you have to get back to the office?”

Daria checked her watch. “I do. This chat was fun. And know that I love you to death, but you really can’t see it?”

“Leave or I will fire you!” Reese said, playfully punching Daria in the arm.

“All right, I’m leaving. If I don’t see you before your getaway, enjoy your time with that hunk of a man. I hope Cam doesn’t get jealous.”

Reese shot one last look Daria’s way before she left. Reese then grabbed the *Lowdown* blog-post copies Marnie had given her. She read through the first two or three and had to stop. Dammit! It was obvious who the blog source was, and she wasn’t happy about it at all.

Chapter Fourteen

“Are you the source for the *Lowdown* blog?”
“The *what* now?” Cam asked.

Reese grabbed her water bottle and took a long swig. She’d just finished thirty minutes on the elliptical machine she’d had delivered that morning. She wiped some sweat from her brow with a towel, then did a walk around her condo to cool down. “It’s a blog that seems to know a lot about me and Jen. I mean, a ton. And the only person I know who knows that much is you.”

“It’s not me,” he said without hesitation. Cam wasn’t a good bullshitter. If he was behind it, she was certain she’d be able to tell from his voice. And since there was no pitch to it, or his signature laugh-under-pressure quirk, she tended to believe him.

“If you aren’t behind it, then who is?” she said, changing her phone from one hand to the other.

“Beats me. What is this *Lowdown* blog about?”

“Local sports gossip mostly, but it does have a nationwide following. People seem to be hooked on these blogs about us, but John is worried the tide could turn and backfire on me. Have you told anyone about this situation?”

“Devi knows everything, but that’s because I tell her. And she wouldn’t have time or want to be bothered with stuff like this.”

Devi was Cam's fiancée. They'd met in an emergency room when he'd cut the bottom of his foot wide open on a piece of glass at the beach. She'd been the doctor who'd tended to his injury and stitched him up. From that point they'd gone out on a few dates, and it progressed from there. Reese had liked Devi the minute she'd met her. She was a grounding force for him, someone to keep his calm and rooted. It didn't hurt that she was gorgeous. And she also didn't care about his fame. She loved him for his quirks and the huge heart Reese loved him for too.

"It's possible it's coming from John's people, but if that were the case, I can't see him not knowing who the leak is. He has told all the PR and marketing crew. Maybe one of them is spilling the beans. I guess I'll mention it to him."

"How have you been doing? We haven't talked in a while. Texts are nice, but they aren't the same."

She'd been keeping him updated with what Grady and his teammates had done and the workouts she'd been invited to. She tried to keep that talk to a minimum so that he wouldn't tease her about her budding friendship with Grady.

"I've really enjoyed training with the Renegades. I think they enjoy having me around. And one had a great suggestion that I start posting some workout videos online. As a way of easing back into my regular life again. So I'm going to do that, and if I get the okay from John, I'm going to post it."

"Sounds cool. If you need me to co-star in one of those workout videos, I'd be happy to."

"I'm probably going to take you up on that."

"How are you setting this all up? Did Daria find someone to take the video?"

"About that..." She cleared her throat, knowing Cam would be all over this. "I'm going to shoot the video with Grady. And his little sister is going to be our videographer. Apparently, she's quite talented."

"I see," Cam said, unable to hide the laughter from his voice. "That's cozy. And where will you take this video? Since

you have to stay out of sight.”

“In Muskoka. He’s family has a cottage up there.”

“Ahh, interesting. Even cozier.”

“Oh, stop!”

“He likes you,” he said in a singsong voice.

“We’re friends.”

“I can’t keep track of all the female friends I have who invite me to work out with them, create a charcuterie board in mere minutes, and then invite me to Muskoka to make a video,” he said sarcastically. “Wait, I forgot that he wore your workout clothes and posted that to social media. The same guy who hasn’t posted to social media in three months.”

“For the record, I would do all that for you.”

“Never! A charcuterie board? You wouldn’t know where to begin.”

She grumbled something unintelligible. “It’s strictly platonic.”

“I’m not going to fight you on it, but just be aware. A guy doesn’t shower that kind of attention on a woman for friendship. And yes, he may be a nice guy, but he has the hots for you. If you don’t like him, maybe let him know. Don’t string him along.”

Reese thought of her conversation with Daria. Had she strung Cam along? And if she had, she’d had no idea she’d even done that. She’d genuinely thought that Cam loved her like a sister or a friend. Romantic feelings had never popped in her head because she’d never had romantic feelings for him.

“I would never knowingly string anyone along.”

“Except that now you know.”

Was he trying to say something to her without actually saying it?

“Right. Well, if you’re looking for me this weekend, I’ll be in Muskoka.”

“Wait a second. You didn’t say the weekend. I assumed it was just for the day.”

“He positioned it as a vacation.”

Cam didn’t hold back his laughter now. “Man, I love you, Reese, but sometimes... Here’s some advice. Bring condoms.”

* * *

So apparently Reese was in an imaginary love triangle. Definitely imaginary, since she didn’t believe it existed. No, Cam was not in love with her. No, Grady didn’t lust after her. She vowed to stop listening to this gossip and enjoy herself as much as possible in her forced banishment. So instead, she looked through all the new samples Daria had sent over, trying to find the right outfit for her workout video. She’d also packed a box of samples for Grady’s family. She couldn’t show up with nothing.

And like Grady’s social media post, she hoped the workout video would keep her athletic line afloat. She couldn’t afford for it to go under. She had invested almost every dime she had into it. There were also other investors to keep happy. They certainly didn’t want to lose their money either. Reese was fully aware that she still had Jen to contend with. She hadn’t played all her cards yet, and in order to nullify the threat, Reese had to gain access to her old emails, something John and his team were still working on.

Reese was ready to go Thursday morning. After a quick workout and shower, she’d set her small rolling luggage and big box of samples near the front door. She’d probably packed more than she needed to, but she wanted to be ready for every situation. Between her and Cam, she’d been the planner, the organizer, the one who had everything mapped out. Cam had been more of a free spirit, the jokester, someone Reese had to keep in line.

She was everything her mother wasn’t.

The knock on her door startled her. She glanced at her watch and wondered where the time had gone. She grabbed

her purse and a bottle of water for the drive. When she opened the door, Grady had a huge smile on his face.

“Ready to go?”

“You bet. I may need some help with my stuff,” she said, noticing he only had a small backpack slung over his shoulders.

Grady’s face crunched up in confusion as he stared at her bag and box. “You know we’re only going for three days, right?”

“The luggage is for me. The box is for your family. I had some samples brought over. It’s the least I could do.”

“You showing up is more than enough. My little sister is already losing her mind.”

Reese blushed a little. She was used to the fans and people adoring her, but it felt different that it was Grady’s sister. Reese wasn’t sure how to behave long term around someone who liked her that much. Would she have to worry about making a mistake? Shattering this young woman’s image of her?

“I insist on bringing something,” she said, reaching down to grab the box. He quickly took it from her, and they made their way down to his SUV. “And you’ve done so much for me already. I can’t thank you enough.”

The drive was a little over two hours. She’d been to Muskoka once before to do some scenic promotional work, but she’d never been there for relaxation—though she wasn’t sure how relaxing it would be. Meeting his family brought on anxiety she hadn’t expected. She didn’t expect Grady to parade her around like Jordy had, but meeting new people was hard for her. No, that wasn’t right. She was good at meeting them. It was maintaining a relationship afterward. Her subconscious motto had always been not to trust people because they all abandoned her. All but Cam. He’d been the only one she could ever rely on.

She was careful to keep the conversation generic for their drive. She had way too many thoughts going through her head

about Cam and Grady, and she wanted to put it all aside. The weekend was her much-needed vacation, and after all the drama with Jen, a fun workout video and some time on the water was the perfect remedy.

“Muskoka is gorgeous, and I bet it’s a dream right now.”

“It is. I wish I had more time to spend out here, but that would mean spending time with my parents. I love them to death and back, but they’re always on my case about settling down. My older sister Sara is engaged. She’s getting married next summer, so hopefully that will keep them at bay for a while.”

She heard no resentment in his voice, not the way she sounded when she spoke of her own parents. “They want you to be happy.”

“I know. They were married with two kids by the time they were my age. Do you know how many times I’ve heard that story? About a million.”

He seemed so matter-of-fact that she didn’t read into it, despite Cam’s suggestion about condoms. He was so off base, and she knew it. Grady was clearly looking for friendship, or at least that’s what she told herself.

“I hope they don’t get any ideas about the two of us.”

“They probably will, but I’ve already laid out the situation.”

As they drew closer to the cottage, Reese let out a contented sigh. She loved cottage country and being able to get away from it all. She was a city girl through and through, but there was something to be said for the peaceful tranquility of the water and the loons hooting in the distance.

“Have you always had this place up here?”

“My grandparents bought it, long before the prices got ridiculous. My parents recently overhauled it with wall-to-wall renovations. My aunt used to have a stake in the place, but my parents bought her out. It’s not like she came up here all that often.”

“Did you come here often?”

“All the time. My mom is a history professor, so she’d be out here with us all summer. Dad is a cardiologist, so he didn’t have as much time. But nowadays, Mom only teaches the odd class when she wants, and that’s just about never.”

They turned off onto a gravel road and a few miles down it, the cottages came into view. They weren’t the most expensive ones in this area, but they were gorgeous, nevertheless. When Grady pulled into a long driveway, Reese could see the modern wood cottage in the distance with its high ceilings and huge windows. He parked and helped her with her box once again. They made it up the stone steps and inside.

“Mom? Dad?”

They were met with silence.

“Probably outside,” Grady said. “We’ll set your things in Sara’s room. She’s not coming out this weekend.”

He showed her to her room where she set down her bag. The room had a double-size bed with a white bedspread that was accentuated by the wood slats of the walls. Decorative pillows were piled high, and on the chair next to the bed were fluffy white towels. On the nightstand were some miniature toiletries as well as a small wicker basket of snacks. She’d never been treated this well at a hotel. Her delight must have shown as she exited the room and met Grady in the hallway.

“Why are you smiling?” Grady asked with a smile of his own.

“My room appears to be decked out like I’m staying in a five-star hotel.”

“Right, about that... I know I said that Jodi was a little excited about having you here. Well, my mom is too. She loves figure skating. She’s probably seen every one of your performances. So you may have two people fangirling over you. I was afraid if I told you sooner, you’d think my family was weird and wouldn’t come.”

“Not at all! I think it’s very sweet.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He led her outside and through the patio doors. Down a rocky hill was the water, and Reese could see one figure sitting on the dock. The place was picture perfect. And for a flash, she saw herself sitting in one of those chairs, with Grady sitting next to her. Also picture perfect.

“Shall we go down and meet my dad?”

He burst her daydream.

“Yes, let’s do that.”

Chapter Fifteen

Reese followed Grady down the massive rock steps to the dock. The back end of the cottage was on piles and the drop was at least twenty feet. She followed him out to the dock where an older version of Grady, with graying hair and lines around his mouth and eyes. He was sitting in his Adirondack chair, reading a book. Dr. Radcliffe took off his glasses and set down his book when he saw them approach. He hoisted himself out of his chair.

“Hey, Dad, this is Reese Beresford. Reese, this is my dad.”

“Yes, of course I know Reese. Your mother and sister haven’t stopped talking about this visit. It’s a pleasure to meet you, young lady. Just so you know, I’m the only sane one. Call me Ted.”

Reese shook his extended hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ted.”

“Where’s Mom?” Grady asked, looking around.

“Where is your mother?” he echoed with exasperation. “She’s out looking for the perfect produce stand. She wants to barbecue corn with dinner, and she hasn’t liked anything she’s seen so far. We hope she’s back in time for dinner.”

“And Jodi?”

“On her way. She’s been training all week in the city.”

“Training?” Reese asked.

“Soccer training. She’s hoping to make the national team this year.”

Reese was in awe. Every Radcliffe was a high achiever.

“Can I get you anything,” Ted said to Reese. “You’ve been stuck in a car for a few hours and probably need something to drink.”

“I’m fine, thank you for asking.”

“Well, then I’m out of ideas. Reese, make yourself at home.”

Grady turned to Reese. “We could take the boat out on the lake or walk the trail not too far from here. It’s a good workout.”

“Let’s do the trail,” Reese said without hesitation. She’d read about the trails and had brought along some hiking boots.

“Sounds like a plan.”

She ran up to her room to change and grab suitable footwear. With their hiking boots on and armed with a bottles of water, they made off down the driveway and gravel road for the trail, which was less than a five-minute walk. Reese enjoyed feeling the sun on her skin. She hadn’t been out much all summer and it showed. She felt as hollow and gaunt as she looked.

“Your dad is nice,” Reese said.

“He’s pretty boring. He’s kind of a by-the-book guy. Nothing excites him. Nothing makes him sad. Pretty much the opposite of Mom.”

“But he loves you, and he’s here.”

Grady didn’t say anything right away. The only sounds came from singing birds and the crunching of Reese’s and Grady’s feet on the gravel.

“Speaking of dads...have you heard from him? Since the Jennifer thing broke?”

I walked into that one, didn't I?

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. I’m not even sure if he has my contact information. And if he tried to get it through my

mom, she hasn't said. He's a bit old school, so he may have mailed something to my mom's house."

Grady grasped her hand to prevent her from missing the trail entrance. She jumped at the touch even though she liked it.

"This way," he said.

"Sorry, I almost missed it. Too lost in memories."

The trail was just wide enough for them to walk side by side. A gentle breeze blew through her hair, and she enjoyed the escape from the heat. The trees and all their leaves did a good job of shielding them from the sun.

"I bet if you called him, he'd want to talk."

"I'm sure he would, but I don't even know where I'd begin. There's so much hurt there. He was able to escape her, but I was stuck. He didn't offer me a lifeline, or a way out. I can't easily forget that. It was so hard to stay motivated for skating when I had a mother who didn't care. Cam and his family kept me on track."

"Why did he leave? I know it doesn't make a difference now, but I guess I'm curious."

"Where do I begin? My mother is cold. She always has been. Come to think of it, I've never seen her cry. Nothing fazes her. At least that's the front she puts up. And my dad was warm, a cuddler, wanted family nights and to hang out and play board games. My mom wanted her private time...all the time. So I guess he figured that when I turned eighteen, I was old enough to take care of myself. Little did he know that I would end up taking care of her. I used my first endorsement deal to pay off her mortgage and her car loan. After that, she expected me to pay at least half her bills. I finally put my foot down and told her she'd have to pay her bills and do something with her life. My dad's alimony payments were only going to take her so far. To make a long story short, he couldn't live with her anymore. And the second I got my chance to leave, I was gone too, once I had enough money to

support myself. To think I stuck it out with her almost four years after he left.”

“I would be pissed off he left too.”

Reese took the opportunity of a short pause to change the subject. “But enough about me. Tell me about you. I’m guessing you don’t have a girlfriend?”

Did I just ask that?

She wanted to give herself a head slap. That was not the segue she was looking for. Her damn mouth started speaking before her brain had time to catch up. She took a quick, pensive glance at him, but the placid expression on his face told her that the question didn’t seem to bother him.

“No, that’s why my mom gives me so much grief.”

“Yeah, I figured, that’s why I asked,” she said, trying to cover her gaff.

“I was dating someone back in Philadelphia, but she hated how much I was away. Road trips, you know? And she didn’t want to spend summers here, so we fizzled out. Nobody since. But aren’t you dating someone? Jackson or something like that?”

“Jordy.”

“Right.”

“How did you know that?”

He took a long swig of his water. “I googled you once I figured out who you were when you came my door, you know, freaking out about the music.”

Oh God.

“Right, that.”

“And it came up in my search.”

“Well, I broke up with him.”

Grady’s blue eyes opened wide. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“It needed to happen. I was going through the worst moments of my life, and he wanted me to go to a party with

him. We certainly didn't have the same priorities."

"I'll say. Probably for the best."

"You can say that again."

Grady's phone chimed. He pulled it out of his pocket and took a quick read. "It's my mom. She's summoning us back."

The timing couldn't have been better. Discussing Jordy was the last thing she wanted to do. They jogged back to the cottage, catching their breaths as they walked up the stone steps. Grady was reaching for the door when it suddenly swung open. Julia Radcliffe was standing there, the biggest smile on her face. Her deep blue eyes seemed to be smiling at Reese as she stepped forward and hugged her.

"Hello, Reese! We are so happy to have you here! When Grady told me he'd invited you, I was over the moon. You are a national treasure! And that sweet Cam! You two are the best figure skating pair of all time."

"I don't know about that," Reese said, her cheeks flushing in embarrassment.

"You both are! And such a gorgeous pair. And a silver medal in your first Olympics? You made the country proud."

"Mom, you need to get a grip."

"Oh, you," she said, swatting her son out of the way. She then grasped on to Reese's hand and led her into the house. "I know I shouldn't ask this, but I can't help myself. Is Cam secretly your boyfriend?"

"Mom, I need to cattle prod you," Grady said from behind them.

"Shush. Is he?" Julia asked, leaning in and whispering to Reese.

"He's not. He never has been."

"I knew it!"

"You did not!" Grady said. "You were convinced they were secretly married."

Julia stopped and turned to stare at her son. “Don’t you have something to do?”

“No. Because right now I’m scared of leaving you alone with Reese.”

“You probably don’t know this, but I’m a huge skating fan,” Julia said, leading Reese into the dining room. There she had set up a teapot and coffee carafe. Next to them was a plate of various cookies and another plate of what looked like lemon poppyseed cake. “Please sit. Coffee or tea?”

“Tea would be great.”

“You pulled out the fine china?” Grady said incredulously.

“All right, I’ve had enough out of you, Grady. Your father needs help hauling firewood. Take your time.”

Reese tried not to giggle as Grady reluctantly left. Once he was gone, Julia motioned for Reese to sit at the table and poured her a cup of tea. Reese took a piece of lemon poppyseed cake, wondering how Julia knew that it was her favorite. On further thought, she hoped it was a coincidence, because if she’d found that out, what else did she know about her?

“I am just mortified about what is happening to you. That Jennifer woman should be sued for slander. Her story isn’t even believable. I’ve been reading that she’s doing all this to gain publicity for her skating academy.”

Reese broke a piece of poppyseed cake. “I really don’t know, and I haven’t seen or heard from her in years.”

“She’s not a nice person.”

“I think that maybe she’s a desperate person.”

Reese enjoyed her lemon poppyseed cake and listened to Julia’s theories. While she still didn’t know much about Ted, she could see that he was very different from his wife. Julia definitely had more personality.

“About Grady,” Julia said, pouring Reese another cup of coffee. “Are the two of you dating? My son is being cagey.”

Reese smiled behind her teacup. She could see why Grady would be cagey. “We’re just neighbors. And friends.” She paused for a moment. She liked the way *friend* sounded.

“He’s saying the same thing. It would be great having you as my daughter-in-law.”

“Oh my God! Are you trying to scare her away?” Grady said, standing next to his seated mother. “Please don’t scare her away.”

Julia pursed her lips, annoyed that her son was back so quickly.

“I was just pointing out how nice it would be.”

“I think Reese would like to get settled before dinner. Maybe relax a little and not be interrogated.”

Julia rolled her eyes. “I suppose I should get started on dinner. Your sister will be here soon.”

Julia rose and walked into the kitchen. Grady turned to Reese.

“Hurry, get away while you can!” he joked.

Reese stood up and squeezed his forearm. “Thanks for the save. I think I will go get freshened up. Thanks again for the invite.”

“Don’t thank me yet. You haven’t met Jodi.”

Chapter Sixteen

Reese had curled up on the big bed for a few moments. She hadn't expected to fall asleep, but the next thing she knew, some sort of commotion was happening in the main area of the house, and a quick look at her watch told her almost two hours had passed. She sat up and wiped the sleep from her eyes. After a yawn and a few stretches to iron out the kinks, she headed to the bathroom to take a quick shower. She changed into something more suitable for lounging by the lake than her hiking clothes, a pink skirt that showed off her toned legs, and a white-and-pink tank top that showed off her equally toned arms. She made her way to the kitchen and adjoining sunken living room to find Julia there with a girl she assumed to be Jodi.

"Mom, I came straight from training. You knew that. By the time I got to the bakery, it was closed. They close early on Fridays, so I went to a grocery store and picked up a cake."

"There is no way I can serve that! It's store-bought."

"So is a cake from a bakery."

Reese gently cleared her throat and both women turned to face her. Jodi's deep blue eyes widened while Julia threw on a smile she hadn't been wearing a moment ago.

"Reese, we didn't wake you, did we?" Julia said, stepping away from her daughter and walking Reese's way.

"Oh no. I didn't even realize I'd fallen asleep. You must be Jodi?"

Jodi pushed past her mom and gave Reese a hug. She was at least four inches taller than Reese, with long blond hair pulled back sleekly into a ponytail. A huge grin beamed from her face as she stepped away, her eyes surveying Reese as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"I am so excited to meet you! When Grady told me you were his neighbor, I was going to start stalking you. Okay, that sounds crazy. Not stalk you, but totally try to meet you. I mean, you and Cam are legends! The greatest of all time."

"I wouldn't say that," Reese said, trying not to blush. She knew she and Cam were good, occasionally even great, but greatest of all time? Many would debate that.

"Beijing? Come on! People still talk about it. That performance...totally hot and totally amazing!"

"Stop crowding our guest," Julia said with a frown. She then turned to Reese. "I hope you're hungry. We'll be eating in about twenty minutes. Grady said you have no dietary restrictions, is that correct?"

"I'll eat just about anything."

"Wonderful. Jodi, go find your father and brother and try to round them up."

"Why don't I come with you?" Reese suggested. She wasn't sure she wanted to be alone for another Julia conversation. While she liked Grady's mom, she could do without another round with her.

Jodi beamed and grabbed Reese's arm. "Sure. They're probably at the dock. Dad likes to fish, although he hasn't caught anything in years."

They stepped onto the deck that had been rearranged since Reese had taken her nap. The umbrella was up on the large patio table, and five place settings had been set. The barbecue was steaming, and Reese's mouth watered at the smell of roasted potatoes in what must have been garlic. It wasn't overly hot, and the perfect day for an outdoor dinner. Reese glanced down at the dock and saw Ted still in his chair reading

a book, but this time Grady was in the water, swimming against the gentle current.

“I have to ask. Is Cam your boyfriend?”

“He is not,” Reese said with a grin. “He’s engaged and it’s not to me.”

Jodi seemed satisfied with that answer. “Okay, second question. Are you dating my brother?”

“No, we’re just friends.”

“You’re not lying, right? Sometimes Grady gets all secretive, and he almost never brings anyone here. I mean, I don’t know anything for sure, but he’s different around you. Unlike his stuck-up ex. Talk about a princess. I have no idea what he saw in her. Okay, I do know, but sex and huge boobs aren’t everything.”

Reese hid a grimace. This wasn’t the kind of conversation she wanted to be a part of.

“I’m not lying. If we ever start dating, I’ll let you know.”

Jodi stopped walking, and Reese nearly walked into her, which could have sent them both tumbling down the stone steps.

“There’s a chance?”

Reese bit her lip in consternation. She hadn’t meant to give Jodi hope. “I meant that as a hypothetical.”

They reached the bottom and took the walk along the path to the dock. Grady saw them coming and swam up to the dock’s edge. Reese tried to look away as he pulled himself out of the water, but she couldn’t. His lean body rippled from the exertion, and beads of water dripped down his smooth, toned chest. His six-pack was on full display, and it took Reese a moment to realize she was staring. He made eye contact with her and smiled before grabbing a towel he’d left on the dock.

“Mom says we’re eating soon. Consider yourself summoned,” Jodi said, reaching down to her dad and giving him a hug.

“When did you get here?” Ted asked.

“About twenty minutes ago. Mom’s pissed that I didn’t pick up the cake in time.”

“Is it someone’s birthday?” Reese asked, worried she’d be thrust into an awkward situation of not having a gift.

“No, but I think I know what happened here. She wanted to have a special cake for you, and my sister didn’t get to the bakery before it closed. Now my mom is stewing upstairs, wondering what she’s going to get for dessert,” Grady said, using the towel to dry off his chest.

Reese was watching him as though he were a master violinist the way he worked that towel over his body. She shook herself out of any impure thoughts that would come next.

“I passed by and got one from Henderson’s. They had a whole bunch of cakes.”

“The grocery store,” Grady explained to Reese. “Now my mom is freaking out, figuring how to transform a cheap cake into something nice,” he said with a sneaky grin.

“I’m about to push you back into the water,” Jodi said.

“I’d like to see you try.”

“We can make that a reality.”

Reese took it all in. Was this what it was like to have siblings? Teasing and play-fighting? If it was, she was envious beyond words. She’d always longed for a sibling, and when Cam came into her life, he was the big brother she’d been wishing for.

“Enough,” Ted said. “Jodi, go help your mother. Grady, hurry up and dry off so you can *also* help your mother. I’ll go to keep an eye on the barbecue so that your mother isn’t doing everything. Reese, don’t listen to these jokers. Just relax while we get dinner organized.”

Ted rose from his chair and slowly headed up to the deck, book still in hand. Jodi followed up behind him, no doubt complaining since Ted turned back to her once and scowled.

That left Reese alone with a shirtless Grady. She was staring at his pectorals when he spoke.

“I figure after dinner we can pin Jodi down on a time to do our video. Or would you like to pin me down?”

“Sounds good.” She paused. “Wait, what?”

Oh no! He’d caught her staring again, and this time her cheeks flushed red hot.

“My eyes are up here,” he said with a smirk.

She wasn’t sure how to play the situation, so she went with the truth. “You’re in fantastic shape. I was admiring your assets.”

Cam had always chided her on her blunt honesty. It had gotten her into trouble before. She was well aware that it was probably another one of the reasons she didn’t keep long-term friendships. She wasn’t the type to cajole. Her motto was to give the truth whether a person liked it or not. Over the years Cam had gotten used to it. Others took off without giving her another chance.

“Thanks. You’re in great shape too. Now about my sister. We’ll figure something out about the video. I think morning is best.”

“I’m flexible.”

“There’s a joke there, but I’ll keep it to myself.”

They headed back up to the deck. Reese helped Jodi bring out food while Grady went inside to quickly shower and change. He returned just as Ted was taking the steaks off the barbecue. As they sat down to dinner, Reese was worried she’d feel uncomfortable during the dinner conversation, but she fit right in, chatting about sports, the weather, the amazing dinner Julia had prepared, and Jodi’s training schedule. Reese was happy that Jennifer and the scandal she’d created didn’t come up.

Reese helped clear away the dinner plates, while Grady and Ted worked on washing dishes. It was a Radcliffe rule that whoever cooked, the other cleaned. Reese liked the rule as she

put away leftovers in the containers Julia had provided. Jodi set up new plates and utensils for dessert and got the coffee started.

Once the dishes had been dried and put away and the coffee had finished brewing, they settled again outside. The gathering felt more informal now. Grady sat on one of the patio sofas while Jodi sprawled in one of the loungers. Ted passed around cups of coffee while Julia plated the chocolate cake. Her face was marred with disdain as she distributed the store-bought confection. Unsure of where to sit, Reese chose a chair to Grady's.

“What do your parents do?” Ted asked Reese, then stabbed his fork into his cake.

“My father is a structural engineer, and my mother works part time as a florist.”

“They must be so proud of you,” Julia said.

“Are we having a bonfire tonight?” Grady asked.

Julia seemed surprised by the sudden change of topic, while Reese felt her heart warm. He would know that the last thing she wanted to talk about were her parents.

“We could. Or tomorrow night. Is there a rush?”

“Probably not. We want to sit down with Jodi and talk about our workout video in the morning.”

Jodi jumped in. “I’m not a professional videographer,” she said. “I’m good, but I don’t want to make promises.”

“This is a test run anyway, so please don’t feel pressure. My agent hasn’t approved me posting it yet,” Reese said.

“That reminds me,” she said, her steely blue eyes coming alive, “Grady said you’d bring your medals for us to see.”

Grady and I exchanged a look and he shrugged sheepishly.

Gold medals? This was news to her. He’d never mentioned it.

“No, I didn’t say that. That conversation never happened.”

“You said you would ask her.”

“I did not,” Grady said.

“I asked you to ask her. You said you would and didn’t think it would be a big deal.”

“That’s not what I said. I said I’d ask because *asking* was no big deal.”

“Did you even ask?”

Reese’s head was spinning from all the back-and-forth, so she decided to step in. “I forgot them,” Reese said. “I’m so sorry, Jodi. It totally slipped my mind. But I’ll bring them next time. Or if you’re ever visiting your brother, you can come by my place. But I did bring something.”

She got up and retrieved her box, and Grady got up too.

“I’ll help you,” he said.

Once the patio doors were closed behind him, he thanked her. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I’m not sure I wanted to see another Radcliffe spitting match.”

“I did forget to ask. And it’s really not a big deal. If you have them somewhere safe, don’t pull them out for my sister.”

“It’s not a problem. I’d be happy to show them to her.”

They returned with the box of samples. Jodi’s face lit up when she learned the contents. She nearly jumped into the box, rifling through the tops, shorts, leggings, and accessories. Ted picked out an outfit, and Julia chose something for herself and for Sara too. A few items were left over, and Reese could see that Jodi wanted them but was too polite to ask for more.

“Why don’t you take these last few things,” Reese said. She had no intention of hauling anything back.

“Are you sure?” Jodi asked, nearly vibrating with excitement.

“It’s my way of thanking you for the being our videographer.”

“This is amazing. You are amazing.”

That statement should have sent Reese over the moon, but if history told her anything, she couldn't get too attached to the Radcliffes, because like all the other people in her life, they could easily leave too.

Chapter Seventeen

Reese was up first thing in the morning. Even years after retiring from skating, her body was conditioned to get up early for practice. Even if she went to bed late—and that was rare—her brain kicked in to wake her up between five and six in the morning.

She climbed out of bed and watched the beginning of the sun rise over the water from her bedroom window. The Radcliffes had a wonderful place, and she could see herself sitting out on the deck, reading a book, or taking a swim in the water. The place was heaven.

She got dressed and quietly headed down the hallway to the kitchen. She figured she'd get coffee started, but Julia was already there, putting some into a filter.

“Good morning,” Reese said.

“Good morning to you too! You're also an early riser?”

“My body doesn't know what sleeping in is,” Reese said with a smile.

“Well, we can enjoy the quiet time. I'm making coffee. Would you like some breakfast?”

“I'll start with coffee.”

Julia set the coffee maker to start and grabbed two oversized mugs. Even though Reese had declined food, Julia arranged some fruit on a plate.

The coffee finished and they went outside to watch the last of the sunrise. Reese took one of the many comfy blue plush

chairs and cradled her mug of coffee. The day was already warm, and she took a few breaths, relishing her surroundings.

“This place is gorgeous and peaceful.”

“You’re welcome to come any time. I spend more time here than Ted does because of his work, but we’d be happy to let you and Grady have the place to yourselves.”

Reese’s head snapped in Julia’s direction. “Grady and I aren’t dating.”

Julia smirked. “Come on, you two aren’t fooling anyone. I’ve seen the way you two are around each other.”

“We aren’t dating,” Reese said as seriously as possible.

Julia’s gaze narrowed. “I know he doesn’t like telling us about new girlfriends, especially when they’re as famous as you are. It’s okay, I can play along.”

Reese gave a slight shake of her head. “We really are just friends. I wouldn’t lie to you about that.”

She wanted to add that she’d said that the first time Julia had asked, but the realization was finally sinking in.

Julia frowned now. “But I just assumed...”

“Grady has been very kind, that’s all. I just got out of a terrible relationship, and with everything’s that’s going on in my life right now, dating is the last thing on my mind.”

Julia seemed to reluctantly accept that. “I suppose maybe it was also some wishful thinking on my part. You would be lovely for him. He’s had a string of girlfriends I could have thrown off our dock! He’s such a sweet boy and sometimes these girls like to take advantage. It drives me crazy.”

“I’ve made my fair share of bad choices too.”

“I can always hope for your friendship blossoming into more,” she said with a twinkle in her blue eyes.

“He’ll find the right woman,” Reese said, hoping not to disappoint Julia too much.

“I hope so too. And it’s nice that’s he’s closer to home now, but I worry about the pressure.”

“Pressure?”

“It’s a hard town to play hockey in. It’s like the smallest fishbowl, and sometimes he lets all that pressure mount until he can’t cope. I’m not saying he has a nervous breakdown, but he starts to lose his focus and get very anxious, and his play suffers. And now that he’ll be the hometown boy, I can’t imagine what that will be like. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you about pressure,” she said, sipping her coffee and sighing.

This insight into Grady’s life made Reese pause. She hadn’t known Julia all that long, and here she was confiding in Reese. Her body flushed in warmth that Julia liked her, respected her, and most of all, trusted her.

“I do know all about that. I do yoga and Pilates and a lot of breathing exercises. And it’s good to talk to people,” Reese said. “Sometimes Cam and I talk for hours, just to process, you know?”

“Grady has a ton of friends, but I don’t think he has someone to bounce problems off of. But I know I can’t interfere. I need to mind my own business, but that doesn’t mean I can’t worry.”

The patio doors slid open and Jodi stepped out, yawning as she came toward her mother and Reese.

“I wondered where you were,” Jodi said to her mother.

“We were enjoying this beautiful morning.”

Jodi didn’t seem to think much of that. “Yeah, I guess it’s nice out.”

“It’s so nice having Reese here,” Julia said, patting Reese on the arm.

“I’m glad Reese is here too, but I’d like to leave in the next hour to start filming. We don’t want to be doing it in high heat.”

“Right. I’ll go get ready,” Reese said. “Thank you for the coffee, Julia.”

“What about breakfast?” Julia asked.

“We can’t eat a huge breakfast before a workout, but we’ll be back in a few hours,” Jodi said over her shoulder as she headed back inside. To Reese, she added, “I’ll go wake up my brother. Meet me out front in forty-five? And I don’t think I need to tell you how to play to the cameras.”

“I’ve got that part figured out,” she said with a laugh. “Meet you here in forty-five.”

They went their separate ways, and Reese took a long shower and dried her hair. She gave it some curls and tied it back in a neat ponytail. The curls in her ponytail would give her effortless bounce. She then put on her stage makeup. Despite the heat of the day, she would need to look good, but natural onscreen. She kept it simple and fresh and then put on her workout gear. Since she’d retired from competition, she’d kept up a strict exercise regime, mostly out of habit, although she loved the sweat and burn. It had also been a way to forget about the world at those times.

She made her way to the front entrance and found Jodi waiting with Grady. They appeared to be in a deep discussion that abruptly ended when Reese appeared. She hadn’t heard any of it, but she could only assume it was about her.

“We’re ready to go,” Jodi said. “And I have just the place.”

They walked to the end of the property and along the quiet road to the opening of a trail. Jodi led the way, with Grady and Reese following closely behind.

“There’s a great spot here. A little lookout point that’s rarely used. There are some benches there, just like you’d asked for,” Jodi said to Reese. “We’ll film a bunch of scenes and then I can put them together. The point is to make it as casual as possible. And if you flub something, that’s okay. People love that. It makes you look like a normal human being.”

“I’m thinking we do a fifteen-minute video?” Reese asked. “Short and simple, but a great workout that doesn’t require any equipment.”

“Sounds perfect,” Grady said with a smile. Before filming, Reese outlined the workout and showed Grady all the exercises. He knew most of them, but they did a little practicing. Reese understood now why Jodi wanted to get an early start. The sun had risen high in the sky and the temperature was steadily rising with it. They needed to get started.

They started with their warm-up exercises, and Reese put on her friendliest smile to explain why they needed to warm up and what could possibly happen if they didn’t do one. She didn’t want to sound preachy, and it was nice when Grady jumped in to agree with her. They were off to a good start even if they had to do a few takes.

They moved on to some flexibility exercises. Reese started off easy at first, but when she did the splits, Grady let out a loud whistle.

“Sorry, not that flexible,” Grady said. “But damn, you are!”

“Flexibility comes with time,” Reese said. “The more you stretch and work on your flexibility, the quicker your body responds. But it’s also important to listen to your body and never go beyond its limits.”

She then moved on to core exercises and showed her invisible audience how effective a workout could be without any equipment.

“Reese likes to do push-ups, so I propose a push-up contest,” Grady declared. “Who can do the most in one minute.”

“Are you sure you want to do that? I could probably wipe the floor with you.”

“No way. Let’s do this!”

“Ready? Go!”

Reese was pretty sure he was going to do more push-ups than her. And he did, but only by six. His blue eyes were wide when Jodi confirmed the number.

“Man, Reese, you really can kick my ass. Guys twice your size can’t keep up like that.”

They ended the workout with some final stretches and signed off.

“That was a ton of great footage,” Jodi said as they walked back to the cottage. “People will love it! And I should have the edited copy done in a few hours.”

When they got back to the cottage, Jodi went one way, and Reese and Grady went another.

“How about breakfast? I’m starved,” he said.

“I’m hungry too.”

Julia was in the kitchen, putting out platters piled with pancakes, bacon, and what looked like a cheesy hash brown casserole. “I went all out,” she said. “I’m sure you were working hard. Where’s your sister?”

“Editing the video,” Grady said, taking one of the seats and piling his plate full of food.

“I’ll go get her. You guys dig in.”

Reese made a plate of her own, but not nearly as tall as Grady’s. She pointed to the coffee maker, and he nodded. She poured two cups and brought them over.

“That was fun,” he said.

“Really?” she asked, tearing a piece of pancake with her fork.

“I don’t normally do workouts like that. I could definitely feel the burn. Now I understand why your partner is so in shape.”

“He does more weight training. He did have to lift me, after all.”

“I’m sure that was a piece of cake.”

“I don’t know. Maybe you should try throwing me up in the air or over your shoulder.” She immediately stopped. Why had she said it that way? She never flirted.

“Maybe one day I will,” he said playfully.

She tried not to blush. Why was he so adorable and fun to be around? There had to be something wrong with him. And then it hit her.

Grady Radcliffe was trouble, and she knew it.

Chapter Eighteen

Jodi's finished product was amazing. No, beyond amazing. Not only was the video informative, but she'd used all the fun elements of Grady and Reese joking around with each other. She'd added some music and sound effects, along with funny visuals. Jodi had a future as a videographer if she wanted, Reese was certain of it.

Jodi had sent it the morning after Reese and Grady got back to Toronto. Reese sent the finished product to Cam, Daria, Marnie, and John. Cam was the first to message her back that he loved it along with a googly-eyed emoji. He wasn't getting off the Grady love match yet, so she ignored it. John called an hour later, just as Reese was rifling through her fridge and putting away the groceries she'd ordered from a service. She wasn't ready to face the public just yet.

"The PR and marketing teams loves it," John said in his gruff voice. "We are going to go ahead and post it. The language will be generic and fun, and I'll have Daria run it past me before she posts. We'll see how this plays out. If people are receptive, I have an idea, and before I tell you about it, I want to run it past PR. We'll be in touch."

And just like that he hung up.

An hour later, Daria texted to let Reese know she'd shared the video and had tagged Grady, as per John's instructions. Reese had been careful not to check her social media accounts since the Jen scandal, but she ventured on to some of her accounts. She promised herself she wouldn't read the comments; she'd merely check out the engagement.

The second she opened any of her social media apps, she was inundated with notifications. She wanted to throw her phone down and not keep looking, but she couldn't help another peek at the notifications. Good notifications! Did she dare read some of the comments? She closed her eyes and thought about it. Of course there would be bad ones. There was no getting around that, but to see a few positive things? And then she had an idea.

You home?

Grady replied almost immediately.

Yup. Just watching TV.

Can I come over? I need your help with something.

Sure.

She threw on her sandals and jogged next door. Grady already had the door open for her. She handed him her phone.

“Can you read some of these comments? Good and bad, but not the really horrible ones.”

Grady's eyebrows furrowed. “What am I reading?”

“Daria posted the video. I think people like it, but I want you to read the comments so I don't get upset at the really bad ones.”

“I see. I'm your filter. Okay, let's see.” He skimmed the comments and nodded a few times.

“Well, are you going to tell me?”

“I can, but they all sound the same.”

“Good or bad?” Reese asked, feeling the dread setting in.

“I'd say ninety-five percent good. And most of the comments say that we make a cute couple.”

His lopsided grin and shrug told her that he was just as perplexed by those comments as she was.

“Cute couple? Did Daria imply we’re together?” Reese said, grabbing her phone and reading through the original post. There was nothing there to suggest it.

“Nope. I’m guessing people assumed it. I mean, I’m cute, you’re cute, and two cute people equal a cute couple.”

He may have seen this positively, but she didn’t.

“I’m sorry, Grady. That was never the intention. And I certainly don’t want the stink of my scandal on you. Maybe I should put out a statement. Of course, I’d have to run it past John,” she said more to herself.

“It’s not a big deal. We can both come out and state we are just friends.”

That made sense, but why did it stab at her heart just a little?

“Right. Of course. We should do that.”

“There are a few shitty comments, trolls saying you’re doing this to help your image. Though, I suppose they’re right, so I’m not sure why that’s a big deal. Overall, I think we did what we needed to do.”

Reese grinned. This was what she needed. “If you’re up to it, I’d like to do another of these videos. Maybe a whole bunch? And I would pay your sister for any of the videos, and I’d pay you for your time as well. You both shouldn’t be doing this for nothing.”

“I’m pretty sure my sister would do it for free, and I know for a fact that I’d do it for nothing. I’m not hurting for cash. And I loved doing that workout, so maybe you should be charging me instead. Besides, this is the kind of thing friends do for one another.”

A thought occurred to her. “I could do a few of these videos with Cam. Everyone loves Cam.”

Grady smiled thinly. “Sure, of course. That would be cool too.”

She glanced at him and saw a fleeting moment of disappointment, but he covered it up quickly. “But you are still

my number one with these videos. I think you're more the star than I am," she said.

"Nah. They want to see you."

He read off some more of the comments, but before he got the idea of making her a ten-course meal, she headed back to her place.

"Workout with the guys tomorrow?" Grady asked, walking Reese to the door.

"I have a meeting from hell with John in the morning. Could we do the day after?"

"Sure."

She headed home feeling good about her situation. She was on the road to rebuilding what she'd lost, and she had Grady to thank.

* * *

John, Daria, and Marnie showed up before Reese had even put on the coffee, and she was an early riser. They sat around her large kitchen island while she pulled out mugs, cream, and sugar. Daria had a folder in her hand, and Marnie was setting up her laptop. Everyone seemed to be preparing for something.

What is going on now?

Reese poured the coffee and took a seat herself. She was trying to read their faces, but Marnie was focused on her computer screen, Daria was shuffling through papers, and John had on his resting stone-cold face.

"The video was a success. Daria has all the stats, and it seems the response was overwhelmingly positive. Of course there were a few people who were negative, but the stats indicated that those numbers weren't out of whack. We would like you to do another of those videos with Grady, maybe a few more. We'll hire a professional videographer and select the right clothing for each one."

"I have a videographer."

John pursed his lips. “While the quality of the video was sufficient, we need a professional. I understand Grady’s sister did the video. I’ll make sure she’s taken care of and that we find some other opportunity for her.”

That didn’t satisfy Reese, but she’d let it go for now. “I was thinking of doing a video with Cam.”

“Yes, that would be fine. But I think people really responded to Grady,” John said, his tone dismissive. “Daria is going to set up locations, a videographer, and all the other details.”

“Will I have any input?” Reese asked, sipping her coffee.

“Yes, of course. Daria will coordinate it all with you. Now on to other matters. We have been discussing what to do with the Jennifer situation. We’ve been throwing around a lot of ideas these past few weeks, and we think the best way to shut her up is with a lawsuit.”

Reese nearly spit out her coffee.

“Lawsuit? No way!”

Marnie looked up from her laptop and slowly shut the lid. “It’s not the best solution, but it would make her rethink any next move. Based on the evidence we have and the statements we’ve taken, we believe a lawsuit would make her take pause. She also can’t afford to fight us.”

Reese thought of Jen’s kid. She may have hated everything Jen had said and done, but it wasn’t her kid’s fault. “What if we do some sort of mediation with her? Why do we have to go straight to a lawsuit?”

“To frighten her to stop. If we can get all the emails and texts, she’s sunk. A lawsuit usually gets people back in line.”

Reese didn’t like this side of Marnie.

“I prefer mediation. Maybe if we talk this through with her, explain the situation to her, she’ll back down and retract. Lawsuits look ugly, and don’t we want to rehabilitate my reputation?”

John's jaw tensed, but he nodded. "Yes, we do. We'll discuss this further. But we need to neutralize her soon. And that brings me to the last thing I wanted to talk to you about."

Something about his tone put her on guard. "Okay," she said cautiously.

"We need to work hard to give you that squeaky-clean image again. Right now, people are on the fence, not sure if they should trust who they thought you were or trust what Jennifer is saying about you. It doesn't help that your idiot ex-boyfriend has been making the rounds. I've had a few people tell me that he's talking about you at golf tournaments, fundraising events, any place he can get his sorry ass invited to. Thankfully, he hasn't gone to the media. I needed to come up with a solution. So that means we need to get you a boyfriend. Of course, we would have liked that person to be Cam, but he's engaged, and I don't think he'll call off his engagement for this endeavor. So I have the next best person in mind."

Reese hated Jordy now more than ever. No doubt he was dropping her name to get invited to all these functions. But the horror of what John was suggesting was sinking in. A fake boyfriend? The thought of having to pretend to care about someone. No! She couldn't do that.

"I don't like this idea already. Is this some person I've never met? That I need to trust? No, this is a terrible idea."

"You don't even know who it is. He's not only beloved, he's currently single."

"I'm a firm no."

"I haven't told you his name."

"The answer is no."

"How about I tell you who it is first, then you decide."

"You can tell me the name, but I'm still a no."

"Grady Radcliffe."

Chapter Nineteen

Reese wasn't sure if she loved or hated the idea. Sure, she trusted Grady and she did know him, but taking this kind of step? Pretending to be his girlfriend? And for how long? Did he even know about this little scheme John had cooked up? And what would he gain from it? Reese saw no upside for him.

"Have you told him about this?" Reese asked.

"I discussed it with him briefly last night. And before you ask, yes, he was receptive to the idea, but he told me to talk to you about it first."

Reese closed her eyes and tried not to smile. Even though she hadn't known him long, it was typical of him to put her first. "I don't understand. I see what I get out of this. A super nice guy with a ton of fans who is dating the pariah. I get how that helps my tarnished image, but what about Grady? What does he get?"

John shifted a bit in his seat. Reese didn't understand why this was making him uncomfortable.

"He gets two things: One, he's going into the last year of his contract. The higher his profile, the more attention he receives. The more attention he receives, the more he gets paid. As for the second reason, Grady has a reputation for being a bit soft. We think that dating you would show that he's hardening up."

Reese wrinkled her nose. In amongst all that was a carefully worded insult. "That doesn't sound positive at all!"

Are you suggesting that he'd *harden up* because I'm so cold? Or because of my recent scandal?"

"A bit of both," John said diplomatically.

Reese wasn't sure what to do with that. "Basically, I'm bad cop to his good cop."

"Not necessarily," Marnie said, jumping in again. "You had a massive following before this unfortunate incident happened. And a lot of those people still love you. Think of you and Grady more as a power couple."

Reese paced the condo, absorbing all of this. It wasn't adding up. "But we aren't a couple. I'm not sure I can pull it off."

Daria smirked but said nothing.

"If what we saw in the workout video is any indication, you'll have no problem with it," Marnie said. "Our PR team is going to come up with a few ideas for photos to post to social media. And when the time is right, we want the two of you to go out to dinner, hang out in more public places, that kind of thing. Have a dinner party with friends. You know, what couples do. Like what you and Cam used to do on the ice. We want people to start speculating before we make it official. The point of this exercise is to divert people's attention from the whole Jennifer situation."

"And you think that will work?"

"I'm certain it will work," John said. "Daria is going to contact you in the next few days with some ideas. When the time is right, we launch our campaign."

"And how long do we have to keep this charade going?"

"I'm not sure. Until the Jennifer issue is settled."

"Settled? Is that days, weeks, months? I need something definitive."

"We don't know," Marnie said. "Ideally, a few months. But as we all have learned, Jennifer can be quite unpredictable."

"A few months? Of pretending to be Grady's girlfriend?"

“What’s the big deal?” Daria said, jumping into the conversation. “He’s gorgeous and the two of you obviously have chemistry. It’s all over the video.”

Why were they all ganging up on her?

“Fine, I’ll mull this over. Can we move on?”

They wrapped up and Reese showed them out. She checked her watch and knew that Grady wouldn’t be home from his workout yet, so she called Cam instead. Since they’d retired from skating, he’d started working for his father’s construction business. Cam served as his accountant, a degree he’d worked on all throughout their skating careers.

“Hey, Reese. What’s up?”

There was a heaviness in his voice, as if he was either tired or had the beginnings of a summer cold.

“You okay?”

He sighed. “Just tired. It’s been a long day.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

He hesitated for a moment. “Nah. It’s not important. How about you?”

She gave him the rundown of the entire conversation, and when she got to Grady, Cam let out a long whistle.

“It is a good idea, and it makes sense. Plus, the guy does have the hots for you.”

Reese groaned. “I almost considered not telling you because I knew you’d start in on that again.”

“I can’t help it, but I think it’s the right way to go. And maybe you’ll realize that you actually like him back.”

“Would you stop already!”

“I want you to be happy,” Cam said, the tone of his voice growing more serious. “Grady seems like a legitimately nice guy, and I think you’ve got to give him a chance. And what better way to do that than to have a fake relationship? You can try him out, see if you like him. You never know, right? And if

you don't click with him, you end it with no hard feelings since there wasn't a relationship in the first place."

He was giving her a lot to think about. But even though he was convinced that Grady had a thing for her, Reese wasn't so sure. She wasn't about to let herself get mixed up in another dead-end relationship. She'd learned her lesson with Jordy, and right now what she needed most was a break from men, even the ones who appeared to be good guys.

"And you're sure you're okay?" she asked, pressing again. Something wasn't right. She knew Cam better than anyone else in her life, and he sounded down.

"It's nothing. I promise."

"You're not having problems with Devi, are you?"

"No! Everything is fine."

She wasn't convinced, but she knew she wasn't going to get anything else out of him. She'd save her interrogation for another day.

* * *

Reese didn't want to be pushy and barge over to Grady's apartment, so instead she did a workout in her living room, then took a shower. She glanced over at her tablet and bit her lip. She hadn't wanted to do it before, but now she discovered that she had newfound confidence and flipped open her tablet and checked out what people were saying about her on her own social media pages. She wasn't brave enough to venture into the realm of the worldwide web just yet. Not that she thought her own social media pages were safe spaces.

She read through the comments she knew that Daria had been through. Daria had been keeping a close eye on everything, and if she saw anything questionable, it was reported or deleted. How Daria kept up with all this, Reese didn't know. But as she scrolled through one comment after another, she saw something that stopped her dead. One person was asking about Reese's relationship with Grady and another

person suggested they check out the *Lowdown* for more info. Reese followed the link provided and was brought to the latest post on the blog.

She sipped her water as she read through it. Whoever was behind the blog seemed to know a lot. They'd figured out that Reese had gone up to Muskoka to the Radcliffes' place based on the backdrop of the workout video. They knew that Reese and Grady lived next door to each other and that someone had seen them leaving the building together. The blog's author was convinced that Reese and Grady were dating.

Reese sat back in her chair and pondered this. Could she use it somehow? She texted Daria a link to the blog and asked just that. Daria would take it to PR and ask their opinion, she knew that much. In the meantime, she wanted to talk to Grady. They had a lot to discuss.

Chapter Twenty

R Reese spent the whole day thinking, and before she knew it, it was early evening. After making a boring salad for dinner, she thought about texting Grady. Would it suddenly be awkward? If she agreed to do this fake relationship with him, would their budding friendship be blown to pieces because they were now trying to pretend to be a couple? She couldn't stop thinking about all this when her phone buzzed and nearly sent her off her chair in surprise.

How you doing today?

Did he know she was thinking about him?

I'm good. I know John talked to you. You sure you're okay with this fake boyfriend/girlfriend thing?

Totally. But if you want, we can talk about it.

She took a minute to think about that, those feelings of awkwardness resurfacing again.

Sure. Do you want to come here?

I was just making something to eat. How about you come here?

Okay.

She went to change into something nicer than the old pair of shorts and ratty T-shirt she was currently wearing. She grabbed a bottle of Riesling on her way out the door. Maybe if she positioned it as something they could celebrate, it wouldn't seem so strange. When she got to his door, it was ajar and she let herself in. Grady was in his kitchen, a blue apron tied around his waist as he mixed something in a pot. As she got closer, she could see it was penne in boiling water.

“You hungry? Because I made extra.”

She thought about her lousy salad. “I could eat. What are you making?”

“It's sort of made up. It's a pasta dish with marinated artichokes, kalamata olives, and Parmesan cheese with a drizzling of olive oil. It tastes a hell of a lot better than it sounds.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Nah. It's super simple. But you can pour that wine you brought. What's the occasion?”

“Our impending relationship. Didn't you hear?”

He laughed and she couldn't help but smile. “Right. John mentioned it last night. He probably gave you the same speech he gave me. Something about helping each other out. I said I'm in. It's not like either of us are attached, so no one is getting hurt.”

He pointed to where he kept the wineglasses, and Reese poured two glasses. She set his down next to his cutting board of artichokes and olives.

“I suppose, but we may have to pour it on thick sometimes. Will that be weird?”

“We can think of it as a performance. Besides, we're already friends, and we're getting to know each other. And I figure we can make this fun if we want to.”

Did she say what she was thinking? No, she could save that for later. So far, the conversation hadn't given her any

uncomfortable feelings, and she certainly didn't want to bring them in now.

“What you're doing for me is huge. But I'm not sure you're really getting much out of it. I asked John, and he mentioned something about going into a new contract. That can't be enough for the risk you're about to take.” And she certainly wasn't going to mention the other reason John had given her.

“Either people haven't told you about my 'soft' side, or you're doing a really good job at pretending not to know,” he said, sipping his wine.

She bit her lip, trying valiantly not to laugh. “Okay, I may have heard someone mention it. But am I worth the risk?”

She didn't like how that came out. She hadn't meant to say it that way. The fact she felt she was such a liability wasn't good for her confidence.

“Of course you are. Trust me, this arrangement is mutually beneficial.”

He poured off the water from his cooked pasta and set out two bowls. He then doled out the artichokes, olives, and some freshly grated Parmesan cheese. He added the pasta and a generous drizzle of olive oil. The dish made her mouth water.

“Enjoy,” he said, pushing the bowl toward her.

While she liked all the ingredients, she wasn't sure how she felt about them all being together, but one bite had her sold.

“Oh my God, this is amazing!”

“I came up with it one night. I was starving and just started putting ingredients together.”

“Where did you learn to cook? You know just how to pair things. If I don't follow a recipe, my food is inedible.”

“I'm far from an expert, but I learned a lot from my grandma. She was a master of throwing things together. She had a huge garden up at the cottage, and when it was time for harvest, she didn't want anything to go to waste. I really liked

helping her, so that's how it all started. Maybe one day I'll show you how to can vegetables."

Reese gasped just a little. "You know how to do that?"

"Yup. And it's easy. I can teach you on one of our fake dates. Who doesn't want to can tomatoes and beets, although both get kind of messy."

She rolled her eyes but still smiled. "I'm up for the challenge. I'm not one to back down."

"Good. And maybe I can give you some recipe ideas. I love cooking. I find it relaxing. I also love cooking and listening to music, but I try to make sure the music isn't too loud," he said with a wink.

Reese covered her face with her hands. "I can't believe I marched over here and yelled at you for that. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. Look, a friendship blossomed out of it."

"I suppose."

"And then John made sure a fake relationship blossomed." He paused for a moment. "We'll probably need to navigate this whole relationship thing over the next few days. John said that his PR team and your assistant would be part of it. Sounds very romantic."

Reese giggled. "So romantic!"

"I'm sure we can figure out part of it on our own as well. We are adults, after all."

"I think so. We're both responsible adults too. And just so you know, I really owe you one for this. You've done so much for me."

Grady smiled, that boyish grin that made him so adorable. "I know you probably don't believe this, but you've done a lot for me too. The workout video was great for both of us. I'm well aware of my reputation, and I know I need to give the impression that I've toughened up. And at the end of the day, everyone thinks you're pretty cool, a woman who can easily stand up to the pressure and perform. Maybe some of that will rub off on me."

“There’s a lot to be said for standing up to the pressure, and I’ve worked on my mental game for a long time, but...it’s easy when you don’t let the emotional side in. And that may have been the best and worst thing I’ve ever done. Other than Cam, I don’t let people get close. And when they do get close, most of the time I freak out and retreat. Cam never let me do that with him, so I’m asking you for something really important.” He nodded, keenly aware that she had something difficult to say. “I don’t want you to let me do that either. I don’t want to lose this friendship we have, because I know you’re an amazing person.”

His blue eyes were trained on her, but she had no idea what was going on in his head. Had she said too much? Asked too much?

“You’re amazing too.” He held his hand out to her. “Let’s shake on our new arrangement and to a wonderful lifelong friendship.”

“I say we drink to it too!”

They finished their meals and retreated to the sofa with two full glasses of wine. Reese was determined that they finish the bottle, but she still wanted to keep her wits about her. As they sat there, a random thought occurred to her, and before she could keep it from exiting her mouth, the wine did the talking.

“So, your mom mentioned that you had a crappy ex too.”

Grady let out a deep breath. “Yeah, her name was Michelle. I met her at a bar. That was my first mistake. She was with some friends, and I was with some of the guys. We got to talking and she seemed sweet. I got her number and called her a few days later. It was okay for the first few months, but she was the jealous type. I couldn’t talk to a woman without her freaking out. Turns out Michelle was very insecure. Then she started calling me ten or fifteen times a day. And then the texting started. Sometimes I’d check after practice, and I had thirty texts from her! It got distracting for my game. When I tried to break up with her the first time, she got so emotional and wouldn’t stop crying. And being the

softie that I am, I tried to make it work. I finally broke it off with her a month before I was traded. She kept calling me, trying to get back together...so I changed my number.”

“You didn’t!”

“I know it’s awful, but I needed her to leave me alone, and talking it out with her wasn’t working. I’d never done something like that before, but this was an exception.”

“You had an ex who wouldn’t leave you alone, and I had one who barely wanted anything to do with me.”

He sipped his wine and furrowed his brows. “I don’t get that guy. I love spending time with you. You’re a lot of fun. He was the one with the problem.”

Reese thought about that as she stared into her wine. “Honestly, I don’t get that a lot. People initially want to be around me because of who I am, but then most fade away. I assumed it meant that something was wrong with me.”

He patted her hand gently, and for a second, she was sure he was going to grasp on to it, but he seemed to think better of it. “There is nothing wrong with you. Your ex was an idiot.”

She glanced over at him and that’s when she saw it. The look. She closed her eyes to mentally clear her head.

“He was a lot of things,” she said way too cheerfully.

“Don’t let him get in your head. He’s not worth it. Remember that you’re special.”

Her breath hitched. She knew if she looked at him again, her thoughts would lead to a place she didn’t want to go, so instead she downed the rest of her wine in one gulp. “I should head out,” she said, getting up and heading for the kitchen. She deposited her glass next to the sink and headed for the door. “Thanks for this. I had fun, and it was a great talk.”

“Sure, anytime,” he said, sounding surprised.

“I’ll see you soon, fake boyfriend,” she said, ignoring his disappointment.

And with that, she got out of his condo as soon as she could.

Chapter Twenty-One

As Reese's team worked on the next steps, Reese worked out with Grady, Dylan, and Preston. She shoved the feelings she was having aside and instead formulated workouts and even did one with Grady in her living room as well as one with Dylan and Preston at the workout facility with the videographer Daria had found. She hadn't posted anything yet, waiting for the go-ahead from John.

And then the call came. It was time to put Operation Fake Relationship into effect.

"Tonight is your debut," Daria said. "You're going out to dinner with Grady. I've already made reservations for seven at Maurice's, that hot new place downtown. I've tipped off a few people, so look your best because people will be taking pictures. And that workout you did with Grady in your living room? I'm also going to post it this afternoon. It's looks great, and very cozy. Make sure you and Grady look cuddly tonight. Definitely hold hands, but nothing over the top. Got it?"

"Got it," Reese said, noting that John had made her his little soldier. Daria was almost starting to sound like him too. "Anything else?"

"We are going to wait a few weeks before confirming the relationship. We want it to get more buzz."

"I do have a question for you, though. What if this irritates Jen? Has John considered that?"

"About that..."

Reese padded over to her bedroom, looking through her closet for something to wear while she waited for Daria to get on with it. She'd heard of Maurice's. It was a trendy spot, but nothing too fancy. She chose a maxi dress she'd never worn, along with a pair of cute sandals. She'd pair it with a nice purse.

"I'm waiting," Reese prodded.

"John's got the legal team involved. I know you didn't want that, but don't worry. It's more about mediation than litigation. I guess he figures that's not the same thing. He'd love for this to go away without getting ugly."

"You're not lying to me, right? It *is* mediation?"

"Yes. He really wants to make her go away and work on getting your reputation back. Her lawyer sounds like a jerk, but I don't know what the endgame is. Maybe money? I know he's got people looking into her past, all on the down-low. He's looking for a weak spot. If I know John, he's going to start a media campaign, and that why he's starting with this relationship with you and Grady. He wants you to have some good attention."

"I guess, but it's going to be weird pretending to be in love."

"I've seen Grady. It shouldn't be hard."

"Whatever."

"You can *whatever* me all you want, but the guy is eye candy. And he seems like a decent guy. He can't be any worse than Jordy."

"That may be true, but I'm happy being single."

"If you say so. Make sure you give me all the details about your big night later."

Reese rolled her eyes. She couldn't figure out why Daria was pushing for this. "Does Grady know about this date?"

"Yes, I left a message and he confirmed with a text. So have a nice evening."

Reese checked where the place was. It was walking distance, but she knew it was better that she and Grady showed up in a car. It also made it easier to escape if need be. She showered and got ready, putting on a light layer of makeup. After all those years of competing, she was sick and tired of makeup, especially the stage kind. She only wore makeup when necessary, and tonight was necessary.

She texted Grady an hour before the reservation. He texted her back a moment later to tell her he'd be ready to go and that he'd be driving. She did one more check of her makeup and outfit, then took a quick peek at social media. Like Daria had promised, she'd tipped off the town gossips about a possible budding romance between Reese and Grady. And there she was. A picture from happier times, post world championship, and a picture of Grady from one of his hockey games.

Are they dating? the headline read. Rumor has it that Reese Beresford and Grady Radcliffe are seeing each other exclusively. Sources say sparks flew when he moved in to her building. We will have to see if the Bully Queen and the Hockey Hunk have found love.

Reese groaned. *Bully Queen?*

Reese frowned. She'd always hated being called the Ice Queen for the obvious double meaning, but Bully Queen? She had more work to do on her image than she'd thought.

She checked her watch and grabbed her purse. It was go time. She was exiting her condo just as Grady was doing the same from his. He looked handsome in a pair of blue jeans and a fitted darker blue shirt that hugged his chest perfectly. She tried not to stare, but how could she not? He was a magnificent specimen.

"Ready to go?" Grady asked with a twinkle in his blue eyes.

"I think so. Can I admit that I'm a little nervous?"

"Me too. I feel like we are being put on display, but if we act natural, it should be fine."

“What if I burst into a fit of laughter?” she asked as they walked to his car.

“Then I’ll start laughing, and whoever is there taking pictures will think we are either crazy or in love.”

“I guess either option is okay.”

They drove out of the underground parking garage and Reese could feel her nerves tick up. She was always good under pressure, but something about this was different. She didn’t like playing this game, but at the same time, she did like spending time with Grady. She pushed those thoughts aside. She had to think of this evening as a performance, and she’d always been good at performing.

“Did you tell your parents about this?” she asked.

“I sort of fibbed and told them we were actually dating.”

Reese’s jaw dropped. “But why?” She immediately thought of Julia and how excited the news would make her.

“My parents aren’t good at keeping secrets. The minute they know something, they feel a need to tell other people. I figured I’d tell them we were dating. How about you?”

“I haven’t told my mom yet. I was going to wait and see how this played out. But Cam knows.”

“He’s like a brother to you, isn’t he?”

“The best brother a girl could have.”

“I can see that. You trust him a lot. It’s good to have someone like that.”

“I’m sure you have a million friends like that.”

“I have friends, but none like that. You’re lucky.”

She looked at him then, but he didn’t return her gaze. He simply kept on driving right into a parking spot on the street near Maurice’s. Reese didn’t think that Grady was jealous of Cam. No, it was deeper than that. It was as if he longed to have a friend like Cam, and this surprised her the most. She’d always assumed that people gravitated to him, that he had close friends. Millions of them.

“You ready?” Grady asked. “No going back now.”

“Let’s do this.”

With one deep breath, she got out of the car. Should she reach out for his hand as they walked to the restaurant? She wasn’t sure, so she did nothing at all. Instead, she walked close to him, keeping a small smile on her face as they talked about the weather. It was a warm evening, but not too hot. And as they neared the restaurant entrance, she was sure she saw someone snap a picture.

“Ladies first,” Grady said.

“Why thank you.”

They stepped inside and the hostess raised an eyebrow when she saw them. She pasted on a fake smile and asked if they had a reservation.

“It’s under Grady Radcliffe,” he said.

Reese couldn’t tell if he was playing along with the hostess who clearly knew who they were, or if he was genuinely being polite.

“Right,” she said, checking her computer screen. “Come with me.”

She proceeded to seat them in the middle of the restaurant. Was that intentional on the restaurant’s part, or had Daria asked for that? Reese decided to stop thinking about that and took her seat across from Grady. The hostess handed them their menus, went over the wine and food specials, and was gone.

“That was easy,” Grady said with a nervous smile. “Now what?”

He was nervous too?

“We act natural?”

“Why do I feel like a zoo animal?”

“Because this is probably the most wide-open table in the joint?”

He laughed at that. “Okay, let’s make the most of it.”

Reese ordered the scallops risotto and Grady opted for the steak. They each ordered a glass of wine, and Reese tried not to glance around. Her focus had to be on Grady. She was supposed to be in love, after all.

“It’s nice to be out. This is the first time in a very long time.”

“Sorry about the circumstances.”

“No worries. I’m enjoying the company.”

“Should we pretend to laugh? Or is that too much?” Grady asked.

“Might be too much. Let’s just be ourselves.”

“Good idea.”

Reese grabbed a roll and slathered it with butter. Grady did the same and they munched on their bread before making eye contact. And then they both erupted into spontaneous laughter.

“Okay, we need to up our game,” Reese said. “We aren’t acting naturally, so I’ll start. How was your workout today?”

“Good. It was leg day. The guys want to know if you’re coming tomorrow. Preston said he’s been working on his flexibility but needs some new exercises. The guy bores easily.”

“I’d love to. And you can tell Preston I’ve got a ton of exercises I could show him. The usual time?”

“I think so. I asked them about doing another video, and they like the idea. And I was thinking, there’s a team mixer coming up. They do that before the season. Do you want to be my date?”

“I probably should be. I *am* your girlfriend.”

That twinkle in his eyes was back. “Right. You are. And my mom has invited you back up to the cottage. I didn’t give her an answer because now that she thinks we are dating,

she'll expect us to share a room, and I don't want to make it weird for you."

Reese dabbed her lips with her napkin. It was more a stalling tactic than anything else. "The time up at your cottage was amazing. So if you want to go there, I'm all for it. And I don't mind sharing a room with you. I did it plenty of times with Cam when funds were tight and we didn't have extra money to spend on separate rooms on the road. It's really no big deal."

"Then let's keep that option open."

Their server came around with their meals and they enjoyed them slowly. Reese had him try her risotto and she tried his steak. When they were done, their server asked if they wanted dessert.

"I saw the death by chocolate cake on the menu. Want to share?" Grady asked.

Reese beamed. "I would love that."

The server returned with their dessert, two forks, and two coffees. Reese savored every delicious bite. Despite being on full display, she had enjoyed her night, right down to the perfect dessert.

She tried to pay the bill, but Grady insisted on covering it. As they left the restaurant, he took her hand in his. It felt like the most natural action. Once again, she thought she heard the snap of cameras, but she couldn't be sure. She also didn't care. It may not have been a real date, but it had been the best date of her life.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Reese woke up the next morning and checked her phone. She had a few messages from Daria with links attached to the *Lowdown* and various gossip blogs. They all had pictures of her and Grady from the night before. The captions didn't say much other than to speculate that Reese and Grady were dating. Reese waited until she'd showered and made her morning coffee to call Daria.

"It went perfectly," Daria said. "We couldn't have planned it any better."

"What is our next step?"

"We're going to keep everything low-key. If anyone asks if you're dating, you're going to deny it. We want to keep people guessing and focusing on anything but Jennifer."

"That's all fine, but any ideas on when I can go back to work? I'd really like to be focusing on Crush right now."

"I know you're itching to get back. Let me talk to John. He'll probably want to run it past PR."

Reese was tired of hearing about PR, and she was wondering what all these outside parties were costing her. She'd thought to ask, but she knew she needed them, whatever the cost was.

"Fine. Let me know."

Reese finished her coffee and got ready for her workout with Grady and the guys. She was ready to go when Grady

texted her. As they walked to his car, she asked him if he'd seen all the gossip.

"I saw it this morning. Daria sent it to me. I guess she's trying to keep me in the loop."

"What do you think?"

He shrugged. "I think we make a cute couple."

She slapped him on the arm. "I meant about the reaction."

"Right, that," he said and chuckled. "It seemed positive."

"I'm not sure I like my new moniker. Bully Queen just doesn't have a nice ring to it. Hockey Hunk, on the other hand..."

"I feel very objectified," he said, trying to keep a straight face.

She rolled her eyes and got into his car. "I think you'll survive."

They got to the team practice facility, finding both Dylan and Preston inside, already working on some stretching exercises Reese had shown them.

"If it's not the lovebirds," Dylan said with a playful smile.

"All right, you're not going to be doing that, are you?" Grady said.

"I can't help it."

Reese ignored it all and got right into her workout. She hadn't worked with weights in a while, so Preston offered to be her spotter while Dylan and Grady worked on the exercise bikes.

"I'm really happy you and Grady decided to try the dating thing," Preston said as Reese bench pressed her weights. "I could tell the first time he brought you here that he was interested in you. I don't know if he's told you this, but we were friends from back in our junior hockey days. I've seen him go in and out of relationships without even thinking about it, but you're different, Reese. He looks at you differently, he

talks about you differently. No pressure, I just thought you should know.”

Reese wanted to tell him it *was* different because it was no relationship at all, but at the same time it was all a bit overwhelming. She needed to keep Grady in the friend zone. “He’s a great guy, so we’ll see where this goes.” She decided the diplomatic approach was best.

“If it helps, Dylan and I think you’re pretty cool.”

“You guys are cool too.”

Once their workout was finished, Reese and Grady headed back to their condo building. She kept running her conversation with Preston through her head and hated what she concluded: Grady was too good for her.

“Does Daria have anything planned for us tonight? If not, maybe we could hang out and watch a movie?” Grady suggested.

Reese thought nothing of it at first, but then something niggled at her. Something about hanging out and watching a movie together seemed too familiar, like something a couple would do, and they certainly weren’t a couple. And the last thing she wanted was to get involved in a legitimate relationship. Life was already too complicated, and adding a boyfriend to the mix was not something that interested her, even if that boyfriend was Grady. And she knew her track record. She’d either drive him away or he’d somehow morph into someone like Jordy.

“I’d love to, but Daria has me looking over some paperwork. Rain check?”

“Yeah, any time.”

She felt bad turning him down, but it was for the best. The less attached they were, the better.

* * *

With John's blessing, Reese went into the office the next morning. She couldn't believe how much she'd missed it. She sat at her desk and let out a contented sigh. It looked just as it had all those weeks ago. The only difference was that Daria had left all the correspondence that wasn't time sensitive. Reese went through it slowly, savoring each moment. She'd barely noticed when Daria entered her office and sat down across from her.

"You know how much I love you, but Operation Fake Relationship is a pain in the ass," she said, setting a manila folder down on Reese's desk. "I get to make all the arrangements but don't get to have any of the fun."

Reese looked up at her and then at the folder. "What's this?"

"A whole list of things PR wants you and Grady to do together. They found out about his family's place up in Muskoka. They want you to go up there with Grady and do a photo shoot."

Reese frowned. "A photo shoot? With lighting and a bunch of other people?"

"I presume."

"Why are we doing this if it's all supposed to be a secret?"

Daria shrugged. "I guess to feed the trolls bits and pieces. Isn't that how marketing works with celebrities? Don't *they* feed the paparazzi?"

Reese briefly leafed through the folder. The PR team had her doing all kinds of things all over town, many of them calling for professional photographers. "Daria, be honest with me. What is this costing me? The PR team, the marketing team, advisers, and lawyers. All of it."

Daria pulled her chair a little closer, not that anyone else could hear them.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I don't want to get in trouble for this, but you should know what's going on."

Reese could feel a heavy, hard ball forming in her stomach. She didn't let nerves get to her, but she was pretty sure she wasn't going to like what Daria had to say. "Start talking," she said.

"Don't get me wrong, John hired an amazing marketing and PR team, but they are costing you a small fortune. Some of the invoices have started coming in, and, well, given the state of Crush right now, he's spending more than I think he should. All these professional videographers? It's costing you thousands when the video Grady's sister produced was just as good. The PR firm sent their first invoice this week, and you probably don't want to see it, but you're going to have to sign off on it."

Reese closed her eyes and massaged her temples. "But what other alternatives do I have?"

"I think you should take back some control from John. At least oversee what he's doing. He doesn't care what he spends because it's not his money. I think you fire the videographers and ask Grady's sister to take the videos. As for this Muskoka trip...if you go on it, take the pictures yourself. That way they will look authentic. If everything looks too polished, it won't seem sincere. And I can help you with filters. We can make these photos look great."

She was right, and Reese knew it. "I'll talk to John. I know I have to spend money to salvage my business, but I can't go bankrupt at the same time."

"Now that you mentioned him, he said he'd be by later. Which brings me to your legal fees..."

Reese put up a hand to stop her. "I can only take so much today. What if we save the legal fees invoice for another day?"

"Sure. In the meantime, I will need you to sign off on some things. That will probably keep you busy until John gets here."

The paperwork did keep her busy, and when John strode into her office a few hours later with Marnie in tow, Reese could sense something in the air that she wasn't going to like.

They took seats around her desk and were joined by Daria moments later. She had coffee and some desserts. Reese realized then that Daria needed a raise—that was if there was any money left.

“The relationship with Grady is having the desired effect,” John began. “The social media response has been positive, and our PR team says that the metrics are looking good. So we are going to continue in that direction.”

Reese held up a hand. “Since I’m now in the office, I’ve had time to check over invoices and related paperwork. I’m going to be straight with you: the cost of the campaign is staggering. John, I can’t keep paying these bills when my business is on life support.”

John scowled momentarily but collected himself right away. “I understand there are some costs associated with what we are doing, but it’s all necessary.”

“We are going to have to bring costs down. I’ve done some research of my own, and I’ve found some savings. I’ll supply you with a more detailed report tomorrow, but if you want me to go to Muskoka to perpetuate this lie some more, I can take my own damn pictures with Grady. And if I can’t, I’ll find someone who can. And I’m going to approach Jodi Radcliffe about being the videographer for future workout videos. She did a great job and I’m sure she’d be less than half the price.”

“I understand you want to cut costs—”

“I want the videos and pictures to look authentic.”

“All right. If you insist, I can concede that point.”

“I’m also going to have Daria look into some cost-cutting measures. That means she won’t have every waking minute to monitor my social media pages. Before you volunteer the PR firm at a gazillion dollars an hour, I will take on some of my own social media. It’s not like I have anything better to do.”

“But if you—”

“I know. If I say or do something stupid, you’ll kill me. It won’t happen. I promise.”

John appeared to ponder all this. “Fine. I won’t argue with you about this. Now I’d like to get to the topic I came here to discuss.”

Reese braced herself. He was using his very serious voice now. “I have a feeling I’m going to want to duck for cover.”

“It’s about Jennifer.”

The hard ball in her stomach seemed to have instantly sprung painful thorns. “Go on.”

“She seems to be threatening to release more damaging emails and text messages. Our lawyers have told her lawyer that we have obtained all the text messages and emails from your phone even though we still haven’t done that. For some reason, she seems to be angry about something, and she wants to retaliate.”

“It’s Grady. That’s what has set her off. She doesn’t want me to be happy.”

“Whatever the case, our lawyers informed her lawyer that if she releases any more texts or emails, that we will release some of our own. That seems to have gained us a reprieve.”

“That’s good. And are we making progress on the emails and text messages?”

“Yes. Our tech guy thinks he can download them all. Then we’re going to have people go through them.”

Reese could hear an imaginary cash register cha-chinging all these new bills. “I could help with that. Again, it’s not like I’m busy. And since I was on the receiving end of these emails and texts, it will be easier for me to go through them.”

“We will keep that in mind. But that’s not all. We have one more problem. Josh Semple has been sniffing around.”

“The Josh Semple from the *Gazette*?”

“The same. He wants an interview with you, and it appears he’s been digging around. He’s doing some sort of piece on this whole fiasco. I told him that you’re not doing interviews right now.”

Reese wanted to crawl under her desk. Josh Semple did not like her. He thought figure skating wasn't a sport. He didn't believe that figure skaters were true athletes. That the whole sport was corrupt. And on and on.

“This is horrible.”

“I'm going to see what I can come up with. I'm pretty sure he's no friend to us, but I wanted to make you aware. To counteract anything he may come up with, I'm in the process of negotiating an interview with Kasey Belmont. You'll be a guest on her morning show, and I'll book you a few other spots. But that's not for a while. We still need to get you back in everyone's good graces. In the coming weeks we'll be doing some interview prep. Keep that in mind.”

He rattled off some other information, but her mind kept going back to Josh Semple. If he was doing a piece on her and Jen, there was no way in hell that Reese's reputation was going to survive it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Since Grady wasn't busy, Reese asked him if he'd be willing to hang out with her at the park near their condo building. She wanted to take some selfies to post on her social media accounts later. He jumped at the opportunity and asked if he should wear some of his Crush gear.

"Maybe too obvious and pushy," Reese said. "Something casual. I want us to look carefree and in love."

"Sounds good. Meet you in the hallway in a few minutes."

Reese chose a pink-and-white summer dress and put her hair up in a messy bun. She threw on some makeup—she was going for a natural look—and grabbed her phone before meeting Grady in the hallway. He was looking handsome, as always, in a pair of khaki shorts and a polo shirt that hugged his chest and arms perfectly.

"Want to grab some drinks on our way there?" he asked.

"Sounds like a great idea."

They hit the small coffee shop across from the park. Reese had gone there a million times before, but now with Grady in tow, it seemed different. Most of the baristas knew her but had never been pushy or acted silly when they saw her. But she was walking in with Grady now, and she had no idea if that would change things.

One person was ahead of them, and when it was their turn, the barista barely batted an eyelash.

"I'll have a cold brew," Reese said.

“Make it two. I got it,” Grady said, pulling out his wallet before she had a chance to grab hers.

A few other people were in the coffee shop, most of them at small tables, their heads buried in laptop screens, but two young girls sitting in the corner were watching them and giggling. Reese pretended not to notice when one pointed her phone at them, clearly taking photos. This was what Reese wanted, even though it was a massive invasion of her privacy.

Walking across the street to the park, they scoped out some places to take candid—and not so candid—shots. They chose a park bench near some flower planters. It was a lovely backdrop and Reese took a few pictures of the two of them. She then took a shot of Grady drinking his cold brew, making sure the coffee-shop name was hidden. She could hear John’s wrath if any name had been visible.

“What about a pic of us holding hands. You know, just a pic of our hands.”

“I like that,” Reese said.

They took those and a few other pictures before sitting back on the bench and feeling the warm August sun on their faces.

“It’s a gorgeous day,” he said. “But I hate August.”

Reese arched a brow. “Why do you hate August? What has it ever done to you?”

He gave her a half smile. “August makes me think of September. And September is a bigger bummer than August.”

“I’m really baffled, so you better start explaining.”

He chuckled at that. “I didn’t always hate August and September. They used to be cool. It would be a time to go back to school and see all my friends, but then, as I got older, it wasn’t cool or fun anymore. Pressure started setting in. Unlike my two brilliant sisters, I wasn’t the smartest kid in the class. I really struggled with some subjects. I’m sure I had more than one teacher who could have failed me, and it began to stress me out.”

“I bet. That would cause anxiety, but you’re such a smart guy.”

“Not so much. Not like the rest of my family, so it’s a good thing I had hockey. Until it wasn’t. When I made junior, it meant leaving home, so not only was I a shitty student, I was leaving my comfort zone. I used to get so anxious, I’d throw up. It wasn’t until the end of September that I’d be able to get into the groove and set all the anxiety aside. I think that’s why I still get nervous. I have irrational thoughts about training camp and not making the team.”

Reese grasped on to his hand and squeezed it gently. “You are going to make the team. The papers say you are the second coming! Why are you even doubting that?”

“It’s the anxiety talking. Sometimes it’s hard to turn off those negative thoughts. Doubt sets in.”

She thought about what his mom had said. Did all this factor into game play?

“I don’t know how you feel about this, but have you considered talking to someone about these thoughts?”

“I am. To you right now,” he said with a mischievous smile.

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“I know,” he said. “I did see a therapist when I was a teenager. It did help. My dad thought I should go on anxiety meds, but my mom was against it. I stayed out of the whole thing. But some of the guys...”

He stopped. Reese watched him intently, waiting for him to continue, but something was holding him back.

“Some of the guys what?”

“They find other ways to cope. And I don’t want to gossip.”

“You don’t have to tell me, but I can assure you I wouldn’t breathe a word to anyone. And I don’t even want you to tell me their names.”

He looked straight ahead, an almost vacant look in his eyes. “I never want to get that bad, you know? Where I’m taking drugs or drinking to cope. Some of those guys don’t even realize they are ruining their lives.”

“Is that something you’re worried about? That you may resort to that?”

“I don’t think so, but the pressure can be...smothering.”

“If this is something you ever want to talk about, call or text me anytime. I don’t care if it’s three in the morning. If anyone knows pressure, it’s me. I can relate to this. And if it makes you feel better, I’ve done therapy too. Especially after my dad left. I was so hurt and betrayed. There were times I contemplated quitting skating. But I had Cam, and he would talk me through it. I want you to know that I can be your shoulder to lean on. We all need and deserve someone like that.”

He sighed. “I’m supposed to be tough. Above this.”

“You’re human. And if people don’t like that, they can screw off. And know that anything we talk about will be in the strictest confidence.”

“I know that. I trust you.”

“Have you considered meditation?”

“Some of the guys do that,” he said.

“We can do it together. It’s amazing for stress.”

He placed an arm around her shoulder and pulled her in close. “This is the best relationship I’ve ever had. Fake or real.”

“Ditto, Radcliffe.”

“When this is all said and done, you promise we’re staying friends?”

“I’d have it no other way.”

* * *

With Grady's permission, she posted one picture of them doing a selfie together and one picture of just Grady. It was a profile shot of him reading a dedication plaque in the park. He looked focused, his square jaw tensed just a little. Reese didn't stick around for the comments. She was always too afraid of seeing some of the nasty ones, but Daria confirmed later that most of them had been positive.

Reese showed Grady the next day when he came over for yoga and meditation. He smiled when he saw the picture of himself.

"I look good," he remarked.

"If you say so yourself," she said with a smile.

They did a full session of yoga and completed a short fifteen-minute session of guided meditation. Reese had an app she liked to use, and they both stretched out on their yoga mats and followed the soothing voice of the instructor. When Reese sat up, she realized that Grady was so relaxed, he'd fallen asleep.

She quietly made her way into the kitchen and put a kettle on for tea. She liked to have tea when she finished mediation, and this was a relaxing blend of chamomile and citrus she'd gotten from a tea shop a few blocks away. She let the tea steep and peeked into the living room to see Grady still stretched out on the floor, peacefully asleep. Part of her wanted to curl up next to him, but she shook the thought from her head.

She grabbed the two steaming mugs and headed for the living room. She set them down gently and pulled out her phone. After a quick check of her social media pages, she wondered if she should cover him with a blanket, but just as she was reaching for the quilt on her sofa, his blue eyes shot open.

"Did I fall asleep?" he asked, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"That happens. Meditation can be very relaxing. A lot of people use it for insomnia."

"I feel really good right now. Totally calm."

“That’s the idea,” Reese said with a wide smile. “I made some tea. It’s a blend for relaxation.”

Grady took his mug and sniffed it. “Smells good. And I’m going to need the name of the app we just used. I think it could help me wind down after games. Sometimes I’m so hyped up I can’t sleep.”

“It will definitely help. I’ll text you the link.”

Grady sipped the tea and smiled. “It tastes good. I’m going to need the name of that too.”

“I’ll give you some to take home.”

He was about to say something when their phones both lit up with a text message from Daria.

“I dread this,” Reese said, grabbing her phone. She did a quick read. “Looks like she wants us to orchestrate another cute photo. Any ideas?”

“Yeah. Why don’t you come out to my parents’ place this weekend? Dad is stuck at the hospital and my mom will only be there on Saturday. We could hang out, take some really great shots of nature, and meditate.”

“Our own version of Netflix and chill.”

What did I just say?

He cleared his throat and hid a smile. “Yeah, kind of. You up for it?”

“I’d love to.”

“Then make sure to bring your hiking gear. We are going to have a jam-packed weekend. And one of the guys has a place nearby and he’s having the mixer I was telling you about. We could check that out.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“I think we’ll have a great weekend.”

Reese was nervous about it, but she wasn’t about to back out.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Reese made blueberry muffins and brought along some gourmet coffee beans as a hostess gift for Julia. She hated showing up empty-handed.

When they arrived at the cottage, Julia was weeding her two flowerpots on either side of the front steps, seeming to love every second of it. Reese had a passing thought of her mother's vast hoard of flowerpots that were more important to her than anything else during the summer months. She waved when she saw them drive up.

"You picked a perfect weekend to come up here," Julia said, giving each of them a hug. "The weather is going to be gorgeous! And as a bonus, you'll have the place to yourself tomorrow evening. My friend Cathy is throwing herself a retirement party. No one wants to drive home after having a few so I'll spend the night at her place."

Reese couldn't imagine Julia having one drink, let alone several.

"Thanks, Mom," Grady said.

"I want you lovebirds to have some romantic alone time."

Reese could feel the heat rising in her cheeks. She could see why Grady would let his parents believe the relationship was real. For one, Julia wanted it so badly. But more importantly, if she did know the truth, she'd likely spill the beans. At the same time, she felt sorry for Julia. She did want this so badly, and when the truth came out...well, Grady would have to deal with the disappointment.

“I brought some muffins and coffee,” Reese said.

“Wonderful. Let’s enjoy that now.”

They followed her inside and Julia put on a pot for coffee. She couldn’t stop smiling, and Reese wondered if she’d be boasting about her son’s new relationship to all her friends. Reese was pretty sure that was going to happen.

“We thought we’d do a hike later,” Grady said.

“That sounds lovely. You should do that before the heat starts. Then a swim in the lake to cool you off. After that, I can fix you both some lunch.”

Grady tried not to roll his eyes. “Okay, thanks, Mom.”

“In the meantime, why don’t the two of you settle into your room, and the coffee will be ready by the time you get back.”

Reese followed Grady into the room she would share with him for at least one night.

“You can take the spare room tomorrow night,” Grady said. “And if you want, I can sleep on the floor tonight.”

Reese looked at the queen-size bed. “Not necessary. We’re adults, and we can share a bed.”

“Good, because the prospect of sleeping on the floor didn’t appeal to me,” he said with a grin.

After dropping off the muffins, they changed into their hiking gear. Grady grabbed two bottles of water and they set down the street toward the path.

“I don’t need bear spray, do I?” Reese asked.

“I hope not. I’ve been coming out here since I was a baby, and no one has ever seen a bear roaming around too close. And the rules around here are strict about garbage, so we should be fine.”

The heat of the late morning had set in. Within minutes, Reese could feel her clothes sticking to her, but the trees kept them shielded from the direct sun. It was lovely, and Reese took a few pictures for social media. She had Grady pose for a

few pictures and when they came to a clearing along the lake, Grady suggested a break. They sat on a huge rock cliff and took in the beauty of the water.

“This place is gorgeous,” Reese said.

“It’s peaceful,” Grady said, passing a bottle of water to Reese. He twisted off the top of his and took a long drink. “Mom and Dad were thinking of selling, but my sisters and I convinced them to hang on to it. We agreed to bring our own families here when the time comes and keep the place in the family. Who knows if that will work, but we’ll try.”

“That’s a great idea.”

“And you’re welcome to come out here anytime,” he said, glancing over at her.

“Thank you. I may take you up on that.”

They finished the five-kilometer hike and headed back. It was a good workout, but Reese needed some relief from the heat.

“How about a swim?” Grady asked.

“That would be refreshing.”

“And by the time we’ve cooled off, Mom will probably have lunch ready for us.”

“She’s going to spoil me.”

Grady laughed. “I think that’s the idea.”

Reese changed into her bathing suit first while Grady made small talk with his mom. When he’d changed, they grabbed some towels and headed down to the dock. She tried not to stare at his shirtless body, but she couldn’t help it. The man was an Adonis.

“Race you to the water,” Grady said, taking off at a run. He’d caught her daydreaming.

Grady had a head start and beat her to the dock. He did a cannonball and thundered into the water. Reese jumped in close behind. The cool water was a rush of relief. When she surfaced, he was a few feet away from her.

“The water is great,” she said.

“Warmer than the beginning of summer,” he said.

Reese did a slow lap back to the dock and Grady followed. She climbed up the dock steps and sat on the edge, letting her feet dangle in the water. Grady joined her, staring out at the water.

“I love this place,” Reese said. “I could stay here forever.”

“We can stay longer if you want. I don’t have to be anywhere, and I’m pretty sure you don’t need to be anywhere. And we can probably do some pretty good workouts here.”

“We could, but I’m starting to get back to work. And I think John wants us to be seen. Besides, don’t you have training camp in less than a month? Preston mentioned that you guys will be working out every day.”

“I can miss a few days.”

“Let’s play it by ear. Maybe we can stay a few extra days. I will have to clear that with John.”

Grady rolled his eyes. “John can be a real pain in the ass. And a buzzkill.”

They dried off and headed back to the cottage. As Grady had predicted, Julia had a spread of sandwiches and two different kinds of salads. One was a lettuce salad, and the other appeared to be tomatoes, onions, and feta cheese. Reese sat down and dug into both salads and took a half sandwich of what appeared to be turkey, cheese, and various vegetables. Everything tasted delicious.

“Tomatoes from the garden,” Julia said. “We have a ton of them back home, so I brought some here. I’ll be making salsa with the rest. Have you canned before, Reese?”

“Never.”

“If you ever have some time, I could show you. I think it would be fun. Did Grady tell you he cans? Learned from his grandma.”

“Mom, I’m pretty sure Reese doesn’t want to can with you.”

Reese laughed. “I would love to. Text me and we can set up a time. I love learning new things. And Grady could come along too.”

They finished up lunch and Reese helped Grady put the leftovers away and then tackle the dishes. Julia was stepping out to meet up with friends for the afternoon. She appeared to have quite the social circle, keeping herself busy. She grabbed her bag and bid them adieu.

“So now what do we do?” Reese asked. “We’ve done a hike, had a swim, and we’ve eaten lunch. Is there anything else?”

“We could go to town. There are some neat shops. Maybe stop for ice cream. There’s a great shop that has the most amazing chocolate-peanut-butter sundae. Then tonight we could sit by the water or make some s’mores in the firepit. Or we could do nothing at all.”

He was babbling and she found him adorable. “I like your first plan better.”

She quickly showered and changed into a pair of shorts and a simple tank top. She put on a straw hat she’d paid a small fortune for at a boutique in Los Angeles after she and Cam had won their last gold medal. As ice-skating darlings, they’d been tapped to do some talk shows. She been wandering the shops around their hotel and seen the hat in the window, loved it, gone inside, and before she knew what she was doing, she was handing over her credit card for the two-hundred-dollar hat.

Reese took her sunglasses, small purse, expensive hat, and phone for their trip into town. Grady had showered in his parents’ bathroom and was waiting for her near the front door.

“We need to drive. We could walk, but it would take a while and we’d die of heat exhaustion before we got there.”

Fifteen minutes later, they were in town, trying to find a parking spot on the busy main street. Grady eventually found

one a few blocks away. The sidewalks were packed with tourists and residents, but Reese didn't care. She was certain no one would recognize her, and Grady was inconspicuous too in his baseball cap and sunglasses. What caught her by surprise was when he grasped on to her hand. She liked the feel of his calloused hand in her soft one. She was sure he was simply playing the game of acting like her fake boyfriend.

Right?

"I don't want to lose you in the crowd," he said causally, as if reading her mind.

They stopped in almost every shop. Reese bought some handmade greeting cards and a body lotion. Grady stopped at a bakery and grabbed some cinnamon buns and apple turnovers. Their last stop was the ice cream shop. Reese loved chocolate and peanut butter just as much as Grady did, so they ordered the largest size they had to share. They found an empty picnic table out of the sun and enjoyed their treats.

"This has been fun," Reese said. She took a bite of the sundae and moaned. "My God, this is heaven. Where has this been all my life?"

"Told you it was good," Grady said. "Every evening, the place is packed and there's a line for a block. It's an institution."

"We may need to come back tomorrow."

"I'd be happy to."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "You must have a lot of history here, and tons of friends. I hope I'm not keeping you from them."

"I have friends. We usually only hang out to party, and I'm growing out of that, you know? I'm happy to have a quiet weekend with you. And if you want to catch that get-together with my teammates, we can do that too. But only if you want to."

She sensed he was nervous about that, or afraid she was going to say no. "I worry that I'm boring," she said. "That they won't find me interesting."

He smiled. “You’re not boring at all. I’ve brought a few women out here, and not one of them would go on a five-kilometer hike or chase after me into the lake. They’ve all been too worried about their hair, or the hike would be too long. So much whining.”

“You’re picking the wrong women,” Reese said with a mischievous smile.

“Maybe I am.”

“About that get-together, I’d be happy to go. I’d like to meet your friends.”

He beamed at that. “Great.”

They finished their ice creams and took a slow walk back to the car. By the time they got back to the cottage, Julia was working on dinner. She had the barbecue fired up and was putting corn and chicken on it. Reese offered to make the salad while Grady set the table. Reese allowed herself a moment to take it all in, especially when Grady went outside to help his mom with the barbecue. Was this how normal families lived? She was going to miss this when her fake relationship with Grady was over.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Julia had a social calendar Reese could only dream of. She was going out for an evening of drinks and cards with her friends, calling out to Reese and Grady that she would be late and not to wait up for her.

“Your mom is popular,” Reese said, drying the last of the dishes.

“Mom is a social butterfly. Dad is too. They know everyone around here. And when she says she’ll be back late, it could be two or three in the morning.”

Reese’s head tilted. “Are you serious?”

“Oh yeah. They really will be playing cards late into the night. Mom will have a drink when she gets there and won’t have another. But she pretends she needs to wait for it to wear off, so she keeps playing.”

“What are they playing?”

“I actually don’t know.”

Reese watched Grady go into a cupboard drawer. He pulled out a s’mores kit.

“This is for later.”

“They look yummy! I’ve never had them before, but I’ve always wanted to.”

His hand flew to his chest overdramatically. “You have never had s’mores before.”

“I led a sheltered life.”

“That is going to change tonight. Once the sun has set, we can get a small fire started in the pit and make some s’mores.”

“You are a bad influence on me. First ice cream and now s’mores?”

“They are both worth it.”

He took her to the grassy area of the property where a firepit had been installed. They took a few lawn chairs and Reese watched as Grady set up the fire. Once he had a nice fire going, he took his seat next to her. Reese watched as he unpacked the s’mores kit, then impaled a marshmallow with a long metal skewer. He handed it over, then repeated the action for himself.

“This is an art,” he said. “You can’t just put your marshmallow into the flames and expect perfection. You need to rotate your marshmallow and make sure you don’t keep it in the direct fire. Then, when it’s nice and toasty, we put a piece of chocolate on a graham cracker and then the marshmallow. After that, we top it with another graham cracker. We squish it all together and wait for it to cool for a minute. You don’t want to burn your mouth. The marshmallow can get very hot.”

Reese tried not to smile. Grady was taking this very seriously. She put her marshmallow near the flame, careful not to put it directly in. Grady nodded his approval as he toasted his own marshmallow, and Reese slowly rotated her skewer. When Grady deemed it ready, she placed it on the graham cracker he had prepared and squished it between another graham cracker with chocolate on it. The marshmallow oozed out both sides, but she was careful not to touch it.

“You never did stuff like this when you went camping?” he asked.

“This is the closest I’ve ever been to camping. My parents didn’t camp, and I was usually too busy training or studying to go camping.”

“Hmm. We were busy too, but summers were important for us. And my family loves the outdoors. I’m going to have to get you in a tent for some old-fashioned roughing it. That

reminds me. It won't be like real camping, but we can set up the patio furniture on the deck, put out the netting, and sleep outside one night. My parents have it all rigged up for when the bugs get bad."

His suggestion caught her off guard, and she found herself smiling. "That sounds like fun."

"Yeah, we can tell scary stories and stay up all night."

She playfully punched him in the arm. "Not so fun."

Her s'more had cooled enough and Reese took a bite. The chocolate, marshmallow, and graham cracker hit her all at once. She couldn't believe she'd missed out on this. "Oh my God. This is freaking amazing."

"Told you," he said proudly.

She'd barely finished it before she'd speared another marshmallow on her skewer and had it in the low flames. And just like her first s'more, she relished the second one. She thought about having a third, but instead toasted a marshmallow and ate it on its own.

"I feel like I've missed out on so much. S'mores, camping. What else?"

"I don't know," Grady said, licking his lips. "Have you ever climbed a tree? Peed in a pool? Ate bugs?"

"None of those. And the second one sounds gross. As for climbing a tree, both my parents would have killed me. I spent most of my teen years training. There was no time for fun. I don't really have memories of spending summers anywhere. I trained. My dad wanted me to be the best, and my mom liked the attention. Cam had more of a childhood because his parents were normal. Maybe that's why I don't have many healthy relationships."

"I think I'm a healthy relationship for you."

"You are," Reese said, patting his arm. "Basically, you and Cam. The only two normal men in my life. All the others have been losers. I either attract losers or seek them out. I'm not sure which."

“I’m in a similar boat,” Grady said, assembling another s’more. “But I think I seek out materialistic women who would rather buy makeup and shoes than have an adult conversation. My brain tells me I want a certain kind of woman in my life, and then I do the exact opposite.”

“Me too! It’s like I pick the opposite of the man I want.”

“For me, I’ve always envisioned someone athletic so that we could do things together. A woman I could joke around with, who would want to try new things. Someone I could talk to about what’s going on in my life...” He trailed off. “Anyway, I always end up with a woman who can barely climb a staircase, who wants to gossip, and who I feel I can’t share anything serious with.”

Reese pulled a chunk off her marshmallow, catching the long, melted strands with her fingers. “Why do you think that happened?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because that’s the type of women who were around. Plus, most of the guys date women like that. Maybe I was subconsciously trying to fit in.”

Reese could sympathize. She’d spent her life trying to fit in. “If it helps, Jordy was a loser. We dated on and off for three years. He used me. He didn’t care about me. He didn’t come see me win gold. Not once did he ever say he was proud of me.”

“We’re really diving deep into our emotions tonight, aren’t we,” Grady said and winked at her. “One of my therapists told me Michelle wasn’t a healthy relationship for me. And I stopped seeing her because of it. I guess she was right. Do you think you like bad boys?”

“No. I think it’s more about searching for something. Maybe because I couldn’t fix my mother, I wanted to fix Jordy?”

Grady prepared another s’more and set his marshmallow into the flames. “I wonder if I’m too nice. Maybe I’m easy pickings for some women. And maybe I want them to be

someone else, and when I finally realize they aren't, I cut my losses."

"Maybe this pretend relationship is good for both of us. It's keeping us occupied so we can't get ourselves into any more destructive relationships."

"Maybe."

They talked for a long time and Reese didn't even notice that hours went by. Julia had been gone a while when they headed back up to the cottage. It was nearly midnight.

"I think I'll turn in. I'm not used to the outdoors," she said, stifling a yawn.

"I'll be up in a bit."

Reese headed to the bathroom first, to wash her face and brush her teeth. She changed into her T-shirt and shorts pajamas and crawled into the bed. A part of her was a little nervous about sharing a bed with Grady. Would he hog the covers? Would she? She didn't think she talked in her sleep or snored. Whatever the case, she couldn't think about it.

Her next thought was to check in on social media, but she wanted to enjoy her time at the Radcliffes, so she pulled out the book she'd brought from home instead. It was a thriller that she got twenty pages into before drifting off to sleep. When she opened her eyes hours later, her book was on the nightstand and the cottage was silent. That was one thing that was different from the city. There were no distant sounds of traffic or people in the hallway. No late-night sirens or honking horns. It was all dark and silent, but she could see Grady beside her, outlined by the moonlight shining in through the window. She turned over and looked at Grady. He was fast asleep, and he looked peaceful and even more handsome than usual.

Part of her wanted to reach out and touch his face, or even just scoot a little closer to him. She wondered what it would feel like to be wrapped up in his arms. All the talk of Jordy had had her thinking how different Grady was. How normal.

Why couldn't a guy like him want to be with a woman like her?

He shifted a little and his eyes fluttered open. Had he known she was staring?

“Can't sleep?”

“I was thinking, and when I think, I can't sleep.”

“What were you thinking about?” he asked, his voice heavy.

“How quiet it is here. I'm not used to that.”

“The city is loud.”

Moments passed and she thought he'd fallen back asleep, but then he spoke again. “You're still looking at me.”

He was right. She was. Her heart was feeling things she didn't know how to process.

“Thank you for inviting me here. For wanting to spend time with me. Often, I feel like I'm burdening someone, or that I'm only around because of who I am. I never feel that way around you. I feel like I can be myself when we're together. Man, I'm probably going to regret saying this to you in the morning. I don't normally lay my cards out like that.”

His eyes were fully open now and he was staring at her, his gaze so intense she thought she'd shrivel up right before him. “I love spending time with you. I never want you to think you're a burden. And I may regret this in the morning, but I love every second I spend with you. I look forward to it.”

Her bottom lip quivered for just a second. “You're not just saying that, right?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“You're smart and funny and beautiful—”

She stopped him with a finger to his lips.

“Don't say things you don't mean.” Her voice sounded almost desperate to her own ears.

He took her hand in his, the one she'd used to cover his lips, and kissed the back of it gently. Her heart skipped a beat

and she held her breath as he moved closer to her, their faces only inches apart. Suddenly, blood was pounding through her veins. What was happening?

“Can I kiss you, Reese?”

“Yes,” she said, her heart soaring.

The kiss was gentle, tentative, and the sweetest kiss she’d ever had. And when she kissed him back, he pulled her in even closer, the intensity of the kiss ramping up. Her body was on fire, yearning for him, and when he leaned back, she was breathless.

“If you want me to stop, I’ll stop.”

She shook her head. “I don’t want you to stop.”

His lips trailed down to her neck while one of his hands traced her shoulder, then arm. She took in a deep breath, relishing every moment, scared it would never happen again. What if they came to their senses the next morning? She just knew she’d want to remember this night for the rest of her life.

“How is your skin so soft?” he said, gazing into her eyes.

“A good moisturizer?”

She regretted how stupid it sounded, but he didn’t seem to notice. He kissed her lips again before reaching his wandering hand up under her tank top. His thumb passed over one nipple that had hardened to a bud. She suddenly wanted to be naked, but more importantly, she wanted him naked too.

Without invitation, she ripped off the tank top and threw it to the ground. She then reached for the bottom of his shirt and pulled it up, prompting him to yank it over his head. And in an instant, his mouth was on her nipple, gently sucking and biting before moving to the next. Every inch of her tingled with anticipation, wanting to rush things but take them slowly all at the same time. Her brain was battling her body.

When he was done with her breasts—at least momentarily—he sat up, looming over her like a Greek god. His usually pleasant and welcoming face had become serious, as if he

were contemplating her destruction. And if she were honest, she wanted him to plunder her. But something more was there. Was he having second thoughts? She reached out to touch him, her fingers passing over the hard muscles in his abdomen.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I—” He stopped. “I don’t want to ruin this moment.”

“What’s going on?” She was worried now. What had happened to change things? “I’m on the pill if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“No. I have condoms—” He stopped again, then seemed to come to a decision. “Let’s let this weekend happen. You and me. No other complications.”

She knew what he meant. “One hundred percent.”

It was all he needed to hear. He leaned back down to kiss her, his hand working on her shorts again. This time he had them and her panties down and discarded. She hooked a finger on his shorts and did the same. Without hesitation, she reached for him, grasping on to his rock-hard length, biting her lip in satisfaction. She wanted to stroke him, but he pulled her hand away and shook his head.

“I’m not coming that way. I want to be inside you.”

She thought she would get relief from his tortuous touch, but instead, his fingers found her core, gently circling her clit. She thought she’d come right then, but she calmed herself. She wanted this to be slow, but when one finger, then two entered her, her body began to betray her. And when he hit her G-spot, she came undone. His mouth stifled her cries as he continued to pump in and out of her.

When she’d come down from her orgasm, he smiled at her, pure satisfaction written all over her face. He trailed his lips along her neck, then whispered in her ear, “This is just the beginning.”

She had no idea what that meant, nor did she care. He gently spread her legs and settled himself between them, and she nearly came again when she felt his tip at her entrance.

Inch by inch, he slid into her slick passage until he was fully buried inside her. And slowly he began to move. She wanted him to go faster, grinding her hips into him, but he'd pull away from her each time as punishment.

“Please, harder,” she said breathlessly.

He pretended not to hear her, instead keeping the pace slow and steady until he couldn't take it any longer. She felt the heat rising in both of them, and before she could fully catch her breath, he was thrusting into her harder and harder. Once again, he muffled her cries of ecstasy with his lips until he came too.

It took her a moment to get her bearings. She closed her eyes as a satisfied mewl escaped her. Still inside her, Grady kissed her gently on the forehead, then on the lips. The sweetest of kisses.

“I'll go get cleaned up and bring a towel back for you.”

She nodded dreamily, and when he returned, he gently wiped her with the warm, wet towel. He tossed it into the laundry hamper in the closet, then crawled back into bed, pulling her in close to him. She rested her cheek on his shoulder, softly touching his pectorals with her fingertips. She wanted to say something, but words escaped her. And as he gently caressed her arm, she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Six

When she awoke later that morning, the bed was empty. The sun was shining into their room, and she took a moment to stretch and turn over. Memories of the night before came back in red-hot waves, and her body began to tingle. No man had ever done that before. Sure, she'd only been in any kind of relationship with two, total, but neither had made her come alive like Grady had. And the sex? Her body hummed at the thought of it.

She threw on some clothes and slipped across the hall into the bathroom. She could smell coffee drifting toward her, but it would have to wait. She could hardly present herself to Julia for breakfast knowing she'd had sex with her son the night before.

With her shower out of the way and her wet hair tied up in a messy bun, she changed into shorts and a T-shirt. She padded down the hall to find Julia at the kitchen table reading the newspaper, a cup of coffee and a plate of toast in front of her.

"Good morning," she said.

Julia looked up and pulled off her reading glasses. "Morning, Reese. Can I get you some breakfast?"

"I can make myself some toast. Is Grady around?"

"He went for a run. He should be back soon. We didn't want to wake you. But once he gets back, I can make some bacon and eggs. You're probably exhausted from all that activity yesterday."

Reese's eyes opened wide. Had she heard them? "Uh, I guess so."

"The hike, the swimming, the sun and heat. It adds up. How do you like your eggs?"

Relief swept through Reese. "I'm not picky. I'm happy any way you make them."

Reese poured herself some coffee and went out onto the deck to enjoy the gorgeous morning. It was like she could smell the heat in the air. She sat on one of the loungers, watching the water ripple in the distance. Was there any picture more beautiful than this? She was certain there wasn't.

She didn't know how long she'd been out there when Grady came up the deck steps from the side of the cottage. He looked sweaty and out of breath and just the sight of him made every part of her hum. He gave her a boyish smile as he took a seat in the lounge next to her.

"I won't get too close," he said. "I'm sweaty and likely very smelly."

"That's quite all right," Reese said with a small smile of her own.

"You good this morning?"

"I'm great. How about you?"

"Really good."

They stared at each other for a moment before Reese said, "Are we going to keep doing this?"

"You mean not talk about last night?"

"Something like that."

"Yeah, it will probably get more and more awkward if we don't."

"Probably."

Grady nodded. "Okay, I'll go first. Can I propose something? Something I sort of already ran past you?"

"Absolutely."

“Let’s have an amazing weekend here and not think about anything else. Let’s enjoy each other’s company. And then we can talk about it later.”

Reese bit down on her lip. She couldn’t have asked for a better proposal. “Just to be clear, you mean more amazing sex, right?”

He laughed and his face couldn’t have been more handsome. “Yes. You said it better than I did.”

“I’m up for that.”

“Can I throw something else out there? Something for you to think about?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t want to put any pressure on you, Reese. Or ruin our hedonistic weekend, but everything I said last night, I meant. I think you’re beautiful and I love every minute I spend with you. When this weekend is over, I don’t want it to just end. I know I’m laying a lot out there for you, and I don’t want to freak you out, but I want you to know how I feel.”

Reese’s throat tightened a bit as she absorbed it all. Her first instinct was to panic, to run, but she found herself nodding. Just like he’d said, they were going to enjoy the weekend. There was time to think about all that other stuff later.

“I appreciate you saying that. And I love spending time with you too. And you’re super hot. But let’s leave that all for later. Just like you said.”

“Good. Now I’m going to take a shower so I don’t smell. Then let’s eat. I’m starving.”

* * *

After a hearty breakfast, Reese and Grady changed into swimsuits and headed to the dock to enjoy the morning. Reese laid out a towel and applied a liberal amount of sunscreen on her too-pale skin.

“Let me get your back,” Grady said.

He squeezed some sunscreen into his hand and slowly massaged it on all her exposed skin. She had on a red bikini with white polka dots. It was cute and had a touch of a retro look. She had always been proud of her figure, and even though she'd never been busty, she filled it out enough to look good.

“All done,” he said proudly.

“Can I return the favor?” Reese asked.

“I'd like that.”

Reese narrowed her gaze. “Don't like it too much. Your mom is still around.”

“You're taking all the fun out of it.”

“I am for now.”

They sat on the dock, and as the morning wore on, the heat began to descend. Reese went to refill their water bottles inside, and when she returned, Grady was taking the cover off their motorboat.

“Want to take a ride on the lake? It'll cool us off. Normally, Dad and I take this puppy out fishing, but we can just sit on the water, ponder life, contemplate world peace, make out.”

“I'd love to. I'm really looking forward to pondering life,” she said, stifling a laugh.

“Yeah, me too,” he said, playing along. “And the contemplating of world peace.”

She grabbed their towels, their water bottles, and her beach bag and climbed into the boat. Grady untied it and started the engine. They were soon easing away from the dock area and out in the open water. In no time, Grady had the boat up to speed. Reese held on to her straw hat as they jetted through the water. When Grady found a spot he liked, he killed the engine and dropped anchor.

“This is one of my favorite spots,” he said. “We used to dive from over there,” he said, pointing to a steep rock cliff. “Other times we’d just hang out with friends.”

“Lady friends?”

“One or two. I am human.”

“I’m just teasing,” she said, taking in the view. Other than the normal sounds of birds and nature, the area was peaceful. She couldn’t see or hear another human. When Grady left the driver’s seat and came over to sit next to her, she scooted over. He put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her in close.

“About that making out...”

“I thought we were pondering life? Contemplating world peace?”

He kissed her then, gently biting down on her lower lip. “I want you to ponder me doing this,” he said, sliding his hands around her waist and hoisting her onto his lap. She could feel his hardness through his shorts, and it made her breath hitch. “Then I want you to ponder this.” His voice dropped deeper as his hand found her core and pushed her bikini bottoms to one side. He plunged two fingers into her wet center. She arched back as he gently pumped his fingers in and out of her. When he found her spot...that spot, she came undone. He didn’t let up as he used his other hand to expose one of her breasts. As he rode her through her orgasm, he sucked and licked her sensitive nipple.

“Fuck me,” she said breathlessly.

“I like this take-command side of you,” he said with a mischievous smile.

He slid down his shorts and was inside her in a flash. He sat back as she rode him, taking his as deeply as she could, then grinding into him relentlessly.

“You have to slow down,” he said and grunted. “I’m going to come.”

Like the times he hadn’t shown her mercy, she picked up the pace, slamming down hard on him, letting him fill her

completely. And when he came inside her, she followed closely behind, taking as much of him as she could.

“Holy shit,” he said with a little laugh. “That was fucking hot.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself,” she said, kissing him hard on the lips. “I’d be happy to do more pondering with you later.”

They took a swim to cool off, then lay out in the back of the small boat, doing nothing at all. She loved that she could simply enjoy herself and not have to be working or thinking or strategizing. It was something she wasn’t accustomed to. And when they headed back to the cottage a few hours later, Julia was on the deck, calling them up.

“All right, lovebirds. I’m off to Cathy’s. I should be back later tomorrow morning. We’re planning to get in a game of golf in the morning. There is lots of food in the fridge and you can call me if you can’t find something. Don’t burn the place down while I’m gone.”

They watched her leave and Reese turned to Grady. “Did she hear us last night? I feel like she keeps implying it.”

“I doubt it,” Grady said. “When she falls asleep, an air siren won’t wake her up.”

“And what about the place burning down? I feel like something is implied there.”

“Long story involving me and a kitchen fire. But it all had a happy ending and insurance covered the damage.”

“One day I’m going to need to hear that story.”

“In the meantime, how about we get something to eat. You’re going to need to keep up your energy.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Reese and Grady put together dinner. He roasted potatoes and barbecued steaks while Reese made a salad, about the only thing she trusted herself with. While she set the table, she stole a glance outside at Grady. He manned the grill like an expert and her heart warmed. This was normal. Couples did this. They made dinner, enjoyed each other's company, spent time together...this was what she wanted. She couldn't wipe the smile from her face when Grady came in with the rest of the food. He'd hit his parents' wine rack and pulled out a Pinot Grigio. They toasted to their weekend away and feasted on dinner. Afterward, they sat on the deck, watching the sun slowly set. Reese topped off their wineglasses and sat next to Grady on the patio sofa.

"Thank you for this. All of it," Reese said, settling into the crook of his arm. "I know we said we wouldn't talk about it..."

"But?"

"I don't know. I'm a mess of thoughts."

He kissed the top of her head and gave her a squeeze. "We're having fun. No pressure."

"I guess I've never had fun like this before. And I know the last thing I should be doing is talking about old boyfriends, but Jordy and Mark—the loser before Jordy—really soured me on relationships. When this whole Jen thing broke and I needed Jordy the most, he wanted to show me off at a party. Who does that?"

“An asshole?” Grady offered.

“A total asshole. And to think I tried to make it work with him for three years. Three years! He’d shown me who he was when he didn’t come to Beijing. Why would he suddenly be different?”

“Maybe deep down you were hoping he’d change?”

“Well, that was stupid. How about you? Any losers?” she asked, sipping her wine.

“A few. All of them,” he said and chuckled. “I nearly asked one to marry me. That was a few years before Michelle. Her name was Lana. We’d been dating about a year. She was gorgeous, and she seemed really into me. And I was into her, too. But we didn’t have that much in common. She didn’t like watching sports; she hated playing them even more. She had this weird thing about not wanting to ever sweat. I couldn’t take her out to eat because she’d barely eat food. It was just too much. Thankfully, my sisters talked some sense into me. I can’t imagine being married to her.”

Something tugged at Reese’s heart. The thought of Grady being married...attached to someone else. Even the thought of him wanting to marry someone. Reese had dreamed about that, but it had always seemed out of reach.

“You dodged a bullet.”

“I’ll say.”

He ran his fingers up and down her arm and Reese sighed contentedly. Even though this wasn’t real, it sure felt real, real enough that she didn’t want to let it go. But at the same time, she was scared. After Jordy, the last thing she wanted was another terrible relationship, and she liked Grady too much to jeopardize their friendship. As if reading her thoughts, he spoke.

“Back to not talking about us... We shouldn’t, but I’m going to say how I feel. That’s one thing I learned in therapy. That I bottle too much up, so here it goes. I know we said this was a fun weekend, no attachments, but I want an attachment.

I want you to be my real girlfriend. Or at least for us to date. For real. It's okay if you say no, but I had to say it for myself."

Even though a bit of panic set in, she still admired him for his honesty. "I don't want to hurt your feelings—"

"All I'm asking for is that you take some time to think about whether you want to pursue it when this gig is up. And I would like to continue being friends with benefits for now, if you're agreeable to that."

"Yes, I'd like that. I think it's only fair to tell you that I'm not sure I want to be in a relationship again. After Jordy...it's not that I don't trust you, I'm just not sure what I want right now."

"Fair enough. But now it's out in the open."

"And that's refreshing."

They went inside, watched a movie while cuddling on the couch, and ate the brownies Julia had left for them. Reese wanted to pinch herself. She couldn't remember when she'd spent so much time with a boyfriend, real or otherwise. With Jordy, it had been dates here and there, and not once had they gone on a vacation together. He barely tolerated her mother and avoided her if possible. When it came to Cam, he was completely dismissive. And the sex? Reese had always craved the closeness, anything she could get, but it was so mechanical and all about Jordy and what he wanted to do. With Grady, everything was magnetic with a surge of adrenaline. And dare she say a little magical? But a relationship? What would happen when they eventually broke up? She'd lose him forever, though she wondered if there was any going back anyway.

These thoughts so consumed her that she barely noticed when the movie ended.

"Want to sleep outside tonight? I can set it up. It may not be the most comfortable, but the patio furniture transforms into a makeshift bed, and I can set the netting over the gazebo. We can sleep under the stars."

"That sounds wonderful."

“You get the pillows and blankets from our bed, and I’ll set everything up.”

She changed into her tank top and shorts and grabbed what they needed from the bed. When she got outside, Grady had transformed the deck into a bedroom, complete with some candles. Had he done this all for her? Her eyes stung with tears, but she refused to let them fall. No man had ever been this good to her.

“I’ll go change and be right back,” he said.

While he was gone, Reese set up the bed, laying out the blankets and fluffing the pillows. When Grady returned, he took her hand and they slipped under the blankets. The evening was cooler than she’d expected, and Grady sensed it. He pulled her close and wrapped a blanket around them.

“I know it’s not like a bed,” Grady said.

“It’s perfect,” she said, reaching up to kiss his cheek.

Snug and warm, she drifted off to sleep. She didn’t know how much time had passed, but she was awakened by Grady. He was kissing her neck and working his way down her body. First the spot between her breasts, then down to her belly button.

“This is a pleasant way to wake up,” she said.

“I thought so. Unless you want to go back to sleep.”

“I think I’ve slept enough.

He slid down her shorts and panties and before she had time to grasp what was happening, his tongue was on her clit, swirling, sucking, and nipping. The sensation was glorious, and her instinct was to wiggle away, the pleasure too much, but he held her hips firmly in place as his tongue invaded her. He shifted a little and suddenly two fingers were inside her, then three as his tongue worked its magic.

She cried out as her climax gripped her. Pleased with himself, he kissed her, and she could taste herself. Something she’d never experienced before. And a man going down on her

at all was something else she'd never experienced. Mark had been too much of a prude, and Jordy thought it was disgusting.

"I've been wanting to taste you for a long time," he whispered into her ear. "Now I need to fuck you."

In one swift motion, he was buried inside her to the hilt. He slammed into her relentlessly, and she pushed back against him, wanting more.

"I need you deeper," she said.

He pulled back and slipped out of her, then he flipped her onto her knees. He was inside her again, deeper than she'd ever felt, and she groaned into the pillow as he plowed into her. She could feel her second orgasm rising, and when he reached around to massage her clit, she was seeing stars. Another primal scream erupted from her as she clenched on to his cock. Unable to hold back any longer, he came inside her, collapsing next to her, his chest heaving.

"Reese, you're going to ruin me," he said, trying to catch his breath. "Every other woman will be compared to you."

She thought about that statement as he led her to the shower. It lingered in the air as he gently washed her and thumbed her nipples. Every woman would be compared to her. It repeated itself, and each time it did, a little hole widened in her heart. This wasn't forever. He knew it just as much as she did. She had to keep telling herself this was all fun and sex, and then it would be over. Just like all her other failed relationships, real, or otherwise.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“I’m so excited to meet you. Preston has been bragging about working out with you, and now I finally get to meet you. I’m Marie, by the way. I can’t believe I haven’t properly introduced myself. I’m too busy fangirling. Please don’t hold it against me.”

Reese and Grady had arrived at the small party minutes before. Reese had been a little nervous meeting everyone, but she hadn’t expected Grady to be nervous too. But then he’d explained it to her. He was going to meet many of his teammates for the first time, and he wanted to make the best impression. But Reese wondered if her presence and all her baggage added to his anxiety. He didn’t say and she knew he wouldn’t.

“I would never do that,” Reese said. “And I want to say that Preston is a great guy and an even better workout partner.”

Marie smiled. “He’s a good man. And so is Grady. Dylan too. That’s why I’m glad they’re friends. I call them ‘the three amigos.’ Look, I don’t want to start gossiping and scare you away, but some of these guys...it’s about partying and women. The three amigos aren’t like that.”

“Good to know.”

Marie grasped Reese’s hand. “Let me introduce you to some of the other wives and girlfriends.”

For the next hour, Marie made the introductions and Reese put on her game face. She knew how to make people feel special and that they were interesting, but Reese’s problem

was keeping them reeled in as future friends. She had no idea where she made her mistakes. She suspected it was her lack of follow-through. Her main concern had always been that she'd come off too needy and high maintenance, when she was really the opposite. Did people then think she was aloof? Uninterested?

"I'm sorry about all this crap you're going through," Hilary Partridge said. She was the wife of Gavin Partridge, the team captain. She'd steered Reese to a quiet corner where they were enjoying glasses of wine on her spacious deck. The party was going on around them, but for the most part, it was eating and drinking and nothing rowdy. "I think we've all had to deal with a Jennifer in our lives. Unfortunately, your Jennifer has made it very public and personal."

"She definitely has."

"Dylan and Preston have filled us in. We know you're cool, so don't worry about anything going on here. We all support you. We're like family around here, so that makes you family, too."

Reese's face flushed. She couldn't let herself cry. *Family?* "Thank you. That means a lot to me."

"The Renegades look out for each other. We've all faced tough times, whatever those times may have been. So if you need us, we're here."

Reese blinked back a few tears. "I haven't had a lot of support recently, so I appreciate this."

"Grady hasn't said much, and if I'm honest, we're still getting to know him, but he's a good guy, and while we don't know you yet, I'm pretty sure you're awesome. And if I can let you in on a little secret...a ton of the ladies around here are so excited to have you in the fold. You're a legend, Reese. If they get a little awestruck, don't hold it against them."

"I never would."

Hilary then took the time to introduce Reese to everyone individually. The guys seemed to like her, while the women easily embraced her. They asked about Cam, if she'd ever

dated him, about Jennifer and the scandal. Several offered to help in any way they could, and Reese offered them the same, although she was pretty sure no one was interested in her help just yet. Not until she could rid herself of the Jennifer stench.

“We get together every few weeks for a girls’ night. You’re invited,” Hilary said. “If you’d like to come, give me your number, and I’ll add you to the group chat.”

“That sounds like fun,” Reese said, beaming. She’d never been a part of a big group of friends before. This was all so new.

“Now, I don’t want to sound pushy, but we all follow each other on social media. It’s part of our solidarity. And the way it’s looking for you right now, you could use all the support you can get. I can send you a list of all our handles for you to follow, and you and I’ll do the same.”

“Okay.”

Preston and Gavin had been manning the barbecues and at that moment; they brought huge trays of meat to a table set up on the deck. The table was also covered with a platter of corn on the cob, bowls of potato salad, and various other dishes and vegetables. Reese piled her plate high and took a seat next to Grady at one of the patio tables. He was chatting with Mika, a defenseman on the team. Reese passively listened, and when Mika got up to refill his plate, Grady turned to her.

“Having fun?”

“Yes. Everyone here has been great and so accepting. How about you?”

“I’m meeting some new teammates. So far so good. But what I really want to do is head back to the cottage and spend some quality time with you.”

“And your mom?”

“Maybe we can slip something in her drink?”

She playfully slapped him arm. “We go home tomorrow. You can spend quality time with me then.”

“Or later tonight after we put my mom to bed.”

“You’re insatiable.”

“Can you blame me?”

She thought about this as she ate a forkful of pasta salad. She hated comparing Grady to Jordy, but even during the first few months they’d dated, not once had he given her the impression that he needed to have her. That he wanted to have sex with her every second of the day. In fact, he’d never given her the impression that he’d ever really needed her or that she was important at all. Not like Grady.

“All right, how about this,” Reese said, tracing her finger up and down his forearm. “Let’s stay at least another hour, then quietly slip out. We can head back to the cottage and see if we can sneak back into your room. What happens after that is up to you.”

His gaze moved from her fingers to her eyes, and she could see the desire raging inside his own. “I’m not sure I can wait that long.”

“What if I said I’d make it worth your while?”

“Then one hour it is.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Her weekend at Muskoka ended far too soon, and then it was back to reality and to her office. She forwarded pictures to Daria for social media posts, then looked over product samples. John didn't think it was a good time for her to meet with clients just yet, but she did have input on ad campaigns and product releases. So far, her plus-size line was still on hold, even though stock was piling up.

They worked through lunch. Daria ran to the deli across the street and came back with salad and sandwiches.

"You took some great pictures," Daria said, scrolling through them on her phone as she took a bite of her BLT.

"It's pretty easy when the subject of those pictures is gorgeous," Reese said. "And the Radcliffes' place in Muskoka is lovely. I had a really good time, and it ended way too soon."

One of Daria's eyebrows arched. "Do you have a little crush on him?"

"I do have a pulse," Reese said, hoping to change the subject. But Daria wasn't having it.

"Maybe the two of you could make your fake relationship real?"

Reese shrugged.

Daria pointed at her. "A-ha! You're blushing. Did something happen between the two of you?"

"Nothing serious. If something happens, it happens. If it doesn't, well, that's okay too."

Reese knew she had to be careful. As close as she'd become close to Daria, she was still Daria's boss, and sharing too much with her was unprofessional. But at the same time, Daria was a trusted confidante.

"I think he'd be a nice change," Daria said, spearing a chunk of tomato. "He's also adorable."

"I know, but after Jordy, I think it's best I keep things strictly platonic. Besides, I'm still dealing with Jen. Any news on that front?"

"John said he'd be by later today with an update. She's claiming that you've ruined her livelihood and wants to sue for some kind of compensation. It all seems so flimsy. But who really knows. John and his PR team are launching some massive offensive. I'm guessing your sit-down with Kasey Belmont is supposed to be the final nail in her coffin."

"I'm not looking forward to that interview."

"It will be fine."

They finished lunch and Reese tackled product invoices. Their small accounting department took care of it all, but she liked to check in, see what their costs were, and what they were selling to retailers. She was reviewing online sales when John and Marnie breezed into her office with Daria dutifully following behind. Reese closed the lid of her laptop and watched John's serious expression for any idea of what was to come.

"How is it going?" Reese asked.

"It could be worse. It seems the final major stumbling block in this whole Jennifer debacle is her idiot lawyer. He clearly craves the limelight, and getting Jennifer as a client seems to have made his dream come true. Despite all the evidence we've obtained from your email address and text messages from your old phone, he insists on making this public. That means we've reached a crossroads."

Reese took in a deep breath. She knew she wasn't going to like what came next. "Go on."

“He wants to ride this out as long as possible, and that’s not good news for us. Now if we go on the attack, she may be looked at sympathetically, so this has become one of those damned if you do, damned if you don’t situations. The consensus is to stay the course, continue to show you in a positive light, and when the time is right, we do the interview with Kasey Belmont. We’re still going to have to deal with Josh Semple, but we’ll try to neutralize him somehow.”

“I was hoping this would be over soon,” Reese said with a groan.

“So were we. In the meantime, keep up positive appearances. I know Grady does a lot of charitable work, and since your favorite charities are a little leery of having you around, I’m going to see if Grady’s organizations are okay with having you attend a function.”

The way he said it made her sound like a pariah. “I don’t want them to feel like they are obligated to.”

“It’s worth a chat.”

“And my plus-size launch? Is that back on the calendar?”

“Not yet. We want to feel out public opinion first.”

“We are sitting on thousands and thousands of dead stock. It should already be on sales floors. John, if we don’t get this out soon, it could break me.”

He nodded grimly. “I know. I will have an answer for you by the end of the week.”

The thought of having to dump the stock to liquidators for pennies on the dollar made her stomach flip-flop. It would most certainly ruin her business.

John droned on about a few loose ends, before rising and leaving as fast as he’d come. Maybe sensing Reese’s mood, Daria stayed behind when John and Marnie were gone.

“It will be fine,” she said again. “You are going to overcome this. You’re a fighter, and you’ll fight your way through this.”

“I hope so. But why do I feel like I’m about to lose everything?”

* * *

Reese had forgotten about rush hour. As downtown traffic limped along, she called Cam on her car’s speakerphone. He’d called her earlier that afternoon, but she’d been in the meeting with John and Marnie.

“Long time no chat. How are you doing?” he said in his always cheerful voice.

“It’s only been a few days.”

“I know, but I figured you’d get bored with the hockey hunk and start texting me. You must have had fun.”

“It was relaxing, and I did have some fun.”

Cam was silent for a moment. “What happened there?”

Even over the phone, he could read her perfectly. They’d always been so finely in tune with one another, a trait that kept them from any on-ice accidents. But spending all that time together had also given them the ability to know each other better than anyone else in their lives.

“I had sex with him.”

Cam hooted all the way from London. “I knew he crazy about you. And I figured the feelings were mutual. So now what?”

“We’re keeping things casual. If something happens, it will happen. But I’m not looking for a relationship. After Jordy...I need a break.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way...nah, take it the wrong way. Your relationship with Jordy wasn’t healthy. It was destructive. Now you don’t have to take my advice, but I think you should give this guy a shot.”

“I want to, but we’ve built a nice friendship together. And if we start a serious relationship, what happens when we break

up? I lose a friendship.”

“Whoa. *When* you break up? Why would you assume that?”

“Because unlike you, I can’t seem to find the right life partner.”

“Because you keep hitching your wagon to the wrong people. I don’t know Grady, but he gives off a different vibe.”

A thought occurred to Reese. “Why don’t you come down here for a few days? Or even overnight? You can meet Grady and we can hang out. I miss hanging out with you. And I trust your opinion. If you think he’s someone I should give a shot to, then maybe I will.”

“Dad wanted me to come into the city and get some documents from his lawyer, so I can definitely stay overnight.”

“Good. And maybe we can do a workout video together?”

“I did say I’d do more of those.”

“Thank you, Cam. You’re the best.”

She’d have both her men under one roof, and nothing could make her happier.

Chapter Thirty

Cam came over a few days later, just when Reese had something to celebrate. John and the PR team had given her the green light to launch her plus-size line. The rollout would be dramatically reduced, with almost no fanfare, but at least the clothes would hit stores and be out of the warehouse. Reese felt a huge weight lifted, and to celebrate, she ordered takeout from a Thai restaurant down the street. Grady was going to be late—he was hanging out with some of the guys after their first team meeting of season—and told her to eat without him.

“I love this place. I’m glad you picked it,” Cam said, diving into his tom yum soup.

“It’s one of my favorites.”

Reese piled chicken satay and fried rice onto her plate. She grabbed a few spring rolls before Cam could claim them all. It was nice to spend some time with him. She’d gone from spending almost every waking minute with him, to spending next to no time with him. And it had left a void. A void two years long that she hadn’t filled very well until Grady had come along.

“Good news about your line finally launching. Things are looking up.”

Reese groaned. “They are, but Jen has an attention-seeking lawyer. Even though my lawyer has all the emails and texts we exchanged, her lawyer isn’t backing off. Basically, if we go

after her, we look bad. If we let her keep up this assault on me, we look bad. I'm currently in a no-win situation."

"I like what you're doing, though. You are rising above it and moving on. You can't let her stop you from living your life."

"But I want to defend myself."

"That's what the TV interview is for."

"I'm looking forward to interview prep," she said sarcastically.

They finished up dinner and Reese was packing up the leftovers when there was a knock at the door. Cam let Grady in, and the two exchanged pleasantries.

"I was about to put the food away. Are you hungry?" Reese asked.

"Famished."

Grady singlehandedly finished off the leftovers while Reese got coffee started. They would be celebrating her launch with red velvet cake, her favorite. She was taking it out of the box and arranging it on a plate as she listened to Grady and Cam talk sports. Reese was sure that Cam had always wanted to be a star hockey player, but fate had dealt him a different hand, one that had made him just as successful, but maybe not as rich. But what she loved about the conversation was that they liked each other. Cam could barely be in the same room with Jordy for more than five minutes.

Reese took Grady's empty plate away, not wanting to disturb their intense discussion about draft picks. She returned with a tray of coffee and cake. And then Reese had a thought.

"Let's take a picture of the three of us."

They both shrugged and Reese took her phone and set it up on a timer. They moved into place and took several shots. Reese picked the best one and posted it to a few of her social media accounts. The accompanying text was that she was spending time with the two more important men in her life.

She knew it was over the top, but she was going with it anyway. She tagged Grady and Cam, then set down her phone.

They enjoyed their coffee and cake, and when Reese looked at her phone twenty minutes later, it was lit with notifications. Reese tentatively hit the app icon for one of her pages. She opened it to thousands of likes and a long list of comments. She read the first dozen or so, and a wide smile spread across her face.

“What’s going on?” Cam asked.

“It seems my picture is getting a lot of good attention,” Reese said gleefully. She handed her phone to Grady to look and then he handed it Cam.

“I think they like us,” Grady said.

She wasn’t so sure about the “us” part, but she’d take the good vibes.

Hours later, after they’d spent the evening talking sports, Reese walked Grady back to his place while Cam stayed behind and settled into the spare room. She could have let Grady leave on his own, but she wanted to thank him for coming over, and she wanted to kiss goodnight.

The kiss was amazing, like always, but as she turned to leave, Grady clasped her hand. He tilted his head a bit and narrowed his gaze slightly.

“You and Cam...really just friends?”

It was her turn to be perplexed. “Yes. We’ve been best friends since I was eight. Why?”

“It’s the way he looks at you. It’s intense.”

She thought back to a similar conversation she’d had with Cam about Grady, and she shook her head at the memory. What were the chances?

“We tried dating a million years ago, and we both agreed it wasn’t right. Really, he’s the brother I’ve always wanted. Nothing more.”

“Okay. Maybe I’m seeing things that aren’t there.”

“You are.”

She gave him one last peck on the cheek and laughed at the irony.

* * *

The good times did not last. Less than a week later, the *Lowdown* had a new scoop. And Reese wasn't happy about it. She had been waiting for Grady to get home from team physicals. They'd planned to have a quiet evening in, but now she was seething. She was on his doorstep before he'd had time to set down his keys.

“We have a mole.”

Grady's blue eyes looked at her quizzically. “A mole?”

“Someone is feeding information to that blog, the *Lowdown*. They knew we spent the weekend at your parents' cottage. They know about Jen's lawyer being a jerk. They also seem to know a lot about my plus-size product launch. Like, everything. I don't know what is going on.”

She was pacing his open-concept living room, dining room, and kitchen, while he searched through his fridge and pulled out some leftover pasta. He also grabbed a bottle of Riesling and poured her a generous glass. He passed it to her, and she took a long sip. She'd been stewing about this all afternoon.

“I'm about to do what my dad does with us when we need to work something out,” Grady said, using his teacher voice—a voice he'd never used on Reese before. “I'm assuming you've read the entire blog detailing all this.”

“Yes.”

“And was it positive or negative?”

That question caught Reese off guard. She really hadn't analyzed the tone. She was angrier that anyone had divulged the info to the blog in the first place. She took a second to

think back to the content, how it was written, and the overall message it had sent.

“It wasn’t negative. More informative.”

“That’s a good thing. Then it didn’t paint you in a negative light?”

“No, but someone is feeding them information.”

“Okay,” Grady said, popping his plate of pasta into the microwave. “You don’t mind if I eat?”

“No, no. Of course not.”

“The second thing we have to look at is who knows the information that *Lowdown* got. Let’s make a list,” he said, pulling a notepad out of a drawer and sliding it across to Reese. She grabbed a pen that was sitting on his counter.

“Cam knows everything, but he would never tell. Plus, I’ve already asked him about this, and he denied knowing anything, and he’s a terrible liar. I’d have known if he wasn’t telling the truth. There’s also Daria, Marnie, John, and I assume the PR team. And who knows if they’ve told anyone. I know you know, but you’d also never tell.”

“At least we have a list to work with. I think your next step is to talk to John. He needs to go back to the PR team and see what they know.”

As Reese wrote down her suspects, a thought occurred to her. “I wonder if I could feed certain people information to see if it ended up in *Lowdown*.”

Grady’s microwave dinged and he retrieved his food and sat at his kitchen island with her. “You could,” he said. “But maybe see if John’s team can find the mole first. Want some food?”

“I’m too angry to eat.”

“I know it sucks. But you’ll figure this out.”

Reese sipped more of her wine. “I can only assume that whoever is behind this is doing it for monetary gain. *Lowdown* must be paying them. But how much could it possibly be?”

“Maybe, but it can’t be much. But don’t they also have a YouTube channel and other revenue streams?”

“Maybe. I’m going to investigate further. I suppose I need to figure out why someone close to me would do this.”

“For all you know, it could be for the attention—knowing something no one else knows.”

Reese thought about that later as she lay in bed unable to sleep. She’d stayed over at Grady’s, but his long day at the rink had him passing out the moment his head hit the pillow. She couldn’t help but wonder who had betrayed her. She knew she could eliminate Grady, Cam, and Daria from the list. But she couldn’t trust anyone else.

Chapter Thirty-One

Reese's plus-size line was quietly launched. Her marketing team had done what they could with what few resources they had. They'd been instructed by the PR team not to use Reese's image and not to mention her at all. They'd used their small advertising budget for social media campaigns. There wasn't the fanfare she'd gotten when she'd launched her very first line, or the men's line a year later. There was simply no extra money to splash out, but her marketing team had focused on a lot of influencers, so Reese had some hope. Deep down, though, she knew the line would be seriously in the red until she could untarnish her image.

Reese was no closer to finding out who the mole was, and now with Grady in training camp, she saw less of him. When she did see him, he was usually both mentally and physically exhausted. For a brief moment she wondered if this would be a new pattern for them, the way it had been with Jordy, but she banished that thought. Grady was nothing like Jordy and she wouldn't even let herself think about that again. Even though it felt like her world was contracting, she poured herself into her work.

Reese was engrossed in work when Daria knocked on the door. Reese motioned for her to come in, and Daria sat across from her. She could see by Daria's pensive look that it was more bad news.

"Just rip the Band-Aid off," Reese said.

"How did you know?"

“It’s written all over your face.”

Daria cleared her throat and grimaced. “Josh Semple called. He wanted to speak to you about a piece that’s appearing in the *Gazette* on Saturday. It sounds like it’s going to be a feature in the Entertainment section. Actually, it sounds like several features.”

Reese’s stomach did a nosedive. The *Gazette*’s Saturday edition was a must-have, and given any other situation, she would have leapt at the opportunity to get that kind of exposure, especially with her new line tanking. But Josh Semple had no love for her, or her sport, and every piece was an attack. Why would this one be any different?

“Did he say what it was about?”

“The whole Jennifer Brennan scandal. He mentioned something about this being a series of articles and that he’d like your participation. Before you even ask, I’ve left a message for John to get back to us.”

“Semple hates me. This is going to be a disaster.”

“I’m going to assume John will not want you to participate.”

“I’m assuming the same thing.”

“When I hear from him, I’ll let you know.”

It was Thursday, and Semple was cutting it close for a comment. Reese didn’t know what to think, and instead of concentrating on her work, she was thinking about Semple. She wanted to call him back, state her case, but she knew John would kill her. So she waited. Made coffee from the single-serve coffee maker in the break room, and paced her office. John called her back an hour later. By that point, Reese had consumed three cups of coffee and was bouncing off the walls.

“I spoke to Semple,” he started. “I’m not sure what his angle is. He asked a lot of questions, but they weren’t ones I expected. I thought for sure he was going to go for the jugular, but it sounds like it may be fair and balanced. The bad news is that he plans to run this as a series; the *Gazette* is going to print one article a week in their Saturday edition for a few

weeks. I have a feeling this goes beyond you and Jennifer, but we won't know for sure until we see what's printed on Saturday."

"What do I do?"

"What you're doing now. Grady has a charity event Saturday night. Something to do with poor kids. Whatever. I want you there."

She wrinkled her nose. John could be so crude. "What if Semple's piece nails me to the wall?"

"I don't think it will. So make sure to be seen, talk to people, be friendly, and take pictures. We need everyone to see you as the sweetheart you once were."

John was on form. Reese rolled her eyes.

"Right. I'll bring out sweet and nice Reese."

"You know what I mean. Gotta run. We'll talk Saturday morning after the piece is out."

* * *

Reese asked Grady to run out for Saturday's *Gazette*. After pacing her apartment waiting for him, she put on coffee and made oatmeal she knew she wouldn't be able to eat. Grady returned a few minutes later, paper in hand. He tried to give it to her, but she refused.

"Read it. Tell me what it says."

"Seriously?"

"Yes. I can't do it."

While he searched for the section, she grabbed two mugs and filled them with coffee. Grady liked his coffee black, and she handed it to him along with her oatmeal. She knew he'd eat it. She put a splash of cream in her coffee and sat across from him at her kitchen island. She watched his eyes move back and forth and tried not to read into his expression.

Once Grady was done, he set the paper down and pushed it in her direction.

“It’s pretty neutral.”

Neutral?

“What does that mean?”

“He doesn’t say anything bad about either of you. It seems to set the stage for who you and Jennifer are. It doesn’t even get into anything juicy. I figure that’s how he plans to frame his series of articles.”

“So it’s not bad?”

“No. The worst thing he says about you is that you’re a competitor. And some stuff about your parents. It was a lot about your childhoods. You do know that your parents participated in this, right?”

Reese nearly spat out her coffee. “What?”

She snatched the paper and tore it open. She skimmed the article and there they were. Quotes from both her parents. She could understand that her father hadn’t told her, but her mother? Reese wanted to punch something. And then it hit her hard. Semple had reached out to her dad, so why hadn’t her father reached out to her? Not once since all of this had he even tried, but he sat down with Semple? She shook her head. That was for another day.

“I can’t believe this. My mother...” She stopped.

Grady took a spoonful of her oatmeal but didn’t eat it. “Your mother what?”

Reese took a deep breath. “She didn’t tell me she’d spoken to Semple. I would have stopped her. At least my dad wouldn’t have thrown me under the bus like this.”

Grady pushed aside the oatmeal and reached for Reese’s hand. “You may still be pissed at him, but it sounds like you had a great relationship with your dad up until he left. You could probably reach out to him. I’m sure he’d take your call.”

Reese bit her lip to keep from crying. “When I won gold with Cam in Beijing, my mom didn’t come because she had to dog sit for a friend. Jordy was *busy*. But...”

“Your dad was there.”

She nodded as tears escaped her eyes.

“Like I said, Reese, you can call him. I don’t know your dad, but I know he’ll pick up the phone and he’ll be happy to hear from you.”

Reese gathered herself, putting on her stoic face. “Yeah, I’ll think about it.”

He frowned. “I have a feeling you won’t.”

They stared at each other, their gazes locked. Reese turned away first. “More coffee?”

“I’m good.”

“I should probably call my mom.” She could hear the coldness in her voice, and Grady picked up on it too.

“Okay. I’ll see you later? For our dinner date?”

Reese had almost forgotten about that. “Right.”

On parting, he kissed her forehead, and Reese gave herself a few minutes to collect herself. She took that time to read the article in full. Grady hadn’t been wrong, the piece’s tone did ring as neutral, like the first chapter in a story she probably wasn’t going to like. And while her father’s words had been kind, it was her mother who had stuck the knife in. As usual.

She picked up the phone and dialed. “Hey, Mom,” Reese said.

“Oh, hello, Reese. It’s been a while. I’m guessing you need something?”

Reese wasn’t certain her mother had always been this way. Yes, she’d been aloof for as long as Reese could remember, half invested in parenting, but she hadn’t gotten mean until Reese hit her teens. And when her father left, Fran Beresford went full-on bitch. There was a time Reese would have killed for her mother’s approval.

Now she didn't care. She didn't like the way she felt when she was around her mother. As if at any moment something catastrophic would happen. It was better keeping Fran at arm's length.

"I guess I do. I need you to stop talking to Josh Semple."

"Who is Josh Semple?" her mother asked, clearly irritated by the request.

"The reporter with the *Gazette*. The one you spoke to about my childhood. The one you spoke to without asking me first."

"Well, he called and asked questions. I didn't think it was a big deal. And I didn't realize I needed to run things past you. It's not like you tell me things."

"What are you talking about?"

"The new boyfriend you have. I have to find out from Facebook."

Reese's hand tightened around her phone. "We're dating. It's hardly anything serious. I wasn't keeping it a secret."

"And I wasn't keeping my conversation with that reporter a secret either. Besides, he talked to me weeks ago. I'd forgotten all about it."

"Please don't speak to him again."

A long silence passed before her mother spoke. "Fine. Is there anyone else I shouldn't talk to?"

"Yes. Anyone asking about me."

Fran huffed. "Is there anything new with this Jennifer situation? Anything I need to know? Or should know?"

Reese thought to lie and tell her mother nothing, but she hated doing that, so she gave her the abbreviated version. Reese could tell by the change of her mother's tone that Fran appreciated being updated. Their relationship would never be perfect, but she knew—or at least hoped—she could trust her mother with the limited information when her mother realized the ramifications. As for her father, while Grady had given her

something to think about, she had no intention of calling him.
She still wasn't ready to forgive.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Reese stared at her reflection. She'd chosen a pastel-pink-colored dress with spaghetti straps that had a corset-like top and a flowy skirt. The fundraising dinner she was attending with Grady was in support of cancer research at Mr. Radcliffe's hospital. While Ted Radcliffe was a cardiologist, this foundation was near and dear to him. Grady had mentioned that Ted's youngest sister had died of a leukemia when she was just eighteen, and that Ted had been a supporter of the foundation from its inception.

"Why didn't your dad become an oncologist?" Reese had asked the day he'd told her about this piece of his family's history.

"I think it hit too close to home. And he was just going into medicine when she passed, so he focused on another specialty."

And that had made sense to her.

She grabbed a pair of strappy pale-pink pumps and headed for the bathroom to check her makeup one last time. She had the summer bronzed look with a dark pink lip. She'd done an updo herself—something she'd learned to do from her skating days—and made sure no strand of hair was out of place. Satisfied with how she looked, she took a breath and headed for the living room. Grady would be by any second, so she slipped on the impossibly high heels and prayed she didn't stumble. She put a tube of lipstick, her phone, and her ID in her purse. As she mulled a sweater, she heard the knock on her door.

“You look gorgeous,” Grady said when she swung it open.

He was in a black suit and a tie nearly matching her dress. He looked delicious.

“You clean up pretty well, too.”

“We’re going to make a hot couple.”

Normally, she wouldn’t have been nervous. This would have been just another charity event she would have loved and been honored to attend, but this was different. People had a skewed idea of her now, and those who would usually flock to her...well, she expected them to stay away. She wasn’t going to push her luck. If people didn’t want to talk to or be seen with her, she wouldn’t force it. But having no one to talk to other than Grady? That would take some getting used to.

The great thing about their building was its proximity to downtown. They were at the hotel where the reception was taking place in a matter of minutes. Reese had hoped they’d be sitting with the Radcliffes, but she was out of luck. They’d been placed at a table with the foundation’s major donors. Reese would be on full display, trying to charm them if possible. A tall order for a social pariah.

But first, she and Grady circulated through the room. He took hold of her hand, and after they’d both grabbed a flute of champagne, they chatted with various people. Reese put on her megawatt smile and when the various guests chatted with her, she felt her anxiety ease.

They don’t hate me.

“What a terrible thing going on with you,” one older lady said. She had to be in her eighties, with her shiny white hair pulled into a bun and her makeup effortlessly done. Her red lipstick was hard to miss. “That woman should be sued. You should sue her. You know, she’s just jealous. Don’t let it bother you.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Alderman. I appreciate your support.”

Mrs. Alderman was old money, but she had a heart of gold. Reese had seen her before at charity events, but she had never had the opportunity to speak to her. Mrs. Alderman loved to

dress up for parties and dragged along her husband of fifty-something years. They had three children, but the Aldermans had made it clear to anyone listening that they planned to donate most of their fortune to charity. And the York Cancer Foundation charity was one of them.

“I read Josh Semple’s article,” she said, dropping her voice. “I hope you and your father can work things out.”

Not her too!

She hated that the world now knew she was estranged from her father, and she had both her parents to thank for that revelation.

“I say, never say never.”

“Good, dear,” Mrs. Alderman said, patting Reese on the hand.

After chatting with several more donors, they took their seats. Dinner was a long, drawn-out affair, but Reese kept a smile on her face and spoke with everyone at her table. The night was going well. Between the main course and dessert, she excused herself to use the ladies’ room. There were a few other women in the room, but none seemed to take notice of her. As she touched up her makeup and put on more lipstick, she could feel a pair of eyes staring at her through the mirror. A woman, her expression blank, kept her gaze focused on Reese.

“Nice evening, isn’t it?” Reese said cheerfully.

Reese saw the women’s jaw tense. She was likely in her late thirties to mid-forties. She was dressed in a classic black dress and enough gold jewelry to be blinding.

“I’m adopted.”

Reese felt her words like a gut punch. She knew she couldn’t react. She’d hear the woman out, take her abuse, and apologize. She knew the drill.

“One of our sons is adopted,” the woman went on. “So to see and hear that people like you make fun of people who are adopted, to attack them, to make fun of them and use it against

them is disgusting. You are disgusting. How dare you even show your face here. My ten-year-old son saw what you said, and we talked about it, but it upset him because now he's going to wonder if someone like you is going to say something nasty to him. To make him feel less of a son to me and my husband. So fuck you."

The woman was shaking now, and Reese thought to reach out, but she was certain that was the last thing the woman wanted from her.

"I don't think there is anything I can say that would be appropriate, but I am truly sorry. I was a stupid kid who said some really stupid things. I had no real idea how much those words would hurt. It's not something I believe..."

"Then own what you did. Apologize for being the nasty piece of work you are. You ruined that young woman's life."

If only this woman knew.

"I'm sorry for the way her life turned out, but I can't and won't take responsibility for the course her life took. I'm not going to say more about it."

"Coward."

The woman snatched her purse and stormed out of the ladies' room. Reese took a couple of deep breaths, her body vibrating. She'd wanted to tell that woman what Jen had done to her, and that while she herself had retaliated in the worst possible way, Jen was no saint.

But the woman had taken a side, and she was never going to change her mind on who she thought Reese was.

Once Reese had collected herself enough, she made her way back to the table. Grady was there, eating his tiramisu. He smiled at her when she sat down, but his expression dimmed when he saw her distress.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

"You look a little pale."

“It’s nothing.”

The last thing she wanted to do was burden him with her drama. She sat through the last of the speeches and award presentations, and she kept a smile pasted on her face, but she thought of the woman from the ladies’ room. How many people thought of Reese in the same way? Probably too many, and if she didn’t get her life back on course soon and win back all the people she’d lost, she feared she’d be ruined forever.

Chapter Thirty-Three

With training camp in full gear for Grady, he was often busy, or on a road trip with the team. He wasn't expected to play in any of the early preseason games—those games were for rising stars—but he went with the team, nonetheless. Reese missed his company, but she stayed immersed in her work. And when Cam was in town again for more meetings with his father's lawyer, Reese asked him to stay over. When he was done his meetings, he and Reese went to an old-school diner for some burgers and fries.

"Your dad must be working you to the bone," Reese said, swishing the ice in her soda.

"Just a lot of work lately."

"You mentioned something about acquiring another business? Something like that?"

"Yeah."

Something was off with him. He was normally upbeat, the one who propped her up, who made jokes, who always had a smile on his face. "You don't seem yourself."

"Yeah, it's nothing," he said, forcing a smile.

Reese shook her head. "It's not nothing. It's not Devi, is it?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Then what?"

He stared into his soda and frowned. “Things are a little complicated at work right now, and it’s a lot to deal with.”

She wasn’t buying any of this. “We share everything. Why are you being cagey?”

“I’m not being cagey. I just...don’t want to burden you with anything. You’ve got enough going on.”

Her heart rate ticked up. “You better tell me what’s going on, because right now, I’m getting a little nervous.”

He groaned and pushed his soda away. “The meetings I have with Dad’s lawyers? It’s to avoid bankruptcy.”

His words jolted her. “Bankruptcy?”

“Business hasn’t been great, and Dad made some bad financial decisions. When I started working on his books, I realized just how bad it was. We’ve been trying to turn it around these last few months, but it looks like he has no other choice but to file for bankruptcy and lose everything.”

Reese blinked a few times. This came as a shock to her. “I’m so sorry, Cam. I guess he doesn’t want you to help him out financially?”

Cam shifted in his seat and looked pensive. “I’m not in a position to help him.”

“It’s that bad?”

“It’s bad and I don’t have enough money to help. I’m planning a wedding and we just bought a house.”

Something wasn’t adding up. Reese knew how much they’d made on the skating tour after they’d retired. Sure, it wasn’t a total windfall, but he must have saved more money than that, unless his father’s debt was astronomical.

“How much does your dad owe?”

“Almost half a million. And he’s putting more and more money into the business every month. He can’t go on this way. Mom is looking for a full-time job to help out, and I said I would do what I could.”

“I’d offer to help, but all my extra cash is invested in the business.”

“I would never ask anyway.”

Reese circled back to Cam. “Do you have your money tied up in investments?”

Cam looked confused, but then something seemed to dawn on him. “Reese, I didn’t make that much money post skating. You were the one with all the endorsements. Companies loved using your face and body. I’m not handsome and I don’t appear to be very marketable.”

“But I always thought—”

“It’s okay. Look, I can’t complain about how it was. I made lots of money on tour, enough that my dad doesn’t have to pay me, but I can’t bail him out. Besides, I don’t think he’d let me bail him out.”

Reese hated that Cam’s family was going through this. They were like her real family. “I can try to help.”

“No. Dad’s resigned to the fact he’s going to lose the business. It’s for the best. It’s going to make him physically sick if he doesn’t let it go. He’s still young enough to do work with other contractors.”

“What if I talked to Grady—”

“No! Let it go, please. It’s fine,” Cam said, putting on a mournful smile. “Really, it’s all fine. I didn’t tell you about this sooner because you had your own crap to deal with. Besides, we’re in the final stages of it now.”

“I’m really sorry about all this.”

“I am too, but let’s enjoy our evening together, okay?”

“Okay,” she said reluctantly.

The server came around with their meals and they dove in. Reese took a bite of her cheeseburger and sighed contentedly. It was her favorite, and she made sure she got it every time.

“Enough about me. What’s going on with you?” Cam asked.

Reese dipped a fry into some ketchup and shrugged. Did she want to tell him what had happened at the hospital foundation dinner? She hadn't told Grady, even though it had shaken her so much that night, she thought she'd be sick.

"I went to a fundraising dinner with Grady. John insisted I go. It was mostly fine, but then this lady caught me in the ladies' room, and it didn't go well. She let me know what she thought of what I'd said to Jen when I was fifteen years old."

"Oh crap."

"It was awful. I didn't tell Grady because I didn't want to ruin the evening. But it bugs me even now."

"You're always going to get those kinds of people."

"And I suppose you saw the Semple article."

"I did. I wasn't going to bring it up until you did."

"I feel like his new series is going to be like an ax waiting to fall. I've already told my mom not to speak to him again, and as for my father...well, I have no control over that."

"Semple's been trying to get a hold of me, but I politely told him I wasn't going to participate. As for your dad..."

"Not you too! Grady has already tried the guilt trip. It's not going to work."

Cam frowned a little as he watched her trail another fry through her ketchup. She wasn't going to make eye contact with him because she knew what his face would tell her.

"Your dad did a terrible thing, leaving you behind. I will never argue otherwise, but he loves you like crazy. He was at every competition cheering you on. And I know you're hurt by what he did, but I'm pretty sure he regrets leaving you."

Reese's eyes met Cam's now. "But he didn't do anything about it. He could have asked me to come live with him. Instead of making me live with her."

"He was over an hour from the rink. He probably thought he was doing the right thing."

“I would have woken up at three in the morning to get to the rink if it meant not having to live with her. Do you know that I worry all the time that I’m going to be like her? Of all the competitors I’ve had to face in my life, the biggest one was my own mother.”

Reese could see the pity in Cam’s eyes, so she looked away.

“That’s why we had you stay at our place for long chunks of time. We knew it was a toxic environment for you.”

“Remember that time I stayed with your parents all winter? My mother didn’t even care. She didn’t call to see if I was okay. She was happy to be rid of me.”

“I know your mom will never do this, but she needs therapy, to deal with whatever is going on with her. As an outside observer, I think she surrounds herself with all that junk because it replaces something that is missing. Maybe the fact she never had more kids, or that she was in a failing marriage, I don’t know. But she’s not well.”

Reese pushed her plate away with nearly a slam. “I refuse to feel sorry for her.”

Cam’s green eyes opened wide. “Sorry for her? Never. I’m trying to figure out what makes her tick.”

“I wouldn’t bother. She has no intention of changing.”

“Don’t you want to be able to salvage something one day?”

“If you want an answer at this very minute, it’s a no.”

He stared at Reese for a long time before he spoke again. “Something you just said is sticking with me. You aren’t like her, Reese. Not even a bit, but do you think you are?”

She kept her gaze focused on the white Formica table. “Sometimes I see it. We’re both cold, distant, lacking personal connections. Don’t you see that?”

His face contorted in confusion. “No, not even a little. You’re not cold at all. You’d give anyone the shirt off your back. Personal connections? Hello, what about me? Distant?”

No, but I think you close yourself off because you're scared of being her. Don't make this a self-fulfilling prophecy."

She wanted to protest, but maybe he was right. But what if he wasn't?

He put up one hand in surrender. "I'm going to back off. I probably should have done that already."

"Let's not talk about me, my mom, my dad, Jennifer, your dad's business, or Josh Semple."

"Then what are we going to talk about?"

Reese couldn't help laugh at the goofy smile on Cam's face. "Anything but what I just mentioned."

"Tell you what, let's finish our burgers and go see a movie. We'll buy the biggest bucket of popcorn and watch the funniest movie they have. Just like old times."

"I'd like that."

It was just what she needed. Mindless entertainment with her best friend.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Reese was sitting on her condo balcony with a fresh cup of coffee enjoying the crisp morning air. The trees had just begun to change colors and the rain from the night before had left behind the smell of decomposing leaves. She'd always liked that smell of musty sweetness, but autumn also brought on a lingering sense of anxiety. Just like Grady, she'd hated the beginning of a school year as a kid. It meant added responsibilities beyond skating. It was also a time she struggled to make friends or keep old ones. She didn't have as much time as everyone else, and unlike Cam, she wasn't outgoing, so connections rarely lasted. And though she was a good student, she would sometimes fall behind in her work, and it was a battle to get up to speed.

She sat back in her lounge and grabbed her iPad. She'd decided to take Friday off. Grady had a rare night off, too, and they planned to enjoy the night in with movies, dinner, and who knows what else. Her heart skipped a beat at that.

She hit the Home button on her iPad and saw a notification for a new *Lowdown* post. She'd subscribed because she didn't want to miss anything posted about her, and even though it had been almost a week with no new gossip regarding her situation, she checked each notification.

And today was her unlucky day.

She read through the post and seethed with anger. The mole had told the blog's writer all about her childhood, right down to her mother's hoarding and how her father had abandoned Reese when she'd turned eighteen. No detail had

been left out. She wanted to throw her iPad off the balcony. Who had done this? It took her a moment to calm down—even her breathing—before she could come up with suspects, but the list was still mostly the same. Cam and his family, John, Marnie, Daria, Grady, and whomever they told. The list was still far too long. She could rule out her parents. The blog was too embarrassing for them to have participated.

She called Cam, but his phone went to voicemail. It was too early to call Grady, since he'd been on a road trip and had come in late the night before. She checked her watch. It was just after eight, and Daria was always in the office early.

“Did you see the *Lowdown*?” she asked the second Daria answered. She didn't even give her a chance to say hello.

“I did,” Daria said with a groan.

“I am so upset right now. I can't believe anyone would do this!”

“I know. It's terrible,” Daria said sadly.

“Has anyone around the office been gossiping? Trying to find information about me?”

“Not that I know of, but they wouldn't do it around me. They know we're pretty close.”

Reese went into her condo. Even though she was several floors up, she trusted no one. She made sure the door was shut behind her before plopping down on her sofa. “Can you do me a favor? I want you to poke around, see if you can find out who has been talking. I know it won't be easy. I also know that it's no secret what an awful relationship I have with my parents. But the hoarding? I haven't told many people about that.”

“That is an excellent clue. Does John even know about that?”

“He's been to my mother's house, back when I first signed with him, so he would have seen it. For now, it's important that we come up with a list. I need to get this sorted.”

“I don't blame you. But if I can point one thing out?”

Reese paused at that. “Sure.”

“The reaction to the blog has been pretty positive. You’re getting a lot of good attention, people giving you sympathy. I’m not condoning what’s happening, but maybe this rat isn’t really a rat?”

Her cheeks burned. She didn’t want sympathy, but she didn’t want to argue with Daria either. “At least something good is coming of it. We’ll talk more about this on Monday, unless the Semple piece is a hit job. We won’t know that until tomorrow.”

She got off the phone and decided to go for a run. She had too much pent-up energy that needed burning off. She took a route through the park, noticing nothing or no one. She was too tightly wound to think about anything other than running. She’d pushed herself harder than she would have normally, and she was panting when she got home. She hit the shower and as she was making herself another coffee, she noticed a text from Grady.

Come over. I saw the blog.

It felt strange to walk down the hall with her coffee cup, but she didn’t care. She knocked on the door and Grady answered it in seconds.

“Hello, beautiful,” he said, flashing her a warm smile.

She frowned. “I hate people.”

“And a good morning to you too! How about some breakfast? That will cheer you up. I shouldn’t have it, but what about some blueberry pancakes? I can make the blueberries into a smiley face.”

“Okay,” she said. No one had ever made her smiley face pancakes before.

She followed him into the kitchen and sat down on one of the bistro chairs at his island. He pulled out the flour, baking powder, sugar, milk, and an egg. While he whipped up the pancake batter, she sorted through the blueberries. Ten minutes

later, he presented her with a stack of pancakes and a bottle of maple syrup. Her pancakes did have smiley faces.

“Thank you for this.”

“I know you’re having a bad day.”

“I’m embarrassed to see my entire life put on display like that. I’m sure my mother is furious and probably blames me about what came out. And I’m no closer to figuring out who is feeding this blog information.”

Grady speared a chunk of pancake and popped it into his mouth. As he chewed he put a finger up. He hopped off his bistro chair and grabbed a pad of paper and pen from a drawer.

“I have an idea,” he said. “Let’s take our list of suspects and figure out their motives. And we can go from there.”

“We’re would-be detectives?”

“Do you have anything else to do? Other than stew?”

“Good point.”

They worked on the list even though Reese couldn’t be certain who knew all the gossip that was being spilled. But she started with the big names and worked out who they may have told.

“Let’s start with John,” Grady said. “What are the chances he would talk to *Lowdown*?”

“Zero. He wouldn’t put his revenue stream in jeopardy, and he certainly wouldn’t go about repairing my image this way. He has no motive.”

“We can cross him off the list, but do we know if he’s told anyone?”

“I don’t think so, do you?”

Grady shook his head. “Nah. He’s too private and professional. He wouldn’t have told his family or friends. We can eliminate him.”

Reese pointed to Grady’s name on the list. “I think we can eliminate you too. I know you wouldn’t screw me over.”

“I also have no motive.”

He crossed his own name off the list, then said, “Marnie? I can’t say I know her well. We’ve only chatted a couple of times.”

“Obviously I can’t say for certain,” Reese said. “But I don’t see a motive. And John would kill her.”

“But we can’t say for certain, right?”

Reese got up to refill her coffee. She thought about Marnie. She wasn’t close with her the way she was with Daria, but they had shared stories about their lives. She knew about Marnie’s alcoholic mom. But like John, Marnie had been to the house a few times. It was obvious Fran was a hoarder. Still, Reese was pretty sure that Marnie was loyal. It would be hard to believe that she’d stoop to giving information to a trashy blog.

“I guess we can’t, but it’s still a long shot. I don’t know what her motive would be.”

“Could she have told other people?”

“Yes, I suppose. But that’s not something I could see her doing.”

“So we aren’t striking her off the list yet?”

“No, but the odds it’s her are slim.”

“What about Cam?”

She put a splash of cream in her coffee and sat back down. “Not a chance. He would never do anything like that to me.”

“Would he have told anyone?”

“He may have told his fiancée, and I’m sure his family knows, but they wouldn’t spill the beans. They have no reason...” She trailed off and Grady arched an eyebrow.

“No reason to? What?”

Reese groaned and massaged her temples. “I’m about to tell you something and you have to keep it between us.”

“Of course.”

“Cam’s family is going through some financial troubles. What am I talking about? It’s more than that. His dad is losing his business and filing for bankruptcy. But he would never betray me like that. Not for a couple of bucks from a trashy blog. Besides, his dad wouldn’t even know what a blog was.”

“The blog pays five figures for certain tips and stories.”

Reese’s eyes opened wide. “Holy shit! How do you know that?”

“I looked into it. That’s what I heard. If someone needed the money, they could keep giving tips. This blog is huge. They have video channels now; they’re all over the place.”

“Still, Cam wouldn’t do it.”

“Would his father? Mother? Maybe his sister?”

“They’re like family to me. I don’t think so.”

A hole was forming in her chest.

Could someone from Cam’s family be doing this?

“I say we don’t cross him off the list until we can clear his whole family.”

“Right. Sure,” she said absently.

“And last we have Daria. You know her best. I don’t know her at all.”

“She’s been a loyal soldier. She wouldn’t do this. And I would be shocked if she had told anyone about my life. It wouldn’t make sense. And it’s not like she has a boyfriend to confide in.”

“It leaves us with a small list of potential suspects. Of course, there could be others who are associated with people on our list that we don’t know about.”

“That’s a possibility.”

But Reese was pretty sure that she knew who her mole was, and it was going to blow her world apart.

Chapter Thirty-Five

First thing the next morning, Reese ran down to the convenience store near their building to pick up a copy of the *Gazette*. She'd left Grady behind, sleeping peacefully. When she got back, she popped a reusable pod into the coffee maker and stared at the paper resting harmlessly on the island countertop. Part of her was dying to know what was inside, the other part was terrified. But she could do this on her own now. She didn't need to rely on Grady. She was a gold medal winner, for God's sake! She took a deep breath and dove in.

She flipped open to the Entertainment section. Semple's continuation of his series had migrated to page three. At least it was no longer on the front page of the section. Her heart thumped as she read the first line.

Reese Beresford is no saint, but neither is Jennifer Brennan.

A double sting, Reese thought. She dove into the piece, trying to keep her focus without skipping ahead. This article started where the last one had left off. It began at Woodbine Middle School, which Reese and Jennifer had both attended. Semple had gone back and found as many of their schoolmates as he could. Reese remembered some names, but others were foreign to her. As she read, she was brought back to a time she'd rather forget. She'd had a small core of friends. Mia and Robin had been steady friends until high school when they'd drifted apart. Semple had managed to track down both.

Her eyes stung with tears as her old friends—ones she hadn't seen in years—spoke about their friendship and Reese's commitment to skating. They'd also confirmed the relentless bullying, and how Jennifer went out of her way to make Reese's life difficult. They spoke of how Reese had been good at deflecting the bullying, but that by the time it had gotten excessive, the friends were no longer close and hadn't been directly involved, but they wouldn't have blamed Reese for finally fighting back.

Reese set the paper down and thought of Mia and Robin. They'd been good to her, her only real and true friends in middle school. Why had she allowed herself to drift from them? And even now, when they hadn't spoken in years, they'd still been good and supportive friends. She vowed to reach out to them. That would be her priority.

Semple had found friends of Jennifer's from that time as well. All people Reese had never connected with, people who had never said a word to her, people Reese viewed as the popular crowd. Two had spoken to Semple, but he'd noted that several more had declined to get involved. Of the two who had, one didn't recall much, but said Jennifer was hard to get along with. She also said she barely remembered Reese from that time. The other said she remembered Reese as a quiet kid who minded her own business but was also someone Jennifer thought of as competition. She made several comments about Jennifer's competitive streak.

The piece ended with an interview from a few skaters around the club at the same time as Reese. One had clearly befriended Jennifer and said that Reese was constantly showing off, making all the other skaters look bad. The other two said Reese had always been quick to help out, and was polite and courteous. They couldn't say the same about Jen, who often made the rink atmosphere hostile.

Semple concluded the piece by blaming the adults around the "two young women" who did nothing to prevent what was about to happen.

Reese folded the newspaper. He'd ended the article with a great hook, a hook so great that even Reese had no idea what

was about to happen. The emails and texts?

She was dissecting the article when Grady came into the kitchen and kissed the top of her head.

“You’re up early,” Reese said. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No. I have practice at nine. I can’t sleep in. How was it?” he asked, pointing to the paper.

“It was a draw once again. I think he’s doing it intentionally.”

“Likely. He wants to create some tension for when he reveals the big climax.”

“I can’t wait,” Reese said bitterly.

“I’m going to make a protein shake, then head out to training camp. Let’s do something tonight. Anything.”

“Sure.”

Once Grady had finished his shake and showered, he kissed her on the cheek and was out the door. Reese grabbed her phone and searched for Mia’s and Robin’s profiles on social media. While Robin had since married, she still went by her maiden name. Mia had been easy to find too. She sent them both personal messages. At first, she’d thought to make it generic and polite, but that was the old Reese. The one who kept herself closed off from too much emotion. She wanted Mia and Robin to know what they meant to her, and more importantly, how special they were. She also apologized for how their friendships had ended. She hit send knowing she may not hear back from them, but that it was worth the chance.

She didn’t have to wait long. Within an hour she’d heard from both, and their return messages had been so kind that it had brought Reese to tears. She decided this time to message them both together.

Maybe we can meet for coffee sometime? I know you both have your own lives now, but I’d like to catch up, see how you’re doing.

She was putting herself out here and possibly facing rejection, but she had to try.

Mia responded first.

I'd love to.

Reese beamed, and when Robin's message came moments later, adding that she'd love to get together too, Reese thought her heart might burst.

Yes, let's do it soon. This week?

She couldn't believe she had Josh Semple to thank for this.

* * *

John called a meeting for Monday morning in Reese's boardroom. He'd sent her an email late Sunday night and requested that Cam be there too. He hadn't said much, but inviting Cam along seemed odd to Reese.

Daria had coffee and muffins waiting for them, and as they sat around the boardroom table, Reese couldn't help but feel a sense of foreboding. She also took the opportunity to look around the room. Essentially, all her known suspects were sitting around the same table. Marnie, John, Daria, and Cam.

"I have a few things I want to talk about. First, Semple has asked me again if Reese would be willing to do a sit-down with him. I'm not going to lie; I'm worried. Originally, I wanted to wait until November for Reese's interview with Kasey Belmont, but I don't think we can wait much longer. Marnie and I have been talking it over, and we've arranged for something three weeks from now. That means a lot of prep beforehand, so we'll start next week."

"Three weeks? You've been saying this is a long game, now we're rushing it?" Reese said.

"I worry about Semple. We need to get ahead of him. The interview will be Friday night, before the last article of his series."

“But what if he moves up his date?” Cam asked.

“It’s set in stone from what I’ve heard. I’ll arrange for some practice interview sessions starting next week.”

Reese’s head was spinning. She needed more time.

“Cam, on to your request to do more promotional materials with Reese. I’m afraid that given the current situation, that’s out of the question.”

That caught her off guard. When had Cam requested anything? And without speaking to her first? She looked over at him, but his focus was on John.

“I understand that, but even the smallest thing would help right now.”

“It’s out of question. We aren’t at the point that Reese should resume any sort of endorsement.”

Cam’s jaw tensed. “You left me with the impression it was a possibility. Now you’re shutting the door on that opportunity?”

“I apologize if I gave you that impression, but we need to keep Reese’s opportunities on hold right now.”

Cam slammed this fist on the table, jarring everyone.

“I have helped out every step along the way. Now I need a favor in return. I’m not asking for a lot.”

John slapped on a fake smile, the one he used when he was about to be dismissive. “While I understand your current situation, you need to understand that we can’t bring down Reese’s brand just because you found yourself in a predicament. I will try to find you something that you can do on your own.”

Reese looked between the two men. She didn’t like the direction John was taking the conversation.

“A few thousand is not going to cut it. My dad is sinking right now. He needs a damn lifeboat!”

Silence filled the air. John cleared his throat. “I will see what we can do. I’ve told you that already,” he said calmly.

Cam gritted his teeth. Reese had never seen him so angry. “I need to step out.”

He nearly tore the door off its hinges as he left and everyone at the table looked at one another.

“What was that about?” Daria asked.

Before Reese could stop him or say it wasn’t anyone’s business, John spoke.

“It seems his father has fallen on some hard times. Something to do with his business. Anyway, let’s move on.”

Reese assumed Cam would come back right away, but when twenty minutes had passed, she put her hand up to stop the meeting. They’d moved on to discussing the interview prep, but all she could think about was Cam. She’d even forgot to bring up the *Lowdown*, and subtly inquire about it to see what she could glean.

“I’m going to go find Cam. You’ll probably be done the meeting by the time I get back.”

She scoured the offices and the small warehouse attached. He was nowhere, but when she looked out to the parking lot, she could see his SUV was still there. She then remembered a small eating area outside, complete with a couple of picnic tables. Sure enough, he was sitting there, staring absently at a neighboring building. Reese sat across from him and he tried to smile.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. John is a jerk. I told him about Dad, and he promised he’d help me out. I should have known he was lying.”

Venom dripped from Cam’s voice.

“Let me help,” Reese said.

“I don’t want to stretch you too thin. I’ll think of something. The bank has given us a bit of a reprieve, so maybe I can scrape something together. I even reached out to the skating tours, and it seems I’m nothing without you.”

“Cam, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. It will work out.”

Even though she had enough to deal with, she was going to make Cam and his family a priority, just as she had with Mia and Robin. She owed it to Cam and his family. And she didn’t care what John thought about it.

Chapter Thirty-Six

A few days later, the *Lowdown* had another exclusive, and it had to do with Cam's dad and suggested Reese had turned her back on him and his family. The blog enraged John, and he demanded that Cam come forward to dispute the claim. He did without hesitation, but it made Reese even more determined to find the mole.

"I think I can rule Cam's family out," she told Grady over sushi in her condo. "At least I think I can. I don't see them doing this."

"Unless they were desperate," Grady said, easing a dynamite roll into his mouth.

"I suppose that's possible. But Cam would never do it."

"You think it's down to Daria and Marnie?"

"And anyone they've told. And anyone Cam and John have told. I'm assuming you've told no one."

"Not a soul. Not even my family."

Reese massaged her temples. "I still don't see Marnie or Daria having a motive. I hate that I'm saying this, but Cam is the only one with a clear motive."

"But you've eliminated him."

"I know, I know," she said, feeling a headache coming on. "My mind is a jumbled mess. Trying to figure out who is doing this is driving me crazy."

"Have you considered the possibility it could be John?"

Reese dipped a tempura yam roll into some soya sauce.

“No. Do you suspect him?”

“Not really, but I could see him having someone feed info to *Lowdown* for PR. But based on this most recent post, maybe not? It didn’t give you any good press.”

“What do I do?” she asked and sighed.

“My two cents? Talk to John. Make him aware of your theories. You need to put a stop to this.”

“Can we talk about something else?”

“Of course,” he said, grabbing a veggie roll.

“I wanted to thank you for something. It’s a bit indirect, but it’s still important. When the Semple piece came out on Saturday, I reached out to my old friends Mia and Robin. I hadn’t seen or spoken to them in almost thirteen years. Anyway, we met at a café this afternoon and caught up on old times. It was great. I have no idea where it will go from here, but I was happy I reconnected.”

“That’s great, but what does it have to do with me?”

She fiddled with her chopsticks before finally making eye contact with Grady. “Spending time with you has helped me get out of my shell. Had this been months ago or before the scandal, I wouldn’t have dreamed of messaging them. I would have assumed they’d rebuff me. Or worse, the thought to reach out simply wouldn’t have occurred to me. So thank you for that.”

He set down his chopsticks and leaned over the island to kiss her. “You know, I really had nothing to do with that.”

“I’m in a better headspace. That wouldn’t have happened without you.”

“Sure, but that’s still about you. But since we are talking about this, there is someone else you could reach out to.”

She bit her lip thinking about that. Messaging her old friends was one thing, but her father?

“How about we chalk this up as a win and I consider calling my dad. Would that make you happy?”

He nodded. “That would make me very happy.”

* * *

She took Grady’s advice and told John she wanted to see him. She went to his office instead and insisted they speak alone when he suggested Marnie join the meeting. He motioned for Reese to take a seat and frowned when he took the seat behind his desk.

“Must be important if you came to my office.”

She rarely visited his office because he didn’t invite her very often. His posh spot downtown screamed his success, but he usually only bothered meeting new clients here to show off what he could do for them. After that, he didn’t want to remind them how much money he was making off them.

“It is. I’d like to talk about the *Lowdown* blog.”

He nodded as if he knew she was going to say that. “I’ve noticed some things that are concerning.”

“I’m concerned we have someone on the inside.”

He tapped his fingers on his desk and took a long moment to think. “Yes, we do,” he finally said.

“What’s our next step?”

“I don’t know who it is. Do you?”

She tapped her fingers nervously on the arm of her chair. “I have a list, and I’ve narrowed down the names, but I need to know if you’ve told anyone about my mother, about Cam’s father’s business, etcetera.”

“I haven’t breathed a word to anyone. Not even my wife. It would be highly unprofessional.”

“Then that leaves Cam, Daria, Marnie, Grady, and anyone they’ve told. I have eliminated Grady. He hasn’t told anyone,

and he was no reason to gossip about me. So that leaves the three others, and I don't suspect Cam."

John blinked a few times. He took off his reading glasses and set them down on his desk. He made eye contact with Reese, and it felt like a lightning strike. "I wouldn't take Cam off that list."

Reese tilted her head. "What?"

John massaged his temples and he seemed to be debating what to say next. "I shouldn't be telling you this...it is utterly unprofessional, but this issue with Cam's father has been going on for a lot longer than you think. Cam has been trying to help his father for over a year. I sat him down and gave him my honest opinion, that his father should cut his losses and move on with his life. Turns out he's a stubborn man, so Cam has been sinking his savings into this money pit of a business. Cam has nothing else to give. If it wasn't for his fiancée, he'd be living on the street."

Reese's jaw dropped.

"He told me he was financially secure."

"Perhaps he didn't want to worry you. I've done as much as I can for him, but he doesn't garner the same attention you do. You have more cachet, a pretty face, a fantastic athlete's body. Securing endorsements for you—prior to Jennifer—was easy. But Cam is nothing more than a sidekick. I've managed to land him some speaking engagements, but they don't pay much."

Reese's head was spinning. "But why are you telling me that I can't take him off my list?"

"He's desperate. He asked me for a loan, and I said I couldn't. Ethically, it was impossible. But this *Lowdown* blog...I've looked into them. They pay a lot of money for their stories and gossip. This could be a source of income for Cam."

"He would never do that to me," Reese said with a vehement shake of her head.

"I'm seeing a side to him I've never seen before. And maybe he's hiding it from you because he doesn't want you to

see it.”

“But I offered to help him. He declined.”

“He may eventually take you up on your offer. Please don’t give him money. The business can’t be saved. I had my own accountant look at the books. It’s beyond help. And if they don’t stop propping it up, they’ll lose their house too.”

“I don’t understand how this happened. It’s a good business.”

“Cam and his father are very similar. Too kind. Sounds like his father would offer people deals he couldn’t really afford. Or he did people a lot of favors. It caught up to him. And I can’t help but wonder if Cam thinks giving these tips to *Lowdown* doesn’t hurt anyone.”

“I can’t wrap my head around this. But one of the blogs was about his father’s dire straits.”

“Don’t you think people would be sympathetic to Cam? Maybe give his father some business? Donations?”

Reese hadn’t thought of that.

“Be wary of him, that’s all. I don’t think we can say for certain that he’s not behind it.”

“There is still Marnie and Daria.”

“I would fire Marnie on the spot if I found out it was her. She would never work in this city again, and she knows it. As for Daria, she’s been loyal to you from day one. Why would she do something stupid now? I can’t say whether either have told other people, but I will talk to Marnie and see what can I learn. I suggest you do the same with Daria, but don’t let on what you’re trying to do. Let’s be careful about this.”

“And Cam?”

“I don’t know. When you speak to him next, ask questions, see what he offers. I hope to God he’s not behind this.”

Reese left the meeting empty. Someone close to her had betrayed her, and when she found out who it was, she would never forgive them.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Reese missed having Grady around, especially now, when so much was going on around her. She wanted to talk to him about everything, but she was also aware that his schedule had changed dramatically. With training camp nearly over, she'd have more time with him, but for now, she was dealing with it all alone.

One afternoon she was having lunch with Daria in their small kitchen area when Grady surprised her with flowers. Reese was mid-bite of her Cobb salad when he popped his head in, then thrust the flowers in front of his face. The bouquet was overflowing with roses, lilies, and irises.

"What is this?" Reese asked, rising to take them from him.

"I thought you could use flowers. A beautiful bouquet for a beautiful lady," he said.

"Awww," Daria said from behind them.

"Thank you. Why don't you sit and have lunch with us? Daria grabbed more than we could possibly eat."

"I don't want to interrupt."

"You are not interrupting, right, Daria?"

"The more the merrier," she said with a smile.

Reese grabbed a plate for him and shared some of her salad, and gave him half of her turkey and Swiss sandwich. As Grady and Daria got on like old friends, Reese tried hard not to stare too long at her assistant, wondering if she was behind all the leaks. She'd secretly had their tech guy go through

Daria's computer, and so far, he'd found nothing. Reese hated resorting to this, but she had to eliminate every possibility.

"I've never really had a chance to sit down and chat with you," Grady said to Daria, flashing his megawatt smile. "How long have you worked here?"

"Since Crush started. Before that, John had hired me to be Reese's assistant, right after the first gold medal. It's been an honor, and in the process, I've made a great friend."

"That's cool. I bet this job keeps you busy."

"It does, but I love the work. I've never had a job that I've loved coming to. This has been the first."

"What were you doing before?" Grady asked.

Glenda, from their production team, came in and waved to Reese. Without interrupting Grady and Daria's conversation, Reese got up to meet her.

"I know you're having lunch, but could I steal you for a minute? We got the first samples for next fall's line, and the colors are not a match. They aren't even close."

"Oh, crap." She turned to Daria and Grady. "I'll be right back."

She followed Glenda back to the small production area and to Glenda's desk. There she saw the original sample Reese's team had provided to the manufacturer, and the sample products that had come back from them. The colors weren't even in the same neighborhood. The greens were several shades off, looking almost black instead of forest green. The royal blues were pastels, and the purples were maroon instead of lilac.

"These colors are totally off," Reese said, her heart sinking. "If we don't get this right, and get it right now, it could put production back for weeks."

"I know. That's why I wanted you to come see right away. This is a major screwup. I've already called the manufacturer overseas, but they are closed for the day. I've left them my cell to call me ASAP."

“What sort of contingency plan do we have?”

“I always factor in three to four weeks for things like this. And we’ve had colors be off before, but this... I don’t think this is catastrophic, but we’ll need to move fast and have them send over the next samples right away. I’m sorry about this, Reese. I know you’ve got a lot on your plate and don’t need this too.”

“It’s fine. Things like this happen.”

Reese looked over the samples again. “Other than the colors, the rest is okay? The samples look and feel correct?”

“Everything is perfect otherwise.”

“At least we have that. Anything else while I’m here?”

“Just this small disaster.”

“We’ll make sure it’s resolved.”

Reese headed back to the kitchen area to find Daria and Grady laughing about something. When she retook her seat, she caught herself up with a story Daria was telling Grady about the coffee machine exploding, and how they were finding coffee grounds in the carpet weeks later. Reese remembered. They’d had to have the carpet shampooed three times to get the stains out.

“Everything okay?” Daria asked when she’d finished her story.

“All the color samples for the fall line are off. Some weren’t that bad, but others weren’t even close. Glenda is on it, and we have some leeway, but if we want everything in stores by the end of July, we need to get moving on this.”

“Oh no! How did that happen?”

“Glenda isn’t sure.”

“I wonder if she needs my help. I can put in a few calls.”

Grady checked his watch and stood up. “I hate to disappear, but I have a flight to catch in a few hours. Reese, we’ll talk later? I’ll be back in two days.”

“Sure, of course.”

He kissed her on the cheek and waved goodbye to Daria, who watched him go.

“He’s really sweet. I can see why you’d fall head over heels,” Daria said.

“We aren’t official. We are good friends playing along for everyone.”

Daria narrowed her hazel eyes. “Come on, the two of you look like you’re in love.”

Love? No, Reese was not going that far, not even close. She loved spending time with him, and yes, maybe at some point she would consider more serious dating, but they were still firmly in the friend zone...well, the friends-with-benefits zone. She wasn’t prepared to let him walk out of her life for the sake of a relationship that had a good chance of failing.

“We aren’t in love. We’re just friends.” She said it with such finality that she surprised herself. “Anyway, we have to get back to work. We have a crisis to avert.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Cam was in town for a few hours meeting with lawyers. Reese invited him over for dinner, knowing she would have to talk to him and see what she could find out. Even while she set her dining room table, waiting for both Cam and the takeout to arrive, she was filled with nervous energy. Conversations with Cam had always come naturally, but this time...she had an agenda, and it left her unsettled. She couldn't believe he would betray her.

Cam came before the takeout. He gave her a big hug when she let him in.

"About the *Lowdown*," she said. "I'm so sorry. I can't believe they found out. How are you and your family doing?"

Cam's smile faded as he followed her into the kitchen. She handed him a beer and grabbed one for herself. A little liquid courage couldn't hurt.

"We're all fine. That was a bummer and very unexpected. My parents were pretty upset about it, but now it's out there. And it had an unintended consequence. Dad's actually had an increase in calls for work, and I've already told him he can't keep offering people deals. That's what got him in trouble in the first place."

"At least there's a silver lining."

"I'm sorry you got attacked in the process. That was unfair."

"I'm used to being a punching bag."

The front door buzzed.

“Dinner is here.”

She let up the delivery person and Cam went to greet him. She’d ordered from a Greek place this time, and nearly dove into the spanakopita. After they’d filled themselves as much as they could and talked about anything but the mole, Reese knew she had to bring it back around to that. Her stomach was roiling.

“I’ve been thinking about your dad a lot. And how maybe I can help. I don’t have a lot of money since most of it is tied up with Crush, but I’d be happy to give your dad an interest-free loan.”

Cam shook his head. “We talked about this already. It’s not necessary, and I certainly don’t want to stretch you too thin.”

“But I would hate to see your dad lose everything. And it’s the least I could do after John nixed all the promotional avenues.”

Cam’s face became sullen. “Yeah, that was a blow. I was really hoping he would come through for me there.”

“You were really angry that day,” Reese said, her voice softening.

“It felt like the world was closing in on me. That I had no other solution. I was so frustrated, but that’s not any excuse for my behavior. I’m sorry for acting like a jerk that day.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I felt terrible because I couldn’t help. That’s why I’m offering now. Maybe my contribution can keep your dad from going under.”

He shook his head. “No need. Like I said, the sympathy that blog post brought in gave my dad a bit of a lifeline. I’ve got some feelers out, too, and I may have come into some money.”

Reese tried to make no outward reaction, but she felt a hard lump in her throat. “Oh yeah?”

“I got a little lucky. I finally got a break.”

Blood pumped hard through Reese's veins. "Tell me more about this break," she said, making her voice sound upbeat.

"I can't say right now. But when I can, I'll give you all the details."

Reese swallowed hard again. "We never keep anything from each other. Why now?"

"It's all in the final planning stages. I don't want to blow anything," he said casually.

She placed her shaking hands on her lap. "This is kind of weird. I tell you everything, Cam."

He stood up and grabbed their dishes, walking them over to the sink. "It's not that I want to keep it from you. I can't say anything. And while I know you won't tell anyone, I can't have anyone jeopardize the deal. What if you told Grady and he told someone else?"

"I won't tell Grady," she said, noting that he hadn't turned to face her yet. When he finally did, she could see the annoyance in his eyes.

"Look, I'd love to let you in on this, but it's too important for me to put at risk. The second I get the go-ahead, you'll be the first to know. I promise."

"But—"

"Why are you pushing so hard?"

She closed her eyes for a few seconds. When she opened them again, she had to make a decision. Did she confront him, or hope instead that she could trust him?

"I have a mole, Cam. Someone who is giving information to the *Lowdown*. I don't know who it is, but I have to stop them."

Confusion covered his face. "Okay?"

"I sat down with Grady, and we created a list of everyone I knew who had the information that the mole was giving to *Lowdown*. Obviously, it's not a perfect list, but it has a few key names."

“I’m not following. What does this have to do with me?”

“You’re on the list.”

His green eyes shot open. “Me?”

“There are others on the list. Hell, Grady is on the list. I had to be honest with myself when I created it, and that means I had to put everyone on it. And I hate that it includes you, but you’re on it.”

“Well, take me off,” he snapped. “I wouldn’t talk to a trash blog like that. Not for any reason.”

She closed her eyes again and took a few calming breaths.

“*Lowdown* is paying the mole for their information.”

The silence that followed was suffocating.

“Are you suggesting that I would betray you for a few bucks from a garbage blog?”

She rose now and went to him, but he stepped away from her. “I know you’re desperate—”

“Not that desperate! What makes you think I would do anything like that?”

“Your dad needs the money. You just said the blog had an unintended positive consequence. And now you’re telling me you’ve come into some money, but you can’t tell me where or how? Would you blame me if I had just an iota of suspicion?”

“Yes, I would! I have always had your back, and now you think I would stab you in it? You were the one person I could always trust and depend on, and you’re telling me you don’t trust me?”

“If you would just tell me where you’re getting the money from—”

“I can’t tell you! But if you think I’m getting it from *Lowdown*...I’m not sure we have a friendship anymore.”

“Come on, Cam, don’t say that,” she pleaded.

“You’ve accused me of betraying you. Friends don’t do that.”

“I’m sorry, but—”

“No. I have to go before we say anything else we’re going to regret.”

He left, slamming the door behind him. She ran to her bathroom and threw up.

* * *

Reese had never wished for Grady to be around more than she did the next day. She went into work, tried to call Cam, and texted him when he wouldn’t answer his phone. Then that night, as she crawled into bed, she got a notification of a new *Lowdown* post. This time it had new information. Another blow she wasn’t prepared for.

Reese and Grady: It’s all fake.

She didn’t read the blog right away, not until her heart stopped beating a million times a minute. When she did read it, the mole had told *Lowdown* everything. That it had been John’s idea to rehabilitate Reese’s image and boost Grady’s contract negotiations with the Renegades. That they’d been fake dating for months. No detail had been left out.

She didn’t sleep at all that night, and in the morning, she told Daria she was taking the day off. She waited until Grady got home from his afternoon flight. He came over the second he got home and gave her a hug.

“This is terrible,” she said. “Now what? I talked to John, and he’s already released a denial. This has to stop.”

“I know. I’ve been thinking a lot about this. I know who the mole is.”

“I know too.”

“It’s Cam,” she said at the same moment he declared, “It’s Daria.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

“D aria?”
“Cam?”

They stared at each other, perplexed.

“I thought you were going to say Daria,” Grady said.

“I thought you were going to say Cam,” Reese returned.

“We have some talking to do.”

Reese ran down the reasons why she thought Cam was behind it, right up to the fight and how he’d walked out of her apartment. Grady listened, but when she was done, he gave a slight shake of his head.

“I don’t think it’s Cam. While your evidence is compelling, I can’t stop thinking about my conversation with Daria. When you were called away at lunch the other day, I talked to her, and it got a little weird. And when I look back on everything you’ve told me about her, I can’t help but think it all adds up.”

“You’re going to need to explain it better than that.”

Grady led her to the sofa and they sat.

“Maybe you don’t see it because you’re so directly associated with her, but she comes off a bit strange. She’s too happy to please you, to do whatever she can for you. She’s problem-solving for you before you even have a problem.”

“No, no, no. She’s just doing her job. She’s been an amazing assistant.”

“An amazing assistant who’s invested in you. I also think she’s jealous of your success. When did this gossip with *Lowdown* start?”

“I don’t know. A month or two ago.”

“And what event happened in your life?”

“Jen and her emails?”

“After that?”

Reese racked her brain. The whole period had been a disaster, so parsing events and moments wasn’t so easy. Then it hit her.

“You and me?”

“Bingo.”

“But she knows this is all platonic. Why would she be jealous?”

He bristled at that statement, but the moment seemed to pass. “Your ex was a jerk. She likely didn’t feel threatened by him. But she kept asking a lot of questions about us. If we were going to get serious, how I felt about you. She even came straight out and told me I shouldn’t waste my affections on you. She was very specific.”

Reese blinked a few times. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “I wasn’t gone that long. When did you have time?”

“I work fast.”

“You were laughing when I got back.”

“I changed the subject. Asked her about her own life. She asked me if there were any single guys on the team. I joked that none would be good enough for her. Then she told me about the coffee machine exploding, or something along those lines. That’s when you came back.”

“It still doesn’t make sense to me.”

“Look, I know your focus is on Cam, and with good reason. The facts seem to line up with his predicament. But

she doesn't want to lose you. She wants you to need her. Her obsession with you isn't healthy."

"Again, you came up with that in five minutes?"

"It was more like ten, but yes. The tip about Cam and his father's business was to hurt Cam. The tip about our fake relationship was to hurt us. Everything else has been to help you."

Reese stood up and paced the room. "She's been my assistant for years. Why now?"

"She's saving you from Jen, from Cam, and from me. She's saving you for herself."

"Are you suggesting she has a crush on me?"

"No. She just needs you to need her. And she's driving out everyone else. So far, she's succeeded with Cam. And now she's working on me."

"I'm just not sure...I don't think I believe it."

"I know I'm throwing a lot at you. But think about it. You'll see that it makes sense."

"And if it doesn't? That does mean it's Cam."

"Tell you what. Feed her something. Give her some information you've given no one else. See what she does with it. But make sure she knows you've 'told' other people."

"Like what? I've told her everything about me."

"I don't know. We can brainstorm and come up with something."

"Whether it's Daria or Cam, in the end it's going to devastate me."

* * *

Reese was a mess for the rest of the workweek. She couldn't get anything done, and her repeated calls to Cam went unanswered. John had started her interview prep that she

insisted on doing at his office or her condo, making sure that Daria was politely uninvited. She needed to find her mole, and if by chance Grady was right, she couldn't have Daria around for interview prep.

On Saturday, another of Semple's articles came out. This time he'd interviewed many people who had been at the skating academy with Reese and Jen. And like the last few weeks, this piece was a draw as well. Jennifer came off as domineering and Reese aloof. No winners. All the latest piece did was ramp up her anxiety. At least she was thankful there were no other *Lowdown* posts about her.

"How is the interview prep going?" Grady asked.

"It's exhausting. I feel like I'm under cross-examination."

He pulled her close, kissing her gently on the lips. "It's two weeks away. You'll be fine."

"I hope so. I've been trying to convince people that you are my wonderful boyfriend thanks to the mole."

"And Daria?"

"I'm stilling thinking of what I can drop on her. To test her."

"You'll come up with something. In the meantime, I thought we'd have a pizza night. And we'd make it from scratch. It will be my guilty pleasure this week. Want to help?"

"You bet! Tell me what to do."

They started with the sauce. He pulled out an onion for her to chop and had her slowly sauté it in some oil. He added the can of crushed tomatoes, a small can of tomato paste, salt, and some spices. He instructed her to stir occasionally and reduce the heat, as he got started on the dough.

"I like to use the traditional method, but we're going to get hungry, so I'll use the quick-rise yeast. The dough and sauce will be ready around the same time."

He pulled out an array of toppings: artichoke hearts, Genoa salami, mushrooms, capers, and kalamata olives. She chopped up some ingredients while he tackled the others. Within an

hour, they'd assembled their pizza and Grady was sliding it into the oven.

"That was fun."

"I know cooking isn't your forte, so I figured I'd show you my favorite dish. I mean, who doesn't love pizza?"

Thirty minutes later they were eating and drinking her favorite Riesling. It was a perfect date night.

"Thank you for this."

"I figured you needed it."

He sipped his wine and glanced over at her from atop his glass. When he set it down, he reached out across the table and took hold of one of her hands, gently squeezing it.

"I know I said I wouldn't push it, and I certainly haven't, but I think we make a great team, Reese."

She wanted to pull back, knowing where this conversation was going to lead. She wasn't ready. She needed more time. Why couldn't they maintain the status quo?

"Grady, I..." She had no words.

"The second I met you, I knew you were right for me. And I love all the time we spend together. Remember when I was describing my perfect woman to you up at the cottage? I was describing *you*. This whole 'arrangement' is going to come to an end soon. Let's just make it official, at least between the two of us now."

"No."

She watched as the small, simple word hit him like a bullet to the chest.

"No?"

There was so much confusion on his face, and Reese wanted to get up and run, but she couldn't keep running.

"Why can't we just keep things the way they are? Why does what we have need to change?"

“I guess it doesn’t, but I don’t see why we can’t transition to an official relationship.”

“Because relationships end. Then we end. You go on your merry way and move on. And I lose a dear friend.”

“We’ll still be friends no matter what happens.”

She snatched her hand away. “It won’t happen that way. And I won’t risk it.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “So we can’t be in a relationship because you’re scared?”

“Yes.”

He looked away and took a deep breath. Frustration was setting in.

“I’m supposed to sit back and pine away for you the way Cam did for all those years and probably still does? I’m not going to do that. I’m not going to watch a woman I’m falling for date other guys and wish I was that guy. I won’t put myself through that.”

“Why are you bringing up Cam?”

“Because that’s the pattern. The guys who love you are never good enough. Then you end up saddling yourself with a loser who treats you like shit. I won’t watch that. I won’t stick around to see it. I’m sorry if I’m being selfish, but if you won’t take a chance on me, then I’m out.”

She gasped, and in an instant, all her breath left her. “This isn’t fair. If I refuse to date you, you won’t be my friend? That’s blackmail!”

“No, it’s my self-preservation. If you feel so strongly that you don’t want to be with me, that’s okay. But I can’t make myself crazy being near you but not being with you.”

“It was fine the way it was. Why are you messing with us?”

“Because I don’t want to fake my way with you. I want it for real. And you don’t because you’re scared of a bunch of what-ifs. And I think you like the present situation because

you can walk away from it and have this notion that we'll still be friends. That's nuts."

"I just don't want to lose you."

"You're going to lose me anyway. I hate that you think it's blackmail, but I can't do this if it's not us together."

"What does that all mean? You just walk out on me? On our friendship?"

"I guess so. I'll stay in this fake relationship until after your interview. And then I'm going to tell John I'm done. I think that's best for us. Having me stick around in your life under false pretenses isn't healthy for either one of us."

"Grady, I..." She had no next words. She had no idea what to say. This wasn't how she expected this night to turn out.

"I'll let John know in the morning."

They stared at each other for a moment. She was withering under his gaze.

"I should probably go," she said quietly.

"Yeah. Probably."

She grabbed her keys and made the slow walk down to her condo. Tears had started falling before she'd reached her door. First Cam and now Grady. She was losing the most important people in her life.

Chapter Forty

Reese spent the next week focusing on work and her interview prep. She tried not to think of Cam or Grady. Neither had spoken to her. She'd tried reaching out to them and had finally given up. The only other person she could confide in was Daria, but because Grady had sowed doubts about her, she kept everything to herself. It was suffocating.

A week before the interview, she and Daria sat in the lunchroom eating. Reese had been withdrawn, and it wasn't until Daria shook her forearm gently that Reese snapped out of it.

"Sorry, did I miss something?" Reese asked.

"You seemed lost in thought. Is everything okay with you?"

"I've got a lot on my mind. Sometimes this is all so overwhelming."

"Boy troubles?"

Reese looked at Daria who was smiling back at her. Something about her smile didn't feel right.

"Yeah, something like that."

"I hope it wasn't that lame *Lowdown* blog. They're always coming up with crazy stuff. Of course, you and Grady are solid."

"Yeah. We are. I have no idea where that blog is getting their information from. Sounds like someone desperate for

attention who is hell-bent on hurting me.”

“You think so?”

“It looks like they want to see me and Grady break up. But that’s not going to happen. I really love him.”

Daria’s jaw tensed, but she maintained a smile. “That’s super. After Jordy, I’m glad you found someone who appreciates you. He seems like a nice guy, especially for a jock.”

“What do you mean?”

“Grady is totally different, I’m sure. But you know that guys like him have groupies in every city. I’m sure he’s the exception. He seems like one of the good guys. I mean, I’m sure he is.”

“He is. I could see myself marrying him.”

Reese watched Daria closely, and this time the other woman’s whole body tensed.

“Good. I want to see you married and with kids. Do you think you could still juggle Crush, though? With kids you’d need to tow around, because it’s not like he’d be much help. He’d be gone most of the time.”

“I really hope so.” She took a breath, seizing a moment of inspiration. “I’ve been wanting to tell you my big news. I’m pregnant.”

Reese thought Daria was about to pass out from the shock. “You’re pregnant?”

“I just found out a few days ago. I’m processing it all. It was unexpected. I’ve told Grady, obviously, and Cam is happy for me. I haven’t told John or Marnie yet, but I’m meeting them tonight to tell them. I suppose it will come as quite a shock. But our families are happy for us, and that’s what is important.”

“Are the two of you going to get married?” Daria asked, her voice barely a whisper.

“I don’t know yet. We want to keep it quiet until I reach the end of my first trimester. Anyway, keep this on the down-low until then. I’ve already told way too many people.”

“Of course. You know you can trust me.”

“Thank you for being such a good friend.”

Reese went back to her office, and Daria went to her desk. Now Reese had to wait.

* * *

She was sitting in bed reading two nights later when she got the *Lowdown* notification. Her finger hovered over the link, and she prayed she wouldn’t see her name. She tapped the app and it opened to the headline:

Reese and Grady Love Baby!

She bit her lip to keep herself from crying. She then picked up her phone and thought to text Grady but stopped herself. No, he’d made his position clear, and she wasn’t going to bother him again.

* * *

Reese went to work the next morning and called Daria into her office. Always pleasant, Daria stood by Reese’s desk.

“What can I do for you this lovely morning? How are you feeling? Any morning sickness? My sister was sick her entire first trimester. She used to drink a lot of ginger tea. I got you a box on my way in.”

“I’m fine. Just a little upset. I saw the *Lowdown* last night.”

Daria frowned in sympathy. “Yeah, I saw that too. How awful that your news was spoiled.”

Reese wasn’t going to prolong this. “Why did you do it?”

“Do what?” Daria asked, maintaining her phony smile.

“The *Lowdown*? Why would you do this to me? To Cam and Grady? To my family? To Cam’s family?”

Daria feigned shock. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’m not pregnant, Daria! And you are the only person I told that lie to. It was a test, and you failed it miserably.”

She blinked rapidly. “I didn’t talk to them,” she said, her voice hitching up.

“Are you suggesting that someone else happened to come up with the same lie? Why, Daria? I trusted you!”

A tear slipped down Daria’s face, and it only enraged Reese.

“I trusted you with every part of my life. You were someone I depended on! And you ratted me out for a few bucks?”

“It’s not like that! I was helping you!”

“No, you were hurting me and all the important people in my life! Why?”

Her face was blotchy and she was vibrating with energy. “None of them were good enough for you! I wanted people to know you were important. Better than some washed-up figure skater, or some hockey player who was going to cheat on you! The world needed to know how awful your parents were and how you rose above it.”

“No, they didn’t! And if I wanted people to know, I’d tell them myself.”

“I was doing it for you!”

Reese composed herself. “Someone from HR will escort you out. I’ll have your personal affects couriered to you.”

“Reese, please! I need you to know that I never wanted you to get hurt. I was protecting you.”

“You’re lucky I don’t sue you! Get out!”

Reese watched Daria turn and slowly leave. Reese followed behind her and slammed her door shut. Slumping into her chair, she tried not to cry, but she couldn't control the sobs. Now she officially had no one.

Chapter Forty-One

Reese took the afternoon off and drove the two-plus hours to London. She waited until she was there to call Cam, and as she expected, he didn't answer. She left a voicemail to tell him she was in town and wanted to see him. She followed up with a text. She knew Cam checked his phone often, so he would at least see the notifications.

She'd wait as long as she had to. With nowhere to go, she took refuge in a coffee shop. She'd brought along her laptop to do some work, but she kept looking at her phone, waiting for his reply. After two hours, she was certain it was never going to come, and the stares she was getting from staff were telling her it was time to go. She'd reached her car when her phone chimed a text.

I'm at home. You can come here.

Her heart soared. As she drove, she rehearsed what she was going to say. She planned to fall on her sword and beg forgiveness. She hoped the damage she'd done could be reversed.

Cam and Devi lived in a bungalow with a porch. She remembered sitting out there the last time she'd been here, chatting and laughing with Cam and his future wife. Of course, she'd made the journey alone. Jordy had been busy, and Reese had been forced to make up an excuse for his absence. Grady would never have said no, but she shook that thought away. She had to fix relationships one person at a time.

She knocked on the door and Cam answered it a moment later, a steely look on his face. She felt small, hating what their relationship had devolved to.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hello, Reese.”

“I came here to talk. To apologize.”

She could see him weighing his options, but eventually he stepped aside to let her in. She followed him into the small dining room where he motioned for her to sit down as he did the same.

“I really screwed up, Cam. I’m sorry. I should have never accused you of being the mole, but I had no idea who it was. The only thing I did know was that it was someone close to me that I trusted a lot. That left you and Daria.”

His expression remained cold. “I assume you’ve concluded it’s Daria.”

“Yes.”

“Maybe you should have accused her first.”

He wasn’t giving her an inch and she tried not to panic. “I should have never doubted you. You’ve been my rock. My best friend forever, and I hope I haven’t thrown our friendship away. I can’t stress enough how sorry I am for being so stupid.”

“I would have never betrayed you.”

“I got fixated on your dad’s predicament and that you needed the money so badly. I wasn’t thinking straight.”

Still, his expression didn’t change. “Why would I go to some blog and tell them about my dad’s business? It doesn’t make sense.”

“When you mentioned that it had an unintended positive consequence, it got me thinking.” She didn’t tell him that John had suspected the same thing.

“First of all, I’m not smart enough to come up with a scheme like that. And I would never stab my best friend in the

back.”

Reese covered her face with her hands. “If I could take it all back, I would. I hate that we’re not talking. I hate that I didn’t trust you or believe you. I’m hoping you can please forgive me.”

“Do you have any idea how I felt after I left your place? Like I’d lost my best friend. I was already dealing with my dad, and then that? It felt like my world was crumbling around me.”

“I’m sorry, Cam. That’s my fault. Daria was in my ear about you having a thing for me and that maybe Grady was jealous about it. It was all stupid and fed into everything.”

“I get that I may have given you reason to be suspicious, but when I told you I couldn’t share what I had in the works, you should have respected that.”

“I know.”

His face softened a little. “I can tell you what it is now because the announcement is coming out Monday, but I expect you to keep it to yourself. And the only reason I couldn’t tell you sooner is because I hadn’t signed off on the deal yet. Even John said I couldn’t breathe a word.”

“You have my word. My lips are sealed.”

“I got a book deal. My memoir.”

“Cam, that’s great!” she said, leaping out of her seat and giving him a hug. When he returned it, she knew they were on their way to fixing the mess she’d created.

“It’s not a huge advance, but it’s big enough for Dad to pay his most pressing bills. And the added business from that blog post should keep Dad going at least another six months. I suppose I can thank Daria for that, ironically. We hope in that time to get Dad’s finances in order.”

“This is amazing news,” she said, wiping a tear from her eye.

“I’ve also lined up a coaching gig at the skating academy in town. Part-time, which will help especially since I’m not

taking a salary from Dad. John also mentioned that a network is interested in having me do some color commentary for the nationals and worlds this season. It all adds up.”

“I’m so happy for you. And anything I can do, never hesitate to ask.”

“Reese, let’s never do this again. I don’t want you to ever distrust me, and vice versa.”

“Agreed.”

“I do have a question, though,” he said, a mischievous glint in his eye. “Are you pregnant?”

She gasped and shook her head. “No. It’s the lie I gave Daria to see what she’d do with it. Not the best lie I could have come up with. I’ve probably added more unnecessary drama to my life. It’s not like I’ve already done enough damage these past few weeks.”

“I’m sensing more than just me, then?”

She told him what had happened with Grady. As she spoke, he made coffee in the attached kitchen and put a cup in front of her, just the way she liked it. When she was finished telling him everything, Cam frowned.

“Why are you wasting this opportunity?” he asked.

“I’m not! I want to keep him around as a friend. If I get into a relationship with him and it tanks, he’s gone.”

“But you’ve lost him now. And can I ask you a really pointed question. Why are you assuming it will fail?”

“Every relationship I’ve been in has failed. And look at my parents. Failure. So I don’t have a lot to aspire to.”

“The one good guy who comes along, that respects you, that you’ve bonded with, you turn your back on. But guys like Jordy, you eat them up and keep them around for three years. Are you seeing a pattern?”

Oh God!

“Give this guy a real chance before he cuts and runs for good. I want you to be happy with a guy who deserves you.

Grady is the guy.”

“But what do I say? What do I do?”

“Use your instincts and let your heart do the talking. Make things right with him.”

“But before I do that, there is something else I have to do, and it’s just as important.”

Chapter Forty-Two

Reese sat in her car for several long minutes. She checked her watch. She wasn't late yet, but she couldn't sit out here forever. Tapping the steering wheel a few times, she tried hard to summon up her courage, and finally she told herself she had to do it. With a few deep breaths, she climbed out of the car and up the walkway to the small, redbrick two story. She stared at the oak door for a moment before she knocked.

She heard some footsteps and then the latch of the lock. The door swung open, and she was staring into light brown eyes just like her own. Gordon Beresford had aged, his hair more salt and pepper now, and extra lines had formed around his eyes. He didn't wait for Reese to say anything. Instead, he scooped her up into his arms and squeezed her tight.

"I'm so happy you're here, sweetie. And I'm sorry. Please come in. We have so much to talk about."

He still smelled like Old Spice, and the scent comforted her. She stepped inside and took off her boots. He held her hand and led her through the hallway into his kitchen and then to his sunken living room. He'd put a tray of cookies—shortbread, her favorite—and mugs for coffee on the table. As she looked around the room, she saw various pictures of herself, with her gold medal, in school, at competitions. There was also a picture of him with another woman.

She sat down, still a little overwhelmed and uncomfortable as her father fussed around.

“Coffee with a bit of cream? Or would you like something else?”

“That would be fine.”

He scooted off and she politely took a cookie and set it on the plate he had for her. When he returned, he poured coffee for them and took a seat, staring at her with glistening eyes.

“When you called, I thought I was dreaming. Reese, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry I left, and I’m sorry how that hurt you. If I could take it all back, I would. And I’m especially sorry for all the things you’ve been dealing with these last few months. I wanted to call so many times, but I feared you wouldn’t take my call.”

You’re not wrong on that.

She’d learned in therapy that she had to share her feelings with the people she loved. Even if she wounded him, and she wasn’t about to spare her father. “You hurt me so deeply, Dad. You leaving changed the way I viewed relationships with people. Do you know that until recently, I haven’t been able to have a meaningful and healthy relationship with a man? That I’m always afraid they will leave me? And I didn’t come here to be mean, I came here because you need to know this.”

“I understand, and I deserve it.”

“And you left me with her.”

The pain in Reese’s voice made her want to crumble to the floor. She looked at her father and saw some of the same pain. He let out a deep breath and frowned.

“I thought I was doing the right thing by leaving you with your mom. You were established in the house and you had a routine. I suppose I didn’t expect your mother’s reaction. I thought that the two of us could work out an arrangement, but she got so angry. And then you got angry, and I didn’t know what to do.”

“But you didn’t fight for me. You didn’t try to talk to me. All I had was her, and she told me all these horrible things you had done to her. I stupidly believed it all. And by the time I

knew better, the rift was too deep. I felt betrayed because you didn't try to reach out."

"I did try, sweetie. But your mother blocked my calls and told me to stay away. I shouldn't have listened to her. And this isn't about me attacking your mother. I won't do that."

"It doesn't matter. I barely have a relationship her. I got free of her and took care of myself."

"I'm so sorry, Reese. I'm sorry for everything. I don't know how I can ever make this up to you, but I want to try. It's not too late for us to have a relationship again."

She instinctively looked up at the picture of her father and the woman up on the wall. He followed her gaze.

"That's Beth. I met her six years ago. We got married three years ago. She's a lovely woman. I don't want you to think I was having an affair with her when I left your mother."

"I'm pretty sure I know why you left."

"Again, I won't attack your mother, but our marriage was over. It had been over for a long time, but I thought if I waited until you were eighteen, that you could decide for yourself what your next steps were. If you wanted to live with me, I would have welcomed that, but Fran insisted that you stay with her, that you wanted to stay with her. I didn't want to make the separation any harder."

"I never wanted to stay with her."

Gordon gulped in a breath. "I didn't know. I believed what she told me. She wouldn't let me come over and get my things. She insisted on keeping the house; she wanted everything, and to keep the peace, I agreed to it. But it never made things better. And when you told me you hated me and never wanted to see me again, I knew I'd made so many terrible mistakes."

"I feel like I've been parentless for ten years."

"I don't want you to feel that way anymore. What can I do to be back in your life? Reese, you're my girl, and I love you with all my heart."

She broke her cookie in half, but she didn't eat any of it. Instead, she pushed the plate away and looked into her father's eyes. "I can't promise you anything. I'm not even sure I'll want to talk to you again after this. Coming here was hard and I'm still trying to sort my head out. But at the very least, I could use your support. I'm going through this stupid scandal, and I'm feeling alone right now."

He leaned forward. "What can I do?"

"Nothing, I suppose." She thought for a second, then said, "No, there is something. Please don't talk to the press. And maybe we can think about talking again in a while. I'm not promising anything, but I think I want you back in my life, but it will take some time."

"That's okay. I don't want you to feel any pressure. And I won't speak to the press again. When I talked to Mr. Semple, he made it clear that he wasn't going to destroy your life. I believed him. I hope I'm not wrong."

"I hope so too."

"If you need me for anything, please know that I'm there for you."

"Thanks, Dad. I'm glad we had this talk...and I think I'd like to do it again. Maybe meet Beth."

"I'd love that."

She glanced at her watch. "I have to go. I have an interview coming up in a few days, and I should probably get my head in the right frame of mind."

She rose and he followed her to the door. "Thank you for coming, sweetie. It was so wonderful seeing you."

"It was nice seeing you too."

She gave him a quick hug and left. The next few days were going to determine the course of her life, good or bad.

Chapter Forty-Three

Grady's last obligation to Reese was to attend the interview with her. It was the first time she'd seen him since their bust-up at his condo. They'd decided to meet at the TV studio, and when she saw him talking to John and Marnie, her heart skipped. She missed him so damn much, but she had to wait for her moment to talk to him.

"Great, you're here," John said. "They are going to get you into makeup, then we'll chat one last time. No pressure, but this is a live interview. Just remember what we did in prep, and you'll be fine."

She wanted to talk to Grady, but the crew led her away. While she sat in the makeup chair, she rehearsed her answers, trying to stay calm. This was her last shot at redemption, especially with Semple's final piece coming out the next day. She needed to nail the interview, and if that wasn't bad enough, she needed to make amends with Grady too.

"All done here. Good luck," the makeup artist said without much enthusiasm.

Reese was taken back the studio area where she met up with John and Marnie. Grady was gone.

"Where's Grady?"

"He said he needed to step out. He should be back shortly."

She tried to keep her nerves in check. The interview was a ten-minute segment, short for what she needed to say, but it would have to do. She was going to be on the most-watched afternoon talk show in the country, and while the visibility

would be good, she couldn't mess up. And wondering where Grady had gone and if he would be back was messing her up. A lot.

The show's producer came out to give Reese information on camera placement, where she would sit, how long the segment would go, and then asked her if she had any questions. She didn't. He then led her to her seat onstage. Within minutes, Kasey Belmont took the stage, too, and shook Reese's hand.

"Pleasure to have you here. Thanks for agreeing to do the interview."

The producer gave them both last-minute details, and while Reese was listening, she glanced around to see if Grady had resurfaced. Relief swept over her when she saw him standing next to John and looking her way; but he didn't smile, and her heart ached.

Reese took a breath, and the interview began. Kasey started by thanking Reese, and after a quick salutation, she jumped right in.

"It's been a roller coaster of a few months for you, hasn't it," Kasey said.

"You can say that again," Reese said with a soft smile. She'd been warned not to look smug.

"Let's dive right in. The texts. The emails. What was going on?"

"Yeah, that was a dark time for me. I was at an age when hormones are raging, and you're trying to find yourself in the world, and I had a bully. The attacks on me were relentless. I know the texts and emails I sent look bad. I said some truly horrible things to Jen. But Kasey, if I could take it all back, I would in a heartbeat. Fifteen-year-old me and the person I am today are two different people. I've grown up a lot. I would never say or do anything like that now. I know I hurt Jennifer's feelings, and I apologize for that. I was insensitive and unkind. It was wrong."

“Ms. Brennan has claimed you had her kicked off the national team.”

“No. I had no power over any decisions made by the team. At the time, Cam and I weren’t even the top pairs team in the country. And Jennifer skated singles. I didn’t even know she had quit the national team until I stopped seeing her around the rink.”

“What do you say to her claims that you had a hand in her skating academy being unsuccessful?”

“I’d heard about her skating academy, but I had no idea if it was going well or not. I haven’t seen Jen since she left our program ten years ago. Our lives have gone in different directions. I’ve been focused on my athletic-wear brand and life after skating.”

“You say you’ve grown up a lot since then. How do you respond to the apology call you made?”

Reese groaned. “That was definitely not a great moment for me. My business was in trouble, I’d broken up with my boyfriend, and I was frustrated that people weren’t seeing the full picture. I know that sounds like a lot of excuses, but the stress was overwhelming. I hadn’t been able to produce my evidence at that point, so when the conversation veered off, I tried to defend myself, and I did it poorly. And I’m not here to attack Jen or question her motives. If she believes something to be true, who am I to say she’s wrong?”

“You mention the end of a relationship. It wasn’t long after that when you began dating Grady Radcliffe. I’m sure you’re aware of the *Lowdown* blog?”

“I am.”

“The blog suggested that you and Grady were faking the relationship to help you both rehabilitate your images.”

“The last blog also said I was pregnant.”

“Are you?”

“No. Don’t believe everything you read in gossip blogs.”

“I’ll ask the question everyone wants to know. Is your relationship with Grady Radcliffe real?”

Reese bit her lip to keep it from quivering. “I want to clear this up once and for all. I knew the moment I laid eyes on Grady Radcliffe that he was the partner I’d been looking for all my life. That he was special. It took me a while to get to that point, to let myself believe it, but without him I’m not sure I would have been able to get through all this. He makes me laugh, and he listens when I cry, and he never judges. He gets me, and there is nothing fake or phony about that. Kasey, I love him. He is the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

She wanted to glance over at him, but she knew it would look strange on camera. She would have to wait until the interview was over to see his reaction.

Kasey asked a few more questions and wrapped up the interview. Reese thought she’d fared well. The cameras stopped rolling, she shook Kasey’s hand, and she sought out Grady. He was off to one side, staring at her. When he gave her a half wave, she walked toward him, picking up her pace as she did, and when she stood before him, he reached his hand out to her.

“I love you too.”

* * *

“Vindication,” John said, sounding more animated than she’d heard him in years.

“What? What are you talking about?” Reese asked.

He shoved his tablet Reese and Grady’s way, and Reese gasped. Perhaps fearing that the interview would scoop him, Josh Semple and the *Gazette* had released the final article online, one day early.

Reese and Grady walked over to a quiet corner and read the article together. Reese thought her knees were about to buckle, and she grabbed Grady’s arm to keep herself upright. Because there it was—literally in black and white. Semple had

published his final article, the longest of all of them, and it detailed what had gone on, Jen's motives, and the sad outcome.

Jennifer Brennan found herself in an impossible situation. Her skating academy was failing, the father of her child had stopped paying child support, and a former rival had launched an athletic-wear line that was gaining traction. In the face of losing all she had, she wanted to settle an imaginary score about an old grudge.

"Wow," Reese said, but she continued reading.

Spurred on by friends who knew only part of the story, Brennan bought into her own version of events. She would do whatever she had to in order to take down her former rival. And while Beresford bears some blame, can we really blame a fifteen-year-old for being reactionary? Based on the texts, emails, and interviews from friends of Brennan, she was clearly the aggressor and always had been. For some reason, she hated Beresford. As this columnist analyzed the evidence, the only conclusion I could come up with was that she felt inferior to the more talented Beresford. But then, many other skaters at the academy were much more talented than Brennan. Why target Reese Beresford?

"Ouch," Reese said.

"Yeah, that's brutal."

She read on.

Perhaps the real fault lies at the feet of the adults around them. How could they have missed the rising tensions? It seems everyone at the skating academy was aware of the animosity, yet it got by coaches and parents. These two athletes were failed by the people around them.

Both Jennifer Brennan and Reese Beresford declined to be interviewed. I would have liked to have been able to talk to them, to get their sides of the story. What this whole sordid tale tells us is that we can't be quick to judge. When the scandal broke three months ago, the first instinct of many people was to cancel Reese Beresford. To ruin her new company, to tar

and feather her. Instead, if we'd all dug a little deeper, we would have seen the truth: Jennifer Brennan had always wanted to destroy the Queen of Ice, and this time she almost succeeded.

Reese leaned back into Grady for support. It was over. It was finally over.

“I think that was a pretty positive article,” Grady said.

“I’m in shock.”

They walked back to John and returned his tablet. He couldn’t wipe the smile off his face.

“I would love to sue her, but I think it’s best we put this whole matter behind us. I will warn her lawyer that if any other funny business starts, we are suing that woman into oblivion.”

“I never want to think about her again.” Reese turned to Grady. “Should we go home?”

“Definitely. We have a lot of catching up to do.”

Epilogue

Reese loved the sound of church bells ringing. She could hear them in the distance as their car pulled up to the reception. Grady looked fabulous in his silver-blue suit, and Reese's blue dress complemented it perfectly. He always knew what to wear. He took her hand as they got out of the car and walked into the reception hall.

Cam had asked Reese to be his best woman, but she'd declined. She didn't want to take any attention away from Cam or his new bride. But she had agreed to give a speech as if she were his best woman. A speech she'd worked on for weeks because she wanted to get it just right. She owed Cam that much.

They made their way through the line, and she gave an extra big hug to Cam. "You are a married man, now," she said. "How does it feel?"

"The same as yesterday. But I'm super happy. Now don't roast me later."

"I'd never do that."

"Just think. You'll be doing this next year with Grady."

"And you'll be doing a speech of your own."

"I can't wait."

She and Grady moved along so more of the guests could get through the line. They found their name tags, and of course Cam had seated her with his family. They were family to each other. They took their seats and chatted with those at their

table. Speeches were delivered during dinner. As promised, Reese had kept it short, telling all the guests what a wonderful human being Cam was. And when dinner was over, it was time to have fun.

“Shall we dance?” Grady asked.

The first thing he’d promised her after getting down on one knee was that he would learn to dance. In the last few months, he’d learned how much she loved it. He’d taken some private lessons, gotten some lessons from Reese, and now they were about to show off their moves.

“We’ll be doing this around the same time next year,” he said as he swept her into his arms.

“I’m counting down the days,” she said.

“And maybe your dad will walk you down the aisle?”

“That’s a work in progress.”

“I’ll take what I can get. As long as I have you by my side.”

She couldn’t wait.

Also by Anna Albo

The Senator's Son series

[The Senator's Son](#)

[This Much Is True](#)

Boys of Winter series

[On the Rebound](#)

[Power Play](#)

[Do You Believe?](#)

Hate to Love You series

[Clarity](#)

[The Truth About Us](#)

[Somewhere in Between](#)

Coming Soon!

[Full Throttle](#)

About the Author

Anna was born and raised in Canada. She's a prairie girl who loves the city.

From new adult to chick lit and everything in between, Anna writes contemporary romance and women's fiction that makes people laugh and love.

When Anna isn't writing her latest book, she's enjoying a cup of tea while attempting to create a culinary masterpiece.

She lives with her partner and their furry babies.

This is Anna's seventh book.

Do you want to get the latest news, sneak peeks, bonus scenes and exclusive content? Join me at annaalbo.com

