



Secret Baby
FOR THE
PLAYER

MEG SUMMERS

SECRET BABY FOR THE PLAYER

A BROTHER'S BEST FRIEND COLLEGE SPORTS
ROMANCE



MEG SUMMERS

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](#)

[Epilogue](#)

CHAPTER 1



ZACH

Whenever I think of Ivy Collins, I get so hard I can hardly think.

This time, it's the sight of her lacy bra hanging over the sink that sets me off. Imagining the material pressed against her skin makes me groan in frustration.

You know what you signed up for, I tell myself now as I look down at my erection.

Granted, when I skipped a whole weekend of football practice (not a good look for the captain and star of my community college team), I hadn't quite thought things through.

All I'd known was that my parents were going out of town for their anniversary weekend and Ivy, the nerdy girl-next-door, was babysitting my little sister while they were away.

But, somehow, nothing's working. None of my charms are paying off. And I'm left having to give myself a hand for the fifth time this weekend. Pun very much intended.

I wrap my right hand around my throbbing eight inches, supporting myself against the wall with my left hand. God, I can imagine her looking at me with those piercing eyes she always keeps hidden behind those sexy librarian glasses. Her mouth looks like ripe fruit ready for tasting and I can barely wait to help myself. Closing my eyes, I imagine it's her hand as I start moving my hand up and down, squeezing sometimes, imagining how she'd feel if I were to thrust into her fully. In my mind, she drops to her knees and her mouth is closing in

on me. My thumb swipes my head, as I picture her tongue doing the same and her name slips out before I can stop it. “Ivy.”

Of course, that’s the exact moment the bathroom door is thrown open by the object of my desire. “Ohmygod!” She stares at me for a couple of seconds in shock before letting out the loudest scream I’ve ever heard in my life.

I don’t have the brain power to do or say anything before Ivy literally scrambles away.

“Ivy,” I finally say, but I’m met with resounding silence. That girl can *run*.

Not the reaction I usually get when a girl sees me naked, I think, feeling a little sour as I reach for my towel.

Two minutes later, towel wrapped around my waist, I’m walking downstairs, unsure of what to say to her. I’m not usually tongue-tied around girls my age, but then again, this is completely uncharted territory.

Ivy’s sitting in front of the TV, a remote in her hand. I can only see her profile from this angle, but I still take a second to admire her. Truth is, Ivy doesn’t turn heads like some of the other girls I’ve seen around Sundale—for instance, Pam, my very recent ex. Her cherubic face still gets her mistaken for a sixteen-year-old, even though she’s nineteen, and she opts to dress in shades of gray.

But even beneath her odd clothes and owlsh glasses, she’s undeniably pretty. Granted, even *I* hadn’t noticed that about her. Since I’d moved here from Long Island a few years ago, she’d been my neighbor, and all I remember feeling was amusement whenever she blushed after I spoke to her. At the time, I’d been receiving far more female attention as a new high school football player in Sundale than I’d ever received in all my years at Long Island, so she was just another nerd who had the hots for me.

The weird thing is she reminds me of my middle school best friend in the oddest and sickest of ways. They have the same initials, the same shade of green eyes, and an obsession

with too-large glasses. And they're both nerds, the exact category of girls I usually avoid. Or used to. Because shortly after I started at Sundale community college, I got tired of being with variations of the same girl, and started to expand my reach.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not tired of playing the field. But I am tired of the vain, self-important, selfish, empty shells I've been enjoying until recently. The pretty packages that have nothing inside. I find myself wanting something different. Wanting more. *Needing* more. And Ivy is just that. So different, and yet so compelling.

As if hearing my thoughts, Ivy turns to me, and I'm briefly distracted by her large green eyes as she glares in my direction. To her credit, she doesn't bolt again, even though I can see her fingers trembling slightly.

"Hey," I tell her. I don't mean to be the douche who grins during a sincere apology, but I can't *not* smile when I see Ivy sitting here, her overlarge clothes covering her petite body in the most alluring way. Even when she doesn't try to be, she is cute.

"I'm sorry about what you saw."

Ivy's cheeks flush red. I feel my grin spread of its own accord. This makes me feel better, I admit, knowing that she's not as immune to my charms as she pretends to be.

She mumbles something, her cheeks still red.

I take a step closer, now only a few feet away from her. "What?" I ask.

She looks up at me, the expression on her face almost terrified. "No, you're not," she says, her voice trembling a little.

I cock my head to one side. "What do you mean?"

She stands up, almost tripping over her too-long denim overalls. "You're not... sorry," she says, now staring down at her feet. As her face turns red, she adds, "You wanted me to see that. You were calling my name."

“It’s not like I planned it. Your name slipped out because I was thinking about you,” I tell her, taking another step forward. “I was imagining *your* fingers wrapped around my...”

“Okay, stop it!” she squeals, taking a few steps back. “Stop it, *really*. I don’t want to hear anymore.”

God, she is adorable.

“I came here to babysit your little sister, not...”

“Not to have sex with me?” I supply, and her cheeks go even redder. “Don’t worry, I know what you’re here for. The sounds of you watching cartoons with Rosa all day keep me up all night.” *That, and wondering what it would feel to have you naked in bed next to me instead of in the guestroom.* But I refrain myself from adding that.

She crosses her arms, glaring fiercely at me. I feel my amusement dip a little, not because she manages to somehow get through, but because her pose is oddly reminiscent of her father’s, Coach Collins, my present football coach and the toughest one I’ve had to date.

And also the reason why I should *not* be considering doing anything with Ivy. Still, the heart wants what it wants, doesn’t it? Or should I say, the body. My heart has nothing to do with this. I have to focus on my future, not getting attached to anyone who can hold me back. I have enough on my plate as it is without adding a relationship to the mix.

“Just stop it,” she says, her voice taking on an edge.

“I’m no longer masturbating, Ivy.”

She looks like she wants to bolt again. “You know what I mean,” she mutters, somehow managing to hold my gaze. “Stop... everything.”

“Like what?” I ask, crossing my arms as I stare down at her. I admit, when I decided to skip football training for this, I hadn’t thought there would be much talking involved. But even sparring with her like this is more enjoyable than every single bit of the five months I spent with Pam. There’s just something about Ivy...

“Everything,” she mutters now. “Appearing in front of me in a towel and looking... looking like that.”

Her gaze dips for a second, and I watch her gaze at my body. She lets in an almost silent intake of breath, and I understand why. For years now, I’ve been working my ass off to get my body to the best it can be. Toned to perfection by the thousands of hours training at the football field. Not an ounce of body fat anywhere. Just hard-rock muscle and a definition that helps my performance on the field. I gained an extra two inches in height since I started college, making me at least a foot taller than her, and weighing about fifty pounds more in muscle. My body is a machine and a work of art, all in one.

But somehow, Ivy manages to break her gaze free and look up at me.

I feel a tinge of frustration. *Why* is she not caving in? And *how* is she resisting me?

I do like a challenge, though, so I let my cockiest grin spread across my face and hold her gaze with mine. “Looking like what, Ivy? Myself?”

“No,” she says. “Looking like a preschooler who forgot all your clothes back at school.”

Ouch.

Okay, I misread her disgust as anticipation.

“I know what you’re doing,” she spits now, apparently having decided to ignore her embarrassment to drive her point home. “You’ve been half naked and...”

“And what?” I say, now barely listening. My amusement has been replaced by slight annoyance. I have gone through the past few days assuming that Ivy *was* interested in me but was holding out on me for some reason.

It seems I was completely wrong.

I think back to my time going to high school with her. I did have quite a lot of memories with Ivy, because her brother and I were best friends. Still are. I remember her blushing to the

roots of her light brown hair every time I even looked in her direction.

I'd taken it for granted that she *did* have a crush on me, like almost every girl I went to high school with. But I'm beginning to doubt now. Ivy has always been a nerdish, shy girl, and even graduating from high school had not changed that. I hadn't paid her much attention, but maybe I was not the odd one out. Maybe she retreated in embarrassment every time a guy spoke to her.

That thought doesn't please me.

"And you've been dropping sexual innuendos all weekend —" she says to me. She is evidently losing her trail now, and my amusement is making a tentative comeback as she struggles to say everything on her mind. "—and just now, in the bathroom..."

My amusement comes back full force. I take a step forward and am impressed when she doesn't take a step back. "What happened in the bathroom?" I ask her.

She looks like she wants to dissolve into a puddle right in front of me. "Well," she mutters, now staring at the floor between us again. "You were looking up at my bra and *calling my name* as you..."

It takes every ounce of willpower in me not to laugh at her expression. "As I *what?*"

She says nothing.

I feel almost guilty. There is no reason to make her uncomfortable while she does my parents a favor. It's one thing to flirt with a girl who wants you but doesn't have the courage to admit it.

It's another thing entirely to toy around with one who isn't attracted to you.

And so, I take a deep breath. "Ivy," I tell her.

She looks up at me, and I gaze into her eyes for the briefest of milliseconds, but it's enough to see the fire burning in her eyes.

I feel the deepest parts of my stomach curdle in victory. She *does* want me. She is much better at hiding it than anyone else I've ever met, but I've seen that gaze too many times to *not* know what it means.

My honorable intentions fly out the window in that instant, and I take another step forward, almost closing the gap between us.

“What are you doing?” she squeals, terrified.

I want to say something, but she's so close I can smell her. I inhale a mix of peppermint and old books and coffee and something citrusy, and my body instantly reacts.

I don't know how I restrain myself from reaching out, crushing her against my bare chest, and kissing the living daylight out of her.

Instead, I settle for honesty. “Yes, Ivy,” I tell her. “I was masturbating to the thought of you. I've been masturbating to the thought of you ever since you came over yesterday. I think of fucking you every single minute of every day. I don't mean to drop sexual innuendos. I mean to tell you how badly I want to fuck you, because it's all I can think about.”

She's leaning backward now, as though desperate to get as far away from me as she can. Still, her feet remain in the same spot, and she's staring up at me from behind those large glasses.

I stare back, realizing how desperate I am for a sign, anything from her to tell me that I'm about to achieve my only goal for this weekend. I don't remember the last time I was this desperate for a girl. And not just any girl. I'm desperate for *her*.

“Ivy? Zach?”

Ivy squeals and turns around and I just freeze. My little sister is squinting at us, a blanket trailing behind her right hand, her hair tousled up from sleep.

“What are you doing?” she chirps as she scuttles toward Ivy, dropping her blanket.

If Ivy looked embarrassed before, she is mortified now.

“Nothing,” she mutters to Rosa, backing away from me. “We were just... talking. What do you want for dinner?”

Rosa starts to say something, but Ivy turns to me again. “Thanks, but I’m really not interested,” she mutters under her breath before she marches up to my sister and starts to quiz her about her afternoon dreams.

I stare at her, feeling almost dizzy with the realization that Ivy Collins is somehow immune to my charms.

CHAPTER 2



IVY

God, if you are up there, PLEASE save me from Zachary Anderson.

Or at least from falling flat on my face in front of him.

“Hey, Ivy!” Rosa calls, distracting me from my thoughts. I turn around to see her holding the Monopoly game box over her head. “Wanna play?”

I start to say yes, but then I realize that Rosa’s next question will probably relate to asking Zach to play with us. “How about I brush your hair?”

Rosa squeals with joy, just like I knew she would. Yanking my arm, she leads me up the stairs. I hold my breath as we pass by Zach’s room. Thankfully, the door is shut and music is blaring within. The room right next to it is the bathroom, and I feel my cheeks flame as we pass by it as my mind plays the scene from earlier in full detail.

I’d rather die than tell him, but that was literally the best thing I’ve ever seen in my life.

Not that I have much experience, I think as I open the door to Rosa’s brightly pink room. I’d never seen a naked man in the flesh.

Having Zach be the first is oddly rewarding.

Rosa sits down in front of her little dressing mirror as I reach for one of her brushes.

“What were you and Zach talking about?”

I drop the brush. “Nothing,” I say, bending down to pick it again, my heart hammering within my chest. Rosa’s eyes are alight with curiosity, but I start to brush her curls and she purrs and closes my eyes.

Relief momentarily spreads through me. I can’t help but notice that Rosa’s hair is the same shade of blond Zach’s is.

An image of naked Zach flashes through my mind and my blush deepens.

Okay, I admit it. Zach is *hot*. Maybe hotter than any other guy I ever met. I spent the last four years obsessed with him. And even now, during my gap year, it’s still hard to keep my heart from bursting out of my chest whenever he drops in to see my dad or my brother.

I’ve made my peace with the fact that Zach will never look at me the way he used to look at his ex. It’s fine. Better than fine, even. If the one guy I care for never sees me as a girl, I won’t need to worry about losing my virginity, my father finding out about it, and killing the guy in a fit of murderous rage.

So, I lived all these years with my unrequited crush.

Then, suddenly, this weekend, Zach is all smiles and talking to me. And his body... I’m breathless just thinking about it. And even though I turned him down a million times already, he keeps making his way over to me.

This morning’s bathroom incident was the last straw. The thought that Zach Anderson was thinking of me as he stroked his giant dick makes my legs turn into jelly. My stomach burns with feelings I didn’t know I was capable of having, and...

“Ow!”

“Oh my God,” I almost panic looking down at Rosa. I dragged the brush too hard through her hair. “I’m so, so sorry.”

The pain is all over her face for a second, a tear forming in one of her eyes, but she shakes it off. “It’s fine,” she declares. “Can we play Monopoly now?”

I squint down at her. I know I just hurt her, but Rosa never turns down having her hair brushed. And especially for a game she hardly understands. “Why do you want to play the game so badly?”

She looks at me, her big brown eyes filled with guilt. “I feel bad for Zach,” she says after a moment. “All weekend, we’ve been having fun together and he’s been stuck in his room.”

My heart misses a beat at the mention of his name, but I manage to pull it together. “Trust me,” I tell her. “He doesn’t want us around.”

“He so does!” Rosa insists, already running out of her room. “He told me yesterday.”

My heart seizes for a moment. “What did he tell you?” I ask, hurrying after her as she pounds down to Zach’s room. My main priority should be stopping her, but there’s that insane part of me that can’t help obsessing about Zach.

Okay, that part might be *all* of me.

“Zach?” Rosa calls, banging her tiny fists on the door.

My stomach plummets. *Too late*, I think. But as much as I claim to hate the idea, anticipation swells in my belly. Because a huge part of me *wants* to be around Zach. I want him within inches of me the way he did a few hours ago, and for him to tell me again how much he wants to fuck me. I want him to move even closer, take me in his arms, and...

Zach opens the door and stares at us, looking partly curious and partly annoyed.

“Will you watch cartoons with us, Zach?” Rosa says, putting on her most childlike voice and looking up at her brother with eyes full of stars.

I bite back a smile. Only five years old and Rosa knows far more about manipulating men than I ever will.

Zach’s expression dissolves into a grin as he bends down and scoops his little sister to his chest. I feel my own heart

dissolve at how cute they are together. Or rather, how cute Zach is with his sister.

Great, I think. As if I needed more reasons to like him.

He marches down the stairs, barely throwing me a second glance, and I go after them. The siblings chirp on about Frozen and Princess Elsa, and I'm spared a few seconds to stare at my phone, which is already exploding with social media notifications.

"When is she going to post next? I miss her SO much!"

"I'm rolling over LOLing at your latest video! Congrats on 400K btw! Face reveal?"

"Every time I imagine what she looks like, a prettier version of Emma Watson comes to mind."

My heart is beating frantically as I look at each and every comment. What am I—

"What are you looking at?"

I jump. Zach is staring at me, and he leans over to try to glance at my phone screen.

I snatch my phone away and slip it into my pocket. "Nothing," I say, turning resolutely to Rosa. "So, Frozen, is it?"

Minutes later, we're cocooned on the couch, with Rosa lying in her brother's arms and me sitting as far away as I can from the pair. The cartoon characters' voices fill the room, and Zach is distracted enough for me to bring out my phone and reply to a few comments. Ten minutes later, Rosa is snoring gently and Zach's attention is on me again.

"Who are you texting?" he asks, his eyes narrowed in curiosity.

Different replies flash through my mind, ranging from "None of your business," to "Why do you care?" but the last thing I want is for Zach to take anything I say as an invitation to prod further, so I say, "You don't know her."

He cocks his head to one side, looking devilishly handsome as his straight blond hair falls over his forehead. “You’re lying.”

“Am not,” I say, but I’m quite certain the guilty blush on my cheeks gives me away.

His grin widens. “Come on, Ivy,” he says, and goosebumps rise on my arms at the sound of my name on his lips. “All your former high school friends are already away at college. And you do *not* text them. No one keeps in touch with their townie friends when they move to school in big cities and see the world for the first time.”

I say nothing. There’s nothing to say that wouldn’t incriminate me further anyway.

“Why didn’t you?” he asks suddenly.

I raise my brows. “Didn’t what?”

“Didn’t go off to college,” he says now. For the first time all weekend, he looks genuinely curious about something unrelated to having sex with me. “I heard from Dave that you got a swimming scholarship to *UC Berkeley*. I was surprised when he said you decided to take a gap year. Even *he* didn’t know why you decided to not go.”

No one knows. No one will ever know if I can help it. I wanted to go to college once, I really did. I wanted an education. I had the grades and the smarts to do well in school. Still being home at this stage in my life was not what I had envisioned a few years ago, but now? Just the thought of... No, I couldn’t... Then my mind caught on something he said.

“You talk to my brother about me?”

Fuck. The question had slipped out of my mouth before I’d given it permission to, and the devilish glare in Zach’s eyes tells me I made a very big mistake.

He leans closer, managing to seize all of the air in the room. “Yeah, I do, Ivy,” he says. “I find you very intriguing.”

He keeps talking, but my brain is no longer processing what he says, because he raises his hand and cups my cheeks

with his long, slender fingers.

My entire body bursts into flame. I have never felt as turned on as I do right now. Even though I know I shouldn't and his baby sister is snoring between us, all I want to do is to lean into him, tear off his shirt, and...

I force myself to stay calm. This is Zach, for god's sake. Yeah, he might seem *temporarily* interested in me for reasons I don't quite understand, but I can't give into him. I can't have sex with him and deal with the heartbreak of him forgetting about me minutes later.

Also, I can't deal with sleeping with him and having my father find out.

"You're the best swimmer in Sundale and you shoved aside a scholarship that would take you pro for some reason," he says, and his words shoot me back to the present. "It's like stomping on your own dreams. There is way more to you than I know, than *any* of us knows."

My heart is hammering within my chest again. Normally, I'd chalk everything up to Zach being Zach... but this is different.

And now more than ever I need to make sure my secrets remain just that. Secrets.

My phone vibrates, and I look down at the screen before I can help myself. It's another comment:

"400K! Put a face reveal in the next video or I'll literally kms!"

Heart racing, I switch off the screen in the next moment and look up at Zach. His bright blue eyes are fixed on me, and I get the uncomfortable feeling that he can see right through me.

"What?" I ask.

He merely leans over, his face stopping only a mere inch from mine, so close that if I moved my head a quarter of an inch upward, our lips would graze. He trails one of his fingers

down my cheek and neck, stopping at my collarbone. I wait, my heart in my chest.

“You’re an enigma,” he mutters to me. “I can’t wait to start exploring you.”

And even knowing that that might be what ultimately destroys me, all I can think at that moment is, I can’t either.

CHAPTER 3



ZACH

The energy in the living room is palpable the moment I step one foot in it. Ivy has her arms around Rosa as they watch *yet* another cartoon, but their moods are quite different from what I've seen from them all weekend. Rosa looks almost tearful, and while I know Ivy is trying her best to console my little sister, I can see the relief etched on every corner of her face.

I admit, I'm with Rosa on this one. Because, in a few hours, my parents will be back and Ivy will take her pretty face, her nerdy glasses, and her lacy bras and go back to her own house.

I spent over forty-eight hours with Ivy Collins and she, somehow, evaded every attempt on my part to get her into my bed.

The last thing I want is to think of my failures, so I stride into the room as Ivy pulls Rosa to her feet.

"Come on," she tells Rosa. "We have to get you in bed."

Rosa looks even sadder than she did when my parents decided to leave for their weekend. "Will you read me a bedtime story?" she asks. "And can I come and stay over at your place tomorrow?"

"I'll read you a bedtime story," Ivy says, cradling Rosa's head to her hips. She doesn't answer the question about Rosa staying over before they leave for Rosa's bedroom, but *that* is not quite surprising. Everyone in our town knows Coach Collins runs his household like a military encampment. No

visitors of either sex are allowed to stay past a few hours, and even the football team needs to observe some guidelines when they need to go there.

Which is why it is doubly infuriating that I couldn't get near Ivy this weekend. This had been my one and only chance, and I blew it.

I collapse on the couch, reach for the remote, and change channels just before Princess Elsa belts into a new song that would no doubt annoy me further. I settle on a news channel, where the news reporters are laughing about some politician's recent misfortune.

"Didn't take you for a news guy."

Ivy is back. I turn around and she blushes when my eyes catch hers. She seems to have blurted out the statement without quite thinking it through.

She settles on the couch, perching as far away from me as she can. I know she's only staying in the same room with me because she knows my parents will be back within the hour *and* she already cleaned out the guest room and removed her stuff from the place.

"Sorry," she mutters.

I glance over at her. A huge part of me can't resist teasing her, but I fight the urge. There is no way Ivy will say yes to me. Especially not when my parents might walk through the door at any moment.

But I've become curious about her over the course of the past few days, so I ask, "Will you tell me now why you didn't go off to college?"

Her brows furrow beneath her glasses. "Wh-why do you want to know?"

I raise my brows. "It's just a question, Ivy."

She stares at me suspiciously, and I feel a small pang. For a moment, I'm taken back to middle school and to my best friend whenever I'd try to have her do something exciting but that she thought was dangerous.

I brush those memories off and focus on Ivy again.

After a few seconds, she lets out a small sigh and says, “Because I’d rather not.”

“That’s not an answer.”

She pushes her glasses up the bridge of her nose, and looks around the living room, as though checking to make sure no one is eavesdropping. “I don’t want to go off to college and spend four years swimming,” she mutters.

Her statement takes me aback. Every minute of my time at Sundale Community College is spent with the idea that soon enough, scouts from larger schools will approach with an offer that will put me on a track to the NFL. The idea that an athlete would miss that golden opportunity because they didn’t want to play their sport was unheard of.

“What? Why? You love swimming and you’re the best swimmer around here.”

She looks at me, her eyes filled with muted pain. “No,” she says in a whisper. “I *hate* swimming. I can’t stand being in the water.”

It’s the longest statement Ivy has ever said to me, as well as the most personal. But I barely notice that. I’m still reeling in shock.

“How—?” I start to ask but stop. There are so many questions spiraling in my head, I have no idea where to begin.

“I started swimming when I was six,” she starts. I get the feeling she never told anyone this before. “I really liked it. The water was so freeing, so liberating. I could do anything and everything I wanted. I was never very athletic and I knew it made my dad sad but I was okay with that because that was just me, you know? And the weightlessness of the water helped me feel better.” Her eyes drop to the floor. “One day, Dad came to practice and I guess he thought I had potential. Dad being dad took the chance to make it more than just a hobby.” I could feel the pain in her voice. “What started off as fun became a chore. An obligation. A way to make my dad proud of me for the first time. And I wanted that. His pride in

me. I wanted to be important to him, to feel what my brother felt every day, so I kept my head down and followed his lead. And he did his best to produce the best swimmer he could. But now...”

She breaks off. All I can do is I stare at Ivy, an unfamiliar emotion pulling on my heartstrings. A need to pull her into my arms and protect her from feeling torn about her own future.

The realization hits me like a punch in the gut, and I have to physically pull myself back. I can't have feelings for this girl. *Any* feelings. Because I have enough on my plate as it is already and I don't need to get entangled with the coach's daughter.

But I can't bring myself to stop asking questions. “What is it you want to do with your life, then?” I ask her.

She raises her head and stares at me for a moment, biting her lip, and I can't control the physical reaction she causes in me every time she is close.

“It doesn't matter,” she tells me finally. “I'm never going to get to do it.”

Her eyes glean as if starting to tear up, and before I can even think things through, I'm standing up and moving over to her side of the couch, taking her in my arms and crushing her to my chest.

Ivy lets out a gasp and I expect her to scam across the room. Except, she doesn't. Instead, she stays in my arms.

It's stupid, but I count that as a victory of sorts.

“Now I'm dying to know what you really want to do,” I tell her.

She looks up at me, and I immediately wish she hadn't. I hugged her merely because she was hurting, but seeing her large brown eyes gaze up at me frees me of all my good intentions once more. I graze her cheek with a finger.

She lets out a low moan of protest, and the sound goes straight to my groin.

Fuck.

This is escalating way too quickly. The gentlemanly thing to do would be to take a step back, get my hands off her, and return to our discussion.

But I can hardly do that, not when my hard dick is pressing against her belly.

I look down at Ivy, who is still gazing at me. Reaching out, I pull her glasses off her face. Without the glass barrier, her eyes are even prettier, emerald green eyes with specks of gold in them. I have never seen her without her glasses before. She is even prettier than I thought.

My gaze drops to her lips, and I know I'm only mere seconds from kissing her.

But Ivy draws back, moving back to the couch. I am torn between regret and relief. We are both silent for a few moments, before she says, "Book critic."

"What?" I can barely remember what we were talking about.

"I'd like to be a book critic. That's what I'm really passionate about."

"Is that a real career?" I ask, but the *half angry half hurt look* on her face makes me regret my question.

"It is," she mutters, but I can already feel her shutting off, unwilling to keep talking to me.

That has never stopped me before, though.

"You need to tell your dad you don't want to be a swimmer," I tell her. She is legally an adult now, after all, and Coach wouldn't punish his adult daughter for not pursuing his own dreams, would he?

She looks up at me as if I'm crazy. "I... can't."

I raise my brows at her. "Why not?"

She gazes at me, silent for a few seconds. "You wouldn't understand," she says.

"Yeah, I kind of do," I tell her. Her glasses are still in my hand, and when I peer through them, I confirm something I'd

suspected for years. “You’re a deathly shy person, afraid of standing up to your father or doing things you *really* want to do. You wear a pair of glasses you don’t even need because you want to be invisible. And there’s something going on with you that involves your phone that I haven’t quite figured out yet.”

As I watch Ivy digest my words, there’s some grim satisfaction in the fact that I know that I am at least partly right. Ivy is a huge question mark, and the real her is hiding behind the bespectacled, overalls-wearing nerd her father has molded.

And I’m dying to know *her*.

A faint flush rises up Ivy’s cheeks. She stands up, her eyes narrowed at me. “You have no freaking idea what you’re talking about,” she says, her voice low and controlled.

I raise my brows. I would have never thought in a million years that it was possible for Ivy to be angry about *anything*.

“You don’t *know* me,” she says. “And maybe you should face all your own issues before attempting to solve mine.”

I have to admit that I am kind of enjoying this. It’s like peeling back the layers Ivy hides under when presenting herself to the world. The fact that I finally get a taste of the real her makes me feel better than I’ve felt all weekend.

“What issues do you mean, exactly?” I ask now, meeting her angry gaze with an intentionally docile one.

“I’ve watched almost all of your matches since high school,” she spits back at me. “You *hate* being on the football field. Sure, you might like football or whatever, but crowds make you tense. You always hide behind your teammates when you run out into the field and you’re the first to leave after a match.”

It’s like I’m hit by a bucket of icy water. For a moment, I’m back in a football field, holding the ball and listening to the noise of the crowd threatening to burst my eardrums.

Sweat breaks out in my forehead as I focus back on her. How the fuck had she figured it out? The panic I feel on the

football field is my deepest, darkest secret, and I've hidden it so well that even Coach Collins chalked up my moments of freezing on the field as me trying to make a calculated decision.

No one knows about it. Not even my parents.

In those terrifying moments, I'm transported to a time and a dark place I'd fought really hard to let go of. *To leave behind. To forget. To grow out of.*

Fuck, I think, looking at my sweaty hands. Almost nine years later and I still haven't been able to move on.

"We both have secrets," she says, pulling my attention back. "So, deal with yours and I'll deal with mine."

I feel my breath ease a little. She isn't pushing further, isn't trying to make me talk about it.

Still, as I stare at her, I know that her not asking isn't enough. I need her to not *know* anything about my panic attacks. Any person knowing about them is one person too many, even if it is someone like Ivy, who never talks to anyone.

I close my eyes and summon up the cockiest of smiles, pushing my panic underneath my mask. "Let's make revealing our secrets fun," I say, and her brows furrow with suspicion. "With every fact I tell you, you peel back a layer of clothing. Deal?"

She stares up at me, and the repulsed look in her eyes gives me some relief. I've pushed her away enough that she won't talk to me at all until my parents get here. And, when Ivy finally leaves, I can get on with my life having learned a vital lesson on why I need to stay away from her from here on out. She's way too cute and definitely too smart for my own good.

I wait for her to turn away and march up the stairs. If I get lucky enough, I'll have the chance to deny her allegations and give her some bogus story about how much I dislike attention or some shit like that.

"Deal."

My brain combusts in that instant. “What?”

“Deal,” Ivy repeats. “With each answer I get, I remove one piece of clothing.”

Sweat breaks out on my forehead. *No*, I think. I would rather literally fling myself into the Atlantic Ocean than say anything else to her. I stare at her, and Ivy meets my gaze. Something about her intense stare makes me feel like she can see into my soul and read parts of myself that I’d locked away for years. I think of something flippant and funny to say to defuse the tension threatening to explode inside me, and I come out blank.

My parents’ car tires sound in our driveway.

I turn to the window, and the glare of their headlights blinds me for a second.

They’re back, I think, and I almost sag at the relief the realization brings.

“Well,” Ivy says in a subdued tone. “Goodbye, Zach.”

I watch as she takes her bag and walks out of the living room. The front door opens and shuts, and I watch through the window as she goes up to my mom. They talk but there’s no way for me to know what they’re saying from here.

I turn away and go up the stairs, realizing as I move that not every part of me is ringing with blessed relief.

There is a part that feels something strikingly similar to something I felt a long time ago with my best friend.

Loss.

Ivy somehow managed to uncover a part of me that no one else knows. That no one else *should* know. But as scary as that is, I find myself wishing she wasn’t leaving. I don’t want her to just disappear. I want her back here.

I want *her*.

Now what the hell do I do?

CHAPTER 4



“Welcome back, sweetie!”

With a big fake grin on my face, I walk into my dad’s outstretched arms. He hugs me as tightly as he can, and I almost feel my ribs bending from the pressure.

“I missed you,” he mutters into my hair before he takes a step back and looks down at me.

I can’t help a genuine smile this time. My dad and I had fallen out briefly over my refusal to go to college, but this was the first time I’d spent more than a night sleeping away from home. My mom had died giving birth to me, and his scraggly face had been the only parental fixture all my life.

“You look thinner,” he says as he steps back to observe me closer.

I feel panic seize my breath. I didn’t do anything with Zach (thank god) but sometimes, I feel like my dad has a detector implanted in his brain and he can sniff out any evidence of my wrongdoing. This was the main reason I stayed on the straight and narrow in high school, and even now I make sure to not do anything I know he won’t tolerate.

The result? A nineteen-year-old virgin.

Also, even if I hadn’t let Zach touch me, I’d seen him naked. I’d stared at his broad chest and wondered what it would feel like under my hands or pressing against my own, to lie down underneath him while he...

“You should go up to drop your bags,” my dad says, interrupting my thoughts. “Dinner is in a few minutes.”

I heave a sigh of relief.

I make my way past the oddly mismatched couches in our living room—another fixture of my life, borne out of a lack of my father’s decorating skills and his insistence on having enough room to sit all the members of his football team every time he wants them to visit—and past the dining room, where Dave, my brother, is slicing an avocado open with a knife.

“Hey,” he says.

I give him a little wave before I go upstairs, heading for my bedroom. I open the door as gently as I can. The lights are out, and when I flick them on, everything seems to look the way it did before I left. Except for the bottle of soda I’d kept behind the door, which is now lying to the side.

Panic flares up again. I’m well aware that my dad performs impromptu visits to check in my bedroom even when I’m not around. Growing up, I hadn’t minded that much, because I had nothing to hide.

Now, however...

I look around the bedroom again. My dad is so good at his checks that he never leaves any indication as to the fact that he was there at all. Apart from the soda bottle, I have nothing to go on.

I dump my bags on my white furry rug and head to my closet. My clothes look the same as they were when I left them, all ironed with the hangers evenly spaced.

My heart starts to beat a little faster.

Did he check in here? I know my dad is less likely to check my closet for anything, and this is why I stashed *everything* in there. But...

“Ivy?” my dad calls from downstairs, making me jump.

“Coming,” I yell back. I’ll have to check later.

Within minutes, I'm back downstairs and my dad is heaping potatoes onto my plate.

"You're going to have to eat it all," he tells me, his mustache barely concealing his frown. "Pretty sure the Andersons didn't feed you."

My brother looks up from his phone to give a small guffaw. "Yeah, right. She probably did most of the cooking. No way Zach has moved near a stove all weekend."

My heart seizes. Zach has somehow infiltrated the conversation, and the last thing I want is for my dad to ask me direct questions about him.

Thankfully, I get my wish. My dad's lined face looks even sterner as he reaches for the salad bowl. "He's going to have to explain missing ten hours of practice by Monday."

"Come on, Dad," Dave says with an eye roll. "It was a fucking weekend. He had to take care of his sister."

My dad shoots Dave a glare for cursing. I stare down at my plate. If I had said that, I would be kicked out of the house in a few seconds.

"Still shows indiscipline," my dad declares. "Ivy was ready to take care of his sister all weekend. Sometimes, you've got to put family first, yes, but balancing your career is important as well."

Dave gives another eye roll, and I let myself feel relief for a few seconds. The conversation about Zach has died out, so it's time to face another problem. Wondering what my dad found out when he searched my room.

I watch him as he stuffs the salad into his mouth. He had greeted me as warmly as he could have, but that did *not* mean he didn't find anything. Once, when I was young, I sneaked home a *Harry Potter* book from the library even though my dad had expressly forbidden me from reading any book while practicing for the state's swimming championships. I'd stupidly left it on my bedside table for a day, until I realized my mishap and returned it to the library, praying that he *hadn't*

found out after all. He didn't bring it up for weeks, and I thought for sure he never came across it.

But one day, after I'd come second place in the swimming championship, he had called me into his room and told me that he *did find* out about the book. I was barred from going to the library for a month.

That was more than ten years ago, and I have gotten better at hiding stuff since then. But there was no way to guarantee that my dad did not come across my hidden stash. If he came across it, though, I highly doubt that he is going to wait for months, especially for a secret of that magnitude.

"By the way, Ivy," my dad says, interrupting my thoughts. "I went into your room when you were gone."

Okay, this was not supposed to happen like this.

I wipe my sweaty hands on my jeans underneath the table. "Really?" I ask, aware that my voice is a pitch higher.

"Yeah, and I..."

But just then, the living room phone starts to ring. My dad pushes back the chair and walks away without completing his statement.

My heart slams into my chest with trepidation.

"Remember when I told you to get a lock?" Dave says, momentarily distracting me.

"Huh?" I ask.

"He's going to be checking on your room at this rate until you go off to college," Dave says, leaning back on his chair with a lazy smile. "And you seem to like it."

My fear is replaced by a slight annoyance. I am tired of people telling me how to run my life when they have no idea how to be in my shoes. *Is today bossy football player day or something? I say nothing, reaching for my fork again.*

But Dave doesn't seem to need my input to continue. "There's only one way to deal with a parent like him, and you know it. Get independent, and you won't have to keep being

treated like a freaking prisoner. All you needed to do was to go off to college for him to realize you're not his little girl anymore. But you'd rather remain here and keep up the image of Daddy's perfect little girl, don't you?"

I stare at him. Dave and I have never been particularly close siblings, and for a ton of reasons. While our father considers his prowess at football sufficient reason to let him rebel a little, it isn't quite the same for me with swimming. Swimming is not his favorite sport, after all.

But Dave will never quite understand the technicalities. And there is no need to explain it to him. He can be as bullheaded as Zach when he wants to be.

My dad returns then. "That was Mrs. Anderson," he says. "She says she sent you a text to thank you but you haven't replied."

I reach into my pocket for my phone, but my dad stops me. "Remember, Ivy," he says. "No phones allowed during meal times."

Dave stops texting for a bit to send me a sly look.

Great, I think. But the last thing I want is to stew over the double standard, not when I'm still on pins and needles about what my dad found out in my room.

"You were saying something about going into my room," I remind him, carefully avoiding Dave's look of disgust.

"Yeah," my dad says, heaping more salad onto my plate and then his. "You left some laundry in your basket before you left. Remember what I told you about unwashed laundry? It stinks after a while."

I plaster on another fake smile and apologize. Deep within me, however, every neuron in my brain is firing with joy. There's *no* way my father would bring up unwashed laundry before talking about finding a bunch of recording equipment stuffed deep in my closet.

"I'm done eating," Dave declares then, pushing back his chair and reaching for his plate.

“You didn’t eat any salad,” my dad says.

“Don’t need to,” Dave says, already walking away.

He is so lucky.

I finish up everything on my plate before I request permission to leave. I’m (thankfully) granted permission, and I hop upstairs to my room. Dave is right in front of my room, still on his phone. I try to get around me, but he stops me first.

“Did Zach try anything stupid at all this weekend?” he asks.

My heart misses a beat. “What do you mean?” I say.

“Did he invite Pam over or something? I find it hard to believe Zach would go a whole weekend without a girl. Even though it’s someone like Pam who is completely dense and just watches videos of that *Alexandria* YouTube chick talking about books because it makes her seem smart.”

Alexandria is a YouTube channel run by a supposedly teenage girl who makes book critique videos on book all the time. All of the English teachers in Sundale—or perhaps the whole of America—adored her. Her comment sections were filled with students thanking her for her service—and begging for a face reveal.

My breath eases slightly for the tenth time tonight. “No one came over,” I assure him, before I move around him to get inside my bedroom at last. The last thing I want is to keep discussing Zach when all I want to do is go to my room and sleep off the weekend in my own bed.

Inside my room, I ditch my overalls for one of my silk nighties. I go over to my closet, push aside my clothes, and stare down at the locked metal box I’ve stashed there for years now. The padlock is still intact.

I finally sigh in relief.

My secret is still safe.

For now.

But just then, a knock at my door startles me. I turn around, my heart in my throat, wondering if my dad has decided to check in again.

But the knock is *not* coming from the door, I realize after a few more raps. It's from the window, and when I turn around, I receive the shock of my life.

Zach Anderson is outside my window.

CHAPTER 5



ZACH

The window is still locked, and so I don't hear her scream. But that's what her body language is telling me she just did, though she immediately clamps her mouth with her hand and looks around fiercely, as though certain there are a million people in the room, watching us.

I bite back a smile. This is going to be fun, I'm certain of it.

I beckon her forward with my fingers, and she looks around again, giving me enough time to take in the sight of her. She's no longer wearing her usual overalls, instead clad in a simple pink-colored silk nightgown with the hem just below her butt. Her hair is loose from her usual pigtails, running across her shoulders and back with a reckless abandon.

My gaze drops to her breasts, peeking through the sheer fabric.

Fuck, I thought I wanted her before. I *really* want her.

But I force myself to push all of those thoughts away. When I hightailed it over here from my parents' house, I had *none* of these things on my mind. Sure, I would have been way more ecstatic about coming over if I had known I'd find her looking like this.

But I'd come for different reasons. I wanted to end our last conversation on my terms. I needed to convince her somehow that everything she thought about my fear of crowds was wrong.

And I needed to figure out what about her made me think it was a good idea to slip into Coach Collins' house at night at the risk of being killed.

Ivy hurries over to the window and opens it. The blast of hot air in her room hits me in the face.

"What are you doing here?" she whispers, her eyes wide as she looks down at me.

The thin strap of her nightie falls off her shoulders, revealing the white, bare skin and the topmost part of her breasts. I regretfully tear myself away from the view and look up into her face.

"I thought we needed to talk. Or *keep* talking." It was important to warm her up to a place where bringing up what she said felt natural.

She looks around the room again, before she turns back to me. "You can't be here," she tells me. "*Really*. My dad is going to kill me."

I bite back a fake sigh of agony. "Right," I tell her. "Unfortunately, he's not here to do that."

I see her fingers itching toward the window to close it back, so I slither in through the open space before she can do anything. Ivy lets out a strangled scream, but I'm already striding toward the door, sliding the inside lock into place. I look around. Her room looks exactly as I expected; white walls with pink paintings on them, snowy white beddings with a pink dressing table. *This room is so girly and it doesn't suit her at all. It's basically, your typical overbearing father's idea of what girls like.*

She looks at me with fear in her eyes. "I *never* lock my room door," she says.

I roll my eyes. "Come on. Dave locks his door all the time." I'd been in his room plenty of times after we snuck in some beer for some illegal teen drinking.

"That's *Dave*," she says. She looks around again, and I get off my high horse. She can't help it if she's been raised by the most overprotective parent in the history of our town.

I go over to her and take her hand in mine. “Look, Ivy,” I tell her. “He’s *not* going to come in here. The door is locked. And I’ll disappear if he starts making his way up the stairs.”

Ivy bites her lip as she looks up at me. I can see she’s deciding whether having me here is worth facing her father’s wrath. “Well,” she says. “There’s no place for you to disappear.”

I grin. “Sure, there is.” I march over to her closet, but before I can pull open the door, Ivy darts by me and presses her body against both doors.

“You can’t look in there,” she says.

I raise my brows. “I promise I’m not looking for more bras. Wanted to see if it was roomy enough. People hide in closets for a reason. Even the strictest of dads sometimes forget to check in there.”

She bites her lip again, apparently not even the slightest bit eased by my response. “Well, I don’t want you in there.”

“Why?”

She seems to be thinking hard for a minute. And then she says, “Well, it’s really disorganized.”

God, she keeps getting cuter.

“You’re lying,” I say. “And now I’m curious to see what you’re hiding in there.”

Her eyes are wide once more. She looks too frightened to even say anything.

I move closer to her, gripping her waist with both hands. I’ve never felt anything quite as pleasant as holding on to her waist with just the slimmest of fabrics between her skin and mine, but I somehow manage to hold on to logical reasoning.

Ivy lets out a small gasp. She looks up at me, her pink lips parted.

I swallow a groan. How is it that I find *everything* she does alluring?

I move her gently over to the side and reach for the door again. Ivy lets out a sound of protest and holds my wrist, but she is far too weak for me. I yank the door open and look at the closet.

“You color code your clothes,” I notice, not entirely surprised. “*And* you’re a liar.” Her closet seems to be the most organized thing I’ve ever come across on planet Earth.

She merely bites her lip. “It’s just...”

I part the hangers aside. It takes a mere moment to see what she’s so intent on hiding. A medium-size silver box, not unlike a treasure chest.

“You know, if you *did* want to hide a few things from your dad, putting all of them in a chest is not the smartest idea. This box is literally begging to be opened,” I say.

“You said it yourself,” she replies. “Even the strictest dads often forget to check the closet.”

I bite back a smile before I bend down to wrestle the box from its hiding place. Ivy makes a sudden move, but she doesn’t stop me as I heave the box on her rug. It’s way lighter than I expected, and I look down at the polished silver surface.

“Why do I think this box contains the version of your life no one in Sundale knows about?” I ask her.

She looks almost embarrassed. “Well, everyone is hiding something.”

I cock my head to one side, wondering if that is a direct jab at me. Still, this is just what I need. The more I push her to reveal her own secrets, the less likely she is to hang on to mine.

“Does this box relate to all the texts you kept hiding while you were in my house?” I ask her. I noticed that she seemed to jump in terror every time her phone beeped. I vaguely remember telling her it was odd since she had few friends left in town, but I could not be too sure. Right then, I was way more focused on trying to kiss the shit out of her.

She stiffens. “What texts?”

I raise my brows. “Ivy,” I say. “You don’t need to lie to me.”

She blushes, but I can see the determination in the set of her shoulders. She’s not going to tell me, not until I pry it out of her.

“That was just Paul Johnson,” she tells me. “My friend.”

My mind summons an unclear image of the guy. Tall, lanky, and the only other high schooler from Ivy’s set that didn’t go to college after graduation.

I ignore the sudden wave of jealousy. “You’re lying,” I tell her.

She blushes again. But before she can say anything, her phone beeps from somewhere in the room. I turn around. It’s on the bed, right between two pink fluffy pillows.

And then, everything seems to go on in slow motion.

I turn to look at Ivy, who has her eyes trained on me. At that moment, I know we’re both thinking the same thing.

She hurries toward the bed, but I’m way faster. Football instinct kicking in, I dive onto her bed, holding out my hands to grab the phone. I’m successful, taking hold of it and landing on the bed a few milliseconds before Ivy jumps right next to me. I tighten my hand on the phone as she lets out a small yell, reaching out for it. I hold the phone just out of reach, but she presses herself against me, fighting to get it back.

And now, somehow, my hand is clasped against her naked butt, and her thin straps have given way so her bare breasts are thrust against my chest.

For a moment, I almost drop the phone.

Ivy doesn’t seem to notice her state of near-nakedness. She is *that* intent on taking the phone from me.

I can’t help myself. I give her butt (*why* the hell does she not have panties on?) a small squeeze.

Ivy lets out a sudden moan that tears me apart. Her body relaxes for a second, the muscles of her butt flaccid against

me. She looks up at me, her anxiety and need replaced by nothing but pure, burning lust.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I reached for the phone for no reason other than to figure out what she was hiding. And now, I have somehow wound up in Ivy's bed, and she is as close to naked as can be and pliant in my arms.

I let out a muffled groan as I fight to maintain a few brain cells still online, . I force myself to turn away and look at the phone screen.

But I don't even need to. Because Ivy mutters in the next second, "I'm hiding the fact that I have a YouTube channel. The box is filled with my recording equipment. No one knows."

I sit up, slightly confused. "I don't think your dad would be upset about that, Ivy."

She sits up as well, thankfully shrugging her nightie back into place. "He would, if he knew I'd been keeping it a secret for three years and have over four hundred thousand subscribers."

My mind is blown. "Oh my God," I say. "*You* are Alexandria."

I remember my jibe about book critics not making a lot of money and I want to punch myself in the face. *Every student* in Utah knows who Alexandria is. Even our former football coach back in high school adored her. According to him, Alexandria was the sole reason his children found reading fun in a world of Snapchat and Instagram.

She looks up at me, appearing even more shocked. "How did you figure it out?"

"It's you, isn't it?" I ask, realizing I'm not as surprised as I could have been. I'd watched some videos in the past to pass an English Lit test or two, and I had always imagined it would be a smart, nerdy girl talking into the microphone.

She bites her lip, staring down into her lap. “Yeah,” she says.

“You have about a million views on every video,” I say completely in awe of this girl. “What’s that—thirty grand every month?”

“No,” she says, not looking at me. “I haven’t gotten around to monetizing my channel yet.”

I don’t have to ask why. Coach Collins is notoriously traditional. He would consider it a scandal if his daughter had been making hundreds of thousands online for years without telling him.

“I *want* to do this,” Ivy tells me, now sounding defeated. “But I can’t bring myself to take that step knowing if it gets out, he’ll be devastated.”

The pain in her voice stabs at me. I reach out and take hold of her chin, tugging it up to meet her eyes.

“Maybe he’s going to be hurt,” I tell her softly. “But you *need* to get around to telling him. It’s your life, Ivy. You can’t let Coach Collins dictate every single thing about it, from what you wear to how many boys you talk to. It’s *your* life. You need to start doing things that make *you* happy.”

Ivy blinks back a tear. I wait for her to say something. We’ve never been this physically close before, and I just know she’s going to be pulling back from me in a few moments, asking me to leave and wondering how I got her to confide in me.

But she somehow doesn’t do any of those things.

She does something much worse.

She leans forward, closes the gap between us, and kisses me.

CHAPTER 6



I regret my decision in a fraction of a millisecond.

However, there is no time to pull back or to apologize, because Zach kisses me back. Immediately. He pins me to him, kissing me with more passion than I have ever felt in my entire life.

I'd only been kissed twice in my life. In middle school, when I was fourteen and the only person in class who had not been kissed, I risked pressing my lips against Charlie Jackson just before I ran home and prayed that my dad wouldn't find out. And the second time was during prom night, when I was seriously considering losing my virginity. I hadn't wanted to be the only person leaving high school without giving it away.

So, I'd asked Drew Harper, the person I deemed worthy enough. He was sexually experienced but didn't scream about his escapades from the rooftops, the way most of my classmates did. He had agreed, and we had started with an unfortunately dry kiss that had told me that I didn't want to lose my virginity just yet.

Zach's kiss trumps both of those kisses combined. He holds me in his arms, kissing me with a mix of possessiveness and gentleness, and I turn to jelly in just a few seconds. He holds my chin to his, ravishing my entire being with slow, sensual strokes of his tongue.

I let out an involuntary moan of longing. *This* is what I've wanted for the past nineteen years, even if I'd had no idea myself.

“You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting to do this,” he mutters. His mouth drops little kisses down my neck and shoulder and collarbone. I feel his tongue dart out to lick the skin of my upper arm, and the unexpected action makes pleasure rip through me.

“Zach,” I mutter, not sure what else I’m about to say. There is *nothing* to say, other than the fact that from the moment he started talking about how I needed to start taking charge of my life, only one thing came to mind.

Kissing him.

It was almost fate, really. Zach Anderson is my first and only crush. He is the only guy I’ve ever had genuine feelings for. And he crept into my bedroom. Sure, my judgement was slightly impaired when I told him my deepest secret, something no one else in the entire world knows.

But he responded *exactly* as I always hoped the first person I told would. He had even figured it out before I told him.

From the moment I felt his hands on my naked body, I’d been consumed with the thought of kissing him. But it was only when he had started his little speech that I knew that I wasn’t going to let him leave without making the first move. I’d done that over the weekend and wasn’t going to do it again, not now.

“Fuck,” Zach mutters, his mouth pressed against my ear. “You have no idea how it feels to hear you say my name.”

My heart bursts with a combination of strange emotions. I almost feel stupid when I ask, “What does it feel like?”

He pulls himself back to gaze into my eyes, and the intensity of emotion in his blue eyes makes my stomach contract. “Like the best thing in the world.”

But the moment he says that, his fingers grow lax on my cheeks. The struggle clear in his eyes, but only for an instant. He pulls away fully now, rolling off the bed and standing up.

I sit up again, confusion driving away all of my other emotions. “What’s wrong?” I ask. I am positive I’ve not done something wrong... yet.

He buries his face in his hands and lets out an animalistic grunt. When he looks up at me, his eyes are filled with regret. "I can't do this," he tells me.

Embarrassment hits me like a punch to the stomach. I shrug on my nightie so it stays in place before I ask, "Why?"

I've become one of my dad's worst nightmares, I realize the moment I ask the question. A girl trying to convince a guy to have sex with her.

"I'm sorry," Zach says, not answering my question. I watch as he inches toward the window. "It just doesn't feel right. I'm sorry I flirted with you all weekend, but..."

I nod, swallowing the ball of shame in my throat. "I understand," I say. It's a tale as old as time. Guys like Zach could take their pleasure in having fun with girls like me who would, more often than not, ignore their request.

But *if* the girl got won over somehow, they backed away instantly. Because hot guys did not go for bespectacled nerds. They went for hot blondes like Pam.

Tears sting my eyes as I stand up. I feel like a total idiot, but there is no reason to let Zach know that. I invited him into my room and told him my deepest secret. Still, it doesn't mean he has to have sex with me, especially if he doesn't want to.

This is just going to be a lesson for me. That's all.

"Goodnight," I say, not bearing to look at him. I'm not even angry at him, even though I'm furious at myself. I had heard Dave and his friends talk over and over about flirting with girls and losing interest when the girls showed any. I literally had grown up knowing about that. It was my fault that I had assumed Zach Anderson actually found me interesting.

I expect him to reply and slip out the window. But he doesn't. Instead, he crosses the room to me and asks, "What's wrong?"

I can't bear to hear him talk like he cares. A single tear runs down my cheek, and I brush it away rapidly.

He sees it anyway. “Ivy,” he says, his voice filled with angst. “The last thing I want is to make you feel horrible.”

I take a step back. I don’t want his pity.

I look up at him, ignoring how embarrassed I feel about this moment. “It’s nothing.”

“What is nothing?” he asks, sounding a little confused.

I take a deep breath. I did not want to have to say the words. But I swallow my humiliation and say it in a rush. “That you don’t want to have sex with me. It’s fine, and I...”

His scoff cuts me short. “Are you kidding?” he says, his voice a little higher than normal. “I *don’t* want to have sex with you?”

As fast as lightning, he reaches out for my wrist and presses it against his stomach. Then he goes even lower, and my cheeks flame as I touch him through the fabric of his sweatpants. He is rock hard.

Goosebumps start in my forearms, and the center of my legs burns with heat and desire.

But my touch seems to have more of an impact on Zach. He lets out another growl. In the next second, he is holding my hips and pushing me against the nearest wall, the one right by my bookshelf. The wooden bookshelf trembles and a book drops to the floor, but Zach doesn’t seem to notice.

“All I’ve thought of these past few days is making love to you,” he says, his voice harsh. His eyes are pools of blue fire that hold mine. “I would love nothing more than to tear off this ridiculous gown and fuck you all night, but...”

My cheeks grow redder. No one has ever spoken to me like that before. No one has ever *desired* me like this before.

And I realize how much I’m dying to hear him say more of those words.

“But...?” I mutter.

“But not here, not now,” Zach says. “You deserve better.”

My throat constricts, but not from humiliation this time. This time, it is a last-ditch effort to stop myself from saying the words that are begging to be let out of my brain.

I fail to stop it. “What if I don’t want better?” *What if I want you right now?* I add silently, but I can’t quite bring myself to say the words.

Zach reacts as though he read my mind, though. With a last growl of defeat, he bends down, tears my strap from my shoulder, and looks at my breast. He lets out a small sigh of adoration before he takes one of my nipples into his mouth.

The moan rips itself out of me before I give it permission to. I’ve never, *never* felt such pleasure flooding through my body all at once, and I...

My father’s footsteps on the stairs stop my world for a moment.

I let out a small scream, leaping away from Zach and turning toward the door. His footsteps are growing closer still, and I know without a doubt that he’s heading for my room.

I turn toward Zach, my heart beating in terror.

But he is by far faster than I anticipated.

“See you later,” he mutters, leaping across the room to land a small kiss on my lips before he darts out of the room through the window.

I turn around. My dad just got to the top of the stairs. I hurry toward the window, slam it shut and turn off the lights. I have just enough time to unlock the door and dive underneath the covers before the door creaks open.

“Goodnight, sweetie,” my dad says, but I pretend to be fast asleep.

Finally, blessedly, the door closes again, and after a few seconds, I throw off the covers as my heart rate struggles to return to normal.

Everything that happened tonight was completely wild.

But I know that I want it to happen again.

CHAPTER 7



ZACH

“Let’s get going, people!”

I look up to see the Coach storming into the locker room, his face contorted in that way that only means one thing; we have to either kick the asses of our opponents from Cisco College or *he* is going to do the kicking.

A cheer starts up in the room, and I join in it, clapping as hard as I can. But, if I’m being perfectly honest, I don’t feel as euphoric as I should.

And I should be feeling pretty damn ecstatic right now. It’s the opening match of the season, and once we whack the butts of the players from Cisco and proceed to the next round, I’ll be one step closer to playing on a field where scouts from huge colleges hung around.

Even the slight anxiety I feel over going out on a field with thousands cheering can’t dull that anticipation.

Unfortunately, something else can, I realize with a small ting.

“Alright, boys,” Coach Collins says now. “Gather around.”

I hop over the bench closest to me and reach him first. Dave slides in beside me and our wide receiver, Mark, is on the other end. The coach huddles between me and Dave, putting his arms around both our shoulders.

“We’ve been training for this match for a long time,” he starts.

“Yeah, all summer,” Dave mutters, and a guffaw goes through the group.

I glance at Dave, wondering how Coach Collins lets Dave run wild and interrupt him when Ivy is not even allowed to curse.

The moment I think of her, there’s a tug in my belly. I push the feeling aside. Tonight, I’m supposed to focus on football. Football and *nothing else*.

And that’s not supposed to be hard. It’s been three weeks since I sneaked into Ivy’s bedroom. I’d sent her a couple of texts that went unanswered and also popped in to visit Dave once or twice. She remained in her room and I didn’t catch a glimpse of her.

The message was staunchly received. Our dalliance was supposed to be a one-time thing, and we were supposed to never acknowledge it again.

Just thinking that burns my chest, but I’m still a little grateful. I find myself thinking of Ivy at odd hours of the day, even after all this time. If we hadn’t been interrupted and I had made love to her, I have no doubt that I’d be completely under her spell.

And that would make life way more unbearable.

Coach Collins ignores his son. “We know this team,” he tells us. “We know their weaknesses, their strengths, and their failings. We’ve played them and beaten them several times before. This is just a warmup, but I want each and every one of you to go out there and play like your life depends on it. I want all of those players to go back to their college screaming at the top of their lungs how no one will stand a chance against us this season!”

Another uproar starts at the coach’s words, and I join in halfheartedly. The team disperses, and I go back to my locker to fetch my socks.

“Hey,” Dave says, reaching into the locker right next to mine. “You feeling okay?”

I force a smile, ignoring the prick of guilt inside me. The last thing I ever want is for Dave to learn about everything that happened between me and his sister.

“I’m good,” I tell him, reaching for my helmet. I hold it under my armpit as I sit down on the bench, waiting for everyone else to get ready.

“A little too good,” Dave says with a small chuckle. “Pam came to meet me last night. Says she’s concerned about you and every time she texts you, you ignore her.”

I bite back a sigh. “We broke up,” I remind him. “And the last thing I want is to get back together with her.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Dave says. “I like the fact that you don’t want to get back together. She’s completely crazy.”

It’s hard to defend Pam when I know Dave is right. Pam was the third girl I’d dated since starting college. In the six months of our relationship, she threw fits about thirty times, mostly when she saw me talking to a girl or when I didn’t reply to her texts instantly. It was a relief when she finally called it off.

“But I’m surprised that *you* have not gotten back together with her,” Dave says. “I’ve not seen you with any lady in weeks. That has got to be a record, hasn’t it?”

I feel a little amused despite everything. “Shut it, asshole,” I say, standing up to deliver a punch to his shoulder.

But when I turn around, my amusement flees in a mere instant. Ivy has just appeared at the door of the locker room, and she is weaving her way through the members of the football team. No one else seems to mind her, and that is not quite surprising. As the daughter of the coach and the little sister of a player, she pops in regularly.

But this time is different for me.

She’s dressed the same way she always is, wearing her large glasses and a pair of overalls, with her hair tied up in a bun. But I can’t help remembering her the way I saw her last, her silken hair tangled between my fingers and her nipple caught between my teeth while she moaned out my name...

Damn it. I'm getting hard.

Get a hold of yourself, I warn myself. It was all well and good to have fun in the confines of Ivy's bedroom. But this is our locker room, where Dave is right beside me and the coach has just left. The last thing I want is for Ivy to get into trouble because I stared at her a little too long.

So, I turn around and reopen my locker just as she steps up to Dave.

"Hi," she says to her brother. I watch her from the corner of my eyes, fighting the urge to turn around and tell her something—*anything*. "I brought a pair of knee pads for you. Dad says yours are chafed raw."

Dave grunts a thank you as he takes the pads. He starts to ask her about dinner and I start getting a tad angsty. Even though Ivy is a deathly shy person, we *do* exchange greetings every time she comes in here. Granted, it always leads to her turning crimson, but we are cordial nonetheless.

It's not crazy to expect the same thing to happen now, even under Dave's nose.

I turn around and start to say hi. But then, I stop abruptly. Because Ivy is not alone. Standing right behind her is a tall, lanky dude with his hands shoved in his pockets while he grins for no particular reason.

Paul Johnson.

Every atom of goodwill flees from me the moment I lay eyes on him. I have no idea what to think or *why* I react that way. Only that all I want to do is shove Paul as far away as I can from Ivy.

Ivy is still talking to Dave, but she glances at me for a millisecond. Her cheeks turn red, but she looks away again and focuses on her brother.

Great. Now I feel like punching something.

I reach for my helmet again and turn toward the doorway. Maybe all I need is some fresh air to fight the swirling

jealousy inside me. Once I breathe in the cool night breeze, I might calm down.

But Paul, looking self-important, steps up to me. “Hey, Zach,” he says, sounding eerily similar to a President about to confer a national honor to a citizen. He holds out his hand, his chin tilted upward.

Not to sound like a douchebag, but *I’m* usually the one that people want a handshake from.

I fight the urge to take his hand and twist it against his body, settling for a gruff handshake.

“You nervous?” he asks me, now sounding like a reporter.

I raise my brows. Who the hell asks that kind of question? For a moment, I think he’s talking about my anxiety, and I glance at Ivy. She seems determined to ignore me, and I want to punch myself.

I spent that day in her room actually talking to her and enjoying her company. It had been only a few hours, but I’d convinced myself that this could develop into a genuine friendship.

In other words, I’d been a complete idiot.

“Zach?”

I look back at Paul, feeling weirdly indifferent about him. Truth is, it isn’t his fault. Or Ivy’s. It is mine. I let myself become too fascinated by her. And now, all I need to do is detach myself.

So I smile at him. “Not really,” I say. “More than ready to kick their butts.”

My words come up louder than I intended, and Mark starts a cheer that reverberates around the locker room. Paul’s air of superiority seems to fade a little, and his chin drops by a few centimeters. I glance at Ivy. She looks slightly uncomfortable, and I’m almost pleased by that.

“Great,” Paul says in a way that makes me want to kill him. This is *not* about Ivy, but I almost feel like this scrawny guy in front of me is judging me somehow.

Paul holds his hand out for a high-five and I oblige. Even if he seems to have a stick up his ass, there's really no reason to be upset at Paul. He isn't the one who left my texts unanswered or...

My body turns into lead as Paul leans over and puts his arm around Ivy.

"See you later, Dave," he says as he turns around, his arm still around her. Ivy gives a little smile to her brother, still completely ignoring me as she turns around and walks out of the locker room with Paul.

I turn around, anger flowing through my veins with such ferocity that it takes every nerve in me to not smash my fists into my locker door. I close my eyes and try to breathe in and out, but the attempt to calm myself doesn't work. Not when I recall Paul's arm around her.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"Nice," Mark says, interrupting my thoughts. "That your sister's boyfriend, Dave?"

Great. Now I want to punch Mark.

"Hell, no," Dave says. "The only chance Ivy has of dating anyone is to go off to college. Coach is *not* going to let her date anyone in this town."

How is it that everything they say manages to piss me off even more?

"Not surprised," Mark says. "But he seems to like her."

"He's wasting his time," Dave declares with a bored yawn. "He's not getting anywhere near Ivy. Don't get me wrong, she's probably going to end up with someone like him—nerdish and pleasant. But she's going to be thirty before she does."

Mark lets out a burst of laughter, and I have to fight the urge to strangle him.

I do not turn around from my locker until their footsteps are trailing off.

They're right, I tell myself fiercely. The chances of me seeing Ivy without incurring the coach's wrath are next to none. Even if I'm slightly pissed off at her, I don't want to cause strife in her family.

Letting what happened between us die a slow natural death was the right decision.

Even if it makes me want to slam my fist into a wall, I need to let her go.

CHAPTER 8



I breathe in the frigid air of the night and shiver. I'm right in the center of the stands, where the scents of a thousand other spectators are hitting me. Still, I feel like I just stepped out of a freezer.

"You okay?" Paul says, shrugging off his jacket. "Here, take this."

I smile at him. "I'm fine," I say, but I take it anyway. Paul and I have been friends since high school. Two geeks of the math club that started hanging out together. I know him well enough to know that he gets hurt when I refuse his kind gestures.

I slip into the black jacket, and it smells of him and a bit of mayo—Paul now works at Max's restaurant downtown, the only restaurant in town, really.

"Really, are you okay?" he asks, peering at me. "You seemed really tense earlier, back in the locker room."

My heart misses a beat, but thankfully, I don't need to answer. Because just then, the trumpets let out a deafening tune as a dozen SCC cheerleaders cartwheel onto the field, closely followed by the football players themselves and my dad. I try to not look too closely at Pam, which is difficult as she is leading the cheerleading squad. The spectators let out a huge uproar, ending the hope of conversation between me and Paul.

As relieved as I feel, I also feel a bit of heartache as I watch Zach sprint onto the field. I'm close enough to the field

that I can see the telltale signs of his anxiety, the same way I'd noticed it for years and years. He is right in the center of the group, obscured by the other players. His helmet blocks his face completely, so I don't have access to that.

Still, I notice his fists are clenched. And when I look through my pair of binoculars, I notice the tense muscles of his neck.

I take in a deep breath. I'd made the conscious decision to *not* reply to his texts. It was as much for his benefit as it was for mine. If we had waited a second longer that night and my dad had caught us together, we would both be dead. My dad could go into a rage and dismiss him from the team, and I was going to be locked up in a glass tower.

A friendship—or anything else—between us is never meant to be.

The other team runs out a few moments later to a mix of boos and cheers—not surprising, as they are playing on SCC grounds. But I'm not quite as intrigued anymore. My dad is already looking up the stands for me, as he always does. When he locks eyes with me, he sends me a smile which I return, but his expression turns grim when he sees Paul right by my side.

That is not surprising as well. My dad no longer thinks of Paul as good friendship material, not since he settled for working a minimum wage job after being rejected from Harvard (I did try to dissuade Paul from applying for only one school, but my pleas were ignored. Paul doesn't quite listen to anyone but himself). While my dad had been tolerant of Paul even though he was *not* a sportsman, he has since, and I quote, “lost value in my eyes since he let go of his only redeemable quality.”

I've not told Paul what my dad said, though. It isn't worth losing my only friendship in town because of my dad's uptightness.

The cheers die down, and to my dismay, Paul resumes conversation immediately. “So, why were you so tense earlier?”

I pretend to be intrigued in watching the players get into positions as the referee runs out into the field. But Paul is still staring avidly at me, and so I crack. “Nothing,” I say. “I really wasn’t.”

“I get it, you know,” he says, giving a long-suffering sigh as he leans back onto his seat.

My heart misses another beat. “Get what?”

“It’s kind of annoying to go into that locker room when *we* know they’re secretly judging us,” he says with that air of self-importance that I find annoying about him. “I mean, when we live in a town that exalts knowing your way around a field over truly intelligent people, it would be quite difficult to stand in that stench of testosterone and not feel uncomfortable.”

I bite back a sigh. I usually avoid coming to sporting events with Paul because I’m not quite ready to hear his tirade about how sportsmen receive more than their fair share of credit.

“I don’t think they’re judging us,” I say. A whistle goes off, and I turn my attention back to the field. Zach and the captain of the other team are heading toward the center of the field, where the referee now stands, holding a coin up in the air.

My heart burns with an indescribable feeling. I always do feel a little antsy when I’m around Zach. But this time, it feels a little bit more painful, and I know why. I was content being one of the dozens of girls that had a crush on Zach. But the fact that I now know he was at least momentarily interested in me and I had to cut him off stings a little.

“They *are* judging us,” Paul insists, just as the referee declares that the SCC team wins the coin toss. Zach chooses to go on offense. “I mean, look at that Zach guy. He looked ready to bite my head off because I asked him a few questions.”

God, I think. The last thing I need is for Paul to settle on berating Zach.

“He’s just intense,” I tell him.

“Yeah, he intensely has a chip on his shoulder,” Paul replies.

I bite back any further comments as I reach for my binoculars. The game is only a few seconds to kickoff, and Zach doesn't seem any more relaxed.

And as much as I want to think that I occupy even a fragment of his thoughts, I know better.



Two hours later, the bleachers are emptying as the spectators scream and cheer about the first SCC victory of the season. I watch from my seat, my gut wrapped around my chest, as Zach is hoisted onto the shoulders of a crowd of blue-and-gold wearing fans, all screaming at the top of their lungs.

“Ugh,” Paul says. He seems even more annoyed than the handful of supporters from Cisco. “Everything about fan admiration irks me.”

I let out an aggravated sigh. I was barely able to watch the match because Paul decided that every minute of the past two hours were the perfect time to go through some topics that inflame him: why Harvard rejected him, the failures of American football, Harvard, the aggravating fan culture associated with sportsmen in USA, Harvard, how the rules made no sense, oh, yeah, and Harvard.

I could not take a single more moment of it.

“I'm going down there.”

He raises his brows. “Really?”

I know exactly what he is thinking: *Not you too.*

“I need to see my dad,” I say, and I feel relieved as he nods in annoyed understanding. Even Paul knows his limits when I mention my dad.

I hug him goodbye and make my way down to the bleachers. I manage to weave my way through the rest of the people streaming out of the place. As a recent high school

graduate who is five-one and wears denim overalls and a pair of glasses, I blend into the background fairly easily, and no one even acknowledges my existence as I pass by them.

Works perfectly for me.

When I get to the front-row seats, I get a clearer view of the field. Zach is no longer on anyone's shoulders, and I watch as he pulls his helmet off and shakes the sweat off his hair.

I *want* to look away, but I can't help myself. Not when every cell in my body is screaming at me to go to him.

I look around for my dad, hoping *he* will find me and call me to his side. There's no way I'm going to think of going after Zach when my dad had his eyes on me.

But I get no such luck. My dad seems to have deserted the field early, and Dave's still in the midst of a dozen cheerleaders.

I turn back to Zach. He's striding away from the field, and I see him glance backward to see if anyone notices his departure before he disappears underneath the bleachers.

My chest hurts looking at him. Something is going on with him, I'm certain of it. Zach does spend less time jubilating on the field than most of the other players, but I have never seen him leave this early.

I look around to see if anyone noticed, and I catch Pam's head swiveling this way and that, as though searching for someone.

My overprotectiveness kicks in, and before I can force myself to wonder what I'm doing, I'm climbing over the railings and hurrying across the field. I manage to weave my way through hundreds of people without no one noticing me. I make sure to stay as far as I can from Dave, though, and very soon, I'm underneath the bleachers, a deserted cave-like space with concrete floor.

The place is empty and eerily quiet, a stark difference to the noise going on just on the other side of the seats. Zach is leaning against a wall, seemingly staring into space. He looks up the moment I step in.

“Er,” I say, my mouth suddenly dry. It suddenly hits me that this is a bad idea, but since I can’t quite turn back the hands of time, I have to see it through. “Are you okay?”

He raises his brows at me as he pushes himself off the wall. He walks over slowly, and with each step he takes, I can read the venom in his eyes.

He is furious at me.

And I don’t blame him. I took the coward’s way out by not replying to his texts. All I needed to do was text him and tell him that nothing could ever happen between us. But I’d chosen to avoid him.

“I almost cost us the match today,” he says when he’s only a few feet away from me.

I feel my heart go out to him. It’s impossible to not feel the urge to wrap him in my arms when he’s like this, raw with anxiety after a match he was supposed to be happy about. “I’m sorry,” I say, knowing my words are inadequate. “I know you were a little tense because of the crowds at first, but you bounced back beautifully when kickoff started, and you...”

“I wasn’t tense because of the crowds,” he says, gruffly, cutting me short.

I feel my breath catch in my throat. “Really?” I manage to say. “Then why?”

He holds my gaze with his. “Because from the moment I saw you with that Paul guy, all I wanted to do was rip his head off.”

My throat seems to close in on itself as Zach takes another step forward. He pulls me into his arms, kissing me with more possessiveness than I could have ever thought possible.

“I’m trying to be the perfect gentleman,” he mutters against my hair. “But I want you tonight, Ivy. I *need* you tonight.”

CHAPTER 9



ZACH

There are several reasons why this is a bad idea. Hell, it's such a bad idea that there are no positives.

It would be the easiest thing in the world for anyone—including Coach Collins and Dave—to walk in and see me kissing Ivy. The spot underneath the bleachers is not exactly the most closeted space in town, especially after a football match just ended.

And Ivy deserves better. She never slept with anyone before, and I do not want her first time to be in this dank, damp space.

Besides, we haven't spoken in weeks. Things were already coming to a natural end. *This* is not supposed to happen.

But even with the thoughts swirling around in my head, when I gaze at her, I realize I can't convince myself to walk away. My obsession with her has mutated over the past few weeks, and the only thing I *can* do now is pull her closer. I let out an involuntary groan as I feel my crotch pressing against her belly.

She looks up at me, her eyes filled with wonder and innocence, and I get harder.

"Ivy," I pant. "You need to leave. *Now.*" This is the best I can do; urge her to leave before I start kissing her again. Because if and when I do that, I'm not certain I'll be able to stop.

But Ivy doesn't reply. She merely keeps gazing at me, and then, just before I can repeat my order, she reaches forward and presses her palm against the bulk in my pants.

Goosebumps start in my arms. "Ivy," I groan, as pleasure explodes like a million little stars inside me. "*Please.*"

She shakes her head. "I want you," she whispers, staring deeply into my eyes. "I want *this.*"

I can't hold back any longer.

No longer capable of any sensible thoughts, I let out a grunt as I push her up against the nearest wall, kissing her the way I've wanted to for the past few weeks. Ivy moans, pliant and willing in my arms, and that is enough to drive me crazy. I reach upward and yank the hair band out of her hair, so that her silken hair spills like a sheet into my palm. I groan with satisfaction as I run my fingers through her locks, unable to stop myself from kissing her.

"Zach," Ivy moans, and my name on her lips drives me crazy for about a second.

I tear myself away from her. She's looking up at me, her lips swollen and red with my kisses. Her eyes are bright with desire, and she doesn't need to say anything before I understand.

She wants me too.

I tear off Paul's jacket from her tiny body, feeling massive satisfaction as I fling the musty piece of clothing away from us. Then, I reach for the strap of her overalls and unbuckle it. Ivy pushes it lower, letting it gather in a heap around her feet. I go on my knees, tearing off her soaking wet panties. Her scent threatens to drive me insane, but I force myself to stay calm as I reach forward and take her clit in my mouth.

Ivy lets out a loud scream of pleasure, and I hesitate for a second, wondering if she wants to back away. But she pushes her fingers in my hair, urging me to continue. I suck her gently, one of my fingers already reaching upward to explore her opening. She shivers as she holds on to me, letting out loud, throaty moans.

I let go of her clit and let my tongue slip into her, sighing the moment I get a taste of her. She tastes exactly like I imagined—divine, exquisite, and all things Ivy. I hold on to her waist as I continue to run my tongue down her labia, loving the way she shivers in my arms.

“Zach,” she cries. “Please.”

She’s begging me to take her, but I’m not quite ready yet. I want her to come before I enter her. So, I slip my index finger in. Ivy lets out a piercing scream of pleasure, and I start to slip in and out of her, my tongue back on her clit, sucking as gently as I can.

It only takes a few seconds for Ivy to let out her loudest scream yet, trembling all over as she climaxes. I stand up just in time to hold her as she collapses into my arms, panting hard.

“That was...” she starts, but I cut her off by kissing her, unable to hold off any longer. I hoist her into my arms, pushing her up against the wall again. Her legs cuff themselves around my back, and I single-handedly rid myself of my pants and briefs, as I hold on to Ivy one-armed.

I look down at her. As much as I want to thrust myself deep into her, I need to know she’s absolutely fine with it. But before I can so much as ask, Ivy reaches downward and wraps her fingers around my naked dick.

I’m not imagining it this time. My brain literally combusts. If this was any other girl, I’d have stopped and asked if we could get a condom, but I’m literally unable to even *think* about that.

She guides me into her. I let her, unsure of whether I can still control my own movements at this instant. I slip into her inch by inch, holding back on a groan as pleasure rips through me.

“Fuck, Ivy,” I mutter, my face in her hair. This is the best I’ve ever felt in my life. I’m certain of it.

I start to move inside her, and I realize I was wrong. *This* is the best feeling ever, thrusting inside Ivy as she moans and

digs her fingernails into my neck. All I want is to thrust fast and deep, but this is her first time, and I'd rather die than hurt her. So, I settle for sweet, slow strokes, driving myself mad with need.

Ivy digs her nails even deeper into my neck. "Zach," she mutters, her cheeks flushing as she meets my gaze. "Go harder."

My brain melts into acquiescence. I forget everything, obsessed with driving myself into her as deep as I can. Ivy lets out a scream that pushes me to madness. I groan, driving myself into her over and over, faster and harder than before. Ivy is moaning and trembling in my arms, and her sounds threaten to drive me insane.

I drive into her one last time before I spill into her. I let out a growl, my pleasure threatening to tear me apart. I bury my face in her hair as the feeling of bliss spreads through me, not bearing to tear myself away from her. Ivy is moaning beneath me as my climax triggers hers, her nails buried in the nape of my hair.

I hold on to her until she stops trembling, and then I set her on her feet. Silently, I pull back her overalls, feeling dazed as I go through the motions. When I stepped onto the football field tonight, I never thought anything like this would happen.

And it did. It raises a lot of questions about the future, but this is not the time to figure it out.

"I think everyone has gone home," Ivy says, her tone subdued.

I turn around to listen. She's right, I realize. I'd somehow failed to notice that, while we had been making love, the noise had died down considerably.

"I need to get home before my dad starts to wonder where I am," she adds as she bends to pick Paul's jacket.

She turns to leave, but I reach out for her and turn her around gently to face me. "I had a really nice time tonight," I tell her.

She looks up at me and blushes, a small smile on her face. “Yeah, me too.”

I suddenly feel lighter than I have in weeks. “So, my texts aren’t going to go unanswered anymore?” I ask.

Her cheeks grow redder. “Sorry about that,” she mutters. “And no.”

I fight the urge to grin like an idiot as I lead her out from under the bleachers, my arm around her shoulder. The place is completely deserted now, hundreds of empty plastic water bottles, hotdog wrappings, and confetti sadly abandoned all over the place.

“I’ve never been out here this late before,” she says.

I look around at the empty seats. “Me neither,” I say. I usually ditch the field before people empty out of it.

She stares at me, undeniable concern in her eyes. “I would really like to know why you have a problem with crowds. I know it’s not my place, but...”

Her words trail off, and I feel a tightening in my chest. There are two things I never speak about; my fears and my feelings. And even though I’m not particularly pissed off at Ivy for bringing it up, I’m still not ready to tell her anything about it.

And so I say, “We should just get you home. My car is in the parking lot.”

I hate myself for putting that hurt look in her eyes, but I do not say anything else as I lead her away from the field and into the deserted parking lot. As we cross over to my car, another thought occurs to me.

“You sure your dad will be fine with me giving you a ride?” I ask her.

“Yeah,” she mutters. “He’s probably off with the team or something. He won’t be home yet. He’d have called me if he got home.”

She sounds unsure, and I’m not quite certain if it’s because of my dismissal or the thought of the coach wondering where

she went. I settle for the latter, easier reason. “You don’t seem sure,” I say. “Wanna check your phone for missed calls?”

She nods and slips the phone out of her pocket. “Yeah, I was right,” she says when the screen comes on. “There isn’t...”

But she trails off again, and when I look up, I know precisely why.

Footsteps. Someone else is here. They are at the other end, so out of reach that I can’t see who it is.

I turn to Ivy, who has fright written on her face. I want to punch myself in that instant.

This was a bad idea, and I had known it from the start.

I mull over my two options in my head. Is it wiser to find out who it is, just to be certain it *isn’t* the coach or someone else on the team who can relay the news to him? Or is it better to assume the person can’t see us either and just slip into my car and drive off?

When I glance at Ivy, she seems to have considered both options as well. “Let’s just go,” she mutters.

I hesitate. There’s hardly anyone who had come to the match that doesn’t know me or the coach’s daughter. And everyone knows what kind of father Coach Collins is. News in our little town spreads pretty quickly, and it is possible that there would be a scandal if the wrong person saw us.

But it’s also possible that this is a random high school student who is buzzed out of his mind and will merely ask for a high five before forgetting he ever saw us.

“Please,” Ivy mutters, tugging on my wrist.

I let out a breath. She’s clearly terrified, and I have to put her wishes first. I nod, leading her toward my car. I open the passenger door, waiting for her to slip in before I go around the car door.

Before I open the driver’s door, I take one last look at where the footsteps came from.

The person seems to be drawing nearer, into near-darkness and away from the total blackout on the other end of the car park. It's still too dark to make out any facial features, but I catch the streak of blond locks and the gold tint of a cheerleader's uniform.

My throat tightens momentarily as I slip into the car and slam the door behind me.

"Is everything okay?" Ivy asks as I start the car.

I force a smile. "Sure," I say.

There is no need to worry her even more. I could be wrong, after all.

But as I drive away, I know for a fact that I *am* right. I would recognize those blond streaks anywhere.

Pam saw us.

CHAPTER 10



IVY

My heart jumps to my throat the moment the football team walks in. I have my back to the wall and I'm pretending to be interested in whatever Paul is saying as he makes me a milkshake behind the counter. Still, I can almost see them as they walk in, speaking loudly and causing everyone else in the restaurant to erupt into cheers.

My heart misses a beat. Zach is here, and I *still* have not had enough time to process the fact that I lost my virginity to him.

My cheeks heat up as the memory of last night comes to me. If I close my eyes and think hard enough (the way I did in bed all night and this morning), it's almost as if I am back underneath the bleachers, my legs wrapped around his waist as he thrust into me from...

"You okay there? Ivy? You've gone a little red."

I force a smile on for Paul. "I'm good," I say, reaching for the milkshake and taking a sip of it, just as Max Davies, the owner of the restaurant, comes up behind the counter, booming about last night's victory.

"Free milkshakes and burgers for everyone in the football team!" he declares, and the team members go wild.

I want to turn around and actually see Zach, but I can't bring myself to man up and do just that, *even* if that is the entire reason I popped over at Max's in the first place. I told Dad I was coming to see Paul and he had given a reluctant grunt in response.

But I was lying. The SCC football team always celebrates their wins by going to Max's the morning after a victory. I wanted to pop in here and see Zach, maybe even speak to him for a second.

But I lost my nerve.

Now, all I want to do is leave the restaurant, but I can't bear to do that, to imagine Zach's eyes on me as I walk past his teammates. And since Dave is in the bunch, there's a very huge probability that he could call me over and I'd embarrass myself by stammering the answers to his questions while Zach watched.

And I'd rather sit at this counter for twenty-four hours than let that happen.

"Great," Paul says now, reaching for another cup to make another milkshake. "Fifteen more milkshakes to make. Such fun."

I force another smile at him, but my ears are fixated on catching every word the team members are saying. The louder ones of the group keep talking about the game, and Zach's name comes up often, each time making my heart miss a bit. Zach barely speaks, though, and I catch his voice only two or three times.

It fills me with a small thrill to wonder if he's watching me as well.

Paul ducks underneath the counter, a tray of milkshakes in hand, just as my phone buzzes with a notification. I reach for it. There are more comments on my channel on the video I posted just last week, most of them clamoring for a face reveal.

I feel my stomach tighten with an emotion I'm unfamiliar with. Ever since the talk with Zach, I've been less apprehensive about my YouTube channel. I've even thought seriously about monetizing it, and while the tab is still open on my laptop back at home, I've not still summoned the courage to go through with it.

Monetizing the channel is one, far easier, thing. Revealing to high school students around the world that I run the channel is another thing. Dad is going to be heartbroken, and even people in our town are going to think of me a little differently.

But before I can delve deeper into those thoughts, the door of the restaurant opens, and this time, high, girlish voices float to my ears. The team starts to yell out some names, but only one name really strikes a chord.

Pam.

My stomach grows tense. I don't want to hear this. *That*, I'm certain of.

"Hey, Zach!" Pam's voices call out. Zach says something in reply, and my heart unclenches from my throat and settles lower in my abdominal cavity.

I reach for my phone again, intent on drowning out everything they're saying by focusing on replying to the new comments.

But I can't help it. This time, it's Zach's voice that comes through loud and clear. "Pam," he says. "Can I see you outside for a bit?"

"You can see her, alright," someone jeers, and suddenly, it seems everyone on the team is guffawing.

Tears sting my eyes. It is utterly ridiculous to feel bad, and I know it, but I can't help it. Pam *is* everything I am not: a tall, gorgeous college student who has enamored everyone on his team. There is no doubt in my mind that no one on the team would bat an eye if he said he wanted to speak to me. Even if I wasn't the coach's daughter, I am still the dorky girl-next-door.

"Now I have to get started on fifteen burgers," Paul grumbles as he walks up to the counter again. "I hate Saturday shifts."

I turn around, using a brief second to glance at where the team is seated. Zach stands up, his hand firm on Pam's back as he escorts her out of the restaurant.

I look away. I can't bear to see anymore.

“Wanna help me?” Paul says. “Max loves the coach. He’ll let you into the kitchen.”

“Sure,” I say instantly. The last thing I want to do is stay here and wait for Zach and Pam to come back holding hands or worse.

The kitchen is warm with fumes, but I don’t quite mind. Max is at the other end of the gray room, speaking loudly to a friend on the phone. Paul grabs the buns from an overhead cabinet and spreads them out on the kitchen table.

“I guarantee you that when we go back out, there’ll be a million more cheerleaders swarming around them like flies,” he says darkly. “Of course today has to be the day Karl calls in sick and I’m stuck with these people.”

Just what I need, I think, taking the bottle of mayonnaise and squirting it over the lettuce. I’m trying hard to not think of why Zach would even need to call Pam, but it’s difficult when I know that I’ll have to go back out in fifteen minutes.

“He can’t just keep it in his pants, can he?” Paul says suddenly.

I glance at him. He’s staring out the dirty kitchen window, disgust in his face. I follow his gaze, and my heart drops several inches further.

The window has a view to the back of the restaurant, and just behind the dumpsters, Zach is talking to Pam. She’s leaning against the wall, looking up at him with the most seductive and alluring look I’ve ever seen on a woman. Zach has a small smile as he bends over her, saying something.

I can’t help but notice that they are in the same exact position Zach and I were moments before he grabbed me and made love to me last night.

I swallow the ball that comes rushing up my throat, dropping the mayo bottle on the floor, where some of the liquid splatters out.

“Are you okay?” Paul says.

I shake my head, barely aware of what I'm doing. Paul takes a few steps closer, but I back away.

"I have to go," I tell him. Without waiting for an answer, I race out of the kitchen, slip underneath the counter, hurry past the team, and out of the restaurant.

It takes me a mere fifteen minutes to get home, my eyes fixed on the floor so no one else can see me cry. More than the hurt spreading through my body and making it hard to move my fingers, I feel unbearable humiliation.

I was an idiot to cave into Zach. I was an idiot to even *think* he gave a flick about me. I know that now.

When I get home, I head straight to my room. Dad is still somewhere in the house, and I know that in a few minutes he's going to knock on my door and ask what's wrong, and so I have to make something up.

But for right now, I have a few minutes, so I just let go. My knees give in, forcing me down. I just kneel there and cry, not bothering to hold back my sobs. It doesn't even matter. Nothing matters except the sinking realization that my dad was right all along. If I had listened to him, I wouldn't feel the way I feel now, like my heart is being ripped out of my chest.

It was easier to move on when all we shared was a kiss and a conversation, but right now, the memories of last night are burned into my head. The thought of going through tomorrow and the day after that pretending I am fine is almost unbearable.

A knock interrupts me, and I bolt to my feet, wiping my tears as rapidly as I can. The last thing I need is for my dad to find me this way. I'm already thinking of possible coverups when I realize that it's not my dad at the door.

It's Zach, knocking on my window.

CHAPTER 11



ZACH

I'm risking a lot to be here, up on a ledge on Coach Collins' house at noon, when I know damn well he can walk out any minute.

But the moment I see Ivy crash onto her floor and start to cry, I know that I would risk a hell of a lot more.

I stare at her now as she looks at me through the window, as though wondering whether to let me in or not. Her red-rimmed eyes stab at my heart, and I almost want to throw myself off the ledge to feel a semblance of the pain I caused her.

She lets out a small breath and starts to walk slowly to the window. I don't allow myself to feel relief until she opens it.

"You shouldn't be here," she mutters.

I leap through the tiny open space before she changes her mind.

"I don't want you here," Ivy says, backing away from me like I'm a monster. "Really, I don't need you to apologize, or explain, or rationalize. I just need you to *leave* before my dad comes up."

I ignore the burning her words start in my chest. "I'm not leaving until I tell you what happened."

Pain flashes across her face. "I know what happened," she says, her voice higher than before. "You were with Pam, flirting and..." She stops as her eyes fill with tears.

I'm dying to go to her and crush her in my arms, but I force myself to stay put as I say, "That's not what happened." I take a deep breath, cursing myself for not telling her this yesterday. "Pam saw us."

Her eyes widen with disbelief.

"She was the one in the parking lot," I explain. "I needed to tell her to not tell anyone what she saw. She played dumb and pretended to not see us, but I know Pam enough to know she *did* see something."

Ivy only stares at me, but she stops crying, and for that I feel a little grateful.

"I'm sorry," I say, taking a step forward. It surprises me how *much* I do mean that. I'd had one-night stands with several girls in the past, and I'd not even given a second thought as to how they felt the morning after. I would never have imagined that I would race across town in ten minutes because I realized I hurt one of them.

Ivy lets out a deep breath. She looks almost embarrassed as she stares at her feet. "I'm sorry too," she says. "I had no right to overreact. I just thought..." her entire face goes red. "Pam is everything you would want in a girl."

I scoff, amused. "And yet, I'm crazy about you," I tell her.

She looks up at me with her big, brown eyes, and before I'm even completely aware of what I'm doing, I'm marching over to her, taking her in my arms and pulling her chin up to mine in a kiss. The moment our lips touch, my entire body drains of tension and I know that *this* is different.

I started this entire thing because I found Ivy alluring. It's more than that now. There's a part of me that I hadn't even known existed, a part that is quite ready to kill anyone rather than see her get hurt.

And that scares me.

I pull away for a moment, breathing harder than normal. Things are moving too fast, and I am feeling way more than I want to.

As much as I want Ivy, I need to press pause, at least for a little while. I move over to the bed, sitting down on top of the pink-colored comforter, unable to completely tear myself out of her world and move back into mine. The thought of delving back to the restaurant, with a dozen spectators cheering us for the match, is not a pleasant one.

“Are you going to tell me?” Ivy says, interrupting my thoughts.

I look up at her, with the uncomfortable feeling that she somehow knows what I was thinking. “Tell you what?”

“The reason why you hate crowds.”

My heart misses a painful beat, but I force a slow smile onto my face. “Only if we play the game my parents interrupted.”

Ivy seems to have anticipated my response. “Fine,” she says, sounding disgusted. She goes over to her dressing table, sitting down behind her laptop.

I feel a stab of guilt. There’s no reason to be a dick to her when she’s trying to help, especially now. Sighing, I stand up and go over to her, watching as she powers on her laptop.

“Have you monetized your channel yet?” I ask. As much as I don’t want to hurt her, I was going to step on hot coals before I started telling her my sob story. “You did imply you were going to do it.”

She merely blushes and reaches for her laptop, attempting to slam it shut. But I’m quicker. I snap up the device and look at the screen. The internet tab open is a form for monetization.

She doesn’t even try to fight me. “I was trying to monetize it,” she tells me, biting her lip. “But...”

She *does* look adorable whenever she chews her lip.

“I’m going to wait until you do it,” I tell her.

She stares at me almost defiantly, but then she says, “Fine,” and reaches for the laptop. I watch her as she fills the form, typing faster than anyone I’d ever seen in my life.

“Done,” she says a few minutes later, pushing away the laptop, her fingers trembling slightly.

I bend in front of her, taking her hand in mine. “Ivy,” I tell her. “You’ve been working on this channel for *years*. You deserve this money.”

“It’s going to be a lot of money,” she whispers to me. “A whole freaking lot. I won’t be able to hide it from my dad.”

“Easy,” I say. “I’ll just hold on to it for you.”

She grins at me, and I have to fight the urge to take her in my arms again. I focus instead on the obvious worry lurking deep in her eyes.

“Ivy,” I tell her, reaching for her hand. “You can take all of the money and keep it in a bank somewhere. But you’re not going to be a teen forever. You need to make all of the money you can when you have the chance.”

She says nothing for a moment, and then nods.

“Spit it out,” I tell her.

She stares at me, as though deciding whether to trust me. Finally, she takes a deep breath. “The moment my subscribers realize I’ve monetized the channel, they’re going to think it means I’m going to do a face reveal. And that’s not going to go well.”

“It is,” I tell her. “Coach can rage all he wants, but four hundred thousand people around the world will have their minds blown when they learn that they can now attach a face to your words.”

She shakes her head, doubt written in her face.

I cock my head to one side, suddenly realizing something. Ivy is under the opinion that her fans won’t be ecstatic about her face reveal. “This is not just about your dad, is it?”

She says nothing.

I raise her chin up so she’s staring into my eyes. “Ivy,” I say. “They’re going to fall in love with you.”

“Not when they realize I look like this.”

I reach out and remove the glasses on her face, slipping them into my pocket. Ivy lets out a moan of protest I quench with my lips on hers. I fight the sudden desire it evokes in me for a moment, pulling away from her to say, “You can’t hide beneath those glasses and your overalls all your life, Ivy. You’re more beautiful than you even know. And when your subscribers see you, they’re going to fall in love with you.”

She reaches out and holds my hand, stars in her eyes. “Thank you.”

I beam at her, hating the way my lungs seem to expand with fresh air. *Why* does Ivy have this impact on me?

And is there any way I can pull back before it is too late?

She leans into me then, her lips brushing mine. I lose the power of thought in that instant, bringing my lips closer to her and deepening the kiss. Ivy lets out a moan, wrapping her arms around me, and pulling me even closer. She breaks off the kiss, her small fingers reaching under my T-shirt and brushing against the hair on my chest.

“Ivy,” I groan, a few more touches like that and I am certain to lose control.

She ignores my warning, her fingers exploring even lower, reaching for the tight knot in my jeans. I hold my breath as she reaches for my fly, her fingers trembling as she tries to unbuckle the button.

“Sorry,” she mutters, her cheeks going red. “I...”

God. I can’t get enough of her.

I grin, covering her fingers with mine. “It’s fine,” I say. It takes only a few seconds for me to rid myself of the contraption and shove my pants down my hips. I feel my breath seize a little as her gaze flutters on the pink burn scars around my left hip, but she doesn’t settle on them. She focuses instead on my dick, taking a deep breath as she looks at me, erect and throbbing, with fluid leaking from my tip.

“That’s the reaction I was kind of hoping you’d have that day in the bathroom,” I tell her.

“Really?” she murmurs. “Cause I thought you’d prefer me to do less of reacting and more of *this*.”

My brain freezes as she wraps her fingers around the length of my penis, moving up and down in slow strokes. I hold on to her shoulder, the pleasure I feel threatening to snap me into two.

Ivy seems to enjoy my fighting for control. She looks up at me, her eyes glittering with mischief.

I reach out for her, intent on placing her on the floor and thrusting into her as deep as I can, but before I can do that, she bends, running her tongue across my tip and letting it absorb the leaking fluid.

I sigh, all of my defenses crumbling.

Ivy takes me in her mouth. She sucks me, running her tongue down my shaft as she goes in and out. I place my hand on her head, the pleasure making my balls tighten.

I have never felt this way, ever.

I’m already approaching climax, and that realization gives me the strength to pull away from her. She lets out a small groan, but I cover her mouth in a kiss, pulling her onto the ground with me.

I cover her mouth with my hand as I finally, blessedly, thrust into her.

She bites my palm as she struggles to not scream, and I suppress a groan in pleasure-pain. I can hear Coach Collins moving about in the living room, but not even the possible repercussions succeed in beating me back into a state of logical consciousness. A thought about contraceptives pops up as well, but it gets squashed as I breathe in the scent of Ivy. All I can think or feel or *breathe* right now is Ivy.

I thrust again, and her teeth clamp down on my palm harder. Almost enjoying the feeling, I continue to thrust, fast and hard. The sensation spills out of me, wrapping itself around me with such force I feel nothing but pure, dizzying, bliss. Ivy is writhing beneath me and I reach lower and take her nipple in my mouth, thrusting even deeper, and driving the

both of us toward ecstasy. She wraps her legs around me, urging me to go even harder, to explore parts of herself that neither of us knew existed.

I grind my teeth as I come in her. I know in that instant what I'd known for a while but I'd not let myself consider.

There's something about Ivy that is always going to make me keep coming back. Always.

CHAPTER 12



ZACH

The first time I stepped into the SCC football field and met up with Coach Collins, he gave me two ground rules. One, to *never* look at the scoreboard during a match. Two, and arguably the most important rule, was not to listen to the commentators. Ever.

“When you’re on that field and you have forty seconds to decide what you want to do with the ball, listening to those bastards pandering on and suggesting shit they know nothing about will do you no good,” he’d said.

And he was right.

But right now, hunched over with the ball clenched in my fist, I find myself disregarding what is supposed to be a lifelong lesson, and not for the first time.

“And now, for the fourth down, with eighty yards to cross for a touchdown and less than three minutes remaining, team captain and quarterback Anderson takes the ball and prepares for his next move.”

“What do you think he’ll do, Pete?”

“A betting man would go for handing it over to Collins, definitely. Collins has the best hands of anyone on this field, and the Iowa Team will surely tackle him before he advances five yards.”

Now I know why Coach Collins hates commentators.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath in, trying hard to not focus on their rambling. But even more overwhelming is

the screaming from the crowd, and for the slightest second I find it impossible to breathe.

“Anderson!” Dave is screaming from the other end of the pitch.

I look over the heads of the defense line of the Iowa team. Dave is waving his hands in the air, his face contorted in exasperation.

I take in another deep breath, my fingers trembling slightly as Pete the Commentator announces there are two minutes left.

As much as I like football, *this* always happens at least once during every match. My fingers starting to tremble, my thoughts fleeing my brain as I struggle to hold on to everything, *anything*. Dave is still screaming my name, Coach Collins is bellowing something else from the sidelines, and the spectators are screaming louder than ever.

Focus, Zach, I yell at myself.

Shocker. That doesn't work.

My brain is starting to pound with a headache, and I close my eyes, willing for it to drift away. Instead, an image of Irene Cullingham floats up to my mind, her sad green eyes blinking as she disappears only to reappear in the next second.

Fuck.

My fingers are trembling even harder now, and I feel the start of a panic attack coming.

Not again, I think, trying to hold on to something, anything.

Ivy's image flashes through my mind, and for a fraction of a second, the world goes silent, and I'm back in her room, running my fingers through her hair, watching her grin at me.

When I look down at my hands again, they're completely still.

I glance at Dave, who is still screaming my name. This time, however, the noise from the crowd has been distilled into a low, buzzing noise.

I make my decision then. Dave screwed up the last three downs. I can't bet on him delivering even a field goal now.

I straighten up, holding the ball up and turning around in an arch, as if to throw the ball. The defense line shatters, most of them heading for Dave. But when I complete the circle of turn, the ball is still clenched in my fist.

Then, as the crowd surges in an uproar that doesn't affect me, I start to run like hell.

I push my way through the one lineman who isn't headed for Dave. The rest of the defense team is quickly regrouping—the commentators were right about the Iowa Team being near-invisible—and I swerve past yet another lineman. My next challenger is Kravinsky, a six-foot-four linebacker. He throws himself into the air with impressive agility for his size, aiming to tackle me into the ground.

For a millisecond, my brain freezes and the screaming from the crowd starts to grind into my skull, but I force Ivy back into my brain. This time, my mouth is on her nipple, and her moans are the only sound in my ears.

I let out a grunt as I roll underneath Kravinsky's bulk before he hits the ground in an earth-shattering crash, emerging on the other side of him with the ball held tightly in my fist. I continue to run like crazy, advancing past the seventy, sixty, fifty, and forty yards. The second linebacker charges toward me as I cross the thirty-yard, but he's tackled by Dave in seconds. I hop over a defensive back and throw myself into the endzone.

Touchdown.

The buzzer sounds in the next second, nearly drowned by the uproar from the crowd. My teammates huddle around me, Dave screaming as he punches me in the stomach.

"You bastard," he screeches. "Gotta have all the glory, don't you?"

I grin at him. Before I can think to answer, we are swaddled by a stream of spectators breaking free of their seats. I hitch my grin in place and allow them to hoist me on their

shoulders, already counting down the moments until I can leave the pitch.

Thankfully, I don't have to wait long this time. Coach Collins is right beside the frantic crowd, waving hard at me. Relief fills me as I hop off their shoulders, wave goodbye, and shove my way through the crowd to meet him, pulling off my helmet as I go. I'm a few feet from him when I notice that he's with an older man who's wearing a suit and a sleazy smile.

"Good game," Coach says gruffly, pulling me in for a one-second, one-armed hug.

I bite back a smile. Coach Collins usually remains unimpressed by what he calls "small games." He would hardly show emotion if a championship was not on the line.

"Troy Donovan here. *Great* game," the suited man says, extending his arm for a handshake. "The Iowa team hasn't been defeated that soundly in years! An eighty-yard touchdown? That'll wipe the smiles off their faces, no doubt!"

Coach looks slightly miffed at Mr. Donovan's correction, but he says, "Mr. Donovan is here from Florida State. He was impressed with your performance."

A thrill runs through me. Florida State is not close to being my school of choice, but it's a great college for football, and it's beyond promising that they are the first school meeting up with me.

"Very impressed," Mr. Donovan corrects again, and Coach Collins frowns. "It was amazing. Raw talent, I'd say."

I grin at him. "Thanks."

"He wants to talk to you about possibly continuing your education at Florida State," Coach says tonelessly. "He..."

"Well, now that you mention it," Mr. Donovan says, and I see Coach's frown deepen. "While I thoroughly enjoyed your behavior out there today, I do have some questions."

I raise my brows. "Really? About what?"

The man looks almost uncomfortable. "You were a treasure out there, no doubt. But it seemed to me—and

everyone—that toward the end of the match, you kind of *froze* for a bit there. And I’ve watched a few of your former matches to know that this *freezing* is sort of a common occurrence with you, Anderson.”

I feel my heart sink a few inches. Making sure to keep my expression intact, I turn to Coach Collins, who is now positively snarling.

“That freezing, Mr. Donovan, is what I like to call *thought*. You see, playing football necessitates pausing for a few moments to decide what route to take next. Anderson did the right thing today, and because of that, we won the game.”

“Barely,” Mr. Donovan says, his smile in place.

My fingers ball into fists, and he seems to notice that, because he backtracks rather quickly. “While the team did admirably, mostly due to Anderson, the buzzer went off a second after he made it to the end zone. If he had been a second slower in making his decision...”

“But I wasn’t,” I cut in. I know enough not to piss a scout, but I also know I’m done taking shit from a man who knows absolutely jack shit about what he’s talking about. “So, what’s the problem here?”

Mr. Donovan stares for a few seconds. And then he says, “Your coach seems to find pride in you taking time to think things through even in highly tense situations. But I can hardly recall watching an NFL match where any player froze to mull things over in his head.”

Coach Collins looks like he wants nothing more than to pound the man’s skull into a pulp. And as much as I want to follow his path of righteous anger, I can’t.

Somewhere in the deep dark corner of my belly, I’m still wrestling with the truth. Mr. Donovan is right. Nobody who wants to make it to the NFL spends almost half a minute wrestling panic while hundreds of people are waiting for him to play.

Especially not the quarterback.

I give him a terse smile. “See you later,” I say, extending my hand for a final handshake.

The coach rounds on me the moment Mr. Donovan is out of earshot. “Hell no,” he says. “You’re not going to see him again. I’ve got half a mind to not allow him into the premises to watch any of our matches ever again.”

I manage a genuine smile this time. “Florida State is a good college, Coach.”

“Not good enough for any scout to be so uppity,” Coach declares. “You’re one of my best players. If we’ve got to work on your thinking time, we will. But not because we’re hoping a college in the worst state in the country wants you.” He huffs, but his expression softens as he claps a hand on my shoulder. “By the time this season ends and we *win* this championship, a million scouts will be after you. You have your eyes set on UCLA, and I freaking assure you that they’ll be running after you in a few months. Let’s see what Florida Fancypants has to say then.”

I ignore the sinking feeling in my gut and chuckle. “Thanks, Coach.”

“Have a good night before we meet up at Max’s tomorrow,” he says before he leaves. “You deserve it.”

I wait for him to go before I turn around and stare at the emptying bleachers, the sinking feeling intensifying even further. The SCC bleachers sit a mere three thousand, and that number is enough to trigger my anxiety.

Going onto an NFL pitch with millions of people watching my every move is going to send me into a full-on panic attack for sure.

My fingernails dig into my palms. I’ve been playing football for six years now, and when I started off at Sundale High School, I thought the anxiety would fade away with time. It hasn’t, and even now I have to wait for my brain to spiral into nothingness for a few minutes before I regain full control of my consciousness.

Coach Collins—and all the other coaches I'd had—have always chalked these moments to my slower decision making. None of them had much of a problem with me.

But Mr. Donovan saw through the bullshit. Just the way any other college scout is going to see through it, and I know that as well as I know my last name.

Even if I've spent most of the past seven years ignoring the anxiety-ridden part of me, I can't ignore it any longer, since it's certain to ruin my life if I let it go unchecked.

And to start fixing it, I need to go to the one person whose image seems to have kept the monsters at bay long enough to score a touchdown tonight.

I need to find Ivy.

CHAPTER 13



IVY

Keep smiling, Ivy. It's not that hard.

But it *is* hard, and I know it. *Especially* when I'm standing just beside the football locker room, technically doing nothing but pretending to be waiting for my dad or my brother.

I feel like an idiot, standing off to the side and pretending to be intrigued by my phone while I'm *really* staring at the cheerleading squad. About five of them, including Pam, are currently chatting with two boys from the football team, pressuring them about details of their victory.

As if they didn't watch the match.

I warn myself not to be salty. It's not their fault they weren't born socially awkward and so cowardly they had to stand by the locker room hoping the guy they wanted to talk to came out sometime within the next hour. If I had even ten percent of their courage, I'd be in the locker room already, looking for Zach.

But, I don't, so I'm stuck here.

"Ivy?"

I look up, a chill running down my spine. "Hi, Pam," I say, trying my hardest to sound casual. She seems to have somehow lost interest in her conversation and turned around to see me. Months ago, she would have looked past me like I was one of the walls of the locker room.

But not now. And I know why.

She marches over to me, but I feel some relief that everyone in her small group only gives me one bored glance before they turn back to their conversation. It should be far easier to deal with Pam alone.

Or so I hope.

“Why are you here?” she says with a sickly, Regina George smile.

“Erm...” *Why* on god’s green earth are my palms sweating? “To see my brother.”

“Dave left thirty minutes ago,” she says, cocking her head to the side.

Shoot, I think. I wonder for a fraction of a second if my dad had been the better lie, but I dismiss it instantly. My dad had left even before the team had come to the locker room. That had been why I felt safe enough to lurk around the entrance.

I look up to see her eyes glittering in enjoyment. My sweaty palms ball into fists. She’s goading me and enjoying it all the way. She knows *precisely* why I am here, but she’s not going to stop until I admit it to her.

“How’s Zach?” she asks sweetly.

I feel my cheeks flush. “He’s fine,” I say automatically, before I feel the urge to kick myself. She’s being the typical mean girl. I’m supposed to lash back with well-thought-out zingers like hers.

Unfortunately, I’m not versed in the mean girl lingo.

She reaches up to twirl a lock of her blond ponytail around in her fingers. “Really? How do you know that?”

My mouth is dry, and I’m seriously beginning to rethink coming here at all. “He’s my friend’s brother...” *Shoot*. “I mean, my brother’s friend, and....”

I stop talking as Pam starts to grin. There is no need to continue anyway. She’s got me exactly where she wants.

She glances around, as if to make sure no one is watching us, before she takes a step forward. It takes everything in me not to increase the gap between us. She stares down at me, her creepy smile still in place.

“I know you think you’ve got something going on with Zach,” she says. “Maybe your weird dad made you seduce him so you can end up a football wife since you’re too weak to *actually* play football or some shit like that, but I’m going to do you a favor and set things straight. Zach is going to fuck you and move on to the next weirdo nerd girl, and when the news breaks, everyone in town is going to know...”

“Pam.”

My heart misses a beat. Zach is standing behind Pam. He’s now wearing sweats and the deepest frown I’ve ever seen on him.

Pam seems to switch personalities in a second. Her phony smile drops for a winning, cheerleader-on-the-pitch one. “Hey, Zach!” she chirps, striding over to him, her arms outstretched in a hug. “You were fantastic out there. I mean...”

He sidesteps her just before she gets to him, and I hear her let out a gasp, wobbling at the unexpected lack of support. Zach doesn’t wait for her to find her feet. He slips past her, takes my hand, and pulls me past her and the group of cheerleaders.

“I’m sorry about that,” he says as we’re passing them and heading back toward the football field. “She’s like an old dog that can’t learn new tricks, except in her case it seems to be hard understanding the word no.”

I let out a forced chuckle, my insides still burning with embarrassment. I am starting to understand that Zach cares for me, but I don’t quite understand *why*. I’m too chicken to even stand up for myself in front of Pam, and as Zach turns to face me, I force myself to hold back the sudden tears that spring to my eyes.

“Hey,” Zach says, looking down at me with his face contorted in concern. “I’m going to spend the whole day

tomorrow telling Pam she's going to have to deal with me the next time she so much as looks at you. But I'd rather spend *this* night with you."

I grin in spite of myself. "Yeah, me too," I tell him. My heart lifts as I reach up to press my hand against his cheek.

He sighs in pleasure. "You have no fucking idea how long I've been waiting to feel you touch me."

I giggle, because I'd just been thinking the same thing.

He looks down at me, and there's a dark emotion lurking behind his eyes as he says, "I've got to tell you something."

The first thought that flies through my head is: *He wants to break up with you.*

The sudden terror that grips me makes me want to kick myself. We are not even dating, and even if I sort of got used to his goodnight messages over the past month, I *need* to remember that. This is the happiest I've ever been, but it can also come crashing down within a moment's notice.

"A scout from Florida State approached me," he says.

My face relaxes in a grin, mostly from relief. But then I remember what a big deal that is, and excitement floods me for him—along with the smallest of distress over the fact that Zach is going to be leaving Sundale soon. He has six months left at SCC, after all, and then he's going to zap off to the farthest corner of the country while I'm still here, being the perfect coach's daughter.

I push away all my negative thoughts and focus on the positive. This is Zach's dream, and all I can do is support him.

"That's amazing, Zach," I say. "Congratulations."

But he doesn't even smile. His blue eyes have grown dark with angst, and worry eclipses my flawed excitement.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"The scout was not particularly impressed with my... delays... in the field."

He seems completely embarrassed to share that detail with me. My heart breaks for him as I read between the lines. The first scout who approached him noticed the one thing he's still keeping a secret from everyone. There's every chance other scouts will notice as well, and that will reduce his chances of getting as much football scholarships as he thought.

I reach out and take his hand. "I'm sorry," I mutter. "But I do think you've got a chance to fix it before anyone else notices."

He looks down at me, his eyes burning with suspicion. "What do you mean?"

I'm almost apprehensive as I say my next words. "Therapy, Zach. Anxiety is a mental health challenge, and a psychiatrist would..."

Zach pulls his hand away from mine almost roughly. "No, thanks. Do you know what will happen if I go to a shrink and everyone here finds out?"

His action pierces my heart with pain, but only for a moment. "I understand that..."

"No, you don't," he says, his facial expression similar to what it had been when he saw Pam with me earlier. "You *don't* understand. This is a small town. Word spreads around pretty fast. No scout would go close to a player who has been diagnosed with anxiety so crippling it affects them on the field."

I take in a deep breath, trying to figure out how else to convince him. I did not expect him to be so opposed to the idea of therapy, but that was kind of foolish. Zach hides that part of himself even from himself. There's no way he'll find it easy to talk about it with a complete stranger.

"If you go to a therapist outside of town, the risks would be far reduced. No one would know," I say.

"Yeah, except for the scouts, when they ask for my full medical history." He buries his face in his palms for a few moments, breathing deeply, as though trying to regulate his emotions. When he looks back at me, his eyes are red-rimmed.

“Stop pushing it, okay?” he says. “You of all people should understand someone keeping secrets from everyone else.”

His words hurt, but I try not to dwell on them as another idea strikes me. “Fine,” I say. “Why don’t we make a deal, then?”

He eyes me suspiciously. “What deal?”

I swallow the flame of fear that leaps to my throat. “I tell my dad about my YouTube channel, and you have to see a therapist when I do.”

He looks at me as if I’ve gone crazy. And maybe I have, I think. Because a few months ago, I would not have imagined that I would be risking everything about my safe, pleasant life for anyone, even if there was a life on the line.

And I am willing to give it all up for Zach.

It’s official. Even though it kills me to admit it, I know it. I’m head-over-heels for him.

“You’re kidding,” he says.

I push back the memories that spring to my head about how wrong this could go. “No,” I tell him. “I’m going to tell him tonight.” This is the best time too, because my dad is going to still be ecstatic over his team’s win. It would be much worse if I caught him on a bad day.

Zach merely stares at me as if he doesn’t recognize me. I swallow hard and tell him bye, before I walk away, past the field and in front of the locker room, which is now completely deserted. My bike is locked to a pole at the far end of the car park, and my fingers tremble as I unlock it and get on it.

My mind is spiraling about how wrong this could go, but I push all of those thoughts away. I want to get home and get this over with before I lose my nerve. This is going to be the first active decision I’ve ever made all my life, and even if it blows up in my face (which I know it will) I’ll at least be happier knowing that I was less cowardly for once.

I pull up in front of my house about ten minutes later, my fingers now frozen with fright. Still, I climb up the porch

steps, ignoring the panic inside me.

I'm doing this for a good cause, I remind myself. Once I do this, Zach will get rid of his anxiety, get into a good school in six months, and...

And leave me.

I shove the thought away as soon as it comes. Pam's words keep ringing in my head, but I'm going to deal with it later. That is a different can of worms to face off.

I push open the door to the house, my heart banging in my chest. No one is in the hall, and my breath eases slightly. It takes me a moment to will my heart rate to return to normal, before I make my way to the living room.

Dad is on the couch, his gaze on the TV, where a match is playing.

I take in my deepest of breaths. "Dad," I say, "I need to tell you something."

He turns to me, his gaze empty and dark as he stares at me.

But I don't have a long time to worry about his odd behavior, because I notice something else.

Lying at his feet is my silver box, the lock broken into. The box is open, and my camera equipment is right there, exposed to the world for the first time.

CHAPTER 14



ZACH

I rotate my left arm around in a semicircle, my other hand clamped tightly on my left shoulder to numb the pain the simple motion emits. Practice was particularly horrible today, and I'm still paying for it.

"You good, Anderson?"

I grimace at Dave Collins as he comes up to me. He's wearing a grin, a towel, and nothing else, while his body is still sleek with drops of water from the shower.

"Thanks for the near shoulder dislocation," I say, and his grins widens.

"All's fair in love and war, bro," he says, opening his locker and reaching for a shirt. "We were on opposing teams, and I had to do my very best. The last thing I want is to give Coach one more reason to breathe down my neck at home the same way he does on the field."

I feel a lurch in my chest. Over the past week, there have been a lot of whispers around the team that Coach is in a fouler mood than anyone has ever seen him. I'd assumed it was because we were gearing up for the quarter-finals match, but if he's just as foul at home, it only confirms something my barrage of unanswered texts had hinted at already.

It has to do with Ivy.

It didn't take a genius to figure it out. Ivy had put herself out on the front lines by volunteering to tell her dad about a secret she'd kept away from him for years, all so I would man

up and go to therapy. And I let her do it, because I'd been convinced she would lose her nerve halfway and not do it after all.

It seems she did it, and Coach is furious with her. He *is* taking it out on all of us, but my heart aches as I imagine how badly it is going for Ivy. Our communication was cut off over the past week, and I have literally no way to get to her and make sure she is okay.

I stuff my dirty jersey into my locker, trying to quell the urge to bash my head into the deepest part of the locker along with it. I reacted like a child when Ivy had brought up her suggestion of therapy. Looking back, it *is* the right decision to talk with a professional and untie the bundle of childhood angst that still lurks deep within me.

But I fucked that up, and Ivy is now paying the price.

I turn to glance at Dave, who is now running a comb through his hair. I dealt with the turmoil of being torn apart from her these past week, although it's been greatly surpassed by anxiety about what's really going on with her. And right now, as I stare at her brother, I realize how desperately I want to know what exactly happened.

But just before I can figure out the least suspicious way to pitch my question, Mark comes striding up to his locker, dripping water on the floor.

"You're going to have to tell Coach to lay it off on the insults," he spits at Dave as he throws his locker open. "He didn't have to call me a weirdly-shaped buffoon for missing one catch today. It's my high school English teacher all over again."

Dave chuckles. "At least you're not the one who has to make him breakfast and listen to him harp on about how the toast is too dry, or too moist, or too stringy. How the hell is bread stringy, anyway?"

Dave glances at me, and I let out the obligatory chuckle, even though every nerve in my body is tingling with the thought of asking the next, obvious question.

But Mark does it before I get a chance to. “Doesn’t your little sister do the cooking?”

I feel my shoulders tense. I bury my head inside my locker, rummaging the contents for nothing in particular, while my ears are pricked up for Dave’s next words.

“Yeah, a long time ago,” Dave says. “Until she got busted for doing something stupid and my dad is teaching her a lesson by grounding her for—by my estimate—three years.”

Mark lets out a guffaw. I wait for him to say something else, but he strides away toward the end of the locker room, and I am left alone with Dave once more.

I can’t take it anymore. With the best look of indifference I can muster, I turn over to Dave. “Really?” I ask. “I can’t imagine Ivy doing anything to upset the Coach.”

Dave gives a snide smile. “Well, me neither. Have to say, it kind of shocked me. But it wasn’t so unexpected, you know? She spends all of her time being Daddy’s Little Girl and making me look like the jerk rascal. Feels good to have her under the chopping block for a change.”

My fingers ball into fists of their own accord. I force myself to relax them. Dave is her brother, after all. There’s bound to be a little sibling rivalry between them.

I search my mind for something to say, something indifferent enough so Dave doesn’t get suspicious, but interesting enough for him to continue talking. All I come up with is, “Sucks for her. She’ll be going through it.”

Dave shrugs. “Eh. It’s crazy how much of a rascal she was, though. I mean, she had a whole YouTube channel with five hundred thousand subscribers.” I summon a false look of surprise on my face. “No wonder she wanted to take a gap year. Once the news breaks out in town, my dad is going to end up looking like the idiot who didn’t know his daughter had a whole other life somewhere, or like the jackass who pushed his two children into sports so he can live through them. He’s a little bit of both, but it’s worse when *everyone* knows it.”

I force a smile. “Yeah, I see that.” I’m dying to ask how Ivy is, but I know there’s no way to do that without sounding too interested.

“And maybe Ivy will learn some essential life skills from this. Fingers crossed. Sucking up to people will lead you nowhere.”

My nails are digging into my palms again. “She managed to live a happy life without the both of you finding out and when you did find out, it came crashing down. Maybe it *did* lead her somewhere.”

Fuck. I hadn’t thought those words through before saying them.

Dave’s eyes narrow, and I feel a headache starting up in the center of my head. I need to say something to throw him off the scent, but...

“Then maybe if she wasn’t a coward, she’d have stood up for herself and stopped him from pushing her into sports,” Dave says, and I feel slight relief. He doesn’t suspect that I’ve got anything going on with Ivy. He’s just pissed off I took his side over hers.

But my relief turns into boiling hot rage as I internalize his words. “Like you stood up for yourself?”

His eyes are slits now. “What is that supposed to mean?” he asks.

His statement is a warning, but right now my headache is pulsating through all the parts of my head, making it difficult to not give into recklessness. “You’re the lucky one. You love football, so you’ve never had to deal with telling Coach you don’t agree with his dream for you. It’s not the same for Ivy. She hates sports, but can’t tell your dad that and disappoint him. Hence the sneaking around. But you’ve never had to experience that.”

Dave stares at me in disbelief for a few moments. Then, he slams his door shut and picks up his sports bag.

“Whatever, bro,” he says before he pushes past me.

My head is pounding now, and I feel more like an idiot than ever. I can't blame Dave for being the asshole who can't understand where his sister is at. A while ago, *I* was Dave, telling Ivy that all she needed to do was stand up to her dad and live her life on her own terms.

But it's not that easy, and I know that now.

I sigh, burying my head in my arms, not caring about everyone else milling around in the locker room. I had thought of Ivy as a nerdy people-pleaser who could not break free of her own chains even though she had the means to.

But I'm as hypocritical as she was. I am refusing to go to therapy because I'm a coward. And she risked everything about her relationship with her dad to force me to go.

She won the bet.

And as I heave my sports bag over my shoulder, I am aware of two things.

One, I'm going to start therapy as soon as I can. Not just for myself, but because of Ivy. Her sacrifice is not going to go to waste.

And two, I need to see Ivy. I'll face the wrath of a million coaches before I go one more moment without seeing her.

And there is only one way to go about that.

CHAPTER 15



I t's almost seven when there's a knock on my window. I'd laid in bed all day without showering, and I'd eaten nothing but some Pringles that had been in my room for months. It had been a week since my dad grounded me, and each day had basically been the same; me fighting through a depressive haze, giving up halfway and just lying in bed, ignoring the hunger pangs and letting tears leak out of my eyes without stopping them.

But when I hear the knock, I sit up, faster than I'd done anything else all week. There was no way it was Zach. Maybe my dad had gotten sick of me staying in my room and only coming out for food when I was certain the house was completely deserted. Maybe he was now trying to break open my door.

But I'm wrong. It's Zach all right. He's standing on the ledge, looking through my window with the purest concern in his eyes.

I burst into tears for the tenth time that day. But this time, I feel more relief than I'd felt for the past seven days. One of the hardest things about going through this week-long ordeal was not seeing anyone or not being able to speak to anyone. And the person that I missed the most was Zach.

His eyes narrow when he sees me burst into tears, and he knocks on the window, louder this time. I read his lips. *Open the window.*

I start to stand up, but then I fall back onto the bed the moment I catch a whiff of my armpits. I haven't showered in four days and I've been wearing the same nightie for three of them. I've also not brushed my teeth in a while.

The last thing I want is for Zach to see—or smell—me like this.

Zach is impatient. He bangs on my window, louder still. His lips form words again. *Open the window, Ivy. Coach is still back at his office. You don't have to worry.*

I'm too embarrassed to tell him the real reason why I don't want him in here. So, I stand up, my legs feeling weak and half-atrophied after a whole week of barely using them. I manage to stumble across my rug and stand in front of the window.

I *know* I can't open the window and have him sliding in because I smell gross, but it feels darn good to be within seeing distance of him again. I can feel my face muscles figuring out how to form a smile again as I stare at his perfect face, the sweaty hair falling over his forehead, his fingers twitching against...

The next bang almost knocks me over.

"Ivy," he calls, now loudly enough for me to hear him through the glass. "Open this damn window or I'm breaking it in."

I bite my lip, unable to meet his gaze. A few minutes ago, I would've never imagined that I would climb out of my spiral and feel anything but aching despair. But staring at Zach, my despair starts to slip into embarrassment as I imagine what I look like, with dry tear tracks no doubt on my face, my nose red from crying, and my uncombed, unwashed hair definitely sticking out in all places.

"Ivy?" he calls.

I look up at him, trying hard to not give into my basic instinct to dive underneath my covers and wait for him to go. "You can't come in," I say.

“I told you, Coach is still at school,” he says, but then his eyes darken with what looks like self-disgust. “If this is because of me, I’m sorry. I’m really, *really* sorry. I was a jackass and the coward who let you face him off so I wouldn’t have to drag my ass to therapy. You didn’t deserve that.”

Tears sting my eyes and I wipe them again, not wanting to look even worse. Neither Dave nor my dad have said anything remotely positive to me all week. My dad had raged all night about finding the equipment, and I had to deal with Dave sitting behind him, shooting me a sly smile that I read loud and clear: *If you’d locked your room and pushed him out of your business the way I told you to, none of this would have happened.*

But it had. My dad had seized my phone that night and ordered me to my room, screaming about betrayal and everything else. I’d obeyed him—to Dave’s increased amusement—mostly because I was too numb to even state my case.

I was also more aware of the truth than I’d ever been in my entire life. No matter what Dave said, he got an easy pass over me. My dad was more likely to ignore his rebellion. Dave played football after all, so everything else he did barely mattered.

But my dad would *never* accept the real me, the person whose only dream was to become a famed critic, never swim again for as long as I lived, and stop wearing large glasses and stupid overalls that shielded me from everyone else.

My dad wanted the picture-perfect daughter. And if he was going to throw a fit about my YouTube channel, he was surely going to kill me if he found out I’d had sex with Zach.

I glance at Zach, who’s staring at me with unabashed concern. Tears sting my eyes again. It’s crazy, but it hits me then that Zach is the first person I’ve ever met who has seen all the parts of me and has not raged at the sight.

“Ivy,” he says again, interrupting my train of thoughts.

I let out a breath, pushing away thoughts of my dad and brother and focusing instead on the here and now. “I can’t let you in,” I tell him again, feeling my embarrassment increase. “I haven’t showered in a while.”

He frowns in confusion. “And?”

I take in a deep breath, feeling like an idiot. “I stink,” I explain. “And...”

He doesn’t let me finish. He bangs on the window again. “I don’t give a fuck,” he says. “Open this window before I kick it in.”

His passion melts my heart, but one thought about the state of my stinky armpits and I shake my head.

He looks completely furious. “Look,” he says after a moment. “I didn’t shower after practice too. I probably smell way worse than you do. Let’s call it even. Open this window. I *need* to see you.”

My heart melts even further, and I take the last few steps toward the window, trying not to start bawling as I open up the window. Zach heaves a sigh of relief. It takes him a mere moment to slide through the window, and another moment to reach for me.

I go to him, feeling my body drain with tension as his large arms wrap themselves around me. He smells amazingly, and I know instantly that he was lying about not showering after practice. I’m trying my hardest not to cry, but I fail in about a millisecond. Loud, ugly sobs that seem to have been waiting for a week to let themselves out finally pour out of me.

“I’m sorry,” I manage to choke, feeling more like an idiot than ever. “I just...”

He pulls me back to gaze into my eyes. “Hey,” he says. “Don’t apologize. I want to kill myself for letting you face your dad and tell him everything.”

I want to tell him that my dad found out on his own, but before I can, my gaze slides to his lips. I’m drawn back to our nights together, our body crashing against each other as he drives me to ecstasy.

It takes only a moment for burning lust to rip through me. I don't let myself think about anything else, or explore the detriment of my actions.

I stand on my tip-toes and kiss him.

Zach lets out a grunt that tells me everything I need to know about how much he wants me, even in my sorry state. But he pulls back in a second. "Are you sure?" he says. "You want to talk about it?"

I shake my head quickly. I know I'm going to have to mull over the fact that Zach Anderson was willing to put aside his desire to talk to me the way I hoped my dad would, but right now, all I want is to feel him inside me.

And so, I reach up and kiss him again, desperate to feel good.

Zach doesn't hesitate this time. He pulls me even closer, ripping my nightie off my body with one hand. He lets out another grunt as he presses my naked body against his fully-clothed one.

"Fuck," he mutters against my lips. "You're like a fucking addiction."

I'm barely listening. My fingers are trembling as I reach for his sweatpants, pulling them along with his briefs, wanting him to be as naked as I am. I've never been this forward before, but I've never needed him this much before either.

Zach lets me do the honors and helps me out, removing his sports bag from his shoulder and stripping his sweatshirt off his body. He hoists me in his arms as soon as I get rid of his pants, settling me on my musky-smelling bed. He doesn't seem to notice the odor as he bends over me, kissing me slowly and deeply.

I writhe underneath him, aching for more. My hand slips downward in the gap between our bodies, and I wrap my fingers around him. Zach shudders, losing enough control for me to act. Reaching up, I push him away from him, letting him lie flat on the bed before I climb astride him.

“Ivy,” he calls, but I’m already taking him into me. Shocks of pleasure run through me and I let out a loud scream, barely caring who hears me.

Zach grunts, his hands coming up to my waist to guide me. I ignore his directions, instead riding him according to my rhythms, as fast and as hard as I can, enjoying the feel of him slamming against the center of my core with each thrust.

Zach lets out an animalistic growl. His hold tightens on my waist, and he is trying desperately to flip us so he is on top again, so he is in control.

An intense feeling of stubbornness overtakes me, and I double down on my position, splaying my fingers on his broad chest and riding even harder. I’ve never done that before, taken active control of anything at all in my life. But right now, as I moan with the pleasure from making love to Zach, I feel more powerful and in charge than I’ve ever felt in my life.

And I’m not ready to give that up.

Zach’s fingers are still gripping my waist, desperate to turn me over. So, I lean forward and fit his nipple in my mouth, sucking gently. He lets out a small growl of defeat, his hands falling away from my waist to grip instead at my breasts.

I scream in pleasure-pain at his grip on my sensitive breasts, but I realize with a flush climbing up my cheeks that I like it. I continue to ride him, ignoring the sweat spilling out of my pores and turning Zach’s grip sweaty, moaning louder and higher than I’ve ever done in my life.

Zach has spent almost every moment since we met telling me to be myself. I feel flushed with success as I realize this might be the first time I’m letting myself give into something I’ve always wanted to do. Tonight, I’m letting my inhibitions break free, and I’m enjoying it more than I thought I would.

Zach grunts again, his hands finding my hips. He starts to thrust into me from underneath, and I scream even louder, unprepared for this twist in my pleasure. I’m too weak to stop him, and he capitalizes on it, thrusting as hard as he can until I’m bursting at the seams, my orgasm tearing so powerfully

through me that I surrender myself to it. I close my eyes, barely aware of how loud my screams have gotten.

As I'm coming down, the front door shuts downstairs, and my dad's heavy steps walk through the house. Zach puts on his clothes again, as I fight off the melancholy that threatens to overwhelm me.

"I wish I could stay longer," he says, his brows furrowing in concern as he stares at me.

I force a smile I don't really feel. "I'll be fine."

We kiss and he slips out the window again. I slam it shut and turn around, wanting to bury my feelings in Pringles. But when I catch the scent of the snack, a wave of nausea swells up inside me, along with a more familiar feeling of dread.

No, I think instantly, quelling the thought before it even arises. Pringles smell nauseating sometimes. It doesn't mean anything.

But no matter what I tell myself, I can't stop from worrying. I head for my closet. During my final weeks in high school, a nonprofit group had come to speak to the senior girls about the importance of contraceptives and not letting one "silly mistake" ruin your entire life. They had shared the morning-after pill and some pregnancy tests. While I'd given out my morning-after pill a second later (not a big deal since I hadn't seen myself having sex in the next five years), the pregnancy kit was buried somewhere in my closet.

My heart pounds as I get down on my knees and shift aside the stack of shoe boxes on the floor to find the kit. It's easier to find now that my recording box is still confiscated, and my heart eases slightly as I look down at the slightly squished kit.

Dad is back, and I would ideally wait until he was in bed until I did something this risky, but I can't help myself.

I open the door as quietly as I can, tiptoeing across the empty hallway for the bathroom. I slip inside and lock it behind me, waiting a second or two for sounds coming from downstairs to alert me that my dad heard me.

He doesn't seem to have heard, and so I sit on the toilet and pee on the stick, urging my heart to not race. The test kit promised results in two minutes, anyway. I would know sooner or later.

Two minutes later, I'm staring down at a plus sign.

CHAPTER 16



ZACH

“**A**lrigh**t**, Zachary. Let’s go back to the earliest memory you have of your childhood.”

I feel my fingers digging holes into my sweatpants as I press them down on my thighs. “Do we have to?”

“Yes,” Dr. Glover says, reclining back on her red sofa, her eyes fixed on me.

I meet her gaze, feeling half disgruntled and half defiant. As seconds pass, the odds of me remaining on her red couch and prattling on about my childhood life are slimming. Fast.

I feel a stab of guilt. Yeah, I did promise Ivy I was going to see a therapist, and I’d meant it. *Especially* at the time. But the last thing I expected after I told my mother to book an appointment out of town was an owl-eyed woman in her fifties with glasses on her face, who looked more like a strict school principal than anything else.

“Would I be right in assuming that there are memories of your childhood you’d like to keep hidden? Memories that could, in fact, be contributing to your present anxiety.”

Sweat beads on my brow. I close my eyes for a moment.

“Move out of the way, fatty!”

A shove. I look up. It’s Tommy Kravitz. And he’s not alone. Half of our class is behind him, and quite a number of people are snickering.

“How does your mom even get pants your size?” Chrissie Butterfield meows behind him, her arms crossed and her lips in a perfect pout.

“She probably has to make them herself,” someone else snickers.

“Let’s pull them off him and see if they’ve got a label or not. then we’ll know!” Chrissie declares.

“Hey! Leave him alone!”

I look up and a tremulous smile graces my lips. It’s Irene, risking herself to save me for the hundredth time that month.

“Zachary?”

I start, my eyes flying open. My heart is pounding like I’ve just run for hours on the field, and a smooth sheen of sweat covers my forehead now.

I let out a huge sigh, collapsing against the couch. A stupid, childish sense of relief spreads through me. I’m no longer back in my middle school. I’m here in Utah, hundreds of miles away.

And I’m a college student with a much better body.

Dr. Glover is staring at me, looking not-at-all surprised by my reactions. “Where did you go?” she asks silently.

I stare at her for a millisecond and wonder whether to answer the question. But then, Tommy Kravitz’s evil grin flashes through my mind, and I grab my duffel bag.

“Session’s over,” I tell her, rising up.

She glances at her clock. “Actually, you still have forty-five minutes.”

“Then you’re in luck,” I say, already heading toward the door. “You get one free hour of paid time today.”

“Zachary,” she calls, her voice even sterner now.

I take a deep breath and turn back toward her. “What?”

“You might not understand what I mean or even what just happened, but it seems to me like you just had a breakthrough.

Whatever is fueling your anxiety stems from your childhood trauma, and no matter how much we try to repress those feelings or we try to pretend we've moved on from them, they show up in different ways in our adulthood. The best way—the only way—to get through them is to actually face them.”

I let out a small sigh. Her words are burning a hole in my chest, but I shove the strange feelings that burrow into that hole aside. “I’ll take my chances,” I tell her.

“Really?”

I latch a small grin onto my face. “Really,” I say. “Been doing that for eight years now.” My life in Long Island is a part of me that I locked into a box and tossed out the window the moment I stepped foot in Utah. It was a different time, and I would literally rather swim with sharks than explore even one more memory from that period.

“And how’s that working out for you?” she asks, sounding almost demure.

My grip tightens on my duffel bag.

Fuck.

“Look, Zachary,” she says now, in a more maternal tone than she’d been using the past twenty minutes. “I see a lot of patients every day, and...”

“Thriving business,” I say. “Congrats.”

She lets out a small smirk and looks at me like a tired mother fielding retorts from her angry teen. “A lot of people come in here and sit on that couch, expecting me to give them a get-out-of-jail free card. They want me to look into their head, examine their traumas without them ever having to say a word, and wave a magic wand to make it all go away.”

“And you can’t?” I say in a monotone. “Shocker. I’ll be demanding a refund.”

This time, she favors me with a full smile. “Evasion through humor,” she says. “You know, Zachary, you’re kind of a walking stereotype.”

I turn around fully, intrigued with the conversation for the first time. “What do you mean?” I ask.

She smiles again. “The good-looking jock who goes around cracking jokes and makes life seem like the easiest thing on Earth. There’s always something in the shadows that makes you tick.”

Goosebumps start in my arms. I admit, she’s a pretty decent therapist. She read me almost as plainly as Ivy did.

But I’ll be damned if I let her know any of that.

“Good-looking?” I say, raising my brows at her, my smile still fixed. “You’re in your fifties and I turned eighteen only two years ago. I’ll be suing for harassment.”

“See you next week,” she calls as I turn the door knob and slip through.

“Don’t hold your breath,” I call back before slamming the door shut.



Going to my first therapy session hours before a match was not my brightest idea, I think as I stuff my bag into my locker an hour later. I am back on campus, and thankfully, the locker room is mostly bare of my other teammates. And so, I have a few minutes to mull over my thoughts.

Dr. Glover was right. I assumed therapy would be a walk in the park, and that I would feel a little better about playing today. But now, all I can think about is Tommy fucking Kravitz.

I search for a quick distraction, and Ivy comes to mind. Slipping my phone out of my pocket, I click on her name. A tinge of frustration hits me when I look down at our chats. The last reply I’d gotten from her was a thumbs up emoji when I told her of my therapy session last night. My morning texts had gone unanswered, and now...

“Didn’t expect you this early, Anderson.”

I look up. Dave Collins is approaching his own locker, looking sweaty from what seems to be a recent workout...

And Pam right by his side.

“Hi, Zach,” she says brightly, striding over to plant a kiss on my cheek, way too close to my lips. “How’s it going?”

“Fine,” I say shortly, spinning around on my bench. I start to lock up my locker. The last thing I want is to be in a locker room with Pam and Dave.

“What are you doing here?” Dave asks again.

I pause. There’s no way I’m going to tell him anything about my therapy session. “No reason,” I say as casually as I can. “You?”

Dave says something about the gym as he hops in beside me, and I pretend to listen while I watch Pam from the corner of my eyes. Her gaze is on her phone, and she seems to be tuning out the gym talk.

But Dave shoots me a furtive glance when Pam is not watching. I raise my brows, and he shoots me another look I interpret very clearly: *Please TALK to her. She’s killing me.*

I give him a small, stiff shake. Dave returns a frown before he turns back to Pam.

“So, what are you doing tonight? You up for drinks after the game?”

She shoots me a gaze that comes off as sly, even though I’m certain she means for it to be seductive. “Sure,” she says. “If Zach is coming.”

“I’m not,” I say shortly, ignoring another glare from Dave. “Busy.”

“Doing what?” Dave says, suspicion in his eyes.

My shoulders tense as I hop over the bench. “Nothing,” I say.

Unfortunately, Dave doesn’t back down easily this time. “You never hang out anymore,” he says, his tone slightly accusatory. “What the hell do you do after games nowadays?”

I glance at Pam, and she has a sweet syrupy smile on her face. “Yeah, Zach,” she says, batting her eyes at me in the sickest of ways. “What do you do? You know, we kind of missed you after the first game. Where were you?”

My fingers ball into fists. Pam knows exactly where I was: fucking Ivy underneath the bleachers, minutes before she found us.

“Tell us,” Pam coos, the perfect picture of curious innocence. “You’ve got a new girl or something?”

Dave’s ears practically perk up. “You bastard,” he growls, delivering the words along with a playful punch that causes me to double over in pain. “You’ve been keeping *that* from me? Who is it?”

I send a warning glare to Pam. “I’m not keeping anything,” I say, inserting a tone of finality into my voice.

“Really?” Pam says. “Because you barely have time for me.”

This time, Dave steps in to save me. “Yeah, you guys broke up.” He shoots me a small look over her head that I interpret as; *Good call, by the way.*

Pam’s nostrils flare, and she opens her mouth to say something. But before she can get it out, two other men stroll into the locker room. I look up, grateful for the interaction. It’s Coach Collins and a stranger.

“Hey,” he says brusquely. “Ready for the match?”

I nod, while Dave completely ignores him.

“David?” he says pointedly. “You see your sister for breakfast today?”

My abdominal muscles tense in anticipation. The question was casual enough, and Coach Collins’s facial expressions are a mask. But there is something about the intensity of his gaze on Dave that tells me that he is a little more interested in the question than usual.

“No,” Dave says, his tone hard. “Slept in Mark’s house overnight. Her wailing is starting to piss me off.”

The tension spreads to all the muscles of my body. There is something wrong with Ivy. I open my mouth to ask what happened in the most casual way I can, but a knowing look from Pam stops me in my tracks.

“Come on, Pam,” Dave says now, banging his locker shut and striding away. He gives me a *you owe me* look as he takes her by the wrist and leads her away.

Coach Collins waits for his son to leave before he turns to me. “Anderson,” he says, and I can tell he’s fighting to push away his home problems and face his work life. “Your mom said you might be here. I want to introduce you to someone.”

Another scout, probably, and my tension increases. Right now, I’m worried about my shit show of a therapy session and what is going on with Ivy *and* whatever Pam is holding over my head.

I don’t want to have to pile on another scout grilling me about my play hours before a match.

“This is Mr. Hernandez,” Coach says, and I shake the man’s hand, a stiff smile on my face. “He’s from UCLA.”

My eyes widen, and my brain threatens to collapse for a second. “UCLA?” I croak.

“UCLA,” Coach echoes, giving me a knowing smile. “Told you you were too good for Florida State. Now you’ve got your dream school.”

Mr. Hernandez nods, his grip tightening on my hand. “I’ve caught your last few games, and I told your Coach I just *had* to see you before this match.” He lets go and gives me a small smile. “How would you like to move to Los Angeles at the end of this summer?”

CHAPTER 17



IVY

The first sounds of banging on my door make my heart fly up to my throat. I jerk up in bed, my heart rate quadrupling in about a millisecond.

“Ivy?”

My heart rate recedes slightly. It’s my father’s voice, and he sounds restrained, almost cautious—the way he has started to sound over the past week, since I locked myself up and had not stepped out of my room.

Since I learned about my pregnancy.

“Ivy?” he calls again, and I respond with complete silence. “Match went great. We missed you.”

My chest burns with grief. I’m probably only about a month into my pregnancy and I’m already missing out on seeing things I genuinely enjoy. What will happen when the baby starts to balloon out of my stomach and I won’t even be able to step out of my house without causing shockwaves through the crowd?

Tears leak out of the corner of my eyes, running down the week-old track of dry tears on my cheek. I choke down on my sob, but I know from my father’s sharp intake of breath that he heard me.

“Ivy, look,” he says, his voice losing all signs of caution and heading straight into distress mode. “I understand you’re upset about my grounding you and taking away your filming equipment.” He pauses for a second. “And you’re right.”

Even in my haze of despair, my ears perk up. This is the first time in my entire life that my father is actually apologizing for punishing me.

“I understand that you want to pursue your dreams of being a *YouTube* star,” he says, saying the word with barely concealed disgust. “I watched your channel. It’s educational enough. You’ve brought a lot of understanding to a lot of young kids. I don’t think it’s a wise career path, but I understand why you’d like it as a hobby. I’m going to return all of your equipment. You can do everything you want and shoot videos to your heart’s content, okay?” He pauses, and I can almost see his internal struggle before he says the words, “I only want to do what’s right for you, Ivy. Whatever will make you happy. I hate seeing you all cooped up in your room like this.”

I fail to choke down on another sob. I barricaded myself in my room for a week now, and that had gotten my father to show a softer side, a side that I didn’t even know existed. He thinks I’m stashing myself away because of my YouTube channel, and he’s willing to go as far as compromising his future hopes for me in a bid to see me happy.

The thought that things have gotten this much more complicated makes me fall deeper into my pit of despair. I put my arms around myself, unable to stop the tears from flowing. My dad is willing to overlook the channel, yes. But he’ll never accept it as my future. He just said it himself, I can have it as a hobby. But more than that, there’s no way in hell he will not go crazy when he finds out I’m pregnant.

Especially if he finds out the baby is Zach’s.

“Ivy, come on,” my dad says now, exasperated. “I want you down for dinner. I *need* to see you downstairs for dinner.”

Someone mumbles something right beside him, and my ears perk up again. It’s Dave, and it sounds like he’s dissuading our dad from trying to talk me into eating. The next moment, my dad’s voice utters, “She’s gonna come out of that room today, or I’m going to stand here all night,” he spits.

“Get downstairs and whip up something. God knows you can stand to learn how to cook after you almost cost us the match.”

Dave mumbles an angry retort and stomps down the stairs. My father takes a deep breath, raps on the door, and says in a far softer voice than he used with David. “I’m not going to ask any questions or do anything else. I just want to see you.”

I let out a huge breath. His concern breaks my heart. My dad has never used this kind of tone with me, ever.

“Come on, Ivy,” he says, and I can hear a sad smile in his voice. “You’ve got to be sick of breathing in stale air for a whole week.”

I give a small nod before I remember he can’t see me. Still, he’s right. It’s been two whole weeks of barely eating, waiting for the middle of the night to use the bathroom, and only showering when I felt like it. First when he punished me and then my self-isolation.

I push aside my smelly covers and stumble to my feet. They start to shake and threaten to give out from under me, but I manage to make my way over to the door. My fingers tremble as I reach forward to hold the doorknob, but I manage to twist it and pull open the door.

My dad is on the other side of the door, staring at me like I’m an angel.

“Hell,” he says, looking like his heart just burst with joy. “Can’t believe I let a stupid YouTube channel stop me from seeing you for two whole weeks.”

A YouTube channel, I think, and something worse.

I feel a sob escape me in the next instant. But this time, my dad is pulling me into his arms, hugging me as though he doesn’t plan to ever let me go. My arms go around him and I hug him even tighter, as tears leak down my eyes.

“I love you, sweetie,” he mutters, his voice unusually thick.

I say the words back, realizing how much I believe him. He does love me, YouTube channel or not. His parenting style

is difficult at best, but he's willing to overlook everything I do as long as he's certain it makes me happy.

I need to believe him when he says those words. And I need to believe he will still love me even if he finds out about my baby with Zach. I'm in over my head with this, and I have no idea what to do.

But my dad would.

He lets go of me, gripping me tightly by the arm. "Let's get to the kitchen," he says, and I can tell he's trying his hardest to sound normal. "You know, before your brother burns the house down."

I give him a weak smile, my first in a long time. He grins back and leads me down the stairs.

"You're going to have to eat. A lot," he says. "You're all skin and bone."

I nod, even though I'm barely listening. My heart is racing, but I can tell I'm coming to a quick conclusion. I need to tell him about the pregnancy before I lose my nerve.

"Dad," I say, and he turns to look at me. "There's something I have to tell you."

"What is it, hon?" he says, his gaze focused on me.

I open my mouth to blurt out the words *I'm pregnant*, but Dave calls from downstairs.

"Dad! Phone for you! Mr. Hernandez!"

My dad's grip tightens on me and he leads me down the stairs, clearly brimming with excitement. "The UCLA scout," he tells me as we go downstairs, now twice as fast as before.

I feel my heart shrink to half its size. "UCLA? But that's..."

"Anderson's dream school," he continues, now positively grinning. "If Hernandez had any reservations about signing him, Zach cleared them all tonight. Boy was a terror out there."

I feel as though multiple needles are starting to pierce my shrunken heart, but I maintain a smile somehow.

“That’s good,” I mutter.

“*Great,*” my dad corrects as we reach the foot of the stairs and he starts to head toward the phone, still holding me. Dave is holding out the phone, a frown on his face. “We’ve qualified for the semi-finals, hon. Once Anderson gets us to the finals, he can wrap his last summer at SCC up and move on to UCLA.”

My entire body goes limp, but my dad hardly notices. He’s already on the phone, speaking to the scout. Dave glares at me for a second before he returns to the kitchen, but I can barely see him.

Zach Anderson is leaving town in a little over four months and heading toward achieving every single one of his life goals.

“Ivy?” my dad calls, and I jump, startled. He’s off the phone and smiling at him. “Mr. Hernandez just wanted to congratulate us for our win. Great, right?” He pauses. “What did you want to say, by the way?”

I feel my breath catch in my throat.

I need to tell someone about the pregnancy. It is killing me, and doing nothing about it means it will become a much bigger problem in only a few months.

But if I tell my dad about the pregnancy, it will end Zach.

“Ivy?” my dad calls.

I look up into his lined, smiling face. “Nothing,” I say. “It’s nothing.”

I’m not going to destroy Zach’s career.

CHAPTER 18



ZACH

“Nice to see you here again, Zach.”

I narrow my eyes at her as I slip onto the couch. Is it my imagination, or is there a hint of subdued victory in her eyes?

“I didn’t say those words to make fun of you, Zachary,” Doctor Glover says. “I’m truly, genuinely happy to see you here.”

I let out a small sigh. She *can* somehow read my mind.

“I wasn’t going to come,” I admit. The moment the words cross my mouth, I feel like an idiotic teenager. It’s true, though. The last place I ever wanted to come back to was Doctor Glover’s beige-painted office.

“Why are you here?”

There’s a hitch in my chest, but when I mull over the events of last night, I know there’s no going back. I *have* to tell her everything. It is my only chance of ever getting out of Sundale and achieving my dreams.

“Cause I got another scholarship offer, this time from my dream school.”

Dr. Glover nods, even though I’ve not told her anything about my life. My mom picked a therapist deliberately thirty minutes outside town, so the likelihood she knows anything about the SCC team is quite slim.

I quickly fill in the details about me being a community college football captain and trying to head out to an Ivy League college in the next few months.

“Okay,” she says. “And you think your... anxiety... could stomp on this chance?”

My throat is threatening to close in on itself, but I force the word out somehow. “Yes.”

She scribbles something on a notepad, and seconds tick by in silence. My fingers clasp around themselves, and I start to brace myself for the question that’s coming next.

It happens way too soon. “So,” she says. “Are you ready to talk about your childhood?”

I let out another, bigger sigh. Sweat beads are forming on my forehead again, but there’s no chance I’m going to leave here without sorting through the mega-clump of emotions that I buried inside me for years.

“I was a fat kid,” I say, as quickly as I can, before I can bolt out of there and clump it up again.

Dr. Glover stares. “Oh,” she says finally.

I feel a tinge of irritation. Not a single person in Sundale knows this, apart from my parents. Even Rosa doesn’t know. Not to sound like a jerk, but I expected way more of a reaction from the first person who knew.

“I’d say something about how fit you look now, but I’d hate to be accused of harassment,” she adds, a shadow of a smile on her lips.

An unwilling grin spreads across my face, and I feel my fingers unfurl from one another.

“Why do you think you hate talking about your past so much?” she says.

My throat is closing in on itself again. “Because...”

I blink, and the images of Tommy Kravitz and Chrissie Butterfield come to mind. But this time, I do the same thing I

did at the match last night. I think of Ivy in my arms, and my throat starts to relax.

“Because it was the worst period of my life,” I say. My eyes are still closed, and I don’t think I can bear to open them and see the pity in her eyes.

“I see,” Dr. Glover says, sounding almost nonchalant.

I open my eyes, and she’s scribbling something again. When she looks up at me, she asks, “What would you say the best period of your time back then was?”

The answer is easy enough. “I made a friend. Irene Cullingham.” I can still picture her now, the large green eyes hidden behind too-huge glasses. Still, the thought of how that friendship ended threatens to make me fly off the couch.

Dr. Glover seems to notice that. “You got bullied,” she says.

“You make it sound almost like an everyday event,” I reply, my fingers already balling into fists from anxiety. As much as I know I need to do this, every second that passes makes me feel like it’s the worst of ideas.

“Trust me,” Dr. Glover says in a calm, reassuring voice. “Being bullied is horrible. I have patients thrice your age sitting down on that couch five times a week and still trying to unpack what they did wrong to cause a thirteen-year old bully to steal their lunch religiously for two years.”

“Or burn their pants off in front of the whole school,” I hear myself mutter.

The moment I realize what I just said, I want to bite my tongue off.

Dr. Glover says nothing, although I can tell she heard every word.

“Look...” I start, unsure of what to say next.

“It’s fine,” she interrupts. “I’m a complete stranger, and the last thing you would want is to tell me about the goings on in your life. But you are different now. Your life is different. And though you can trust me to keep your secrets and know I won’t

judge you, I understand it can be hard. Still, you're going to have to talk about it. If not with me, then with someone in your personal life, someone you absolutely trust."

I don't miss a beat. My mind goes to Ivy, and the tension in my shoulders drains all over again.

Dr. Glover glances at the clock. "This session is coming to an end, but I do hope that you'll find some time to talk to a trusted person before our next session."

I pause. It's been twenty-four hours since the match, and I still haven't heard a word from Ivy. She had not come for the match, since she was still probably grounded, and I'd talked myself out of asking the coach about her. There were other things to talk about after the match with the guys, especially since word had spread about the UCLA coach.

My gut loops around itself. Three months ago, I'd have been ecstatic about a UCLA offer. Now, I still am, but the thought of leaving Sundale is a little bittersweet now. And I know that there is only one reason it feels that way.

I rise up from the couch. "Thanks," I tell Dr. Glover. "I'll be back."

It's time to go see Ivy.



The moment I see Ivy through the glass, I know something's wrong.

Her eyes are completely bloodshot, the skin around them shrunken and pink from what seems like hours of crying. She's wearing one of her silk nighties, but one so soiled it seems she's been wearing it for a while. Her nose is even pinker than the skin around her eyes, and she's still sniffing as she rises up the bed to stare at me.

Or stare at the window, I correct myself balefully. She's completely avoiding eye contact with me.

I bang on the window, grateful that both the coach and Dave are away at school. “Open up,” I say.

She doesn’t react at all.

An uncomfortable feeling rises up in my gut. Something happened, and I have a feeling it is really bad.

“Ivy,” I say, banging on the window even harder now.

She does nothing.

I’m starting to get slightly worried. The most upsetting thing that I can think of is the coach finding out about her channel, and that happened two weeks ago.

But then... Goosebumps start up in my arms.

Something worse *could* have happened. Like the coach finding out about *us*.

I dismiss that possibility in the next second. If that had happened, the coach would have hunted me down and tied a noose around my neck. This is something else.

Has she somehow found out about UCLA? That would explain the twenty-four-hour silent treatment, but it’s not quite enough to explain the lack of communication over the entire week.

I glance at her. She’s retreating back into bed.

My worry gives way to irritation. Without thinking, I slam my fist through the glass. Cracks appear instantly, and Ivy lets out a small gasp, stopping in her tracks.

“You gonna open up?” I ask.

She merely backs away.

My irritation snowballs into full blown rage.

I close my eyes and try to take a deep breath, try to calm down. But the images fly through my head in quick succession.

A blue-green pool. The entire seventh grade. Smoke. Tommy’s evil grin.

And Irene Cullingham's green eyes, wide with fright, as she backs away.

When I open my eyes, beads of sweat are running down my forehead.

With all the energy I can muster, I slam my fist again through the window.

It shatters instantly.

Ivy lets out a louder, completely terrified gasp as I snake through the window now, ignoring the little cuts on my arms that the shards of glass leave.

“My dad is going to kill you,” she mutters.

Even with how pissed off I am, I sigh with relief. It's the first time I've heard her voice all week.

I take a step closer to her. She starts to retreat again, but I'm faster on the second try. In a millisecond, I manage to wrap my arms around her and pin her to me. She tries to wiggle free, but I hold her harder, ignoring the instant boner her movements give me.

“Correction,” I pant at her, my bursts of energy having given way to draining relief. “*I'm gonna kill you the next time you ghost me.*”

I expect something like a tremulous smile, but that doesn't happen. Instead, Ivy's eyes shine with tears. I relax my hold on her, a little confused, but she seizes that second faster than lightning.

She jerks out of my hand, scuttling away to the far distance of the room.

“You need to leave,” she mutters, now staring at the floor.

I feel a strong sense of déjà vu as I recall our first night speaking back in my house, how she stared at the floor almost every time rather than look up at me.

“Why?” I say, frustration wiggling its way into my system by way of a sudden headache. “I thought we were past all of

this.” It seems to me like every other day, Ivy is coming up with a new reason to stop me from seeing her.

She finally looks up at me, her eyes filled with unshed tears. “I don’t want *this* anymore,” she mutters. “I don’t want *you* anymore.”

I feel like I’m being thrown across a football field.

My very first instinct is to not believe her, of course. But there’s no reason to. She’s gazing directly at me, and not avoiding my gaze the way she usually does when she is hiding something. She has been completely AWOL for a week as well, and I’ve had to literally break through the window to see her.

She really, really doesn’t want me around.

This is Irene Cullingham all over again, I think, feeling like my heart is being ripped out of my chest.

But I ball my fingers into fists of determination. I’m no longer a lovesick twelve-year-old torn apart by betrayal. I am older and better at handling my feelings.

I know how to leave when someone wants me gone.

“Bye, Ivy,” I say.

And as I swing one leg through the hole at the center of the shard-ridden window, I make a promise to myself.

To never, ever set foot into Ivy’s room again.

CHAPTER 19



ZACH

“Trouble in paradise?”

I groan as Pam slides into my booth, a knowing smirk on her face. She’s dressed in her cheerleading uniform—an odd choice, since the school is on Easter break. But again, Pam was never one to let a school break stop her from showing as much skin as possible. Her hair is in two ridiculous pigtails, and when she sits, she folds her arms under her boobs, thrusting her cleavage out even more.

Great, I think. I had a lot of reservations about meeting up with Coach Collins at Max’s restaurant, particularly bumping into Ivy.

But fate decided to do me one worse. Not only do I have to force myself not to glance at Ivy, who is engaged in conversation with her best friend, Paul, I have to deal with Pam trying to woo me before the coach hauls himself down here.

“Kinda busy, Pam,” I tell her, digging into my pocket for my phone. Maybe if I ignore her long enough, she’ll leave.

But of course, she doesn’t.

“Really?” she coos sweetly. “Couldn’t help but notice you keep checking out Nerd of the Year over there.”

It has been two weeks since I slipped through Ivy’s window for the last time. Yet, my protectiveness toward her rises up as Pam says those words. “Don’t call her that,” I say, my voice sterner than I want it to be.

Pam lets out a chuckle. “She’s broken up with you. You can unclench now.”

For all her empty-headed blonde theatrics, Pam is a snooping genius. And so, I don’t even bother to ask how she knows that. I keep my gaze on my phone.

“It’s crazy, right?” Pam says, intentionally ignoring the fact that I’m intent on ignoring her. “Didn’t think you’d fall head over heels for the coach’s daughter. This is a nightmare now. *How* do you think he’ll feel if he finds out about your sudden betrayal?”

My fist clenches around my phone so hard I damn near break the screen guard. I look up to see a sneer on her face. She’s got my attention, and she knows it.

“Told you not to say a word about that,” I tell her.

“Really?” she says, sounding completely unconcerned. “And what part of you smashing my heart and hanging me out to dry was supposed to convince me to do anything you want me to do?”

I resist the urge to pound my fist on the table between us. “We broke up more than three months ago,” I say. “Get over it.”

A small snarl appears on her face, but Pam covers it the next second with her sickly-sweet smile. She says nothing for a few seconds, and then, suddenly, she raises her hand.

“Milkshake, please,” she says loudly.

I turn my head half an inch to the side, glancing at the sales counter for a millisecond. I catch Ivy staring at us for a second, before she fixedly turns her back again. Paul, who was saying something to Ivy, leans backward and calls, “Coming.”

God, I want to pound Paul into a pulp.

“She left you and is now dating the town dork,” Pam says, her eyes trained on Paul as he starts to whip up her milkshake. “Match made in heaven, wouldn’t you say?”

I can almost feel all the cells in my body zinging with anger. “Pam,” I say, the word a warning. “Leave me the fuck

alone.”

“Here’s your milkshake,” someone says, and I look up to Paul standing over us. He sets the drink in front of Pam before he turns to me, a strange smile on his face. “How are you doing, Zach?”

I raise my brows. Is it my imagination or does he sound oddly similar to Pam?

“He’s doing great,” Pam says, placing a hand on mine. “The best.”

Paul nods before he marches back to the counter. I round on Pam, my anger slowly reaching a full boil.

“What the fuck?” I snarl at her. “Did you tell him?”

Pam is the picture of innocence. “Tell him what, Zachy?”

It’s taking literally every nerve in my body not to throttle her. “You know what.”

“That you broke up with the dazzling angel?” She pauses, and I say nothing. The last thing I’m going to do is give Pam the satisfaction of playing along with her twisted game. So, I stay silent, ignoring the curiosity gnawing at my insides.

“No,” she finally says, and I feel my breath ease a little. “But it’s not that hard to figure out, you know? Last time you all were here, she kept staring at you as if she’d suck your dick if you so much as nodded at her. Now, a month later, she looks like she’s been crying every single second of the day, and your jaw keeps twitching every time you see Paul speaking to her. Seems to me that she’s the one who broke up, especially because you wouldn’t give a hoot of jealousy if you’d dumped her. What I can’t figure out—yet—is why she did it.”

Same here, I almost say, but I dismiss the thought. It has been two harrowing weeks of going through all the possibilities. But I’m not going to let myself focus on that anymore. Ivy pulled out of our situation for whatever reason, and I’m not going to torture myself with that, not the way I did with Irene.

“You’re right,” I tell Pam, suddenly tired of her stupid little game. “We broke up, and the coach still doesn’t know. But he is coming to see me in a few minutes. If you want to tell him about us, then go ahead.”

Pam’s eyes narrow for a second. But again, she’s quick with her smile. “Oh, I don’t want to do that. Coach Collins would literally kill you if he learned you did anything with Ivy. I don’t want you dead.”

“What do you want, then?” I ask, almost amused. “Me tortured?”

She rolls her eyes. “No, silly,” she says. “I want you back.”

I raise my brows, unable to believe she just said that.

“You’ve had your fun, Zachy,” she says with her sweet smile. “You smashed the town nerd. Hurray. But we belong together, the same way nerds do with dorks.” She nods toward the counter again. “In a few months, you’re going to be off playing in an Ivy league college. We had ups and downs in our relationship, and you did whatever with Ivy to punish me, but...”

“Pam,” I say, cutting her off. My eyes are fixed on her, because I need to pass my message across once and for all. “I’m *never* getting back together with you. *Ever*. You can befriend Dave and ask him to help patch us up, you can threaten to tell the coach about me and Ivy. Hell, you could even get up on this table and scream about my time with Ivy. But I would rather be boiled in hot oil than spend one more second with you.”

Pam stares at me, her eyes wide with an equal mixture of confusion and hurt. I hold her gaze with mine, waiting for her to say something.

But for the first time, she doesn’t. She silently stands up and stalks away, milkshake still undrunk.

Finally, I think, heaving a sigh of relief. I managed to shut her up. I’m going to pay for that later, but I’m going to enjoy this moment of blessed relief as long as I can.

“Hey, son.”

I look up and my relief deepens even further. It's Coach.

"Hi," I say, but he's too busy glancing at the counter for his daughter. I feel like a strong fist has closed around my heart as I follow his gaze. Ivy is now talking to Paul again, and even though I can't see her face, her head seems to be bobbing with excitement as she nods along to whatever the hell he's saying.

When Coach looks back at me, he has the shadow of a smile on her face.

"I've been a bit of a dick of a father," he says, sounding as though he just wants to share a little and doesn't particularly care who he's talking to. "Always hated her hanging out with that kid. With *anyone*, really. But I invited him over for dinner tonight. I'm gonna grill him for seven hours straight, but *then* I'm gonna let him date Ivy. Anything to make her happy, you know?"

I grab Pam's milkshake and down it in one go, hoping the coach doesn't notice my trembling fingers. I replace the glass on the table when the liquid is gone, now fighting the urge to seize it and throw it against the wall.

Of course. Ivy wants to date Paul. And in a piece of twisted irony, *I'd* made that possible. I'd been the one to convince her to tell her dad about her channel. And out of that fight had come a way more lenient Coach Collins.

I give him as genuine a smile as I can produce over the circumstances, but I hop into our conversation immediately, not wanting to give him another chance to gush about his daughter. "What did you want to talk about, Coach?" I ask.

He has a benign smile on his face as he turns back to me. "More scouts have started to call me ahead of the semi-finals game," he says. "About half the team already has bidders." His smile disappears as his lips stretch out into a grim line, and I interpret that to mean Dave isn't a part of that half. "But other scouts are calling for you. Oregon, Notre Dame, even Duke. They're crazy about you."

“Cool,” I say, my smile widening into a genuinely broad one. All of those schools are big in college football, and if I play hard enough, each one of them could deliver me into the large arms of the NFL.

“Yeah,” Coach says. “The imbecile from Florida State called too, but I had no qualms about never picking up.”

Paul’s booming laugh rings loud and clear through the room then, and from the corner of my eyes I see he’s still talking to Ivy. I feel almost nauseous as jealousy courses down my spine.

“Zach?”

“Yeah,” I say quickly. This is my future. It doesn’t have to matter if Ivy decided to spend her life with Paul Boring-Pants Johnson. We did have a friendship a long time ago, and that’s about it.

I need to find a way to believe that.

“So, about the scouts...” Coach starts, but I’m quick to interrupt.

“What about Mr. Hernandez?” I ask.

His eyebrows contract in what seems to be disgust. “UCLA seems to have a lot of offers packed up this year. Hernandez is playing coy.”

The news hits me like a fist to the stomach. I’d trade all the other scouts for UCLA in a heartbeat. “Really?” I ask. “How?”

“He says he wants to score your performance on the semi-finals first,” he says, his nostrils flared. “Then, he says, we’ll talk.”

I take a moment to mull over the information, but Coach keeps speaking. “Look, UCLA is a great school and all, but there are other schools all around the country that are *dying* for you. Hell, the Duke scout called me about a hundred times in the space of thirty minutes while I was in the bathroom. You’re an asset and you don’t need to prove what you’ve proven a billion times over to get accepted into a school, not

when the offers are lined up like this. And, you do know that...”

I barely hear Coach. I’m staring at the counter from the corner of my eyes, and I grow rigid at the sight of Paul grinning at Ivy as he slides a milkshake across the counter to her.

What I wouldn’t give to pull him across that counter and smash my fist into his...

I close my eyes and exhale, trying to focus on something other than Paul.

“Coach,” I call, interrupting him. “I don’t mind.”

He raises his brows. “Don’t mind... what?”

“Winning the semi-finals to impress Mr. Hernandez,” I say. Coach’s eyes narrow suspiciously, but I continue speaking before he can start talking. “It’s my dream school, and I still have a lot of months before I need to decide what school I want to go with. The offers are going to be there after the semi-finals, aren’t they?”

Coach gives me a disapproving glance, but he finally nods. “For you, yes. It’s one month away, but...”

“Trust me,” I say. “I’m gonna make sure we win this match. I’ll practice ten hours every day for four weeks if I have to.”

“You don’t need to do that,” Coach says with an unwilling smile. “You’re good enough as it is.”

“I will anyway,” I say. It’s the perfect opportunity to focus on something other than Ivy and her new boyfriend.

Coach is glancing over at his daughter again, and I take it as my cue. Standing up, I exchange a handshake with him and stride out of the restaurant, making sure to not throw a parting glance at Ivy.

She is in my past now, after all, and I need to focus on what is more important now.

Winning a scholarship to my dream college in a month.

CHAPTER 20



“I hate the view from down here,” Paul says as we plump down on our front-row seats, right in front of the railings separating the seats from the football field.

“We’re close enough to see everything,” I tell him, raising my voice slightly so he can hear me against the crowd of hundreds of people also struggling to find their seats. This is the second biggest match of the season, and it’s against a formidable opponent, Santa Barbara, so people are more excited than usual.

“And close enough for the ball to hit us if one of these jocks forgets how to play,” Paul says in a monotone.

I feel my stomach grip with excitement when Paul mentions jocks. But I manage to maintain my placid expression when I say, “That’s not going to happen.”

“Really?” Paul says. “How can you be so sure? Because the way I see it, one guy hits another the wrong way, and suddenly they’re throwing balls and one of them ends up smashing through your glasses.”

I push my glasses up the bridge of my nose and say nothing. Time has not increased my love for Paul’s impassioned rants. Though he has become a bit exasperating, I have to admit he is one of the reasons why I’ve been able to make it through last month. After my two-week long denial-despair-depression phase, I’d managed to pull myself up into a state of near-numbness. I have tried to approach things

logically, and since my dad harped on about Zach and his prospects every damn night, I know I can't keep the baby.

But handling these things is not that easy. There is only one Planned Parenthood center in our town, and stepping inside is a sure way to have your parents immediately know your business. The last girl that thought to get an abortion in town still had her name on everyone's lips, even though she had moved out with her family three years ago.

It is social suicide to repeat her mistake. So, I have opted for the better option—to get out of town. There is another Planned Parenthood two towns away, and it is the perfect spot. But I don't have a car and I'm unwilling to hitchhike.

Thankfully, the revenue from my YouTube channel helps me. Even though my depression haze has prevented me from posting in weeks, I've monetized my channel and started to rake in about a thousand dollars every day. I turned to the stash, ordered an Uber at noon, when my dad and brother were away at school, and made my way to the center.

So much for planning, though.

The Uber pulled into the driveway by a car filled with a bunch of girls. When they started to step out, I nearly got a mini-heart attack. About half a dozen Sundale girls, all of them cheerleaders in Pam's squad.

Apparently, my plan was the same as that of other Sundale girls with similar... complications.

I ducked as low as I could and begged the driver to take me back home. I now had to deal with two problems; the baby growing inside me and the fear that any of those girls might have seen me.



I've run into Pam a couple of times after my failed visit to the clinic, and she has not said anything, so I'm fairly certain I'm safe. I'm now dealing with the bigger problem, figuring out

how to make my way to another clinic where I will for sure not run into *anyone*.

A loud cheer goes up then, and my heart misses a beat as I look out onto the field. The Sundale Vipers are jogging out, and my entire chest fills as I watch Zach, his painted face hidden behind his helmet. I'm close enough to see him without binoculars now, and he seems much more relaxed now. His fists are not as clenched, and he seems comfortable as he jogs at the outer end of the group.

Pain spreads over my body. As much as I hate to play the guessing game, it is all I've been doing since the last time I spoke to Zach. I spend most nights wondering about him, if he's taken my advice to go to therapy, what school he's considering...

And if he's seeing someone new.

It's hard to find out any of this since he's pretty much confined himself to school ever since we stopped talking. When Dave speaks about him, it's merely to say Zach is going to send himself to an early grave, what with the amount of practice he's putting himself through.

I've toyed with the idea of messaging him once or twice... or a million times... over the course of the past four weeks. But I've never brought myself to do it. As much as I want him to know what's happening, and want him to help me through it, I still don't want to destroy his life.

If I get through this, I will try to talk to him and explain. But not before.

The referee blows a whistle, and I watch as Zach and the Saint Barbara captain step out for the coin toss. It aches my heart to see him this closely, but I can't look away.

The Saint Barbara team wins the coin toss, and the crowd groans in frustration. Zach's fists clench for a moment before he unclenches and stalks back to his team.

"Hopefully, he doesn't throw a fit again," Paul says, sounding as though that is *precisely* what he wants.

His last word catches my interest, and I turn to him. “What do you mean, *again?*” I ask.

He grins at me. “Haven’t you heard? Anderson has been benched for half of the practices over the last month. He has thrown more fits in one month than a spoiled two-year-old princess. Keeps getting angry over every little thing. There was a bit of talk that your dad was going to bench him for this match as well, but he was way too important, I guess.”

Worry eclipses my heart for a second, but I try to entertain the thought that Paul is exaggerating as usual. “How do you know this?” I ask.

He lets out a snort of derision. “That’s all his team members talk about when they come to the restaurant after practice. They’re all convinced something’s wrong with him. They can’t figure it out, though.”

Another slice of pain threatens to break my heart in two. I fix my gaze on Zach. It would be foolish for me to assume that his outbursts have anything to do with me. He accepted my breakup without a word of protest and has not said a word to me since.

I obviously did not mean that much to him. Not enough to cause a month-long outburst, at least.

“I hope he’s alright,” I mutter, more to myself than Paul.

“Who cares?” Paul says, giving another snort. “I have to suffer through ninety minutes of this. I shouldn’t be expected to care if they’re alright too.”

“You wanted to come here,” I say, slightly defensive.

“Only because *you* wanted me to come,” he points out.

My stomach curls with discomfort. While Paul has been a great help these past few weeks, he has also been making some statements that make me feel like he is gearing toward asking me out, and not as a friend. My dad obviously thinks the same, as he’s invited Paul for dinner twice over the last month. I’ve been playing along with that, mostly because if my dad thinks I’m interested in Paul, it will never cross his mind to worry about Zach.

“What’s wrong?” Paul asks, and I start.

“Nothing,” I say quickly. “Just a little cold.”

He gives me a small grin. “Well, then,” he announces. “You’re in luck.” He drapes an arm around me and pulls me closer.

I have to fight the urge to pull away instantly. “That’s *really* not necessary,” I say, but he ignores me.

Reaching into his bag, he brings out a tiny bottle of vodka. “Brought this to warm up—and because I knew the match would be boring as hell. You in?”

“You want to drink?” I ask, raising my brows. “Here?”

“Why not?” Paul says, taking a gulp. I turn away instinctively at the stench of alcohol. “These guys get drunk every day.”

“But you don’t,” I point out.

He merely shrugs and takes another swig.

I turn back to the pitch to see the first down is about to start. The SCC team is on the defense, and the quarterback of the Santa Barbara team is about to make the first move. Zach is on the first line of the defense, and my heart aches even more as I set my gaze on him.

The Santa Barbara quarterback barrels into him without warning, and Zach repels the attack. I watch, my heart in my throat, as a small scuffle starts.

Paul lets out a scoff as he takes yet another swig. “Can’t believe we consider this sport. Two hulks slumming it out on a field and eventually getting paid millions to do it.”

I turn to him, already starting to regret thinking it was a good idea to ask Paul to come. “Can you lay off him?”

Paul’s eyes widen, as though he never expected me to be on the football team’s side. “I don’t mean your brother or your dad,” he says after a prolonged pause. “I’m talking about Zach Anderson.”

My stomach grows tight. I don't want to get into it with Paul, but I'm sick of him talking about Zach.

"Yeah," I finally say. "Lay off him too."

Paul looks like I just hit him. He stares at me for a few seconds, before he gives a small huff, reclines back in his chair, and continues to drink his alcohol in stony silence.

I glance at him from the corner of my eyes, wondering whether to apologize. Though it would have come easy to me two months ago, I don't have it in me to stroke Paul's ego as well. The truth is I'm currently emotionally depleted. It was a tough time, first with my dad finding out about my channel, and now with the pregnancy. Knowing I have to give it up because it is the right thing to do, even though so many nights, in the darkness of my room, I wonder what if... And my heart breaks each and every time because it's just hopeful thinking but an empty dream.

I continue to watch the match, my eyes fixed on Zach with such intensity I can't bring myself to pull away. The opposing quarterback passes the ball over to a running back, but Zach manages to intercept the ball before the player goes even two yards. He positions himself, swinging his right foot. The ball goes smart across the field and through the Santa Barbara's field posts.

The crowd goes wild. A smile stretches out my lips as I watch his team members pat him on the back. The commentators are gushing about his spectacular play and how ingenious Zach is as a player, and while I'm happy to hear that, there's a pain in my chest that I don't quite understand.

Paul says something snide, but I keep my eyes glued to the field. Zach needs to perform excellently in this match to get his place in his dream college... or so my father reminded me half a million times.

And I want that for him. So much. Even if the thought of him leaving forever threatens to break me into a million pieces, I want the best for him.

The game resumes and the Santa Barbara team again fails to move the ball more than ten yards before getting tackled by Zach and Mark. My heart jumps to my throat as the cheers grow even wilder.

“The SCC captain seems to be a one-man team tonight,” a commentator remarks, and my heart burns with equal parts angst and pride.

“The boy is sheer talent,” the other commentator says.

I feel stupid, sudden tears spring to my eyes. They’re right. I know it as well as they do, but I still feel some melancholy at their words. Today, everyone in town gets to participate in the sheer wonder that is Zach Anderson.

But I can’t do that. Not without remembering how things ended between us.

The third quarter resumes with only five yards to go for the Santa Barbara team. Zach viciously tackles the ball and scores again. The crowd goes even crazier, and the commentator starts to say something about this being a first for the Santa Barbara team.

“Are you okay?” Paul suddenly asks, sounding a little stuffy.

I turn to him and notice he’s holding a different flask but I don’t comment on it. “Yeah. Why?”

“You’ve got tears in your eyes.” His speech is a little slurry, but his derision is quite intact. “*Nothing* about football is worth crying for.”

I take in a deep breath, trying to rein in my impatience. “That’s what you think.”

“It’s what I know,” he says, taking another swig.

Paul starts to say something, but an uproar from the crowd makes me jerk my head back to the field. The Santa Barbara players have started to take their positions.

The Santa Barbara center passes to the quarterback, and a hushed silence falls on the crowd as everyone waits for his

next play. I watch with bated breath as the quarterback makes a U-turn and starts to run down the field.

Zach tackles him in about a second.

The resultant roar is so deafening Paul's alcohol gets knocked out of his hand in fright. My first grin in weeks spreads across my face as I join in the applause for Zach. The commentators are screaming about how Santa Barbara had never been this "defeated" in the first play when a chant of "Anderson" starts somewhere in the stadium.

I expect Zach to do what he always does, smile and skulk nervously behind his teammates, who are now dogpiling him. But this time, he doesn't. Instead, he lifts a hand in response, his grin so bright I can see it underneath the helmet.

Tears of pride sting my eyes. He *did* go to therapy. And he seems a lot better for it.

Just then, I watch as his gaze sweeps over the stadium, across the top seats and even lower. My breath catches in my throat as his gaze rests on the first row of seats, and then inexplicably, on me.

And somehow, within the crazy shouts of the stadium, we lock eyes.

I'm too nervous—and terrified—to do anything other than just stare back. I wait for him to do something, to smile or nod slightly or acknowledge my existence in any way. Seconds trickle by in silence, but they feel like long hours to me.

But then, his gaze shifts slightly away from me. And suddenly, he's looking away from the bleachers, waving at the crowd, and then settling down into the offense position.

All the air goes out of me. My ears tune out the sounds of the crowd and the referee's orders, but somehow, the commentators' voices float toward him.

"Amazing play by Anderson there."

"Yeah, he's got a lot of ladies in the crowd crazy about him."

"I think we are *all* crazy about Anderson tonight,"

Sadness spreads across my body like a thick web, threatening to choke me with its tendrils. A sob is coming up my throat, and I quickly choke it down and stand up.

“Where are you going?” Paul asks.

I want to say something, but the last thing I want is to burst into tears like an idiot while sitting in the front row. I merely shake my head and push my way through the other people sitting in the front seats, ignoring their groans of discontent. In a few minutes, I’m away from the bleachers and hurrying down the sides of the seats, close to the spot Zach and I had sex for the first time.

I make sure the area is completely deserted before I give into my misery, wiping the tears from my eyes and breathing hard and fast to prevent myself from crying even more.

Thing is, I *do* feel like an idiot. The commentators are right. The whole town loves Zach. I broke up with him because I’m pregnant with his baby, and he’s never going to find out about my sacrifice. It seems like he never wants to talk to me—or even *look* at me—ever again.

And that hurts way more than I thought it would.

“Ivy?”

I swing around. It’s Paul, and I take a step back in embarrassment, before I realize Paul is way too drunk to potentially remember anything from this conversation. He stumbles toward me, his eyes half closed and his knees threatening to buckle under him with each step.

“Paul,” I say, just as I hear loud cheers from the crowd. It sounds like it’s game over, and the renewed chants of “Anderson” some feet away cues me into the fact that we won.

My heart starts to ache again, but I take some relief in the fact that I don’t need to stay a second longer. Getting a drunk Paul home is the perfect reason to leave.

“Let’s get you home,” I tell him, linking my arm around his.

But Paul yanks his hand away roughly.

I squint at him. “Paul? Is something wrong?”

I don’t get an answer to my question. Instead, Paul grabs me by the arms with surprising strength for someone so thin, and pins me against the wall directly opposite the bleachers.

“Paul,” I say, torn between confusion and a hint of dread. I’ve never known Paul to act this roughly. But again, I’ve never been with Paul when he is drunk.

“You like him, don’t you?” he slurs, and the stench of alcohol sends a wave of nausea riding up my throat.

“Who?” I ask, confusion winning the battle of my emotions, but not for long. Paul presses himself against me, and when I try to struggle, he holds me even tighter.

“*Him,*” he sneers, pressing even harder. “Anderson. That fucking bastard.”

My heart starts hammering within my chest. Paul always has a bit of disdain when he talks about football players, but I’ve never heard him speak with this much hatred.

I search my frantic brain for some logic. No matter how much I struggle, I’m not going to wiggle free of Paul. There is also a very slim chance anyone will see me. I know that since the night I had sex with Zach just a few feet away. I could scream, but the last thing I want is to call unnecessary attention to us right now.

I have only one option left: to talk things through with Paul. He is a drunken, slightly scary stranger right now, but if I play my cards right, maybe I can appeal to the sober part of him long enough to wiggle free and make a run for it. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t lie to me,” he snarls, so loudly I feel my heart jump to my throat. “I *saw* you. Every fucking time he came to the restaurant you acted like you wanted to fuck him right then and there. You’re in love with him.” He takes a deep, harsh breath. “And you’ve been stringing me along for five fucking years.”

My eyes widen in astonishment. Paul and I have been friends since high school, but I would never have guessed he

felt anything for me but good old friendship.

“I didn’t string you along,” I mutter, scouting the area from the corner of my eyes for possible help. But there is no one around, except a bunch of football players several miles away, too far away to even hear me scream.

“Prove it,” Paul snarls.

I look up at him. He has a cruel, sadistic grin on his face that scares me even more than his words.

I take a small breath, trying to calm my racing heart. There is no way to talk him out of this. I have to figure something else out.

But before I can decide on what to do next, Paul bends forward and smashes his lips against mine.

CHAPTER 21



ZACH

“**G**ood one, son,” Coach says gruffly. “Here you go.”

He tosses me a bottle of water. I unscrew the cap and drink it all in one gulp, barely paying attention to my teammates, who are still slapping me on the shoulder and ecstatic from the game.

“Is Mr. Hernandez here?” I ask him the moment I get all of the water down. Right now, it is more important than ever that I impressed the scout...

Especially with what I saw while looking out into the crowd.

I try to clamp down on the anger swirling inside me, but the water bottle pays the price. I squeeze it into an ungainly ball before I toss it to the side.

“Yes,” the coach says. “He was roaring about your victory. I think he’s seen enough to offer you that scholarship.” He nods toward the bleachers, and I follow his gaze to see the scout making his way down the rows of seats. “Here he comes.”

The coach heads toward the bleachers to fetch him, and I reach into the cooler for another bottle of water. It is far easier to focus on my victories. I played like a maniac out there, and I know it as well as the cheering crowd does.

But every time I try to focus on that, I find myself being pulled back to those seconds on the field where I decided to

search for Ivy on the bleachers... and saw Paul leering at me from beside her.

I try to put the image out of my head for the umpteenth time, but what I see as I straighten up from taking another bottle doesn't help.

About fifty yards away, Ivy is talking to Paul, who has his arms around her upper arms, his head bent over hers as though they're seconds from kissing.

My anger shoots out without warning, and I find myself struggling against smashing the bottle into something.... or someone. Paul would be a good target.

Calm down, Zach, I tell myself, turning away from them. I decided to let go of Ivy weeks ago. Also, this match is the most important match of my life so far. I do not want to ruin it because Ivy is talking to some guy.

"Guys," Coach says, and I turn to him. He has Mr. Hernandez in tow, who is beaming approvingly at me. "Gather around for a minute."

My team members hop off their benches and the floor as we gather around in a semicircle. I walk toward the circle, trying hard to lock out the image of Ivy and Paul from my head.

But I can't. I just can't.

And so, I turn around for a tiny glance.

They are even farther now, but when I squint, I can see them. Paul has Ivy shoved up against the wall, and his head is even lower. He's trying to kiss her—and the sight drops my heart a few inches.

Until I glance at Ivy.

She's rearing back as far as she can, her body reclining away from him.

My anger turns to burning, molten rage in an instant.

I'm barely aware of giving my body permission to do what I do next. But in the next millisecond, I'm tossing the bottle

away, vaulting over two benches and a low hedge and running toward Paul, faster than I've ever run in the field. Hell, faster than I've ever run in my life. The adrenaline is pulsing through me, pushing furious energy into my vein, causing the rage to tighten around me like a million vines seeking relief.

I feel that relief when I get to Paul, tear him one-handed away from Ivy, and send my fist crushing against his skull.

Paul lets out a terrified yelp, and from the back of my mind I hear Ivy yell out something in relief. But I'm unable to fully process those emotions to back away. Instead, I feel the cord tightening inside me again, seeking relief.

I smash my fist against the side of Paul's head again. This time, he's flat on the ground, and I can tell he's been knocked out... and has been drinking for a few hours, from the stench on him. But my head is still buzzing with an indomitable rage, and I see him in my mind's eye—laughing with Ivy, putting his arm around her, kissing her when all she wanted to do was get away.

I get down and sit astride him, hold up his limp body to mine, and throw in a few more punches. He's awake and yelping in an instant, but even that doesn't stop me. Every time I throw a punch, I remember his hands on Ivy, and within a few seconds, I feel my rage transcend into something close to a desire to murder.

It could have been a few minutes or hours, but suddenly, rough hands are pulling me off him. I fight them, my rage coursing through me so badly I can hardly grasp on to a single rational thought. But these hands are firm and seem to be multiplying by the minute. And so, I jerk away from them, turn around...

And gaze at the shocked faces of my team members.

That, more than anything, causes me to take a deep breath and see things away from the red filter of my rage. All of my teammates are now gathered in a spot that was empty a few minutes ago, along with half of the Santa Barbara team, and about a hundred spectators, all staring in hushed silence.

I feel my anger draining out of me. I turn back to see Paul being helped up by two spectators, both of them have their faces painted with SCC colors. But right now, they're glaring at me like I'm a monster.

I look down at my bloodied fists.

Maybe I am.

On the other side of Paul is Ivy, who's now wrapped in her father's arms. I look up at the coach's face, but he seems only concerned with his daughter. When I turn back to look at the hundred and something people still staring/glaring at me, some murmuring starts in the crowd.

God, I think, my anxiety coming back in the place of trembling fingers.

I have never felt more like an idiot in my entire life.

More people are already streaming toward the spot, gaping at Paul Johnson's bloody, battered face. I take a step away and then another, my anxiety now swapping places with confusion and shame. Right now, I want nothing more than to run and keep fucking running. Forever.

But then, Dave Collins takes control of the situation. Swiping a bullhorn from under the referee's arm, he steps into the spot between myself and the team members.

"Show's over," he barks into the bullhorn. "Back to your seats, everyone. *Now.*"

The place is silent for a few seconds. Finally, people start to leave the same way they came, murmuring starting up as they head back up toward their seats. I look down at my fingers and feel their trembling increase.

This was what happened at the pool eight years ago, but on a much larger scale.

And this time, Tommy Kravitz was not the bully. *I am.*

I look up at the rest of the people still milling about. The Santa Barbara team and half of the SCC team were departing, but I catch the gaze of Pam, who has her arms folded and is

staring at me with the most vindictive smile on her face, as though the show has thoroughly pleased her.

I feel anger coursing through me again, but Dave seems to have spotted her the same moment I did. Stepping up to her, he puts the bullhorn to his mouth and screams, “When I say everyone needs to leave, I mean you too, Pam. Go. *Now.*”

She jumps at the loud noise and glares at him. She finally marches away, but not without throwing me another smile over her shoulder.

I let out a sigh, expelling the thought of Pam from my mind. I’ll deal with her later. Right now, though, I have to focus on the present.

The other people around are fewer now. Ivy and the coach, who still has an arm on her shoulder; Dave; the two spectators holding Paul up who seem to be his relatives...

And Mr. Hernandez.

I feel like I was just stabbed through the abdomen.

The beaming smile he had on his face earlier is completely gone, and he has his arms crossed exactly like Pam’s. He doesn’t look like a benign college scout anymore. He looks almost as furious as Paul’s family does.

I lock my gaze with him, but he doesn’t say anything.

One of Paul’s relatives, a small mousy girl with her facial features completely hidden by the paint, breaks the silence first. “You wanted to *kill* him,” she says, her voice several pitches high. “All because he was *kissing* a girl!”

I open my mouth to defend myself, but Coach gets there faster. “Trying to *force* himself on a girl,” he says, his voice sounding like a whip. His fists are clenched as he stares at Paul, who is merely struggling to stay afoot because of his family members and whimpering with pain. “He was trying to force himself on *my* daughter at a match where *I* was.” The venom in his face intensifies. “He’s lucky I didn’t get to him first.”

The mousy girl seems to quail at the sound of the coach's voice. I spare a glance at Mr. Hernandez, feeling almost relieved that the coach knows the true story, at least. But Mr. Hernandez doesn't seem impressed. Neither does Dave, who is staring at me stonily with eyes filled with something close to suspicion.

"Get him out of my sight," Coach Collins spits at Paul's helpers. "Before I finish the job."

They waste no time in scuttling off away from the football field.

The coach takes a deep breath, seemingly trying to control his anger. He turns to Mr. Hernandez, who looks like he's seeking an explanation.

"I apologize for the... debacle," he says. "This was not supposed to happen."

"Clearly," Mr. Hernandez says, his nostrils flaring.

The coach doesn't seem to hear him anymore. He has his eyes set on Ivy again. "Are you alright?" he's muttering to her, his arm still around her. "Want me to take you home?"

I shoot a glance at her. I'm certain she knows I'm staring at her, but she's ignoring my gaze and everyone else's, staring at the floor instead.

"I'm fine," she mutters back. "I'll be fine."

I feel her dismissal pierce me like a sword through the heart. But I brush the feelings aside as quickly as I can. Mr. Hernandez and the scholarship he was offering are far more important.

"Your player created a scene," Mr. Hernandez says, drawing the coach's attention to him. "He *ruined* the match by beating someone to a pulp."

My heart sinks even further, and I open my mouth to offer an apology. But Coach cuts me short again. Stepping forward and removing his arm from Ivy, he meets Mr. Hernandez's angry gaze with his.

“My *player* was saving my daughter from being assaulted,” he says.

Ivy gives a fairly audible whimper at his word. I glance at her. She has her arms wrapped around herself, looking more vulnerable than I’ve ever seen her.

I quell the urge to go to her and return my gaze on Mr. Hernandez.

“I take it defending sexual assaulters is *not* part of your school’s policy?” Coach asks.

Mr. Hernandez’s nostrils flare even more, and I know Coach has gone a step too far. The man is silent for a few more seconds, but then he takes a deep breath, glances at my fists, and looks up at Coach.

“It’s not,” he says. “But neither is brutal violence in the middle of a match. UCLA only awards scholarships to players who know the difference between justice and revenge.”

He turns and strides off, not toward the bleachers, but the car park.

My stomach ties in a knot. He’s leaving.

“Don’t worry about it,” Coach declares, still glaring after him.

I say nothing. There is nothing *to* say. Instead, I glance at Dave, who is still staring at me like he’s a little suspicious about something.

My stomach tightens even more. I don’t need to go out on a limb to know exactly what Dave is thinking. I’ve known Ivy for years and talked to her once or twice as far as he knows.

But there is no reason—as far as he knows—that would justify me beating her friend that brutally. Coach would have come to that conclusion as well, had he not been too incensed about the whole affair.

Coach steps forward and pats me on the shoulder. “Thank you,” he says, staring deep into my eyes. “I’d have killed the guy if I got to him first.”

I nod, even though all I feel is a sunken hole in my gut. I don't deserve his thanks. No matter what Coach says, I believe Mr. Hernandez more. There is a difference between justice and revenge. Were it another girl, I'd have stopped at the first punch and alerted campus security. I'd have walked out of this situation a hero.

But there is something about Ivy that always seems to bring all my strongest emotions to a boil.

I glance at Dave again, wondering what he's thinking. He says nothing, merely gazing at me.

"You did the right thing," Coach adds after an awkward silence. This time, he turns to Dave and glares at him, as though urging him to say something.

Dave breaks eye contact with me and glances at Ivy instead, who is still huddled in a corner.

"Yeah," he says after a pause. "He acted like a real *brother*."

He turns around, marching off into the darkness, and I feel the hole in my gut expand even more.

CHAPTER 22



My legs are unsteady with fear as I climb up the porch steps of the Anderson home. The windows are open and the living room lights are still on. At least one family member is still up. But that does nothing to quell the fear spreading through me.

Even before Dad suggested I pay a visit to Zach to thank him, I knew I needed to do it. It is the right thing to do. He stepped in to save me at the risk of losing all of his lifelong dreams, and all I'd done was lurk behind my dad while he defended him.

I feel my fear rocketing when I knock on the door.

Please, let no one answer, I think, and even thinking that makes me feel a little guilty.

He saved me, and I should be grateful and happy to see him.

Truth is that a little part of me does want to see him.

But as much as I've missed Zach over the past few weeks, seeing him grind his fist into Paul's skull terrified me. Not because I think Paul didn't deserve it or because I think he'd ever do the same thing to me.

But because I know that I'd led him to do that. I'd filled him with so much rage he'd put his future at risk to defend me.

I'd spent the past few weeks thinking I meant nothing to Zach Anderson. To know that the ending of our relationship

had filled him with so much rage made me a little terrified to face him now.

I pull myself back to the present and knock on the door again. I'd give myself a maximum of three knocks, and if I get no reply, I'll race all the way home and go the coward's route by texting him. That way, I won't have to...

The door is flung open and I look up with a sinking feeling to see Mrs. Anderson beaming at me.

"Ivy!" she says, clearly delighted. "It's been far too long. Rosa keeps asking me when you'll come over."

She wraps her arms around me, and I feel a little relieved. Even if news of what happened are probably spreading through town at this very moment, no word of it seemed to have reached the Anderson household. I'm not being treated like a victim or, even worse, a symbol of fatal attraction.

"Did you come to see Rosa?" she says, pulling me into the warmth of the living room. "She's asleep right now."

"No," I say, swallowing hard. "I'm here to see... Zach."

Thankfully, she doesn't ask any follow-up questions. The Andersons are as liberal as they come. "Right on up," she says. "He just showered, I think. I'm locking up now, but he can escort you home when you're done."

I offer a tremulous smile as I walk past her, my legs becoming increasingly heavier. Still, I manage to go up the stairs, where a wave of nostalgia hits me. Four months ago, Zach had been nothing more than my brother's close friend and the boy I'd had a crush on my entire life.

And now, I have his baby in my belly and have grown attached to him in a way I can't explain.

The realization hits me then. I want to see Zach. I want him to see me too.

I'm at the top of the stairs now, and I walk stiffly to Zach's door. For the three nights I stayed in the Anderson house while I was babysitting, I could mostly hear Zach's speakers blaring some loud music.

Now, it's oddly quiet. But I can see light through the gap between the door and the floor.

He's not asleep yet.

My stomach tenses with a mixture of anticipation and fear as I knock on the door. My brain is whirring, even though all I want is for my mind to focus on the best opening statement. Do I just tell him thanks and run off? Or do I thank him and *then* apologize for not sticking up for him?

But before I can decide, the door swings open and Zach is right in front of me, wearing nothing but a towel around his waist, the hairs on his chest slick with water from the shower.

I immediately feel a strong sense of déjà vu. That, and a stronger sense of arousal.

How is it that merely seeing Zach Anderson has the potential to turn the space between my legs into a puddle, even after everything that has happened?

I swallow my embarrassment at myself and summon courage to look up into his face. His expression—one of muted disgust and disapproval—stills my desire for a second.

“You shouldn't be here,” he says, already stepping back.

I try to remember the lines I was practicing a second ago, but I just come up blank. I just stare like an idiot as he takes another step back and reaches for the door.

The thought of having Zach Anderson slam the door in my face is what forces me to speak up.

“I'm sorry about the game,” I say, feeling my cheeks starting to burn.

My déjà vu increases. I thought I'd managed to shed off all of my shyness around Zach. But I was apparently wrong.

“Nothing to be sorry about,” he says, his eyes cold as he gazes at me. “We won.”

It physically hurts when he looks at me like that, like I am a complete stranger blocking him from going about his day.

He looked at me like that back in the field, and I became convinced he wanted nothing to do with me.

Until he beat Paul to a pulp right in front of me.

Now, as I stare at him, I wonder whether I'm right. Maybe he was just punching a molester because he hated assault. Maybe it had nothing to do with me in particular.

That thought makes my pain burn even deeper.

"What do you want?" he asks. "I need to go to bed. Been a long day."

Embarrassment fuels the embers of my pain even more. It sounds to me—and to any rational person—that he doesn't want me around. If I were half as smart as I know I am, I would tell him goodbye and turn around and leave, never to speak to him again.

But instead, I stand there, rooted to one spot.

I'm going to give this one last shot, even if it makes me look desperate.

"I'm sorry about not standing up to defend you back there in the field," I say. It takes all of my courage to look him in the face when he's staring at me disdainfully like that, but I continue to speak. "I should have said something, and I know it. I just..."

I taper off, unsure of how to phrase my next words without pissing him off even more. The truth is, I *would* have said something. But the entire town was there, watching us. There was Pam, my brother... and my father.

All it would have taken was for me to say something the wrong way and the whole town would know without a doubt what happened between me and Zach. And if I had said one *more* wrong thing, someone would find out about my pregnancy.

I couldn't take that risk. For me *and* Zach.

I don't want to have to explain all of that to him, but when I look up at him, I'm surprised to see his look has softened a little.

“I get it,” he says, and the muscles in his jaw tense for a bit. I know in that instant he’s remembering seeing Paul kissing me. But he sighs, evidently pushing the memory away again. “What happened was awful.” He fixes me with his blue eyes, and the barely-shielded concern makes my knees grow weak for a minute. “How are you?”

“Fine,” I say, meaning it. “To be honest, everything is still a little blurry.” I’d barely been able to wrap my head around the fact that Paul had nursed a secret crush on me all these years and was forcing me to kiss him before Zach pulled him off me and swung his fist at him.

I look up at him, realizing how much more concerned I am for him. “Did you smooth things over with the scout?” I ask, a pang of guilt hitting me. I would hate to know I cost Zach the opportunity of a lifetime.

“Yes,” he says after a pause, and I feel joy trickle down my spine. He’s *finally* talking to me. “Coach and I called him after the game. He was a little pissed, but he understood. He did say that any other scandals or outbursts like this would take the offer off the table permanently, though.”

I nod, feeling a tinge of relief. But there is the nagging part of the brain that’s hooked on the word scandal. Having an affair with the coach’s daughter *is* a scandal.

It’s more important than ever that I keep things to myself. I’m going to figure out how to go to the farthest abortion clinic I can, do something about the baby, and go back to my usual life.

Zach is staring at me, and awkwardness spreads as seconds trickle by in silence. It’s time to say goodbye, and I know it. We’ve had a casual pleasant conversation and could now cut the cord loose.

But I don’t want to go. I don’t even think I could push myself to leave even if I tried.

So, I search my brain for something to say. And this time, I’m thankfully able to think of a question I’m curious about.

“You seemed... less tense... on the field earlier, before...” I would rather die than bring up the assault again, so I wait for Zach to fill in the gaps.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’m going to therapy. I figured I owed you one, even if you *did* decide to stop speaking to me.”

Embarrassment and guilt stab at me. “I’m sorry,” I mutter.

He merely shrugs. And finally, he takes a step back. “You want to come in?”

Every cell in my body zings with anticipation, but I manage to maintain a casual voice as I say, “Yeah.”

I’ve never been in Zach’s room, and the moment I step in, I’m hit with a wave of shock. His room looks different from what I expected. It’s bare of any belongings but for a queen-sized bed in the center of the room, a dressing table and chair, and a closet. A large speaker is right by his bed, and there’s a basketball hoop fixed right above his door.

“Wow,” I mutter.

He raises his brows. “Surprised I’m not a dirty slob like your brother?”

I feel the corner of my lips tug up into a smile. “Yeah, actually,” I tell him. Dave’s room looks like the typical boy’s room—a roaring mess.

Zach perches himself on the chair and I feel a little awkward as I sit on the corner of the bed. We’ve had a crazy ride for the past three months, but I almost feel like a stranger again.

“You were right,” he says, almost startling me.

“About what?” I ask, a little confused.

“The therapist,” he says. “I chose one outside town for obvious reasons. And she’s been a great help.”

But I can see from the tightening of his jaw that he’s not telling me something. I open my mouth to prod before I start to wonder if I’m even *allowed* to do that anymore.

Screw it, I think, and I decide to go for it.

“Are you finding it difficult to talk about your feelings?” I ask him.

He shoots me a look that reads *obviously*. His slight disapproval stings, but I continue to speak.

“It’ll get better with time, I think.”

He lets out a sound similar to a growl. “It *won’t*,” he says, his voice a little high. “Because no matter how hard I try, I can’t...”

He lets out another, louder growl, pressing his palms to his face. He seems to be unraveling, and a fist closes over my heart as his raw emotions pierce my skin. I *want* to go to him, to take him in my arms and tell him that it’s going to be alright, but...

He lifts his face from his hands, and his eyes are a little red now. “I can’t tell her,” he mutters, not quite looking at me.

I stare at him, not sure of what to do or say. I’d long figured out that Zach had some demons from his past, but if a therapist could not get it out, there was no way *I* would.

But I had to try. For him.

And so, with my heart banging in my chest, I stand up and make my way over to him. He’s too deep in thought to even notice me coming over. He doesn’t react until I reach out with trembling fingers and put my hand on his bare shoulder.

His entire body shudders for a moment before he becomes still.

“Fuck,” he mutters, looking up at me. “You have no idea how much I missed you touching me.”

Butterflies start to wiggle in my stomach, but I ignore the sensation.

“Maybe you could start by telling me what you don’t want to tell your therapist,” I say, hating the way my voice comes out in an undecided croak.

He raises his brows and lets out a chuckle. “Can’t do that,” he says.

“Why not?” I ask, and I am sounding a little more confident. Boldened by that, I push further. “I told you something I’d never told anyone. It’s your turn.”

But Zach stands up, brushing my hand off his shoulder and striding to the other end of the room. His rejection stings, but I try to take it in stride. This is about helping him, and nothing else.

“I get that you don’t trust me with a secret,” I say.

“It’s not about that,” he says. His back is to me, and he’s staring out of the window at something I can’t see. His grip tightens on the windowsill before he adds. “It’s just... you’re exactly like her.”

“Like who?” I ask, my brows furrowed.

He says nothing for a few moments. And then, just when I’m figuring out what to say next, he lets out a huge breath.

“Her name was Irene Cullingham,” he says, and my heart misses a beat. He is *actually* going to tell me. “She was my best friend all through middle school. She was the nerdiest nerd you’d ever meet. Used to grind me all the time about not doing my homework correctly.” He gives a tiny laugh. “Loved to wear these Harry Potter-looking glasses too.”

Goosebumps rise in my arms, along with a tight squeeze around my abdominal muscles. The girl he is describing is *like* me. We even had the same initials.

“We went everywhere together,” he continues, sounding as though he had forgotten I was in the room and was now having a full-on conversation with himself. “I was not nerdish, but she was the only one who bothered to talk to me, who even cared. I was completely in love with her.” He gives another chuckle, and a prick hits at my heart.

Get over it, Ivy, I tell myself. It is beyond stupid to be jealous of a girl he’s probably not seen in close to a decade.

“Our middle school in Long Island was horrible,” he continues. “Bullying was all the rage back then, and I was the prime target for the most popular kid, Tommy Kravitz.”

My eyes widen in astonishment. There was *no* way in hell that Zach had been bullied in middle school. There was no way *he* had not been the popular kid all his life.

He seems to sense my surprise. Without turning toward me, he continues to speak. “I was a fat kid,” he says. “Hated exercise and loved to binge eat because I had no friends.”

My mind is reeling with shock and a sprinkle of disbelief. How had Zach transformed from a lonely fat kid to the most popular football player in the entire *town*?

Again, he gives the answer to my unspoken question. “I was cool with life, you know? I got bullied here and there and got laughed at for having the fattest ass in the school, but Irene stuck with me through all of that bullshit. And so, I fought my way through, too.”

There’s an “Until” coming. I’m sure of it.

I’m proven right.

“Until one day, when the school organized a pool party on the fourth of July.”

Zach’s fingers start to tremble on the windowsill, and my first instinct is to go to him and hug him. But I maintain my spot. He *needs* to get the story out, once and for all. I need to let him fight through his demons.

And he does.

Within the next five minutes, Zach tells me the sickest story I’ve ever heard involving twelve-year-old kids. He had been having fun with Irene at the pool until the bully, Tommy Kravitz, thought it would be funny to “prank” him.

“Tommy had stolen some of the school’s fireworks. I don’t know why or what he intended to do with them, but when he set his eyes on me, his plans were set.” His eyes go hard, fists clenched. “He came close to me, set the fireworks ablaze, and slipped them into my swimming trunks, laughing the entire time. Him and his group of friends who had grabbed me so he could do it.” Zach’s voice is oddly detached.

“It hurt but it took me a few seconds to realize I was actually on fire. I fought to get free from the guys grabbing me and jumped in the pool. By then, my shorts were almost completely burned off.” He looks so lost, so angry, so unreachable. Like he is not here anymore and I couldn’t get to him if I wanted to. “The worst part is that I only remembered I couldn’t swim after I was already in the water. On the deep side of the pool. All I could think about at first is that I was on fire and had to put it out so I had to get in the water.”

Tears are streaming down my face but I can’t talk. I can hardly breathe as I’m taken with him on his journey through hell. “I almost died. I had to be rescued by *two* lifeguards because I was that fat. And since I wasn’t breathing, the two lifeguards were far more concerned with administering CPR than covering off my burned body.” He is now shaking his head.

“When I came to, I was completely naked, displayed in front of a sea of jeering classmates, the burn pains still stinging my waist.” His eyes go out the window and I wonder what he is seeing. “When I looked for Irene, she was disappearing into the crowd of classmates. She never said a word to me after that,” he says, his voice coolly detached. “Not that there was much to say. Within a week, the school had given my parents the gist of what happened, and they decided to pack things up and move. I spent the summer before I started school here dieting and hitting the gym. I was determined to never let that happen to me ever again.”

My heart is in pieces for him. Little things are starting to make sense now. I’d seen those scars back in my room, but I’d been too ridden with desire to ask where they were from. I’d assumed he got it from playing football.

I cast my mind back to the day Zach Anderson started at Sundale High School. He’d caused an instant uproar; the new, mysterious, good-looking guy. He’d had girls pinning for years, i.e., me. He’d joined the jocks instantly—the one group of people no one would dare bully—and had started to play football.

He had also liked popular, attractive girls like Pam, because... The realization hits me like a punch.

Because the last thing he wanted was to be with any girl that reminded him of Irene.

But somehow, he *had* shown interest in me. Was it because I reminded him of Irene a little too much?

That thought fills me with a sinking feeling, but I remember something else.

Zach had not even tried to contest the breakup. I'd thought it meant that he did not care about me. But I understand a little better now. He was used to people he cared about leaving.

My heart hurts even more for him now. I'd behaved exactly like Irene had... twice. First, by cutting things off without an explanation. And secondly, by not defending him after what Paul did.

"I'm sorry," I mutter. "For everything." My words seem inadequate even to myself, but I mean them more than I ever have in all my life.

He turns to me then, his face bare of emotions. But I can tell he's hiding all of his feelings beneath an uncaring mask.

"It's fine."

"No," I insist, taking a step closer to him. "It's not. It's *really* not."

He merely shrugs and turns back to the window. My heart hurts. He no longer trusts me to make him feel better.

"I'm sorry," I say again, wishing I could somehow put my thoughts into his head without having to say them. I wanted him to know that, unlike Irene, I'd not just left him because I was scared of sinking with him. I'd done what was best for him.

"Stop saying that," he says, his voice a tad harsh. "You're not Irene—no matter how much you look like her. You did nothing wrong."

My heart misses a painful beat as I take another step forward. “I did,” I say, ignoring the instant awkwardness I feel bringing this up. “I told you we had to break up but I didn’t tell you why.”

My cheeks burn. I should not have used the term break up—there was never a relationship after all.

But when Zach turns back to me, he doesn’t seem to have registered the word at all. He seems more curious than anything. “Why *did* you end it?”

My heart starts to race. I force myself to not do what my instincts are telling me to, to *not* put a hand over my belly.

The pregnancy is *my* complication. I’m going to deal with it.

“I... I can’t tell you.”

Zach’s expression of curiosity changes to tired understanding in an instant. “Yeah, got it,” he says. “Last thing you’d want is to dull your intelligence by dating a jock, anyway.”

My eyes widen in surprise. Zach thinks *I*’m too good for *him*? Wait! He thought we were *dating*? And he thinks I want some nerd and not him?

My astonishment rids me of all of my awkwardness and guilt and embarrassment. In the next moment, I’m striding over to Zach, turning him around, and placing my hands on his bare upper arms.

“That’s not it,” I say, the words tumbling out of my mouth fast. “That’s *definitely* not it. I wish I could tell you, but it has nothing to do with wanting to date Paul or *anyone else* or even not wanting my dad to find out. I was fine with risking all of that. I would have chosen you over a million Pauls...”

I’d not really let myself think about what I was saying as I talked, but the moment I become aware of my last sentence, a flush comes up my neck as my entire face reddens.

Slowly, I raise my face up to look at Zach, expecting his facial expression to make me feel even more embarrassed.

But I'm wrong. Because Zach doesn't look amused or surprised or even confused.

He raises his eyebrows at me before he nods toward the space between our feet. Feeling some trepidation, I follow his gaze.

And let out a yelp.

Zach is fully naked now, he's fully erect and inches from grazing my lower abdomen. I seem to have shaken the towel loose from his body when I gripped his upper arm.

"Ivy," he says, his tone thick with desire.

I look up at him, my heart banging in my chest. I can no longer remember anything I was saying in the last minute. I'm only fully aware of how much I want him to throw me on his bed and make love to me all night.

"I understand you're trying to tell me something," he says, his voice low. "But as you can see," he nods toward his erection again, "I'm not quite *capable* of understanding that right now. Maybe we can pick up this conversation later?"

I glance down at him again, and a thick, harsh wave of desire sweeps through me. I want to tell him I've completely lost track of the conversation and want to begin another, but I can't quite get my mouth to move.

Zach puts a finger under my chin and lifts my gaze to his. I feel my entire body shudder with pleasure at his touch.

What I would give to...

"Ivy," he says, his gaze fixed on me with smoldering intensity. "Leave. Now. We should have this conversation when I'm not thinking of pushing you up against that wall and fucking your brains out."

I gulp hard.

Then I turn around and scuttle out of his room.

CHAPTER 23



ZACH

O kay, I *do* feel like an idiot.

I swing my body over, landing, as I always have, on the awning underneath Ivy's window. The place is damper than usual, thanks to a slight all-afternoon drizzle, and I catch myself almost sliding and having to hold on to her windowsill for support.

I shake the drops of water out of my head and reach for the single rose, held between my teeth as I use my hands to swing up the house. The window is blurry, and I have to wipe it clear with my jacket, feeling more like an idiot than ever.

I hadn't quite thought things through when I stepped out of my house, picked a rose from my mother's garden, and hightailed it out of my house toward Ivy's, I'd not really thought through anything. I'd just woken up with a burning need to see Ivy.

And here I am now.

I peek through the now-repaired window, feeling the first pangs of doubt. Nothing about our conversation last night pointed to the fact that we are back together. Sure, we spent an hour mulling over things, and I'd said things to Ivy that I'd buried for years and now felt like a huge load lifted off my back. But she was hiding quite a lot of things from me, including the reason why she had called things off. There was every chance she'd ask me to leave.

But the moment I look through the window, all my doubts disappear.

Because Ivy is lying down, *naked*, her back arching up from her bed as she pleases herself with her finger.

It takes every single atom in my body to stop myself from smashing through the window again. As much as I want to be with her in that moment, I still my body, letting myself enjoy the pleasure of watching her.

Her eyes are closed and her lips are parted in a way that tells me she's moaning out loud. I can't hear her because of the stupid fucking window, but my imagination is so good I can almost hear her purring in my ears. As I watch, she reaches with her free hand for her breasts, which are about two times larger from the last time I saw them. She squeezes her left breast, and her lips part even wider in what seems to be ecstasy.

Fuck.

I close my mouth to prevent a dribble of saliva from escaping. Ivy lifts a finger and brushes it across her hard nipple, her back arching higher.

Without thinking, I reach forward and wrap my rock-hard dick in my hand. The feeling eases the tension twisting inside my gut, but when I think of how I'd much prefer Ivy's hands on my dick, I burn with longing.

Ivy seems to be in the throes of pleasure now. Her fingers are working even harder as she plunges them in and out of herself, and her back is almost completely off the bed. Her eyes are still shut tight, and she seems to be letting out a series of low moans.

I don't think as I run my hand across the shaft of my dick.

I don't want to be the weirdo who is watching a girl please herself, but fuck, it feels good to touch myself as I watch *her* touching herself.

And, before I can start to feel guilty about it, her face contorts in a way that can only mean one thing. She's orgasming. Her lips pucker to form one word.

Zach.

I feel goosebumps of bliss rise on my arms. She *is* thinking of me.

I can't hold back anymore. Not caring if I'm interrupting her or not, I rap on the window.

I watch as Ivy jerks up, resting on her elbows, and looks toward the window. Our eyes meet, and I expect her to shriek or dive under the covers or have a million other Ivy reactions.

But she doesn't.

Instead, she merely stares at me, and a slow smile spreads across her face.

God.

I reach forward and grab my dick again. My entire body is burning with tension, and I can't help myself.

If I'm not inside her in the next minute, I'm going to explode.

Ivy, thankfully, doesn't keep me waiting. She hops off the bed and strides toward me, not even bothering to conceal her naked body.

I admit, I'm more turned on by the minute. As much as I liked the shy Ivy who was prone to fear, I like this one even better—the Ivy who is not ashamed of taking her pleasures when she wishes.

She reaches the window and pulls it open. I slide through the crack and land on my feet gracefully.

“Here,” I say, giving her the single rose. Half of the petals have gone missing from my arduous journey up the house, but she takes it, not sparing a glance at it. Instead, her green eyes are fixed on me, and I can see the desire burning in her eyes.

She reaches up and takes my hand, guiding me slowly down the valley of her swollen breasts, her belly, and even deeper.

Then, she guides one of my fingers into her.

I bite down a groan. She feels better than ever, swollen, soft, and dripping wet. I explore her without further guidance,

enjoying the way she moans in my arms.

An image flashes before my eyes, of me thrusting into Ivy as she is pushed against a wall, the same way I'd done the first day we had sex. I feel almost crazy as I reach for her and pull her into my arms, intent on recreating the image in real life.

But when I take a step closer to her, I trip over a microphone.

"I'm sorry," she mutters, staring down at it. "I was recording a video earlier, and I'm not really done."

I squint at her. "Really?" Over the past few weeks, even *I* had noticed that Ivy had not uploaded on her channel in a while. I'd assumed it was related to her father finding out.

"Yeah," she says. She takes a deep breath and looks up at me. "I'm planning for a face reveal."

A grin spreads through my face, and for a second, I forget the intensity of my desire. "Really?" I ask her.

She nods, giving me a little smile. "Yeah, really. Our conversation last night meant a lot to me..." my heart thrums with pleasure "...and I want to be a better person. A more *courageous* person, that does exactly what they want to do all the time... or most of the time, anyway. Also, my dad already knows all about it and has given me the go-ahead. I really don't have any other excuse."

But there's something in her facial expression that tells me that she does have a mind block about what she's about to do.

"What other excuses were you trying to hide behind?"

She bites her lip, looking like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar. I try to ignore how adorable she is and focus on her words instead.

"Maybe like the fact that my followers think I'm this deathly hot creature. And they might be a little disappointed."

I raise my brows, incredulity sweeping over me. "You *are* a deathly hot creature," I say. One glance at her naked body makes my desire flood back like a storm, but I manage to keep

a rein on my thoughts. This is important to Ivy, and so it is important to me. “They’re going to love you.”

She blushes, hard. “Thank you.”

“And about the ‘being courageous’ thing,” I say, unable to help pulling her against me. “You’re doing a great job. I mean, you didn’t freak out that I caught you masturbating, completely naked.”

God. Just saying the words makes me remember how desperately I want to make love to her.

She grins and gives me a shrug. “Yeah, I guess.”

“But...” I say, dragging the word slowly as I lift up my hand to gently remove one of the hair bands from her pigtails. “I’d love it if you took it a step further. You know, maybe by ditching the glasses and the pigtails...” I take out the other one, and her hair instantly cascades down her back in a dark brown wavy sheet “... for good.”

She raises her head to look at me, and I see the uncertainty in her eyes. “I’ll work my way up to it,” she says.

I nod. I understand her to an extent, at least. Her style is a shield against the world that makes her slip through unnoticed. She has been put in a box by the coach all her life, and she’s still a little uncertain about stepping out of it.

I open my mouth to tell her my thoughts, but my words die in my throat.

Because Ivy gets on her knees, unbuckles my belt, shoves my jeans down my legs, and wraps her lips around my dick.

Fuck.

She starts to suck, and my brain explodes with a multitude of sensations. I can’t remember where I am or what I’m doing or what we were talking about a few minutes ago. Every nerve in my body is obsessed with her, and I press my fingers down on her head, letting the sensations from her mouth drive me more insane.

She runs her wet tongue down my shaft and I feel my legs turn to jelly. It’s a struggle maintaining a standing position,

and I push my hands against the nearest wall, letting her tongue run over the tip of my dick again and again. There's a tug as she starts to push me toward climax, and it is then I gain a semblance of brain power.

I want to be inside her. I *need* to be inside her.

Getting down on my knees, I bend over and take her nipple in my mouth without as much as a warning. She lets out a scream of pleasure. I take her breast in my hand, loving how much softer and tender they are. She continues to moan with pleasure, and her sounds threaten to drive me over the edge.

I turn her around and push myself into her.

The relief from finally being inside her makes me let out a groan so loud I'm grateful Coach isn't around. I hold her by the waist, pulling her against me as I slam into her from behind. Ivy lets out a high-pitched moan and I continue to thrust into her, almost completely lost in the throes of my own pleasure.

"Zach," she moans, and a tiny explosion goes off in my brain. I go even harder, pushing myself toward my climax, not having enough patience to slow it down or enjoy the moment. At this instant, all I'm capable of doing is pushing myself inside of Ivy again and again until I can't anymore.

She moans my name again, and this time, my climax takes me with a vengeance. I let out a louder groan as I spill myself into her, while Ivy writhes underneath me, her orgasm triggered by my own. The euphoria washes over me in waves, until it finally dims and I can feel like myself enough to pull out of her.

I lie down on the rug and pull her against my chest, feeling better than I have in a very long time. I kiss the top of her head, realizing how at peace I am. Hell, I could stay here for years and not mind it one tiny bit. There's still a tiny niggling feeling at the back of my head reminding me that Ivy ended things spontaneously in the past and could do so again, but it doesn't bother me like it would have.

Because I know I'm willing to take that risk.

CHAPTER 24



My phone buzzes with an email, and my stomach tightens in both fear and anticipation.

I know just who—or what—it is.

Still, I click on the email and read the words.

“Dear Ms. Collins,

This is a reminder that your appointment date is set for tomorrow at 12pm. We eagerly await your presence in our clinic.

Regards,

Planned Parenthood.”

The tension I was feeling eases slightly as I go over the words. After the fifth time, I even manage to smile a little. This is good news. *Really* good news. Right? Because this is what needs to be done. For Zach.

I must be close to three months already, so if I’m going through with this it needs to happen as quickly as possible. I scoured the internet all of last night and I’d found the perfect place, a clinic four hours away. It’s far enough that no one can see me this time, but close enough for me to make it over there and back before my dad gets back home. It’s essentially perfect.

And once I’m done, I’m going to go back to my regular life; being a content creator, deciding what to do next now that college doesn’t seem like a feasible option anymore, and...

Dating Zach Anderson.

A slight zing zaps through me. I bite back a grin, feeling like an idiot. I've never felt this giddily happy all my life.

Especially when I am in a public place.

I look up from my book—the book I chose to critique while I did my face reveal—and look around at the restaurant. It is almost completely deserted. I'm the only client, and the only worker is Karl, Paul's former co-worker. Paul was fired by Max Davies. Last I heard from him, he was still nursing the injuries on his face and considering a community college two towns away.

I let out a small sigh. I still find it hard to believe Paul did what he did. We'd had a good friendship for five years. The thought that he had been biding his time all of this while was a little chilling.

I shake my head. I don't want to think of him right now. I look around for a distraction. But I'm still the only one in the restaurant, I note mournfully.

The door bangs in and the SCC football team comes trooping in, fresh from practice and as loud as ever. My heart slams as I spot Zach in the crowd. He's grinning ear to ear as he speaks to Dave, and his blond hair is wet from what seems to be a mixture of sweat and water.

As if he catches me looking, he turns around and his gaze lands on me. He gives me a tiny grin. My heart leaps as I grin back. But I let my gaze dip back to my book a moment later. Pam and about a dozen more of her cheerleaders are hanging around the team, along with a bazillion other college students that seem to follow them everywhere, and I don't want *any* of them to catch me looking at Zach like that.

I pretend to be reading, even though I'm really listening hard. I hear my dad march up to the counter and announce he's paying for everyone. The team orders one by one, and a tingle runs up my spine as I hear Zach's voice. Then, they all march past me and settle down on the couch area of the restaurant.

My outfit really does make me invisible.

I glance at them. Zach is the center of the group, right beside my dad. His sweatshirt is thrown open so I can see the windbreaker he's wearing underneath. *That*, and the way the sweat sheens over the naked part of his chest and slicks the hair down...

Ivy, focus, I tell myself. The more I stare at Zach, the more I put us at risk.

My dad's voice comes through loud and clear then. "We had a good practice today," he starts. "But..."

Dave lets out a loud groan, cutting him short. "Could you leave it at that? We literally demolished practice. Can't we have fun for *once*?"

I look up to see my dad glaring at my brother. But some of the team members and hangers-on seem to agree with Dave, and one of the cheerleaders even plops down on his lap.

My dad looks at her like he wants to bite off her head, and I see her try to get up. But David places an arm around her thighs, trapping her.

"Seriously," Dave says, ignoring my dad's look. "Let us have an *hour* of fun. For God's sake."

I'm barely listening to Dave disrespect my dad—I've gone tired of seeing *that*. But seeing the girl on Dave's laps makes me confront something that makes my chest hurt. Zach and I are never going to be in that kind of relationship, at least not until we both leave Sundale. I'm never going to be the girl accepted by his crowd the way Pam is.

"The final game is kind of important, son," my dad says to Dave in a slow, endearing manner, causing the other players to sneer. "We're going to New York City in two months. Want to go and have fun? Go ahead. There's plenty of reserve players to fill for you."

Dave's jaw locks and his fingers ball into fists. He basically shoves the cheerleader off his lap and doesn't say anything.

Just then, I look down on my phone to a new text from Zach. A new thrill runs through me as I read it.

Do it, it says.

I type back quickly. *Do WHAT?*

He replies just as fast. *Take off your pigtails and glasses.*

I feel a little anxiety replace my thrill. I look up at him, and he flashes me a small smile before he turns back to listen to my dad.

I feel slightly less apprehensive. No one's looking at me now. Even Pam doesn't seem to have noticed me yet.

But if I suddenly transform into a different person, she is sure to notice.

You did say you wanted to work up to more courage is his next text.

I feel a smile tug at the corner of my lips. *Yeah*, I reply. *In private.*

Zach shoots me another smile, his gaze intense. Then he looks down on his phone and starts to text. I glance down at my screen to see another text from him.

Come on. I want to see you look like you do when I'm making love to you.

My heart misses a beat. I swear, his words get me wet in a millisecond.

His next text comes a second later. *I DARE you.*

I exchange glances with him again, and this time, a thrill envelopes me.

I reach up and tug my bands out of my hair. I get rid of the glasses as well and shove them all in my purse.

He texts back a single word. *Fuck.*

My stomach warms with erupting butterflies. It's only been a few minutes since they stepped in here, but I want the meeting to be over right now. I want to be back in my room with Zach.

But that doesn't happen. Thirty minutes later, my dad is still going on about strategies, clearly not interested in the fact

that he has lost half his audience. I catch Pam staring at me once or twice, but I keep my head down, texting Zach. A full hour passes before my dad gets interrupted by a call.

“Fuck,” Dave moans the moment he steps out. “Kill me now.”

I look up to see Pam hop off her seat. “Don’t worry, guys. He’s going to be on that call for a pretty long time.”

Mark raises his brows. “Why?”

“Cause I asked a telemarketer friend of mine to convince him to get bars on his windows or something,” she says, waving a hand, a sly grin on her face. “Thought he would love the idea of barring people from his precious daughter even more.”

My cheeks burn as she looks my way and half of the listeners follow her gaze. I stare down at my book, but not before I see Zach giving Pam the death glare.

But she seems to ignore him. Instead, she climbs on a table and screams, “I rented out Max’s to celebrate your last win. Basically, it’s time to party!”

What happens next is straight out of a movie. Two muscular guys burst through the doors, holding on to kegs. The football team cheers. Another man comes in with what looks like a DJ board. He’s followed closely by even more college students, all of them screaming at the top of their lungs.

The restaurant loses its calm, serene environment and turns into a rave in less than a minute. The DJ starts to play a song, causing an uproar. The football players erupt into party mode: chugging beers, dancing on tables, and Dave even starts to make out with the cheerleader. My dad comes back then, but he’s still on his call, and even though I can tell he’s pissed off, there’s literally nothing he can do to stop it now.

Zach catches my gaze, and the expression of surprise on his face makes me almost burst into laughter. He smiles at me, and then nods toward the spot in front of the counter.

I raise my brows, and he nods toward the spot again.

My breath freezes for a moment. Is he asking me to dance, here, in front of everyone?

But before I can even properly consider the offer, Pam hops on a table and grabs a mic from the DJ.

“Everyone,” she calls, signaling for the DJ to turn off the music. He listens, and the restaurant is silent once more, except for a few groans.

Pam ignores them. “I just wanted to welcome you to this party, which *I* created to congratulate the SCC team on their victory and wish them luck as they go on to New York City!”

A resounding cheer goes through the restaurant. Pam waits for the cheers to die down before she continues. “We have a great team, a wonderful coach...” my dad gives a tight smile as dozens of heads turn toward him. “...and an outstanding captain. They’re going to win us the medal for sure.”

Another round of cheers goes through the crowd, and Zach gets a few punches to his shoulder.

Ow, he types as the cheers die down, and I start to giggle.

“Finally,” Pam says when the restaurant is silent once more. “I’d like to extend my personal congratulations to the captain, Zach Anderson.”

Pam turns to Zach, smiling more sweetly than ever. Zach’s brows are raised as he looks back at her, and I can tell he is confused.

Pam pauses for a moment, before she says, “He’s expecting a baby with our dear Ivy Collins, Coach Collins’ daughter. Congratulations!”

CHAPTER 25



ZACH

My heart stops beating for five seconds.

My first thought is that Pam is lying. It has to be fake. There's no way Ivy is pregnant with *my* baby and I found out through my vengeful ex.

But then, when I glance at Ivy, my heart drops.

She's looking back at me, tears of regret in her eyes.

It's real, I think, before my brain freezes. Ivy *is* pregnant with my baby.

I don't have more than a few seconds to internalize the thought before I hear an animal-like growl. The next second, I feel a fist swinging out of thin air at me. With reflexes borne out of years playing in the football field, I dodge the fist and look around.

It's Coach, his face purple with anger. He lets out another, louder growl, before he throws himself in the air, his hands reaching out for my neck. I dodge him again, this time aware of the fact that the whole restaurant is in an uproar. My first instinct is to turn and check to see if Ivy is alright, but before I can do that, Coach lunges for me again.

I hold him off easily. "Coach," I start, but I can't think of anything to say. There is *nothing* to say.

"You fucking bastard!" he yells, spitting in my face. "I'm going to kill you!"

He swings again, and this time, I let him hit me. The punch catches me at the angle of my jaw, and I brace myself for the pain. Coach swings again, and he catches me at that exact spot. The pain spreads, but I barely feel it.

I'm way too concerned about my discovery.

Coach brings his fist to me yet again, but this time he's held back by the team members and Max, the owner of the restaurant, who has appeared out of nowhere.

"I respect you and all, Coach," he says in a raspy voice. "But I'd appreciate it if you took it outside."

Coach looks at him, panting hard, bloody murder in his eyes. But I'm barely paying attention. I turn around to look for Ivy. Dave is with her now, screaming at her as he yanks her out of her seat and attempts to drag her out of the restaurant. Ivy is resisting, but she's way too weak for her brother.

I quell the urge to go to her. Half of the town is here, after all, staring at us like we're putting on the most exciting show of the year.

"How?" Coach says now, actual tears in his eyes. "How *could you?*"

I feel my heart burn with guilt. I've never felt more like a dick than in this moment. I understand Coach's anger, and more importantly, his hurt. I've betrayed him, maybe more than anyone he's put his trust in for a while. He has treated me like a son all this time, and I repaid him by screwing his daughter.

"I'm sorry," I mutter. I want to explain everything, but *this* is not the time to do that. Hell, I can't go on a tirade about how I thought it would be a good idea to seduce his daughter, but along the line, I'd ended up falling in love with her.

In love. Even with the circumstances, a thrill runs through me as I acknowledge the depths of my feelings for Ivy for the first time.

He stares at me, his eyes red with anger and hurt. "I can't believe this," he mutters more to himself than me.

I glance around at the people around him—my teammates. They're still restraining him, on edge to prevent him from punching me again, but I can tell they're on the coach's side.

And hell, I don't blame them.

"You had all the girls in the world," he says, sounding like the anger is seeping out of him. "You didn't need to put a baby in my *teenage* daughter."

I was wrong. *This* is when I feel more like a dick than ever.

I want to say something, but there's nothing to say.

Not from me at least.

Because, from the corner of my eyes, I watch as Ivy breaks free of Dave's grip and marches up to her father, more passion in her eyes than I've ever seen before.

"I need to talk to you," she says to him, ignoring the dozens of eyes staring at us.

Coach turns to look at her, and the pain in his eyes multiplies. He doesn't seem to even notice that we're in the center of a hushed crowd.

"Is it true?" he asks, sounding broken. "Did he have sex with you?"

"No," she says, and I hear a tiny gasp from the crowd. I turn to stare at her, but Ivy has eyes for only her father. "I had sex with *him*. Because I wanted to. And..."

But Dave cuts her short. Reaching forward, he grips her by the arm so tightly his fingers leave dents on her skin. He yanks her to him, ignoring her yell of protest.

I take a step toward him, but Mark steps in front of me.

"Fuck you," Dave spits at me. "Fuck you, really."

Then he drags Ivy out of the restaurant, the eyes of everyone on them.

The coach barely seems to register their departure. He turns to me. "I don't believe this," he mutters now, looking at me. "I don't believe *you* would do this to me."

I feel more like a dick as I mutter the words again. “I’m really sorry, Coach.”

He stares at me for a few minutes, a cryptic smile on his face. He lets the silence linger on for a few moments before he says, “I’m sorry too.”

I stare at him, a feeling of doom enveloping me at his words.

“Hernandez clearly stated he didn’t want any more scandals,” he says, the tiny sad smile still on his face. “But this is way more than a scandal. This is a *betrayal*.”

He buries his face in his palms and lets out a sigh of resolve. When he looks up at me, he looks more collected than he has been in a while.

“You’re kicked off the team,” he says. “For good.”

He turns and marches out of the restaurant. I stand there, numbness spreading through me.

I’m no longer on the team. Everything I’d spent the last six years preparing for is over now. I am done with football.

I watch as my team members—former team members—silently turn and walk out after the coach. The restaurant is deathly silent as the door closes after them, and I’m left in a crowd of college kids staring at me like I’m the devil himself.

And in a way, I have. I’m no longer Zach Anderson, the captain of the football team with huge prospects ahead of him. I’m now a regular community college student. But even worse, I literally have no idea what to do with my life.

Still feeling dazed with numbness, I push through the crowd and make my way to the door, feeling the eyes of everyone on me. Ironically, this is the one time I don’t feel even the slightest tinge to have a crowd focused on me.

Ivy had helped me get rid of that anxiety... mere days before I lost her. Her *and* every single good thing I had in my life.

I’m moments from the door when Pam finally slides up to me. I stare at her, realizing that the anger I thought I would

feel toward her is non-existent. The secret was going to blow up in our faces soon enough anyway.

What I didn't count on was for it to come with the news that Ivy is pregnant.

She leans forward to open the door, before she slides back and lets me pass. I walk through, not bothering to say anything to her.

“You did tell me to do my worst,” she says sweetly, before the door bangs shut behind me.

CHAPTER 26



IVY

Dave kicks the door to our house open and throws me in. *Literally* throws me in. I fly through the air and head straight for the ground. I stretch out my hands to break my fall, and I end up landing painfully on my palms.

But before the wave of pain completely washes over me, Dave is standing right over me, yanking me up to my feet.

“What the fuck were you doing, whoring yourself out to Zach? I *fucking knew* there was something going on between you and him. I fucking knew it.”

I stare at him, too angry to even feel the tears running down my face. “Shut up, Dave,” I spit, hearing my voice tremble with anger. “Shut up.”

He looks at me as if I’ve gone mad. “What the fuck did you just say to me?”

I stand my ground, meeting his gaze with mine. “I told you to shut up. You can’t go around telling me to rebel against Dad the way you have been doing for years and call me a whore for doing precisely what you’re doing.”

He punches the air between us. “Are you crazy?” he snarls. “You didn’t just have sex. You had sex with Zach and got pregnant. You *ruined* his future.”

I open my mouth to respond, but my dad storms in then. He looks as shattered as he did in the restaurant, but there is an added emotion: rage.

“I can’t believe you did this,” he muttered, his fists balled. “I can’t believe *you* did this. I tried my best to do everything right, and do everything by you. I gave you all you could ever want.”

Dave gives a tiny grin. “Yeah,” he says. “Can’t believe you’ve been on my neck these past few years on being a *good* child. But your perfect child was whoring around and letting herself get screwed by the captain of your team.”

My dad stares at him as if he can’t believe what Dave just said. And out of nowhere, he swings at him.

Maybe Dave had not been expecting it or something, but he doesn’t dodge, and the punch catches him right on the nose. He lets out a groan and slides backward, blood sprouting out of his nose.

I let out a yell of surprise. Dave had said a million terrible things in the past, and my dad had never—*never*—hurt him before.

My dad turns to me, and more tears run down my cheeks. I do not feel sorry for anything I did—except not telling Zach about our baby—but I did not want this to happen. I did not want to destroy all of Zach’s prospects and ruin my family. All I’d wanted was to date Zach in secret until we were both far away from this town and could do it in public. I was fine with that.

But in less than an hour, everything changed.

I wait for my dad to say something—anything—but he doesn’t. He just stares at me, looking completely broken. Sadness pierces my soul. I hurt him.

The only thing I can do now is to offer an explanation.

“I was going to tell you Zach and I were dating after he left Sundale,” I tell him, wiping the tears clean from my face. “I didn’t want this to happen like this. I didn’t want you to find out like this.”

Dave scoffs, and I glance at him. He’s holding a palm to his bloodied face, but his eyes are filled with amusement.

“*Dating*,” he says, his voice sounding awkward because of his nose. “You’re out of your mind. Zach was going to go on to UCLA and probably end up in the first round of drafts in the NFL. You’re fucking crazy if you think he wanted anything other than to screw you.”

His words twist into my heart like a knife. *He has a point*, I think. I hate myself for thinking it, but I know I’m right. Zach had a bright future ahead of him. The prospect of our relationship continuing had been slim.

“But at least you have him all to yourself now, right?” he sneers. “He’s old news now. He has no team, no prospects. You can have him all to yourself. Exactly what you hoped for.”

I have never felt the urge to punch someone more than I wanted to punch Dave in that instant. “I never wanted this.”

“Really?” he says, sounding even more amused. “You didn’t tell Pam all about it because you know how much she loves to put on a spectacle for the crowd?”

I open my mouth to tell him I had no idea how Pam found out—the question still worries me right now—but my dad speaks first.

“I talked to Pam on the way over,” he says in a monotone. “One of her friends caught you going to a clinic outside town.”

Of course, I think. I’d worried for weeks about having been seen by the cheerleaders. Now that I know I was right to be worried, I strangely feel calmer than ever.

Dave stares at me as if he can’t believe his eyes. “You... what?”

I take in a deep breath, ignoring him. I need to explain everything to my dad, at least.

“I was going to get an abortion,” I tell him. “I had one scheduled for tomorrow. I didn’t know Pam knew or that she was going to do this, but...”

I pause, unsure of how to phrase my next words. A lot of different emotions and thoughts are pushing themselves

around my brain, but one thought has pushed itself to the foremost position right now, and it's a thought I don't know how to articulate.

I don't want to get an abortion. I never really did.

I tried my hardest to find a place to do it, but all for the wrong reasons. I'd wanted to protect Zach, his career and his reputation. I was scared that if this came out, it would ruin him. It would also ruin the image my dad had of me in his head.

And it did.

But now that the secret is out, in the most humiliating and horrific way it could, I'm seeing things more clearly.

This baby means something. It is a symbol of my love for Zach, of the few precious months we spent together.

I do not want to let that go.

And so, I look up at my dad's lined face and phrase my thoughts better. "I was going to get an abortion before you all found out, but I'm not going to anymore."

Dave lets out a sound of astonishment. But I stare at my father, wanting to hear what he has to say.

He pushes himself forward, grabs me with a pincer-like grip that hurts twice as much as Dave's did, and pulls me to him.

"Over my dead body," he spits in my face.

"What?"

He looks at me, his face contorted with a venom that I had never seen before. "I absolutely forbid you to keep that bastard."

I gaze at him, half-convinced I didn't hear him right.

"You will get that abortion," he says. "Pam has succeeded in branding you as the town whore. That is what they'll all see when they look at you—the girl that got herself pregnant and ruined Zach Anderson's career. I won't let you add another layer to the rumors by tramping around this town with his

child. Right now, it'll take months for you to show your face around town. If you have this baby, not only will you *never* show your face around town again, but you'll also lose your dignity. You'll become the town whore *and* the town pariah. I won't be able to do as much as go to work without hearing whispers about your illicit child behind me the moment I leave."

Dave calling me a whore was one thing, but hearing my dad use the same word hurt *really* hurt.

Tears burn in my eyes as I stare at him. He stares venomously back.

Everything becomes clear in that exact moment.

My dad never really loved me. He loved the *image* he knew of me; the perfect daughter with a perfect reputation. He had "forgiven" my secret YouTube channel because while I had lied to him, I'd not done anything out of the ordinary. I'd merely rebelled a little, but I was doing a technically respectable thing. He couldn't get mad about that, at least not for long.

But *this* mistake was unforgivable, one that publicly broadcasts and ruins the image the town had of him. He does not give a fig about my feelings, my wants, or even the baby growing inside me.

All he cares about is his reputation.

I've never wished for my mother more than in that instant. *Or* been more certain than ever that keeping my baby was the right thing to do.

I try to release myself from his grip, but he holds on even tighter, and a moan of hurt wrenches itself out of me.

My dad doesn't seem to notice. He pulls me even closer, his eyes inches from mine.

"Did you hear me?" he asks, his tone icily cold. "*We* are going to keep your appointment with the clinic tomorrow. With any luck, people will move on from the debacle at Max's and some people will even be convinced that you never even had sex with him."

Pain burrows even deeper into my heart. I've spent my entire life, save the past few months, following diligently in my dad's footsteps. I'd done everything he had ever asked me to do.

I had no idea I'd merely been creating the slightly-tolerable version of myself for him, the one that he could accept, because I was a girl who was no good at football.

All I want to do is yank myself away and tell him I'm going to do whatever I want, but something stills me.

Zach.

My dad is the only person with the power to restore Zach's position in his team. I don't want to have my baby at the expense of Zach losing every single thing he wants for himself.

I close my eyes, and more tears flow down my cheeks. As much as I want the baby, I'll let go of it, if...

I open my eyes. "I'll do it," I say, and my dad lets out a small breath as his grip on my arm relaxes slightly. "*If* you reinstate Zach on the team."

Dave lets out an unbelieving snort, but my dad doesn't even turn around. His grip tightens around me once more, and I force myself to not wince.

"That will *never* happen," he says. "*Never*. He had sex with my daughter and betrayed me. He put a baby in you and ruined the family's reputation. I'll die before he goes scot-free."

I barely recognize him underneath all the hatred. His words cave out a deeper hole in my chest, but I feel slight relief as well. I don't have to give up my baby.

With a grunt and a strong pull, I wrench myself free of his grasp. My skin immediately starts to bruise from the tension, but I ignore the pain and step backward, away from his grasp.

"Then I'm going to keep my baby," I say. "And there's nothing you can do about it."

He looks at me as if I've just stuck a knife to him. I understand his disbelief. This is the first time I've ever said no

to him.

I catch a movement from the corner of my eyes and turn to see Dave moving forward to stand with our dad. “You wouldn’t dare,” he says, the corner of his lip turned upward in a sneer.

My hands ball into fists. I’ve gone through a million emotions over the past few hours, but I’ve not felt one as powerful as the rage that’s now pounding through every cell in my body.

I look at Dave and say the words I’ve wanted to say for so long. “Fuck you.”

He actually staggers, like I pushed him backward. “The fuck did you just say, whore?” he says, taking two steps closer to me.

My dad makes a sudden movement, but he doesn’t try to protect me from Dave or punish him for calling me a whore. He only punched him before because Dave had insulted his intellect as well, I realize.

But I hardly care. Neither of them have the power to upset me anymore.

“Fuck you, asshole,” I tell him. The words are burning in my throat and I let them spill the way I’ve wanted to for years. “Dad has treated you better than me all of these years because you like football and he thinks you’re going to be an NFL legacy. Well, *he’s* wrong. You’re nothing but a drunken, bitter piece-of-shit who won’t get as much as one football scholarship because all you want to do is rebel against Dad.”

Dave is trembling with anger, and he takes another step toward me. I brace myself to get hit by him, but this time, our dad steps in.

“Stop,” he says. His gaze is still on me, and his expression has not lost even a bit of its venom.

Dave stills, but his fingers are still trembling.

“You’re *going* to get an abortion,” my dad says now, his voice quiet and calm. “As long as you live under this roof,

you'll obey my rules, or..."

"Or what, *Coach*?"

I see a shadow of surprise dawn on his face, but it leaves rather quickly as well.

"Or you're no longer welcome underneath my roof," he says.

Tears prick my eyes again, but I wipe them away as quickly as I can. I'm done crying.

I glance around the living room, the mismatched furniture and barred windows. This place had been my home for the last nineteen years, but it had also been my prison.

"I'm not the girl you want anyway," I tell him, my voice as silent as his. "I'm not the perfectly shy little girl turned pro swimmer athlete that you desperately want in your life. I'll never be a football-loving disappointment like Dave..." Dave takes a step forward, but my dad stills him again. "I'm sorry it took you so long to realize that." I pause, and tears sting my eyes again. "I'm sorry it took *me* so long to realize that and to tell you that. My reputation in this town might mean a lot to you, just as *yours* used to mean to me. But I'm done. I don't have to live by your rules anymore. I'm not going to."

For once, Dave doesn't look amused or angered. He looks confused.

"You can't *leave* here," he snarls, as though he's certain I'm out of my mind. "Where the hell are you going to go?"

"Anywhere I want," I say, wiping my eyes clean again. "Because I'm not going to let either of you bully me into killing my baby." Right now, my unborn baby is the only family I have who is going to love me for me.

"You can't go *anywhere you want*," my dad says, and I can see by the glint in his eyes he thinks I'm bluffing. He thinks he still owns me.

"Actually, I can," I tell him. "I have close to half a million subscribers and I have thousands of dollars saved. I've had the power to leave you—and this town—for a while now. But

dumbly, I chose to hide that part of myself to please you. Thank god I no longer have to. I'm done."

I wait for either of them to say something, but they don't. They both look completely gobsmacked.

I turn around and head up the stairs to get my stuff.

I'm following Zach's advice. I am no longer living my life according to my father's wishes.

CHAPTER 27



ZACH

Great. Just what I needed.

I stay mute as I climb down the rest of the stairs and head toward the dining table, hating the way my parents and Rosa's eyes follow me with each step. None of them looks particularly pissed off about what happened.

Honestly, I'd have deserved it if they did—especially for my parents. They'd let me explore my own path since we arrived at Sundale, and I'd repaid them by being the center of the biggest scandal that had plagued the town in decades.

But they don't seem mad. The only look in their eyes is concern, and *that* makes me wish for their anger. I don't want them looking at me like I'm a fragile thing about to fall apart, the way they had looked at me after the pool incident.

Even though I am *definitely* about to fall apart.

I slide into my seat at the dining table, between my dad and Rosa.

"Hi," my dad says, peering at me like he's trying to remember details of my face. "You good?"

I shrug and pick up my fork. The faster I eat, the faster I can return to my room and stare at the ceiling the way I've been doing for the past five days.

"Bold choice, not showering today," my mother says. "Or throughout this week."

I know she's trying to make a joke, but all I can muster is a scowl.

My mom lets out a tired sigh, and I see her exchange glances with my dad from the corner of my eyes.

"Really, Zach," she says. "Talk to us."

I look up. All of them are staring at me again, including Rosa.

"What's there to say?" I ask, unable to keep the edge out of my voice. "I was kicked off the team. I don't know whether I'm ever going to go off to college. And, oh, my pregnant girlfriend left home without so much as a word."

I feel a ball in my throat. I've been slammed by a lot of bad luck recently, but I have to admit that the last one really hurts. A lot. Everything I know about Ivy's departure I'd learned from Rosa, who had seen her leaving and had the chance to give her one last hug.

The thought that Ivy is somewhere out there with our baby growing in her is almost unbearable. But I like to focus on her. Because, if I don't focus on Ivy, I'll have to focus on more unchangeable things, like the fact that with one sentence, Coach wiped out my future in football.

My dad appears to read my mind. "I've been going to Coach Collins' office every day. He rarely comes in but I've seen him a couple of times. He refuses to take back your suspension. But I believe that with time..."

"It's fine, Dad," I tell him, not wanting to hear the shred of hope in his voice. "I'll get over it, somehow."

"No, you won't," my mom suddenly says, her voice high.

I'm surprised to see tears in her eyes. "Mom," I say, dropping my fork. "It's fine. I'll live."

"No," she says, even more staunchly than before. She blinks and I watch, astonished, as a tear runs down her cheek. She holds my gaze with hers, not bothering to wipe it off. "I've seen this before, Zach. I remember the sweet, happy kid you were at Long Island. And then those horrible kids did that

awful thing to you and you shut yourself off. *Forever*. You don't have friends anymore. You have one-night stands and buddies. You never even talk to *us*. We let you run around playing football because we thought you found your happiness there and we were glad to see you happy, even though it was on the field. And now you've lost that. And you lost Ivy. You're never going to recover from this."

She gives a small sob then, and my dad stands up and goes around to her. I stare at the both of them, the numbness I've been feeling for the past few days giving way to shock. I would've never guessed that my parents had noticed a change in me since the pool incident. They'd never brought it up since we moved to Sundale.

"I'm sorry," I mutter, because it makes my heart fold to see my mom cry. She is right. I never speak to them anymore. I don't know how to. I've changed from the son they knew into another person entirely.

"There's nothing for you to be sorry about," my dad says, handing my mom a napkin.

I feel my throat tighten again. It's hard to talk to my parents after so long, and even harder to talk about embarrassing details. "Yes, there is," I manage to say. "I embarrassed you in front of the town. I ruined my chance to play football professionally."

"You think I give a fuck about that?" my dad asks, his voice a little higher. "It doesn't matter whether you choose to play football or not. For all I care, don't go off to college. And hell will boil over before we start caring more about petty gossip than our son's happiness..."

"Dad!" Rosa perks up from her seat. "You said a bad word!"

"Yeah," my dad says nonchalantly. "Go and get a cookie from the cookie jar or something."

She hurries toward the cookie counter, and I feel a smile tug at my lips. I remember growing up with my parents and

being the child who waited for my parents to curse so I'd be rewarded.

My heart burns with pain and longing. My bullies made me into the person I am now. I started to play football because I wanted to be a part of the clique that never got bullied. I stayed away from my family all these years because I was too ashamed to face them.

Doctor Glover was right. Bullies have the power to take a lot from you even after years have passed.

"We just want you to be happy," my mom says, sniffing a little. "And we will knock on the coach's office every day for a year if we have to, if it means he'll let you back into the team. But I can't bear the thought of you digging yourself into your shell even deeper, and you..."

She breaks off again, wiping at her eyes. Rosa comes back to the table now, holding her prized cookie.

"What do you want?" she asks me out of nowhere.

My dad frowns at her. "Rosa, this is a conversation for grown-ups."

She ignores him and stares directly at me. "What do you think will make you happy, Zach? Maybe if you know the answer, then Mom can give that to you and she'll no longer be sad."

Another smile comes, along with my numbness fast departing. It feels good to not have to carry the burden of shame anymore.

So, I close my eyes and think for a moment.

I lost several things in one day, but there is only one of those things that I'd not introduced into my life because I was terrified of being bullied again.

The answer comes quickly.

"Ivy," I say.

My mom looks almost hopeful. "Are you sure?"

I think for a moment. “Yes,” I say, meaning it with all my heart. Right now, the only key to my happiness is making things right with Ivy. And the thought of being with Ivy as we took care of our baby is the best thing I can hope for.

Worry dims a bit of that hope, though.

“I have no idea where she is,” I say. “And I don’t think her dad knows either. She changed her numbers and vanished into thin air.”

“Explains why he’s so bitter,” my dad mutters, and my mom slaps him on the arm in reproach.

A lightness fills my chest, along with a tinge of sadness. I can’t believe I’ve missed out on talking to my family for eight years because of Tommy fucking Kravitz.

Not anymore, I promise myself.

“I know where she is,” Rosa says.

I turn to her, my heart missing a painful beat. “Are you serious?” I ask, not daring to hope.

“Yes,” Rosa says, her attention divided between me and her cookie. “She said she was going to stay in a motel outside town while she figured out what city she wanted to go to next.”

Relief envelopes me, but I can’t help but glare at Rosa. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, you didn’t ask.”

My parents let out a chuckle in unison, and I send a frown in their direction as well. But my feeling of relief is spreading, mixing with joy as it pushes itself through all the areas in my body.

Ivy is somewhere out of town. And I am going to search every motel if I have to.

“I’m going to try to get in touch with her tomorrow,” I tell my parents.

My dad sighs in relief and my mother grins. She stands up, comes around the table, and envelopes me in a hug.

I hug her back, feeling better than I have in a long time. Even if football is no longer an option for me, there are other things in my life.

I need to remember that.

My mom returns to her place on the table. We eat dinner quickly and silently, and I bask in emotions that I'd long forgotten existed. The night has been surprising, but in the best of ways.

When I get upstairs, I find another surprise.

Three missed calls from an unknown number.

CHAPTER 28



IVY

When I stride into the retail store closest to my motel, I hear the whispers every time I pass by a bunch of people. It refreshes me how much I don't give a fuck.

But I find myself wondering *why* they're whispering. Because of the pregnancy scandal, or because they were one of the million people who had watched the face reveal video I'd uploaded less than twenty-four hours ago? It could be as a result of the scandal, even though I'm surprised they remember me.

The first thing I'd done when I left my dad's house was to buy clothes that I *wanted* to wear. I'd not packed any of the overalls and I'd left my glasses behind. Now, in a pair of skinny jeans and a crop top, I feel more like the young adult I am.

I reach for a bar of soap and add it to my shopping cart, feeling thankful that I will not endure the whispering for much longer. This is the last thing I need to do before I order an Uber to the airport and catch my plane to California, the state Zach was supposed to...

"Oh my God, Ivy!"

I turn around, and my jaw drops to the ground. It's Pam, in the flesh, wearing her cheerleading uniform and grinning at me like we're best buddies. She moves toward me, her arms outstretched.

I back away. I'd used the past week to let go of all of the negative emotions I had for the people in my hometown,

including my family and Pam. Still, seeing her brings those emotions reeling back again. “What the hell do you want?”

She doesn't appear flustered by my cold tone. Still, I catch an evil glint in her eyes, something that tells me she's still very much basking in the glory of her reveal.

“How's it going?” she asks. “You're moving out of Sundale, aren't you?”

I quell the urge to punch her in the face. Instead, I try to focus on how stupid I was, ever thinking I was nothing compared to Pam, and how I let her fuel my insecurities for so long.

The thought brings a smile to my face, and my body drains of anger. “Yes,” I say. The faster I answer her, the faster she will leave. “Moving to California to grow my YouTube channel even more. You should subscribe.”

Her smile dips a little, but she flashes it once more, her evil glint becoming brighter. “Really? You're moving... *alone*?” She throws an obvious glance at my belly. “What—no Zach?”

I flash back a smile in return. I'd expected that.

“What—no dignity?” I reply. Her smile slides off her face, but I'm not quite done. “Pam, I'm moving out of this small sad town with small sad people like yourself. I'm going to build my career and grow tremendously there while you're hopping around town thinking wearing your cheerleader outfits everywhere makes you look cool.”

I let out a small breath, feeling flush with victory. I'd once thought that I didn't know how to speak the mean girl lingo.

Turns out it was pretty easy to learn.

I raise my brows as Pam positively starts to snarl at me. She opens her mouth to say something, but someone gets there first.

“Damn.”

I let out a gasp. Zach has appeared right behind Pam. He has a tired smile on his face, but he looks like he's lost fifty

pounds and aged five years since I last saw him.

“Zach,” I mutter, tears springing to my eyes. It’s hard to believe that it *is* him. I’d spent the past week trying hard to not think about him and everything I did to him. But he’s here right now, staring at me like I’m the most precious thing in the world.

He walks toward me, looking past Pam like she’s a statue. He takes my hand in his, and I almost collapse in his arms, right then and there.

“Love the new look,” he says. “And the new attitude.”

“Zach,” I say again, choking back both a laugh and a sob. I have a million things to say but no idea how to start.

But Zach interrupts me. “Let me go first,” he says, squeezing my hand gently. “I’m sorry.”

I stare at him. Is he out of his mind? “You’re sorry?” I squeak. “*I* should be sorry. I didn’t tell you about the pregnancy.” From the corner of my eyes, I can see that Pam, still snarling, is not the only spectator. Other people have gathered to watch us.

But Zach doesn’t seem to mind. “Yes, because you were protecting me,” he says. “I kind of figured that one out. But I’m sorry you thought that my football career was more important than you are, Ivy, because you’re wrong. Nothing beats the place you have in my heart. You *and* our baby. And I would love to spend the rest of my life proving that to you.”

I can’t help the tears flowing down my cheeks now. My heart is melting into a puddle, and I’m too choked up to speak, but somehow, I manage to. “I love you,” I mutter. “But I can’t live with myself knowing that you gave up everything for me.”

“You *are* everything,” he corrects, and my heart melts even more. “Also, I didn’t give up football.”

I look up at him, shocked. “Are you back on the team?”

He smiles and shakes his head. “No, but I still have one scholarship offer standing.”

I stare at him, not believing my ears. “UCLA?”

He shakes his head again, and I feel my heart thrum with slight guilt. I had lost him the school he craved most.

“Duke,” he says, and my heart leaps up a little. Duke is a good school, even though it isn’t his first choice. “Your dad was right. He once told me that the Duke scout called him a hundred times about me. He called me twice as many times. He wants me on the team, and all I need to do is finish up with community college—and I’m done with finals. When I told him about the scandal, he laughed. Says the NFL is a place full of thrice as many scandals anyway.”

I hear myself scream with joy as I jump into his arms. Zach catches me, and we hug right there in the store, a dozen pairs of eyes on us. I see Pam’s eyes fill with angry tears before I close my eyes and let myself bask in the warmth of having Zach returned back to me.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get UCLA,” I mutter into his neck.

“I don’t care,” he mutters back. “Because all I want, all I *need*, is right here in my arms.”

Happy tears sting my eyes. I want to tell him “Same here,” but I’m too choked up, and I’m pretty certain he knows anyway.

EPILOGUE



Eighteen months later...

“Oh my God! Are you her? *Are you her?*”

A smile tugs on my lips. And goddamnit, even the act of smiling is hard for me, especially since I’m trying to push through hundreds of people on the crowded bleachers to find my seat while strapping Rosalyn to my chest with one hand and holding on to a basket of her lunch with the other.

“I’m her,” I tell the girl, a brunette in her mid-teens with eyes popping out of her head.

“Oh my God, *I love you,*” she says. Her cheeks go red instantly. “I’m sorry. I love your channel. I watch *all* your videos.”

I grin at her, feeling slightly less tired. “Thank you,” I tell her.

“My brother’s playing today,” she tells me. “I wouldn’t have expected to see you here. Why are *you* here?”

“Oh, well...” I say. “I kind of...”

But she cuts me short. “Your fiancé, isn’t it? The one you talk about? Oh my God! Is he here right now? Is he playing?”

“Ivy!” someone calls, and I feel a stab of relief as I turn around and see Zach’s mother, fighting through the crowd to get to me. She takes Rosalyn off my hands, and relief fills me as blood flows through my stiff arm.

“You look like she weighs a ton,” she says reproachfully. “She’s just one year old.”

“And she weighs a ton,” I say. I turn back to the teenager long enough to sign an autograph and thank her for being a fan before I follow Mrs. Anderson to our seats, where Mr. Anderson is currently looking through a pair of binoculars at the field and Rosa is hopping up and down, desperate to see us.

She squeals and makes a beeline for us when we appear. I hold out my hand for her, but she merely pulls Rosalyn away from her mother.

“Ouch,” I say.

Mrs. Anderson chuckles. “Children take everything away, don’t they?”

I laugh, reaching for my pair of binoculars and scouring the field. A thrill of anticipation zaps through me, even though the field is bare now. Still, this is Zach’s first match since starting at Duke, and I am eager to see him play.

“You’ll think the one place you’ll not run into your fans is at a college football match,” Zach’s mother says.

I grin at her. “Yeah, they’re everywhere.” Over the past eighteen months, my followers had grown by a million, and I was always meeting them when I stepped out. A few of them had suggested I opened a lifestyle vlog about Rosalyn and Zach, something I was still mulling over as a second source of income.

Mrs. Anderson turns to gaze at me, a worried smile on her face as she says, “I ran into your dad the other day.”

My heart misses a beat, but other than that, I feel nothing. Not even loss. Mrs. Anderson has been bringing him up more frequently than usual. Thanks to her, I know a lot of things—that Dave has really not been given a football scholarship and is still mulling his options, that my dad’s pride seems to have waned with time, and that he really wants to see me.

“He asked me to give him your new number. I said I’d ask.”

I take a deep breath. Everything that happened had taken place a while ago, but I could still remember him ordering me to abort my baby or leave his home. I don't want to hold on to those negative memories. Not forever, anyway. But I'm never going to forget and I'm not quite ready yet to forgive.

"I'll consider it," I promise.

I don't say much more. Because the Duke team is running out onto the field now and I stand up and cheer as loudly as I can for Zach, along with the rest of his family.

It's time to watch my fiancé kick some ass.

The End.