



*Sweet*

# HEARTBREAK

BOOK ONE ~ WEYBRIDGE ACADEMY

ALEXANDRA MOODY

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**HEARTBREAK**

ALEXANDRA MOODY



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*For Archie*

## CHAPTER ONE

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There were two certainties about summer in Rapid Bay: the unbearable heat and the unbearably wealthy. Neither was particularly pleasant to deal with, but both were an unfortunate necessity for my mom's small beach café to survive. This summer was no exception, as the vacationing elite descended on our coastal town and briefly transformed our simple, sleepy home into a bustling hive of activity.

I'd spent most of the break helping my mom by working at the café. She'd never had the money to hire extra hands for the busy season, so I'd been chipping in since I was old enough to carry a tray of food. I usually quite enjoyed the madness of a busy day serving customers. The chaotic, frantic energy made the summer days pass by in a flash, but I couldn't say the same today. Today, it seemed nothing was going right.

"Oh, sweet heaven," Norma groaned. "That penny-pinching plastic panther is back."

I looked up from the stubborn stain on the counter I was cleaning. A woman had just entered the café with her husband and teenage son in tow. I immediately recognized them as they had eaten here several times this week already, and the woman's face was pumped so full of chemicals it was kind of hard to forget.

The father and son were dressed casually and looked ready for a day out on one of the expensive yachts docked at the marina. The woman appeared to have missed the memo though. Her sky-high wedges didn't look very seaworthy, and her fitted leather dress must have been sweltering in the heat.

She wore a broad-brimmed hat, even though she was indoors, and was holding the same striking panther's head handbag she'd been toting around all week.

It had only taken one encounter for Norma and me to realize these people were the worst type of vacationers who visited our town. The father and son ignored us entirely while the woman rarely made eye contact. She wasn't much taller than me but seemed to stand a little straighter and tilt her head up so she looked down her nose when she spoke to me. She slowly dragged out the words as if she thought I wouldn't understand otherwise. I might have been waiting tables for the summer, but I was at the top of my class at school and definitely smart enough to know a job didn't equal someone's worth. It didn't help my opinion of the family that they hadn't tipped us once.

"I think it's your turn, Isobel," Norma said as she hurried out back to the kitchen.

I turned to object, but she was already gone.

"Traitor," I hissed under my breath. Norma might have been in her sixties, but she sure was quick. She'd been working for my mom as a waitress for as long as I could remember, and she was as much a part of the café as the mismatched colored chairs or the seagrass lanterns that hung from the ceiling. She was practically family, which was probably why she felt no guilt fleeing difficult customers and leaving them to me.

"I need three coffees."

I turned to find the panther had arrived at the counter. The woman had barely acknowledged me. Instead, her eyes were fixated on the phone her manicured nails were tapping against. Her husband and son weren't much better. The man was loitering by the front door on a phone call, and the son was laughing at some video he was watching on his own phone. I was completely invisible to these people.

Despite the fact she wasn't looking at me, I gave the woman a warm smile. "If you'd like to take a seat, I can bring those right over to you."

The woman defied the Botox that froze her forehead to lift one eyebrow as she finally glanced up at me. “We won’t be eating today. It’s a million degrees in here. You can make those coffees to go.”

My cheeks flushed under her condescending gaze. She was looking at me as if it were my fault the air-conditioning was broken. It had needed replacing for a while, but Mom never had the money for that. All summer, the old girl had been coughing like she needed a good thump on the back. Usually, a well-aimed knock to the side of the box did the trick, and her droning mechanical purr would return, but no amount of force seemed to be working this morning. I really wished she hadn’t chosen the hottest morning of the summer to rasp her last dying breath.

The whole café was stifling, only made worse by the ovens and cooktops blazing in the kitchen. We had a few portable fans cranked up to their maximum power, but they were fighting a losing battle. They simply pushed the hot, humid air around the building without providing any relief. We’d only had a handful of customers all day, and like this woman, most of them had ordered their drinks to go.

“Sorry, yes, it’s a bit unpleasant in here at the moment as our air-conditioning is broken. I’ll grab those coffees for—”

I was interrupted as the teen son started to grumble. “Mom, this is ridiculous. I know this place is closer, but it’s like waiting in a furnace. Let’s just go to the Starbucks down the road.”

The woman gave a short exhale as she considered her son’s complaint. “Yes, dear, you’re probably right. If I wanted to go to a sauna, I’d book an appointment at the spa.” She placed a hand on his arm and started to guide him toward the door. “You can cancel that order,” she called over her shoulder to me, once again not bothering to look my way.

I slouched down on the counter as I watched them leave. They might not have been the nicest people, but at least they were customers. Something we were seriously lacking today.



“What happened?” Norma asked, conveniently returning as soon as the woman and her family were gone.

“Apparently, this panther isn’t a fan of the heat. She decided to go hunt down a coffee at the Starbucks instead.”

“Ah.” Norma nodded. “I don’t really blame them.”

“This heat really is getting ridiculous.” I wiped the back of my hand across my forehead.

Norma shrugged. She must have been struggling just as much as I was, but she gave no hint of being bothered by it. She wasn’t even slightly flushed; meanwhile, I was sweating like I’d just run a marathon. I had to wonder if Norma’s spitfire energy somehow combatted heat waves.

“Well, sugar, be grateful you won’t be here past lunch. Not with that big trip you’re going on—”

“Let’s not talk about the trip.” I rushed to cut her off. I was determined not to think about where I was headed after work today until I absolutely had to. I still had a couple of hours of my shift left, and I fully intended to make the most of the blissful remaining moments when I could pretend the trip wasn’t happening.

Norma tutted. “Denial isn’t going to make it go away.”

“I’m not in denial. I’d just rather live in the moment.”

“Sounds like denial to me.”

I chose to ignore her. “Anyway, getting back to this heat,” I said before she could continue to poke holes in the happy illusion I’d created for myself. “Surely, there’s something else we can do to get some cool air in here?”

“I think we’ve tried everything, but I could always head outside and do a rain dance?”

I might have laughed, but Norma looked dead serious. “Uh, maybe we use the rain dance as a last resort. We don’t want to ruin the last few days of everyone’s vacations.”

“Ah, that’s right, summer’s almost over. School starts next week, doesn’t it?”

“Don’t remind me,” I muttered. I normally didn’t mind the start of a new school year, and I’d always thought my senior year was going to be the best year of my life. But everything was different now.

“Perhaps you could take one last look at the air conditioner?” I suggested. I knew I was probably pushing the friendship, seeing as Norma had already tried to fix it several times this morning, but I wasn’t ready to give up just yet. If anyone could bring the air conditioner back to life, it was Norma. Almost everything in the café was a million years old, but she knew the tricks that got even our most stubborn appliances to work.

She shared a doubtful smile with me. “I have a feeling it’s not long for this world, sweetie.” Norma often had feelings about things and had been proclaiming for years she was a psychic. She was almost always wrong when it came to her predictions, but she was probably right about this. “But I suppose I could see if some more Norma love will do the trick.”

“Thank you!” I exclaimed. “Just maybe don’t throw a wrench at it this time.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Norma winked before heading out back. She was a firm believer in tough love when it came to getting appliances to work, so I imagined she was off to see if there was a baseball bat or something equally as sturdy she could use to bludgeon the machine.

There were only two customers in the café, so I made sure to cover their tables while Norma was gone. The place should have been full at this time of day, and I knew the lack of customers was really going to set my mom back. The café had been struggling ever since the new Starbucks opened down the road.

The familiar chime of the doorbell sounded, and although my ears perked up, I didn’t bother to glance at the door immediately. I expected to hear the chime sound again as the customer quickly realized it was so hot you could barely breathe in here and tried to backtrack as fast as possible.

It was only after several seconds had passed without the sound of a second ding that I looked up from the table I was wiping down. The rag in my hand dropped to the ground, and I drew in a ragged breath when I saw who had entered the café.

What on earth were *they* doing here?

I wanted to escape into the safety of the kitchen, but I couldn't seem to move as I watched my ex-boyfriend walk hand in hand across the room with the girl who used to be my best friend. Could this day get any worse?

Nina and Levi slid into one of the booths, laughing at something one of them had said. The sound sliced right through me and seemed to pierce my heart with unnerving accuracy. Neither of them had noticed me, but how could they when they seemed incapable of taking their eyes off each other? I couldn't understand how I'd found the room to be so hot only moments ago because suddenly my skin felt ice cold.

My eyes darted toward the back of the restaurant, desperately searching for Norma. Nina and Levi were the last people in the world I wanted to serve. The two of them had been cheating together for months before I found out. *Months*. And the only thing worse than their betrayal was the fact I'd lost both my boyfriend and my best friend on the same day. The last few weeks of the school year had been agony, and seeing them again only had me reliving the heartbreak all over.

By some miracle, I hadn't encountered them at all during the summer break. But that was set to change when school started next week. I thought I still had a few more days before I'd have to face them again, but it seemed today's bad luck was catching.

I looked for Norma one last time before I gave up hope of any rescue and forced myself over to their table. Each step felt a little heavier than the last, and even though I did my best to put on a brave face, it was impossible to stop my hands from shaking and ignore how my legs felt powerless beneath me. Sweat clung to the back of my neck and beaded at my brow—and for the first time today, it wasn't entirely caused by the heat.

I had no idea how I was going to survive my senior year.

When I arrived at Nina and Levi's booth, it took me a moment to gather my wits enough to speak. They looked perfect together, like some picture out of an Abercrombie catalog. I'd always felt out of place around them because they came from the wealthy side of town. There weren't many locals in Rapid Bay who could compare to the rich tourists who appeared every summer, but Nina's and Levi's families owned houses on the foreshore. They didn't have to worry about how their parents were going to make rent each month or how they would pay for them to go to college. Levi's parents even owned a few of the vacation homes on the beach that they rented out to our wealthy visitors.

As I looked at them together now, I realized just how laughable it was that Levi had ever been interested in me. I must have been a phase for him. Some kind of rebellious teenage moment when he'd decided to slum it with the girl who wore clothes from thrift shops and spent all her free time working at a café just so she and her mom could get by.

"What can I get you?" Somehow, I got the question out without my voice breaking, and I was able to keep my tone neutral, almost disinterested. My expression was just as bland, and I managed to prevent the pain from showing in my eyes. The last thing I wanted was for Nina and Levi to see how hard it was for me to face them. The only hint of my true emotions was the notepad that began to bend as I gripped it tightly in my hand.

"Oh, Isobel, I forgot you work here." Nina pretty much sang out the words in the condescending tone she so often used. I'd heard her throw it at other girls a million times before but never at me. I guessed that had all changed now I wasn't the one dating the star of the school's football team.

She looked me over in one quick, assessing glance. She'd always had a talent for making me feel self-conscious without saying a word, and today was no different. The slight twitch of her lips was enough to show she didn't approve of the black apron I was wearing over my jean shorts and work T-shirt. It

had the simple Beach Street Café logo printed across the front of it in blue-green lettering, and it was hardly offensive.

“How was your summer?” she asked. “I see your hair’s still allergic to the heat.”

I gave her a tight smile and resisted the urge to pat at the flyaway hairs I could feel frizzing about my face. I had both the luck and misfortune of inheriting my mom’s blonde and somewhat untamable locks. People always commented on how beautiful my natural curls were, but the compliments vanished when there was a lick of moisture in the air. Nina must have loved the fact she’d caught me on a bad hair day.

“My summer has been fine,” I replied, but it absolutely killed me to be even slightly cordial. “And my mom owns this place. I’ve worked here as long as you’ve known me.”

Nina tittered out a laugh and flicked her long brown ponytail over her shoulder before placing a hand against Levi’s chest. “Yes, of course, how silly of me. We’ve been away at Levi’s lake house all summer, so it must have slipped my mind.”

I clenched the notepad tighter. Just a few months ago, Levi had been trying to convince me to take time off from work so I could join him at his lake house. He had been upset I didn’t want to abandon my mom, and Nina knew it. There was nothing holding her back though, and she seemed more than happy to rub it in. I couldn’t understand how I’d been friends with her for so long.

I decided to focus on my ex-boyfriend’s face instead, but that didn’t make me feel much better. We’d dated for almost a year, but looking at him now was like staring at a stranger. There was no warmth in his eyes, and the smile he’d been giving Nina dropped as he looked up at me. His appraisal of me was cold and hard and left me feeling like I was nothing more than a waitress to him now.

It was clear he no longer loved me. He probably never had. I’d always wondered how the boy the whole town adored could possibly want someone like me, and I finally had my answer: he hadn’t.

“I’ll have a coffee,” Levi said, breaking our awkward stare-off. Even if I hated him, I was grateful he’d placed an order before Nina had a chance to keep shoving their relationship in my face.

“Me too,” Nina added. “With quinoa milk.”

Was that even a thing? I’d heard some pretty obscure coffee requests in my time, but this was a first. Nina had always drunk her coffee with low-fat milk, so I knew she was being difficult for the sake of it. She was probably hoping to force a reaction out of me, but I didn’t bite. I swallowed down my irritation before responding. “We don’t have quinoa milk.”

“Oh, really?” She looked thoroughly put out. “I guess I’ll just have water then. It’s so hot in here. Did you know that?”

“No, I hadn’t really noticed.” I forced out a smile. “I’ll be right back with your order.”

I walked from their table in a daze.

“Oh, sugar,” Norma said as I entered the kitchen. “I just saw who was out there. You should have come and got me when *those two* came in. You know I would have covered their table for you.”

I slowly nodded, feeling like I was waking from a bad dream. I’d somehow managed to get through my first encounter with Nina and Levi, but I still couldn’t bear the thought of facing them every day when school started next week.

“How am I going to do this?” I whispered to Norma. “How am I going to live with a whole year of this?”

I wasn’t sure I could handle it. Not when I was stuck at a school that worshiped the ground Levi walked on. Not when Nina had both stolen my boyfriend and made sure my other friends wanted nothing to do with me too. Why did high school have to suck so badly?

Norma rubbed my arm and gave me a sympathetic smile. “You made a lot of progress over the summer.”

“Did I?” It was hard to agree with her, but when I thought about how I’d felt at the start of the break, I knew she probably had a point. I’d barely been able to get out of bed, let alone crack a smile. I’d been like a zombie slowly dragging my feet through each day, but I was feeling a little more human now, and the days were a little less painful.

“You did.” She nodded. “And this year will fly by in a flash. You’ll be off at college before you know it, and it won’t be long before you’re a fancy doctor or a famous lawyer or something, and those two will be a distant memory.”

I let out a sigh and shook my head. “I’ve told you all summer I don’t want to go to college anymore.”

“Sure, you don’t.” She raised her eyebrows at me like she did every time I claimed I’d changed my mind about my future. I’d wanted to get out of Rapid Bay and go to college for as long as I could remember, but not anymore. College was the silly dream of a kid who didn’t realize just how much it would cost or how hard it was to get a scholarship. Besides, Mom needed my help at the café, and I knew I couldn’t abandon her.

“I’m serious,” I replied, as convincingly as I could. “I love it in Rapid Bay, so why would I ever leave?”

“Okay, honey, if you say so.” Norma’s expression had changed, and her eyes were now filled with concern.

I hated when she looked at me that way. Like I was too young to know what I wanted. Like she thought I was throwing my future away. Like I had a choice.

“Besides, I just want to concentrate on finishing high school right now,” I quickly added. The last thing I needed was another lecture about my future. I loved her to bits, but Norma was never afraid to tell me her honest opinion. And I got enough of that from my mom. “College is forever away, and anything could happen in the next year. Who knows, maybe I’ll even learn to stop my heart from shattering every time I see Nina and Levi together.”

“Oh, Isobel.” Norma gave me a sad smile. “You might not believe me, but sometimes the sweetest things in life flourish from the hardest. I have a feeling everything is going to be much better before you know it. You’ll see.”

“I hope so,” I murmured, but I wasn’t convinced. It was far more likely this was another of Norma’s doomed predictions.

“Do you want me to take over their table for you?”

“No, it’s okay. I need to do this.” It would have been so easy to agree, but I had to face Nina and Levi if I ever wanted to move on. Plus, I was far too stubborn to let them know they’d gotten to me.

“We can always spit in their coffee, if that will make you feel better?”

I laughed. “No, I have to believe much stronger karma than a bit of spit is coming their way.”

“That’s my girl,” Norma said. “But, if you change your mind, I have no problem getting in trouble with your mama for a little revenge. In fact, this might be the one time she’d be okay with it.”

“Thanks, Norma. I’ll keep that in mind.”

I took a deep breath before I headed back out onto the café floor and did my best to switch off my mind as I got back to work. My body seemed to move on autopilot as I did everything in my power to quell the surge of emotions trying to drag me under as I served them their drinks.

I wasn’t sure how I managed to survive the rest of their stay at the café—especially when it seemed Nina was going out of her way to paw at Levi whenever I was close by. It was a miracle I didn’t lose my composure, and I had to bite my tongue several times to stop myself from uttering the cutting remarks that so easily came to mind.

I thought the torture was finally over when the pair paid their bill, but as I headed down the hallway leading from the café to the kitchen, I heard my name being called out.

I stopped and turned to see Nina marching toward me.



“You’re not supposed to be back here,” I said as she stopped in front of me.

Nina shot me a strained smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “You never had a problem with me coming back here before.”

“Well, things were different back then.”

“Yes, I guess they were.”

I folded my arms over my chest, struggling to keep my cool. “Is there something I can help you with?”

The smile fell from her lips as she eyed me. “Look, I came here hoping to bury the hatchet between us before we start our senior year, but I don’t know how you expect me to do that when I saw the way you were looking at Levi. I just wanted to make sure you’re not going to try anything.”

“Excuse me?”

“He’s not your boyfriend anymore, Isobel, and it’s pretty rude that you were making eyes at him when I was sitting right there.”

“Are you serious?” I scoffed. “I wasn’t making eyes at him.”

If anything, I had been trying my hardest not to show how wounded I felt. The last thing I had on my mind was flirting with the guy who’d broken my heart.

Nina folded her arms over her chest, mirroring my stance as she stared me down. “You obviously were. It’s sad enough that you haven’t moved on from him, but it’s clear I’m going to have to spell things out to you. Levi doesn’t love you. He loves me. And I don’t want you getting any ideas once school starts.”

She was looking at me as though I was some evil mastermind who had spent all summer planning my revenge rather than licking my wounds.

“So, let me get this straight,” I said. “You steal my boyfriend, tell lies about me to all our friends, and, as if that’s not enough, you now feel the need to come and warn me not to do the same thing.” I shook my head, disgusted with her. “Is

that why you dragged Levi in here this morning? You must be feeling pretty insecure about things between the two of you if you felt the need to shove your relationship in my face and threaten me.”

“I’m not insecure about us.”

“Right.” I raised my hand in front of her as she opened her mouth to continue. “I’m sorry, Nina, but I don’t have time for this. I have to get back to work.” I took a step to leave but paused and looked over my shoulder. “If you’re already worried about your new boyfriend dumping you or cheating on you, then perhaps you should have a think about the kind of guy you’re dating. What’s that line? Oh yeah, once a cheater, always a cheater.”

I walked away before she had a chance to respond and could practically feel the wrath radiating off her as I left. Thankfully, she didn’t follow me for round two. Although I was certain she’d have something in store for me on Monday, right now, I didn’t care. That was Monday’s problem, and I had far more pressing issues to worry about. Like the fact that while Nina had been yelling at me, my shift had ended. And that trip I’d been trying not to think about? Well, I’d rather face my ex-boyfriend again.

## CHAPTER TWO

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I leaned against the office door as I pulled the grubby black apron from around my waist. My mom's head was lowered over her desk as she concentrated on various documents spread out before her. From the deep line between her eyebrows, I could tell they were bills and she was worrying about how to pay them. Rent for the premises had gone up yet again, which made the broken air conditioner an especially unwelcome expense. She couldn't afford to fix it, and she definitely couldn't afford a day like today without any customers. Not at the busiest time of year.

She looked tired. Not that Mom would ever admit it. Candice Grace was stubborn and determined. She could be falling asleep at her desk and still insist she was fresh as a daisy and keep working.

As I placed my apron on the table just inside the door, she glanced up from her stack of bills. "You're not ready," she said. "Why aren't you ready?"

"I got held up at the end of my shift. It'll only take me a minute to change."

"A minute? You don't have a minute! You're going to miss your bus..." Her voice was filled with an urgency I just didn't feel.

"Would that really be a bad thing?"

She folded her arms across her chest and lifted her eyebrows in response.

“Okay, okay. I’ll be quick.” I turned and dashed upstairs to our apartment. There was no time for me to shower or even run a brush through my hair. I simply changed out of my work T-shirt, threw on the first clean clothes I could find, and grabbed the backpack I’d packed the night before. It was probably a good thing I didn’t have time to contemplate what I was getting ready for. If I did, I doubted I’d be able to leave the apartment at all.

Mom was waiting for me in her car as I rushed back downstairs. The rusty old vehicle was considered ancient when she bought it ten years ago and, like the café’s air conditioner, it had been running on borrowed time for a while now.

“You didn’t do your hair,” Mom said as I jumped into the passenger seat. She let out a long sigh, and I could hear every ounce of her exhaustion in the breath. She needed a break from work. Even just a couple of days off would do her wonders. I knew she’d never take it though. Not when this place was the one love in her life other than me. She poured everything she had into it.

“Well, the choice was either do my hair or catch my bus. I figured you’d prefer the latter.”

Mom muttered something under her breath, but I didn’t catch it as she turned the key in the ignition and the car spluttered to life. I glanced out the window and up at the old Beach Street Café sign that hung over the entrance to the restaurant. I was only going to be gone for one weekend, but I knew I would miss everything about this place. From the faded blue-and-white-striped awning out front to the smell of bacon that infused every inch of the kitchen and restaurant each morning. I was even going to miss the early starts and the crazy customers.

As we pulled away from the curb, I slumped in my seat and turned my attention to the road ahead. Just a block away, a line of people was building up outside the newly opened Starbucks. My mom didn’t seem to notice though. Her eyes were fixed on the road, and her fingers were tapping against the steering wheel. She must have been just as anxious about today as I was.

“Have you got your bus ticket?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve got the cash I gave you to get a cab when you arrive?”

“Mom, you went over this a million times last night. I’ve got everything I need.”

She slowly nodded and then glanced at me. “How are you feeling?”

I shrugged and looked out the window. It was only now I’d had a minute to stop that the reality of where I was going was starting to sink in. I couldn’t deny it any longer.

“It’s understandable if you feel nervous...”

“I’m not nervous.” My conviction surprised me. I felt a lot of things about this trip, mainly anger, but my nerves seemed to have subsided somewhat. Facing Nina and Levi had been difficult, but I’d come through it. If I could handle them, maybe I could also handle *him*.

“But it would be completely natural if you were nervous,” my mom continued. “Talk to me.”

“You already know how I feel,” I told her. “You know I don’t want to do this. I don’t get why you think it’s such a good idea.”

“Isobel... you know why.”

“Do I? Because the last seventeen years of my life have been perfectly fine without Matthew LaFleur.” My skin bristled as I said his name out loud. *Matthew LaFleur*. It was a name I tended to avoid saying. One that had only been uttered a handful of times in our house over the years, but this past week, I’d been hearing it far too frequently.

“He’s your father,” Mom said. “You need to give him a chance.”

I sunk farther in my seat, crossing my arms over my chest. *Some father*. The man was a total stranger to me, and now I was being forced to travel to some town I’d never heard of so I

could meet him. I still couldn't understand why my mom was making me do this. She said it was because I was old enough now that I should know where I came from. But I was quite happy to leave that a mystery. The two of us had been perfectly fine without him in our lives so far. Why did she have to go and ruin things?

We stayed silent until Mom pulled up at the bus station. Despite my mad hurry to get ready, we'd arrived slightly early, and I still had a few minutes before my bus arrived.

"Isobel, before you go, there is something you should know about Matthew."

"Something? I know *nothing* about him, Mom. And I'm happy to keep it that way. The guy knocked you up then abandoned you. That's all I need to know."

She rarely talked about my father until recently and had only ever given me the most obscure explanations for why he wasn't in our life. As a kid, she'd told me he couldn't be with us because he lived in a different world. For years, I'd wondered where he might be, imagining he was a prince stuck in some faraway land. It didn't take long before I snapped out of the fairy tales and back to reality though. The reason he wasn't around was simple: he didn't want to be. So, it didn't matter where he was, as long as it was far away from us.

Mom had often said we were better off without him, and I'd accepted that a long time ago. I wasn't sure why she'd suddenly changed her mind or why she was so desperate for me to meet a man she'd kept from me my whole life. It didn't make any sense, but I didn't care. I just wanted to get it over with.

"You know it's not as simple as that," she said. "There were circumstances—"

"Circumstances? Mom, stop acting like he's not the bad guy."

She blew out a long breath. "Things with Matthew are just complicated. If anything, I'm the one you should be angry with."

“I don’t know why you’re suddenly defending him.” I honestly didn’t understand how my mom could possibly think she was the one in the wrong.

“Well...” My mom started to speak but then paused and let out another long breath. “Like I said, it’s complicated. I’m sorry, there’s just so much you don’t know about him...”

“Which is apparently why we have to meet. Do we need to talk about this now? I’ve got to catch my bus.”

“I just don’t want you to be surprised when you get there.”

“Has the guy got a second head?”

“No—”

“Is his skin a shade of *Avatar* blue?”

“Of course not.”

“Then I’m sure I won’t be surprised.”

“But—”

“Mom, like I’ve told you a million times this week, I’m just meeting this guy to make you happy and then I’m going to come home and go back to pretending I was an immaculate conception.”

“Isobel...” Her voice trailed off as my bus pulled up at the stop.

“I’ve got to go.” I opened the car door and climbed out, but when I turned to shut the door behind me, I was met with my mom’s sad eyes. I might have been angry about meeting my father, but it wasn’t fair to take it out on her. She’d only ever wanted what was best for me. I didn’t want to leave things this way.

“It’s going to be fine, Mom.” My voice had turned soft. “My expectations of the guy are about as low as you can get, but I’ll give him a chance. For you.”

She slowly nodded, but the sadness in her eyes didn’t dissipate. She looked like she wanted to cry, which only made me feel worse. I rarely got angry with my mom, and I hated

myself for being short with her. I climbed back into the car and reached across the center console to give her a hug.

“I’m sorry to put all this pressure on you, Isobel,” she said as she wrapped her arms around me. “I know it’s already been a tough year. But I promise everything is going to be okay.”

“I know,” I replied. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too.” She squeezed me tightly before pulling away and then flashed me a smile, but it didn’t quite seem to reach her eyes. “Call me when you get there, okay?”

“I will.”

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed and then nodded toward the bus. “You better get going.”

I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before hurrying from the car. The bus was making a steady rumbling chuff as it idled by the curb, and my stomach tied itself up in knots as I slowly made my way aboard. I rarely left Rapid Bay and had never embarked on a trip this big on my own. I kept trying to convince myself it was just the journey that had me on edge, but I knew that was only partially true.

I found a window seat toward the back, and as I peered outside, I saw my mom was still waiting in her car watching me. The concern in her eyes was clear even at a distance, and I wondered whether she was finding it hard because I was leaving or because of the man she knew was waiting for me at the other end of the journey.

I pressed my hand against the window, and she gave me a sad wave in return. I’d be back in a couple of days, so she really didn’t have to worry.

As the bus pulled away from the curb, I leaned back in my seat and stared out the window, watching Rapid Bay quickly disappear into the distance.

I’d told my mom I didn’t want to know my father—that I wasn’t interested in anything other than getting this meeting over and done with. But the longer I sat with my thoughts, the more anxious I became. I knew practically nothing about this man. We shared some DNA, but that was it. Matthew LaFleur



was a total mystery to me. Who was he? And why was it so important I meet him after all these years? I was about to find out whether I wanted to or not.

## CHAPTER THREE

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The bus ride was long and monotonous. I'd always thought there was something kind of romantic about traveling across the country by road, but clearly, I'd never covered any great distance by bus before. After sleeping curled up on a seat all night, my notions of romance were certainly gone. My clothes were crinkled, my mouth tasted like cotton wool, and there was a sore kink in my neck I couldn't stretch out.

I also had a distinctively pungent coffee stain down the middle of my shirt. Coffee had seemed like a great idea when we'd stopped to change buses this morning, but I'd made the mistake of not securing the lid to my cup properly. When I went to take a sip, the drink had spilled everywhere, ruining both my top and my backpack, which was placed at my feet. The drink had even soaked into the spare clothing I had packed. I should have counted myself lucky the coffee wasn't scalding hot, but it was hard to feel grateful when I was looking so disheveled and smelled like something that had fallen out of a garbage can. The universe was having a good laugh at my expense, I was sure of it.

By the time I finally reached the small town Matthew lived in, I was in a foul mood and even less emotionally prepared to meet my long-lost father than I had been when I left Rapid Bay. I didn't want to like anything about the place he called home, but it was hard not to appreciate just how pretty it was. Tall, leafy trees lined the main street through the town, which was made up of gorgeous old redbrick buildings. The place was quaint and picturesque, like something out of a postcard.

It was nothing like the beachside town I'd come from, but this place had a different kind of charm to it.

When the bus finally pulled to a stop, I rose from my seat and stretched my arms over my head. Every part of me felt tight from the journey, and I was in desperate need of some fresh air. I hurried along the aisle, down the steps, and off the bus as fast as my tired body could move. As I stepped onto the sidewalk, I came face-to-face with an elaborately decorated sign surrounded by stunningly bright and painstakingly manicured flowers of all colors.

"Welcome to Weybridge." I read it aloud before scanning the rest of my surroundings. Behind the welcome sign was a large garden square full of greenery bordered by an ornate black fence. I must have been in the center of town because there were stores and cafés lining the streets on either side of the park.

The buildings were old and elegant, and the clothes stores looked high-end. Even the nearest café, which was a few doors down, looked expensive and classy. All the cars parked along the street were sleek and sporty, and the bright morning sun was blinding as it bounced off their pristinely waxed surfaces. I felt like I'd stepped off the bus and onto a movie set, where there wasn't a blade of grass, brick, or building out of place. I was a long way from Rapid Bay, that was for sure.

As I headed over to the nearby taxi stand, I fished around in my backpack for the piece of paper my mom had given me with Matthew's address written on it. There was a slight coffee mark on the corner of the paper, which reminded me how messy I looked. I pulled at the edge of my top in a useless attempt to straighten it out. Not that it would have made any difference given the stain running down the center of it. I couldn't have looked more out of place in this town if I'd tried.

"Where to?" the taxi driver asked as I hopped in the back seat of the lone cab waiting at the stand. The woman was a little older than my mom, and she gave me a kind smile when she spotted the stain on my top. "Get into a fight with your latte this morning?"

“Yeah.” I laughed. “I guess I lost.”

“Happens to me all the time. I’m about as clumsy as they come,” she replied, but I got the impression she was just being nice.

“So, where can I take you?”

“Uh...” I glanced down at the paper in my hand and rattled off the address.

The woman’s eyes lit with recognition. “Ah, that’s the mayor’s house. Well, it’s not anymore, I suppose. He sold it just last week.” She took off from the curb, but her attention was more on me in the rearview mirror than on the road. “Do you know who bought it?”

“No, I’m just meeting someone there,” I said. It would have been a lie to tell her I knew Matthew when I’d never even spoken a word to the man. Also, it seemed unlikely he would have just bought the house. Maybe someone else lived there.

“Well, everyone in town has been dying to find out who’s moving in. I heard the mayor got an offer for the place that he couldn’t refuse and sold within days. Apparently, the buyer offered him a bundle more to get him out of there immediately and to leave it exactly as it came—all the furniture and everything. It’s all anyone around here’s been talking about.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I got the feeling this woman liked to talk, and it seemed she didn’t need any encouragement to continue.

“Jeffery, that’s the mayor, has been fending off buyers for that house for years,” she said. “I’m surprised he was finally convinced to sell. He’s always been very passionate about preserving the history of this town, and that house has been passed down in his family for generations. I thought he’d rather die than see such an important part of Weybridge’s heritage end up in someone else’s hands.”

It seemed like she’d forgotten I was in the car as she talked. The words streamed out of her mouth as though she was speaking to herself rather than a passenger.

“My guess is that it was bought by one of the families of the kids that go to school here. They’ve all got more money than sense...” Her voice trailed off for a second, and her eyes nervously flicked toward me. “Not that I’ve got anything against the kids at the academy,” she quickly added. “Do you go there?”

“Oh, uh, no.” I had no idea what she was talking about.

She blew out a breath, and her shoulders relaxed. “No, didn’t think you did. You don’t really look like the type.” My gaze fell to my coffee-stained shirt, and I could only assume she was referring to my mess of an outfit. If I’d felt out of place in the town center, I imagined that meant I’d stick out like a sore thumb if I went to the town’s school.

The car started to slow, and my stomach dipped in response. I’d been so caught up in the woman’s chatter I’d forgotten I was about to meet my father.

“Well, here we are.”

My mouth dropped open as I looked out the window at the tall sliding gate that marked the entrance to the property. Through the gaps between the black iron bars, I could see glimpses of what looked like a sprawling mansion beyond. I’d only ever seen houses like this on TV or in movies. I didn’t actually think people lived in such places—let alone my father. Perhaps he worked here. It seemed impossible that he might be the person the driver was gossiping about.

I paid the fare and gave the woman my thanks as I jumped from the car. I was a ball of nerves as I made my way to the front gate. All week, I’d been trying my best not to think about meeting my father, but I couldn’t ignore it now. This moment had arrived too fast, and I didn’t feel at all ready for it.

I’d always assumed my father was some sort of lowlife, unable to support my mom and me and incapable of being a dad. This beautiful home didn’t match up with that image of the man at all though. As I stared at the gate before me, I wondered if perhaps it was us who hadn’t lived up to his standards. This house was clearly worth an eye-watering sum

of money. And if the taxi driver was to be believed, the recent buyer of the place sounded extremely wealthy.

It didn't make sense to think that my father might be so rich. Not when my mom had struggled financially for so many years. It was all I'd ever known. I'd assumed my father would be a disappointment, and my expectations of the man had been set seriously low. But now it seemed far more likely that I would be the disappointment. He was probably going to reject me the moment he laid eyes on my coffee-stained shirt.

I didn't want to care—I shouldn't care. But how would I feel if the man turned me out before we'd even exchanged a word? I wasn't sure, and the thought left a sour feeling in my stomach. I'd been so certain that I didn't want to know my father, but now I was worried I wouldn't be given a chance. How stupid was that?

The longer I stood there, the more I began to doubt myself. I needed to get this over with quickly, or I'd be heading back to Rapid Bay without meeting the man at all. And I had promised my mom. There was an intercom by the front gate, so I walked over and pressed the buzzer before I could chicken out.

“La Fleur residence.” A pompous voice came through the speaker.

My heart was in my throat as I replied. “Uh, hi. I'm Isobel Grace. I'm here to meet Matthew LaFleur.”

“Yes, come in, Miss Isobel.” The gate buzzed in response and slowly started to ease open.

“Thanks,” I told the intercom before starting up the drive. I probably should have had the cab driver take me all the way to the house, as it was a surprisingly long way, but I was somewhat glad to have the walk ahead of me and hoped it might take some of the edge off my growing nerves.

It took me a couple of minutes to reach the house, and I marveled at the beauty of the property as I made my way toward the impressive building looming up ahead. The sun came out from behind a cloud as I walked, casting dappled

light across the driveway and highlighting the deep green of the hedged gardens that lined the way. A soft breeze ruffled my hair, bringing with it the lightest scent of roses and freshly cut lawn. This place was like a hidden oasis; strikingly different from the salty heat I'd left behind at home.

The mansion only grew more striking as I drew closer. It was a gorgeous old redbrick building with lush green vines crawling over the face of the first two of the building's three levels. A large fountain stood proudly in the center of the circular driveway, and behind that was a wide set of stairs that led up to a majestic entrance accentuated by tall pillars.

A man waited for me by the imposing front doors. He was dressed in a black suit, his back was ramrod straight, and his chest was puffed out. His expression remained bland as I climbed the stairs toward him. My palms were sweating as I approached. He looked far too old to be my father, but my father's age was yet another fact about him I didn't know.

"Miss Isobel," the man said in greeting. His thick British accent matched the voice I'd heard over the intercom, and given the way he'd addressed me, I guessed he must be some kind of butler or doorman. My mom had a thing for *Downton Abbey*, and I'd watched it enough times to notice an uncanny resemblance between this guy and the butler on the show. But I was almost certain he wasn't the person I'd come to meet.

"Welcome to Weybridge House," the man continued. "I trust your journey was pleasant."

"Uh, sure."

He opened the front doors and gestured for me to come inside. "May I take your bag for you?"

I immediately felt smaller as I entered the grand home. The foyer seemed to go on forever, and the ceiling was so high I had to wonder how anyone was ever able to clear the cobwebs away. There was marble everywhere; the floor, the walls, and even the wide staircase directly in front of me shared the glossy white sheen. The sparkling chandelier hanging overhead was so big it would have taken up half the apartment I lived in with my mom. I must have been gawking like an

idiot because the man cleared his throat, and I remembered he'd asked me a question.

“Oh no, it's fine. I've got it.” I clutched my backpack strap a little tighter. It felt somewhat like a security blanket. A small piece of home in this all too foreign landscape.

He gave me a brief nod before starting into the house. I followed after him, trying not to gasp too obviously at how ridiculous the place was.

“Mr. LaFleur is in his office,” the man continued. “He's expecting you.”

“He...lives here?” I asked the butler in disbelief.

The man let out a slow sigh, like it pained him to utter a response. “He plans to reside here on weekends. Now, like I said, Mr. LaFleur is expecting you.”

I nodded, unsure what else to say. I was still in shock that my father appeared to have serious wealth, and I wondered if my mom had any idea. Surely, if she had known he was rich, she would have asked him for help raising me. For years, we had struggled to get by. Her business barely made it through each winter before the summertime rush just about buoyed us back to life. Mom suffered through constant financial pressure, and I imagined she really could have used the support.

Maybe she had asked, and he'd refused. Although, the more I thought about it, the more I found it difficult to believe my mom would have ever made the request. She was far too proud and independent to accept a handout. No, if she knew about my father's money, it wouldn't have mattered to her. Still, it made me even more curious about what had prompted her to introduce us now.

We passed several other people in suits that matched the butler's as we wandered through the large corridors of the mansion, but none of them so much as glanced my way as they went about their business. The place was like a museum with long, wide corridors and large pictures hanging from the walls. There were even some stone sculptures dotted throughout the building, and I half expected to turn a corner and find a man



holding a flag in the air, followed by a bunch of tourists listening eagerly as he described each piece we passed.

When the butler finally slowed by one of the doors, my heart dipped and my stomach clenched with an unexpected bout of nerves. I tried to remind myself I didn't want my father in my life and I didn't care what he thought of me. But as I stood outside the door, on the precipice of meeting him for the first time, all I could think was that he was sure to find me lacking. That given the opulence and extravagance he was surrounded by, there was no way I would ever be enough.

The door opened before I had time to mentally prepare myself, and the butler cleared his throat. "Miss Isobel to see you, sir." The butler then stood back and gestured for me to enter the room.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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I had never felt more alone than I did at that moment. Even when I'd faced Nina and Levi at the café, I'd known backup was merely a shout away. But here, in this town so far from home, there was nowhere to hide and no one to help me.

I took a breath and reminded myself I was doing this for my mom. She wanted me to know where I came from, so here I was filling in the blank space on my family tree. If it didn't go well, I never had to see the man again. The thought relaxed me somewhat, and I managed to clamp down my nerves and pull my shoulders back. I pushed away the fleeting doubts that had been fluttering in my stomach and entered the room.

Like the rest of the mansion, Matthew's office was obscenely large and extravagant. The walls on either side of me were lined with heaving bookcases that stretched up to the high ceiling above. They drew the eye toward large bay windows on the opposite wall that overlooked the perfect gardens beyond. The room smelled of leather and books, and the only sound was the soft scrape of my Converse as I walked toward the mahogany desk that stood proudly in front of the vast window. A man was standing in front of it waiting for me, but it was only when I stopped a few meters from him that I finally allowed myself to lift my gaze.

As our eyes met for the first time, my father's widened slightly with apparent surprise. He stared at me for a moment, seemingly frozen in place, but with the next blink of his eyes, the shock vanished, and his expression turned stony as he

proceeded to look me over. I felt a little like a horse up for auction as he took in every detail of me. His lips twitched with the barest hint of disapproval as he eyed my beaten-up sneakers, and he frowned when he saw the coffee stain on my shirt. I got the distinct impression he was thoroughly unimpressed by me, but Matthew LaFleur was hardly the man I'd expected to meet either, and I was scrutinizing him just as much as he was me.

Matthew was definitely handsome for a guy his age. He had striking blue eyes and angular cheekbones with stubble across his jaw that was perfectly trimmed. His most striking feature was probably his thick head of salt-and-pepper hair, which didn't have a strand out of place. There also wasn't a single crinkle in his expensive suit. He was far too polished for my liking. From the shine on his shoes to the controlled expression on his face, it was clear he'd spent years buffing out all of his flaws and held himself with the rigid arrogance of a man who always got what he wanted.

He reminded me of the statues I'd passed out in the corridor. Carefully crafted and proudly displayed with a permanent, planned expression etched on to a cold, stone surface.

My hands twisted as I clasped them behind my back, and I tipped my chin up as I met his stare. I felt like nothing more than a speck of dirt to this man. A grimy smear across his polished marble floors that he wanted swept away. I refused to cower before him though. I hadn't needed a father in seventeen years, and I didn't need one now—no matter what my mother might think. Staring at this stranger, I only wished she hadn't suddenly changed her mind about us meeting.

*What was she thinking, sending me here?*

“Hello, Isobel,” Matthew finally said in greeting. They were the first words I'd heard from the man, and they held a complete lack of emotion. He had a British accent that was every bit as haughty as his expression. Mom's *Downton Abbey* obsession was suddenly making a whole lot of sense.

I hesitated for a moment as I wondered how to respond. What did I call this man? *Dad? Father? Matthew? Matty?* In my mind, I'd always thought of him as *that jerk who abandoned my mom*, but that was a bit of a mouthful to say aloud, and I doubted it would be well received.

"Mr. LaFleur." I finally found my voice and settled on something formal. He seemed like the type who would balk if I tried to call him daddy.

"You look like her," he said as he continued to study me. "Candice, that is."

He hadn't said that I looked like my mother in the endearing way most people gushed over our similarity. It was more a statement of fact. He could have been speaking about something as bland as the weather. I didn't miss how his eyes flickered to my untamed hair as he spoke my mother's name. My unruly curls were exactly like Mom's, and I was sure he was currently wondering if I even owned a hairbrush.

His gaze continued to assess me, and while his face didn't give much away, I could tell he disliked every part of the girl standing in front of him. From my ratty sneakers to the collection of bangles jingling around my wrist, I was everything he didn't want in a child. When his scrutiny returned to my face, I was almost worried about what he'd say next.

"But you have my eyes."

I wasn't expecting that. He was right though. My eyes were a similar hue of blue to his. I wished he hadn't brought it to my attention. I might have only just met my father, but I already knew I wanted nothing from this man, especially not something as permanent as the eyes I saw in the mirror each day. My father's eyes were an icy shade of blue as cold and hostile as the rest of his demeanor. Why couldn't I have been born with green eyes like my mom?

He looked me over one last time before he turned and walked behind his desk. He lowered himself into his chair and crossed one leg over the other with a gracefulness I most certainly hadn't inherited. I remained where I was standing,

unsure what he expected from me. He'd arranged this meeting, and yet he was acting as though it were just another item on his daily agenda.

It's not like I wanted to be here, and the only reason I'd agreed to come was because my mom insisted. I would have given anything to have her here with me now. I couldn't begrudge her for her absence though. Not when she had the café to run.

"Please, take a seat," he said, gesturing to one of the free chairs across from him. "I trust your journey here was smooth."

Matthew clearly couldn't feel the kink in my neck or smell the coffee stain on my shirt. My legs were still cramping from being tucked under me as I'd slept on the bus last night. I was hardly going to alert him to those facts though.

"It was fine," I replied. "Long, but fine."

He nodded. "I did offer to fly both your mother and you up here, but your mother insisted against it."

This was news to me, but it sounded just like Mom. Her pride would never have allowed it, and now I'd met Matthew, I could understand why she'd be hesitant to accept anything from him—I didn't want to owe this man anything either.

"I'm glad that Candice finally came around and allowed us to meet," he continued. "Clearly, I've missed a lot of your upbringing."

"Clearly," I muttered. I didn't miss how Matthew made it sound like Mom was the reason he'd been absent all these years. He was probably used to spinning the truth in his favor like that. You didn't get as rich as him without throwing a few people under a few buses.

"I'd like to remedy that."

It took me a moment to realize what he'd said, and I struggled to contain my surprise. He looked like a man who didn't want anything to do with me, let alone a father who wanted to become involved in my life.

“Why?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“You are my only child, my legacy in this world. Why wouldn’t I wish to know you?”

I could think of plenty of reasons, the main one being that he’d had years to get to know me but had chosen not to. Not to mention that the man hardly appeared paternal and clearly disapproved of me. But, I didn’t say any of those things out loud.

“I certainly hope we are able to make up for lost time,” he continued. “There’s a lot we have to learn about each other.”

“Okay.”

I didn’t know what else to say, but Matthew nodded as though my vague acknowledgement of his comments meant I was completely on board. I felt nothing of the sort though. I still wasn’t any more interested in making up for lost time with Matthew than I was when I’d gotten on the bus back in Rapid Bay.

“As your father, and under current circumstances, I am also able to provide you with certain opportunities your mother cannot.”

My eyes narrowed. Was this man seriously judging my mom’s ability to provide for me? She’d been caring for me for seventeen years—*unlike some people*.

“However, if you are to take advantage of those opportunities, it will require...a little refinement.” His gaze had again fallen to the coffee-stained outfit I was wearing. “There are many opportunities that will come with being a LaFleur but also expectations.”

A snort accidentally escaped me. As suspected, this rich stranger didn’t think I was good enough to be associated with him. “Look, I’m not sure what you *expect* of me, but I’ve got no expectations for you. I don’t need you to provide anything for me. I have everything I’ve ever wanted back home with my mom. And just because you knocked her up seventeen years ago doesn’t mean I’m a LaFleur.”

If my crass response bothered him, he didn't show it. "You have my blood running through your veins," he replied, calm as anything. "You are a LaFleur, whether you like it or not. And though our surnames may be different, you have inherited all that comes with being a part of this family."

This conversation was definitely not going how I imagined. I thought perhaps we'd exchange awkward pleasantries and maybe he'd ask me about the summer break or going back to school. I never imagined he'd want to be involved in my life or would sit there throwing around words like legacy or expectations. Who even spoke like that?

"You never wanted to be a part of my life before now. Why do you suddenly care if your blood is running through my veins?" I asked.

My question seemed to take him by surprise, and for the first time, I saw a flicker of emotion in his gaze. "You think I don't care?"

"Well, you haven't exactly been banging down our door trying to get to know me, so I think that shows how you really feel."

His eyes still revealed hints of confusion, and he slowly shook his head. "You couldn't be more wrong."

"Yeah, I doubt that. But, look, if you want to be part of my life, that's up to you. Just know that I'm not changing for you or for anyone."

I had only met him to make mom happy. I definitely hadn't come here looking for a father, and I was perfectly content to leave without one. I'd done just fine without him so far. We didn't have much money back in Rapid Bay, but my mom and I were happy. I was beginning to see why she hadn't told me much about my father growing up. He really was from another world, and we were much better off without him.

"I'm not asking you to change who you are," he said. "But there are certain things you must do in order to better represent the family name."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“For starters, you’ll get the best education money can buy. I have enrolled you at Weybridge Academy, and you will be attending school there from Monday.”

My mouth dropped open, and I stuttered. *The nerve of this guy.* My hands clenched into fists at my side as I attempted to control my outrage. I didn’t want his stupid name, and I certainly wouldn’t be attending some pretentious school to try to impress him. I happened to think my education back home was just fine.

“Well, as generous as your offer is, I’m afraid I have to decline,” I said. “I’ve already got a school, and I happen to like my name as it is. It’s been just swell meeting you, but I’d best be off. I would hate to take up any more of your time.”

I started for the door. The stench of wealth and arrogance in this room had grown suffocating, and I never wanted to inhale the pungent scent again. I was supposed to stay the night here, and my bus didn’t leave until tomorrow, but even just a few minutes after meeting Matthew, I knew I would rather sleep at the bus station than spend another moment with the man.

“If you attend this school without complaint, I’ll also pay for your college education...”

I froze, my feet suddenly glued to the floor. I couldn’t deny Matthew’s offer was tempting, and my chest twisted with a desperate sense of longing. He was dangling in front of me the one thing I had always wanted more than anything, and yet I knew I couldn’t accept it. I couldn’t leave my mom like that. I’d already made up my mind about college. I needed to stay in Rapid Bay and help at the café.

“I don’t even want to go to college.” The lie tasted like acid on my tongue. It was one thing to write off my dream to Norma or even my mom, but denying it to Matthew was harder than I cared to admit. I’d been telling them, and convincing myself, I just couldn’t afford to go to college, but now this man was going to give it to me on a silver platter.

Matthew let out a sigh. “That’s not what your mother said.”



“Well, she lied.” I forced my feet to start moving forward once more, and when I got to the door, I wrapped my hands around the handle and jerked it open. I needed to get away from Matthew as quickly as possible. Who knew what else he was going to offer to try to convince me to stay.

As the door swung wide, I found the butler standing there, barring my way. The man must have been in his sixties, but he was a surprisingly imposing figure and seemed to take up most of the doorway. He didn’t move an inch as I tried to edge past him, and it was clear he had no intention of letting me leave.

I spun to face my father. “So, what? Since bribery won’t work, you’re just going to hold me captive?”

“You are not a captive here, but you will be attending Weybridge Academy.”

“Like hell I will.”

Matthew lifted a hand as if to silence me. “It has already been decided. You are to attend Weybridge Academy for the final year of your schooling. You’ll have accommodation on the campus, but I’ve purchased this property so I can visit when my schedule allows, and we can get to know each other. Your mother has already agreed that this is in your best interest.”

“My mom would never agree to this without talking to me.”

“That is between you and your mother, but she did agree. Now, I have work to attend to. A room has been prepared for you to stay in tonight, and a car will collect you and take you to school in the morning.”

It wasn’t often I was lost for words, but I was really struggling to find them right now. I must have looked like a gaping fish opening and closing my mouth as I tried to figure out what to say.

“But, she...”

The butler appeared at my side and started to guide me from the room. I must have been in shock because I didn’t complain as I mechanically turned to follow him from my

father's office. Had my mom really sent me away without even discussing it with me first? It didn't seem possible.

"Oh, and one last thing," Matthew said as I went to leave. I only half turned to him because I was still trying to process the last few blows he'd dealt me. *Seriously*, what more could this man throw my way?

He straightened a little in his chair as I met his eyes. "The children of many influential families attend this school. I'm sure you will make connections with all of the right ones. However, there is one boy I must warn you to stay clear of."

I was still in a state of shock after everything Matthew had already told me, so I didn't know how to react. Who was this boy? And why did Matthew care about him? The poor guy probably just came from the wrong family or his bank account didn't live up to Mr. LaFleur's lofty expectations.

"His name is Noah Hastings."

I was about to ask Matthew why he was bothering to warn me, but I realized there was no point. He hadn't been listening to a word I'd said so far. I'd already told him I wouldn't be attending his stupid ritzy school, and I felt certain once I spoke with my mom this would all be sorted out. I'd be on the bus back to Rapid Bay by morning, and Matthew's advice about where I should go to school, how I should act and who I should associate with would be a distant memory.

"Whatever you say." I shrugged.

Matthew seemed pleased enough by my response. Clearly, he didn't realize I had no intention of ever meeting this boy, let alone avoiding him. Matthew nodded to the butler, and the man went to guide me from the room once more.

"This way, Miss Isobel," he said.

I didn't complain as I let him lead me from my father's office. The sooner I got away from Matthew, the sooner I could call my mom and sort this whole mess out.

I followed the butler back through the house and up the wide set of marble stairs in the entranceway. He showed me to a bedroom far more lavish than any I'd seen before. There

were plush cream carpets spread across the floors and an enormous bed with a lush white comforter and hints of gold sparkling on the headboard. Two sets of double doors covered one wall and appeared to open onto a private balcony. On the opposite wall, a wide archway led through to an open living area.

“This is your room,” the butler said as I stepped inside. “There are clothes in the closet for you. Everything you require for school is already packed.”

He gestured toward a door I hadn’t noticed yet, and curious, I wandered over to check it out. I pulled the door open, and my mouth dropped as a miniature chandelier lit up above my head, revealing a closet larger than my entire bedroom back home. The racks were filled with clothing, and a whole wall was dedicated to displaying bags and shoes. I couldn’t bring myself to step into the closet. Even from here, I could tell the clothes were made from luxurious materials that probably had eye-watering price tags attached.

“He got me clothes?”

“Yes, Mr. LaFleur had them delivered in time for your arrival. Everything was selected by one of New York City’s top stylists, and I’ve been assured the collection reflects what young people are wearing these days.”

The way he said *young people* with such distaste might have been funny if I wasn’t under house arrest. I got the feeling this man wasn’t a big fan of teenagers, and looking after one definitely hadn’t been in his job description when he’d agreed to work for my dad.

“Dinner will be served in an hour,” he continued. “And—”

“Oh, I’m not hungry.” The last thing I wanted was to sit through a meal with my father, and I wasn’t sure I could eat right now anyway. “So, don’t worry about preparing anything for me.”

He nodded. “Well, if you need anything or you change your mind about dinner, you can call for me using the buzzer.”

I noticed the intercom on the wall and nodded. The butler went to leave, but I interrupted him before he could fully close the door. “What was your name?”

“You may call me Caldwell,” he replied before nodding and clicking the door shut.

“Caldwell,” I muttered. He was as total a stick-in-the-mud, just like my father.

Once I was sure he was gone, I pulled my backpack from my shoulders and unzipped it to pull out my phone. Seeing the contents of my bag made my stomach swirl with irritation. They expected me to go off to some strange school tomorrow, and all I’d brought with me was one change of clothes. My mother had some serious explaining to do.

I found my phone at the bottom of the bag and dialed home. Mom answered on the first ring. “How was it? Did you meet him?”

“Oh, yeah, and my father’s a real peach. I can’t *imagine* why it took you seventeen years to introduce us.”

She let out a low exhale. “It didn’t go well then.”

“No, it didn’t. The man thinks I’m trash and seems to want to change everything about me. But, that’s not even the worst bit. Did you really agree to send me away to school?”

The other end of the line went quiet for a moment.

“Mom?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I agreed.” Her voice was low and filled with shame. Her guilt only flared my annoyance.

“And you didn’t think to ask me?”

“Well, I knew you’d be hesitant,” she rushed to explain.

“So, you just sent me here knowing I wouldn’t be coming home. Not giving me a chance to say goodbye. Fully aware I’d be gone for months.”

“Yes.”

“I only have one change of underwear!”

“Isobel...”

“Mom...”

“We figured it would be easier this way. He said he has everything you could ever need.”

Everything I could ever need? That was impossible when the thing I needed most in life was my mom. She was my best friend. We did everything together. I was too angry to tell her that though. “How could you do this to me?”

“How could I say no? To letting you attend one of the most prestigious schools in the country?”

“Uh, easy. You just say *no*.”

Mom wouldn't be derailed though. “Isobel, you're so smart. You deserve every opportunity in life, and going to Weybridge Academy will give you a real shot at getting into a great college next year. A college Matthew has offered to pay for...”

My mom sounded like such a sellout, and I struggled to reign in my anger. “Surely, if you wanted this guy to bankroll my education, you would have asked for his help getting me into this snotty school years ago. Why now? Why not last year or the year before that? What changed?”

Mom took a deep breath.

“Mom?”

“You changed,” she answered quietly. “You stopped dreaming, and I won't let you waste your life.”

“I didn't stop dreaming. I just decided I'm not going to college.”

“Why? Because you so desperately want to spend the rest of your life in Rapid Bay? I know that's not the life you want, and I won't let you stay here and be held back because of me.”

“People change their minds, Mom. I told you I don't want to go to college anymore.”

“I'm not stupid, Isobel. I know I'm the reason you haven't looked at colleges for next year. But I can manage the café just

fine without your help.”

“I like helping out at the café.”

“I know you do. But Rapid Bay is the life *I* wanted. And if you go to this school, the possibilities for you will be endless.” She paused for a moment, and her voice calmed as she continued. “You don’t honestly want to go back to school here after everything that happened there last year, do you?”

I swallowed a heavy lump in my throat. “I’m not *that* fragile. Yes, I was upset by everything that happened, but that doesn’t mean I want to run away.”

“It’s not running away. You’ve been like a zombie all summer, and you haven’t seen a single one of your friends during the break. You deserve a fresh start, and you deserve the future you dreamed of. Matthew can help give you that.”

I scrunched up my nose at the sound of my father’s name on her lips. I hated to hear her say it. I still couldn’t understand how she ever could have been attracted to someone like him in the first place. My mom was so full of life, but I wasn’t sure if Matthew even knew how to crack a smile.

“What did you ever see in him? Was it the money?”

“Of course, it wasn’t the money,” she replied. “He’s not so bad, Isobel. Give him a chance, and you’ll see he’s got a big heart.”

It seemed far more likely the man had an empty cavity in his chest, so I found it hard to believe her. “Mom, I don’t want him in my life, and I don’t want to go to a school that’s so far away from you. Can’t I just come home?”

She didn’t even pause before she responded. “I’m sorry, but I can’t let you do that. I’d never forgive myself if you wasted this opportunity. No. You’re staying right where you are. You may be angry with me right now, but one day, you’ll thank me.”

I was struck speechless by the finality in her voice. Mom never made decisions this way. She’d never forced my hand like this before. We’d always discussed these things together.

“Well, I guess that’s that then.” My tone was devoid of emotion, and I couldn’t help but feel hurt by how this had all played out. My mom had always told me there were things more important in life than money, but it seemed that was a lie. How could she abandon me this way?

“I guess I’ll see you when I see you then,” I said. “Maybe Thanksgiving or Christmas...”

“Isobel...”

“No, Mom, you don’t get to *Isobel* me. You’ve really hurt me. I can barely even talk to you.”

“Okay...” she murmured. “Well, call me when you get to school. I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

“Sure, Mom. I’ll talk to you then.”

I ended the call and walked over to the balcony doors. I pressed my forehead against the glass and stared out at the rolling expanse of green lawns beyond. The sun was starting to set, lighting up the sky with a pinky golden hue as it breached the horizon. I normally loved a beautiful sunset, but I couldn’t appreciate this one. Not when my whole life was about to turn upside down. My dad was even worse than I’d expected, my mom had betrayed me, and tomorrow I was leaving behind everything I knew.

As I stepped back from the doors, I caught my reflection in the glass. My blonde hair was a mess, my eyes were wide, and my ripped jeans and stained top looked completely out of place in the lavish bedroom that surrounded me.

I didn’t belong here, and going to Weybridge Academy was only going to prove it. I’d felt like a fish out of water from the moment I’d arrived in this town. And it seemed that tomorrow I was going to have to figure out how to breathe air.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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Someone had stolen my clothes while I was sleeping. I'd left them folded on the chair beside the bed, but they weren't there when I woke up. I hated the idea that someone had crept into my room while I was sleeping, and the image of Caldwell or Matthew sneaking through the dark was enough to give me nightmares.

I probably wouldn't miss the clothes. The jeans were slightly too small, and the top was pretty much ruined after being covered in coffee yesterday, but finding them gone still upset me. It felt like a small piece of me had been taken with the outfit.

My only option was to wear something out of the closet. Clothing selected for me by some stylist I'd never met. It was such a small thing, but I felt like Matthew was trying to mold me into the person he wanted me to be rather than the person I was.

I didn't have much choice though, unless I wanted to arrive at my new school naked. So, I begrudgingly ventured into the closet and selected a pair of black jeans, a cropped white top, and a leather jacket. The outfit wasn't all that different from one I might have chosen for myself, if I ignored the fact the clothes hadn't come from a thrift store and the labels all bore the name of some Italian designer I couldn't pronounce.

A knock sounded at the door just as I finished sliding the jacket over my shoulders. I turned as it opened, and Caldwell stepped into the room.



“Good morning, Miss Isobel. I trust you slept well.”

“Well enough.” *For a captive.* “And you can just call me Isobel.”

“As you wish.” He nodded in agreement, but I imagined Caldwell would rather eat his waistcoat than call me by my first name alone. “Breakfast is being served in the dining room, and then a car will take you to school.”

“Is my father having breakfast with me?”

“Mr. LaFleur left for New York last night.”

“Right.” After a ten-minute conversation yesterday, it seemed my bio dad was already done with me. Luckily, I was done with him too. It was actually a relief to hear I wouldn’t have to endure the chill of his icy demeanor this morning, and I could hardly bear the thought of eating breakfast with his judgmental eyes watching my every mouthful.

“Well, lead the way,” I said, gesturing toward the door.

Caldwell gave another brief nod before returning to the hallway.

Breakfast was a lonely affair. I ate at a huge dining table that could have sat twenty people with two waitstaff watching from the doorway. They both refused to engage in conversation with me unless it was related to serving breakfast. It was painfully quiet and uncomfortable, and it made me desperately miss my normal morning routine. Mom and I would always eat at our tiny kitchen counter, propped up on stools, drinking our bodyweight in coffee. Our peaceful mornings usually descended into a battle over who got the last refill when only dregs remained in the pot. Mom always let me win, and the thought made my chest pang with sadness. I felt betrayed by the way she’d sent me here, and yet I couldn’t stop myself from missing her.

When I was finally done with my food, Caldwell led me to the front entrance. He opened the door, and as I glanced outside, I saw a large black car waiting in the driveway. A man in a suit almost as smart as Caldwell’s was already loading

several large suitcases into the trunk. I didn't recognize the luggage, but I knew it was all for me.

"I guess that's my ride," I said.

"Indeed." I had no idea how Caldwell's voice could both suck the life out of his words and also pack them full of judgment. It was a skill. He held out a backpack to me, and I frowned as I took it. It was most definitely not the bag I'd come with. The leather smelled expensive, and despite the fact I'd spent my life steering clear of designer clothes, even I recognized the Gucci logo across the front of it.

"The personal items you brought with you are all inside," he said. I had a bad feeling my backpack had gone to clothing heaven along with my jeans and top. "We've packed everything you might need for your time at the academy. But this is in case you require anything else." He lifted his hand to reveal a credit card with my name on it. It was black and shiny, and I wondered how high its limit was. My father was clearly rich, but I had no idea just how rich.

I took the card and tucked it into the back pocket of my jeans. I had no intention of using it though. "Well, thanks for everything. It's been..." My voice trailed off because I wasn't quite sure how to describe the last twenty-four hours of my life.

Caldwell sensed I was at a loss for words, and he gestured toward the car. "We'll see you soon, Miss Isobel."

I really hoped not, but I nodded and gave him a tight smile.

As I stepped from the house, I felt a weight lifting off my shoulders. The air was crisp and fresh, and a gust of wind seemed to clear the dark cloud that had been billowing around me since the moment I'd arrived at my father's mansion. I was being forced to attend some school I'd never laid eyes on before, but at least I didn't have to stay in the large hollow void that was Matthew's home another night.

The driver opened the car door for me, and I thanked him as I made myself comfortable in the back seat. My phone buzzed as the car set off, and I glanced down to see my mom's

name lighting up the screen. I wasn't quite ready to talk with her yet, so I ignored the call and stowed my phone back in my pocket.

I kept thinking about how she'd acted when she'd said goodbye to me. Her hug had been a little too tight and her smile a little too forced. For days, she'd been looking slightly ill. I'd thought she'd been sleeping badly because of the heat or because she was worried about how I would react to seeing my father for the first time. But now I knew the truth. She was readying herself to send me away.

I stared out the window as the car slowly drove back through town, and my heart gave a sad tug as we passed the bus stop. That was where I should have been headed this morning, and if my mom hadn't been so resolute on the phone yesterday, I might have considered jumping from the car and onto the next bus home. I had a feeling she'd just ship me straight back here though.

A part of me didn't want to go home right now anyway. Not when I was still so angry with my mother. I wasn't thrilled to be going to this fancy school Matthew had arranged, but at least I didn't have to see either him or my mom when I was there. There was also the added bonus of not having to deal with Nina or Levi as well.

I had never thought of myself as a girl who ran away from her problems. The more I thought about it, the more I came to terms with the fact that going to a new school might not be the worst thing in the world. I would never in a million years admit that to either of my parents. But, my mom was right; I'd been dreading my return to Rapid Bay High all summer, and a small part of me was relieved I wouldn't have to face it on Monday.

The car headed out of town, but it didn't follow the highway the bus had taken yesterday. Instead, it traveled down a winding road that led through a gorgeous leafy forest. Specks of sunlight danced across my window as it broke through the trees, and every so often, I'd catch sight of a river that wove its way alongside the road.

We drove for about ten minutes before the car started to slow, and the driver glanced over his shoulder to me. “We’re here.”

Any brief feelings of optimism I’d had quickly vanished. I swallowed down a lump of nerves as the car pulled to a stop.

A set of huge wrought iron gates towered over us. They were elaborately designed with swirling metal thorns and roses, and a large golden emblem featuring two roaring lions took pride of place in the center. The gates had sharp spikes protruding from the top as though they were protecting the entrance to a palace—or a prison. Although the gates were huge, they were set back from the road enough that the forest surrounding us effectively concealed them. You could easily drive straight past and not even notice them if you weren’t looking at the right time.

“I have Miss Isobel LaFleur,” the driver said into an intercom box.

“Grace,” I corrected him.

His eyes flicked to look at me in the rearview mirror. “Sorry?”

“My name is Isobel Grace.”

“Oh, my apologies, Miss Grace,” the man replied.

It was a simple mistake, but one that made the hairs on my neck bristle. I was not, and never would be, Isobel LaFleur.

Whoever was on the other end of the intercom didn’t seem troubled by the driver’s confusion, and a moment later, a buzz sounded as the gates began to squeak open. I took a deep breath and held it as I watched them scrape wide. Any irritation I felt quickly dissipated and was replaced by a flutter of nerves.

This all felt so sudden. Despite having a night to sleep on it, I’d barely had time to process the idea of a new school and being separated from the only life I’d ever known. My whole world had been upheaved in a day, and my chest tightened as the car started forward.

Perhaps if my mom had talked to me about it first, I wouldn't have felt so anxious. It was only now as I entered the school that everything seemed to hit me. I wasn't headed back to Rapid Bay anytime soon. This place was my new home.

I glanced out the back window and watched as the gates closed behind us with a *clang*. The sound felt so final, so permanent. There was no turning back now, whether I wanted to or not.

The car crept slowly up the driveway, a long gravel road bordered by ancient leafy trees. Beyond the trees, wide-open fields stretched into the distance, and the lush greenness was accentuated by white and yellow flowers scattered among the grass. For a prison, this place sure was beautiful. It was hard to believe there was a school hidden somewhere amid the pristine scene—let alone a school I would be attending.

When the line of trees broke up ahead and I finally caught sight of my destination, my eyes widened with disbelief. Just this morning, I'd thought Matthew's house was the most impressive building I'd ever seen, but the school was so large and spectacular it made his place look like a shanty. The building sprawled wide in both directions, and its front featured gorgeous sandstone columns and tall windows reaching up several stories high. There were probably castles in Europe less impressive than Weybridge Academy.

The car stopped at the base of a grand entrance staircase that led to the school's front doors. A woman was waiting at the foot of the stairs, and she started making her way to the car as we came to a stop. Given her pantsuit and slick bun, I guessed she was my welcoming committee. I jumped from the car before the driver had a chance to grab my door, and I tried to brush my hair with my fingers as the woman approached. I really should have spent more than five minutes on my appearance this morning.

"Isobel," the woman said. She held out a hand toward me, and as I took it, as she gave a firm shake. "I'm Vice Principal Langley. Welcome to Weybridge Academy."

"Oh, um, thank you."

“We are so looking forward to having you here with us this year.”

I nodded, unsure what to say. Did she greet every student this way? Surely, this was below her pay grade.

She waved her hand, beckoning to someone, and a girl came to join us. She must have been standing with the vice principal when I’d pulled up, but I hadn’t even noticed her. She was dressed casually like me and looked to be about my age. She had gorgeous long hair that was a deep shade of reddish-brown, like fresh autumn leaves, while her sweet face and big doe eyes gave her a look of innocence.

“This is Cressida Farley, your roommate,” the vice principal said.

“Hi, you can call me Cress or Cressie. I’ll only answer to Cressida if you’re my mother or a teacher.” She shot Vice Principal Langley a cheeky smile as the words practically bubbled from her mouth. She seemed like the kind of person who was always brimming with enthusiasm.

Before I could answer, Cress closed the distance between us and gathered me in a warm hug. I was taken by surprise, but the hug was exactly what I needed after the last twenty-four hours. It was over before I could really react though.

“It’s so great to meet you,” Cress said, taking a step back.

The vice principal gave her a soft smile. I wouldn’t have been surprised if Cress had most of the teachers here wrapped around her little finger. It was hard not to immediately like her.

“Cressida will take you to your room and help show you around the school,” Langley said. “If there’s anything else you need, my door is always open.”

She searched my gaze until I nodded, and satisfied, she turned and made her way back up the steps to the building behind her.

“Phew, thank Beyoncé that’s over.” Cress rolled her eyes. “Come on, let’s get you to our room.” She grabbed hold of my hand and started pulling me up the stairs, following after Langley.

“I just need to grab my bags...”

She waved a hand at me though. “Oh, don’t worry about that. Someone will take them for you.”

I glanced over at the car and saw she was right. A man was collecting my bags and placing them on a trolley. Under normal circumstances, I might have worried about losing sight of them, but given that none of my actual belongings were packed inside those bags, I realized I didn’t particularly care.

Cress barreled up the stairs, dragging me with her. Her enthusiastic personality seemed to extend to everything, including the way she walked. “Just a warning, I can be a little full on,” she warned. “But you can always let me know when I’m being too much, and I’ll try my best to tone it down.”

I smiled at her assessment of herself. “I can handle full on.” I kind of liked her buoyant personality. It was refreshing to be around after spending the summer being ignored by the girls I used to think were my friends. I tended to buzz at a much lower frequency than Cress, but perhaps I needed someone like this in my life.

“Good.” She grinned back at me. “Because I think I drove my last roomie a little crazy.”

“Well, that’s always something to look forward to.”

She laughed. “Yeah, I think we’ll get along just fine.”

I smiled at her, but as soon as she looked away, my face fell. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to let someone else into my life. Was I ready to risk another friendship after being so badly burned by everyone back home? Cress didn’t seem like someone who was going to give me too much choice in the matter though. I’d known her all of two minutes, and already her infectious personality was burrowing into my heart.

We entered the building through a pair of solid wooden doors. They were thick and heavy and groaned loudly as Cress used both hands to push them open. I almost offered to give her a hand because it seemed like a two-woman job, but I was surprised by the slight girl’s strength. She quickly got them open and set off into the entrance foyer.

I stopped just inside the door though and gaped up at the wide-open space within. The school looked ancient from the outside, and I'd expected the inside to resemble a dingy old castle, but internally, everything was modern and elegant.

The entrance was light and bright, and everything was white with gorgeous black accents. My eyes were naturally drawn to the sweeping staircase, which was the central focus of the foyer. It curved up in a large spiral all the way to the highest level of the building, and as my eyes lifted upward, I could see huge skylights covered the ceiling allowing the morning sunlight to stream in from overhead. The school was beautiful, but its extravagance only reminded me just how out of place I was. I would never fit in among such opulence.

It took me a moment to realize Cress had continued walking, and I hurried to keep up. There were a few other students crossing the foyer who I had to dodge around to catch up with her, and I could feel their curious gazes on me as I passed. It's like they could immediately tell I was an outsider. My outfit wasn't too different from Cress's, but perhaps, despite my expensive clothes, they could still smell the poor on me.

Cress was already speaking when I fell into step with her. It seemed she'd gone straight into tour guide mode.

"So, this is Esher Hall," she said, fanning a hand at her surrounds. "It's the school's main building where all our classes and meals are held. There's a resident ghost haunting the place, so if a door ever closes for absolutely no reason, that'd be Not-So-Moaning-Myrtle."

I struggled not to smile. "Not-So-Moaning-Myrtle?"

"Well, no one's ever heard her. She's a stealth ghost, you see?"

"Okay, beware the stealth ghost, noted."

She winked at me and laughed before she continued on with her not-so-conventional school tour. She showed me the bathroom with the best lighting for makeup, a janitor's closet with a minibar containing all the best snacks, and her favorite



window from which to watch the boys practicing rugby shirtless after school. These were just the highlights from the first floor as we passed through the building.

“The girls’ and boys’ dormitories are in the two buildings behind Esher,” Cress said as we made our way outside. “You should be grateful you’re a girl. They renovated Lauder Hall over the summer, and our new rooms are to die for. The boys’ dorms aren’t bad, but they’re all going to be so jealous when they see what ours look like this year.”

We’d arrived at a large square that separated Esher from two identical buildings on the opposite side. High hedges bordered the area, and a footpath meandered through manicured gardens. A tiered fountain sat in the center of the square with three stone cherubs taking flight at the top of it. The sun’s light shimmered through the water that cascaded from the cherub’s horns, and the soothing sound of the trickling fountain mixed with the laughter of a group of students sitting around the edge of it.

It was surprisingly peaceful out here, and for the first time since I’d entered through Weybridge’s imposing gates, the tense feeling that had been gripping my chest eased a little.

“Home sweet home,” Cress said, gesturing at the building to the left of us. It was like a miniature version of the castle she’d just taken me through, and I found it impossible to believe I’d be living there. It all felt ridiculous for a girl who normally lived in an apartment above a café.

“So, where are you from?” she asked as we started across the courtyard to our dorm.

“A town called Rapid Bay.” I managed to pull my attention from the gorgeous building and turned to Cress. “It’s a tourist town by the sea, but it’s pretty tiny, so you’ve probably never heard of it.”

“You’re right, I haven’t,” she said with a shrug. “I’m from New York, but my parents are based in Paris at the moment.”

“Oh, that must be hard.” I couldn’t help but think of how much I already missed my mom. It had only been a day, and

she was still in the same country. I couldn't imagine her being on another continent—even if I was currently angry with her.

“Not really, they're always traveling.” Cress shrugged again. “Plus, I had our townhouse all to myself this summer. It was great.”

I matched her smile, but I didn't envy her one bit. I might have spent most of the summer working at the café, but I couldn't imagine being left alone in an apartment for the break. Especially if I'd already spent the entire school year away at boarding school like Cress had. If anything, I felt a little sorry for her.

Just as we reached the front door to Lauder, it opened and a boy stepped through the entrance. He was frowning with his head tilted down and his eyes focused on the ground. He must have sensed us standing there waiting for him to pass because he lifted his head, and our gazes collided.

As our eyes met, I felt a flare of recognition, but I knew I'd never seen him before in my life. The strangest mix of emotions ran through me. I felt both a sense of comfort and like I was helplessly exposed all at once.

His bright green eyes pulled me in so intensely that I struggled to look away. I was stunned by the way he had affected me. Who was this guy?

“Hey, Noah,” Cress said. Her words felt distant, like I was hearing an echo of them from underwater.

The boy slowly turned to Cress, and when his eyes moved to my roommate, the connection between us snapped. I could finally breathe again, and I immediately felt like an idiot. I must have been staring at him like a total fool.

“Cress,” Noah replied. “I was just inside looking for you.” His voice was deep and pleasant, and now that I wasn't so distracted by his gorgeous eyes, I realized they weren't the only attractive thing about him. He was so stunning he didn't quite seem real. His deep-brown hair was unkempt and fell down across his forehead. His lips were full and soft compared to the sharp line of his jaw. He was tall—far taller than I was

— and his tight shirt did little to cover the strong muscles corded beneath.

This boy was the kind of guy who gave fathers nightmares and made grown women swoon. He was overwhelming in every sense of the word, and I got the feeling he could destroy a girl's heart with just one look. He was trouble in both the best and worst sense of the word.

“Well, here I am,” she replied. “This is my new roommate, Isobel. She's just started at Weybridge, and I'm showing her around.”

My mouth went dry as his all-encompassing green eyes returned to mine. The intensity with which he'd stared at me just seconds before had completely disappeared though. He now seemed so bored as he took me in that I wondered if I'd imagined it. He looked me over just once before returning his attention to Cress. It wasn't at all surprising that a guy like him would have no interest in me.

“Are you coming to Luther's tonight?” he asked Cress.

“Yeah, we'll be there,” she replied, her smile widening.

“We can catch up then. I'll leave you to your babysitting duties.” The corner of his lip twitched, but he continued walking past us before I could see his expression properly. With each step he took from us, I felt myself breathing easier.

Cress started giggling, jolting me back to reality. I quickly looked away from him and found her smiling at me. “I see you've already experienced the Noah Hastings effect.”

“The what?” As the words left my lips, the name finally seemed to register in my mind. Noah Hastings. *This* was the guy my father had been warning me about? I glanced over my shoulder and watched him walk away from us. Matthew had called Noah a boy, but I really didn't think that was an accurate description of a guy with that many muscles.

“Noah has a way of making girls lose their words,” Cress explained.

“You didn't seem to lose your words,” I said, dragging my eyes away from Noah.

“Because Noah happens to be my cousin. And *yuck!*” She emphasized her point with an exaggerated shudder. “Anyway, half the girls at school imagine themselves in love with him.”

“Why only imagine?”

“Because you can’t love someone you don’t really know,” she said. “He’s left a trail of broken hearts a mile long.”

Perhaps that was the reason for Matthew’s warning, though my father really didn’t need to worry. There was nothing I hated more than guys who didn’t treat girls well and bulldozed through their emotions. I’d been that girl. I kind of still was that girl. And if there was one positive thing to come out of Levi cheating on me, it was the determination I felt never to let something like that happen to me again. If Noah was half as bad as Cress suggested, I’d be steering well clear of him this year even without Matthew’s advice.

“But, enough about my dreary cousin,” Cress continued. “Let’s get inside and show you our room already.”

She pulled the door open and entered the building. I glanced over my shoulder one last time, catching sight of Noah as he was flocked by a group of girls. One girl in particular seemed to stake her claim over him as she linked her arm with his. She was gorgeous with long red hair and legs that went for days. But, despite her obvious possessiveness of Noah, the other girls in the group weren’t discouraged, and they continued giving him flirtatious smiles and fluttering their lashes at him.

I couldn’t help but be reminded of Levi, who’d always been fending off advances from other girls—even when I’d been standing at his side. I scrunched up my lips with distaste. It appeared every school had their king, and I’d just met Weybridge Academy’s.

## CHAPTER SIX

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I struggled not to gasp when Cress opened the door to our dorm room. Every part of Weybridge Academy I'd seen so far was opulent and beautiful, and where we were expected to sleep was no different.

A large luxurious rug covered most of the floor, and the walls were papered with a subtle leaf design in the softest shade of blue. There were gossamer canopies over the two queen-sized beds, and the wispy material draped effortlessly over the crisp white bedspreads like something out of a dream.

We each had a desk and a dresser, and through the adjoining doors I could see our room had its own bathroom and walk-in closet. This wasn't the kind of room I'd been expecting to sleep in. It would have been more suited to a boutique hotel than a student dorm.

I'd been doing a good job of keeping my reactions in check ever since I'd arrived at the school, but it was impossible not to gape when I caught sight of the view from the window. The room overlooked a massive lake at the rear of the building, and beyond the water, a thick forest extended into the distance. Every bit of the view was so perfect it hardly looked real.

"So, what do you think?" Cress asked.

"That I shouldn't have complained about coming here." I was unable to tear my gaze from the beauty of the lake. I would have expected such a large body of water to have a

deep, dark color, but it was more a light shade of aqua, and the surface was so still it reflected the clouds passing overhead.

Cress let out a shocked laugh. “Really? You didn’t want to come?”

“Not really.” I would never have gotten on the bus here if I’d known what really waited for me in Weybridge. But now that I was here, I could see how strange it might seem to Cress that I’d had reservations about attending the academy. I could never have imagined a school like this existed, and I was yet to even have my first class.

“You weren’t at that school in Switzerland everyone raves about, were you? Because I probably wouldn’t want to come here either if I got to take the mornings off to go skiing in the winter.”

“Uh, no.” I didn’t have a clue what she was talking about. “I went to school back home,” I explained. “The decision to come here wasn’t really mine, and it all happened very last minute. I guess I’m still getting used to the idea.”

This school. My father. It was all a messy blur. And I was still angry with my mom for all of it. We’d never fought like this before. Then again, she’d never made plans for my life without consulting me either. It was slowly starting to make sense to me though. Mom wanted me to have a better future, and this school would no doubt hand it to me. I didn’t agree with her decision, but seeing this place helped me understand it a little better.

“Ah,” Cress said with a nod. “My parents do the same—make decisions without really checking with me. It drives me crazy.”

“My mom’s normally pretty good about discussing them with me,” I said, feeling like I needed to defend her. “But my father...” I shook my head. I did *not* want to talk about Matthew. He might be paying for my schooling, but that was going to be the extent of our relationship, as far as I was concerned.

Thankfully, I was saved from having to explain about Matthew because a knock sounded at the door and Cress danced across the room to open it. A tall girl with flawless dark skin and bright green eyes stood in the entrance. She was the kind of beautiful that stopped people in their tracks. Even her chocolate-colored hair had a shine that I didn't realize was possible outside shampoo commercials.

Cress grabbed her hand to drag her inside. "Anna, finally, come meet my new roomie. This is Isobel."

"Uh, hi," I said, waving a hand in greeting.

Anna started to smile as she watched my awkward wave. "Well, it's about time you showed up." She strode toward me and planted a kiss on each cheek. As if being a total knock-out wasn't enough, Anna also had a gorgeous English accent.

When she stepped back to get a better look at me, her smile widened. "The boys are going to be tripping over themselves when they get a look at you."

My cheeks heated. Was she making fun of me? She had to be joking because Anna and Cress were both stunning, and I was practically a swamp rat in comparison—especially with how wild my hair was today. I could never manage to tame it.

"I'm sure they won't," I murmured.

Anna smirked as she leant back against the wall to assess me. "Oh, they definitely will," she said. "You're hot. Plus, you're fresh meat. I'm surprised there's not already a line of guys waiting outside the door to meet you."

"There will be," Cress said.

I found it hard to believe them. They both sounded genuine though, so at least I didn't think they were making fun of me.

"Even Noah struggled to keep his eyes off her," Cress added.

My stomach flipped at the mention of her cousin. Noah hadn't seemed the least bit interested in me. Surely, Cress had read him wrong.

I shook my head. "You guys are crazy."

“Oh, we’re totally crazy,” Cress agreed. “But not about this. The boys at Weybridge have complete one-track minds.”

“It can be a lot of fun.” Anna grinned.

Cress thumped her arm. “Yeah, because you’re a shameless flirt.”

Anna gave an accepting shrug before turning her attention back to me. “So, do you have a boyfriend back home?”

I swallowed, trying not to give the pain I felt about Levi a chance to surface. I quickly shook my head. “No, no boyfriend. How about you guys?”

Their reactions were strikingly different. Cress seemed to slouch her shoulders, and her eyes dropped to the floor, but Anna screwed up her nose.

“God, no,” Anna said. “The boys here aren’t exactly boyfriend material.”

“That’s true,” Cress agreed. “The good ones are all taken, and the ones with potential come with a host of other issues. I was dating someone last year, but he doesn’t go to school here, and it ended over the summer.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Cress.” I said.

“Thanks, but I’m okay.”

“You’re definitely ready for a rebound.” Anna nudged her playfully with her shoulder.

“Yeah, maybe.” Cress didn’t seem all that enthusiastic about the idea though. The sparkle that had shone in her eyes since the moment I met her seemed to have dimmed a little, and it felt like I was looking in a mirror. She was clearly still struggling with her breakup, and if her feelings toward boys were anything like mine right now, she probably wasn’t ready to move on from her ex.

“I vote that we find you someone hot at Luther’s party tonight,” Anna declared before turning to me to explain. “One of the boys throws a back-to-school party every year at his family’s property just outside town. His parents are never there, and the place is amazing. It can get pretty crazy.”



“And the school lets you do that?”

The two girls laughed.

“I’d like to see them try and stop Luther,” Anna replied.

“Plus, it’s not on school grounds, so even if they did find out about it, there’s not a whole lot they can do,” Cress added. “They sometimes dole out detentions for breaking curfew, but since school doesn’t technically start until tomorrow, it’s a kind of gray area.”

There was a knock at the door, and Cress went to answer it. “Isobel, it’s your bags,” she called over her shoulder. She ushered the man carrying them inside and directed him to the closet. “Just in there would be great.”

He silently moved through the room, placing the bags down in the cavernous closet before disappearing out the door once more. He moved so swiftly I barely had a chance to thank him.

“Do you need help unpacking?” Cress asked. She was already in the closet opening up one of the suitcases.

“Oh, ah, sure, that would be great.”

I’d barely responded when she gasped and pulled out the first item she laid her hands on. “Oh my gosh, you have the Alexander McQueen silk bustier I’ve been eyeing. Oh, and the Balmain ruffle dress.” She looked up at me with wide eyes. “Just so you know, I wanted to be your friend before I saw your closet. Not after.”

I laughed but didn’t say anything. I hadn’t selected a single item in that bag, but it felt like a strange thing to admit.

“You must have spent days shopping for your back-to-school outfits,” she continued. “Where did you find all of this?”

I felt my skin flush as Cress glanced up at me in expectation. I didn’t feel comfortable telling her I’d never seen these clothes before, but I didn’t want to lie to her either.

“It’s all from New York,” I said. That’s where Caldwell told me the stylist bought everything. It wasn’t exactly a lie,

but it felt like one, and I shifted awkwardly on my feet as I glanced away from Cress.

“You’ll have to show me where you shop sometime. It’s all amazing.” She continued to pull clothes from my suitcase, gasping louder each time she saw something else she liked.

“You’re welcome to borrow any of it,” I said. I didn’t have any siblings, so I’d never needed to share my clothes before. I liked the idea of sharing with Cress though. Plus, all those beautiful clothes didn’t really feel like mine.

Cress smiled. “Keep talking like that, and Anna’s going to lose her place as my best friend...”

“Hey!” Anna called out from the other room.

“I’m only joking,” Cress shouted back to her but then grinned at me. “I’m not,” she mouthed.

The girls spent the afternoon helping me unpack. I didn’t want to like them. I really didn’t. Just like my father, Cress and Anna lived in a world of mansions, butlers, and designer clothing. A world filled with things I could never afford, and a lifestyle I’d never grow accustomed to. I was a fish out of water, and I felt so self-conscious of my obvious ugly scales.

Back home, I hadn’t been nearly so out of place, and yet my so-called friends had happily thrown me aside. I wondered whether Cress and Anna would be so callous when they found out I wasn’t one of them. I realized I felt just as wary of new friendships as I did of romantic relationships.

Cress and Anna were hard to keep at arm’s length and almost impossible to dislike. Being around them was like getting caught up in a whirlwind; once you were sucked in, there was no fighting back. You had no choice but to get pulled along for the ride. They included me in all of their jokes and talked with me like we’d been friends for years.

I’d been dreading my return to school all summer and preparing myself for a hard senior year with nothing but my studies for company. I wouldn’t be alone here though. And I wouldn’t have to face the trauma of seeing Nina and Levi every day. Perhaps Weybridge could be a fresh start like Mom

suggested. As the afternoon wore on, I was beginning to feel less anger toward her. Instead of feeling hurt, I found I mostly missed her.

Mom tried calling again just before dinner, and I walked into the corridor where it was quieter to answer the phone. “Hey, Mom.”

“Isobel, thank goodness you answered.” She let out a breath of relief. “I was worried you wouldn’t...”

My chest swelled with guilt. My mom and I rarely fought, and even when we did get angry at each other, we always talked it out. I shouldn’t have dodged her calls this morning no matter how annoyed I was with her.

“No, I’m here. Sorry I missed you earlier. It’s been a long day.”

“I can imagine.”

“And I’m sorry for being so angry with you about all of this. I know you only want what’s best for me.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Iz. I understand why you were upset.” The line went quiet for a moment before she continued. “I should have discussed the new school with you, and it wasn’t fair of me to send you away without a proper goodbye. I was just so scared that you wouldn’t agree to go, and I couldn’t bear it if you passed up this opportunity.”

“It should have been my choice, Mom.”

“I know,” she said. “But you can be just as stubborn as me sometimes, and I knew you would never agree to give Weybridge a go if you weren’t pushed a little.”

“A little?”

“Fine, a lot. But I wasn’t going to let you waste your life here because of me.”

“I wasn’t going to waste—”

“You were. You always talked about going to college, and that all stopped at the start of summer. Suddenly, all your plans for the future revolved around staying in Rapid Bay and

helping me at the café. I had no choice but to accept your father's offer."

"Yeah, well, I would have kept up the college talk if it would have helped me avoid meeting him."

"Don't talk like that," she said. "It's time you two finally knew each other."

I couldn't bring myself to agree.

"He called me last night, you know?"

I struggled to contain my shock. "He did?"

"He did. He wanted me to know you had arrived safe."

"I'm surprised he could spare the time," I muttered.

"Isobel," Mom pleaded. "He really does want to get to know you."

I highly doubted that. He hadn't even bothered to stay in town for one night with me. It was like he couldn't get away from me fast enough.

The door cracked open behind me, and I turned to find Cress peeking her head through the gap. "You nearly ready for dinner?"

I placed a hand over the mouthpiece of my phone. "I'll just be one sec."

She gave me a nod before disappearing into the room again.

"I have to go, Mom. My roommate wants to go get dinner."

"Oh, but you haven't had a chance to tell me about the school..."

"Hmm, I think it'll take a while. There's a lot to tell. We can talk tomorrow."

"Okay, we'll talk tomorrow. Go, have fun."

"I will."

"And, Iz?"

“Yeah?”

“Please promise me you’ll give the school a chance? I think you can be happy there, and that’s all I want for you.”

I let out a sigh and nodded. “Yeah, Mom, I’ll give the school a chance.”

“Thanks, sweetie. You won’t regret it.”

I hoped she was right.

I walked with Cress and Anna back to the main building we’d entered through when I’d first arrived at Weybridge. The sun had fallen now, and the deeper hues of night had descended as we stepped outside. The courtyard that separated our dorm from the other buildings looked even more beautiful than it did in the daylight. Lights twinkled from the hedges that bordered the area, and the fountain in the center was lit up in a soft golden glow that made the sprays of water glitter against the dark backdrop.

The buildings also looked elegant under the night’s sky with shards of light shooting up their sandstone exteriors. The place was like something out of a fairy tale. All I needed to fit in was a glass shoe, a fairy godmother, and a prince. Unfortunately, even if I could conjure up the fairy godmother, I was clumsy enough that a glass slipper was a safety hazard, and I had lost all my trust in charming princes.

“Your mom must care about you a lot if she’s already checking in on you,” Cress said as we made our way inside Esher Hall.

“We’re really close.” I nodded. “I’ve lived at home my whole life, so this is a big change for the both of us.”

“Wow, really?” Anna asked. “I can’t imagine actually having to live with my parents during the school year.”

“I loved it,” I said. “My mom’s my best friend.

“That’s so nice.” Cress gave me a gentle smile as she looped her arm through mine. “Boarding school is definitely different. But you’re going to have such an amazing time here. I’ll make sure of that.”

I was really starting to like both of these girls, and I'd gotten so lucky to be paired with Cress as my roommate. I so easily could have been stuck living with some total witch. Someone like Nina who would backstab me when being my friend didn't suit her anymore.

The two girls had accepted me so quickly, but as I looked at them, I again found myself wondering if they'd still be so welcoming if they knew the truth about how I ended up at Weybridge Academy. Would they still want to be friends with me if they knew I lived in a small apartment above my mom's café? If they saw the clothes I normally wore and realized I had absolutely no money to my name?

They were both so nice I didn't think they would care, but our friendship felt too new and fragile to test it with such a bombshell. I'd never hung out with anyone as wealthy as them before, and I didn't feel confident they'd so easily accept me if they knew I wasn't like them.

I hated being dishonest, but perhaps it wouldn't be so bad if I simply omitted a few things here and there. It hadn't been the worst thing in the world to act like I'd been the one to select my clothes, and I was sure I could easily skirt around the truth in a similar fashion when asked about my past.

It wasn't a perfect solution, but for now, it would have to do. I already felt like an impostor in this place. The last thing I needed was for everyone else at school to see me as one too. It sucked, but a few white lies seemed the best way forward. I just hoped I wouldn't regret it.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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The dining room was nothing like the cafeteria at my school back home. The lighting in the room was soft with large orb pendants dangling over the tables, and the wooden floors were a nice departure from the crappy bright linoleum I was used to. Plants were scattered throughout the area, bringing some life and vibrancy to the room, and large floor-to-ceiling windows lined one of the walls overlooking the courtyard at the back of the building.

The place was packed with students, and as we made our way across the room, people started to turn in their seats to watch us pass. Cress and Anna didn't seem to notice, but I couldn't help but shrink a little under the curious gazes coming my way. I knew I was the new kid here, but the way people watched me made me feel like an alien who had just landed on Earth.

I followed the girls over to a series of buffet stations positioned on the far side of the room. They continued to chat happily as they gathered food onto their trays, and when I saw the selection laid out before us, I was briefly distracted from all the people scrutinizing me.

I couldn't believe how much food there was, and I'd never imagined it could be presented so beautifully. Each plate looked like a mini work of art, a far cry from the slop they used to serve at my old school. I wanted to try everything, but I didn't think my stomach would let me. It had been tied in knots since the moment I'd entered the hall, and I wasn't sure those knots would loosen until we left again. Not when it

appeared I was the latest exhibit at the Weybridge Zoo. I ended up getting a salad and a Coke before I followed the girls to find a seat.

It was a relief when they placed their trays down at an unoccupied table in the corner of the room. As I sat, people gradually stopped staring at me and turned their focus back to their meals. I could still feel a few eyes on me, but it wasn't nearly as overwhelming as before. I'd never received attention like this in my life, not even when I was on Levi's arm at a victory party. It couldn't just be because I was new here, could it?

"Do I have something on my face?" I asked Anna.

She frowned at me, but her eyes lit with understanding once she realized why I was concerned. "Like I told you earlier, you're fresh meat. I'm sure everyone will get over it before the week is through."

The thought of putting up with the staring for a whole week was terrifying. "Surely there are other new students?"

Anna shook her head. "Not for seniors. The school has a set number of places for each year group. The only way a new student gets in is if another student leaves, and students rarely leave Weybridge."

"So, someone had to leave for me to be here?"

"Yeah, Elizabeth Watts. Apparently, her dad got in trouble with the IRS. She got pulled out over the summer holidays."

"That's horrible."

Anna shrugged. "Her loss is our gain. She wasn't the nicest person here."

"No," Cress agreed. "She was best friends with Veronica, who's the self-appointed queen of the school. And when those two girls got together, they were more toxic than the Chernobyl nuclear power plant."

They both seemed pretty pleased the girl had left. I had no time for toxic people either, especially after how things had ended with Nina last year, but I still felt bad this girl's family



was in trouble and she had to be pulled out of school right before senior year.

“Speak of the devil,” Anna said, nudging Cress and nodding toward the other side of the room.

A group of girls had entered through the large double doors. They were all dressed in outfits that wouldn't have looked out of place in a nightclub, and each girl's hair and makeup was as flawless as the next. Despite how gorgeous they all were, it was easy to pick out the queen of the group. She walked slightly ahead of the others and was a head taller with long red hair and skin the color of porcelain.

It wasn't her beauty that made her stand out from the crowd though. Every girl in the group was stunning, but her expression held her above the others. There was an arrogant look in her eyes that could only belong to someone who always got what they wanted. I was all too familiar with that look because Nina had often worn the same one.

As I stared at the girl, I realized I'd seen her earlier today. She was the one who'd been hanging off Noah's arm in the courtyard. That made sense. Of course, the king and queen of Weybridge Academy were together.

Cress gasped as her gaze landed on Veronica. “I think she got her lips done over the summer!”

“Either that or a swarm of bees attacked her mouth.” Anna snorted. “Can you imagine?”

“I'd really rather not,” Cress replied. “No, she probably did it to impress Noah.”

“Probably,” Anna agreed with a roll of her eyes. It was clear neither of the girls liked Veronica.

“Why would she do something so drastic to impress her boyfriend?” I knew girls sometimes did crazy things for guys, but this seemed slightly ridiculous.

“Oh, he's not her boyfriend.” Cress seemed very eager to correct me.

“But they are kind of endgame,” Anna added. “At least, everyone seems certain they’ll end up together.”

I hadn’t seen Noah in the dining room, but then again, I hadn’t exactly been searching for him. With so many people watching me, I’d been avoiding looking anywhere but at Cress and Anna since I sat down. I scanned the room for him now, but I couldn’t see him at any of the tables. He wasn’t the kind of guy who was easy to miss, so I assumed he wasn’t here.

I found my gaze drawn to Veronica again. She was closer to us now, and I could see she did have rather large lips. I never would have guessed they weren’t natural though. Then again, the closest kind of cosmetic treatment I’d encountered at my old school was braces. I’d sported a hideous set on my teeth for two years, and I’d never been more grateful than I was on the day they were removed.

“Isn’t she a bit young to be getting surgery?” I asked, turning to the girls.

They both laughed.

“Lip fillers aren’t exactly surgery, and I think you’ll find a lot of the kids here are keen to enhance their natural beauty,” Anna explained. “Sometimes, having enough money to do whatever you want is a bit of a curse.”

“Yeah, and Veronica’s lips seem to have gotten on the bad end of an engorgement charm,” Cress added with a laugh.

I perked up a little at her words. I didn’t know much about lip fillers, but I certainly knew a Harry Potter reference when I heard one. It was the second one I’d heard from Cress today too. “You like *Harry Potter*?”

“Uh, *yeah*, I’m a Hufflepuff,” Cress said proudly.

“And I’m a Slytherin,” Anna added. “But, don’t hate me. I’m just ambitious AF and far too resourceful to end up in any of the other houses. Plus, I look great in green, and I think Malfoy is hot. I have a recurring dream where we’re snuggling up together by the common room fire.”

“Yeah, *snuggling*,” Cress replied, her voice dripping with innuendo.

Anna shoved Cress's arm as she laughed.

"So, what house are you, Isobel?" Anna asked, her cheeks still slightly pink.

"I always thought I'd be in Ravenclaw."

She looked surprised. "So, are you super smart?"

"I wouldn't say I'm *super* smart, but I do okay in school."

"Only someone super smart would say that." She grinned.

"Maybe you can rub some of that studiousness off on me this year," Cress said. "I'm useless at doing my homework."

"Ha!" Anna laughed. "There's an impossible challenge if I ever heard one."

"I'm not *that* bad," Cress grumbled.

"Every time you're meant to study, you ditch your books after about five minutes and start practicing dances instead."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"No, I say that like it proves my point."

I focused on my food, realizing I'd yet to take a bite. It was just a salad, but I let out a moan of appreciation as I had my first mouthful. I'd never tasted anything so good before. It was filled with light and creamy burrata cheese, and the tomatoes were so sweet and flavorful they almost tasted like strawberries.

"How is this so good?" I asked the moment I swallowed.

"You think dinner is good, wait until you get to dessert," Cress replied.

"Good, huh?"

"Insanely good."

I ate my salad a little quicker so I could try the desserts as Cress suggested. She hadn't been kidding when she said they were insane. The chocolate cake was as decadent as the school itself, and I barely came up for breath as I made my way through a massive slice. It was rich and moist, and the sponge

felt light as air. It even rivaled my mom's pecan pie, and that was my favorite food in the world.

"I'm going to get so fat this year," I said with a groan as we made our way across the courtyard back to our dorm. My stomach felt like it was going to burst out of my pants. Maybe I'd gone a little too hard on the cake.

The girls nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, it takes serious self-control not to leave school with some extra happy pounds at the end of each term," Anna said. "The food here is amazing."

"Especially the waffles," Cress added. "Just wait until breakfast."

I loved waffles so I was definitely screwed.

As we entered the dorm, Anna started off in a different direction than us. "I'm going to go find something to wear for tonight," she said. "I'll meet you guys back in your room." She gave us a wave before disappearing down the corridor.

"We better start getting ready too," Cress said. "Or Anna will be banging down our door in ten minutes demanding we hurry up."

"She gets ready in ten minutes?"

"Yup. But, then again, she's practically a model. She looks good in everything and barely needs any makeup. It's really not fair."

I could see what Cress meant. Anna was so tall and her skin so flawless that I could easily picture her walking down fashion runways. I had a fair bit of height too, but my long legs didn't work all that well with my curves, and I often struggled to make outfits work.

When we got back to our room, Cress started rifling through her side of the closet. "Is it too early for me to be stealing your clothes?" she asked, a hopeful look in her eyes.

"No, of course not. Go for it."

She squealed and clapped her hands together. “Yes! Thank you, thank you!”

She started rummaging through my clothes, but instead of finding things for herself, she began offering me items to try.

“You have to wear these,” she said, pulling out a pair of black jeans. “Oh, and this tee will look so cute with them.” She then added a belt, a blazer, and a pair of wedge boots to the outfit.

“You’re going to look amazing,” she said as she dumped the pile of clothes in my outstretched arms.

“Uh, thanks.” I felt a little overwhelmed. Whenever Nina and I had gotten ready to go out, she’d always been too worried about herself to care what I was wearing. Cress’s enthusiasm might have taken me by surprise, but it was nice how she genuinely seemed to want to help me.

“Shit. I’m being too much, aren’t I?” she said, her happy expression dimming a little as she caught the look on my face.

“No, you’re definitely not too much. I’ve just never had a friend like you before. It’s nice.”

“Aww!” Cress rushed over and pulled me into a hug. “You’re going to make me cry.”

I choked out a laugh as she wrapped her arms around me. “And you’re going to make me pass out. You may be small, but your hugs are strong enough to squeeze all the air out of a girl’s lungs.”

“Sorry.” Cress laughed and skipped back. “So, what do you think about the outfit?” She nodded to the clothes in my hands.

“I think it’s perfect. I’ll go put it on. Help yourself to whatever you want in my closet.”

She clapped her hands together with excitement once again and spun to face the closet with a huge grin on her face.

I quickly changed in the bathroom and put a bit of makeup on. I never usually wore much as I hated the feel of foundation on my face. I put some bronzer on my cheeks and a dash of

mascara over my lashes. My natural curls meant there wasn't much I could do with my hair other than run a bit of product through it.

"Damn, you look hot," Cress said as I walked back out into the room.

I didn't dress up like this often, and the last time I'd bothered with any makeup was when I went to a wedding last year. My mom had gushed over how pretty I'd looked at the time, but it was a different feeling hearing it from a friend. I smiled warmly at her in response.

Cress had changed too. She was wearing an outfit similar to mine. Her jeans were denim though, and the bustier she was wearing was slightly more revealing.

"If anyone looks hot tonight, it's you," I said.

She smiled brightly and gave a little spin. "Yeah, I just had to borrow this top. I hope that's okay?"

"It's more than okay. It would be a crime for anyone but you to wear it."

Her smile widened. "Ugh, we never had any choice but to be friends, did we?"

"No choice at all," I agreed with a laugh.

We were interrupted by a loud knock at the door. "You girls better be ready in there," Anna called.

Cress and I shared a look before we burst out laughing.

"I told you she'd come a-knocking."

"You totally did," I agreed.

"Yeah, we're coming!" Cress called back through the door.

I grabbed my phone off my bed and tucked it into my back pocket as Cress opened the door.

"Damn, Cress, that top is amazing."

"Thanks, it's Isobel's."

"I might have to raid your closet sometime too." Anna spoke to me, but her eyes hadn't left Cress's outfit.

“You can take whatever you want,” I replied.

“Perfect.” She grinned, turning to face me this time. “So, are you ready for your first Weybridge party?”

“Uh, yeah?” The way Anna had asked the question made me feel suddenly unsure of the answer. The party suddenly sounded more serious than I’d initially imagined, like something you needed to prepare for in advance.

“Good,” she replied. “Because tonight is going to be wild.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the array of expensive vehicles sitting in the school parking lot. The kids at Weybridge drove cars that probably cost more than my mom made in a year, and Anna's car fit right in among the others. It was sporty and luxurious with a dashboard that looked like something out of a spaceship. She drove like a bit of a maniac, but I could understand why. She owned a car that accelerated like it was on a racetrack, so I wasn't surprised she enjoyed putting her foot down as we made our way to a property on the other side of town.

The party was at Luther's house. Cress had explained his parents bought the place so they had somewhere to stay when they visited him at school. Apparently though, they never came, so the home sat empty for most of the year. My father seemed to have done the same thing, and I suspected his ridiculous mansion would remain just as empty. It was such a waste and made me a little angry when I thought of how hard my mom worked to keep a roof over our heads. Rich people didn't seem to care about that kind of excess though.

Like the school, Luther's house was hidden away in the woods out of town. It didn't feel all that remote though when his driveway was lined with flashy cars. Everyone from school seemed to be arriving at the same time, and Anna had to park a short walk from the house.

We got out of her car and started up the driveway, trailing a steady stream of students who were headed to the party. Luther's house was a gorgeous old villa that looked like it



belonged in Italy or Spain. No one seemed to be going inside the house though. Instead, everyone was following a path around the side of the building, which led into the woods bordering the property.

A narrow trail cut its way through the trees, lit up by the warm glow of lanterns that lined the edges of the path. It was enough light to guide us but not enough to stop me from stumbling every so often over the divots in the ground. I felt glad I was wearing wedges when I saw a girl in stilettos walking in the group ahead of us. She was constantly lurching forward and clutched desperately on to the arm of a friend for support. I was scared she wasn't going to make it.

I knew we were getting close to the party when the soft sound of music started to drift through the trees. Before long, it had filled the air and seemed to shake the leaves with its deep thrumming base. We soon approached a large clearing that butted up against a sharp cliff face. Fairy lights were draped through the trees that bordered the clearing, and colored lights flashed from a DJ booth at the foot of the cliff.

There were several bonfires crackling at the edges of the party, and given the slight chill in the air, I had a feeling I was going to spend most of my time huddling close to one of them.

The party was well and truly underway as we joined the crowd of students. Some were hanging out by the fires while others were loitering by tables covered with food and alcohol. Most people seemed to have gathered in front of the large DJ booth to dance. The music sounded like it was coming from everywhere, and I found myself scanning the trees around me to see if someone had somehow hooked up speakers to the branches high above.

Cress smiled when she caught my amazed expression. "Luther sure knows how to throw a party, huh?"

"Yeah, this sure is something."

"How does it compare to parties at your old school?"

"Uh..." I fumbled as I tried to come up with an answer. I didn't think it was even slightly comparable to the parties back

home, and I breathed a silent sigh of relief as Anna saved me from answering. She'd been concentrating on the party and must not have heard Cress questioning me.

"Let's get drinks," she said, practically bouncing up and down like she couldn't wait to throw herself into the action.

"Yes!" Cress agreed. "Lead the way."

Anna flashed us both a wide grin before she thrust herself into the crowd.

"So, does Luther throw parties like this often?" I asked Cress as we followed after Anna.

"Not too often. Normally, everyone parties at the school's old boathouse on the weekends."

Anna glanced over her shoulder and shook her head at Cress. "By *everyone*, she means those who are cool enough to warrant an invite from Noah, Luther, or Kaden. Those three boys pretty much rule our school, and when it comes to their more exclusive parties, most kids don't make the cut."

I swallowed and glanced between the two girls. "Do *you guys* make the cut?"

"Let's just say we're lucky Cress is Noah's cousin, or I doubt we'd even know the old boathouse existed."

Cress rolled her eyes. "It's not like that."

"It definitely is," Anna muttered.

The three of us came to a stop as we reached the drinks table. Bottles of spirits were lined up on the tabletop, and large buckets containing other bottles on ice were on the ground beside it.

"Oh, I see Luther's got someone making cocktails tonight," Cress said, nodding to a girl who was vigorously shaking a cocktail shaker at the other end of the table. "You guys want one?"

"Nah, I'm good," Anna said.

"Me too," I quickly agreed. I wasn't really sure what went into cocktails. I hadn't drunk much before, and I didn't think

tonight was the best time to experiment.

“Okay.” Cress shrugged. “I’ll be back in a sec.”

“Mmm, Cristal, this will do me,” Anna said, plucking a bottle from one of the buckets. She popped the cork and giggled as the champagne fizzed over the lip of the bottle.

“Aren’t you driving?” I frowned as I watched Anna eagerly waiting for her champagne to stop spilling out of the bottle.

“You should see your face.” Anna laughed. “I might be reckless, but I’m not stupid. We’ll get an Uber back to school, and I’ll have someone pick up my car in the morning.” She lifted the champagne bottle to her lips and took a quick swig before offering it to me. “Want some?”

“Uh...” I quickly scanned the other available options and grabbed a beer instead. “I’m more of a beer girl.” At least, I had been at the one party I’d drunk at last year.

“A girl after my own heart.”

I turned toward the deep voice and found a guy standing behind me sporting a playful grin. He was handsome with white-blond hair and bright blue eyes. He looked a little like a bulked-up version of Draco Malfoy, and given Anna’s weakness for the Slytherin villain, I imagined he was exactly the kind of guy she’d go for. He was far too preppy to be my type though.

“It’s my job to welcome all the prettiest girls to the party,” he said. “And you two definitely fit the criteria. Who’s your friend, Anna?” This guy was just a little full of himself, and there was a cheeky glint in his eyes I didn’t trust.

Anna pulled the champagne bottle from her lips and shook her head at him. “Someone far too smart to be lured in by your charm.” She turned to me. “It’s best to avoid this one. I’d introduce you, but I don’t want to give the cretin an opening.”

“Maybe she happens to like cretins,” the guy said, giving me a smile. “I’m Luther.”

So, this was the host of the party.

“Isobel,” I said, introducing myself. “And if Anna thinks I should avoid you, I’ll have to trust her on that one.”

He should have been annoyed by my rebuff, but instead, Luther only looked more intrigued.

“Yeah, buzz off, Luther,” Anna said. “We don’t need a welcoming committee.”

His eyes grew big as he turned to Anna. “You’re breaking my heart here.”

“We both know you don’t have a heart.”

“Then what’s this thing I feel shattering into a million pieces in my chest?”

Anna rolled her eyes while Luther turned back to focus on me once more. “Try not to let her turn you against me,” he said. “Despite what she says, I’m all heart and a hell of a lot of fun.”

I lifted an eyebrow. Judging by the party he’d thrown, it was hard to argue with him. He probably was a lot of fun, but I was certainly wary about getting too caught up in it.

“Luther, why don’t you run along and get into mischief somewhere else,” Anna said.

Luther placed a hand against his chest in mock surprise. “Mischief? Me?”

“You know you’re trouble. It’s practically your middle name,” Anna fired back.

“Perhaps,” he replied. “But who said trouble was a bad thing. Don’t you want to get into trouble with me, London?”

“I’m good, thanks.” She scoffed. “And you know that’s not my name. I’m not even from London. There *are* other places in England.”

Luther was definitely flirting with her, and despite Anna’s protests, I got the impression she didn’t totally hate it.

He reached out and pulled the bottle of champagne from her hands, taking a swig before passing it back. “Well, I’ll be around all night if you change your mind.” He winked before

he turned and disappeared into the crowd as Anna scowled after him.

“God, he’s annoying,” she said. “I can’t believe I nearly kissed him last year.”

“I’m kind of surprised you haven’t,” I said. “He looks a lot like a certain Slytherin you dream about.”

Her eyes widened as she glanced in Luther’s direction. “Oh my God, he really does. I’d never noticed before.” She took a long drink of her champagne. “Damn, that’s terrifying.”

She genuinely looked disturbed by the idea, and I laughed. “How did you guys *nearly* kiss?”

“Well, there was a Christmas party, too much champagne, and some mistletoe,” she said before shaking her head. “Luckily, I remembered it was *Luther*, and I slapped his face instead.”

“It was brilliant,” Cress said, joining us once more. She was holding a martini glass filled with a bright pink liquid. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Luther look so shocked. Not many girls turn him down.”

“Yeah, they somehow find his annoying ways attractive,” Anna said. “Clearly they’re all deluded.”

She was protesting a little too much, which only made me wonder again if she liked the guy more than she let on.

“Anyway, we should go dance,” Anna said.

“Yes!” Cress cheered. She gulped down the rest of her drink before grabbing my hand and dragging me toward the makeshift dance floor. I stumbled after her, caught off guard, and Anna followed behind as the three of us made our way into the middle of the dancing crowd.

I didn’t dance much, other than on the rare occasion when I had the apartment to myself back home. I usually sung along to the radio while I cooked dinner, probably looking like a complete idiot as I spun my spatula around the room. The kids here seemed to have none of my reservations though, and they were all bumping and grinding like they were auditioning for a

rap video. I, however, felt like a total klutz as I shifted from side to side.

Anna and Cress threw themselves into the music, and I couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy at how easy they made it look. Anna's style was more seductive while Cress danced with the kind of energy and enthusiasm that couldn't be faked. I already felt out of place at Weybridge Academy, but the feeling was nothing compared to how odd I felt on the dance floor.

I stayed with them for two songs before I quickly made an excuse to leave. "I'm going to grab a drink of water."

"Aw, but we only just started dancing," Cress replied.

I shook my head. "I'll be quick. You keep dancing, and I'll come back to find you."

Cress nodded and smiled. "Don't be too long!"

With a relieved breath, I made my way off the dance floor. I didn't head for the drinks table. Instead, I walked over to one of the bonfires and sat down for a breather on a nearby log. A girl was sitting just a few feet from me, but her head was buried in her phone, and I felt pretty much alone.

It was strange sitting here, watching the party. It was far more extravagant than any party I'd ever been to back home, but really it wasn't all that different. There were still couples making out and kids who'd already gotten too drunk being tended to by their friends. There were people like Cress and Anna who were intent on dancing the night away and those like me who'd rather hang on the periphery.

As my gaze drifted across the party, I noticed one area where the crowd thinned out. The ground was higher there, and a small group of kids sat on a large rock that protruded from the base of the cliff face. It reminded me a little of pride rock from *The Lion King* as it jutted out, overlooking the clearing. When I caught sight of who was sitting on it, I had to smother a snort.

Of course, Noah was up there, surveying the party like a ruler on his throne. There were others with him, sure, but none

had mastered Noah's kingly expression. He was watching the party with the aloof expression of someone who truly believed he was better than everyone around him. In that moment, he reminded me so much of Levi, and I couldn't for the life of me understand how I'd ever found my ex-boyfriend appealing. How did I date someone so self-obsessed for nearly a year?

I watched as Veronica, the redhead the girls had pointed out to me earlier, sauntered over to Noah. She lowered herself onto his lap, gazing up at him with adoring eyes. He barely glanced at her and didn't react as she ran her hand across his chest. It was probably all part of his self-inflated belief that he was too good to be here.

I almost felt sorry for her as she continued to try to get his attention. It was hard to believe everyone thought they were destined to be together, as Anna and Cress had explained. Noah clearly hadn't gotten that memo. I wondered what it must be like for Veronica to be with a guy who so clearly wasn't interested in her. Levi wasn't the best boyfriend, but at least he used to talk to me and knew how to crack a smile.

Eventually, Veronica seemed to give up, and she reluctantly left Noah's lap to go talk with her friends. I couldn't seem to pull my eyes away from him though. What was it about this guy that made my father so wary? And why was everyone so enamored by him? He seemed thoroughly bored by the whole party, and I didn't understand how he could just sit there, surrounded by so many people but still appear so untouchable. So detached. I was trying to work it out; did he really think he was better than everyone here?

"HEY, you're the new girl, right?" The girl who was sitting near me was no longer concentrating on her phone. Instead, she was looking up at me and smiling. She had short curly hair and big hazel eyes that were emphasized by her dark-rimmed glasses. The oversized knit cardigan she was wearing made her look ready for a night curled up by the fireplace rather than a party in the woods. She had the kind of sweet expression that

just couldn't be faked though, and I warmed to her immediately.

"Isobel," I said, returning her somewhat nervous smile.

"I'm Lillian," she replied. "But everyone calls me Lily. Well, everyone but my mom that is. It's nice to finally meet the girl everyone's been talking about."

Her words tumbled out in rapid succession, and it took me a moment to process them. When I did, the smile slipped from my lips. "Everyone's talking about me?"

"Oh, crap, I didn't mean it like that." Lily's big brown eyes widened with concern when she saw my reaction. "Sorry, I have a habit of putting my foot in my mouth," she continued. "I just meant that we've all heard there's a new girl joining us. No one's gossiping or anything. I also tend to ramble a bit, so feel free to shut me up at any time."

"It's fine." I laughed. "I hear you guys aren't used to getting new recruits."

"No, we aren't." She let out a long breath and relaxed. "So, are you enjoying your first Weybridge party?"

I shrugged and glanced back at the crowd. "Parties aren't really my thing." As I thought about it, I wondered if maybe they could become my thing, I'd just never really enjoyed them back home. Levi had always ended up getting too drunk, and I usually spent most of the night watching girls throw themselves at him. It didn't help that the music was always too loud, and there was far too much dancing for my liking. Perhaps a smaller party would be more my style.

"Me neither," she agreed. "I've been reading a book on my phone all night. The only reason I'm here is because my roommate was already drunk before she left our room, and I wanted to watch out for her."

"You must be a good roommate."

She blushed and averted her eyes. "Anyone else would do the same. Who are you rooming with this year?"

"Cress. Do you know her?"



“I think you’ll find everyone knows everyone here.” Lily laughed. “And Cress is great. She gets along with everyone. Not that anyone would ever dare dislike her given who her cousin is...”

“Noah,” I murmured.

“Yeah, Noah Hastings pretty much only has one soft spot, and that’s Cress. No one would ever do anything to hurt her because it would mean dealing with him.” She gave a nervous glance in his direction.

“You’re not a fan of Noah?” I guessed.

“He’s okay.”

I got the impression Lily had much stronger feelings about him that she was keeping to herself. “You *really* don’t like him, do you?”

She laughed and shook her head. “No, he’s fine. I just don’t know him, and I’m not obsessed with him like so many other people here. I get that he’s good-looking and his grandfather’s a billionaire, but I’m really not into the whole dark and brooding thing. He never says much, and I don’t understand how girls can fall at a guy’s feet when he’s never said more than two words to them.”

I didn’t get it either. It didn’t stop me from being curious about him though. “My father warned me to stay away from him this year.”

“Oh, really?” Lily looked like she was about to question me, but then she paused. “Actually, I’m not really surprised,” she continued. “Noah has a terrible reputation with girls. Most of the parents here run in similar circles, and they love to gossip. I’m not surprised your dad is worried.”

I slowly nodded with understanding. That probably explained Matthew’s warning, but I was surprised he cared enough to bother. Maybe he was concerned this boy might distract his new daughter from doing well in school and upholding his precious reputation. I didn’t feel any responsibility to follow Matthew’s advice. I was more likely to jump off a cliff just because he told me not to. But as I looked

back at Noah, sitting on his makeshift stone throne, perched above us all, I got the feeling Matthew might have been right to warn me.

“So, do you have a boyfriend?” Lily asked.

“Not anymore. We broke up at the—”

“Oh no.” Lily shot to her feet. Her eyes were on the dance floor, and it wasn’t hard to see who she was looking at. A girl had stumbled into a drinks table and sent glasses and bottles flying. There was already a crowd of people forming to clean up the broken glass. “That’s Amber, my roommate.” Lily gasped. “I better go help her.”

“Do you need a hand?”

Lily was already making her way from the bonfire. “It’s okay. I think I’ll manage.” She waved a hand over her shoulder before jogging across the clearing to where her roommate was climbing to her feet. I didn’t envy her one bit. At least my roommate was more interested in dancing than drinking.

I watched as Lily reached Amber. A couple of boys were helping to steady her, as she was barely able to stay standing. I imagined she would be in a world of pain tomorrow. Being hungover on the first day of school couldn’t be a fun way to start the year.

The party was back in full swing moments later. A shocked silence had descended over the dance floor when the glasses smashed on the ground, but that seemed to be forgotten very quickly.

I considered returning to Cress and Anna but was reluctant to go. It was far more peaceful sitting by the fire, watching the party from the periphery.

Without Lily distracting me, my gaze seemed to naturally drift back to Noah. His expression had barely changed since I last looked at him, and not even the two girls who were now fawning over him in Veronica’s absence seemed to capture his attention. He still seemed to be observing the party like he was above it all, but I was continually fascinated by him.

Levi had become the king of our school through his sporting prowess and his ability to charm anyone, but how did someone like Noah, who clearly didn't care for the affection of the masses, command their respect? Surely, there was more to his influence than the fact he filled out a shirt nicely and had a gorgeous face. Lily had mentioned his grandfather was a billionaire, but was that all there was to it? Were the people here really so blinded by money? This was one of the most prestigious schools in the country. Surely Noah wasn't the only kid here who came from that kind of wealth.

Noah pushed a hand through his tousled hair and then suddenly looked in my direction, as if he sensed me watching him. I expected to find the same disinterest in his eyes that I'd observed all night, but there was something about his gaze that made me feel like he was lost.

He was a king at this school, but perhaps he found the weight of his crown a little too much to bear? Either way, it shouldn't matter to me. I'd been stupid enough to get lured in by the appeal of our school's resident royal back home. It didn't matter how intriguing Noah Hastings was. I wouldn't be falling into that trap again.

## CHAPTER NINE

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“**W**hatcha doin over here, newbie?”

My cheeks flushed as I jerked my gaze away from Noah to look at Luther who was standing over me, a wide grin stretching his mouth. I really hoped he hadn't been standing there long enough to catch me watching his friend like a crazed stalker.

“Just taking a breather,” I said.

“Do you want company?”

I lifted my eyebrows, surprised by his offer. “I don't think Anna would approve. She seems to think you're trouble.”

He watched me for a moment, almost weighing my response. It seemed he liked what he heard though because his grin grew and he took a seat beside me anyway. “Ah, but I'm the best kind of trouble.”

“And what kind is that?”

“The kind that everyone needs—fun with a dash of mischief, all rolled into one delicious package.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

Luther replied with a laugh before he leaned forward and lifted his hands to warm them by the fire. He looked the picture of ease sitting beside me despite the fact we barely knew each other. He wasn't watching me though; he was looking in the direction I'd been staring before he interrupted me. “So, were you really taking a breather, or were you just

enjoying the view? You seemed awfully focused on my boy Noah when I arrived.”

“I wasn’t focused on anyone,” I quickly replied. “I must have zoned out for a second there.” I tried to sound unbothered, but I could feel my cheeks warming, likely betraying my lie.

“So, you weren’t checking out Noah?”

“I hadn’t even noticed him.”

“Because you don’t have to be embarrassed if you were. Lots of the girls enjoy drooling over him.”

I could definitely see why this guy annoyed Anna so much. “I wasn’t drooling. I’m not interested in any boys here—not you and certainly not Noah.”

He laughed again. “Okay, if you say so.”

“I do.” I folded my arms over my chest, hoping the matter was settled.

“But just so you know, he’s been watching you tonight too...”

My eyes narrowed on Luther. He was clearly messing with me. “You really are full of trouble, aren’t you?”

His lips turned up in a mischievous smirk. “The best kind, like I said.”

I shook my head and relaxed a little. Even though I’d only just met Luther, and he was totally obnoxious, I felt surprisingly comfortable around him. He had a terrible way of getting under your skin, but I kind of enjoyed his ridiculousness. Perhaps we could be friends.

“So, what classes are you taking this year?” he asked.

“It’s a party and you’re asking me about classes?”

“Well, since I’m here on an undercover mission to discover all your secrets, I figured I should start with your weekly schedule...”

“An undercover mission, huh?”

He nodded gleefully. “But, *shhh*, don’t tell anyone.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed.

“So, newbie, your classes are...” Despite his jokes, Luther did seem serious about his task.

“Sorry, Luther, but your undercover mission is already failing. I actually have no idea what classes I’m taking yet. My dad organized everything for me.”

“Ah, one of those fathers. Mine’s like that too.”

“I don’t really know the guy that well,” I said, not wanting to talk about Matthew any more than I had to.

“It’s like looking in a mirror,” Luther said. “My dad’s a total mystery to me too. Kaden and I started a sucky dad club back in freshman year. You’re welcome to join if you want?”

“Sounds exclusive,” I said.

“Oh, it’s the most exclusive. Only the coolest kids get to join.”

“Well, it’s an honor to be invited then.”

He gave me a warm smile. It was the first genuine expression he’d shown, and he suddenly seemed so much more innocent.

“Is Noah a part of your club?” I had no idea why I’d asked that. I’d just told Luther I hadn’t been completely drooling over his friend, and here I was asking questions about Noah the first chance I got.

“No,” Luther replied. “He’s got a shitty grandfather instead, so he doesn’t qualify.” Luther sounded like he was still joking around, but his expression had become more reserved. Although he was happy to talk about his own father and Kaden’s, it seemed like Noah’s grandfather was a more closely guarded subject.

I didn’t want to push it, so I quickly changed the subject. “So, I haven’t met Kaden. I’m guessing he’s one of your friends?”

Luther's tense shoulders relaxed at my question, and he nodded, pointing to a guy sitting with Noah. He had dark hair and an easy smile, which was a striking contrast to the bored look on Noah's face.

"He's the brains of our little trio," Luther said.

"And what are you?"

"The balls." He didn't even take a second to consider it.

I snorted. "The balls?"

"Oh, yeah. If it weren't for me, shit would never get done."

"And what's Noah?"

"The heart." I was taken aback by the answer. He sounded sincere, which was surprising. Luther seemed like the type of guy who rarely took anything seriously. I found it hard to believe it was true though. From what I'd seen and heard about Noah, it sounded like his heart was hard and neglected. How else could he so happily destroy the feelings of so many girls?

I shook my head, wondering why Luther was even sitting here having this conversation with me. I was the new girl. A nobody. Someone who hadn't even known Weybridge existed a day ago and certainly didn't belong at the school. From the way the girls had been talking about them, these boys were too popular to be interested in me.

"Why are you talking to me?" I asked.

Luther shrugged, seemingly much less surprised by the directness of my question than I'd expected. "I've got a good feeling about you, newbie."

"You do?" I frowned.

"Yep, and I always trust my gut." He stood and brushed a hand down his top to straighten it. "I know you said you're not much of a dancer, but no one ever looks bad dancing with me..."

"Is that your way of asking me to dance?"

"Yep."

I smiled and shook my head. “Actually, I think I’m going to call it a night. It’s been a pretty long day for me, and I’d like to feel awake for my first day of classes tomorrow.”

“Suit yourself,” he said. “But just remember what you’re missing out on.” He jumped backward and spun around in a smooth circle, dramatically spreading his arms wide as he swirled. He actually made the move look good, but it wouldn’t have been out of place in a cheesy boy band routine. Once again, I couldn’t tell if Luther was being serious or not. Even his cheeky grin couldn’t confirm either way.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m sure I’ll survive.”

He chuckled under his breath. “Yeah, newbie, I think we’re going to get along just fine.”

I watched him walk away, a small smile still on my lips. Luther was a bit of a playboy, but I’d kind of enjoyed our talk.

I slowly stood and went to search for Cress and Anna. I found them getting drinks out of one of the large coolers and was grateful I didn’t have to face the dance floor again. They both had small beads of sweat dotting their brows, and I was guessing they’d only just taken a break from dancing.

“Isobel!” Cress squealed happily, throwing her arms around me.

I laughed as I caught her. She was pretty buzzed, but at least she wasn’t as drunk as Lily’s roommate.

“We missed you,” she said. “We thought you were coming back to the dance floor.”

“Sorry, I’m really not much of a dancer.”

“That’s okay. You’re here now.” Cress linked her arm through mine. “And you haven’t got a drink. We better fix that.” She turned to the drinks table, but I planted my feet to stop her.

“I would love to, but I think I want to head back to the dorm and get some sleep before tomorrow.”

“But it’s not even late yet.” Cress pouted at me.



“I know, but I’m absolutely useless if I don’t get a good night’s sleep.”

Cress let out a disappointed sigh. “Okay, we can go.”

“Don’t be silly. You guys stay. I’ll grab a ride home with someone else.”

“Are you sure?” Anna asked. “We’re happy to come with you.”

“Totally sure. I don’t want you guys to leave because of me. I’ll see you back at school.”

Anna hesitated. “Okay, but only if you’re certain.”

“I am.”

Cress gave me a big squeeze. “We love you.”

I smiled and nodded as she wrapped her arms around me. I was pretty sure it was just the alcohol speaking, but it was nice to hear all the same. “Have fun. I’ll catch you guys later.”

I turned and headed for the path that led back to Luther’s house. I was a little uncertain about finding a lift with a stranger, but it was better than forcing the girls to leave when they were having so much fun.

As I walked down the path and the music behind me began to fade, I heard voices up ahead. A girl was speaking, and since she was talking so loudly, it was easy to make out what she was saying.

“... and I can’t believe you just let all of those girls practically crawl all over you tonight...”

“Is that why you dragged me out here?” a guy responded. “Because I really don’t need this shit.”

“But, *Noah*,” she whined. “Isn’t it time you forgot about all these other girls? I’ve been patient, and you said things would be different with us this year. That we could finally be together.”

I came to a stop as I caught sight of Noah and Veronica. She had him pressed against a tree on the edge of the path, and while they hadn’t seen me yet, there was no way I could make

my way past without them noticing. The last thing I wanted was to interrupt them having such a private conversation, and I hesitated as I considered what to do.

“I never said that...”

“Oh, so I just imagined it?”

“Well, I didn’t say it, so you must have imagined it,” Noah snapped back.

“But we’re *supposed* to be together,” she continued. “I want it. Both our families want it. I know deep down you want it too.”

“I’ve made it perfectly clear, Veronica. I’m not interested in a relationship right now.”

Veronica stepped away from him slightly, and I could see the hurt in her eyes. I knew Cress and Anna weren’t fans of the girl, but I didn’t like seeing her so upset. Did Noah really have to be so blunt with her?

“Isobel, is that you?” I glanced over my shoulder as Lily came up behind me with her drunken roommate slumped heavily across her shoulders. My eyes darted back to Noah and Veronica. I hoped they hadn’t noticed Lily calling out my name, but Noah had turned in my direction, and his eyes seared into mine.

I hated that I’d been caught eavesdropping, but it’s not like I had much choice. Veronica and Noah were arguing right in the middle of the only route back to the house. If they wanted their conversation kept private, they should have chosen somewhere more secluded. Noah only kept eye contact with me for a moment before he stormed away from Veronica and continued up the path toward the house.

Veronica turned in our direction as well, but she barely seemed to notice me. Instead, her eyes narrowed on Lily, who was now at my side. “What are you looking at, *Charity*?” She practically hissed the words before running after Noah. It was only after she was out of sight that any of us seemed to breathe again.

“She shouldn’t-a called you that,” Lily’s roommate slurred as she teetered dangerously on her heels. She kept swaying like she was going to fall over, and if Lily hadn’t been propping her up, she definitely wouldn’t have been standing.

“It’s fine, Amber.” Lily’s expression betrayed her true feelings, and I could tell she was hurt.

“Why *did* she call you that?” I asked.

“Because I’m a scholarship student.”

“So?”

“So she called me Charity, as in *charity case*.” Lily sighed. “I couldn’t afford to go to Weybridge if it wasn’t for the scholarship.” She didn’t look at me as she spoke, as though she was worried I’d be judging her. Little did she know, I was the last person who would look down on her for that.

“That’s ridiculous,” I protested.

“Yeah, it’s super ridiculous,” Amber mumbled from where she was nuzzled into Lily’s shoulder. “You’re a super-duper-smarty-pants.”

“Amber’s right. Veronica shouldn’t have called you that,” I said. “You’re here on merit. Not just because your parents happen to have more money than they know what to do with.”

“Yeah, well, money is what counts around here.” Lily shrugged. “And it’s not the first time I’ve been called that. I doubt it will be the last. I know I’m lucky to come to this school.”

Lily seemed completely resigned to her place in the school’s pecking order—the poor kid who had to be grateful for even being allowed in. It made me angry thinking of Veronica or anyone treating her that way, but I wasn’t exactly surprised. I too felt out of place at Weybridge, and I hadn’t even told anyone about my background. After finding out how Lily was treated, I was only more convinced I’d made the right choice by keeping it quiet so far.

“This school’s the one that’s lucky to have you,” Amber said. She might have had way too much to drink, but at least

she was a sweet drunk.

Lily blushed and let out a gentle laugh at Amber's garbled compliment. "We really need to get you back to school."

"Here, I'll give you a hand." I went to Amber's other side and took her arm, placing it over my shoulder.

"You have two heads," Amber mumbled to me through bleary eyes. "And they're so pretty. I wish I had two pretty heads."

I lifted my eyebrows as I glanced at Lily, and she looked to be withholding a laugh. It was a compliment, sort of, but the fact Amber was seeing two heads on my shoulders made me doubtful she could make out my features clearly enough to determine I was pretty.

"Uh, thanks. I think," I said as I focused on her again.

"Do I know you?"

"No. I'm Isobel."

"Isobel." She sounded out each syllable of my name, like she was tasting it but couldn't decide if she liked the flavor or not. I wasn't sure what she concluded because her head slumped forward a moment later, and Lily and I had to brace her to keep her upright.

"Are you okay, Amber?" Lily asked.

"Yeah, I'm good."

She sounded far from it.

As we slowly started walking with Amber flopped over our shoulders, Lily shot me a smile. "Thanks for helping. I'm not sure I would have made it back to my car on my own."

"I'm surprised you made it this far." Amber was much heavier than she looked, but it was mostly because she was a total dead weight at this point.

"Me too." Lily let out a laugh. "I probably should have enlisted some help to get her home, but I was just happy she'd finally agreed to leave the party with me."

“Well, I’m happy I was in the right place at the right time.”

“Same.”

Step by step, we slowly made our way back toward Luther’s house. It took a while to traipse our way through the trees because Amber kept lurching and swaying as we walked. I had no idea why Luther thought a party in the middle of the woods was a good idea, especially when people were drinking.

It was a relief when we arrived back at Luther’s driveway and better still when Lily headed for a car right by the house. It was an old sedan, far nicer than the car my mom drove back home, but it still looked out of place surrounded by the luxury vehicles that lined the driveway. I would have killed to own a car like this, but Lily looked embarrassed as she pointed it out to me.

“This is me,” she said. “I think we should put Amber in the back seat.”

“But I want to go in the front,” Amber complained.

“Not tonight,” Lily replied. “I won’t risk you throwing up on the dashboard.”

“I’m not going to throw up,” Amber grumbled, but at least she didn’t complain as we helped her into the car. She perked up a little once she was inside, and she looked past me and started smiling as I was doing up her seat belt.

“Noah Hastings is so hot,” she slurred. There was a dreamy look in her eyes, and I shook my head as I finished strapping her in.

“Yeah, well, it’s a shame that sometimes beauty is only skin-deep,” I replied.

Amber started to giggle. “I think he heard you.”

“What?” My chest tightened, and I glanced over my shoulder. Noah was leaning against a car a little way down the drive. He was staring in our direction, his green eyes narrowed. I didn’t have a chance to analyze his expression because he immediately turned away. He couldn’t have heard me, could he? I hadn’t been speaking very loudly, but he

wasn't standing that far from us either. Maybe he had overheard, or perhaps he was simply scowling at me because I'd listened to his conversation with Veronica earlier. Either way, there was nothing I could do about it now.

I gave Amber a half smile and a shrug before closing the door on her. I took a seat in the front and stared out the passenger window. I watched the lights of Luther's house disappear as Lily drove off.

I hadn't even been here a day, and already I'd made new friends, been to a crazy party, and somehow managed to piss off the supposed king of Weybridge Academy. I had to wonder what on earth this school had in store for me tomorrow.

## CHAPTER TEN

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I woke up with the sun. We'd forgotten to close the curtain last night, and Cress groaned as the soft morning light filtered through our bedroom window. I'd slept surprisingly well considering it was my first night in a new place. But now that I was awake, I had no hope of returning to sleep.

Cress grumbled again and pulled a pillow over her face. She'd come in much later than me last night, and I quickly rose from my bed to close the curtain. We didn't need to be up for a couple more hours, and I was sure Cress would want to go back to sleep.

By the time I turned back to face the room, her breaths had become slow and deep once more. I was impressed by how easily she'd drifted off. There was no way I could go back to sleep once I was up, so I decided to get dressed. I threw on a pair of shorts, a tank, and my running sneakers. I was feeling kind of jittery about starting school, and I figured a little fresh air wouldn't hurt.

The corridor was silent as I made my way outside. Everyone was still sleeping after the party last night. I was glad I'd decided to bail early. I'd heard quite a few girls arriving back at the dorm in the middle of the night. They were crashing around and laughing as they kept trying to shush each other. I was guessing they'd had too much to drink and probably felt terrible this morning. Even Cress didn't make it back until nearly midnight. She didn't seem too drunk, but she

was definitely tipsy. She liked to giggle when she'd been drinking and thought putting on her pajamas was hilarious.

The air was crisp as I left the dorm, and the golden morning light showered the school in a beautiful, almost unearthly glow. I never understood why some people hated early mornings. They were, without a doubt, the best part of the day. I loved seeing the sunrise, and I always felt a kind of boundless hope that anything was possible as I watched a new day begin.

I set off at a light jog, heading toward the lake and the forest beyond. Whenever I went for runs back home, I'd always jogged along the beach. I loved the gentle sound of the waves lapping against the shore and the warm salty breeze rushing through my hair. There was nothing more soothing than watching the morning light shimmer over the waves or seeing the water devour footprints in the sand. While Weybridge was no less beautiful, it was definitely different.

Everything felt so lush and green here, and the smell of tree sap and pine needles permeated the air. The lake was like a mirror this morning, perfectly reflecting the clouds floating above it, and birds chirped as they woke to greet the sun.

I still couldn't believe this place was to be my life for the next year. I didn't want to like it here, not when I'd been forced to come here, but it was hard to hate the school. Especially when I'd already started to make some friends.

I followed a path past the lake and into the trees. The forest was gorgeous under the early morning sun. Dark shadows still clung to the leafy foliage, but soft shafts of sunlight managed to creep through the canopy above. As I breathed in, I was hit by the earthy smell of loam and the sharp fragrance of pine. The ground crunched pleasantly beneath my feet as the cool air brushed against my skin. For a moment, I didn't have to worry about the crazy situation I'd been put in. It was just the forest, my loudly thudding heart, and me.

The path became uneven as I ventured farther into the woods, and the shadows creeping across the ground grew darker as the canopy overhead thickened. I kept my eyes on



the forest floor, making sure I didn't trip. I was clumsy at the best of times, and with tree roots poking up through the dirt path all around me, there was a high chance I wouldn't make it out of the forest safely.

I was so fixated on the ground I didn't see someone approaching until it was too late. I heard the scrape of footsteps ahead of me and quickly lifted my gaze. But I didn't have a chance to stop. All I saw was the brief flash of a guy's bare chest before I slammed right into him. I clenched my eyes shut as his strong arms wrapped around me, caging me to him as we fell. He grunted as we hit the ground, and the wind rushed from my lungs as I landed on top of him.

I let out a small groan. *Damn, that hurt.* It could have been a lot worse. If the guy had landed on top of me, I knew I'd be suffering a whole lot more.

"*Shit*, are you okay?" His voice was deep and rumbly and far too familiar. It only took a few seconds for me to realize who I'd landed on. I closed my eyes a little tighter, hoping that if I kept them shut then perhaps it wouldn't be true.

"Isobel, are you okay?"

Nope, his voice only confirmed it. I was sprawled across none other than Noah Hastings, and given how closely we were intertwined, I wanted the earth to open up and swallow me so I could disappear.

Slowly, I blinked my eyes open. Noah was staring up at me with a slight frown crinkling his brow and concern flashing in his green eyes. They were almost the color of the trees surrounding us; far too pretty to belong to someone so arrogant.

"I'm fine." I tried to push myself up, but it was a little hard to do so without touching Noah's chest. His firm skin was covered in a light sheen of sweat, which only added to his appeal. It wasn't hard to see why all the girls at school were so infatuated with him. Without his shirt on, he looked like a Calvin Klein model. It really wasn't fair. No one should look this good.

I realized I'd been staring at his chest a few seconds too long, and I scrambled to get off him. I was rushing, and as I started to move, I noticed an unpleasant ache in my ankle. I ignored it, tripping over myself as I hurried to get away from him. I must have looked like one of those baby fawns trying to take its first steps because just about every movement I made was a little frantic without being particularly successful.

Noah let out an irritated huff. "Here." He took hold of my arm to help me balance.

His touch made my skin prickle and set off a fluttering sensation in my stomach. The tingles caught me by surprise, and I jerked out of his grasp. "It's okay. I'm fine."

I avoided looking him in the eyes. I didn't want any tingles caused by Noah Hastings, and I could think of nothing worse than letting him know he'd affected me that way. I'd given into those kinds of feelings once before, and things with my ex hadn't ended well. I wasn't stupid enough to go and get a crush on the one guy at this school I'd been directly warned about. Definitely not one who was also already entangled with another girl and who appeared to be Levi's Weybridge equivalent. Nope, I wouldn't be doing any of that.

I went to put pressure on my aching foot, but the moment it bore any weight, my leg collapsed under me, and I staggered right back into Noah. He caught me easily and helped me stand tall once more.

"You know, most girls just flip their hair or bat their eyelashes," he said. "I have to admit, you're the first one to try running into me."

He was still lightly touching my arm to steady me, and I shook him off. "You think I did that on purpose? It was an accident."

"You wouldn't be the first girl to do something crazy to get my attention."

My mouth dropped open. *The nerve of this guy.* I'd been right to think Noah's beauty was only skin-deep, and I was starting to wish he'd heard me after the party last night when

I'd said as much. "There's something wrong with you, you know."

A flicker of uncertainty seemed to flash in his eyes, but it was quickly replaced by the look of superiority he seemed so fond of. "I'm not the one falling all over a guy to impress him."

When I'd met Noah outside the dorms on my first day, he'd been grumpy and indifferent to almost everyone, especially the new girl. But clearly, that was him on a good day. I'd never met someone so conceited in my life. Sure, he was gorgeous, but who could actually stand spending more than two minutes with him? Perhaps that was why I hadn't seen him speaking much last night. No one could actually put up with him once he opened his mouth.

I stepped back from him, making sure to walk lightly on my sore foot. It took a concerted effort not to wince in pain from the small amount of pressure I placed on it. Something was definitely wrong with my ankle, but I didn't want Noah to know it.

"Well, I can see my planned collision has failed to get you to fall in love with me, so why don't you run along and we forget this ever happened." I turned before he could respond and began to hobble away from him. I was moving painfully slow and could feel him watching me as I continued to struggle. Why wouldn't he just leave? Would this embarrassment never end?

He let out a heavy breath. "I can see you're in pain. Let me help you back to school." It must have nearly killed him to make the offer, but I had zero intention of accepting his help.

"I just need to walk it off." I said the words with hope rather than conviction.

"Walk? You look like you need someone to carry you..."

I ignored his comment. I couldn't begin to imagine what would happen if the whole school saw me emerging from the trees cradled in Noah's arms. Every girl here would put a target on my back. And Noah? Well, playing the hero would

probably inflate his big head so much his neck would collapse under the pressure.

I'd barely taken two more awkward steps when Noah caught my elbow. His touch brought all those horrible tingles back to my skin, and I wrenched my arm away from him. "I'm not some damsel in distress."

The corner of his lip twitched, as though he was holding back a smirk. I wasn't sure the guy was capable of humor because his face remained markedly blank. He stared at me for several long seconds before he finally responded.

"I didn't say you were. But you've got a long walk back to school if you don't let me help you."

I knew he was right. Limping all the way back through the woods by myself was going to take forever, and knowing my luck, I'd only fall over again. I couldn't bring myself to accept his help though. Not when I already knew it was a bad idea for so many reasons. Besides, there simply wasn't enough room on the path home for him, his ego, and me.

"I'll manage." My ankle throbbed with pain in response, as if my body was protesting my decision.

Noah shrugged and stepped back, waving for me to proceed. I wasn't sure what his game was, but I wasn't going to wait around to find out. I nodded and began to gingerly walk back along the dirt path.

I expected Noah to jog off again, now that he'd begrudgingly offered to help and I'd refused. But instead, he followed after me. I could feel his eyes on the back of my neck as I took each painful step. Was he really going to trail me all the way back to school?

"Are you sure your surname is Grace?" he asked as we walked.

I didn't answer because I was trying to ignore him, but his question had me curious. Why would I lie about my surname? I was surprised he even remembered what it was. I hoped he wasn't asking because he somehow knew about Matthew. I had a feeling Noah would only judge me if he knew the whole

messy truth behind how I'd come to be at Weybridge Academy, and surely, I'd endured enough pain and embarrassment for one morning.

Thankfully, Noah continued before I could begin to truly worry. "Because you're not exactly the most *graceful* person I've met," he said. "I would have thought Klutz or Crash would be more appropriate..."

Despite my best attempts to pretend Noah wasn't there, I couldn't stop myself from turning on him. "What are you doing?"

"Walking back to school. Same as you."

"No, you're following me, and you keep talking." I was doing a terrible job of pretending he wasn't there.

"It's called conversation. And I'm not following you. We just happen to be going in the same direction."

"What? And you normally walk this slowly?"

"Do *you* normally walk this slowly?" he shot back. "You're clearly struggling on that ankle."

"I told you I'm fine. I'm just taking my time," I lied. "You're the one creepily stalking behind me."

He let out a frustrated sigh and moved closer to me. Too close. He didn't stop until he was just a hairsbreadth away.

"You know, most girls would just accept my help," he said as I looked up at him. The vibrant green of his eyes had dimmed slightly, and he was looking at me as though he was trying to figure me out. He probably thought I had a few screws loose.

"I'm not most girls."

"I can see that, Crash."

I scowled at him, thoroughly disliking the nickname. I'd only crashed into him one time. And, yes, I wasn't the most graceful person... Okay, I was clumsy and cumbersome at the best of times, but did he really have to call me Crash?

That small hint of a smile dared to pull at the corner of his lips again. It eluded me as his mouth remained a firm line. “Are you really so stubborn though?”

“I’m not stubborn.”

He let out a humorless laugh. “Said the girl who’s ignoring all logic just to prove a point.”

“I’m not ignoring all logic.” I spoke through gritted teeth. “I just don’t need help from someone like you.”

“*Someone like me?*” Surprise lit Noah’s eyes, but they quickly started to narrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I think it’s pretty obvious.”

“Pretend it isn’t,” he growled. “Enlighten me.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “I don’t need help from a self-absorbed, egotistical man-child who thinks the whole world revolves around him just because a few girls think he’s attractive. I was told to stay away from you, and it didn’t take me long to realize why.”

I didn’t think his expression could darken any further. Apparently, I was wrong.

“Who told you to stay away from me?” he asked. He seemed far more interested in the answer than addressing all the other insults I’d thrown at him. It was like he hadn’t even heard them.

“Someone who clearly knew what they were talking about.”

Noah exhaled, and I got the impression I was seriously trying his patience. “Whatever. Look, you’re going to hurt yourself even more if you don’t let me help you. I think you’re going to have to defy whoever this person was that warned you against me if you want to get back to school in one piece. Have you no sense of self-preservation?”

I kind of thought that keeping my distance from Noah *was* an act of self-preservation because being close to a guy like him could only end in trouble. I could hardly admit that to him, especially not with his words crawling their way under

my skin. I just wanted to get back to my room to ice my ankle, and arguing with him was clearly getting me nowhere. He seemed persistent enough that he'd probably follow me all the way back to the dorms if I didn't accept his help, so I finally caved.

"Okay, fine, you win. My ankle is killing me, and I could use your help getting back to school."

"Finally," he grumbled, but his eyes flashed with delight. I might have been frustrating him, but I could see how much he enjoyed being right. Accepting his help was hard enough to stomach without the knowledge I was also feeding that ego of his.

"Don't let it go to your head," I quickly added. "You're not carrying me, nobody can know this happened, and once we get back, we return to being strangers."

"You really don't want people to know I helped you?"

"Obviously. So, if we could make this quick, that would be great."

He started to frown, and his expression grew puzzled. He was staring at me like he thought I was some kind of lab experiment gone wrong. Like he couldn't quite decide what to make of me. My cheeks were warming under his scrutiny, and I quickly scrambled for something to say so he'd stop looking at me that way. "Well, are you helping, or am I going to keep on hobbling?"

It took him a second for the words to register, and he glanced down at my ankle and nodded. "Right, your ankle." He moved closer to me, and my stomach dropped as he looked into my eyes. He seemed so much bigger when he was standing right beside me, and my breath felt suddenly shallow as I realized I was going to have to touch him again. Without his shirt, he had so much exposed skin, and nerves shot through me.

Noah hesitated for a moment, and I wondered if he felt as uncertain as I did, but then he cleared his throat and reached

out to me. He took my arm and looped it around his shoulder before gently resting his hand on my back.

His skin was hot to the touch, and his muscles felt hard and strong as he supported me. He smelled far too good for a guy who'd just been working out, and I wished I could stop breathing so I wasn't constantly hit by the musky scent of his deodorant. They did not make teenage boys like this back home, and I immediately regretted agreeing to let him help.

"Let's just get this over with," I muttered as we set off.

Thankfully, Noah remained silent as we walked, only speaking up when it looked as though I was about to trip again. It happened far more frequently than I would have liked. I really couldn't help it. It was hard to pay attention to where we were walking. My mind kept drifting to the strong arm supporting me, and I couldn't stop glancing at how chiseled Noah's abs were. They didn't look real, and I kept wondering if perhaps it was impossible not to be conceited when you looked that way.

It was a welcome relief when we reached the edge of the woods and the school appeared before us. I'd been itching to get some distance from Noah since the moment he wrapped his arm around me, but something stopped me from shrugging out of his grasp the first chance I got. Instead, I waited until we were closer to my dorm before I eased my arm from over his shoulders. I quickly glanced around to make sure no one had noticed us together. Thankfully, it was still early enough that everyone was still in bed. The fewer people who saw Noah holding me, the better.

"You really aren't like everyone else here," Noah said as he stepped back from me.

I was already well aware of just how different I was from the kids at Weybridge, and I hardly needed reminding of that fact when I was constantly surrounded by such obvious wealth. There was no way Noah could know about my humble background, so I wasn't really sure what he meant. It was hard to decipher from his expression whether he was complimenting me or not. I had to assume the latter.



“If you’re saying I’m different because I don’t think you’re God’s gift to the girls at Weybridge Academy, then you’d be correct,” I replied.

He slowly lifted his eyebrows. “Is that how you thank the guy who rescued you?”

“Rescued? I wouldn’t have needed your help in the first place if you hadn’t collided with me.”

“I guess we’ll agree to disagree on that one.” He slowly shook his head, but he didn’t seem all that annoyed by my comment. “You should probably get the school nurse to take a look at your ankle.”

“It’ll be okay once I rest it.”

A small smile curved the corner of his lips. “And you said you’re not stubborn.”

“I’m not—”

“Do you need help getting to your room?”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

“Of course, you will.” He seemed amused by my answer more than anything.

“I guess I’ll see you around, Noah.” I turned and started toward the dorm.

“You can count on it, Isobel.” His words sounded like a promise and sent a thrill down the back of my spine.

I frowned as I opened the door and entered the dorm. Noah was still standing where I’d left him staring after me. There was concern in his eyes, but as I looked back, it quickly dissipated, making me wonder if it had been there at all.

He set off at a jog toward his own dorm. Watching him leave felt like waking from a dream. What had happened in the woods didn’t feel real and left me feeling off-kilter. Noah had been surprisingly persistent, and given everything I knew about him, I struggled to believe he’d actually bothered to help me. He didn’t seem like the type to stick around long enough

to see I was bluffing about my ankle being fine, but I figured he probably enjoyed playing the hero.

It had been a strange morning, but I was going to do my best to forget the accident ever happened. I was going to forget how good Noah smelled and the way my skin tingled when we touched. And I was definitely going to pretend I'd never been pressed up against Noah's naked chest or had his arm wrapped around my waist as he held me close.

I wasn't quite sure how I was going to erase those things from my mind, but I was going to find a way. I didn't need any annoying butterflies over a guy who probably wasn't capable of loving anyone or anything more than himself. It would be best if I kept my distance from him like my father wanted. At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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“**W**hy are you limping?” Cress squealed.

She was already dressed in her school uniform and looked far cuter than I thought possible for someone in plaid. I think it came down to the accessories. She wore a set of black heels and a long dark cardigan she’d belted at the waist. I looked at my uniform, which I’d laid out on the bed the night before. I imagined the drab, formless sweater we were supposed to wear wasn’t going to look as nice on me.

“I twisted my ankle on my run.”

She rushed over. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It’s really no big deal.”

“Are you sure?” Her brow was pinched with concern, and it touched me to see how much she cared.

“I just have to walk it off.” My words didn’t seem to do anything to ease the worry on her face, and I quickly continued. “There’s not much I can do about it now anyway, so I’m going to hop in the shower.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to the nurse?”

“Nope, I’m all good. I better get ready so I’m not late on my first day.” I was already short on time, so I left the room before Cress could continue to worry over me. My ankle was starting to feel a lot better, so I was fairly certain it wasn’t badly damaged. I could imagine nothing worse than spending my first weeks at my new school with my foot in a cast or crutches under my arms.

I had a quick shower before changing into my school clothes. I hadn't tried them on yet, but they fit me perfectly, almost as if they'd been custom-made to fit my body. The white button-down shirt was tailored to follow my curves, and the tartan skirt sat comfortably around my waist, ending the perfect distance above my knees. The check pattern was mostly navy, but it had subtle hints of red threaded through it, and the tie was made to match. While the sweater wasn't particularly fashionable, the material was so soft I couldn't bring myself to take it off.

I wasn't sure how much time I had so I swiped some mascara across my lashes and quickly ran a brush through my hair. "That will have to do," I murmured as I looked at myself in the mirror. It was a struggle to tame my hair on the best of days, and today was no exception. It was as wild as ever and distracted from the smart, neat fit of my uniform. I might have looked the part of a Weybridge student, but I wasn't sure I'd ever feel it.

"Aww, you look adorbs," Cress said as I reentered the bedroom. "Not many people can pull off the school sweater. I'm impressed."

My cheeks warmed as I tried to figure out if she was making fun of me. "You don't have to lie to me, you know."

She smiled brightly. "I never lie when it comes to clothes."

"I'll keep that in mind." I laughed as I picked up my school shoes and went to sit on my bed so I could put them on. I was still struggling not to hobble as I walked and could only lightly press down on my foot. It was going to be a long day walking around school if my ankle kept complaining this way.

"You should really get that checked out," Cress said. She sounded just like her cousin.

"It'll be fine. It's already feeling much better." Was I in denial? Probably. But admitting I was in pain felt like giving into it, and I refused to let my ankle hold me back today. I quickly changed the subject. "How was the rest of the party last night?"

“It was fun, but I wish you had stayed. Did you find a ride home okay?”

“Yeah, I went back with Lily.”

“Oh yeah, she’s sweet.”

“Do you know her well?”

“Not really,” Cress said. “She mostly hangs out with the other scholarship students.”

“Oh.” Cress didn’t sound like she was judging Lily for being here on a scholarship. Not like Veronica had. But her response made me wonder how the rest of the school viewed Lily, and whether she was only friendly with other scholarship students because she wasn’t welcomed by anyone else.

If that were the case, then it was completely unfair. Lily might not be ridiculously rich like the other kids here, but she still belonged. She had earned her place at Weybridge Academy by being smart. I definitely couldn’t say the same. If anyone at this school was a charity case, it was me. Would I be treated differently if the people here knew I came from nothing?

I wasn’t sure of the answer to my question, and it worried me. I’d lost too many friends recently, and I wasn’t sure I could handle being ostracized again.

A knock came at the door. “I’ll get it.” Cress hurried over to the door and pulled it open to reveal an older woman standing in the corridor.

“Good morning, Cressida,” she said. “Is Isobel here? I hear she had a fall, and I’ve come to take a look at her ankle.”

“Oh, sure. Come right in.” Cress stood back as the woman entered the room.

“Hello, Isobel. I’m the school nurse, Miss Ludwell.” She introduced herself as she came over to me. I was still sitting on the edge of my bed, and she lowered herself to kneel by my foot, setting her bag down at her side.

“Do you mind if I take a look at your ankle?” Miss Ludwell had a very direct tone, and although she was asking

for my permission, I didn't think she was someone who would take no for an answer.

"Oh, uh, sure."

I leaned forward to watch as the woman lightly touched my ankle in different places, checking it for points of tenderness and assessing my range of motion. "It's not that bad," I said. "Cress really didn't need to call you."

"It wasn't me," Cress murmured.

"Actually, Mr. Hastings came to my office," Miss Ludwell explained.

"What?" I gasped.

"Noah came to see you?" Cress sounded understandably confused.

The woman nodded. "Yes. I don't normally visit the dorm rooms, but he was quite insistent."

"Interesting," Cress said with a glance in my direction.

My cheeks immediately started to flush. I hadn't told her Noah had been in the woods with me. I'd already started pretending none of it had happened. Clearly, that wasn't an option anymore—at least, it wasn't as far as Cress was concerned.

Noah had surprised me again. He'd clearly gone out of his way to contact the school nurse, which really didn't fit with the image I had of him in my head. I didn't know whether to be grateful or annoyed. Who was he to decide whether I needed the nurse or not?

The nurse was nice, and by the time she'd finished with me, I was glad Noah had sent her. She iced my ankle and strapped it up, and she gave me some painkillers to dull the pain.

Just as Miss Ludwell was finishing up, Anna arrived at the door. She was already in uniform, and like Cress, she'd made an effort to add her own style to the outfit. She was wearing a gorgeous set of hoop earrings, and bracelets jangled around her wrist. She'd paired it all with a set of heels too. I didn't

usually wear heels and had no idea how she expected to survive a whole day of school in them.

“You guys ready for breakfast?” Anna asked as she let herself into the room. “I’m starved...” Her voice trailed off as she caught sight of Miss Ludwell packing up her bag.

“Are you sure you won’t consider resting in your room today?” Miss Ludwell asked me. “That would be my advice.”

“No, I’m okay,” I said for what felt like the tenth time. There was no way I was missing my first day of classes.

“Very well. Remember to ice your foot every few hours and try to keep it elevated. If you come by my office this morning, I can give you a crutch so you won’t be putting too much pressure on it.”

“Okay, thanks.” I wasn’t going to admit it to her, but I had no intention of walking around school with a crutch.

The nurse gave me a warm smile before leaving the room. As she shut the door behind her, Anna came rushing over. “What happened to you?”

“I fell over on my run.”

“Run?” Anna raised an eyebrow. “Why were you *running*?”

She looked so confused I couldn’t help but laugh. “Because I enjoy it.”

“Well, that’s just crazy,” she said. “I’m not sure if we can be friends anymore.” A smile played at her lips though, so I knew she was only joking.

“The run’s not even the most interesting part,” Cress said. “Apparently, Noah was the one who went to the school nurse and sent her up to see Isobel.”

“What?” Anna gasped. “Why?”

“That’s what I want to know.” Cress turned to me, an expectant look in her eyes. “What happened?”

I let out a sigh. “There’s really not that much to tell. I fell over in the woods, and Noah happened to be out running too.

He saw I was hurt and helped me get back to the dorm. I think he must have known I wasn't going to go and get my ankle checked out by the nurse so he sent her over."

Anna started to laugh. "Wow, school hasn't even started yet, and already, every girl here is going to want to kill you."

"Yeah, I have a feeling there will be a few girls out in the woods tomorrow waiting for Noah to run past so they can fall over at his feet," Cress added. "They'll be kicking themselves for not thinking of that sooner."

"I didn't do it on purpose!" I protested.

"Oh, we know that," Anna replied. "But there are genuinely girls here who would."

I shook my head. That's exactly what Noah had assumed. But who in their right mind would fake an injury as a way to get closer to a guy? It sounded like there were some really manipulative girls at this school.

"I still can't believe he sent the school nurse over to check on you," Cress said. "The infirmary is all the way on the other side of school. He must have been really worried if he went out of his way to fetch her."

I thought it far more likely Noah did it because he knew it would annoy me, but I didn't tell the girls that. I could hardly admit to Cress that I was wary of her cousin. "I think you guys are reading into this far too much. It's not a big deal."

"Maybe not to you," Cress replied. "But then again, you don't really know Noah. Any other girl at school would be freaking out."

That was probably another reason why he went to fetch the nurse. I must not have adequately fed his ego this morning. Maybe he was hoping this extra good deed would make me chase after him in grateful thanks. I could guarantee that would not be happening.

"Perhaps we can just keep this between the three of us then?" I asked. "I really don't want anyone else thinking there's more to this than there is, and I'd hate for anyone to go out into the woods to try to fake an injury."



“Of course,” Cress agreed.

Anna looked disappointed. “But this is *such* good gossip...”

Cress folded her arms over her chest. “*Anna...*”

“Okay. Okay. I won’t tell anyone.”

I let out a breath in relief. “Thanks, guys. I really appreciate it.”

They gave me warm smiles in return, and I knew they’d keep their word.

Once the girls had recovered from the shock of hearing what had happened with Noah and me in the woods, we headed to the dining hall for breakfast. It was lucky we left the dorm early because I was still struggling to walk properly, and it took us a while to make it over to the other building. I was glad Cress had suggested I bring my schoolbag with me because I would have struggled to get to the dorm and back before classes started.

Thankfully, I didn’t need to carry much, just the laptop and tablet I’d found in my suitcase when I unpacked. They were both so shiny and new I was nervous to carry them around with me. I’d never owned a tablet before, and my laptop at home was ancient. It was a hand-me-down from one of my mom’s old boyfriends. It was so old it took about ten minutes just to start up. It was a miracle it was still working, and I had to save my schoolwork every few minutes because it was known to shut down without warning.

The dining hall was far emptier this morning than it had been last night, and the echoing sounds of conversation were much quieter. I still got a few curious glances as I walked through the room, but people seemed far less interested than they had been at dinner.

“Half the school is probably hungover,” Cress said as she looked around the room.

“Yeah, I bet they’re all still in bed, waiting for the last possible second to get to class,” Anna agreed.

I wasn't sure how anyone could choose sleep over a good breakfast. Especially when the food here looked so amazing. The buffet had whole sections dedicated to baked goods, fresh fruits, cereals, and yogurts. There were even chefs standing by to cook fresh eggs, pancakes, and waffles. It was insane.

I was tempted to try a bit of everything but eventually settled on some fruit, cereal, and yogurt. My stomach grumbled with hunger, but I was starting to get nervous about my first day of school, and I didn't think I could handle much more than a light breakfast.

"You two seem fine this morning," I said as we sat down at the same table as last night. It had looked as though Cress and Anna were only just getting started when I left the party, and given how late it was when Cress returned, I was surprised she didn't seem more tired.

"We both tend to dance the booze off," Cress said with a laugh.

"Or we're too busy dancing to get more drinks," Anna added with a smile.

"Or making out with hot boys..." Cress gave Anna a knowing nudge with her elbow.

"You kissed someone last night?" I gasped.

Anna's cheeks turned the slightest shade of pink. "Maybe."

"She means definitely," Cress said with a laugh. "Angus Whitmore was all over her."

"Ugh, don't remind me." Anna's head fell into her hands.

"Is he that bad?" I asked, confused as to why she was so embarrassed.

"Yes," Cress replied. "He might be hot, but he's a pompous ass."

Anna groaned in agreement before lifting her head out of her hands. "I always swear I'm not going to kiss him when I go to these things, but somehow, we always end up in a corner making out. It's terrible."

A laugh slipped out of me at the dismayed expression on her face. “Why do you do it then?”

“Because he’s a really, *really* good kisser.”

Cress glanced over her shoulder before pointing at a guy on the other side of the room. “That’s him over there.”

I followed the direction she was nodding in. “The guy drinking out of a tea cup?”

Cress snorted out a laugh. “That’s the one.”

I could see why they thought he was hot. His school shirt clung to his muscles, and he had a nice tan. His light hair was perfectly slicked back, probably the result of a painstaking morning routine. He was definitely a good-looking guy but far too put together for my liking. He even sat a little too straight, and I could see why he might be too uptight for Anna.

As I was watching Angus, my attention strayed, and I caught sight of Noah sitting at the table behind him. He’d changed out of his sports clothes, which was probably a good thing. The girls at breakfast would have caused a riot if he was sitting there with his chest and abs out.

Still, he looked far more appealing in his uniform than he probably should. His tie was slightly loose, and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows showing off his strong forearms. I didn’t know forearms could be an attractive feature on a guy, but Noah made them look hot. He was sitting with Luther and Kaden but none of the crowd he’d been surrounded by last night. His expression was reserved as he sat and talked quietly with his friends.

“He’s hot, right?” Cress said.

“Very,” I murmured before realizing she was still talking about Angus and obviously not her cousin. I blushed and glanced away. The last thing I needed was for the girls to catch me staring at Noah.

“So, how are you feeling about your first day?” Anna asked. She was desperate to get the conversation away from Angus, and I was happy to oblige. There was nothing worse than having to relive something you were embarrassed about.

“A bit nervous,” I said. “I still have no idea how to work my tablet. I can’t even find my class schedule on it.”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Cress said. “Pass your tablet here, and I’ll show you.”

I fished the tablet out of my bag and handed it to her.

“This is the school app,” she explained, pointing to one of the squares on the screen. “Once you log in with your student details, it gives you everything you need. The school gives you a generic password to begin with, and you can change it straightaway.”

As I watched her fingers fly across the tablet screen, I felt grateful for her help. There was no way I would have figured it out on my own. I wasn’t a complete tech Neanderthal, but I’d also never even had a smartphone of my own.

“So, I’ve changed your password to *Cressisthebest*, which shouldn’t be too hard to forget,” she said with a wink. “And I’ll just bring up your class schedule...”

“Oh, what’s she got?” Anna asked, scooting closer. “I wonder if we’re in any classes together...” She peered at the screen over Cress’s shoulder, and her face scrunched up like there was a bad smell under her nose.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“You’re taking such boring classes!” Anna said it like I’d done something to personally offend her.

“I am? Let me take a look.”

Cress handed the tablet back to me, and I scanned the screen. She was right. My first day was filled with English, math, and a business management class. I let out a breath of relief when I saw biology and chemistry were on my schedule later in the week. I also appeared to be taking an economics class.

It was obvious Matthew had picked my schedule for me because I had absolutely no interest in any sort of business classes. I was also guessing he’d consulted my mom because biology and chemistry were by far my best subjects.

I'd always had a natural affinity for the sciences, and I often imagined I'd pursue them in some way at college. I'd completely given up on that dream over the summer, but seeing the subjects on my schedule now reignited a little of the excited spark I'd felt so many times before when imagining myself at college. If Mom could handle things back home without me this year, maybe she'd be okay if I was away for college too. Matthew had offered to pay for my studies, after all. That's if I could bring myself to stomach more of his help.

"We're not going to have any classes together all year," Anna complained.

Cress shuffled closer so she too could study my schedule. "Well, we have English and bio together," she said, smiling at me. "Oh, and all three of us share the same PE class."

"I guess that's something," Anna mumbled, struggling to hide her disappointment.

"Anna takes mostly arts subjects," Cress explained. "I wasn't in any of her classes last year either."

"Yeah, and it sucked. Looks like this year's going to be just as dull."

We were interrupted by the sound of chairs scraping across the floor, and I looked up to find two identical boys taking a seat at our table. They were both handsome with dark blond hair and warm brown eyes. They weren't overly muscular but tall with athletic builds. The fact they were wearing the same school uniform only added to the feeling I was seeing double.

"Anna, are you eating those hash browns?" one of them asked. "Because they just ran out, and you know they're my favorite."

They twins might have had all the same features, but their expressions couldn't have been more different. The guy who'd spoken had a cheeky smile on his face while his brother was rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

"Don't even think about it, Sawyer," Anna said, slapping his hand away as he reached for her plate.

He pouted in reply. “Think of it as a gift to welcome me back to school.”

“I wouldn’t share these with you even if it was your birthday,” she replied before taking a big mouthful of her hash brown patty and groaning with delight. “Damn, this is good.”

She was momentarily distracted by her food, and Sawyer’s hand darted out to grab the other hash brown patty off her plate. It was in his mouth before Anna could react, and he mimicked her moan of pleasure. “It *is* good,” he agreed, grinning as her eyes narrowed at him.

“We haven’t met,” the other boy said. Unlike his brother, his attention was on me rather than the food on Anna’s plate. He offered a hand. “I’m Wes.”

“Isobel.” I smiled and shook his hand in response. His grasp was warm and comforting, and he had kind eyes that smiled back at me.

“This is my brother, Sawyer,” he nodded at his twin, who was still chewing on the hash brown patty.

Sawyer swallowed his food before he gave me a beaming smile. I had a feeling he probably got a lot of girls simply by flashing his teeth. I took the hand he reached out to me, but instead of shaking my hand, he lowered his head to plant a kiss across the back of it. “I’m surprised they let you in the dining hall, gorgeous, because you’re just too damn sweet,” he purred.

I burst out laughing as I removed my hand from his grasp. “Was that really a pickup line?”

Wes thumped his brother over the back of his head while Cress and Anna both groaned at him.

“Seriously, Sawyer?” the girls asked.

“What? Can you blame a guy for trying? The new girl is hot.” Sawyer honestly looked perplexed.

“Ignore my brother,” Wes said to me. “We spent the summer surfing, and I think he got dumped by a few too many waves.”

“*Hey*,” Sawyer complained.

“Yeah, it’s not the ocean’s fault he’s a pig,” Anna agreed. “He was like this far before your summer in Tahiti.”

Sawyer scowled at her, but she flashed him an angelic smile. “What? You know it’s true.”

He looked like he was going to argue back, but Cress interrupted before he got the chance. “Where have you guys been?” she asked. “You weren’t at Luther’s back-to-school party.”

“We got in really late last night,” Wes said.

“Yeah, Dad needed the jet, so our flight home got delayed,” Sawyer added. “Besides, it’s not like we were in any rush to leave. The waves were killer, and the girls were hot—not that Wesley would know much about that. He was mooning over that girlfriend of his the whole time.” Sawyer rolled his eyes before he continued. “Anyway, Dad’s new hotel is sick. You guys should come next time we go there.”

“And watch you pick up girls all summer?” Cress said. “I think I’ll pass.”

“Your loss.” Sawyer shrugged.

I began to feel uncomfortable as I listened to their conversation. I’d barely ever left the town I grew up in, let alone the country. Sawyer spoke so flippantly about his dad’s new hotel that I got the impression their father didn’t own just the one. He talked so casually about having a jet and invited his friends to Tahiti like it was as simple as going to the mall. It all made me feel very much out of place.

“Well, you guys missed a good party,” Anna said.

“Oh yeah?” Sawyer replied. “Can’t have been that good. I heard you hooked up with Angus again...”

“Ugh,” Anna groaned. “How have you heard that already? I thought you guys only just got here.”

“Ha!” Sawyer let out a triumphant laugh. “I didn’t actually know. I just guessed. You’re getting too predictable.”

Anna groaned again and turned to Cress. “Remind me, why are we friends with the twins again?”

“Because we take you skiing every Christmas,” Sawyer responded.

“I didn’t ask you.” Anna kept her head turned away from him. “Seriously, Cress, *why?*”

“Because they take us skiing every Christmas,” she said with a laugh.

Anna shook her head. “I’m really beginning to feel like it’s not worth it.”

Sawyer wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her in close. “We’re also both very lovable. Even if I annoy you a little.”

“A little?”

“Okay, a lot.”

His grin was so adorable that Anna quickly gave in and started to laugh. “You guys are impossible to stay mad at.”

“It’s all a part of the Montfort charm,” Sawyer responded, grinning brightly.

As he let go of Anna, a few girls walked up to the table. They acted like they were there to speak with Anna and Cress, but they just wanted to ogle the twins. I didn’t really blame them because the guys were both really good-looking. While Sawyer was clearly the cheeky, flirtatious one of the pair, Wes was more mysterious and quiet.

The girls introduced themselves to me, but their names went straight in one ear and then right out the other. I was absolutely terrible at remembering names. They were all on the dance team with Cress and chatted excitedly about the dance number they were performing later in the week.

When the bell for class rang, the girls scurried off. At my last school, the signal for classes starting was a dull buzzing noise that sounded over the PA system. At Weybridge, it kind of sounded like a church bell ringing in the distance. Who knew a school bell could sound so classy.



“That’s the warning bell,” Cress said. “We’d better get to class.”

A flurry of nerves churned in my gut as I packed my tablet away. Every aspect of Weybridge Academy had felt foreign to me so far. I wasn’t like the kids I ate breakfast with. I didn’t vacation overseas or drive an expensive car. I was more at home in a shabby café with a broken air conditioner than I was in a ritzy dining hall that served seven types of pancakes. I’d always done well in school, but everything about this place was different from what I knew, and I hoped the lessons didn’t feel as alien to me as the rest of the place. There was only one way I was going to find out, so I sucked in a deep breath and headed for my first class.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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**M**y first class of the day was on the very top floor of the building. It was lucky we left the dining hall as soon as the bell rang because I was still moving slowly on my ankle, and we barely made it to the room in time for the start of the period. There were only a few desks free when we arrived, but I was glad to see there were two beside each other so I could sit next to Cress.

As I sat down, the girl at the desk in front turned in her seat to face me. It was Veronica—the girl Cress had dubbed the queen bee of the school. “You’re the new girl,” she said. “I’m Veronica Cordeaux.”

I gave her a tight smile as I nodded in reply. I wondered if she recognized me as the girl who’d been eavesdropping on her conversation with Noah last night. She’d been so fixated on Lily that I doubted she’d even realized I was there. After the way she’d treated Lily, I wasn’t all that enthused to talk to her.

“I’m Isobel.”

“And your last name?”

“Uh, it’s Grace.”

Veronica frowned as though she was racking her brain for any sign of recognition. “Nope,” she responded. “Never heard of you. What do your parents do?”

I struggled to hide my shock at the question. Was that really the first thing she wanted to know about me? I’d been here one day, and all Veronica could think to ask me was who

my parents were? I shouldn't have been surprised seeing how quick she was to call Lily a charity case. Clearly, a person's station in life was important to this girl.

"Well?" she prompted.

I swallowed a heavy lump in my throat. I'd been nervous about the idea of anyone at Weybridge finding out about my background. I'd even been deliberately vague with Cress and Anna. I couldn't begin to imagine the kind of reaction Veronica would have if I answered her question truthfully. I'd never been embarrassed by my mom's work before, and I wasn't embarrassed now. She probably worked harder than most of these kids' parents. But something inside me felt like telling Veronica the truth was asking for trouble.

"Leave her alone, Veronica." Cress came to my rescue as I hesitated to answer.

Veronica gave Cress a saccharine smile. "I'm hardly bothering her." She turned her attention back on me. "Am I, Isobel?"

I returned her smile with one of my own. "Oh, you're no bother at all."

"So, your parents?" she prompted. "Everyone's been dying to know more about you. You're practically a mystery."

"No mystery here. My mom's in hospitality." I decided to be vague, hoping she wouldn't press me for more details. At least it wasn't an outright lie.

Veronica leaned forward. "And your father?"

"He's not around," I shrugged. There was no way I was uttering a single word about Matthew to this girl.

"Oh, what happened?"

My hands clenched into fists at my sides. "That's none of your business"

Her eyes sparkled with a hint of pleasure, as though she had achieved her goal of getting a reaction out of me. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize it was a touchy subject." Her apology

was about as fake as her lips. “I’m just trying to get to know our newest student.”

“Well, you might have to save your questions for another day.” Cress chimed in once again. “Class is about to start.”

Veronica’s eyes narrowed at Cress as the teacher entered the room, but she soon returned her glare to me. It annoyed her that I wasn’t being more forthcoming. I’d only just met the girl, and I already felt like she was the last person in the world I wanted to discuss the messy details of my family life with. Some people just had bad vibes, and Veronica’s were the worst.

The teacher cleared his throat and introduced himself to class as Mr. Wagner. Thankfully, Veronica finally released me from her judgmental gaze as she turned to face the front of the room. I let out a long breath and relaxed back into my seat now she wasn’t studying me.

“Don’t worry about her,” Cress whispered. “She’s probably extra bitchy this year because it hurts to talk with those lips.”

I snorted, earning myself a warning look from Mr. Wagner. I immediately went quiet and focused on the teacher. I didn’t want to get on the bad side of any teachers—especially not on the first day. I listened closely as he outlined the class’s agenda for the year. I’d always had tunnel vision in school back home, and I was glad I could still employ the same level of concentration here.

I’d been worried about my subjects at Weybridge and wondered whether I would be drastically behind the other students. However, as the teacher went over the material we were going to be studying in English this semester, I relaxed. It all seemed pretty standard, and I wasn’t nearly as anxious as I’d been when I entered the room.

When the class ended, Cress started sniggering. “You didn’t hear a word I said that whole period, did you?”

“You were talking to me?”

“Yeah, I was talking to you.” She chuckled. “At least, I was trying to. It was like you had earmuffs on or something.”

“Sorry, I should have warned you.” I grimaced. “I tend to get hyper focused in class.”

“I’ll remember that next time. Maybe I’ll try drawing on your arm or pulling your hair to get your attention.”

“Oh no, not the hair!”

She wiggled her eyebrows at my reaction. “Looks like I’ve found your secret weakness. I’ll try to use the power I now hold wisely.”

“Okay, thank you.” I laughed.

Cress’s expression turned more serious as we made our way from the classroom. “I’m sorry Veronica was so nosy. It wasn’t exactly the nicest welcome to your first class at your new school. She can be such an Umbridge sometimes.”

Even though the memory of Veronica grilling me made me uneasy, I smiled at Cress’s *Harry Potter* reference. “It’s fine. I just wasn’t expecting the inquisition.”

“That’s Veronica for you. She’s like a shark. The slightest scent of blood, and she goes in for the kill.”

“She sounds like a delightful human being.”

“Tell me about it.” Cress shook her head. “So, you said your mom’s in hospitality. What does that involve?”

“Uh...” I stuttered as I tried to think of a response. I didn’t want to tell Cress that my mom worked day and night at a struggling café and could barely make ends meet. I was scared about how she’d react. As we walked out into the corridor, my eyes flicked from side to side, looking for some kind of inspiration or escape. My eyes landed on a poster board on the opposite wall, and I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“Lobsters.”

“What?”

*Lobsters?* What was I thinking? Lobsters weren't a job. I glared at the poster on the wall. It showed various diagrams of sea creatures and seemed to be just outside the entrance to a biology classroom. My eyes must have landed on the picture of the lobster. Why did that have to be the source of my inspiration? But I couldn't blame the lobster. Clearly, I had just cracked under the pressure and was a terrible, terrible liar.

I took a deep breath and tried to recover. "Uh, she owns a chain of restaurants that specializes in lobster. Well, seafood." Was chain lobster restaurant owner a legitimate-sounding business for a rich person to have? I didn't really know, but it was a better answer to Cress's question than just lobsters.

"Oh, yum. I love all seafood, especially lobster," Cress replied. "You must get to eat so much good food. You'll have to take us to one of her restaurants sometime."

I smiled and nodded even though I knew that was never going to happen. Not when said lobster restaurant didn't exist.

"So, what class have you got next?" Cress asked.

I was relieved I didn't have to keep talking about my mom's fake lobster business, and I quickly pulled up the schedule on my tablet. "Math." Thankfully, the classroom was only a few doors down so I didn't have far to walk. I was already wishing I'd gone to the nurse's office and got the crutch she suggested I use.

"Cool. I have French now, so I'll see you in the dining hall for lunch?"

I nodded and tried to ignore the way my stomach dipped at the thought of Cress leaving. She'd been by my side practically since the moment I'd arrived at this school. I wasn't looking forward to walking the corridors without her.

I knew I couldn't rely on her to hold my hand through the entire school year, so I gave her a smile. "Sure, I'll see you then."

Cress waved before taking off down the hall in the opposite direction. With a sigh, I started making my way to math class.

People were watching me as I hobbled down the corridor. There were far fewer students at Weybridge than my old school, so it was harder to disappear into the crowd between classes. It also made it more obvious when people looked my way—something I was noticing far more now that I no longer had Cress as a shield.

I hurried to math as quickly as my aching ankle would let me. Students were still slowly entering the room as I arrived, so thankfully, I wasn't late. I scanned the room for a familiar face and was met with a sneer from Veronica. Apparently, I shared this class with her too. But even though she was one of the few people I'd talked to in this school, I had no interest in taking the free seat at her side. Our brief conversation in English had already convinced me she wasn't interested in being my friend.

“Newbie!” I lifted my eyes to find Luther waving at me, his face lit with a bright grin. He was sitting at the back of the room with his friend Kaden at his side. He beckoned me over, but I hesitated. I was keen to keep a low profile, and I was already getting enough attention at school as the new kid. I wasn't sure sitting with Kaden and Luther would help take the focus off me.

Veronica's smug smile turned to a dark glare when she heard Luther call out to me. Something about the way she scowled at me pushed me toward the guys though. I wasn't about to let her obvious disapproval get to me. Plus, it wasn't like I had anyone else in the class to sit with.

Luther gestured at the seat next to him as I approached. “Sit with us, newbie.”

I folded my arms over my chest. “I have a name, you know.”

“And a very cute one at that,” Luther said with an approving nod. “So, are you going to sit down or not?”

“Uh, sure.” I still didn't quite trust Luther. He had a constant air of mischief about him, but he was being friendly enough, so I lowered myself into the empty desk at his side. Veronica's searing gaze had followed me to the back of the

room, and I tried to ignore the scowl practically burning holes in my skin and focus on Kaden. “I’m Isobel,” I said, introducing myself before he could start calling me newbie too.

“I know.” He gave me a small smile. “I’m Kaden.”

“I know.”

His smile tugged upward into a grin. Kaden wasn’t nearly as big as Luther or Noah, but he was just as handsome, and his glasses made him look like a cute Clark Kent. It was easy to see why the girls at school were all enamored with these boys.

“How’s your ankle?” Kaden asked.

I frowned and glanced down at it. “You guys heard about that?”

“Oh yeah,” Luther replied. “Noah wouldn’t shut up about it at breakfast.”

My eyes darted up to meet his. “He wouldn’t?”

“Nope.” Luther let out a chuckle. “Sounds like you can be a little stubborn, newbie. I think he was surprised you didn’t want his help. Most girls would have been happy to be Noah’s damsel in distress.”

“I’m not stubborn,” I muttered.

Luther’s face lit up. Noah had clearly told his friends all about our encounter this morning. I wasn’t sure what to make of the fact he’d shared the details with them. I hadn’t planned on telling anyone about it, but I couldn’t keep it from Cress once the nurse revealed he was involved. Why would Noah feel the need to tell the story? Maybe he’d been annoyed by it all and was complaining to the guys. Or maybe he was making fun of me. Hopefully, Luther and Kaden were the only ones he’d spoken with. The last thing I needed was word getting around school that Noah had come to my rescue.

“So, is there a reason you invited me to sit with you?” I asked in an attempt to derail conversation about this morning.

Luther winked. “I told you, newbie, I’ve got a good feeling about you. Plus, I’m still on a top-secret mission to uncover all



your deepest darkest secrets. Like, for instance, where are you from?"

I frowned. "That's hardly a deep, dark secret."

"Then tell us all about it."

Why did everyone at this school ask so many questions? It was becoming harder and harder to keep my home life to myself. I took a deep breath before answering. "A place called Rapid Bay."

"That's down the coast, right?" Kaden asked

"Uh, yeah," I replied. "You know it?"

Kaden nodded. "My aunt used to have a place in Rapid Bay. We went there all the time when I was a kid."

I hadn't expected either of the guys to be aware of my hometown. It might have been a popular place for wealthy people to vacation in, but it was small enough to be fairly unknown.

I gave Kaden a tight smile in response. Unlike him, I wasn't part of the vacation crowd. My family didn't own a property on the foreshore, and I didn't spend my summers working on my tan. My hometown was a stark mixture of people who had it all and those who just got by in life, and my mom and I definitely fell into the latter category.

"You really get to live there year-round?" Kaden asked.

"Uh, yeah." I was growing increasingly uncomfortable. It felt like Kaden was one question away from discovering that I spent most of my time serving food to people like him.

"How long have you lived there?" Luther added.

"My whole life." They looked ready to fire yet another question at me, so I quickly continued. "Are we really going to play twenty questions in math?"

"What better time than during math?" Luther shrugged. "It has to be the most dull subject in the world, and Kaden's always a total drag and actually listens to the teacher for most of it. I figure you will be more entertaining."

I let out a soft laugh, pleased that Luther was so easily distracted from his interrogation. “Well, you’re in for some disappointment. You’ve now surrounded yourself with two drags.”

Luther’s expression fell. “Oh, no. You’re not a nerd too, are you?”

“I just try to do well in school.”

He leaned back in his chair and groaned up at the ceiling. “She *is* a nerd.”

Kaden gave me a bright smile though. “Luther’s always impossible to sit with in class. Maybe between the two of us we can get him to concentrate.”

“Ha! You wish,” Luther replied. “Now, I’ve just got one more reason to be a total distraction.”

The teacher walked into the room, and I expected Luther to quiet down as the man signaled for the class’s attention. Luther kept on prattling away like the teacher wasn’t even there though.

“It’s not like it matters if we do well in these classes. Our parents just bribe the teachers to give us good grades anyway, so there’s really no point in actually trying.”

I couldn’t tell if he was joking or not, so I shot him a scowl just in case he was serious. “There is a point if you want to *learn*,” I hissed back at him.

Luther didn’t respond, and I wondered if I’d actually gotten through to him. His silence lasted all of two minutes, and I stifled a groan as he started prodding my arm with the end of his pen.

“You don’t *really* want to learn though, do you?”

I didn’t look at him as I replied. “Yep.”

“But, why?”

There were plenty of ways I could answer his question—because I enjoyed school, or because I wanted to get good grades so I had options once this year was over. I didn’t say

anything though, hoping the silent treatment might work with him.

It didn't.

He kept prattling on in a one-sided conversation instead. "You know no one actually uses math in real life, right? I mean, I guess accountants and people with other boring jobs use it, but no one actually wants to do that. Unless... You don't want to be an accountant, do you? Maybe that gut feeling I had about you was wrong. I didn't think my gut could ever be wrong, but—"

"Luther?" I hissed, turning to him.

An innocent smile was plastered across his face. "Yes?"

"Shut up!"

Several sniggers sounded from the other students in the room, and I realized I'd almost shouted the words. I immediately lowered my head closer to the desk and wished I could disappear. Thankfully, the teacher didn't reprimand me. He just carried on like I hadn't said anything at all, and I had to wonder if it was because he'd already given up on trying to control Luther. Either that or Luther's parents really did bribe the man.

I felt another poke on my arm, and I lifted my head to see Luther and Kaden both grinning at me.

"I think math is going to be fun this year," Luther said.

I couldn't have disagreed more.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

---

“I hear you yelled at Luther to shut up in math,” Anna said, as I joined her in the dining hall and placed my plate down on the table. It was piled high with food. The nerves that prevented me from eating much earlier in the day were now being overridden by a serious need for comfort food. Math had been an ordeal to say the least. Luther was so distracting, I’d missed half of what the teacher said, and now I was going to have to spend extra time studying tonight to go over the lesson.

“How did you hear that?” I groaned.

Anna shrugged. “Everyone hears everything at Weybridge. They’re all talking about how you were sitting with Luther and Kaden, and no one can believe you told Luther to shut up.”

“Well, he’s annoying.”

Anna laughed. “You’ve got that right.”

“He seems to think we’re going to be friends, but after one class with him I’m pretty sure that’s not going to happen. He literally didn’t stop talking all class. It’s so distracting.”

“He’s like that in most classes,” Anna said, shaking her head. “It’s really a crime that someone so hot is also so irritating.”

I nodded my head firmly in agreement. “He’s like the annoying brother I never asked for.”

“Well, you’re probably the only girl in this school who’s ever compared him to a brother.”

“Annoying cousin then?”

She laughed again. “I just meant that not many girls friend-zone Luther. I can’t stand him, and even I’ve nearly kissed the guy.”

I scrunched up my nose at the thought. “I definitely don’t want to kiss him.”

“Which is probably why he wants to be your friend,” Anna said with a smile.

“That and apparently he wants to uncover all my secrets.”

Anna tilted her head and looked at me. “What do you mean?”

“He kept saying he’s on an undercover mission to uncover all my secrets.”

“Did he now? Why would he be doing that?”

“Beats me.” I shrugged. “Probably just wants to know who the new kid is.”

“Yeah, maybe,” she agreed. “So, what did you think of Kaden?”

“He seems nice. He didn’t say much though. Luther was doing all the talking.”

“Yeah, he’s pretty quiet. Cress used to have the biggest crush on him.”

“Who did I have a crush on, Anna?” Cress asked as she arrived at the table.

“Kaden.”

“Oh, yeah.” Cress gave a dreamy sigh as she slumped into the nearest chair. “It was forever ago, but I was totally hopeless for him when we first started at Weybridge. I think it was the glasses. I find them so sexy.”

“It wasn’t *just* the glasses,” Anna said. “You really started swooning over him when he spoke French to you in class.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Cress sighed again before turning to me. “We got paired together for an assignment, and he’d spent the

summer in France with his family, so he could do the accent perfectly. I turn to absolute putty when a guy has an accent.”

“Did you guys ever get together?” I asked.

“No.” Cress pouted. “I crushed on him for our entire freshman year, but I was too nervous to make a move. I started dating my ex that summer, and the rest is history.”

“But you’re single now...” Anna’s voice was thick with suggestion.

“I *am* single now,” Cress agreed. “But there’s no way Kaden would be interested in me. He’s always been too busy concentrating on school to have a girlfriend.”

“Who said anything about being his girlfriend? I just think you guys should be bone buddies.”

“Bone buddies?” I laughed.

“Yeah, buddies who bone...” Anna looked so serious that I laughed again. She said it like it was the most normal thing in the world.

Meanwhile, Cress’s cheeks had flushed bright pink. “I’m not becoming anyone’s bone buddy.”

“Your loss,” Anna replied with a shrug. “I think Kaden got extra hot over the summer.”

Cress carefully looked over her shoulder and scanned the room for Kaden. He was sitting at the same table he’d been at for breakfast with Luther and Noah. My focus wasn’t on Kaden. My gaze drifted of its own accord to Noah. His expression was muted, and even though he sat with his best friends, he seemed distant. Luther and Kaden were both joking around and laughing at his side, and yet he only seemed to show a mild interest. There was definitely no hint of a smile.

“You really think he’s hotter?” Cress asked. “He seems just as hot as always to me...”

Anna slammed her hand down on the table, jolting me with surprise. “And that is why you should be bone buddies. You’ve always thought he was hot even when all the other idiots at our school didn’t realize.”

“I told you that was a million years ago.” Cress had turned back to face our table. “I don’t see him that way anymore”

“Uh-huh.” Anna clearly didn’t believe her, and I wasn’t convinced either. There had been a hint of longing in Cress’s eyes when she’d looked over at Kaden, and perhaps her crush wasn’t as ancient as she claimed.

“No one ever seems to go over to their table,” I said, glancing back at them once more. “Noah, Luther, and Kaden’s, that is.”

Cress shrugged. “It’s always just kind of been *their* table.”

“But why would that make people avoid it?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never really questioned it,” Cress said.

“That’s because you’re Noah’s cousin,” Anna said, rolling her eyes before she leaned in close to answer me. “When the three of them are together, people tend to tread carefully. Those boys are heirs to the biggest fortunes in this school, and they wield a crazy amount of power because of it. They make most of the kids at Weybridge look poor, which is kind of mind-blowing when you consider who’s at this school.”

“But why would that make people avoid them?”

“It’s not that people avoid them. It’s more that people don’t want to piss them off. There’s almost like some unwritten rule to leave them alone in here. Plus, everyone’s terrified after Vance tried to sit with them last year, and Luther told him to disappear or *he’d make him*.”

“He was obviously joking,” Cress said.

“Was he?” Anna replied. “Because if those boys wanted to make you disappear, they totally could...”

Cress scoffed. “They’re not *that* powerful.”

“I swear, Cress, sometimes it’s like you’ve got your blinders on when it comes to your cousin...”

“Well, *because* Noah is my cousin, I happen to know he doesn’t have a hit man on speed dial.”

Anna scoffed. “Yeah, because he’d totally *tell* you about it.”

“He would!”

Anna shook her head and focused back on me. “Okay, so maybe they’re not going to set a hit man on you. But everyone here wants to suck up to them,” she explained. “Success at this school is more about the connections you make than what you study, and you’d be crazy not to want close ties with one of those boys.”

“I guess that’s true,” Cress said. “That’s why they’re not close to anyone outside their little trio. Everyone here wants to get close to them for the wrong reasons.” She sighed as she spoke, and I almost felt sorry for the guys. I couldn’t imagine going through life questioning the motives of everyone around me. It sounded like that’s exactly what they had to do though.

“If they’re so guarded, why would Luther ask me to sit with him in class today?”

“I’m not sure,” Anna said. “It’s pretty unusual.”

“Yeah, he wouldn’t normally do that with a new student.” Cress nodded in agreement. “Maybe he’s just trying to figure you out. I bet the fact you didn’t leap at the chance to have Noah help you this morning is making his little head implode.”

“Because that’s not normal?” I guessed.

“Not in this place,” Anna replied. “I might not be totally enamored by Noah, like most girls here, but even I would have taken him up on his offer to carry me back to school. I mean, who wouldn’t want to be cradled against his naked chest? *Yum.*”

I scrunched up my face at the thought. That didn’t sound even slightly delicious. If Noah had carried me back to school today I would have been too mortified to ever show my face again.

Anna burst out laughing when she saw my reaction. “Yeah, Luther definitely sat next to you because of that. You’ve obviously caught his attention, and I imagine he’ll keep you



around once he realizes you're not all that interested in the politics of this school. It's very refreshing."

Much to my relief, the attention on me shifted as Sawyer and Wes joined us at the table.

"Have you guys seen the new Spanish teacher?" Sawyer asked. "Because her ass is *muy bueno*—"

"Sawyer!" Anna and Cress both shouted.

"What? She's my future wife, I can talk about her ass."

"Good luck with that," Anna said. "There's no way she'd even consider dating you, let alone marrying you."

"Uh, hello, hotel heir sitting right here," Sawyer fanned his hands in front of his face. "Who wouldn't be interested?"

"Anyone who's ever talked to you," Anna fired back.

"Ha ha, very funny." Sawyer had only just sat down but he suddenly leaped to his feet. "Now I'm going to have to spend lunch proving you wrong." With that, he left the table and headed over to a group of girls. Within moments he had one cornered, and she was soon giggling as he flirted with her.

"Your brother's a bit of a player, isn't he?" I asked Wes.

"You could say that," he agreed, with a shake of his head. "Thankfully, we're not really alike in that respect."

"So you don't go round breaking girl's hearts?"

"It's not really my style." His expression was genuine and I felt like he was telling the truth. Wes was definitely the sweeter of the twins.

"How was your first morning of classes?" he asked.

"Good, although I think I've got my work cut out for me in math this year."

"I know the feeling," he agreed. "If you ever need someone to study with, let me know."

I'd always studied alone, but before I could tell him that, something about the sweet smile on his face caused me to nod

in response. “Sure, that would be great.” I felt a twinge of guilt in my stomach, as I doubted I would take him up on the offer.

“Should we take bets on whether Sawyer nails, fails, or bails with that junior?” Anna asked, still watching him flirt with the girl across the room.

“Bails,” Cress immediately responded. “He’s all talk. There’s no way he’s going to keep this up and actually go on a date just to prove a point.”

“I think you underestimate him,” Wes said. “He can be pretty determined when he wants to be. I say nails. He’s definitely coming back with a date.”

They turned to me and I shrugged. I’d only just met the guy so I echoed Wes’ guess. I figured he would know his brother best.

“He’s definitely going to fail,” Anna said. “That girl might be laughing at his jokes, but this is Sawyer we’re talking about. No self-respecting girl would actually go on a date with him.”

When Sawyer returned to the table, it was with an inflated ego and a date for the weekend. Anna and Cress both groaned, disappointed they had guessed wrong. That only seemed to boost Sawyer’s mood further though. Apparently, he loved nothing more than proving people wrong. He spent the rest of lunch pondering if his Spanish teacher would be jealous, and Anna spent the rest of lunch throwing fries at his face whenever he said something obnoxious. Her plate was empty within minutes.

I left lunch before the bell rang so I could slowly make my way to the next class. I hadn’t iced my ankle in hours, and it was starting to throb again. I really should have spent my lunch break hunting down the nurse’s office so I could get the crutch she’d offered me, but I’d been so distracted I’d forgotten to go.

I found my next classroom easily enough, which meant I was early for my business management lesson. No one else had arrived yet, and I grabbed a seat toward the back of the

room. I'd barely gotten comfortable when I heard movement at the door. My gaze naturally drifted upward, and my stomach dipped as I saw who was entering the room—Noah.

He stopped just inside the doorway, and as our eyes met my heart seemed to flicker. I rubbed a hand across the spot on my chest, uncomfortable with the reaction. All the guy had done was help me back to my dorm this morning. I wasn't interested in him, and yet I was doing a terrible job of forgetting just how good he smelled and how my body had tingled when he wrapped his arm around me.

I ripped my gaze away from him and pulled my laptop out of my bag. The hairs on my arms stood on end as I felt him approach. Why was I so aware of his every movement? I didn't think he'd acknowledge me, so I was surprised when he stopped next to my desk.

“You didn't tell everyone,” he said.

I slowly lifted my eyes to his. A hint of confusion had created a pucker at his brow.

“Tell everyone what?”

“About your ankle this morning. I haven't heard any rumors flying about the school, so I can only assume you didn't tell everyone I was there.”

“Should I have?”

He shrugged. “I'm just surprised. Not many people in this world surprise me.”

“Okay...”

He searched my gaze, like I was some kind of puzzle he was yet to solve. I didn't want him putting all the pieces of me together though—not when I knew he wouldn't like the finished product.

“Thank you for sending the nurse this morning,” I said, desperate to break the silence. I didn't like the way he studied me during the pauses in conversation, and I especially disliked how my body seemed more responsive to him when we were quiet. It was hard uttering my gratitude when I was still

suspicious of his motives, but whatever his reasons for getting the nurse this morning it had still been helpful.

“I guess this self-absorbed, egotistical man-child knew you’d be too stubborn to seek her out yourself.” So he *had* heard my insult this morning. I opened my mouth to object, but he kept talking before I got a chance. “How’s your ankle feeling now?”

I blew out a breath and ignored the way my ankle throbbed in response to his question. “It’s fine.”

“The way you’ve been limping all day says otherwise.”

“Well, it *will* be fine,” I clarified.

“You say that word a lot, you know. *Fine.*”

“Well, it does a *fine* job of describing things.”

A small smile tempted the corner of his lips. “I guess it does.” He’d gotten closer as we talked, and even though there was nothing unusual about the distance that separated us, it felt so intimate when his eyes locked on to mine and danced with amusement like they did now.

Laughter from the door drew my attention away from him. It felt like someone had popped the bubble surrounding Noah and me as other students entered the classroom. He stepped away as people began moving down the aisle between us. He didn’t go far though, choosing to sit right behind me.

The room was filled with empty seats, and I was surprised he’d picked one so close to me. My skin buzzed at his proximity, and I could practically feel his eyes on the back of my neck. When I glanced over my shoulder, Noah was concentrating on his laptop, so I must have imagined it.

As I turned away, a guy who had taken the seat beside Noah pulled him into a conversation. “Noah, my man, how was your summer break?”

“It was *fine.*”

I struggled not to smile. I desperately wanted to look over my shoulder again to see if Noah was smiling too. There was an edge of humor to his voice that suggested he might be. I

didn't look though. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing I was listening in.

"It's a shame we couldn't catch up," the guy continued. "Would have been great to see you at our summer party in the Hampton's. Perhaps next year?"

"Perhaps," Noah replied. He sounded less interested in the conversation now, and I had to wonder if this was an example of what Cress and Anna had been talking about. Noah hated people cozying up to him and trying to use him. It sounded like this guy was sucking up big-time, and as he continued to talk, I felt the urge to stuff a sock in his mouth.

"Father bought me a new yacht for my birthday," the guy continued. "I'm taking it out next time we all have a free weekend. You must come."

"I'm afraid I'm busy," Noah replied.

"I didn't say what weekend..."

"You didn't have to."

That seemed to shut the guy up. Noah wasn't even slightly subtle when it came to shooting him down. And I didn't blame him. Yacht-boy sounded like he needed a little grounding.

"Hey, Isobel, did you drop this?"

I glanced up and found a familiar face looking down at me. I was so relieved to see Lily it took me a moment to realize she was holding a pen in her outstretched hand. It was nice to know she was in this class too.

"Thanks, it must have fallen out of my bag." I took the pen from Lily before she went to sit at the desk next to me.

"How was the rest of your night?" I asked. I'd helped Lily get Amber to their dorm room after we got back from the party, but Amber perked up as I was leaving. I'd had a bad feeling it was going to be a while before she went to sleep.

"Ugh, it was terrible," Lily said. "Amber decided she wanted to be a pirate and sang sea shanties for hours. I couldn't go to sleep because she kept trying to escape our room so she could go search for mermaids in the lake."

“Oh no,” I cringed. “How’s she feeling this morning?”

“Not so great. She was throwing up when I left for breakfast, and I haven’t seen her since.”

“Poor girl.”

“I definitely don’t envy her,” Lily agreed. “How’s your first day going?”

“Uh...” My voice trailed off as I remembered Noah was right behind me. I could have sworn I felt his attention prickling against my skin. “It’s feeling like the longest day of my life.”

If I was being honest, it was just my time in this class that had felt like an eternity. The minutes had a way of stretching in Noah’s presence, like everything was happening in slow motion, and I had to wonder if he had a secret super human ability to control time. It definitely seemed to come to a screeching halt whenever he looked me in the eyes.

Lily giggled. “Yeah, the first day back at school is always like that. It doesn’t help that I stayed up way too late with Amber.”

“I hope she appreciates that you looked after her.”

“Oh, I’m sure she will once she’s feeling a bit better.”

I glanced at the clock to check the time. The teacher was already running five minutes late for class. I wasn’t about to complain though. Matthew had chosen this subject for me and I wasn’t particularly excited about it.

“So, we didn’t get a chance to finish our conversation last night,” Lily said. “You were telling me about your ex-boyfriend...”

I scrunched up my face at the question. Levi was the last thing I wanted to talk about now, especially when I was almost certain Noah was listening in behind me. “There’s not much more to tell. We broke up at the end of last year because he cheated on me.”

“Oh, that sucks. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t great.” Lily didn’t even know all the gory details. “How about you? Are you dating anyone?”

“No. I’ve never really clicked with anyone here.”

“No?”

“I guess I’m just very different from the people here.” Her voice was soft, and her shoulders fell a little as she spoke. I understood what she meant. I’d only just arrived at this school, and I could already tell I wasn’t like the other students here. It wasn’t a good sign that Lily had been at the school for a while and was still feeling like an outsider.

“Yeah, I don’t think the guys here are really my type either,” I agreed. The urge to glance over my shoulder and see Noah’s reaction was almost overpowering.

“Really?” she asked. “What kind of guy do you usually go for?”

I paused as I considered my answer. I had thought Levi was my type, but clearly, he was the wrong choice for me. I now knew to steer clear of the popular guy, and to avoid any guy that basked in attention and adoration. I knew exactly what kind of guy I didn’t want to date, but I had no idea what I was looking for. It was especially hard to come up with an answer when I could feel Noah’s eyes still laser focused on the back of my neck.

“I guess a guy that’s normal would be a good start,” I finally answered. I’d hoped to come up with something witty—something that might get under Noah’s skin and teach him a lesson for listening in on our conversation like I knew he was. Instead, I’d settled for the boring truth. I was never going to like most of the guys in this school. From what I’d seen so far, they spent more time in front of the mirror in the morning perfecting their hair than I did.

Lily laughed and nodded in agreement. “A lot of the guys here are pretty extra.”

The teacher finally entered the classroom, and conversations hushed as he started the lesson. I let myself get drawn into the work. It was amazing how easy it was to

concentrate when you weren't being constantly prodded in the arm.

When the bell rang, signaling the end of class, I was surprised by how quickly the time had gone. I'd been worried a business class would be dull, but so far, it sounded interesting. I was actually looking forward to what the teacher had in store for us this term.

Most of the students filed out of class quickly. It was like they'd packed up five minutes before the lesson had ended and were out the door before the teacher finished speaking. I waited until we were dismissed and was a little slower to gather my things.

Lily waited for me, but as I stood from my desk, her gaze flicked over my shoulder. A small frown creased her brow, but she quickly ironed it out and smiled at me. "I'll see you later, Isobel."

She darted away before I could reply.

I knew exactly what had prompted her to move so fast as I felt *his* presence behind me. I slowly turned and found Noah had stepped away from his desk and edged toward me. I wasn't sure why he felt the need to stand so close, and I took a small step away from him.

"I'm curious," he said. "What exactly does a guy have to do to be considered normal?"

So, he *had* been listening.

"I'm not sure you'd understand if I told you." I started to walk toward the door, but Noah hurried to catch up with me.

"You won't give me a clue?"

"Nope."

"Not even a little one?"

I let out a sigh and stopped as I approached the classroom door. "Why do you want to know?" I asked, turning to face him.

"Why don't you want to tell me?"



“Perhaps I don’t want to tell you because I wasn’t actually talking to you when I said that.”

“I’m aware. That doesn’t stop me being curious though...”

I let out another heavy breath. “I’m not sure why you’re so curious. It’s not like you’ll ever be normal.”

He slowly started to smile. “Are you saying I’m special?”

“No. I’m definitely not saying that.” He already thought it enough for the both of us.

His eyes seemed to sparkle in response. “I think you might be, Crash.”

“Ugh, don’t call me that.” This boy was giving me whiplash. One moment he was dark and brooding, and the next he was taunting me with the barest hints of a smile. “Maybe you should stop worrying about my definition of normal, and start worrying about why you want to know.”

I turned and walked off down the corridor before he could respond. It wasn’t the most majestic exit because my ankle was still causing a slight hobble, and I wasn’t feeling all that triumphant after our interaction.

*Why was Noah so curious?*

And, more importantly, why did I care?

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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“**Y**ou’ve got to be kidding me,” I muttered.

We were standing on the school basketball courts, and I was scowling in the direction of the PE teacher. I’d just gotten over the feeling of awe as I walked past the school’s indoor swimming pool, which had floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the lake, and the fitness center, which had all the latest high-tech equipment a fitness junkie could dream of. I hadn’t even had a chance to appreciate how shiny and new the school’s basketball courts were before the teacher announced the worst news ever.

Today we were taking part in the high-school version of torture—the beep test. Couldn’t they have waited more than two days into the new school year before subjecting us to this?

I wasn’t the only one who was upset by the idea, and a series of groans echoed around me. Cress and Anna were probably two of the loudest. The boys in the class didn’t look nearly so concerned. Although I heard Sawyer grumble to his brother that he shouldn’t have eaten so much for lunch.

The upside to all of this was that at least I’d be too tired to keep stressing over the girls’ PE uniform. We were expected to wear a T-shirt with a pair of booty shorts, and ever since I put them on, I’d been worried half my butt was showing. It wouldn’t have been too bad if the top was oversized, but that too was on the smaller side. The outfit was something I’d be happy enough wearing on a run—when it was the early hours of the morning and there wasn’t a soul in sight. But being

surrounded by a class of teenage boys, I was feeling highly self-conscious.

“We’ll be comparing your test results from the start of the year to the end of the year to see how your fitness improves,” the teacher explained, but it was hard to hear him over the complaints of my classmates.

He started to tell us how the test was going to proceed, but no one was really listening. The concept was pretty straightforward, and I imagined most kids had done the test before. All we had to do was run back and forth between the cones laid out at either end of the court, staying ahead of the beeps. It was easy enough until the beeps started getting progressively quicker and you had to run faster. If you didn’t reach the next cone before the next beep, you were out.

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck start to prickle, and I glanced over my shoulder as Noah and Luther entered the gym. It was like my body had some built-in sensor for whenever those boys were around—self-preservation, I thought.

I concentrated on the teacher, not wanting to be caught staring at the two of them. I was determined to keep my distance from those boys, Noah especially. They were trouble with a capital T, and I had no intention of getting swept up in it.

I couldn’t seem to help myself from noticing wherever Noah was in the room though. He’d stopped just off to one side of the teacher and was leaning against the gym wall looking like he was posing for some catalog photo shoot. I’d never seen a high-school student fill out a PE uniform quite like he did. The shirt perfectly molded to the muscles on his arms and chest.

If I was being honest, a few guys in the class gave Noah a run for his money. I wasn’t completely blind to how good the twins looked in their uniforms, and Luther was almost as muscular as his friend. I just wished I were a little blinder when it came to Noah.

The teacher blew his whistle, and several kids jolted with surprise. "Line up by the cones!" he shouted. Several more groans echoed through the room, but we all started heading to the side of the basketball court.

"This sucks," Anna said. "Coach August must have had a really bad summer if this is how he's starting the year."

"It's like he wants to punish us," Cress agreed. "And we haven't even done anything wrong yet."

"Yet?" I asked.

Cress and Anna shared a knowing smile before Anna turned to me. "Last year, Cress and I got in a bit of trouble because we kept pretending to have our periods to get out of swimming in PE. August probably wouldn't have said anything, but everyone was swimming for a month, and we sat out of every class. You should have seen how pink his cheeks went when he confronted us about it."

Cress giggled as she nodded. "He kept referring to our women's problems, and every time we corrected him to say periods, his cheeks went even brighter. That's probably what this beep test is about. The old guy still hasn't forgiven us."

"Probably," Anna agreed.

"This is going to be fun," Wes said, appearing at my side. "I hope I can beat my score from last year."

"You must be the only person who's excited about this," I told him. I enjoyed running myself, but not like this. The best part about running was finding a steady rhythm and enjoying the outdoors, not racing until your lungs burned and your legs seized up.

"Yeah, because he's a super human fitness freak," Anna agreed with a shake of her head. "Wes, you're crazy."

He laughed and shrugged. "I can't help that I enjoy this stuff."

I looked over to see if Coach August was close to starting the test. He was standing to the side of the court and seemed to be in close conversation with Noah. He was listening intently

to whatever Noah was saying, so I guessed there would still be a few more moments before the running began. I'd woken up this morning and was pleased to find my ankle didn't hurt as much today, but I was still feeling a little nervous about exercising on it again so soon. I'd been walking okay so far, but it was still a little tender. I didn't want to make a big deal about it. I was sure it would be fine if I just started with a light jog and stopped when my ankle started to complain.

"So, what do you think, bro?" Sawyer walked over to stand next to Wes. "Fancy a little bet on which of us will come out on top?"

Wes rolled his eyes. "We already know I'm going to beat you. No point in betting on it."

"You sure? Because I was thinking of putting our dorm room on the line..."

"Oh, really?"

"Yep." Sawyer eagerly rubbed his hands together. "If you win, you get one full weekend of the room to yourself."

"And if you win?"

"Well, I get the room to *myself*."

Wes actually seemed tempted by the idea. "And where would the loser sleep?"

"I'm sure you could find a couch to crash on. Or your car's got a big trunk; you could probably sleep in there."

"Neither of those options sound the least bit appealing. But since I'll be winning anyways..."

A big grin lit Sawyer's face. "Then we have a bet?"

"We have a bet."

The two boys shook hands, identical looks of satisfaction displayed proudly on their faces. Each looked convinced he was going to win.

"Wes seems confident," I murmured to Anna. "Do you think he'll win?"

“To be honest, it could go either way,” she replied. “They’re both just as fit as each other.”

“At least Sawyer didn’t bet his Maserati this time,” Cress said. “He almost cried when Wes won their last bet and got to drive it for a month.”

“So, they make bets a lot?”

Anna nodded. “Oh yeah, they are always competing with each other.”

“Miss Grace?” I turned as Coach August walked over to me.

“Yes?” I somehow managed to smother a frown as he stopped in front of me. I wasn’t sure how he knew my name, but as I was the only new kid in the year group, it probably wasn’t hard to figure out. Still, I wasn’t sure why he’d decided to single me out.

“The nurse contacted me,” he said. “I hear you’ve hurt your ankle.”

I was thrown for a moment. The nurse hadn’t told me she was going to speak to Coach August about my injury.

“Oh, uh, yeah, I did,” I answered. “It’s feeling much better today though.”

My eyes drifted past Coach August to where he and Noah had been standing at the side of the court. Luther was now alongside Noah, chatting away to his friend. But Noah didn’t seem to be listening. He was looking right at me, watching my conversation with the teacher. When our eyes met, he instantly turned to his friend, as though he’d been talking to Luther the whole time.

“Miss Grace, did you hear me?”

“What?” I turned back to face Coach August, who was still looking down at me. I must have completely missed something he’d said.

“I was saying I think it would be best if you sit out the test,” he continued. “You can make it up once your ankle is fully recovered.”

I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or annoyed. I didn't particularly want to do the beep test on a sore ankle. But I also didn't want to sit out by myself. I'd rather just get it over and done with.

"I'm sure I'll be fine," I said.

"I insist." There was a sense of resolve in his voice, and I knew there was no way I'd convince him otherwise. He started gesturing to the bleachers. "You can sit over there and watch."

I let out a sigh. "Okay."

He nodded, satisfied I'd finally agreed, and returned to the sidelines.

"Have fun," I murmured to Cress and Anna. They were practically glaring at me with envy.

"You are so lucky," Anna said.

"Don't worry, I'll be sitting with you soon," Cress added.

I gave them a smile before I trudged over to the bleachers. I hated being the odd person out, and I felt like the rest of the class was judging me as I went to sit by myself. My limp wasn't obvious anymore, so they probably all thought I was cheating to get out of the test somehow.

As I made myself comfortable on a bench a few rows back from the court, I noticed Noah watching me. I could have sworn there was a hint of concern in his eyes, but he pulled them away so quickly it was impossible to tell. Why was he so interested in me today? The image of Noah deep in conversation with Coach August flashed into my mind. I was still surprised the nurse hadn't told me she wanted me to sit out of gym class. Could Noah have been the one to tell the coach about my ankle? Why would he do that?

The test started, and I relaxed back on my seat to watch. I'd done the beep test once at my old school, and kids had started dropping like flies within the first few minutes. They hadn't exactly been a fit bunch though. Everyone here looked to be doing much better. Even Cress and Anna, who had grumbled and groaned about doing the test, seemed to be taking the first few minutes easily in their strides.

The test only became harder as the minutes dragged on. With each beep that sounded, the pace increased and the students had to reach the opposite side of the court quicker. All of a sudden, people started to give up. It was mostly girls at first, but then a few guys stopped too.

When Cress failed to reach her cone before the beep, she came to join me with a pained look in her eyes.

“That. Was. Horrible,” she said between breaths as she collapsed down onto the bench at my side.

“You did really well.”

All I got was a groan in response.

I continued watching and was impressed by how long Anna managed to keep going. She somehow made it look so graceful. Kids were red-faced and puffing on either side of her, but the only hint of her own struggles was the soft glow of sweat on her forehead.

When Anna finally stopped, she abruptly slowed in the middle of the court, like she’d suddenly decided she was bored with the whole experience.

“Anna, you did amazing,” I said as she came to sit on the bleachers.

She merely shrugged and dabbed her face with a fresh towel she’d taken from a basket at the sidelines. “I’ve always been quite good at running,” she said. “Doesn’t stop me from hating it though. It’s terribly boring.”

I smiled and shook my head. I didn’t understand why she thought running was boring. I’d always found it so freeing. I loved the constant feel of my feet hitting the ground and the way I could sense the blood pumping beneath my skin. I lived for those moments when I could take in the beauty of the world around me and allow my mind to just drift. Running between cones to the sound of high-pitched beeps wasn’t quite the same.

“Looks like we could be here a while,” Cress said, nodding at the line of students who were still running across the court.



Most people had dropped out, and there were just a few guys left. All of them looked as fresh as the moment the whole thing had started. Sawyer and Wes were still running and practically moving as one, their feet slapping against the ground in unison. They were so in sync it was almost mesmerizing to watch. There were a couple of other guys I didn't recognize running next to them, and Noah was also still going.

"I'm not going to lie," Anna said. "I'm actually starting to enjoy this beep test. Is it wrong that I find guys running super sexy?" She was watching the boys like she'd just been offered a box of chocolates and couldn't decide which one to take.

"Definitely not wrong," Cress replied.

I could see what they meant. There was something alluring about the way the boys' muscles flexed as they ran and how their sweaty shirts clung to their chests.

"It's a shame that Wes has a girlfriend and Sawyer is Sawyer," Anna continued. "Because right now, I would love to be the ham in that twin sandwich."

I burst out laughing, causing several people to look our way. I immediately went quiet. "I can't believe you just said that!"

"What?" Anna replied. "Just because we're friends with the guys doesn't mean I can't appreciate their beauty."

"I just thought you'd be too busy drooling over Luther," Cress said.

"Ugh, no." Anna protested but didn't look nearly as disgusted by the idea as her words suggested, and her eyes immediately sought Luther out. He was headed for the sidelines, having just tapped out of the test. When he looked up and saw Anna watching him, he winked.

"Definitely not," Anna added. "If anyone out there is worth drooling over, it's Noah. Pretty sure he's been crowned the king of hotness at our school."

I smothered another laugh. "The king of hotness?"

“Yeah, he rules in that department, and we should all bow down to him.”

“Anna, that’s my cousin,” Cress groaned.

“Yeah, your extremely hot cousin,” she said.

Cress’s face scrunched up with disgust. “I’m going to grab a drink of water.”

She stood and walked to the end of the bleachers. I was expecting to see her headed toward a water fountain, but there was a large refrigerator with bottles of water and Gatorades standing by the wall. We definitely didn’t have one of those in the gym at my old school.

“It’s a shame Veronica’s had her claws sunk into him for such a long time,” Anna said. Apparently, she was still talking about Noah. “I bet he’d be a good kisser.”

“So, they *are* dating?” I felt like I couldn’t keep up.

“No, but she’s made it clear to everyone at school that he belongs to her,” Anna replied. “And you’d need to have a death wish to risk her wrath. Though there are plenty of girls who are willing to put themselves in danger for a ride on the Noah train.”

“You have such a beautiful way with words, Anna.”

She snorted a laugh. “I know.”

“So, that’s it then?” I asked. “Noah is off-limits to everyone because Veronica has decided he’s her property?”

“Pretty much.”

“That’s a bit messed up.”

“To be honest, I don’t think it really stops him getting attention from other girls. If anything, it probably makes them want him more,” Anna said with a shake of her head. “Personally, it doesn’t seem worth it to me. Apart from this weird on-again-off-again thing he’s got going with Veronica, Noah wouldn’t date any of the girls at school. As far as I’m concerned, that train has left the station.”

I glanced back at the court to watch Noah running. “Why wouldn’t he date anyone at school? You mean because of Veronica?”

“Nah, I think it’s because his standards are too high.”

That didn’t surprise me in the least.

“Please tell me you’re not still talking about Noah.” Cress had returned with three bottles of water. She passed one to Anna and one to me before she sat back down, opened hers, and took a swig.

Anna shrugged. “I’m just explaining to Isobel that Noah thinks he’s too good to date any of us mere mortals.”

Cress sighed and shook her head. “He’s not like that. He’s just guarded. He doesn’t open up easily.”

“So, he doesn’t date anyone here because he’s worried about getting his heart broken?” I wondered out loud.

“No, I think he’s more concerned about getting used,” Cress explained. “The girls here all have ulterior motives. They only want to date him to boost their status. There’s nothing he hates more than dishonesty, so he never gives girls a chance to take advantage of him that way.”

It was one thing to avoid dating because you’d been cheated on, but to not trust anyone at all was downright depressing. His reaction to our collision in the woods was starting to make a little more sense. It didn’t excuse the fact he’d automatically assumed I’d fallen on him on purpose, but if what Cress said was true, perhaps his reaction wasn’t completely ridiculous.

A shout sounded from the court, pulling me from my thoughts.

“I won!” Sawyer was standing in the middle of the court, dancing on the spot while Wes shook his head at his brother. It looked like Sawyer had stopped running the moment Wes had finished, and given the way he was dancing, he still appeared to have more than enough energy to continue.

“Sawyer, Wes, off the court now!” Coach August shouted to them. “The test isn’t over.”

The boys both dashed to the edge of the court, leaving three boys still running the test. Noah was there, along with two guys I hadn’t met. They were all sprinting hard now, and I felt slightly breathless just watching them.

“I can’t wait to have the room to myself for the weekend,” Sawyer bragged as Wes came over to sit with us. I hadn’t opened my water bottle yet, and I happily offered it to Wes. He looked like he needed it more than me.

“Thanks.” He smiled and accepted the water before focusing on his brother. “You can’t win if you cheated. You tripped me!”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yeah, you did.”

Sawyer looked far too smug as he turned to us. “I guess we’ll just have to ask our umpires. Did any of you see evidence of foul play?”

Cress, Anna, and I shook our heads.

“Sorry, Wes, we were too busy talking. We didn’t see anything.” Cress looked genuinely disappointed that she couldn’t save Wes from his brother’s taunts.

“See!” Sawyer continued. “Now I just have to pick the perfect weekend.” He was still grinning brightly as he spun on his heels and walked off. He proudly made his way over to a group of girls sitting farther down the bleachers, no doubt planning to boast about his victory over his brother.

Wes shook his head as he watched his twin leave. “In all honesty, I can only blame myself for that. I should have known he’d cheat.”

“Maybe we can do something fun that weekend,” Anna said. “Go on a trip somewhere without Sawyer to teach him a lesson.”

Wes slowly started to smile. “Anna, you are totally devious, but I love the way you think.”

“Thank you.”

My eyes drifted to the court as Noah finally came to a stop. He was puffing heavily, and he lifted his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face, flashing his abs to everyone on the bleachers. I heard several girls giggling, and I had no doubt as to why.

Noah was the last student left running, and a smattering of applause floated down from the bleachers. The noise practically turned to cheers when Coach August announced that, since the test was over, class was ending early for the day, and everyone hurried back toward the locker rooms. Anna and Cress couldn't seem to wait to grab a quick shower and get out of their sweaty clothes, and I slowly trailed after them.

“Nice running out there, newbie.”

I turned to find Luther grinning behind me. Noah was at his side, and I tried my best to ignore him. Instead, I shot Luther a scowl. “It's not my fault I couldn't do the test.”

“Uh-huh.”

“My ankle is injured. You *know* that.”

“Do I?”

“Yes.”

Luther gave a lopsided shrug. “So, did you like what you saw from the bleachers?”

“What do you mean?” I was doing my best not to look at Noah, but from the corner of my eye, I could swear he was glaring at his friend.

“I mean, the most athletic boys at Weybridge put on quite a show for you ladies. I was curious if you enjoyed it?”

“Uh...” How did I even respond to that?

“Or maybe you're more into book-smart guys. Or perhaps the arty type?”

I raised an eyebrow at him but kept quiet. He didn't need any encouraging to continue. “Or the funny guy or the bad boy. Come on, what kind of guys do you like to date?”

Finally, he'd gotten to his point. "Luther, all you need to know about my type is that you're not it." I kept my face deadly serious as I spoke, but I couldn't help a grin from forming as I turned away from Luther to follow the rest of the kids out of the gym.

Luther wasn't even slightly discouraged by my response and skipped quickly to my side, a broad smile still plastered on his face. "Message received." He laughed as he walked alongside me. "But that doesn't answer the question."

"Why are you so interested?"

"I told you I'm on an undercover mission to uncover your secrets. That's the one I want to know today."

"I really don't like this game," I grumbled. I was suspicious of all Luther's talk about secrets, and I wasn't sure why he kept insisting on trying to uncover mine. It was probably like Cress and Anna said, and he was trying to figure me out.

"So..." he continued. "What type of guy do you go for?"

I stopped and faced Luther once more, but my eyes flickered in Noah's direction. He was following behind, keeping his distance. Thankfully, Noah didn't seem to be waiting on my answer. Instead, he was glaring at his best friend. It seemed he was just as annoyed with Luther as I was.

"I don't have a type," I replied. Luther opened his mouth to object, but I quickly interrupted before he got a chance. "And I don't have any secrets. Catch you later, Luther."

This time, I managed to escape, and as I strode away, I heard a thump and then Noah hissed, "What is wrong with you?"

Luther laughed, but I was now too far away to catch his response. I just hoped he was finished trying to figure me out because, even though his questions seemed harmless, there were things about me I didn't want anyone in this school to know.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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I was trying to study when my phone started ringing. It wasn't the beaten-up old flip phone I'd been using for the last five years. No, it was the new iPhone that had arrived for me earlier in the day. There was only one person who could have sent it and only one person who had the number, so I knew it was Matthew on the other end of the line. I was suddenly cursing myself for taking the damn thing out of the box.

I scowled down at the device as I saw the screen light up with the words "Matthew LaFleur." Because, of course, my father had already added himself to the contacts list. I was going to have to change the name to something like "Do not answer" so I was reminded to not pick up.

I couldn't imagine why he would be calling, and I had no desire to speak to him, yet I still found myself answering the call. "Hello."

"Miss Isobel, I have your father on the line." I recognized Caldwell's voice but didn't have a chance to respond as I heard the click of the line changing. They had called me, and yet I had to wait several minutes before I was connected to my father.

"Hello, Isobel," he said. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

I highly doubted he was genuinely apologetic. I imagined he kept people waiting all the time.

"I wanted to touch base with you," he continued. "I trust you are settling in at school."

“Well enough.” I didn’t feel the need to go into more detail. I doubted he really wanted to hear how I was getting on anyway.

“And it seems you received your new phone without any issues.”

“Yep.” This had to be the most painful conversation of my life. “Was there anything I can help you with?” I figured it was better to cut right to the chase, rather than sit here and listen to his woeful attempts at small talk.

“Actually, yes. I would like for us to have lunch on Saturday.”

“You would?” My voice betrayed my surprise. He’d bailed and gone to New York almost immediately after meeting me, so I was under the impression he had no plans to see me again anytime soon—if at all.

“I would. It will be around midday. I’ll have Caldwell contact you with the details.”

“But—”

“I’ll see you then.”

He hung up before I had a chance to reply, and as I lowered the phone from my ear, I frowned at it. Matthew actually wanted to see me? I struggled to believe it. Surely, he had some ulterior motive. Maybe there was someone else he wanted me to stay away from, or perhaps he needed to give me another lesson on the *expectations that come with the LaFleur name*. I shuddered at the thought. I didn’t particularly want to see him, but he hadn’t given me the opportunity to object. Perhaps that was why he’d hung up on me so fast. He probably knew I wouldn’t be thrilled by the idea.

“Why do you look like you just sucked on a lemon?” Cress asked as she entered the room. She was still dressed in her dance gear and looked as bubbly as ever despite the fact she’d been at practice for hours.

I tossed the phone down on my desk. “Oh, parent stuff. You know how it is.”



“I really do,” she replied before collapsing on her bed.

“How was practice?” I asked, hoping to steer the subject away from Matthew.

“It was great.” Her face lit with a wide smile as she stared up at the ceiling. “The choreography for our latest dance is amazing. I can’t wait to perform it at the game on Thursday. You’ll come watch me, won’t you?”

“Yeah, of course.” I had no idea what game she was talking about, but I was happy to go and support her.

She smiled brightly and rolled onto her side to face me. “Perfect.” She hopped off her bed again with a surprising amount of energy. “I’m going to grab a quick shower. Should we head to dinner after I’m done?”

My stomach grumbled in agreement, and she laughed. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Cress flitted into the bathroom, and the smile on my face dropped as she closed the door behind her. My talk with Matthew was still at the forefront of my mind. Did I really have to see him again so soon? Mom had told me I needed to give him a chance, but I felt like he’d already had his opportunity and wasted it. He was making an effort to see me again, so perhaps I’d judged the guy too quickly. It was just one lunch. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

Just as she promised, Cress had a quick shower, and we were soon heading for the dining hall.

As we were crossing the courtyard that separated the main building from our dorm, my phone rang again. This time, it was the banged-up old one rather than the shiny new iPhone, which I’d left in my room. As I pulled it from my pocket, I noticed Cress giving the phone a strange look. I quickly realized why. The device was probably older than I was, and I imagined no one in this school used anything other than the latest devices.

Cress didn’t question me about the phone, so I hoped she had simply ignored it. Still, I probably needed to switch to using Matthew’s iPhone from now on.

I glanced at the screen and smiled when I saw it was my mom calling.

“I better take this,” I said to Cress. “It’s my mom, and we’ve been missing each other’s calls for the last few days.”

“Of course, I’ll see you at dinner when you’re done.”

I waited until Cress had walked away before I answered the call.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Oh, you finally answered.” My mom let out a happy cheer. “I was worried that school was working you too hard and we might never speak again.”

I let out a laugh. “Sorry, I keep accidentally leaving my phone in my room.”

“You really make a terrible teenager,” she said. “That thing should be glued to your hand.”

“Well, someone must have raised me wrong then.”

Mom’s delighted laugh lit up the other end of the phone, and I realized how much I missed the sound.

“How’s school?”

“It’s fine.” I wandered over to one of the decorative benches that lined the edges of the courtyard and sat down. It was growing dark, and there weren’t many students about, but thankfully, it wasn’t too cold. “I like my classes, and I’ve started to make a few friends.”

“That’s great, sweetie.”

Her voice was filled with happiness but also a hint of relief, so I suspected she’d been worrying about how I was going to fit in at such a fancy school. The way my friendships back home all ended so disastrously last year had also probably given her a scare.

Coming to Weybridge was a little like being splashed in the face with cold water and being forced to take a fresh look at my life. It was only now, when I looked back on the last few months, that I realized just how miserable I had been. Just a

few days ago, I'd been so angry with my mom for sending me here, but it was hard to stay mad at someone who only ever wanted the very best for you.

"How's the café?" I asked.

"It's good." She replied quickly, like her answer was already prepared. "We've been quite busy even though the summer rush is over. The air conditioner has finally been replaced. And Norma is still insisting she's a psychic. Yesterday, she used her abilities on Frank and told him that he'd already met the love of his life and that she was right before his eyes and he didn't realize it."

I laughed as I easily pictured the scene. Frank had been a regular for years and came to the café every morning for bacon and eggs. It had always been clear to Mom and I that Norma was in love with him.

"She was talking about herself, wasn't she?"

"Oh, there's no doubt about it. Unfortunately, Frank thought long and hard about it but said he had no idea who it could be. You should have seen the way Norma stormed off."

"Oh, poor Norma. I hope Frank finally gets a clue. They'd be so cute together."

"The cutest," Mom agreed. "She told me to say hi and check to make sure you're not breaking too many boys' hearts at your fancy new school."

"Well, you can tell her I say hi back. And that her psychic powers must be wonky because I'm definitely not breaking hearts."

"I'll make sure to let her know."

I couldn't stop smiling as I relaxed back into my seat. Everything felt so much better when I was talking with my mom. Being away from her was probably the hardest part of adjusting to my new school. We'd always been so close, and I don't think I'd truly appreciated how lucky I was to always have her around until I'd come to Weybridge. I missed being at home with her, and I hated that I couldn't just wander into the living room whenever I wanted to talk.

“I miss you so much, Mom.”

“I miss you too. I know it’s hard being apart, but I’m so proud of you and all the amazing things you’re going to achieve. This school is just the beginning.”

I nodded and tried to stop tears from gathering in my eyes. Mom truly believed that being at Weybridge was going to help me conquer the world, and I wanted to make her proud.

“Well, if I achieve anything in life, it isn’t going to be because of some school. It’s going to be because I have the world’s most amazing mom.”

Mom was silent on the other end of the line for a moment, and I could have sworn I heard her sniff. She started to chuckle, so I must have been mistaken. “You know you don’t have to suck up to me right now—there’s no leftover pecan pie in the fridge.”

I smiled. “What? No pecan pie? Is the world ending?”

Mom laughed. “No, it turns out Norma has a thing for it too. I’ve had to start sharing the café’s leftovers with her instead of you.”

“Tell her to have an extra bite for me.”

“I will.”

“Speaking of food, I should probably head to dinner.”

“Okay, sweetie. We’ll talk again soon. I love you.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

I hated hanging up on my mom and quickly rubbed my eyes as tears started to surface. It was so hard being here without her, especially when we couldn’t always get each other on the phone. I really needed to make sure I didn’t let days pass between calls again.

“Are you okay?”

Shivers ran down my spine as I recognized the voice. Somehow Noah’s deep, slightly husky tone had become familiar to me. Like I’d been listening to him for years rather than just a few short encounters.

I slowly lifted my head to look up at him. He was standing by the bench, his hands tucked into the pockets of his sweatshirt. He wasn't in school uniform anymore. Instead, he was wearing a pair of gray sweats and a hoodie. It was irritating how easily he managed to make even the most relaxed outfit look good.

"You seem upset," he continued.

"I'm fine."

"Of course, you are." A small smile lifted his lips as he lowered himself to sit on the bench by my side.

I really didn't know what to make of Noah. Just yesterday, he'd been accusing me of deliberately crashing into him in an attempt to get his attention. Surely, if he believed that he'd be avoiding me like the plague. And yet, he'd helped me back to school and sent the nurse to check on me. He'd talked to me in class, and here he was coming to sit with me as though we were close friends. Cress insisted there was more to Noah than what most people saw, and I was beginning to wonder if she was right.

"How's your ankle?" he asked.

It was an innocent question. Something you'd expect any normal person to ask. But, coming from Noah, it made me uncomfortable. He wasn't like most people. He didn't seem to care about anyone other than Cress and his little trio of friends at Weybridge. He also wasn't afraid of bluntly telling people outside of that small circle exactly what he thought of them. I got the impression Noah was never polite for the sake of it, so why was he bothering to check on my injury?

I followed his example and asked him outright. "Why do you care?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

His reply threw me for a second, and it took me a moment to figure out how to respond. There were so many reasons why I didn't expect Noah to care about my ankle. He was known for steering clear of most girls at school, and he thought I was

some sort of crazed fan girl who would do anything to get him to notice me.

But the biggest reason should have been obvious to him. I was a nobody, not worth a second thought, especially to someone like him. Apparently, he needed it spelled out...

“Because you’re Noah Hastings and I’m just...” I paused, unsure what to say. I couldn’t reveal the true differences between us—the vast chasm of wealth, power, and privilege.

“I’m just the new kid,” I finally continued. “You don’t know anything about me.”

He searched my eyes for several long seconds, almost as if he thought he could gain access to all my secrets with just one look. He must have failed because he leaned back on the bench, making himself comfortable. “Okay, so tell me about yourself?”

I tilted my head and frowned. What was his game now?

“Like, do you have any brothers or sisters?” he prompted.

A crease still crinkled my forehead, but Noah’s face was calm and relaxed, and his green eyes were staring at me expectantly, waiting for my answer.

“No, I’m an only child,” I finally responded.

“How about pets?”

“No, no pets. I always wanted a rabbit, but my mom would never let me get one.”

“You’re from a place called Rapid Bay, right?”

I swallowed and nodded, wondering how he knew that. He must have been chatting to Luther and Kaden, or maybe Cress had mentioned it to him.

“What’s it like there?”

“Uh, it’s just a small seaside town. People like to vacation there a lot. It’s crazy in the summer but peaceful in the winter.”

“So, you get to live in a place that people wish they were in all year-round?”

“Something like that.”

“How did you swing that?”

“Just lucky, I guess.”

He looked like he was going to continue firing off questions, but I didn't like the way he was quizzing me on my hometown, so I quickly cut him off. “What's with you and your friends and asking questions? Finding out a few facts about me doesn't mean you know me. For all you know, I could be a serial killer.”

A small laugh left his lips, and I thought I could live for that sound. “*Are* you a serial killer?”

“Well, no.”

“Are you sure? You sounded quite certain...”

“Yes, I'm sure.”

“Because with the way you're glaring at me right now, I feel like you could have a little Dexter in you...”

“Oh my gosh, Noah, I've never even killed a spider.”

He grinned, and wow, it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. That boy should do nothing but smile. *Ever*. Then again, perhaps that would be dangerous. The girls at school were already falling over themselves to get to him—well, all the girls except for me. I just liked to fall *on* him by accident.

“I like it when you say my name,” he said.

Again, I felt unnerved by his words. He had a way of shifting the ground under me and knocking me off balance without even trying. I tried to act unaffected. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Only the stabby ones.”

“Great,” I muttered. “I'm never living that down.”

“No, probably not.” He was still smiling as he stood. “It was nice getting to know you a little better, Crash.” He turned

and walked away before I could remind him not to call me that.

I sat there, staring after him.

I wasn't sure whether I wanted to punch that boy or kiss him. But what surprised me most was that I hadn't totally hated our conversation. One thing was for sure. I was doing a terrible job of staying away from him.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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It seemed like all anyone wanted to talk about on Thursday was the soccer game taking place that night. I overheard people whispering about it in classes and chatting enthusiastically about it at lunch. Sawyer was on the team and had an endless stream of guys and girls coming up to him to wish him luck during the lunch break, and of course, he lapped it up.

It was hardly the first time I'd watched people worship the ground a jock walked on. But for a soccer player, it was definitely a first. The kids at my old school had acted like our soccer team didn't exist. Football was the most popular sport back home, and it was strange to see the attention flipped at Weybridge.

Apparently, the whole school turned out to watch the Weybridge Eagles' home games, but I was tempted not to go. I wasn't all that into sports and had math homework to catch up on because, thanks to Luther's endless chatter in class, I was already falling behind. When I reached my dorm room at the end of the day, I realized it was going to be impossible to avoid the game.

Cress was all dressed up in her dance uniform with her hair slicked back and heavy makeup on her face. Red was definitely her color, and she looked gorgeous in the short, fitted dress that had Eagles printed across the front of it. She squealed as I entered the room. "Ah, it's your first Eagles game tonight. Isn't it exciting?"

"Uh, yeah?"

Cress kept speaking almost without taking a breath. “Well, if you’re not excited now, you will be when you see how amazing our guys are. And you’ll get to see me dance! We’re performing at halftime. You are still coming, right?”

There was no way I could refuse to go now, so I smiled and nodded. “Of course, I’m coming. I can’t wait to see you dance.” That was something I was actually looking forward to. Cress lived and breathed for her dance team, and I was excited to see what she’d been working on.

“Good.” Cress spoke with the satisfaction of a parent who had finally gotten their child to do what they wanted. “Now, go and put on something cute. And make sure you’re in the school’s colors. I have to leave, but Anna said she’d swing by to get you when she was headed down to the game.”

“Yes, Mom.”

She poked her tongue out at me but then laughed. “I’ll see you after the game is over.” She grabbed a duffel bag and swung it over her shoulder before hurrying from the room. I felt a little like I’d just been caught up in a whirlwind.

I quickly changed and spent a few minutes brushing my hair. It had gone a little crazy during school today—probably because I’d been pulling it out when Luther wouldn’t shut up in math.

There was a knock at the door, but I didn’t have a chance to open it before Anna barreled into the room.

“Isobel, are you ready...” Her voice trailed off as she caught sight of my outfit. “Cress told you to dress cute, right?”

I frowned and glanced down at the jeans and T-shirt I was wearing. It wasn’t perfect, but I didn’t see the problem. Admittedly, the only red top I owned was my school PE top, and it probably looked a little sad when paired with jeans.

“I didn’t have another red top,” I explained, looking at her again.

Anna was wearing a tight red dress that clung to her body. It seemed far too dressy for a soccer game.

“I’m sure Cress has something...” She marched into the closet, and I slowly followed after her.

I leaned against the wall as she hunted for something I could wear. “Why does everyone dress up so much for a game?”

“It’s not really for the game,” she explained. “It’s because everyone likes to go out after and celebrate. We usually head to the burger joint in town. They have the best fries you’ve ever tasted, and just thinking about the burgers makes me drool. You’re going to die when you try them.”

“And I couldn’t wear jeans to a burger place?”

She glanced over her shoulder at me. “The jeans are fine. It’s the top that’s got to go. You’ll look like a freshman if you rock up in actual school clothes.”

“Oh.”

Anna turned back to the closet and pulled a top from the rack. It was a deeper shade of red than the Weybridge sports uniform and looked to be off the shoulder.

“Try this.” She handed the top to me. The material was unbelievably soft, and I was pleasantly surprised by how much I liked the style. I’d half expected Anna to force me into a dress that was just as revealing as the one she was wearing.

“You don’t think Cress will mind if I borrow it?”

“She would be sad if you didn’t. Especially if she saw what you’re currently wearing.”

“I mean, I don’t look that bad, do I?”

She lifted one eyebrow at me, and it was all the answer I needed.

“Okay, okay. I’ll put it on.”

Her face transformed with a smile. “Excellent.”

As we left the dorm, we were met by a crowd of people making their way across the courtyard. They were all headed in the direction of the sports center. There were students from all year groups as well as a few teachers, and everyone was

wearing red. It was impossible not to notice the excited buzz in the air as people laughed and chattered to one another. It felt like the whole school was turning out for the game.

“Anna. Isobel. Wait up!”

We both stopped as Wes jogged toward us. He looked handsome in his red soccer jersey, but it seemed a little unfair that he was allowed to wear school attire when Anna had insisted I’d look silly in it.

“You headed to the game too?” I asked as he reached us.

“I don’t think Sawyer would ever forgive me if I missed a game.”

“And that boy knows how to hold a grudge,” Anna agreed.

“Yeah, he still hasn’t forgiven me for putting a frog in his bed when we were six.” Wes grinned at the memory.

“You put a frog in his bed?” Anna gasped. “I wouldn’t forgive you either.”

“And I thought you were the nice twin,” I added. “I didn’t realize you’re secretly evil.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be much of a secret if everyone knew,” Wes said, still grinning brightly.

We continued on our way to the soccer field, and when I saw where the crowd was headed, I had to suppress my shock. I’d expected the game to be played on a basic grass field. At best, I thought there might be some rickety old bleachers bordering the sidelines—this was just a soccer game, after all. I should have known better than to underestimate Weybridge Academy.

A soccer stadium that looked worthy of hosting a world-class team stood before me. Two huge stands towered over opposite sides of the field, both with roofs covering the countless seats. The grass looked so green I couldn’t be sure if it was real or not. There was a huge eagle painted in the center of the pitch, and tall floodlights loomed high above each corner. Weybridge certainly took soccer seriously.

The stands were packed with people when we arrived, and we had to walk up to one of the middle rows to find some free seats. We arrived just in time because the moment we sat down the players began to emerge from the locker rooms.

The people around us started cheering and stood to greet them. As I looked down at the field, I saw Sawyer jogging out with the rest of the team. He was pumping his arms up in the air in an attempt to rev up the crowd.

“Your brother clearly hates all this attention,” I said to Wes, making him laugh.

“Tell me something I don’t know.” He started to groan and put his head in his hands as Sawyer began blowing kisses to the crowd. “Let me know when it’s over,” he grumbled.

“I’m pretty sure this goes on for the whole game,” Anna said.

“Then tell me when the game is over.”

I was distracted from Sawyer’s performance as the final player took the field. It was Noah. Of course, he played soccer. His presence on the team was probably part of the reason the sport was so popular at the school. Even the girls who hated sports had probably been converted into soccer super fans because of the way he looked in that uniform.

His expression was so different from Sawyer’s as the crowd cheered him onto the field. His lips were flat, and there was a focused look in his eyes. He looked ready to demolish anyone who got in his way, and I imagined the players on the opposing side would be smart to give him a wide berth.

I couldn’t tear my eyes away from him as the game started. He moved with lethal grace and complete determination. The intensity with which he eyed the ball was enough to make any girl in the crowd wish they could take its place on the field. I’d watched enough sports to know he was a true athlete, and he didn’t slow down at all as the game progressed.

“Earth to Isobel...”

The sound of a whistle blowing caught my ear, and I tore my gaze from the field to find Anna grinning at me. “You

really like soccer, huh?”

“What? Why?”

“Well, it’s halftime, and I’ve barely been able to get one word out of you all game.”

It was halftime already? I blushed because it seemed obvious I wasn’t really a soccer fan. The reason I hadn’t been paying attention to anyone was because I’d been totally distracted watching Noah play. Thankfully, it didn’t seem like Anna had noticed I’d been fixated mostly on one player. If she had, I knew she wouldn’t be letting me get away with it.

“Did you play at your old school?” Anna continued.

I shook my head. “I didn’t have much time for sports back home, which is probably a good thing. I have terrible coordination.”

“Seems you aren’t the only one here with terrible coordination.” Anna nodded toward the players from the opposing team who were slowly making their way from the field with their heads hung low. “Langley Prep has no chance of winning.”

“Yeah, they’re getting destroyed out there.” Wes had a huge grin on his face as he looked at the large scoreboard that towered over one end of the field. “We’re already up three goals. They’ll be lucky if they score one.”

“I think it’s because they’re too scared to go anywhere near Noah,” Anna said. “It’s like he’s on a mission tonight.”

“Yeah, he looks great,” I murmured.

Anna nudged her shoulder against mine. “You’ve only been here a week, and I see he’s already made an impression.”

I hadn’t meant to say that out loud, and my cheeks flushed. “I mean, he looks good out there. He’s playing really well.” I corrected myself before quickly changing the subject. “Your brother’s playing well too, Wes.”

“Yeah, he’s been okay,” Wes agreed. “He’s looking a little slow out there though. I think he’s missed one too many early morning fitness sessions.”

“I don’t blame him,” Anna said with a shudder. “I don’t know how anyone gets up before school to train.”

Wes smiled. “I like mornings.”

“Me too.” I shared his smile. Mornings were my favorite time of day, and I was looking forward to when my ankle was fully recovered so I could get back to my morning runs. The thought made me pause. What if I came across Noah out in the woods again? A nervous tremor ran down my spine, and I couldn’t tell whether it was because I liked the idea of bumping into Noah again or not.

Music started playing over the speakers, and Anna began bouncing on her feet as she turned to the field. “It’s time for Cress’s halftime dance number.”

I grinned and joined Anna and Wes as we clapped and cheered the dance team onto the field. As soon as they kicked off their performance, I could tell the girls really knew what they were doing, and I felt a swell of pride as I watched my friend perform her dance so perfectly. I’d seen her practicing a few of the more difficult moves in our room this week, but it was exciting to see them put together with the rest of the team. She made it look so easy.

The energy in the crowd was electric by the time the soccer players returned to the pitch. If the Langley Prep boys had any hope of turning the game around, it quickly diminished as they trudged out of the locker room only to be greeted by the mass of cheering Weybridge fans. There was no fighting the swell of excitement churning through the stadium, and all of it was directed at the home team.

The Eagles completely and utterly dominated Langley. By the end of the game, Weybridge had seven goals while Langley couldn’t score one. It seemed that had mostly been down to Noah. He played defense, and no one could get the ball past him.

“Now can you see why everyone makes such a big deal about the soccer team?” Anna asked as we made our way from the stadium. We’d lost Wes in the crowd, so it was just the two of us.

“I guess they’re pretty good.” I didn’t know all that much about soccer, but even I couldn’t deny the team was impressive. Especially Noah.

Anna scoffed. “Pretty good? They just annihilated the second-best team in their division.”

My eyes widened with surprise. “*That’s* their biggest competition?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I just figured they were a bad team.”

Anna shook her head. “No, they’re actually considered to be quite good. Weybridge is just a whole lot better.”

I couldn’t believe it. The two teams I’d just witnessed didn’t look close to being evenly matched.

The crowd started to thin as we headed into the parking lot. We were planning to meet Cress there before making our way to the burger place in town, and I spotted her leaning against a flashy pink convertible. She was still wearing heavy makeup from her performance but had changed out of her dance costume and into something more casual.

She grinned brightly as we approached. “So, what did you think?” Despite her confident smile, there was a nervous edge to her voice, and her body was tense as she waited for our verdict.

“You guys were amazing.” It was easy to compliment her when she’d done so well.

“You think?”

“Yeah, Cress, you killed it,” Anna agreed.

“You guys didn’t notice me miss the beat on one of my kicks?”

We shook our heads.

“Everyone looked perfectly in sync the whole dance,” I reassured her.



She finally seemed to relax. “It was our first performance of the season, so there were bound to be a few hiccups. We’ll definitely be better next time.”

“Only you could think there were any hiccups with that dance, Cress.” Anna laughed. “Anyway, are you guys ready to get burgers? I’m starved.”

“You and your stomach,” Cress replied as she opened the car door.

Anna leaned in close to me. “She may mock me, but just wait until you taste the burgers we’re about to eat.”

“That good, huh?”

“Good doesn’t even begin to cut it. Forget the soccer match. The best part of the night isn’t going to be what you watched; it’s going to be what you put in your mouth...”

I stared at her for a moment before the two of us burst out laughing.

“I really hope you’re still talking about the burgers, Anna.”

She winked before hopping in the car. “Well, that and the fries.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

---

**T**oddy's Burgers was teeming with Weybridge students. Somehow, Cress had managed to work her magic and find us a booth so we could sit and eat, which was lucky, because it was messy work. I probably had sauce on my face, but I couldn't have cared less because Anna wasn't kidding. The burgers at Toddy's were unbelievably good.

I had completely tuned out from the surrounding restaurant the moment I'd taken the first bite of my burger because food like that deserved nothing less than my undivided attention. When I got down to the last few mouthfuls, I almost wanted to cry. How could my burger bliss almost be over?

"Geez, newbie, you're making me wish I was that burger..."

I glanced up at Luther who was standing at the edge of our booth watching me. My eyes didn't stay on him for more than an instant. I looked right past him to Noah, who was at his side. My stomach dipped as he fixated on my mouth. I quickly grabbed a napkin to wipe my lips in case there was any burger sauce splashed across them.

I tried to look unfazed as I turned to Luther. "Don't you know that you should never interrupt a girl when she's eating a burger?"

"But in my head, I *am* the burger," he replied.

A flicker of surprise flashed in Noah's eyes, but I knew Luther was only joking. There was no way I was letting him get away with it though.

I lifted one eyebrow at him. “If you were the burger, there’s no way I would be enjoying it this much.”

Anna burst out laughing. “Burn, Luther.”

He didn’t look the least bit bothered as he slid into the booth beside her. “If I can’t be Isobel’s burger, perhaps I can be yours. What do you think, London, want to take a bite of me?”

She rolled her eyes at him, but a smile still played on her lips as she turned back to her conversation with Cress. There was definitely something between them. Luther’s expression had seemed just a little bit more sincere, even a little hopeful, when he’d joked with her compared to me. Anna didn’t seem nearly as put off by him as she made out either.

“The burgers here *are* really good.” Noah sat down next to me, and my mouth went dry at the total lack of distance between us in the tight booth seat. He certainly hadn’t been this close when we’d sat together in the courtyard the other night, and it set my nerves on edge to have his leg brushing against mine. He smelled of fresh shower gel, and his hair was still damp, making him look like some god of the sea who’d just emerged from the turbulent waves and made his way onto the shore.

He was looking at me expectantly, and I realized he was waiting for a response. What the hell had he even said? As his gaze flicked down to the burger in my hand, I remembered. The food. Right. *Duh*.

“It’s got to be the best I’ve ever had,” I agreed with an envious look at the remainder of my food. I was still upset my last few bites had been rudely interrupted, and the remains of my burger looked so tantalizing as it waited for me to finish it off.

Noah let out a small chuckle. “Don’t let me keep you from it.”

It took me a moment to process the lightness in Noah’s voice and how he was struggling not to smile. The expression seemed so natural, and yet it was completely at odds with the

air of indifference he radiated when he roamed the school halls. I definitely saw none of the cold and calculating soccer player who'd decimated his opposition on the field tonight.

It would have been easier to sit beside Weybridge's arrogant leader—the one I'd first encountered in the woods and saw at school every day surrounded by walls so thick even Superman couldn't see through them. I knew what to expect from *that* Noah. This Noah's motives were a mystery, and I couldn't tell if the friendly routine was simply an act.

“Seriously, eat,” Noah insisted.

I shot him a scowl but focused on my food all the same. Noah was hardly interested in me, so what did it matter if I inhaled the rest of my burger like I so desperately wanted. I couldn't quite bring myself to eat with the same gusto as before, and I was slightly more delicate about the whole process. I really didn't want to end up with sauce on my face again.

I glanced up at Noah when I finished and found him watching me closely. His eyes seemed bright with amusement, and while he wasn't exactly smiling, the corners of his lips were lifted like they were fighting gravity to curve upward. My cheeks flushed, and I quickly searched for something to say because I didn't know what to make of Noah when he looked at me that way.

“So, do you guys come here after every game?” I asked.

“Just when we win.”

“Oh.” It was hard not to be disappointed. I could have really got on board with a regular visit to Toddy's. “So, it's not every week then...”

Noah shook his head before leaning in slightly closer. “Of course, it is. We always win.”

My tummy fluttered in response, and I seriously hoped it was at the thought of more burgers rather than Noah's proximity. “Well, I think you've just found your new number-one fan. I will be cheering the loudest at every game.”

His alluring half smile seemed tempted to break out on his lips. “So, all it takes for your undying loyalty to the team is a burger?”

“That or good pecan pie. It’s my favorite.”

“Pecan pie?”

“Yeah, my mom’s, more specifically. It’s the one thing she bakes at the café and people come from miles around to grab a slice.” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized I’d said too much. I hadn’t told anyone my mom owned a café, and I hoped Noah had missed my comment.

“Sounds nice,” he said. “So, your mom’s a chef?”

“Uh, yeah, sort of,” I stumbled over the words as I thought about how to explain. “She’s a restaurant owner. Do you have a favorite food?” I asked, quickly trying to move past my slipup.

“Pancakes.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as we steered away from the subject of my mom. “Really?” I laughed.

“Yep. I will do just about anything for a stack of fluffy pancakes. They’re my greatest weakness in life.”

“Huh, who would have thought that all it would take to bring Noah Hastings to his knees was some pancakes?”

“Only the fluffy ones.” He smiled.

Noah always appeared so intimidating and distant, but talking to him was far easier than I had ever imagined. I had no idea why he was talking to me when a whole room of people was vying for his attention. They all seemed to be hovering, waiting for the right moment to approach him. I imagined they wanted to celebrate the team’s win with their star player, and I could constantly feel eyes on us as everyone waited for the perfect moment to steal his attention.

Levi had a similar effect on the people in Rapid Bay after a football game, but he preferred to soak up the adoration as much as possible. Noah didn’t seem to give it a second thought, and he hadn’t taken his eyes off me since the moment

he sat down. It was almost enough to convince me he might actually be interested in me. But I knew there was no way that was possible. I was just the shiny new student, and everyone, including Noah, would be bored of me soon enough.

“Well done on the win tonight,” I said, realizing I hadn’t congratulated him yet. “You played really well.”

“Thanks.”

“You looked pretty intense out there. I wouldn’t have wanted to be a Langley player coming up against you.”

He looked slightly uncomfortable as he rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, I can sometimes get a bit lost in the moment. Soccer’s my outlet.”

“Outlet for what?”

He shrugged, and his gaze detached from mine for a rare moment, a slightly distant look entering his eyes. “It just lets me stop thinking for a while.”

I couldn’t imagine what he needed to avoid thinking about, but I wished he’d tell me more. I felt an intense urge to dig deeper, to see if there was anything he wanted to talk about, but quickly stopped myself. I was the last person Noah would want to confide in if he needed to.

“I should go find Kaden,” he said, breaking my train of thought. “I’ll see you at school, Crash.”

He left without another word, and Luther quickly moved to follow him. I was surprised by Noah’s abrupt departure and had to wonder if I’d said something wrong.

I continued watching him as Noah was swarmed by a group of people. They couldn’t wait to slap him on the back or shake his hand to congratulate him. I had been right. Almost everyone in the room was waiting for the perfect moment to swoop down on him. He was like a lone french fry amid a squabble of seagulls who were constantly tugging him one way and then another. I didn’t envy him one bit.

My stomach tensed when Veronica appeared at his side. Apparently, their argument at Luther’s party hadn’t deterred

her because she was running a hand down his arm and smiling up at him. Something about her smile was a little too forced, and her eyes glowed with a strange combination of pride and jealousy. It was like she both loved and loathed the attention Noah received. Noah didn't seem to notice, and he barely even looked her way, but seeing them together still left me feeling a little uneasy.

I wondered if the feeling was jealousy, but I quickly dismissed the thought. I'd only just met the guy, and I certainly didn't want Noah that way. It was far more likely I was just having a negative reaction to seeing Veronica after she'd been rude to me in English.

A look of relief crossed Noah's features as Sawyer burst through the front door of the restaurant, his arms held aloft. He had scored four goals in the match, more than any other player, and he was ready to bask in the achievement. The crowd of students was more than happy to oblige him, and most turned to welcome him to the restaurant. The hive of activity around Noah briefly dispersed, and even Veronica stopped pawing at his arm. His tense shoulders relaxed slightly, and he looked like he could finally breathe.

The difference between Sawyer and Noah was almost laughable. Sawyer ate up every bit of adoration that came his way. Not only that, but people seemed far more comfortable and confident about approaching him than they were with Noah. It was clear they were far more at ease around him, and within minutes, Sawyer had the entire place singing one of the Eagles' chants.

I'd heard the song enough times during the match to quietly sing along, but Cress and Anna belted out the tune. I felt a little sorry for the one table of people—a family with two young children—who had likely just come for a quiet dinner. They were well and truly outnumbered.

"Is it like this every Thursday?" I called across our table as another chant started up.

"Pretty much," Cress replied. "Though I'm sure Sawyer is riling everyone up a little more than usual tonight because he

had such a great game.”

“Yeah, and be prepared,” Anna added. “We’re going to be hearing about his goals for at least the next week. I really hope he doesn’t repeatedly force us to watch the video of them too.”

“Why would he make you watch the video?” I asked. “You were there.”

She shrugged. “To remind us of his fabulousness.”

“That sounds like Sawyer.”

“So, what were you and Noah talking about?” Cress asked.

Her question caught me off guard. “Oh, uh, I don’t know. This and that.”

She tilted her head at me. “He doesn’t usually talk *this and that* with girls.”

“He doesn’t?”

“No. He doesn’t usually talk with girls at school at all.”

“Yeah, he barely talks to anyone,” Anna agreed. “Maybe he likes you.”

I scoffed. “I doubt that.”

“Why?” Cress said. “He is a guy, after all. And you’re so stunning and sweet.”

“There’s plenty of stunning, sweet girls at this school,” I argued. “You said he’s just not interested in the girls at Weybridge.”

“Yeah, but you’re different from most of the girls at Weybridge,” Anna replied.

I flinched at the word different. I was trying my best to fit in and had barely told them anything about where I was from, but I still stood out like a sore thumb. Was I that obviously out of place? Either way, I couldn’t believe that made me at all interesting to Noah. I looked back to where I’d last seen him, but he’d disappeared in the crowd. Thinking back on our conversation, he’d seemed so relaxed, and we’d talked so



easily, but I knew Cress and Anna were reading into it too much. Noah wasn't interested in me like that.

"I'm sure he was just being polite because I'm his cousin's roommate," I eventually decided.

"Maybe," Cress wondered, but as she shared a look with Anna, I could tell neither of them was convinced.

Thankfully, all talk about Noah and how different I was came to a stop as Wes took a seat at our table.

"So, my brother clearly needs to get out more," he said, his tone laden with sarcasm as he slid into the booth beside me. "Poor thing is such an introvert. I have no idea what I'm going to do with him."

"Yeah, I can see how much he hates all this attention," I agreed.

Wes laughed before he put on a solemn expression and bowed his head. "I just hope we can get him the help he needs."

He then grinned brightly and turned his attention to Cress. "I loved your dance number tonight, by the way."

"Really?" Cress was practically glowing in response.

"Yeah, you girls killed it out there."

"Thanks." She sat a little straighter. "Hopefully, the new recruits we get from the trials this weekend will fit in nicely with the rest of the squad." She gasped suddenly and slapped a hand down on the table in front of me. "Isobel, you have to come try out for the squad."

"Uh..."

"Yes, oh my gosh, it would be so fun to have you dancing with us."

I couldn't help but grimace. The thought of me on a dance team was ridiculous. "I hate to break it to you, Cress, but I can't dance, so that's a really terrible idea."

"Aw, I find that hard to believe," she said. "Won't you at least try out? I'm sure you'd be great, and dance can be a lot of

fun.”

“Sorry, Cress, but I’m far too uncoordinated.” I’d only been at Weybridge a few days, and already I’d managed to hurt myself with my own clumsiness.

Wes let out a soft chuckle. “Yeah, unfortunately, some of us have to go through life with two left feet.”

“You can’t dance either?”

“I make Elaine in *Seinfeld* look good.”

“Wow. So, you’re really bad.”

“Yeah.” He laughed. “It’s a miracle anyone here still talks to me after prom last year.”

“We warned him not to hit the dance floor,” Cress said.

“He refused to listen though.” Anna gave a sad shake of her head before she looked at Wes. “It’s lucky you made varsity crew, Wes, or people would still be talking about how you punched a teacher while doing the robot.”

“Hey, don’t blame my robot skills,” Wes said. “Mr. Wagner was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I’m sure that’s not how he remembers it,” Anna replied.

Wes definitely sounded like he was just as bad at dancing as me. I was hung up on something else Anna had said though. “What’s crew?” I asked, a blank look on my face. “It sounds like some kind of gang.”

All three of them gave me similar looks of confusion, and their surprise at my question made the blood rush from my face. Was I an idiot for not knowing what crew was?

“Didn’t your last school have a rowing team?” Anna asked.

“Oh, rowing, of course.” I wanted to thump myself for being so awkward. I imagined most wealthy schools like Weybridge had rowing teams, and I was worried I’d just made myself look even more out of place. “It wasn’t a big deal at my last school.”

“Well, it’s a big deal here,” Anna explained. Thankfully, she didn’t question my lack of rowing knowledge. “And Wes is one of the best rowers at school.”

“I’m not that good.” He shrugged, but I could have sworn there was an embarrassed glint in his eyes.

“He’s being modest,” Anna continued.

“Really, I’m not.” Wes seemed uncomfortable with her praise, and I was surprised by how humble he seemed for a guy from such a privileged background. He was so different from his brother who I imagined would have been more than happy to brag.

“Fine, you win,” Anna said. “You’re just as average at rowing as you are at dancing.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” Wes grumbled, making us all laugh.

We stayed at Toddy’s for a couple of hours but had to leave when it drew close to curfew. Plenty of students stayed at the restaurant and took the risk, but Cress was tired anyway and didn’t want to have to talk her way out of trouble.

Wes got a ride back to school with us, and I walked beside him as we returned to the dorms while Anna and Cress wandered just ahead.

“So, Sawyer mentioned you have a girlfriend,” I said as we left the parking lot and followed the path that led around the side of Esher Hall to the dorms. “Does she go here?”

Wes’s expression softened. “No, Sarah goes to school back home.”

“Where are you from?”

“New York City.”

“Cool. I’ve never been there before.”

Wes gave me a funny look, and I realized how strange it must sound for a kid who attended Weybridge Academy to have never been somewhere like New York. I quickly kept

talking so he didn't get a chance to ask me about it. "It must be hard, not getting to see her very much," I said.

He nodded slowly. "It's not easy, but we've been together for years, and we'll hopefully be together again when we go to college."

"How long have you guys dated?"

"It's been four years. We started dating when we were thirteen."

My eyes grew wide with surprise. "Wow, really? That's forever."

He chuckled. "I guess it does seem like a while."

"My longest relationship was a year."

"That's still a pretty decent chunk of time."

"Yeah, I guess. It's a shame it was wasted on the wrong guy."

He tilted his head as he looked at me. "Perhaps you'll find the right guy here."

"I doubt it."

"Why?"

I glanced away from him and focused on the soft spray of water bubbling from the courtyard fountain we were passing. "I'm not sure I'd be a good fit for any of the guys here."

"What? That's crazy." Wes looked genuinely shocked but quickly calmed his expression. "I mean, why do you say that?" He looked a little embarrassed as he asked the question.

"Let's just say I don't think I'm the type of girl Weybridge guys are looking for."

"Well, if there's anyone here who thinks that, I'm sure that will be their loss."

I laughed and shook my head. "You're just saying that to be nice."

"No, I'm saying that because, even though I only met you this week, I can tell you're one of the good ones."

I tilted my head to look up at Wes. He was giving me such a cute smile I couldn't help but return it. I could see why his girlfriend put up with a long-distance relationship to be with him. "I think you might be one of the good ones too."

"Nah, I'm nothing special. It probably just seems that way to you because this school is totally nuts. I often feel like I'm the only normal guy here."

"You think you're normal?" My eyes narrowed slightly as I assessed him. I couldn't help but notice the way he'd described himself as *normal*. It was the exact word I'd used when Lily had asked me what type of guy I went for. I'd only really said it to wind up Noah and because I was convinced there were no normal boys at this school. But maybe I was wrong about that.

"Well, I'm as normal as you can be in this place," he clarified. "Why? You think I'm weird?"

I laughed. "No, it's not that."

"Really? Because you're looking at me like you disagree. You think I'm crazy, right?"

"No, not at all," I hurried to reassure him. "You're right. You're perfectly normal, which is probably the best compliment you can pay a person in this place."

He grinned in response.

By the time we reached the girls' dorm, Cress and Anna had already disappeared inside. It was almost curfew, but I hesitated by the front door. "I guess this is me," I said.

"I guess it is." He started moving backward as he went to leave. "I'll see you later, Isobel. And just so you know, I think you're perfectly normal too."

He smiled again before turning to walk across the courtyard to the boys' dormitories, thankfully missing the way my cheeks turned pink in response.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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When Saturday morning dawned, it was with dread rather than relief that I greeted the weekend. I was supposed to be having lunch with Matthew today, and I desperately wished I hadn't agreed to it. I was tempted to cancel on him because this only felt like another opportunity for him to remind me of all the ways I wasn't living up to the LaFleur name. I couldn't bring myself to bail on him though because a small, silly part of me hoped he'd prove me wrong.

More than anything, I wished it were my mom who was waiting for me at lunch. It was only a week since I'd seen her last, but it felt like forever had passed, and I knew it would be a while still before I saw her again. I'd probably have to wait until I had enough time to make the trip home, and given it was more than a day's bus ride, I imagined it would be Christmas before I could get back.

I took my time as I got ready for the day. I was normally such a morning person, but it was hard to garner my normal enthusiasm when I just wanted the day to be over with. I spent forever in the shower, washing my hair and letting the hot water run over my face. I still wasn't confident about jogging on my ankle, and the warm shower was the next best way I could think of to clear my mind.

When I emerged from the bathroom, Cress was already dressed for dance practice, and I felt a rush of guilt. She'd been happily asleep before I got in the shower, and I'd taken so long she'd clearly had to get ready without the use of the bathroom.

“Sorry for taking so long in the shower,” I said. “You should have knocked.”

“Don’t be silly,” Cress reassured me. “I’ll grab a shower after practice. I just need to jump in there to brush my teeth.”

She went into the bathroom and came out a second later with her toothbrush in her mouth. “You better get dressed,” she said, nodding at the towel that was still wrapped around me. “Anna came by while you were in the shower and said she’d be back in a minute so you guys can grab breakfast together. You know how she gets when she’s hungry.”

Cress returned to the bathroom to spit out her toothpaste before flitting back into the room and grabbing her bag off the bed. She was normally a bit of a zombie in the mornings, but perhaps that was just on school days. She seemed to be bounding with energy today.

“We’ve got tryouts today, so I’ll be at practice for the next few hours, but we should go hang out by the lake this afternoon.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “I have to head into town around lunch, but hopefully I’ll be back by then.”

“Perfect.” She hesitated by the door. “Are you sure I can’t convince you to try out?”

“Not even a *confundus charm* could convince me it’s a good idea.”

She let out a small sigh. “Well, it was worth a shot. I’ll see you later.” She flashed me a smile and headed out the door.

Once she was gone, I went to the closet to find something to wear. I had no idea what kind of outfit would be considered appropriate for lunch with Matthew. I also wasn’t sure why I cared. It was just a stupid lunch with a man I barely knew, and I didn’t even want to go. The clothing I wore shouldn’t matter, and yet I couldn’t bring myself to select something without giving it any thought.

A knock at the door pulled me from my dilemma.

“Come in.” I raised my voice so I could be heard from inside the closet. I knew it would be Anna, and she was probably going to be annoyed I wasn’t ready yet. If there was one thing I’d learned about Anna this week, it was that she hated to be kept waiting—especially when food was involved.

I heard the bedroom door creak open, and I called out to her. “Sorry, I’m just going to be a few more minutes. I’m in the closet. Could you come and give me a hand?” Anna was much better at choosing outfits than I was, and I knew she’d have something selected in minutes.

I heard a sharp intake of breath, and as I glanced over my shoulder, I met Noah’s wide eyes. “Noah?” I jolted with surprise. “What are you doing in here?”

He was the last person I expected to see, and my horror magnified as I realized I was only wearing a towel. He immediately looked away, but there was no erasing the fact he’d practically seen me naked.

“Shit!” I clutched my towel tighter to my chest. “Noah, get out of here!”

“Sorry!” He turned and darted back out to the bedroom. “I knocked. You said to come in!”

“You can’t just barge into a girl’s bedroom! Let alone her closet!” I grabbed the first clothes I could find and threw them on.

“I didn’t barge in,” he protested from the bedroom. “Like I said, I knocked, and you told me to come in.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have said to come in if you didn’t want me to come in.”

“I thought you were Anna!”

“I could have been anyone.”

When I was finally dressed, I emerged from the closet and into the bedroom. Noah was standing close to the window, staring outside, his back to the room.



“You can turn around now. I’m dressed.”

He slowly turned, like he wasn’t sure whether to believe me, and his shoulders relaxed when he saw I was telling the truth. Was he seriously worried I’d lie about something like that? I knew the girls at school acted crazy around him, but he didn’t actually think they’d try to trick him into seeing them naked, did he? It was a little hard not to be offended. I didn’t call him out on his reaction though. The sooner this little incident was forgotten, the better.

“So, is there a reason you’re barging into my room on a Saturday morning?” I asked as I tied my wet hair up. There was nothing worse than wet hair dripping on clothes—well, other than a cute boy seeing you in nothing but a towel. God, this moment was going to haunt me forever.

“How many times am I going to have to tell you? I didn’t barge in.”

He probably had a point. I did tell him to come in, after all. “Okay, I’ll rephrase. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit this morning?”

He released a breathy laugh and shook his head. “I was looking for Cress.”

“Oh.” Obviously, that’s why he was here. “She’s at dance practice.”

“Right.” Noah hovered in place and ran a hand through his hair like he wasn’t sure what to say next.

“Do you want me to pass her a message?”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll catch up with her later.” From the way his shoulders dipped, I got the impression this wasn’t just a casual drop-in. Something seemed to be troubling him.

I moved toward him, my feet stealing steps completely unbidden by me. “Noah, is something wrong?”

He frowned, and as he looked into my eyes, I could see whatever was worrying him still stirring there. He opened his mouth to respond but then closed it and looked away. “It’s nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

He didn't get a chance to respond as my phone rang. It was sitting on my bed, and as I glanced at the screen, I could see it was my father calling—or more likely Caldwell. I'd answered several calls from the number this week, expecting to talk to Matthew, only to find Caldwell on the other end of the line. In the end, I'd changed his contact name to the old butler's, seeing as it was never actually Matthew LaFleur who called.

“Do you need to get that?” Noah asked. He was standing right by the phone, so there was no doubt he'd seen the name on the screen.

“No. It's just one of my father's employees. I'm sure they'll leave a message.”

Noah frowned. “Your dad doesn't call you himself?”

“Not unless he has to, I guess.”

He nodded with understanding. “I'm sorry to hear that. A lot of parents here are too busy for their kids. The only person who has time for me is my grandfather, and sometimes I think that's more of a curse than a blessing...”

“Oh, why's that?”

Noah shifted uncomfortably on his feet. “Because everything with my grandfather comes with strings attached.”

His eyes had fallen to the floor, and he seemed to be slightly hunched over. He suddenly appeared so much younger and smaller, like he had shrunk at the mere mention of his grandfather. His vulnerable stance was a stark contrast to the proud figure he portrayed most other times I'd seen him. A hard lump formed in my chest as I watched him.

“That must be hard” was all I could think to say.

“It's not easy.” He let out a heavy sigh, and I could almost feel the weight of his sadness in that one breath. I was surprised by how open he was being with me. He didn't really seem like the type to talk about his family with people. Then again, I didn't really like talking about my dad either, but it felt natural talking with Noah.

“So, do you always dodge calls from your father’s employees, or is it just because I’m here?” His voice was a little lighter now, and as I looked at him again, his confidence and composure seemed to have returned.

“It’s not just because of you,” I admitted. “Things with my dad are complicated. I didn’t know him growing up and only recently met him. He wants to get to know me, but I’m not sure if I want to get to know him. So far, I haven’t been all that impressed by the guy.”

“Ah.” He gave me a sympathetic smile. “Well, if it’s any help, you should know that people can surprise you sometimes.”

“Do you mean by barging into their room when they’re only wearing a towel?”

“Well, that’s one kind of surprise.” He chuckled under his breath. “But, no, I was thinking more like when you meet someone and expect them to be just like everyone else, but they keep proving you wrong.”

From the way he was looking into my eyes, I knew he was talking about me. I blushed and glanced away. “So, you think I should give him a chance?”

“That’s up to you.” He shrugged. “I just know that, if I was in his shoes, I’d want to be given the opportunity to get to know you.”

I knew he was only saying that to make me feel better, but my heart still did a small flip. Noah was just being nice. I had to remind myself that several times before I managed to respond.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I murmured.

There was a knock at the door, and as it opened, I moved a step back from Noah. Without me even realizing it, we had drawn closer to each other. It was like we’d slowly been pulled together by some magnetic force. Surely, he had moved toward me. Or had I stepped toward him? I couldn’t remember.

“Isobel, you better be ready for...” Anna’s voice drifted off, and she stopped in her tracks as she glanced between Noah and me. Her eyes were wide, and I could tell she was surprised to find him in my room. She wasn’t the only one.

“Hi, Anna, I was just leaving,” Noah said as I struggled to think about how I was going to explain the situation to her. She already looked like she was bursting with questions. “Isobel, if you could let Cress know I was looking for her, I’d appreciate it.”

Right, there was a simple explanation. He was here looking for his cousin. “Sure, I’ll let her know.”

Noah made his way to the door but paused before leaving the room. “If you girls are free tonight, you should come to the old boathouse. A few of us will be hanging out. It’ll be fun.”

There were a few moments of silence before I realized both Anna and Noah were looking at me waiting for an answer. It wasn’t as if he’d asked me personally. Had he?

Anna rolled her eyes before turning to Noah. “Sounds great,” she said. “We’ll be there.”

He nodded and gave me a small smile before he left the room. As the door closed behind him, Anna burst into action.

“What was Noah Hastings doing in your room?” she squealed. I really hoped Noah hadn’t heard her through the door.

“He was looking for Cress, just like he said.”

“It didn’t seem like he was here for Cress,” Anna replied. “You should have seen the way he was looking at you.”

“He wasn’t looking at me any way.”

“He was. *And* he invited you to the boathouse tonight.”

“He invited both of us.”

“Because he wanted *you* to come.”

I shook my head. “I really think you’re reading into things too much.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.”

Noah Hastings was the most unavailable boy in this school. He was emotionally closed off to all but a few select people and left a trail of brokenhearted girls in his wake. He was everything I didn't want in a guy. But that didn't stop my body from gravitating toward his or my heart from beating faster whenever he was near. I kept trying to ignore the way I reacted to him because I didn't want to like Noah. But it was getting harder to pretend my feelings were completely neutral toward him.

“I guess we'll find out if I'm right at the boathouse tonight,” Anna said.

I rolled my eyes, not wanting to argue with her any longer. Even if I did like Noah, *and I didn't*, there was no way he liked me in return.

Besides, tonight felt like a lifetime away. I had to get through lunch with my father first.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

Matthew had arranged for us to eat on the outdoor terrace of his Weybridge mansion, and the sun was shining as I followed Caldwell to the large paved balcony that overlooked the back of the property. My father wasn't out there yet, so I walked past the elegantly laid table to the edge of the balcony and took in the view. Beautiful old trees and sprawling lawns surrounded the house, and the terrace overlooked a pool that was just as big as the one at school.

After a week at Weybridge Academy, I was slightly less overwhelmed by the obvious wealth surrounding me. *Slightly*. But I still found it almost impossible to believe that my father could afford a place like this. That my mother had known how rich he was and had still chosen to struggle through raising me on her own. It was so hard to understand; I couldn't help but think there must be more to the story or something I was missing.

"Isobel, I'm glad you came."

I'd started to relax a little as I admired the scenery, but the sound of my father's voice caused my body to tense once more. I had mixed feelings about meeting him today. Part of me wanted it to go well, but mostly, I expected it to be a disaster. I was still so angry with him for forcing my hand and railroading me into attending boarding school. I hated having my decisions stolen from me, so even though I'd quite liked Weybridge Academy so far, I wasn't sure how to forgive him.

I slowly tore my gaze from the beautiful garden to face my father. It was the weekend, but he was still wearing a suit. I wondered if he owned any casual clothing at all. I tried to picture him in a pair of jeans and had to smother a laugh at the thought.

“Hello, Mr. LaFleur.”

His jaw gave the slightest twitch in response to his name. It was the only hint I’d had that perhaps he didn’t like the formality between us.

“Please, take a seat.” He gestured toward the table that was set up for lunch. An impressive buffet of salads and sandwiches was laid out on top of a pure white tablecloth. As I took a seat, a server appeared out of nowhere and poured a glass of water for me and placed a napkin across my lap.

“Would you like something else to drink?” Matthew asked.

“Water’s fine.” I took a quick sip before placing the glass back on the table. Matthew had convinced me to come, and now I was curious to see what he wanted with me. I felt quite sure he didn’t plan to spend our time simply chatting.

“How was your first week at school?” His voice was slightly gentler than the first time we’d met, and his expression seemed a little less hard. It didn’t stop my skin from itching with irritation at his question though. No matter how he framed it, I was always going to be annoyed when he brought up the school he was forcing me to attend.

“If I told you it was horrible, would you let me go home?” I asked.

He barely batted an eyelid before he responded. “I’d suggest you give the school a little longer before you make up your mind about it.”

I scoffed. I was fairly certain that was his way of saying he would never let me leave Weybridge Academy.

“Was it horrible?” he asked.

“Does it really matter?”

“Of course, it matters.”

I let out a sigh. I had a feeling he wasn't going to let this go, so I answered honestly. "It wasn't horrible."

He relaxed when he heard my answer. "Good. And you're making friends?"

"A few."

"I hear you've been getting close to the Montfort twins."

I frowned across the table at him. How did he know I was hanging out with Sawyer and Wes? He must have teachers watching me and reporting back to him or something. The thought made me want to cut all ties with the twins just to avoid being spied on by my father.

"I wouldn't say we're close," I answered. "It's only been a week."

"Well, I have to say I approve of that friendship," he said. "They come from an excellent family. The Montforts are good people."

My feeling of discomfort only increased as I listened to him. "I didn't realize who I was friends with mattered so much to you."

"Of course, it matters. It's important to surround yourself with good people in any walk of life. You should be mindful about which friendships you are furthering."

I couldn't tell if he was offering genuine, supportive advice or just trying to control my every action.

"I'm sure I can figure out the friendships I want to further," I replied. I didn't exactly have a great track record when it came to making good friends, but I liked to think I'd learned from my mistakes. And I refused to build relationships with people simply because my father approved of them.

"Well, you seem to be doing well so far," he agreed. "Though you should be careful. Not everyone who attends Weybridge Academy can be considered to come from a good family."

For a moment I wondered if he was warning me about Noah again, but I quickly disregarded the thought. Noah was



from one of the wealthiest families at the school. And if I'd learned one thing this week, it was that money was all that mattered to people like my father.

Maybe he was talking about Lily and the other scholarship students. I gritted my teeth in response. "I'll keep that in mind," I said, but I had no intention of giving his warning another thought.

Matthew took a sip of his water before he continued. "How's your ankle feeling?"

His question threw me for a second. How many teachers did he have on his payroll? Or maybe he was having me followed. "Oh, uh, it's fine," I stuttered. "How exactly did you hear that?"

"The school nurse called to let me know you'd injured it on a run."

"Right." That made more sense. Still, I really didn't like that he was getting updates on me, even if it was about something you'd expect the school to call a parent for.

"So, it's healed? Because I could send for my doctor to give it a look..."

"No! No, that won't be necessary." The last thing I wanted was to see Matthew's doctor.

"If you're sure."

"I am. It feels good today. I'm sure I'll be back running again come Monday."

"I'm glad to hear it." Matthew gave an approving nod. "I used to enjoy running too. I was on the track team at university, but I never have any time for it now. I'm always far too busy with work. Are you thinking about joining the track team?"

I could tell he was trying to open up and connect with me, but it was hard to talk to him about myself like this. As my father, he should already know these things about me.

"Competing takes the enjoyment out of it for me," I said before I quickly tried to divert the conversation back to him.

Seeing as Matthew seemed to want us to get to know each other, I thought it might be a good opportunity to find out how the hell he was so ridiculously rich.

“So, what is it exactly that you do?” I asked as I loaded up my plate with food. If I could stuff my mouth full of food, I wouldn’t have to do as much talking.

“You don’t know about my work?”

I shrugged. Mom had briefly mentioned Matthew had taken over his family business, but I hadn’t been particularly interested in anything to do with my father at the time. I honestly thought our meeting last week would be the first and only time I’d ever see the man.

“I run The LaFleur Corporation,” he said. “We’re a biotechnology company with a primary focus on cancer treatments.”

“You’re helping cure cancer?”

“Among other things.”

Damn. It was a little harder to hate the guy when he was trying to help people with cancer.

“I’ve only taken over the business full-time in recent years,” he continued. “My father passed last year, and his shoes are quite difficult to fill.”

I felt a lump in my throat as I realized he was talking about my grandfather. I didn’t know the man, but I couldn’t help but feel sad, and I wondered how Matthew was dealing with it.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I murmured. “About your dad.”

He gave a solemn nod. “Yes, well, we weren’t all that close. But we did share a love of science. Your mom says that’s something you’re interested in too?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I was still trying to process the fact my father wasn’t a total villain. I wasn’t quite ready to come to terms with the knowledge we also shared a common interest.

“Well, from what I’ve seen of your grades, you’ve got a true talent for it. I hope you’ve been enjoying the business

subjects I enrolled you in as well.”

“They’re okay, just not really my thing.”

“Business studies were never my thing either, but they will certainly be helpful in whatever field you decide to go into later. Maybe you’ll be like me and find that side of things more enjoyable with hands-on experience.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that I think you’ll be able to learn more on the job. I’m sure you’ll make a great addition to the company when you’re ready.”

“Your company?”

“Of course.”

“You want me to join your company,” I repeated.

“You’re a LaFleur. It’s as much your company as it is mine.”

My hands started shaking as my anger got the better of me. I wasn’t a LaFleur, and I never would be. He thought that by sending me to the right school and helping me choose the right friends he could turn me into the daughter he wanted rather than the one sitting before him. I hadn’t even graduated high school, and already he was talking about me joining his family business like it was inevitable. I wasn’t just some pawn he could mold as he pleased, and if I was going to work for one of my parents, it was most certainly going to be my mom. He’d know that if he actually bothered to try and understand who I was.

I wasn’t sure I could take another second of lunch with Matthew, and I let out a hard breath as I pushed my chair back from the table. “Coming here was a mistake.”

“Have I said something wrong?”

I stood and placed my napkin on the table. I was crazy to think Matthew deserved another chance. I thought he wanted to get to know me, but clearly, he didn’t actually care about that at all. We’d only just met and he was already planning my life out for me.

“Isobel, I can see that I’ve upset you,” Matthew said, leaning forward in his chair. “But if you tell me what’s wrong, I’m sure I can rectify it if you give me a chance. Please, sit back down and talk with me.”

“That’s just it.” I shook my head. “We can talk all you want; it’s not going to be enough to make up for all the years you’ve missed. You seem to think that a little conversation about school and sports makes us father and daughter and gives you the right to start controlling my life. You don’t even know me.”

“I understand that, but this is a start.”

“Yeah, well, we’re starting seventeen years too late.” I turned from the table and stormed away, but the scrape of Matthew’s chair sounded behind me as he hurried to catch up. I’d almost reached the patio doors when his hand touched my wrist.

“Please, Isobel, give me a chance.”

“Why?” I spun to face him. “Why do you deserve a chance after all this time?”

He seemed taken aback by the question, and real emotion shone through his eyes. He was hurt. I could see that clearly, but I didn’t know why he would be. I was nothing more than an inconvenience to him, and he was trying to make the best of it by forcing me to fit into his world.

He cleared his throat before he spoke. “Because even though I don’t know you, I still care about you,” he said. “I know I’ve made a terrible first impression, and I’ve absolutely no idea how to be a father, but I’m trying.

“Trying?” I repeated. It seemed to me like I was the one doing all the heavy lifting. Leaving my home and my school, changing myself to fit the LaFleur framework. Sure, he had made an effort to see me again this weekend, but did that really mean he cared? It felt like this visit was simply another opportunity for Matthew to make me into something I wasn’t.

“I know it’s too much to expect you might see me as your father,” he continued. “But I would like to be a part of your

life.”

“If you wanted me to be a part of your life, you should have done something about it before now.”

“That was out of my control,” he replied, his voice almost a whisper.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” I shook my head. If he couldn’t even take responsibly for being absent my whole life, there was no hope for us. “Look, I should really get back to school.”

“But...”

“No, I need to get back to school.”

A defeated look fell across his face when he saw the determined glint in my eyes. “I’ll have Caldwell fetch your driver for you.”

“Thank you.”

The two of us walked through the house together, and the small distance between us felt like miles. Our lunch had only served to push us further apart, and I wasn’t sure if there was any coming back from it. I didn’t know how to move beyond the bitter feelings that welled up inside me whenever I was in Matthew’s presence. It felt like an impossible obstacle for us to overcome. He could have been the nicest guy in the world, and I still would have held it against him.

Matthew waited with me on the front steps as the black SUV that had brought me here pulled around to the front of the house.

“Isobel, I just want to try and explain...”

I lifted a hand. I didn’t need to hear any excuses or explanations. I just wanted to leave. “Look, I’m going to go to your school, mostly because I haven’t been given any choice. But please stop trying to change me. And stop trying to get to know me. It’s only going to hurt us both more.”

I turned from Matthew and walked down the steps. He didn’t try to stop me.

When I got in the car, I tried to keep my gaze on the shiny leather of the seat in front of me. But as the driver pulled away from the house, I glanced out the window. Matthew was still waiting on the steps. I was used to seeing him stand with a straight back and his chest puffed out with importance, but he seemed deflated now, and his shoulders slouched as he watched the car leave. He probably wasn't used to people biting back at him or not giving him exactly what he wanted.

I tried to put Matthew from my mind as the car drove through the front gates and continued on to the academy. But, despite my dramatic exit, I couldn't help but wonder what excuse he was cooking up for taking seventeen years to reach out to me. He'd said it was out of his control, but if he truly cared about me and wanted to get to know me, as he claimed, what was it that had prevented him for all these years?

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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I decided I wasn't going to go to the boathouse that night. I didn't want to face Noah again after the towel incident that morning. Not when the embarrassment was still so fresh in my mind. I was also emotionally exhausted after lunch with my father, and I much preferred the idea of cuddling up with a book than socializing at a party.

Anna had spent most of the afternoon trying to convince me to change my mind. She kept telling me what a big deal Noah's invite was. She seemed certain he'd invited me personally. But what she failed to understand was that I didn't want to accept any invite from Noah—*especially* if it had been extended exclusively to me.

I might have developed a morbid curiosity for the guy, but that was about as far as I wanted my connection with him to go. I was quite content to keep my distance. I figured the farther I was from him, the less chance I had of getting trapped in his green eyes or experiencing any kind of unwanted tingles when we accidentally touched.

Anna wouldn't listen and kept insisting Noah was interested in me. But there were more than enough girls at this school ready and willing to pump up Noah's ego. Just because he'd spoken to me a couple of times didn't mean I'd caught his attention above all of them.

Even if Anna was right—and *she wasn't*—I had a sense that getting close to Noah would only cause trouble. My heart was already so battered from the last time I took a chance on a guy like him. I knew that if I opened my heart to Noah he

wouldn't just bruise it, he'd decimate it, and that was a risk I didn't want to take.

I'd only been here a week. I'd only just shaken off the devastating junior year I'd had back in Rapid Bay. All I wanted was to get through this school year without repeating my past mistakes. It was pretty straightforward; I just had to avoid backstabbing girlfriends and steer clear of boys—especially boys with striking green eyes.

I sat in my room that night watching Cress as she got ready for the party.

“You've been so quiet this afternoon,” she said, pausing from straightening her hair to look at me through the reflection in the mirror.

It wasn't surprising since I'd been stewing over my disastrous lunch with my father. I hadn't told her I'd met up with him. Mostly because I knew she'd ask too many questions. I wished I could tell her about it, but I didn't know how to open up about Matthew without spilling my guts about the rest of my past. I was terrible at lying, so it felt safer to avoid saying anything at all.

“I'm just tired,” I replied.

“Yeah, first week back can be exhausting,” she said. “Still, I really can't believe you're not going to come with us tonight. Are you sure I can't twist your arm?”

“I'll come next time, I swear.”

“I'm going to hold you to that.” Cress pointed her straightener in my direction, and I had no doubt she meant what she said.

“So, did Noah end up finding you today?” I wasn't sure why I'd asked about him, and I kind of wanted to kick myself for bringing him up at all. I was supposed to be putting the guy from my mind.

“Oh, yeah. I bumped into him before dinner. He was asking about you.”

“He was?” I responded a little too quickly.



“He seemed worried that he embarrassed you earlier?” She said it in a questioning way, and she lifted an eyebrow as she waited for an explanation.

“Well, he came looking for you and...” I scrunched up my nose, hating that I had to admit this out loud. “He walked in on me when I was only wearing a towel!”

“Oh no!” Cress burst out laughing. “Your cheeks are going so pink.”

“Because it’s embarrassing.”

“Not really. Most girls wear less to the beach.”

She had a point, but it didn’t seem to cool my flushed cheeks. I’d been hoping to avoid ever remembering that moment again, let alone having to discuss it.

“So, was everything okay?” I asked, hoping to talk less about my towel. “It seemed kind of important.”

“Oh, you know, it was the usual family stuff,” she said. “His grandfather can be a total dick, and I’m one of the few people he can talk to about it.”

“Why’s he a dick?”

“It’s a long story. Thankfully, we’re cousins on his mom’s side of the family, so I’m not actually related to the man. Noah’s not so lucky. He’s constantly trying to live up to William Hastings’ ridiculous expectations.”

I couldn’t help but feel intrigued. “Why does he have such high expectations for him?”

“Probably because he’s going to inherit the family business,” Cress replied. “Noah’s dad died when he was younger, so his grandfather has been head of the household, as well as the business, for many years. Soon, the mantle passes to Noah. I don’t envy him one bit.”

My heart dipped at her words. “Wow, I had no idea about his dad.”

“It’s not exactly a secret,” she said. “There was a terrible accident at one of their labs. But it was a long time ago, so

people don't tend to talk about it. Mostly they like to gossip about whoever my aunt's shackled up with that week. She's always flitting around the globe with a different dude on her arm. He never sees his mom. None of us do. When Noah lost his dad, he lost his mom too, and his grandfather is all the family he really has left."

"That must be really hard on Noah."

"It's not easy," Cress agreed. "I think that's why he's always been so accommodating to William's incessant demands. He doesn't want to disappoint his grandfather and lose him too."

My eyes widened, and Cress nodded like she too felt the gravity of Noah's situation. It was impossible not to feel some sympathy toward him, and I couldn't imagine what it must have been like growing up in such a way.

"So, what kind of stuff does his grandfather demand?" I asked. I knew I was being far too nosy, but it was hard to keep my curiosity at bay when it came to Noah. Thankfully, Cress didn't seem to mind chatting about her family, so I didn't feel too bad about asking so many questions.

"So many things," she said, shaking her head. "Today's problem is a doozy as well. You know how we've got the Weybridge White Ball at the end of the month?"

"The what?"

"The White Ball," she repeated. "It's the school's first big event of the year. They host it in the ballroom, and everyone dresses up in white. Parents and alumni are invited, so it can be a bit dull, but nobody misses it."

"I had no idea, but I guess I know now." I was also mildly terrified. My two left feet didn't belong anywhere near a ball. "So, what's Noah's grandfather got to do with the ball?"

"Well, William makes Noah take Veronica to the ball every year. It's kind of a tradition between their two families. Anyway, Noah came to me today for help thinking of a way to get out of it."

“What? Why does his grandfather care if Noah takes Veronica? And why is he so against it?”

“Well, it’s Veronica, so that should answer your second question...”

I gave Cress a blank look. “I thought you said the two of them were endgame.” Plus, Veronica was gorgeous and clearly into Noah. I would have thought those were two of the key things he looked for in a girl.

Cress shrugged. “They might be endgame, but that doesn’t mean my cousin is happy about it.”

I hated the way the tense feeling in my chest eased as she spoke.

“For a few years now, Veronica’s family and William have been pushing the two of them together. Veronica’s always been into Noah and has happily gone along, but he doesn’t feel the same way.”

“Why would they push them together?”

“Business. Why else?”

“That’s kind of messed up.”

“That’s the price of being the sole heir to the Hastings’ empire. Noah does his best to wriggle out of things where he can, but William has always been great at manipulating Noah and making him feel like he doesn’t have much of a choice. Family means everything to Noah, and he hates disappointing William more than anything. I wish I could say the same about his grandfather, but all that matters to him is the company.”

“Wow,” I murmured. “What does this company do that’s so important anyway?”

“Ugh.” Cress scrunched her nose up. “Don’t get me started. Hastings Laboratories is one of the biggest pharmaceutical companies in the world.”

“That’s interesting,” I replied. It sounded like my father was in a similar line of work, and I wondered if that meant Noah and I had something in common.

“Interesting?” Cress scoffed. “More like *evil*. The company is notorious for the way they profit from the sick and dying. William Hastings is not a nice man. He’s been in the news a lot over the years for hiking up the prices of drugs people really need that only *he* makes.”

I’d never seen Cress so riled up. She was usually so smiley and bubbly, but now she gritted her teeth as she spoke. She quickly took a deep breath and lightly shook her shoulders as if to shed her negative thoughts.

“Anyway, my parents don’t have much to do with the Hastings family, as you can probably guess. But Noah and I are still close.”

“That’s nice.” I didn’t know what else to say. It sounded like there was so much more to the story of the Hastings family, but I sensed Cress didn’t want to dig any deeper. “So, uh, did you find a way to rescue Noah from his date?”

Cress glanced at me, the familiar bright smile returning to her face. “Well, William hasn’t told Noah he expects him to take Veronica yet this year, so I told Noah he should ask someone else to the ball. Then he can tell William he’s already got a date. His grandfather might be all about pushing his own agenda, but there are a lot of influential families at this school, and he wouldn’t risk upsetting one of them by having Noah cancel on a date with their daughter.”

“That could work.” I nodded, but the whole concept was completely alien to me.

“Yes, I thought so too. I guess he’s just got to find someone to go with him.”

“How ever will he do that?” I rolled my eyes as sarcastically as I could.

She laughed. “I have no idea.”

I could easily imagine the line of girls that would be following Noah everywhere he went if they knew he was searching for a date. I was also sure that most girls at Weybridge qualified as coming from an influential family. Most girls but me, that was.

There was a knock at the door, and Anna burst through it before either of us could respond. She frowned when she saw me. “Why aren’t you dressed?” she asked before immediately turning to Cress. “Why isn’t she dressed?”

“I’m not coming tonight,” I said.

“But we already talked about this. Noah asked you to come!” Anna huffed. “*Noah!*”

“He didn’t just ask me. He invited both of us.”

“While he was looking at you. It was like I wasn’t even in the room. Hell, he probably wished I wasn’t in the room.”

“I told you you’re reading into it too much. He won’t even notice I’m not there.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Anna grumbled before letting out a sigh. “I can’t believe you’re bailing on our first party of the year.”

“There was a party last weekend,” I reminded her.

“That doesn’t count. It was before school started, and you left that one early.”

“She’s promised to come to the next one,” Cress said in my defense. “We should get going, Anna.” She placed her straightener down and walked over to give me a hug. “Call me if you change your mind,” she said. “I’ll come back and walk you out there.”

“Thanks, but I’ll be okay here. You guys have fun.”

“Well, the offer’s there.” She smiled. “We’ll see you later.”

“And I’ll make sure to send you pics of Noah’s sad face when he realizes you’re not there,” Anna called as she skipped to the door.

“Please don’t.”

She winked at me and then closed the door behind them.

I relaxed a little once they were gone. I knew they didn’t like that I was bailing on tonight, but I really thought it was for the best. I wasn’t lying when I told them how tired I was, and I

wasn't sure I was mentally prepared to face another Weybridge party.

With the whole night stretching out ahead of me, I wandered downstairs to the dorm kitchen to make myself a hot drink. There were several girls already in the room, raiding the freezer for ice cream. I didn't recognize any of them, but they looked quite young, so I guessed they were freshmen. I made my way past them and smiled when I saw Lily standing by the kettle. She was already dressed in her pajamas and wearing a pair of fluffy slippers.

"Hey, Lily," I said as I came to stand at her side.

"Isobel, hey. You're not going out tonight?"

"Nah, I'm taking the night off."

"Me too," she said. "Amber has a date, so I've been taking advantage of having our room to myself."

"Yeah, Cress is out too. I was planning to curl up and read a book or something."

"A girl after my own heart," she said with a smile. "I'm making a hot chocolate. Do you want one?"

"Sure. That would be great."

I leaned against the counter as Lily grabbed another mug and filled it with chocolate powder.

"What did you get up to today?" I asked.

"Study, study, and then a bit more study." She sighed. "I have to get top grades to keep my scholarship."

"That must be a lot of pressure."

"Yeah, it can be, but I like to think I thrive under the pressure," she said. "How about you?"

"My dad came to town to visit, and we had lunch."

"Oh, I'm jealous. I wish I could see my parents, but I won't be able to get home until Christmas."

I gave her a sad smile. "Don't be jealous. I'm not close with my dad, and I probably won't see my mom until

Christmas either.”

“It’s hard being away from home.”

“It is,” I agreed.

She poured hot milk into our mugs and added a big pink marshmallow on top of each one before glancing up at me. “I should warn you the hot chocolate here is addictive. Are you sure you want to get hooked?”

“Yeah, hit me with it.”

“That, my friend, is the right answer.” She grinned and passed me the mug.

We slowly made our way from the kitchen, and I took a small sip of my drink as we walked. The hot chocolate was delicious with a rich, full flavor that tasted a little like an Easter egg had been melted in the cup.

“This is so good.” I groaned with appreciation.

“I told you it’s addictive,” Lily said. “I’m always sneaking down at night for hot chocolate. It’s the best.”

As we started up the stairs back to our dorm rooms, I heard the clapping of heels up ahead. I glanced upward to see Veronica rounding the corner and descending the stairs in front of us. She was followed by a group of five other girls, who were all dressed for a big night out. Veronica was wearing a short skirt and a low-cut top, and her hair and makeup were so perfect she looked like she’d been airbrushed. They were probably all going to the party at the boathouse.

Veronica had her head buried in her phone but looked up as she approached and sneered when she saw us.

“Watch it, *Charity*,” she said, stepping forward to push past Lily.

Lily jumped back to avoid a collision and ducked her head so she didn’t meet Veronica’s eyes. I refused to budge an inch, and I cradled my hot chocolate closely as I scowled at Veronica and her friends. Who did they think they were?

“Don’t talk to her like that, Veronica.” The words were out of my mouth before I had a moment to consider them.

Veronica stopped in her tracks and slowly turned to face me. “Excuse me?”

The other girls had all paused as well and were glancing between Veronica and me with a combination of shock and anticipation etched on their faces.

“Her name is Lily not Charity. Don’t call her that.”

Lily swallowed and slowly shook her head. “It’s fine, Isobel. Really.”

Veronica shot me a smug smile. “Yes, it’s fine. It’s just a little inside joke. Isn’t it, *Charity*?”

Lily blanched, and I felt my blood pulse hot with anger. “Nobody’s laughing, Veronica. And Lily isn’t some charity case. She’s incredibly smart and actually earned her place at this school. She isn’t just relying on her parents’ money to get her everything she wants.”

Veronica raised her eyebrows, and a few of her friends started whispering to each other. My comeback could have been addressed at anyone of them, and I realized I’d probably just picked a fight I couldn’t win.

“And what about you, new girl?” Veronica snapped. “What makes you so high and mighty?”

“Nothing,” I responded. “But I’m not just going to stand here while you harass my friend.”

“Didn’t Daddy’s money get *you* into Weybridge?” Veronica continued, ignoring my response. “Oh, wait, he’s not in the picture, right?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“So mysterious, new girl.” Veronica gave an overdramatic sigh and shook her head.

“Come on, Isobel, let’s just go,” Lily pleaded, gently placing her hand on my arm.



“Listen to Charity.” Veronica smirked. “You don’t want to make an enemy of me, new girl.”

“I’m not trying to make you my enemy,” I said. “Just don’t call Lily that name again.”

“Like I said, it’s just a joke between friends.”

There was something unsettling about the way Veronica was smiling at me, like she was completely unaffected by my defense of Lily. Before I could say anything else, she turned and continued down the stairs without a backward glance. Her friends hurried to follow her, still whispering to each other and shooting me judgmental looks.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Lily murmured as we watched her leave. “Veronica’s not the kind of person you want to mess with. But thanks for sticking up for me.”

“It was nothing,” I said. The pit in my stomach said otherwise.

I hadn’t set out to make Veronica my enemy, but I think I just had.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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**O**n Monday morning, I went for my first run since my injury, and I was happy my ankle seemed much better. I decided to stick to the path that wove around the lake rather than venturing into the woods. I didn't want to risk hurting myself again, and that place was practically a minefield. I only went a short distance, but I felt like a completely different person by the time I got back to the dorm. There was nothing like a run to clear my head, and I felt pretty positive about starting a new week.

"You're in a good mood," Cress said as we made our way to breakfast.

"Yeah, you're far too chipper for this early," Anna added, making me laugh.

"I'm just happy my ankle is feeling better," I explained. "I hate not being able to run in the mornings."

"Well, it's probably a good thing you can run again," Anna said. "You'll need those legs of yours when Veronica comes for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"We all heard you stood up to her in the dorm on Saturday night," she explained. "You've got some serious balls for someone who's only been here a week, but I love it!"

Despite Anna's enthusiasm, my stomach dropped. "How did you hear about that?"

“Gossip like that spreads like wildfire here,” Cress jumped in.

“And she was bitching about it with her friends in the common room last night,” Anna said. “I just wish I’d been there to see it.”

“There wasn’t much to see. I just told her to stop calling Lily that horrible nickname.”

“I bet she was livid,” Anna continued. “She hates being put in her place.”

“I wasn’t trying to put her in her place. I was just standing up for Lily. She doesn’t deserve that.”

“No, you’re right,” Cress agreed. “It’s horrible how Veronica treats the scholarship students.”

“It’s not just the scholarship students,” Anna said. “It’s anyone who she doesn’t think is good enough to be here. I swear, she only cares about who your parents are and what your credit card limit is.”

“Yeah, she’s only friendly with people she can reap some sort of benefit from,” Cress said. “She’s all about social climbing and networking. Then again, so are a lot of students here.”

They sounded similar to my father, and I imagined he would have been thrilled if his long-lost daughter had turned out to be like one of the girls who went to this school. Instead, he was stuck with me. I let out a long sigh. “Well, I guess I’m screwed then. I have no interest in social climbing.”

“You’re like the anti-Veronica,” Anna said, spreading her arms wide. “The hero we didn’t know we needed.”

“Stop!” I laughed. “Now you’re just being ridiculous.”

“What? I can’t wait for your next showdown. I’m sure she’s already plotting her revenge.”

The smile quickly dropped from my face.

“Don’t listen to her, Isobel,” Cress said. “I’m sure Veronica will have found something else to distract her in a

couple of days.”

“And if she hasn’t, I promise we’ll still be your friends—even if you are a social leper,” Anna replied.

That didn’t make me feel much better.

I lost all hope of Veronica forgetting about our confrontation when I got to my first class of the day. She was glaring at me as I walked into English, and the hateful looks she was sending my way only continued in math. She kept glancing over her shoulder at me, and there was a calculating look in her eyes that made me anxious.

“She’s not happy with you, newbie,” Luther whispered from beside me. We were supposed to be working on some problems, but he hadn’t even bothered to take out his graph book.

“It’s nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing,” he replied. “I’ve seen that look in Veronica’s eyes before.”

“And what look is that?”

“The one she gets when she’s out for blood.”

I groaned and lowered my head into my hands. “All I did was tell her to stop calling Lily names.”

Luther burst out laughing. “I know, and in front of all her cronies as well. I knew you were going to be fun, newbie, but I didn’t know it was going to be this fun.”

“Is that why she’s so upset?” I wondered out loud. “She thinks I embarrassed her in front of her friends.”

“Who knows,” Luther replied. “Veronica wouldn’t like anything that challenges her position as queen of this school. I, for one, welcome our new overlord.”

Luther raised his hands and then lowered them to the desk in front of him in a show of mock worship. I rolled my eyes at him in response.

“I’m also willing to be your bodyguard when she comes for you,” he continued. “I will protect you with my life.”

“I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“You definitely do.”

I shook my head and tried to concentrate on my math problem. Luther couldn’t be stopped though.

“In other news, you haven’t answered my super secret question of the day,” he said. At least he seemed to be changing the subject.

“You haven’t asked one,” I replied, keeping my gaze glued to my graph pad. “And I’ve already told you. I’m not playing this game with you.”

“Sure, you are,” he replied. “So, today’s question. What is your idea of the perfect date?”

I huffed and put down my pen before looking up at him. He had his hands propped under his chin, and he was blinking up at me with puppy-dog eyes, like my response was the only thing that mattered in the world at that moment.

“My perfect date would be any date that doesn’t involve questions like this.”

“You’re not playing my game properly.” He pouted.

“Maybe because I don’t want to play.”

“Okay, fine. If you answer properly, I promise I won’t ask you another question for the rest of class.”

“Why do you even want to know? I’d never go on a date with you.”

“Ah, *ouch!*”

I sighed. “Don’t be so dramatic. You don’t want to date me either.”

“But I’d never say it like *that.*”

A student sitting in the row in front of us turned, and from the way he was looking between us, I could tell he’d been eavesdropping. Luther straightened his back in response, and his entire demeanor changed as he caught the guy’s gaze.

“What are you looking at, Huntington?” There was nothing playful in his voice, and he spoke with a commanding tone.

The guy paled and turned to face the front of the classroom once more. As soon as he had his back to us, Luther relaxed, and his expression transformed back into the teasing guy I’d been sitting next to all class. It was weird to see Luther acting as anything other than a jokester.

“So, the date?” Luther prompted.

“Oh, uh, I don’t know. Something from the heart, I guess.” It wasn’t much of an answer because I was still distracted after witnessing Luther’s serious side. I didn’t know he had one. But Luther nodded along like I’d just given a deep and profound response.

After that, he didn’t bug me as much, and I actually managed to get some work done. Luther hurried off straight after the lesson, so I walked from the room with Kaden. The two of us shared a chemistry class too, but this was the first time we’d really spoken one-on-one.

“Any idea why Luther is still insisting on asking me all these questions?” I asked.

“I could tell you, but I’d have to kill you.” Kaden grinned.

“So, I’ll take that as a yes.”

His smile broadened. “Luther is just being Luther.”

“Because that’s a proper explanation.” I shook my head. It was impossible to get a straight answer out of these boys. “And what was up with him earlier? You know, when he told that guy to look away.”

Kaden shrugged. “He hates it when people are nosy.”

“Huh, you’d think he’d be fine with it given all the prying questions he’s been asking me.”

“I didn’t say he wasn’t a hypocrite.”

I laughed. “Still, it was weird seeing him act so different than normal.”

Kaden tilted his head as he looked at me. “Do you know why Luther likes you? Why I like you?”

I shook my head.

“Because you don’t want anything from us. That guy, Trevor Huntington, isn’t interested in us as people but would leap at the chance to claim he’s friends with us and especially Noah. This school is filled with Trevors, and Luther can’t stand most of them.”

“Right,” I murmured.

Kaden gave me a soft smile and lowered his voice. “Also, I think it’s great that you stood up to Veronica. Kindness is in short supply in this place. Not enough people here would be willing to stick their neck out for another student who needed help. She might not forget it, but I won’t either.”

My cheeks warmed as I tried to shrug away his compliment. “It really wasn’t a big deal,” I muttered.

“Well, either way, it was the right thing to do.”

I didn’t think my behavior was all that unusual, but it sounded like most of the kids in this school were pretty self-centered. How anyone could stand by and watch their friend get harassed was beyond me.

I parted ways with Kaden and went to meet my friends for lunch. The girls weren’t there when I arrived, but Sawyer and Wes were already seated in front of trays stacked with food. As I joined them, Sawyer started gushing about his date with the junior while Wes did his best to ignore him.

“You told me all about this last night,” Wes groaned.

“But I don’t think you appreciated just how hot she looked,” Sawyer said. “Besides, Isobel wants to hear all about it too? Don’t you?”

“Not really. It’s kind of putting me off my food.”

Wes chuckled. “Yeah, me too.”

“You two really know how to kill a guy’s buzz.” Sawyer picked up his plate and stood from the table. “I’m sure there’s

someone in here who wants to hear my tales of romance.”

Wes smiled at me as he watched his brother go. “I feel like we’ve dodged a bullet.”

“Yeah, I get the feeling Sawyer would have talked about his date all lunch if given the chance.”

“He does like to brag, so you’re probably right. I almost feel sorry for the poor sucker he ends up sitting with. I don’t think the date went half as well as he says it did, but that won’t stop him going on about it.”

“For twins, you guys sure are different.”

“Very,” he agreed. “Sawyer’s the annoying one.”

I laughed. “How’d you get on with the econ homework over the weekend?”

Wes screwed his nose up. “Don’t get me started. It was terrible. I don’t understand why Miss Constance hates us so much.”

“She has to, right? Why else would she give so much homework?”

“I only got halfway through it all, and I worked on it for hours.”

“Me too.” I let out a sigh. I expected to struggle with the business-focused subjects this year, but economics was going to be almost impossible if the teacher kept assigning so much work. We were only one week into the semester, and already I felt like I was floundering. It was yet another reason to be angry at my father. He’d been the one to sign me up to the class, after all.

“We should get together in the library tonight and try to get through it all before class tomorrow,” Wes suggested. “I’m not sure I can handle spending the whole night slogging through it all on my own.”

“No, me neither. That sounds really great, actually.”

“What sounds great?” Anna asked as she and Cress joined us.



“Wes and I are going to the library tonight.”

“What?” Anna’s eyes grew wide, and I was surprised by the concern in her voice.

“It’s not a big deal,” I said. “We’re just going to study. You can come if you want?”

“Don’t you guys want to be *alone*?” Anna practically purred the final word.

“What? Why would you think that?” Wes was frowning, so I guessed he shared my confusion.

“Uh, because nobody actually goes to the library to study. They go there to make out in secret.” Anna was looking at us both like we were stupid.

“That’s not true.” Cress slapped her on the arm.

“It is,” she replied. “There’s this great secluded corner behind the history section.”

“Anna!” we called out together.

“What?” She looked the picture of innocence.

“Most people actually do use the library for studying,” Cress said

“Well, *I’ve* only ever used it for making out,” Anna replied, gently flicking her hair with one hand. “There’s really something about that history section. I swear it must have magical powers or something because I always have the best kisses in there.”

“No one wants to hear about your cozy little make-out nooks.” Cress pretended to gag.

“Okay, okay.” Anna finally surrendered. “I get it, Wes and Isobel aren’t going to make out; they’re going to study. I still think the former is much more exciting.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not really—Wes has a girlfriend, remember. And we’re just friends. Right?” I looked to Wes for support, and he smiled and nodded.

“Right,” he confirmed. “We’ll be staying firmly at the study tables. I’m happy to leave the history section to Anna.”

“Shame.” Anna shrugged. “You two would make a cute couple.”

We laughed off her comment, but the conversation left me slightly concerned, and I glanced at Wes from the corner of my eye. I hoped people wouldn’t think there was more to our friendship just because we were studying together. I also hoped tonight wouldn’t be awkward after everything Anna had said.

As we were leaving lunch, I walked alongside Wes and touched him on the arm. “So, did you know that stuff about the history section?”

“Honestly, that’s the first I’ve heard of it.” He laughed, but when he saw the concern on my face, he stopped and turned to me.

“Wait, did you think that’s why I asked you to study in the library?”

“No, no, not at all,” I quickly backtracked. “I know you wouldn’t do something like that to Sarah. Anna was just being Anna.”

“True.” He relaxed. “Anna probably has a lot more fun in the library than me, but trust me, I need to study.”

“Okay, then we’re on the same page.” I laughed as we continued to walk out of the dining hall.

“Wait?” He stopped again, and a look of overly dramatic surprise covered his face. “You didn’t accept my invite to the library because *you* wanted to get *me* in the history section, did you?”

“Oh my gosh, no!” I gave him a light shove on the arm. “That was the first I’d heard about it as well.”

“Okay, if you say so.” Wes winked, his brown eyes sparkling with amusement. He was definitely the sweet twin, but it appeared there was also a cheeky side to him.

“You’re as bad as your brother.” I shook my head as I walked away. “I’ll see you later tonight.”

“Looking forward to it,” he called after me. Considering we were just planning to study economics, I was surprised by how much I was looking forward to it too.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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The library was in a wing of the main school building I hadn't entered yet, and it was so big it took up several floors. So much of the school was modern with sleek white walls and metal appliances, but the library retained an older charm with a gorgeous carved ceiling high above the tall wooden bookcases that lined the walls of each level.

I'd arrived slightly early to meet Wes, so instead of heading for the study area, I wandered through the stacks. I wasn't even looking for a particular book; I just enjoyed immersing myself in the slightly musty smell of old pages and dust wafting through the air.

"So, this is where you like to hang out."

I turned to find Noah standing behind me, a book clutched to his chest. I was surprised to see him in the library. The backdrop of desks and books seemed to suit him, a little like he was some sexy nerd who'd stepped right out of a romance novel.

I swallowed and quickly shook my head. "No, just tonight. I came here to study. Though, after getting a look at this place, I'm tempted to come back more often."

His expression softened. "Yeah, I like it here too. I have a thing for old, elegant libraries like this."

"I think I might have a thing for them too." I'd never actually been in one so beautiful before, but now that I had, I kind of wanted to see as many beautiful libraries as I could.

"You didn't come to the boathouse on Saturday night."

He sounded disappointed, but I shrugged and glanced away, walking over to one of the shelves to trace my fingers over the spines of a few books. The titles all described dragons or quests, so I assumed I'd found my way to the fantasy section of the library. "I was pretty tired after a big first week."

Noah stepped forward and leaned against the shelf in front of me. I stopped in my tracks and pulled my hand away from the bookshelf. If my finger had continued on its path along the books' spines, it would have ended up right on his chest.

"Yeah, Cress said you weren't feeling up to it."

My cheeks warmed at the idea Noah had asked his cousin about me. I didn't know why I thought that was a big deal.

"Maybe you'll be feeling better and can make it this Saturday instead?" he asked.

I swallowed and peered up at him. He was standing just a fraction too close for my liking. Then again, it was Noah. He could have been standing at the far end of the library and his presence still would have caused my skin to tingle. This boy did something to my heart whenever he was near. The way he was watching my lips as he waited for my answer didn't help either.

He slowly started to smile. "So, what do you think?"

I wished he hadn't smiled. It made my knees feel weak, and I struggled to think clearly when he looked at me like that. "You're asking me to come to the boathouse again?"

"Well, yeah. And I'm hoping maybe you'll actually make it this time."

I frowned. "Why do you care if I make it or not?"

"Maybe if you come this weekend, you'll find out."

"That doesn't really give me much to go on."

He gave a deep chuckle, and the sound sent a shiver down my spine. "No, but I hope you'll come all the same."

I was suddenly regretting my decision to wander the stacks. Being alone with Noah when he smiled at me and

laughed felt dangerous. His nearness was overwhelming, and any resolve I had quickly slipped away.

I felt very aware of how alone we were. The library was silent, and there was no sign of anyone else near us. The bookshelves towered over us, casting shadows across the empty aisle, and the warm, yellow lamps that illuminated the shelves only dimly lit the area. There was something about the way the musty smell of books mixed with the scent of Noah's aftershave that sent my senses wild, and as I felt the air between us charge with electricity, I had to wonder if Anna was right about the library. We were nowhere near the history section, but the secluded spot was perfect for a secret kiss.

A high-pitched giggle broke the silence from behind me, and I took a step back from him. His scent still reached me, and I could no longer tell the difference between his masculine aroma and the musky scent of old books. I wasn't going to be able to read again without thinking of Noah. Maybe I'd have to ditch my paperbacks and start reading on the fancy new smartphone my father got me.

The giggling sounded again. Two girls were standing at the end of the aisle nudging each other and smiling in Noah's direction.

"Looks like you have a couple of fans," I said. He hadn't moved away like I had, but he somehow seemed more distant, like he had shrunk back into the shadows of the aisle to avoid being seen. His smile had diminished, and his eyes had lost the twinkle that had been there just moments ago.

"I'd rather I didn't." His voice was deep and quiet as he responded.

I stared into his eyes, hoping perhaps they might reveal more than he'd voiced. I was beginning to see that Noah didn't want all the attention he received. When we'd first met, I'd assumed he was like Levi and thrived off the adoration and adulation that came with his popularity. He'd acted so indifferent, and I figured it was because he believed he was above it all. That he enjoyed sitting up high on his throne, looking down on the rest of us. The more I got to know him,

the more I realized I couldn't assume anything when it came to Noah.

I heard movement and whispering behind me as Noah's fans grew brave enough to venture into our aisle. Noah glanced away from me, and I knew whatever moment we were sharing was well and truly broken. I was surprisingly annoyed it was over. I felt like I could spend all evening lost in Noah's eyes, trying to understand what was lying deep within.

I didn't have all evening, and I was probably late to meet Wes.

"I should go," I said, but my body was urging me to stay. "I'm meeting someone to study."

Noah cleared his throat and nodded as he stepped back to let me pass. I didn't want to leave this quiet nook of the library, but I couldn't think of a reason to stay. I could hardly tell Noah I found him puzzling and I wanted nothing more than to spend all evening trying to fit together the pieces of him that I was starting to discover.

I somehow found the motivation to move, but Noah reached out and lightly brushed a hand against my wrist as I went to walk past him. "Think about Saturday night," he said. "I hope you'll be there."

His touch was as soft as a feather, and yet it was all I could seem to focus on. How could the briefest brush of his skin against mine be felt throughout my whole body? I swallowed and gave him a small smile in reply. "I will."

It was only once I left the aisle and returned to the brighter part of the library that I felt my head clear. When I was around Noah, it was too easy to forget the rest of the world existed. In an instant, he could make me ignore all the reasons why I had decided to keep my distance from him.

That was the crazy thing. The more I tried to keep him at arm's length, the stronger I felt the pull between us. He was my opposite in every single way, but perhaps it was those differences that made him so impossible to ignore.

“There you are,” Wes said, as I joined him at the study tables.

There were several tables around us all occupied by other students. Despite what Anna believed, the library seemed like a popular place to do homework.

“I saw you coming from the stacks. You weren’t over in the history section, were you?” Wes joked, as I took a seat.

I hadn’t been in the history section, but I felt like I might as well have. Noah and I hadn’t kissed, but being with him had felt intimate in a way it shouldn’t.

“You *were*?” he asked when I didn’t immediately answer. “And on our study date. How could you?”

“Gosh, no. I made certain to avoid that corner!” Perhaps Anna needed to add the fantasy section to her list.

“I was joking.”

“You’re not very funny.”

“Yeah, Sawyer’s always telling me that.” Wes ran a hand through his hair and laughed. “Apparently, there’s only room in this school for one funny Montfort.”

“And that’s Sawyer?”

“So he says.”

I smiled at Wes. “Well, Sawyer’s not as funny as he thinks he is, so you might still have a chance.”

“I’ll start working on my comedic set tonight.”

“I look forward to hearing it.” I laughed. “How was the rest of your day?”

“It was fine,” he replied. “Though I’ve been struggling to get hold of Sarah. The last time we spoke was Friday, which is forever ago for us. I keep calling her, but she just texts me back saying she’s busy and can’t talk. It’s really frustrating.”

“I can imagine.” I wasn’t sure how I would have reacted if I’d been in a long-distance relationship with Levi and he was dodging my calls. I’d been quite a trusting girlfriend, but I



clearly had terrible gut instincts, so I probably wasn't the best person to give Wes any advice on the situation.

"I'm sure she's just getting back into the swing of school," he said.

"The first couple of weeks can feel crazy," I agreed.

He nodded and gave me a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, and I knew my words hadn't consoled him all that much.

I was surprised by how much he cared about his girlfriend not calling him back. I honestly didn't think guys were all that bothered when it came to stuff like that. Then again, my opinion was based on Levi, and I really hoped he wasn't a typical example of male behavior. I didn't have much else to go on. I hadn't been friends with many guys back at my old school, so I didn't have that much experience listening to a boy's side of relationship problems. If I'd shown any signs of getting close to a male classmate, Levi lost it with me. Thinking back, I should have realized far sooner than I did that Levi wasn't the one for me.

"You're really worried about this, huh?"

He let out a breath and sank back in his chair. "I just have this feeling that she's avoiding me. I'm probably overthinking things, but it's hard to get out of your own head sometimes." He rubbed a hand across his forehead. "I was thinking of surprising her this weekend with a visit, but if she's not answering my calls, maybe that's not such a good idea. What do you think?"

"Well, I don't know Sarah, so I'm probably the wrong person to ask..." I didn't know what else to say, but his eyes were pleading with me to offer some semblance of guidance, so I continued. "How did you guys leave things at the end of summer?"

"Everything was great."

"And is she normally pretty honest with you?"

"Well, yeah."

“Then it sounds like you’re just overthinking things,” I said with as much certainty as I could manage. “If you go and visit her, and it turns out there is something wrong, at the very least, you’ll be able to chat about it face-to-face.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” He relaxed a little and sat up a bit straighter. “Thanks for hearing me out. Normally, I talk with Sawyer about this stuff, but he knows a lot of girls who are friends with Sarah, so he’d probably play detective and try to find out why she hasn’t been answering my calls. I’d much rather talk with her myself than hear it thirdhand.”

“Well, it sounds like you’ll be able to talk to her this weekend.”

“Which feels like a lifetime away right now,” he moaned.

“I know,” I agreed. “But do you know what makes the time fly by?”

“What?”

“Economics homework.”

The tightness around his eyes released, and he let out a low chuckle. “I think you might be wrong about that, but I suppose we should get started.”

Wes was at the same stage as me with the homework, so we were able to work together through the rest of the problems. It was much easier to slog through them with his help, and I found we sailed through the rest of the assignment in no time.

“We should do this again,” I said when we finally finished and started to pack up. I normally preferred to do homework on my own, but I didn’t enjoy economics, and it wasn’t nearly so painful with Wes’s help.

“Yeah, I’m down,” he agreed. “Trying to get through it on my own was torture.”

We left the library together and walked back in the direction of the dormitories. As we approached the entrance to the girls’ building, I paused and turned to Wes.

“Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“How did you know Sarah was the right girl for you?” I wasn’t really sure why I’d asked the question. It was probably because Noah was still on my mind. I knew he was the wrong guy for me, for so many reasons, but a small part of me had started to hope that maybe I was mistaken.

Wes paused for a moment as he considered it. “I didn’t, I guess. We were a lot younger back then, and my reasons for asking her out weren’t the same reasons I’ve stayed with her all this time. I think she became the right person along the way, if that makes sense?”

“That’s sweet.”

He tucked his hands into his pockets and tilted his head as he looked at me. “Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I guess I’m just trying to figure out how I’ll know when I’m ready to date again. I had a bad breakup with my ex.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said. “Only you can know when you’ll be ready again, but I think the most important part is *wanting* to be ready. You have to want to date again, and I don’t think that’s something you can force.”

“Wow, Wes, that’s pretty good advice.”

He nodded and gave me a smile. “Just call me your dating sensei.”

I laughed. “I’m not calling you that.”

“But seriously,” he continued. “If all else fails, just listen to your gut. It won’t lead you too far astray.”

“It’s that easy, huh?”

“Hopefully. But what do I know? My girlfriend won’t even call me back.”

“She will,” I reassured him. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. Just give it time.”

“Thanks.” He smiled. “So, same time next week for our joint dating therapy session...I mean, economics study

session?”

“I’ll be there.” I laughed.

He smiled again and turned to head over to the boys’ dorms. As I watched him go, his advice repeated over and over again in my head. So far, I’d been trying to listen to my head when it came to Noah. I was a little scared of what would happen if I let my gut take control.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

---

The teachers must have been going easy on us during our first week back, because now we were in week two and they were piling on the homework. Every night after school, I spent hours slogging through my assignments. I had no idea how my friends managed to get through their homework and their extracurricular activities because I felt totally overwhelmed.

I was drawn back to the library on several occasions. It was so peaceful and beautiful in there it was hard to resist taking my laptop and setting up on one of the desks to study. I didn't bump into Noah in the stacks again, and I wasn't sure whether to be disappointed or not. I thought about our encounter there far more frequently than I should, so it was probably a good thing I didn't see him. I didn't need to be thinking about Noah any more than I already was.

I had to decide if I was going to accept his invite and go to the boathouse that weekend, but I wasn't sure if it was a good idea. Any doubt about whether Noah had personally wanted me to come along had been quashed when he'd asked me in the library. Anna wasn't there that time, so there was no denying it.

I couldn't understand why he'd taken an interest in me, and I still wasn't sure exactly what that interest was. There were so many other girls at this school who would be better suited to him, so I was almost certain his intentions weren't romantic. It seemed far more likely he was being friendly to me because I was Cress's roommate. She was one of the few

people he cared about, after all. He couldn't know the way my heart raced whenever he was near.

I probably would have bailed on the party again, but Anna and Cress didn't give me a choice. They were holding me to my promise that I wouldn't back out a second time, and so I trailed after the two of them on Saturday night as we attempted to navigate the darkened trail around the lake to the boathouse.

The girls were wearing short skirts and high heels, their hair and makeup crafted to perfection. Cress had coerced me into wearing a nice dress too, and the only reason my hair and makeup were done was because Anna had accosted me in the bathroom with her makeup brushes. When they set their minds to something, those two took no prisoners.

"Tonight's going to be so much fun," Cress said as we walked. "Especially since you're here with us this week." She nudged me with her arm.

"You didn't give me much choice."

"No, but you did promise..."

"So you keep telling me."

She grinned brightly like guilt-tripping me didn't bother her one bit.

I still hadn't told them Noah had invited me to come tonight. I wasn't sure if I wanted to bring it up. They would have pressed me for all the details, and Anna especially would have made it out to be a bigger deal than it was. I dreaded to imagine how she'd react if she found out we were in the library when it happened.

"Don't worry, you're going to love it," Anna said. "Though, as much as I like these parties, I'm already getting a bit sick of the same guys being here every week. We need fresh meat."

"You worried you're going to make out with Angus again?" Cress asked her.

"Thankfully, I don't think he's coming tonight," Anna replied. "I heard him complaining about having to leave

school for the weekend for his grandmother's birthday earlier in the week."

"Sounds like such a great guy," I joked.

"I know. He's the worst," Anna agreed. "That's why we need fresh meat. I've got to find someone better to kiss at parties."

"Maybe you just need to look a little closer at the options that are already available," Cress suggested.

"That would be like agreeing to eat at that awful diner just outside town." Anna screwed up her face. "You already know the menu's old and the food's terrible, *plus* you'd be missing out on Toddy's burgers, which are just down the road."

"So, you want the Toddy's burger of guys?" I did my best not to laugh.

"Exactly." Anna grinned. "And I'm pretty certain there's no one that yummy here." Her expression dimmed slightly as she tapped the pocket of her skirt. "Ah, shoot. I think I left my phone back in my room."

"I'm sure you can handle one night without it," Cress said, but Anna was already heading back the way we'd come.

"I'll only be a few minutes. Go on without me. I'll meet you guys there."

Cress shook her head as we kept walking. "I have no idea how she forgot her phone considering it's always glued to her hand."

We rounded a corner, and the boathouse appeared in the distance. Soft lights emanated from the timber shack and reflected across the soft ripples of the lake. A few people lingered on the dock outside the building, but I assumed most were inside given the sound of music that drifted through the air toward us from within the boathouse.

"There it is," Cress said, waving her hand at the boathouse. "It's a bit of a dive and not nearly as nice as the new center the school built a few years back, but at least no one bothers us out here."

It had definitely seen better times, but there was an old charm to the place I felt drawn to. The boathouse felt like it had some character, some stories to tell.

“I like it,” I said.

“I told you, you would.” Cress sounded pleased, but just because I thought the boathouse was cute didn’t mean I was going to enjoy the party she was dragging me to.

We entered the boathouse through the vast entrance that faced the lake. I was surprised by what I found inside. The wide area looked like a large den rather than a storage space for rowboats. The empty metal racks that lined the wooden walls of the room were the only hint of the building’s former purpose. Now, the space was filled with soft lights, comfy sofas, and people—though not nearly as many students as there had been at Luther’s party on the first night of the semester. It seemed to be a more exclusive group, and I recognized a lot of faces from the celebration at Toddy’s after the soccer game last week.

As we made our way inside, my gaze naturally seemed to gravitate toward Noah. He was standing in the far corner of the room, his arms crossed over his wide chest as he stared down at Veronica. She had one hand pressed against his chest while she slowly twirled a piece of hair around one finger with the other. Her face was filled with animation as she spoke, but Noah couldn’t have looked more disinterested.

Cress was watching Noah too and started to laugh. “Noah looks like he’s eaten something sour. I’ve barely talked to him all week. I wonder if he’s managed to get out of taking Veronica to the ball yet.”

I gave a light laugh in response, but my heart wasn’t in it. For some reason, seeing them together and knowing Noah was only putting up with Veronica because his family expected him to made me feel sorry for him. He had all the privilege in the world and the kind of money that could make anything he dreamed a possibility. And yet, it sounded as though his family’s rigid demands made him powerless to direct his own future. The more I thought about it, the more similar we



seemed. We both had obstacles blocking our roads to the future. Mine had always been a lack of money, and his was his grandfather.

“Let’s get some drinks.” Cress grabbed my hand and led me through the room to a fridge by the back wall. It was fully stocked with alcohol, and Cress reached for the bottom shelf and pulled out a four-pack of premixed drinks.

“These are my secret obsession,” she whispered as she handed me one.

“Why are they a secret?” I whispered back.

“Because the sugar content in these bad boys would give my dance teacher a heart attack. She can never know.”

I laughed. “I’ll take your secret to the grave.”

I unscrewed the lid of my drink and took a sip. It was painfully sweet. I wasn’t sure why Cress liked them so much. I found the second sip wasn’t as bad, and it went down a lot easier after the initial sugar hit.

“Oh, I hope one of those is for me!” Anna had arrived and was puffing slightly as she leaned against the wall for support.

“Did you run here?” Cress asked as she handed her a drink.

Anna twisted off the top and took three long gulps before she replied. “Is it that obvious?”

“Well, you’re pretty much gasping for air,” I said. “And you only arrived a minute or two after us. The real question is, how did you do it in those heels?” Anna’s shoes were far taller than anything I ever would have attempted to wear, and the pathway around the lake was hardly flat.

Anna laughed at my shocked expression. “What? Like it’s hard?”

“More like impossible,” I murmured.

“Ladies.” Sawyer stood behind us, the ever-present cheeky grin plastered across his face. “Is it just me, or are you three looking extra spectacular tonight.”

Anna folded her arms across her chest. “What do you want, Sawyer?”

“What? Can’t I compliment my three gorgeous friends?”

“Oh, you can,” Anna replied. “But your three gorgeous friends happen to know all your tricks, and you only tend to pull out the compliments when you want something.”

“I mean, you’re not wrong,” he said with an easy laugh.

“So, what is it?” Cress asked.

“Beer pong. I’m in need of a partner. Kaden and Luther have been dominating the table all night, and since Wes is in New York visiting his girlfriend for the weekend, he isn’t here to buddy up with me. Clearly, he needs to get his priorities straight.”

Sawyer glanced in my direction as he spoke, but I took a step back. “Don’t look at me if you want to win. I’ve never played before.”

They all turned to me in shock.

“Never?” Cress was staring at me like I’d just said something personally offensive.

I shook my head. I didn’t really want to explain that I had no time for parties back home. I was too busy working at the café. On the rare occasion when I did go to them, I spent the whole night looking after my ex. If the party followed a big win and there was alcohol there, he usually took the celebrations a little too far.

Sawyer reached out and grabbed my hand. “In that case, you definitely have to be my partner.”

I sent Cress and Anna a desperate look as he dragged me away. Neither of them came to my rescue. Maybe I was going to have to find new friends.

“Ah, newbie, you’ve come to challenge the beer pong masters?” Luther called as we approached the table.

Sawyer slung an arm over my shoulder. “She sure has. From what I’ve heard, she’s somewhat of a beer pong

prodigy.”

I shrugged Sawyer’s arm away and shot him a glare. He was so full of it, but his smile only widened as he caught the look on my face. “Hey, there’s no need to get angry with me. Word was bound to get out sooner or later.”

I pulled him aside before he could keep bragging. “What are you doing?” I hissed. “As soon as we start playing, they’ll know you’re lying. I’m going to be terrible.”

Sawyer shrugged. “Maybe you’re a natural.”

“Not likely,” I muttered. I barely knew the rules of the game. “How do we play again?”

“Ah, Isobel, always the jokester.” He ruffled my hair playfully, but I swatted his hand away.

“I’m not kidding.”

“Okay, okay,” he conceded, a smile still on his lips. “Just stand at our end of the table and try to throw the ping-pong ball into one of their cups. If you get one, they have to drink it. It’s easy.”

“We’ll see about that,” I muttered before following him back to the table.

My total lack of skill became blatantly obvious once the game started. My hand-eye coordination was bad to begin with, but after losing several cups and being forced to gulp down the lukewarm beer inside, it became even worse.

The grin on Luther’s face only seemed to grow bigger with each shot I missed. The ping-pong ball was too small, and I kept forgetting just how light it was. Every time I threw it toward the cups of beer, it sailed past them and over the end of the table

To make matters worse, Kaden and Luther landed every shot. It barely made a difference when Sawyer did manage to sink one for our team, forcing the boys to drink. Their aim was consistently good, like the beer didn’t affect them at all. Before tonight, I’d begun to think Kaden was the nice one out of their little friendship trio, but he didn’t go easy on me at all.

The game proved he was just as headstrong as Luther and Noah.

“You can’t honestly be enjoying this,” I groaned to Sawyer after he drank our second-to-last cup and threw it to the side. There was only one left on our end of the table now, so there was no doubt we were going to lose.

His eyes sparkled with humor as he looked at me. “Of course, I’m enjoying this. I arrived late to the party. Playing beer pong against Kaden and Luther is the quickest way to catch up on all the drinking I’ve missed.”

I let out another groan. “You’re doing this to get us drunk?”

“Well, yeah. Why else would I be stupid enough to challenge them?”

I gave him my darkest glare in response. “If I forget this tomorrow, and I probably will because of all these beers, remind me you’re officially on my shit list.”

Sawyer laughed and draped his arm over my shoulder once again. “Nah, you can’t put me on your shit list. I’m far too lovable.”

I rolled my eyes at him but smiled. Sawyer was sly and cheeky, and I kind of wanted to kill him right now. But I got the feeling he would be impossible to stay mad at.

He aimed the ball at the cups on Luther and Kaden’s end of the table, but his shot sailed wide, and the two boys celebrated. My eyes fell to our lone remaining cup, and I sighed, knowing I was going to have to drink it in a matter of moments.

I didn’t have a chance to look up before the ball happily plopped into the beer I was staring at. I let out a moan and scowled up at Kaden who gave me an apologetic smile.

“Sorry,” he mouthed.

“Traitor,” I mouthed back. He was going on my shit list too. I slouched my shoulders and looked down at the beer once more.

Sawyer laughed when he caught my expression. “No need to look so sad,” he said as he picked up the cup. “I believe this is what we call taking one for the team.” He winked before quickly downing the drink. I was already feeling light-headed and slightly woozy, so I was all too relieved watching him drink it for me. I didn’t often drink alcohol, so this game had put me right over the edge.

“Bad luck, newbie,” Luther said, walking over to our side of the table and leaning against it. He looked far too composed for a guy who’d been playing beer pong all night. “Care to challenge us again?”

“Ha, no way.” I shook my head. “I think I’m going to retire from beer pong. Forever.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certain.” I went to push past him. “Now, I’m going outside to get some fresh air.”

Luther laughed as he watched me walk away. “Remember, I’m here if you want a rematch.”

I waved him off. There was no way that was happening. As far as I was concerned, I was never playing a drinking game again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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The night had grown cooler, but the alcohol rushing through my veins seemed to combat the chill as I left the boathouse. I walked to the end of the small wooden pier and sat so my legs dangled over the edge. The full moon was reflecting brightly on the smooth surface of the lake before me, and a light breeze ruffled my hair. Aside from the slight autumn nip in the air, it was almost the perfect evening.

As I sat there, I wondered what my mom was up to. She'd been so busy the last few times I'd tried to call her, and I felt a twinge of guilt that she was working harder in my absence. It had been two weeks since I'd seen her last, and I wished she had a smartphone so I could call and see her face.

"I guess your secret is out."

I didn't need to turn to know it was Noah who'd snuck up behind me. There was no mistaking the deep timbre of his voice, and I swallowed down a nervous lump that had risen in my throat as I looked up and over my shoulder to meet his eyes.

"Secret? I don't have a secret." My voice wobbled slightly as I spoke, and I struggled to calm my racing heart. Had he somehow discovered the truth about my past? That I was only here because I'd randomly won the genetic jackpot and, unlike everyone else at this school, I hadn't been born with a silver spoon in my mouth? I wasn't ready to try to explain my messy family situation, and my throat felt dry as I imagined what Noah would think about me if he knew I usually spent my weekends waiting tables.

A smug smile pulled at his lips. “Really? Because I could have sworn you’re not the beer pong prodigy Sawyer said you were.”

“Oh, that.” My shoulders relaxed as I slowly breathed out. “Was I really that terrible?”

He laughed and lowered himself to sit on the edge of the pier beside me. “You missed every shot.”

“Maybe I was just having an off night.”

“Crash, you didn’t even know the rules.”

A small laugh left my lips. “I guess you know my secret then. I’ve never played beer pong before in my life.”

“No? Really?” He nudged his shoulder against mine in jest, and the slight touch drove the butterflies in my tummy wild. He seemed light and carefree, and I couldn’t get enough of it. I tried to remind myself that I’d decided being close to Noah was a bad idea, but it was much harder to convince myself of that when he was sitting at my side.

“I thought you might want a drink of water,” he continued, holding out a plastic bottle. “Here.”

It took me a moment to respond. I was both surprised he’d noticed I needed a water bottle and shocked he’d thought to bring one out for me. For a guy who didn’t tend to engage much with others, he sure was observant. I hadn’t seen him anywhere near the beer pong table while I’d been playing either.

“Thanks.” I gave him a grateful smile as I took the bottle.

“I’m glad you came tonight,” he said as I took a sip. “I was worried you might not show again.”

I swallowed the water and glanced up at him. “Well, Cress and Anna didn’t leave me much choice.”

“Oh.” He exhaled and rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. “So, they’re the only reason you came?”

“One of the reasons.”

He perked up a little.

“I also wanted to challenge the beer pong world champions, but turned out that was a bad idea.”

He chuckled, but his eyes still seemed a little tense. “So, my invite had nothing to do with it?”

I wasn’t really sure how to respond. If Cress and Anna hadn’t forced my hand, I think I would have bailed again. It was probably because I didn’t believe there could be anything more to Noah’s invite than a kind gesture. “I figured you were just being friendly to the new girl.”

“I wasn’t.” He quickly shook his head before he continued. “I mean, I was. But I also asked you because I want to get to know you better. You’re different from the other girls here.”

“I wish people would stop saying that,” I muttered. This school made me feel like a pigeon amid a flight of doves, trying not to draw attention to myself as I flapped awkwardly among them. It wasn’t the nicest thing to know that other people saw it too.

“Why?” he said. “It’s a compliment. You’re real and honest, and you’re not blinded by someone’s surname or what their parents do. People always have hidden motives in this place or lie just to get close to me.”

My stomach dipped at his words. Noah thought I was honest, but in reality, I was probably the biggest liar at Weybridge Academy. I didn’t want to know how he’d react if he found out I didn’t belong here.

“I’m sorry you have to deal with that.”

“Tell me about it,” he muttered. “Plus, you’re one of the few people who has yelled at me in a long time.”

I buried my head in my hands and groaned. I felt my cheeks warm as I recalled our collision in the woods and Noah walking in on me in a towel. Neither of those incidents were really his fault, yet I’d nearly snapped his head off. Add that to the list of reasons why I was so surprised he continued to seek me out.

“Don’t worry, I liked it. It was...” He paused as he searched for the word.



“Different?” I guessed.

“I was going to say refreshing.”

“You found my yelling refreshing?”

“Maybe.” Noah laughed. “Also, you’re kind of cute when you’re angry.”

My face felt like it was burning, and I struggled to look him in the eyes. Surely, he was just joking around to make me feel better.

“Then again, you’re cute when you’re not angry too...”

Was Noah Hastings really calling me cute? Perhaps the beers had altered my hearing somehow. I knew Noah didn’t date girls at school, so there was no way he could be interested in me of all people, but here he was, sitting beside me on the pier in front of the pristine lake, looking at me with his striking green eyes and calling me cute.

“You don’t actually think that,” I murmured.

“Why not?”

“Well, because you’re you and I’m me.”

His lips curved in a small smile. “And what exactly does that mean?”

“It means that a guy like you would never be interested in a girl like me.”

“Why would you say that? Don’t you know how beautiful you are?”

I was taken aback. I couldn’t remember anyone calling me beautiful with such certainty, like I was a fool for not believing it as strongly as he did. I rolled my eyes, trying to make light of his comment, but Noah wasn’t laughing.

“I’m serious,” he insisted. “Both inside and out.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls,” I whispered, glancing up at him from the corner of my eye.

“I’ve never said that to any girl.”

His voice had dropped as he stared deeply into my eyes. His gaze was searching, as if it was diving into the depths of my soul and shining a light on all the messy, dark corners of it. When he looked at me that way, I felt bare before him, and I kept waiting for him to turn from me as he realized he didn't like what he saw.

It would be better that way. If he could simply realize what a terrible match we were. I was a girl who came from nothing, trapped in a world where everyone had everything. I was never going to fit in here, and Noah was the epitome of all the things I never had and could never be. We were totally wrong for each other. But, even realizing that, I couldn't seem to do the smart thing and push him away.

“You really don't believe me. Do you?”

I shrugged and glanced away.

Noah saw far too much when he looked at me, and it left me feeling torn. A part of me was enjoying whatever this was between us and wanted to keep living the fantasy. But that was all this was—a fantasy. And I kind of wished he'd see through my charade to the real me. I was sick of pretending to be something I wasn't, and I hated lying to my friends. But the moment I revealed I'd been lying about my past, everything would come crashing down around me.

I knew I should get up and leave. Especially when Noah was saying such sweet things to me. It was too easy to get caught up in his eyes and to bask in the tingles that were ever present on my skin whenever he was near.

“You really should believe me.” He'd drawn closer, and I could smell the soft scent of his aftershave as I looked into his eyes. They almost seemed to sparkle in the darkness, and all I could think was how much harder it was to remember why Noah was wrong for me when I was sitting so close to him. This was a mistake, and yet I couldn't bring myself to move away.

I needed him to talk about something else, *anything else*, other than how beautiful he thought I was. And I definitely needed him to stop staring dreamily into my eyes. Between the

moonlight, the soft music in the background, and the light ripples on the lake, this all felt far too romantic. Somehow, we'd landed in dangerous territory, and I'd come thoroughly unprepared.

"So, there's this ball the school hosts in a few weeks..." Noah said.

"Oh yeah, I hear you're taking Veronica."

"You heard that?" His expression dimmed, and he pulled back slightly as he frowned. Somehow, my words had broken whatever moment we'd been sharing, and I couldn't help but feel grateful. It felt like I could finally breathe and think a little more clearly again.

"Where did you hear that?"

"Uhhh..." I didn't want to say Cress because it felt like I'd be throwing her under the bus. "Just around. You know how this school is."

"Yeah, I guess I do." He eased back to rest his hands on the wooden slats of the pier. "It's probably because Veronica and I go together every year. It's a stupid tradition, and I'd prefer to take someone else."

"You don't want to take Veronica?"

"I don't want Veronica to get the wrong idea. Besides, like I said, I want to take someone else."

I'd seen the way she constantly threw herself at Noah, so I could definitely understand why he might be worried that taking her to a ball would lead her on. Still, his answer was rather diplomatic, and it made me wonder how he actually felt about Veronica.

"Well, I'm sure you'd have no problem getting another date to the ball."

"Ah," he replied. "See, there lies the problem. The one girl I'd like to ask is the one girl who would say no..."

He hadn't taken his eyes off me for a single second. He couldn't be talking about me, could he? I knew the plan Cress made with Noah hinged on him taking a girl from an

influential family to the ball, so I was the last person he should consider. I couldn't tell him I knew that without betraying Cress's confidence.

"Maybe you should try someone who will say yes then," I suggested.

Noah started to chuckle. "Isobel, I'm talking about you..."

I shook my head. "You don't want to take me to some ball."

"I do."

"Really, you don't. I would make a terrible date. You should invite someone who knows how to dress for these things. Who can dance without causing grievous bodily harm. Someone from your world..." I quickly stopped myself. If I kept going, there was a risk I'd expose myself as a fraud at this school and reveal that Cress had told me about her little plan to get Noah to find a date with an influential family. I'd already said too much.

Noah frowned. "Isobel, I don't care about any of that stuff. I like you."

"Why?"

"Because you're you and I'm me," he said with a small smile. "I just feel drawn to you, and it's been that way ever since you came crashing into my life."

I stared into his eyes, uncertain what to say in response. Noah felt the same connection between us that I'd been experiencing since the first moment we met. I'd been trying to ignore it, to deny it even existed, but as much as I resisted, the connection wouldn't go away. Any other girl would probably throw her arms around him and accept his invitation a million times over, but I held back.

"You don't even know me," I said.

"I know enough to know I want to know more," he said. "Look, don't worry about the ball for now. Just give me a chance. Let me take you on one date."

There was so much hope in his eyes, and it triggered a warm feeling inside my chest. It should have been simple to refuse him. Especially when I had a list of reasons a mile long for why it was a bad idea. But my heart was starting to overrule my head. I wanted to get to know him too and understand why there was such a strong connection between us.

“One little date,” he continued. “And if it’s a complete disaster, I’ll never bother you again.”

Perhaps I was overthinking it. Sure, Matthew had warned me against Noah, but I hardly trusted my father’s judgment. And while I didn’t know if I was ready to put my heart on the line again could one date really be so bad? It would certainly put me in Veronica’s crosshairs, even more than I already was, but I wasn’t going to let that stop me. Maybe it was time to follow Wes’s advice and go with my gut.

Noah’s gaze continued to implore mine, and before I realized what I was doing, I nodded in response. “Okay, fine, one little date.”

He couldn’t stop a wide grin from stretching across his face as he released a heavy breath he’d been holding. “I probably would have preferred a more excited response, but I’ll take what I can get.”

“Sorry.” I laughed. “I’m just ninety-nine percent sure I’m going to end up regretting this.”

That didn’t seem to bother him in the slightest though. “Well, Crash, I guess I’m just going to have to prove you wrong.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

---

“I still can’t believe you’re going on a date with Noah,” Cress said as we made our way to class on Monday morning. I’d told her and Anna he’d asked me out on Saturday night, and to say they were both shocked was an understatement. They weren’t surprised he was going on a date with me specifically; it was more the fact Noah was going out with anyone at all. Everyone at Weybridge knew Noah Hastings didn’t date.

“I can’t believe I agreed to go.” All I could think was that the alcohol must have gone to my head because there was no way I would have agreed to go out with him if I’d been thinking straight. Noah and I had nothing in common. He was a wealthy, popular, soccer-playing, high-school icon while I preferred life in the shadows with my nose thoroughly buried in a textbook. Not to mention the fact that I wasn’t even sure if I was ready to date again. This was only going to end in disaster.

Cress looked thoughtful as she considered me. “He must really like you.”

“I doubt that.” I scoffed. “I’m just the shiny new student.”

“I think you should give Noah more credit,” she replied. “I don’t think he likes you just because you’re new here. I think he likes you because you’re genuine. There aren’t many people like that at our school. Hell, there aren’t many people like that outside our school. You’re kind of special, and don’t you forget it.”

She emphasized her final words by waving her finger at me before turning on her heels and marching into English class.

I watched her walk away, guilt flaring in my chest. Cress thought I was genuine, and yet I'd been lying about my mom and how I grew up since the moment we met.

Dishonesty didn't come naturally to me, and I hated skirting around the truth. I'd been growing increasingly sick of feeling ashamed about my home life and hiding it just so I could fit in. I'd always been so proud of my mom and how she'd kept the café running all these years despite the obstacles in her way. I was still so proud of her, and I wouldn't give up the years spent waiting tables with her for anything.

I knew it was my failed friendships back home that made me so nervous about being open and honest with my new friends. But was I really going to let previous betrayals hold me back for the rest of my life? I'd never been the kind of girl who lied to fit in, and I didn't want to be that person now.

As I stared after Cress, I came to the realization that it was time to tell her and my other friends the truth. I knew them all well enough now that I felt confident they wouldn't judge me about my life in Rapid Bay. But what might upset them was the fact I hadn't been honest from the start.

That wasn't a good enough reason to continue lying though. I needed to come clean, and the sooner, the better. I was done pretending to be something I wasn't. It was a risk, but if my friends didn't want anything to do with me once they knew the truth, then perhaps they weren't friends worth keeping.

A small voice in my head also wondered how Noah would react, but I quickly silenced the thought. We hadn't even been on one date yet, so he should be the least of my worries.

I followed Cress into English with a whole lot more on my mind than my date with Noah. She flashed me a smile as I sat at the table beside her, but I didn't return it.

“There’s something I want to talk to you about tonight,” I said to her.

She frowned slightly when she caught the nervous look in my eyes. “Why do I get the feeling it’s about something more serious than what you’re going to wear on your date?”

I hesitated.

“What’s wrong? Is it something bad?” Cress had swiveled in her seat to face me now, and there was more concern in her voice.

“No, you don’t need to worry.” I glanced around as I shook my head, worried that other people in the class might sense something was wrong.

“So, what is it?”

“Not here. We’ll just talk about it tonight, okay?” I needed the next few hours to figure out exactly what I was going to say and to build up my nerve.

“Okay, sure.” Cress gave me a cautious smile, but her expression quickly turned cold as she caught Veronica watching us. “Is there something we can help you with?”

“Oh, nothing,” Veronica replied with a shrug. She kept her gaze locked on me though, an unsettling look of smug satisfaction on her face. She’d probably been listening in to our conversation and was enjoying the idea that there might be something wrong.

Thankfully, she didn’t say anything else before she turned to face the front of the classroom once more. The look she’d been giving me stayed etched in my mind. There was a vindictive glint in her eyes, and I had a bad feeling she’d heard about my date with Noah. I knew the news would get to her eventually. It was near impossible to avoid the spread of gossip at this school. But I’d hoped we’d have at least a few days of peace before the gossip started.

I couldn’t worry about Veronica right now. Not when I had much bigger problems. I needed to focus on what I was going to say to my friends. I just hoped that I was strong enough to



withstand the fallout if they didn't accept me once they knew the truth.

I was distracted as I walked into math, but when I heard my name being called, I let out a groan.

“Newbie!”

I'd almost forgotten I shared this class with Luther and Kaden. The two of them were sitting at the back of the room grinning at me.

“Newbie, over here.” Luther was waving frantically at me.

I shook my head, taking a seat at the front of the room. I had enough on my mind without Luther and Kaden distracting me all class. Besides, I was still annoyed with them. I blamed their beer pong skills for the headache I'd been fighting all weekend and the alcohol-induced haze I was certain led to me agreeing to a date with Noah.

I'd barely sat down when I felt a presence at my side.

“What you doing, newbie?”

I scowled up at Luther. “Sitting.”

“You're sitting in the wrong place.”

“Yeah, because you and Kaden are on my shit list for getting me drunk on Saturday night.”

Luther laughed. “Don't be silly. You barely drank anything, thanks to Sawyer's willingness to help you out. *He*, on the other hand, was wasted.”

“I still don't want to sit with you guys. You're a bad influence.”

“What if I promise to be good?”

There was a look of pure innocence in Luther's eyes, but I didn't believe him for one moment. I barely had a chance to respond because he started talking again. “Ding, ding, ding,” he sang out in a high-pitched voice. “You're too late, and that offer is officially expired. Looks like we're doing things the hard way.”

Before I could react, he grabbed my bag and carted it to the back of the room.

I watched him go, irritation sizzling down my spine. I was tempted to just ignore him, turn back to the front of the room, and sit through class without my laptop. I couldn't stand the idea of not being able to take notes though, and he totally knew it.

I huffed before slowly trailing after Luther. "You know I hate you, right?" I said, sitting in the chair next to him.

He smiled brightly and placed my bag on my desk. "You can't hate me. You're dating my best friend."

"We're not dating. It's one date."

"Which will turn into two, then three, and then you'll both live happily ever after." Luther was speaking so loudly I was scared the whole class would hear. "And it's all thanks to me."

"Calm down," I hissed at him. "And you're to blame for this because you got me drunk before he asked."

"You were barely tipsy," Luther argued "And no, you and Noah should both be grateful because I was the best wingman ever and figured out all your deep dark secrets beforehand."

My eyes widened, and I worried he'd somehow learned the truth about me.

"Though I still never learned what your type is..." he continued. "Noah really wanted to know the answer to that one."

"Wait, Noah made you ask all those absurd questions?" I wanted to relax because Luther clearly wasn't talking about my life back in Rapid Bay. But it was hard to calm down when it sounded like Luther had been trying to get dirt on me for Noah.

"Well, he didn't have to. I'm just that good a wingman and wanted to help a brother out. I may not know your type, but I know Noah's, and you are exactly the kind of girl he likes."

"You don't know that." I blushed. "And besides, you started quizzing me the first night we met..."

Luther shrugged. "I saw the way he was looking at you when you arrived at the party. I knew right away he was interested."

I found it hard to believe him. There was no way Noah was interested in me from my first day at Weybridge. He hadn't even said two words to me that day, and he had completely shrugged me off when Cress introduced us.

"You should probably name your firstborn after me," he continued. "He wouldn't exist if not for my matchmaking, after all."

I often wondered what was going through Luther's head, but this conversation really took the cake.

"Look, Luther, I hate to burst your bubble, but Noah and I aren't going to end up together."

"Sure, you are."

I looked at Kaden, who was sitting on his other side listening with an amused smile. "Kaden, will you tell Luther he's wrong?"

Kaden's smile only grew. "But I don't want to lie to him."

"Ugh, you both suck."

They chuckled in response.

"Nah, you love us," Luther said.

I hoped the boys would quiet down once class started, but Luther seemed to have no inclination to listen to the teacher at all.

"So, are you excited for the date on Saturday?" he asked.

Apparently, we weren't done talking about Noah, and his question had drawn the attention of several other students in the room. Veronica, in particular, shot us a scowl over her shoulder.

"Luther, can we talk about this later?" I pleaded. "I'm trying to listen."

"But it can't wait."

“I’m pretty sure it can.”

“It really can’t. My curiosity is going to kill me.”

“Wouldn’t that be a shame,” I muttered, making Luther splutter out a muffled laugh.

“You get kind of feisty when you’re annoyed.”

“Funny, you’re the only one who brings that out in me.”

Luther laid a hand against his heart. “I’m touched I have such a profound effect on you.” He was enjoying all this far too much. Even Kaden, who usually seemed more interested in listening to the teacher, was smirking as we spoke.

“Come on, newbie, talk with me.”

“Not going to happen, Luther.”

“But math is boring. Wouldn’t you rather talk with me?”

“No.”

I focused on the teacher, but a moment later, someone poked my arm with a pen. With a sigh, I looked at Luther once more.

“Just answer my one little question, and I’ll be quiet.”

“Fine. Are you asking if I’m excited for the date because you want to know or because you’re digging for information for your friend?”

“Can it be both?”

“Well, if it’s both, then no comment.”

“Oh, then only *I* want to know.” He winked at me.

It was hard not to smile in response. “I’m not answering that.”

“I promise I won’t tell.”

I let out a sigh. “I wouldn’t have agreed to the date if I didn’t want to go.” My answer surprised me. I kept telling myself this was a bad idea, but I’d gone with my gut, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t at least a little intrigued to find out what a date with Noah was like.

Luther beamed in response. “I knew it. You like him.”

“Now I’ve answered your question, can I concentrate on class?”

“Of course.” He gestured toward the front of the room, and I returned my attention to the teacher.

A moment later, there was another prod in my arm. “Do you think the two of you will kiss?”

I turned once more to see Luther innocently batting his eyelashes at me.

“Luther, you’ve had your one question.”

“But I just realized I have another one...”

I was never going to get any work done in math this year.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

---

**A**fter lunch, I saw Lily leaving the dining hall on her way to our next class, and I rushed to catch up with her so we could walk together.

“Hey, Lily, wait up!” I called.

She turned and smiled as I fell into step beside her. “Hey, stranger. Are you excited for another thrilling business management class?”

“Uh, no.”

“Yeah, it’s not the most exciting subject,” she chuckled. “Though given who sits right behind you, I have a feeling that class must still be one of your favorites.” She wiggled her eyebrows, and I blushed because I knew she was talking about Noah.

“Your cheeks are turning bright pink.” She giggled.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I lied.

She tilted her head and smiled, totally unconvinced.

As we continued into the corridor, I noticed people watching me. Being the new girl, I had gotten used to receiving curious looks, but this seemed different. I thought people had gotten bored of me by now. Some students appeared as though they were trying not to laugh when they saw me while I could have sworn others were looking at me with pity.

“Am I being paranoid, or are people looking at me weirdly?” I murmured when yet another kid glanced at me and

struggled to smother a laugh.

Lily stopped and glanced around. “Yeah, maybe. I wonder what’s going on. It’s not like you have food on your face or your uniform is on inside out. You look really cute today.” She was frowning as she scanned me, trying to figure it out.

My skin started to prickle under the constant gaze of everyone around me. I’d just been in the dining hall with pretty much the whole school, and no one was watching me in there. Something must have happened in the short time since, but I had no idea what.

“They’re holding something,” Lily said.

“Huh?”

“Everyone who’s watching you has a piece of paper in their hands.”

I turned my attention to one of the closest students. The girl was intently studying a sheet of paper that she held with both hands. When she glanced up and caught me watching her, the girl blanched, and her eyes darted between me and whatever was on the page.

I didn’t know the girl I’d caught looking at me, but she seemed younger, probably a freshman. I walked over and held a hand out toward her. “Can I see that?”

The girl pulled the paper close to her chest. “Uh…”

“We know it’s something to do with Isobel,” Lily added as she stepped beside me. “Can you please show it to us?”

The girl swallowed before slowly passing the sheet to me. I turned it over in my hand to see what was printed on it, and my stomach dropped. It was a photo of Nina and me taken at my mom’s café. I was wearing my uniform, including my dirty black apron, and the clean but tired booths that lined the restaurant were evident in the background. Across the top of the page, a word had been scrawled in large letters with permanent marker. I read it out loud. “Liar.”

“Isobel, what is this?” I could easily hear the worry in Lily’s voice, but I couldn’t really focus on that right now.

“Where did you get this?” I asked the girl.

She pointed over her shoulder toward the end of the corridor. I gasped at what I saw. A large crowd of students had gathered, and more were flocking to join them. They were surrounded by white pieces of paper, similar to the one I held in my hand. They flitted through the air, were clutched in people’s hands, and were plastered to the walls and floor. The blood drained from my skin as I realized the sheer number of people who were discovering the truth about me.

“Isobel?” Lily prompted.

I started to move forward, slowly at first, but I quickly gained momentum as I drew closer to the crowd and saw the extent of the damage. There were other pictures of me stuck to the walls—one of me mopping the floor at the café and one of my mom and me standing outside, pointing to the sign above the front door. Each image had a different word written across the top.

*“Fake, Phony, Peasant, Charity...”*

I could barely bring myself to look at what the rest of them had to say.

As I reached the throng of students, one voice shouted above the whispers and laughter. “Step right up. Step right up. Come see for yourselves the embarrassing truth the newest addition to Weybridge Academy has been hiding from you all.”

I pushed to the front of the crowd and found Veronica standing against the wall. She was grinning widely as she handed out pieces of paper from a huge stack that one of her cronies was cradling in their arms. When she saw me coming, her eyes lit with delight.

“Ah, if it isn’t the liar herself.”

Laughter rang through the crowd behind me, and I shrank under the weight of it. I was too shocked not to react. Too hurt by all the painful truths that were splayed across Veronica’s posters. I didn’t know how to defend myself. How could I when it was all true?



“It’s funny,” she continued. “You’d think someone who’s intent on lying to the whole school about where she came from would remember to delete their old Instagram account.”

So, that was where she got the pictures. Nina had made the account for me on her phone years ago. I didn’t have a smartphone back then, and I’d forgotten the account even existed.

“So, it seems we have another scholarship student in our midst,” Veronica taunted. She was really putting on a show for those gathered behind me, making certain to project her voice so that everyone could hear. “And this one was so ashamed of it she thought she could pretend to be something she’s not and lie to the whole school.”

“It’s not like that...”

“Isn’t it?”

Lily finally caught up to me and lightly touched my arm. “Is this true?” She had one of the posters clutched to her chest, and her eyes were filled with hurt as she looked between Veronica and me.

I slowly nodded. I didn’t know what else to say. There were no lies written on the pages that were plastered on the walls and littering the floor. I might not be a scholarship student, but I was the biggest charity case in this school.

Lily took a sharp step back from me. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I...”

“Are you ashamed to be like me?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then why didn’t you say anything?”

“Yes, Isobel, why didn’t you say anything?” Veronica stepped forward to stand at Lily’s side and glared at me. “Is it because you think you’re too good to admit you’re just another charity case? Or is it because you’re a pathological liar?”

I opened and closed my mouth several times as I tried to come up with a response. I was completely lost for words though. I could sense the eyes of the crowd on me from every angle. But it was the sadness and betrayal in Lily's gaze that struck me the most.

"No one will ever trust another word you say," Veronica continued. "You're a fake."

Tears started to well in my eyes, and I turned away before Veronica could spot them. I was met with a sea of judgmental stares, and I knew I couldn't stay here a moment longer. I started to push my way past the other students, hurrying as I desperately tried to get away.

Once I emerged from the crowd, I fled back down the corridor. I didn't know where I was headed, only that I didn't want to be anywhere near those stupid posters or Veronica's gleeful expression. She hadn't just enjoyed taking me down; she'd treasured every brutal second of it.

I raced around a corner and almost plowed straight into Cress and Anna who were coming out of the dining hall. I wobbled as I screeched to a halt, and Anna laughed as she went to steady me. "Where are you going so fast? Are your shoes on fire?"

The two girls were smiling until they caught sight of my expression. "Isobel, what's wrong?" Cress reached out a hand to me.

I couldn't look them in the eyes, and I took a quick step back as I shook my head. "It's nothing," I replied before I continued past them, keeping my head down as I made for the exit. I didn't look back, and I hoped they didn't follow. Everything written on those posters about me was true, and soon, Anna and Cress were going to know it too.

I waited until I got to my room before I allowed myself to break down. Sobs racked my body, and I curled up in a ball under the covers of my bed. I wished my mom could be here to console me, and that made the tears flow so much faster. I'd been so worried my friends here wouldn't accept the real me I'd broken the biggest friendship rule there was—tell the truth.

The real kicker was, I'd been planning to come clean with them about everything tonight. Not that it mattered now.

The bell rang to signal the start of classes, but I couldn't bring myself to care. I couldn't face school right now. I was a mess. The shattered feeling inside me was just as bad as when Levi cheated on me. I hadn't realized just how much my friends here had come to mean to me, but they'd already burrowed their way so deeply into my heart I wasn't sure how I'd recover from losing them.

I heard the click of the door opening and someone move into the room, but I kept myself firmly hidden under the covers.

"Isobel?" Cress's soft voice sounded from across the room.

I scrunched up my eyes, wishing I could disappear, but unfortunately, I was a complete Muggle without a lick of magic when I really needed it. Instead, I slowly pulled down the covers and turned to the door.

Cress was standing in the entrance, flanked by Anna and Lily. Their arms were filled with scrunched-up posters, and they were all looking at me with sympathy in their eyes.

"Are you okay?" Cress walked over to sit at the end of my bed while the other two girls sat on the bed across from us.

I was still struggling to form words, and I knew my appearance would tell what my voice could not—I was a wreck. My cheeks were still stained with tears, and I was sure my eyes were red. I wasn't one of those girls who could look pretty when they cried. I usually looked like I'd been punched by the tissue box I was clutching.

"Veronica's a stupid troll," Anna said. "She gets pleasure in life from being horrible to people. What she did back there was just mean. But, don't worry, we got rid of the posters." She lifted a handful of the ripped and torn paper sheets to show me.

It was kind of the girls to do that, especially since they'd all just learned I'd been lying to them. But the damage had already been done. There was no erasing the fact that everyone

knew the truth about me now. I nervously looked at my friends, trying to guess what they thought about it all. “You guys must hate me.”

“No!”

“Not at all.”

“Of course not.”

They all spoke at once and shook their heads.

“We are confused though,” Cress added. “Is what Veronica said true?”

My stomach was tied in knots as I considered how to explain it to them. “I didn’t intend to lie,” I started. “And despite what Veronica assumed, I’m not here on a scholarship. My dad wasn’t around when I was young. I just met him recently, and he’s the one who paid for me to be here.”

“So, the photos...” Lily said. She had a poster in her hand and was looking down at the first photo I’d seen—the one of me in my café uniform.

“Yeah, that’s me.” I took in a deep breath. “That photo is from my mom’s café. She doesn’t have a chain of luxury restaurants or anything like that. It’s just one struggling café by the beach. We never had much money, so I always helped her out by cleaning and waiting tables.”

“So, why didn’t you say anything?” Cress looked both confused and upset.

“I guess when I got here I already felt so out of place. I knew I didn’t belong. I might have felt better if I was here on scholarship because at least then I would have known I’d earned my place here. But being here because of a father I’d only just met and don’t really want anything to do with just didn’t feel right.”

I blew out a breath before I continued with the messy truth. “I had a really bad falling-out with my friends back home at the end of last year. They all ditched me after one of them stole my boyfriend, and I’ve had a really hard time getting over that. When I met you guys and you accepted me so

quickly and easily, I didn't want to do anything to mess that up. And then when I saw how Veronica treated Lily at Luther's party on the first night of school, I was scared that was how everyone at this school felt about people less privileged than them."

"You thought we'd ditch you?" Cress asked.

I shook my head, shame pinking my cheeks. "I didn't know what to think. I've been shunned and abandoned by friends for far less, and I really like you guys. I think I was just scared of how you'd react. I'm not embarrassed of how I grew up. I'm actually so proud. My mom is the most amazing person, and I'm so lucky to have her. I made a mistake keeping all that from you guys, and I'm sorry I wasn't more honest. I understand if you don't want to be friends with me anymore..."

The girls all had a mixture of concern and sadness on their faces.

Cress was the first one to break the silence as she leaned in close and pulled me in for a hug. "Of course, we still want to be friends with you." She squeezed me tightly before pulling back. "I'm just hurt that you'd think I'd ever consider not being friends with you just because of where you're from."

"Yeah, bitch, what were you thinking?" Anna asked, also coming over to give me a hug. "I told you I'd still be friends with you even if you were a social leper. I don't know how I could have been any clearer."

I let out a small laugh. These girls didn't know how much it meant to me to hear that. Especially when my friends back home had all abandoned me.

Lily still hovered in the background, and as I looked at her, she gave me a sad smile. "If I'd known there were some people here who would treat me like they do, I probably would have lied about my scholarship too," she murmured. "Veronica's not the only one. I don't blame you for wanting to avoid that. I really wish you had trusted me though. I, of all people, would have understood."

“I’m sorry, Lily.”

She walked over and took my hands in hers. “I know. And I’m sorry for not standing up for you out in the corridor like you stood up for me. I was caught by surprise. Not that it’s any excuse, but it took me a moment to get my head around things. I get it now.”

“You were right not to stand up for me,” I said. “Veronica wasn’t that far from the truth.”

“Still, you didn’t deserve to be treated that way, no matter what the truth was.”

“Yeah, that was vindictive, even for Veronica,” Anna added. “I hope she wakes up tomorrow with a face full of pimples.”

“Mmm, big throbbing ones with oozing white heads,” Cress agreed.

“The type that can’t be covered with makeup no matter how hard you try.” Anna sounded far too excited by the thought.

My friends were so understanding, and it made me regret not being honest from the start. And now, not only did everyone know the truth, but I’d been painted as a liar to the whole school.

“Do you think everyone here hates me?” I asked.

“No one will hate you for this,” Lily said.

“And I think you’ll find that the people who matter really won’t care,” Cress added. “They just might be surprised you felt the need to keep it from them.”

I swallowed as another rush of guilt shot through me. “I really am sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.” Cress said. “We understand, and we still love you.”

“Do you think Veronica did this because you stood up to her about calling me Charity?” Lily wondered.

“Maybe.”

Anna snorted. “That won’t have helped, but I think this has more to do with the fact you’re going on a date with Noah. She’s trying to sabotage you.”

“You’re going on a date with Noah?” Lily gasped.

“He asked me out on Saturday.” I nodded. “Do you really think Veronica would do that?”

“Ah, *yeah*,” Anna said.

“That’s definitely the reason,” Cress agreed.

The more important question was whether Noah would care. I hadn’t had a chance to think about how he’d react to seeing Veronica’s posters. The night he asked me out, he told me one of the main reasons he was drawn to me was my honesty. We hadn’t even gone on one date yet, and already that was proving to be false.

“Try not to let what Veronica’s done get to you,” Cress said. “You know you still have us, no matter what.”

“Yeah, don’t let the bitches get you down,” Anna agreed.

I gave them a warm smile and nodded. “Can I give you guys another hug?”

The three of them didn’t hesitate as they rushed in and crushed me between them, and I laughed as they smothered me. Veronica might have been trying to sabotage me, but when it came to my friends, it felt like the truth had actually set me free.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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I met Wes in the library to study that night. I'd missed my afternoon classes, so it was the first time I'd emerged from my dorm room since Veronica's stunt with the posters. I received more than a few judgmental looks on my way to the library, and even as I sat down at the study table, people kept looking my way. I hated the attention. It felt like people's interest in the new girl had only just died down, and now I'd been thrown back into the spotlight for all the wrong reasons.

"People will get over it," Wes said, noticing I was distracted by a group of girls who were clearly talking about me as they walked past. "I'm sure by tomorrow there will be some other piece of gossip that's captured their attention."

"I guess you saw the posters then?" He hadn't brought it up yet, and he'd been acting so normal I thought perhaps he'd somehow missed the whole thing.

"Yeah." He shrugged. "And Anna told Sawyer who told me all the details, so you don't have to explain. I totally get it. I just didn't want to say anything unless you brought it up. You must be having a crappy enough time as it is, and none of that stuff matters to me, so we don't have to talk about it if you don't want."

I let out a breath and smiled at him. "Thanks."

"Though, be warned, Sawyer's probably going to ask you to wear your work uniform to school. He thought you looked hot in it."

I laughed. "At least, he's got his priorities straight."



“Yeah, I really wonder about my brother sometimes.” Wes shook his head. “I sometimes think I might have been better off staying at school in New York just to get some space from him.”

“Oh yeah, you were there this weekend, right? How did it go?” I knew Wes had been nervous to visit his girlfriend because she hadn’t been answering his phone calls, so I was hoping his trip went well.

“It was okay.” His expression didn’t light up the way it normally did when he was talking about his girlfriend. “Sarah was happy to see me, so I was definitely worrying about nothing. But since she wasn’t expecting me, her weekend was already packed. She couldn’t cancel everything last minute, so I didn’t end up spending as much time with her as I’d hoped.”

“Ah, that sucks.”

He pushed a hand through his hair and glanced down at the desk in front of him. “I probably shouldn’t have surprised her. She’s always got a million things going on.”

“Still, you went all that way to see her.”

“I know, but maybe I’ll give her a heads-up next time.”

I nodded, but I didn’t really agree. I loved that he’d tried to surprise her. It was super sweet how he’d gone to so much trouble, and I was shocked his girlfriend hadn’t made more effort to spend time with him. She was lucky she had such a great guy who cared so much about her. I kept my thoughts to myself as I didn’t want to upset Wes more.

We tried to focus on studying, but I was really struggling to get my mind in the right place to concentrate. It had been a horrible day, and homework was the last thing I felt like doing. Especially when I could see and hear people gossiping about me at the next table over.

All I wanted was to go back to my bed and bury myself under the covers. I was desperate to talk to my mom too. We kept missing each other’s calls, so it had been days since we’d talked, and I really needed to hear her voice right now.

Wes placed his hands down on his book and looked across the table at me. “We don’t have to study in here if you don’t want.”

“What? No, it’s fine.”

He lifted one eyebrow. “You’re distracted and rightly so. We could go back to the dorms or even set up in the dining hall. No one really goes in there this time of night. Hell, we can abandon our study session altogether if you want. I can finish off the questions and give you the answers to copy at breakfast.”

“You’d do that?”

“Well, yeah.” He shrugged like it was no big deal. “You’re my friend, and you’ve had a really rough day.”

I shook my head as I tried to fight back tears. I was still feeling so emotional, and just hearing Wes’s offer to do my homework was triggering the waterworks.

“That’s really sweet, Wes. But I want to stay. I have to get over the fact people are gossiping about me.”

“Not tonight, you don’t.”

“I know, but I also don’t want Veronica to win. And if I bail on our study session, it feels like she has, you know?”

“Okay, got it.” He nodded. “How about we just take a break instead? I’ll go grab us coffees so we’re adequately juiced to finish off these problems.”

My shoulders relaxed at his suggestion. “Yeah, a break sounds great. I might try to call my mom.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll meet you back here in ten.” Wes shared a warm smile with me before he rose from his seat and headed for the library doors.

I pulled my phone out to dial my mom’s number, but as I unlocked the screen, I heard sniggers at the next table. I glanced up and saw the girls were still watching me, and I decided this probably wasn’t the best place to call my mom.

I got up from the table and wandered into the stacks. There were a few people scattered about, so I kept roaming until I found a nice quiet section. It was deep in the back of the library and led to a dead end, so the chances of someone bothering me were small.

I settled myself down on the floor, pulled out my phone, and tried my mom again. I held my breath for six rings before it clicked over to her voice mail. I exhaled as I ended the call and stared at my phone. Mom didn't usually work Monday nights, so I couldn't understand why she wasn't answering.

I tried to call the café instead. She didn't like it when I called there because it monopolized the line, and she didn't want to miss any telephone orders. I was beginning to feel a little desperate though. I couldn't remember ever going such a long time without speaking to my mom, and I really needed to hear a familiar voice.

"Hello?" An answer came after the first ring, and I immediately recognized the soft husky tone of my favorite waitress.

"Norma, it's me."

"Isobel, sugar, it's so good to hear your voice."

Tears touched my eyes as she spoke. I hadn't realized how much I missed her until now. It might not have been my mom who'd answered, but Norma was definitely second best. "It's good to hear your voice too."

"How's that ritzy school of yours treating you?"

"So far, so good," I lied. The last thing Norma needed was a reason to worry about me, and if I told her the truth, I'd have to explain that I'd been ashamed of my home life, and it broke my heart to imagine telling her that. I'd never once been embarrassed of where I came from, and I hated that this school had briefly changed that in me. If there was one lesson I'd learned from this whole hideous experience, it was that I should be proud of who I was, no matter what.

"Well, we've missed your pretty face around the café, but we're all so gosh darn proud of you for being so brave and

facing a new school in your senior year all by yourself.”

“It’s not all that brave.”

“It is in my books.”

“How is everyone?” I asked, not wanting to talk so much about myself.

“They’re all good,” she said. “We’ve got a new waitress to cover for you. She started today and can’t remember an order to save her life, but she’s sweet, and the customers seem to like her.”

I didn’t know my mom had hired a new recruit, and I was surprised she hadn’t mentioned it. Perhaps if we’d actually talked this week, she might have brought it up. Then again, maybe not. I knew Mom wanted me to be at Weybridge Academy, but I felt like I was letting her down by not being at home. The café really didn’t need any added expenses right now, and it was my fault she’d had to go and hire someone new. I should have been there to help her out.

“And that ex-best friend of yours has also been sniffing around the place,” she continued.

“Nina?”

“That’s the one. Though I thought her name was Dory.”

I snorted. “She’s not a fish.”

“Well, after what she did, she’s always going to be wet and slimy in my books,” Norma said. “Anyway, she’s come by several times asking after you. She said everyone at school was worried as no one has seen or heard from you.”

“Oh.” I was surprised they’d given me a second thought. I had been doing my best to forget my old school and the people I once thought were my friends. “I blocked their numbers. After everything that happened, I wanted this year to be a fresh start.” Though after today, things didn’t feel quite so fresh.

“So, what did you tell her about where I’ve gone?” I continued.

“The truth. I said you’d been whisked away by your father and were at one of the most prestigious schools in the country. She seemed hurt to hear you left without saying goodbye.”

“I don’t know why.” She certainly hadn’t missed me over the summer or worried about me when she’d stolen my boyfriend. And a goodbye was the last thing I expected she’d want from me after our encounter at the café on my final day there.

“Well, I might have overheard her talking with one of the girls she was with,” Norma replied. “It seems like things aren’t going too well with the boy. They broke up.”

It didn’t shock me to hear the news, but I was surprised by how little I cared. I should have felt a sense of vindication, but I just felt sad. Nina and Levi had caused me so much pain, and in the end, it was all for nothing. I wondered if that was why Nina was checking on me. Had she finally come to her senses and realized how stupid it was to throw away years of friendship over a guy?

Unfortunately, it didn’t matter what realization she might have come to. Things between us would never be the same. It was a fact I was only more certain of after today. I’d seen what true friendship was, and what Nina and I shared didn’t compare to the relationships I’d built with my friends here.

“Anyway,” Norma said. “My psychic senses tell me you didn’t call to talk to me about Dory.”

I laughed in response. “No, I was trying to get ahold of my mom.”

“Ah, I thought you might be. She’s not here right now. You know she takes Monday nights off.”

“I know, but I’ve been struggling to catch her all week. I thought maybe she’d been pulling extra shifts.”

“Not tonight. I wish I could help.”

“That’s okay. Any chance your psychic powers can tell me where she’s at?”

“Hmm... Well, they’re currently telling me that she’s not near her phone.”

“Anything more concrete than that?”

Norma chuckled. “I’m afraid not, love.”

“It was worth a try.” I let out a sigh, knowing I was just going to have to wait until Mom finally got back to me. “It was really good to speak to you, Norma.”

“You too, sugar. Feel free to call here again anytime. I know your mom hates the line being busy, but I don’t mind if we miss a few phone orders. They always call back.”

“I think Mom might disagree with you.” I smiled.

“Well, she can’t disagree if she doesn’t know.” I could easily picture Norma’s sly grin over the phone. “Now, I’ve got to run. Talk soon.”

“Yeah, talk soon.”

I lowered the phone from my ear and closed my eyes as I slumped back against the bookcase behind me. I’d really hoped to talk to my mom, and I was struggling to understand where she could be and what she was doing. On Monday nights we usually stayed home, ordered pizza and watched movies together. Did she have some new tradition now that I was gone?

“Hey.”

I opened my eyes and found Noah standing over me. His hands were tucked into his jeans pockets, and he was frowning as he watched me. “I’m not interrupting, am I?”

“Not at all,” I replied.

He took that as an invitation to sit at my side. He slid to the ground and leaned back against the bookcase as he stared at the shelves across from us. He didn’t speak right away, and the silence that stretched between us was like a huge empty void. He was sitting so close to me that our shoulders gently brushed, but he still seemed so distant. I was guessing he’d seen Veronica’s posters.

“I was hoping I might run into you tonight,” he said, still keeping his eyes locked on the books on the other side of the aisle. “Veronica showed me your Instagram account.”

Given the way he still refused to meet my eyes, I knew he wasn't reacting well to the news. I should have known that if, by some miracle, he hadn't seen the posters himself, Veronica would have still made sure he knew the truth about me. It sounded like Anna was right; Veronica had done this whole thing to sabotage my chances with Noah.

“She said you were hiding who you were to manipulate me.”

I drew a deep breath in before I responded. “Is this the part where you say you want nothing to do with me?” My voice sounded surprisingly scratchy, probably from the nerves that had started bubbling in my chest.

I hated to think that Noah and I would be over before we even began. I'd foolishly begun to open myself up to him and the connection I felt between us. The idea of abandoning those feelings upset me more than the stunt Veronica pulled today. But if Noah couldn't accept me for who I was, then it was probably for the best. I wanted someone who would love every part of me. Still, I knew I would be in for a tough year pretending my pulse didn't quicken whenever he was near.

“No, this is the part where I ask you why you felt you needed to keep it a secret.” He turned to me and his eyes were clearly filled with hurt and confusion. “I know there are a lot of jerks at this school, but I didn't realize you thought I was one of them. Did you really think I was so shallow that knowing your mom runs a café would make any difference to me?”

“I don't think you're a jerk or that you're shallow,” I replied. “I wish I had been honest, but when I first arrived, I was so overwhelmed.”

“So you lied?”

“I didn't know what else to do. Weybridge is a completely different world to the one I grew up in. I knew I didn't belong,

and I didn't think anyone here would understand." I could feel my emotions welling up in me as I spoke. For some reason, this felt so much harder than when I'd explained it to my friends.

"I'm kind of broken when it comes to trusting people," I continued. "My ex-boyfriend cheated on me, my friends back home betrayed me, and I have a father who just appeared out of nowhere and will probably disappear just as fast. So, yeah, I lied."

I blew out a breath and stared across the aisle at the books on the shelves opposite us. As I looked at some of the titles, I realized they were history books. I might have laughed if I wasn't so upset. It was pretty ironic that Noah would end up breaking things off with me in what Anna considered the romantic corner of the library.

Noah's hand brushed against my leg, and my eyes shot back to his. There was still hurt in his gaze but perhaps a flicker of understanding too.

"Just because you had a different upbringing than everyone else here, it doesn't mean you don't belong," he said. "If anything, it might make you more worthy than all the kids here who don't appreciate what they've got. I wish you would have been open with me, but maybe if we'd gotten to know each other better, you would have realized where you come from doesn't matter to me. I guess this is why we need our date on Saturday. So we can both learn to trust each other."

My mouth dropped open with shock. "You still want to go on a date with me?"

A smile tugged the corners of his lips as he nodded.

"But why?"

"Because as much as I was surprised to know you were keeping something from me, I can see you weren't doing it to try and manipulate me. I want to give us a chance."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."



I hadn't realized when he sat down how close we were or how his scent seemed to wrap its way around me. We were far too cozy in this corner of the library, and I could see why Anna found the secluded spot so appealing. His eyes lowered to my lips like he wanted to kiss me.

My phone beeped with an incoming text, and I quickly looked away. I was somewhat grateful for the interruption, because I had no intention of kissing Noah for the first time in Anna's secret make out corner.

As I glanced down at the screen, I was hoping to see a notification from my mom. Instead, it was a text from Wes saying he was back at the study tables with our coffees. It was hard not to be disappointed. I let out a sigh as I returned my gaze to Noah.

He nodded at my phone. "Are you expecting something important?"

He was always so surprisingly perceptive, and I could see he was genuinely concerned. I decided to tell him the truth. He'd probably think I was pathetic for missing my mom, but if I'd learned anything today, it was that I needed to be more honest.

"It's my mom," I finally said. "I haven't been able to talk to her all week. She keeps missing my calls, and since she's not working tonight, I was hoping to catch her."

"You miss her."

"So much." I gave him a sad smile. "I've never been separated from her for this long before, and I'm finding it really hard. It's especially difficult when I can't even speak to her. I know she's busy, but after today, I just want to hear her voice, and I would do anything to have a hug from her right now."

"It's never easy being separated from the ones you love," he murmured.

Looking at him now, I got the feeling I wasn't the only person missing my family, and I wondered if he was thinking about his parents. Cress had told me his father passed away

some years ago and his mom was never around. It was difficult being separated from my mom, but I couldn't even begin to fathom what it was like for Noah.

“What about your dad,” he asked. “Would it help to talk to him?”

“No. He'd probably just give me a lecture on how I'm embarrassing his legacy.”

“I get the same one from my grandfather all the time,” Noah admitted. “What does your father do?”

I let out a tired sigh. “Sorry, I don't really like talking about him.”

“I understand. I didn't mean to intrude.”

“It's no intrusion. It's just, after everything that happened today and when I miss my mom so much, my father is the last thing I need on my mind.”

He gave me a sad smile. “How far is Rapid Bay from here?”

“Far enough that it feels like forever away. I'm guessing I'll have to wait until school holidays to visit my mom though. It's too far for me to visit for a weekend.”

“Surely you won't have to wait until the holidays to see your mom. Won't she be coming to the ball next week? Parents are all welcome.”

I hadn't found a chance to tell my mom about it yet, but I already knew there was no way she'd come. She never took weekends off at the café. “No, she'll be working, so I don't think she can come.”

“That's a shame.” From the touch of sadness in Noah's eyes I could see he truly understood.

“It is.” My phone lit up with another text from Wes, telling me he'd also smuggled us cookies into the library. “I should probably get back to my homework.” I slowly started to stand.

Noah pushed himself up as well. I wasn't sure why, but I always seemed to forget just how tall Noah was, and as he

straightened to his full height, he practically towered over me. His broad shoulders seemed to fill the aisle, and when I raised my gaze to his face, I could see him watching me with concern.

“Are you going to be okay?” he asked. “What Veronica did today... Well, I know it can’t have been easy.”

“I’ll be fine.” I somehow always was.

Noah nodded before his eyes dipped to the phone in my hand. “Can I have that?”

“Uh, sure.” I passed the phone over, wondering what he wanted with it. His fingers flashed across the screen, and when he handed it back, I could see he’d given me his phone number.

“If you can’t get ahold of your mom and need someone to talk to, you can call or text me anytime.”

He’d surprised me again, and I wasn’t quite sure what to say. That was actually pretty sweet of Noah and the last thing I would have expected from him after everything that had happened today.

“And, Isobel?”

“Yeah?” I glanced back up at him.

“I’m sorry you felt like you couldn’t trust anyone here.” His voice was quiet, and his eyes were earnest, like he truly wished I hadn’t felt so alone.

“I’m beginning to wonder if perhaps I can...”

He shared a soft smile with me. “I’m glad to hear it.” I’d never seen him smile that way before, but it seemed to reach out and thump me straight in the chest. Noah stepped back so I could pass, and it took me a moment to figure out how to use my legs again after being hit by his smile.

Anna definitely had one thing right. There was something special about the history section of the library.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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I woke up early on Saturday morning. I was usually an early riser, but today I was awake before the sun had even considered breaching the horizon. I wasn't the least bit drowsy as I checked the time. It was too early to go for a run but apparently not too early to begin freaking out about my date with Noah.

It had been a long time since I'd gone on a first date, and it wasn't nearly so daunting because it was with Levi who I'd known since we were kids. I still questioned whether there was any hope for Noah and I, given our vastly different backgrounds. He said it didn't matter to him, but perhaps he didn't quite grasp just how foreign our worlds were. What if he reconsidered once he got to know me better?

When it was finally light enough, I left my dorm and set out for a jog through the woods. My gut had been churning with anxiety ever since I woke up, so it was probably a good thing our date was in the morning. I wasn't sure I could put up with these nerves all day. Thankfully, my run seemed to help, and by the time I returned to my room, I was feeling much calmer.

"Excited for your date?" Cress asked as I opened the door. She was still in her pajamas and carrying a stack of clothes. She laid them on her bed and started arranging them into outfits.

"Uh, sure." I was more interested in what she was doing. She kept shaking her head before tossing a piece of clothing to the side and replacing it with something else. As I came closer,

I realized it was my clothing she had laid out before her. “What are you doing, Cress?”

“Helping you pick an outfit,” she said, lifting her eyes to meet mine with an enthusiastic smile. “My last roomie would never have let me pick a date outfit for her, so I’m really excited you said I could help.”

I couldn’t remember her asking if she could help, but I had no idea what to wear for a date with someone like Noah, so I wasn’t exactly in a position to refuse assistance.

“Thanks, Cress, I really appreciate it.”

Her smile widened, and then she nodded toward the bathroom. “You go and have a shower. I’ll work my magic here and should have the perfect outfit waiting for you when you’re done.”

“You’re the best.”

I quickly ducked in and out of the shower and then proceeded to do my hair and makeup. I usually dreaded trying to tame my hair, but it was being surprisingly cooperative today. I somehow managed to get it sitting in soft waves that cascaded down my shoulders rather than the usual bird’s nest that sat on my head. Even if nothing else went right today, at least I’d had one win for the day.

“So, any ideas what Noah has planned?” I asked Cress as I left the bathroom. The restless energy I’d woken up with this morning had returned while I’d been doing my makeup, and I couldn’t seem to shake it.

“I might have an idea, but my lips are sealed.” She lifted her hand and pretended to zip her mouth shut.

“Not even a hint?”

“Nope. I’m sworn to secrecy.”

“I really hope he hasn’t gone to too much effort,” I said. “What if he decides he doesn’t like me and regrets it?”

Cress gave a soft laugh. “You don’t need to worry. He already likes you. Like, *really* likes you. I think he’s liked you since the moment you tried to take him out in the forest.”

“I didn’t try to take him out,” I muttered. “It was an accident.”

“I’m just saying you don’t have anything to worry about.”

I still wasn’t convinced. “If you say so.”

“I do. Besides, he wouldn’t be taking you on a date if he didn’t already like you.” She passed me a bundle of clothes. “Now, try these on for me.”

“Thanks, Cress.” I shot her a smile and went to the closet to change.

I was surprised by how casual Cress had gone with my look. The outfit was a pair of high-waisted jeans and a black knitted tank with subtle cut outs on the straps. It was something so simple I might have even picked it out myself.

“Are you sure this is a date-appropriate outfit?” I called to her as I slid into my jeans.

“For what you guys have planned, it’s perfect,” she called back.

Cress was only making me more intrigued. If we were doing something that didn’t require me to dress up, then maybe Noah had planned something relaxed and easy for our date. It was probably a good thing. If we were doing something extravagant, I’d probably feel awkward.

I walked back into the bedroom and checked my outfit in the mirror. I still looked like myself, and I was happy with what I was wearing. It definitely wasn’t what I’d expected when Cress had insisted she dress me. I had imagined she was going to get me into sky-high heels and one of her tiniest skirts.

“Do you like the outfit?” she asked.

“It’s perfect.”

“Not quite.” She handed me a small box, and I frowned as I took it.

“What is this?”

“It’s from Anna and me. Open it.”

I gave her a curious glance before I lifted the lid on the box to reveal a gorgeous chain necklace. Hanging from the end of it was a charm covered in engravings of tiny stars. It was delicate and beautiful. I didn't wear much jewelry, but I couldn't wait to try it on.

"I've got the same necklace but with the moon on it, and Anna has one with the sun. We thought it would be perfect if you had the stars to round off our little trio."

Her words hit me hard, and I blinked back tears as I looked up at her. "You guys got this for me?" After everything that had happened this week, I was just grateful the girls hadn't ditched me. I couldn't believe they'd gone out of their way to get me such a thoughtful gift.

"Well, yeah." Cress smiled in return. "I know you've only been here a few weeks, but you're already one of us."

I reached out and pulled her into a firm hug. I wasn't used to receiving such elaborate gifts. Let alone gifts for no reason other than the fact that someone liked me.

"Thanks, Cress. I really love it," I said as I pulled back from the hug. "Will you help me put it on?"

"Of course."

I lifted my hair out the way and she gently clasped the necklace into place. "See, now you're perfect," she said. "We like to think our friendship necklaces bring us luck, so hopefully it will give you some on your date today."

"A lucky friendship charm, I like that." I glanced at myself in the mirror and smiled when I saw the chain around my neck. "Is this weird for you?" I asked as I faced her once more. "The fact I'm going on a date with your cousin, that is."

"No, it's not weird at all," she immediately replied. "Actually, I'm pretty excited about it. I've wanted to see someone make him happy for such a long time, and he's so different around you. It's like I'm seeing the old Noah again."

"The old Noah?"

She gave me a sad smile. “The Noah I used to know before his dad died. It was bad enough that he lost his father, but since then, his grandpa has had all these expectations of him, constantly pressuring him to fill his dad’s shoes and live up to the family name.”

She let out a sigh before she continued. “People always want something from him, and I guess it takes a toll. He’s so guarded now, but he used to joke around all the time. It feels like forever since I’ve seen him crack a real smile. He seems to feel more like himself when you’re around though.”

I felt a little overwhelmed, and I wasn’t sure what to say when Cress had finished. Noah and I had only known each other a few weeks, so it was hard to believe I’d had such an impact on him. When I thought about the connection I felt between us, it didn’t seem so strange. I’d been in a pretty dark place when I’d started at Weybridge, but every time I was close to him, things felt a little brighter.

A knock sounded at the door, and my heart shot to my throat. “That must be him.”

Cress grinned. “Then I better make myself scarce and give you guys some privacy. Have fun today!” With that, she skipped into the bathroom and I soon heard the rush of water from the shower.

I took a deep breath before I stepped toward the door and pulled it open. Noah was standing on the other side, looking flawless as always. He was dressed casually in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, much like myself, but he managed to make even the simplest of outfits look like something out of a catalog. For some reason, he had his hands rested over his eyes.

“Noah, what are you doing?” I asked.

“Just want to make sure you’re dressed. The last time I came through this door I got quite the surprise...”

I laughed and pulled his hands down. “That’s not funny.”

“But it made you laugh. I think it must have been just a little funny.”



I tried to look unimpressed, but I couldn't wipe the smile from my lips. "Fine, perhaps it was a little funny."

He grinned triumphantly, and it took me a moment to remember to breathe as I stared into his joyful eyes. I'd seen two sides to Noah since I'd first met him. There was the guarded side that Cress had described, which I'd seen at parties and around the people at school. But more and more, I was catching glimpses of Noah's lighter side—the side he seemed to hide away. He was so much more buoyant and brighter this morning, which somehow made him unbearably gorgeous.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

I blinked and realized I'd been staring at him. I quickly nodded and grabbed my phone and purse off my desk before following him out the door. We hadn't even started our date yet, and already I was coming off like a mindless idiot. I'd noticed I found it hard to think straight whenever he was close.

"You look beautiful, by the way." He gave me a gentle smile as he spoke, and he was looking at me like I was wearing a gorgeous gown rather than a pair of jeans. "Then again, you always look beautiful."

I blushed under his gaze and returned his smile. "You look pretty good yourself." Good was an understatement. This boy really had too much going for him. Seriously. It only made me wonder what he could possibly see in me because his interest really didn't make any sense.

My doubt was only highlighted when we emerged into the courtyard. There weren't many people about, but everyone we passed stared at us, and they all seemed confused to see me at Noah's side.

I'd had a strange mixture of attention on me after Veronica plastered posters of me all over the place. There were some people who appeared to feel sorry for me, and some who rolled their eyes like I'd been asking for the attention. Then there were others, like Veronica and her friends, who thought I couldn't be trusted and didn't belong here. Whatever people thought about Veronica's stunt, I felt certain going on a date

with Noah was doing little to divert the attention away from me.

“So, are you going to tell me what you have planned yet?” I asked, hoping to distract myself from the many eyes that were on us. We were making our way toward the parking lot, but I still had no idea what to expect. “You haven’t given me any clues.”

“Don’t you like a little mystery?”

“No, surprises aren’t really my thing.” Especially not recently after my parents had dropped the wealthy long-lost father bombshell on me and then ambushed me with Weybridge Academy. My surprise quota was definitely full for the next couple of years.

“Well, I think you’re going to like my surprise.” His expression had changed since we’d emerged into the courtyard. His smile had disappeared, and his face stayed blank and neutral; his mask of indifference was well and truly back in place. Yet, when he spoke to me, his eyes still sparkled slightly. He was like a kid on Christmas morning trying to keep his composure but anticipating the day with a carefully contained excitement.

“Well, now you’ve got me intrigued,” I said, earning myself a brief smile.

We continued to garner attention as we walked, and I struggled to ignore it. I already felt like I wasn’t good enough for him, and the reaction of those around us certainly wasn’t helping.

“I’m not sure people approve of me stealing you away for the morning,” I said.

He frowned as he glanced around us, finally noticing the surprised looks we were receiving. “Just ignore them,” he said. “They’re probably just jealous I’m with the prettiest girl in school.”

“I doubt that,” I murmured back. I was hardly the prettiest girl at Weybridge, and the way people were looking at us made

me feel like the exact opposite. It was like they were watching a troll date a prince, and they couldn't quite believe their eyes.

It was hard to tell if Noah was bothered by the attention because his face gave little away. His expression closed up like this whenever I saw him in crowded places, and I was reminded of how Cress had said Noah was different around me. It made me sad to think he'd become so wary of the people surrounding him every day—to the point where he completely shut down around them. I wasn't sure why he opened up to me, but I was certain I didn't want it to stop.

Noah remained tense until we entered the parking lot, and he unlocked an expensive sports car parked right by the school. It was white and sleek, and his eyes lightened as he opened the door for me.

“I heard guys that drive fast cars are compensating for something...” I said, lifting one eyebrow at him. I was trying to break the somewhat somber mood that had overcome him, and it seemed to do the job because he let out a laugh.

“I just like fast cars,” he said.

“That's what they all say.”

He shook his head and closed the door after me. He was still smiling as he walked around the front of the car and sat in the driver's seat. The car rumbled to life as he turned the engine on, and he pulled it out of the parking lot. It was hard to believe only moments ago he'd been looking so gloomy.

“You act differently when other people aren't around,” I said.

He let out a sigh, and I was sad to see his expression dim. “Other people always want something from me,” he said. “My grandfather is quite influential, and I guess people are always trying to gain status by associating with me. There's nothing worse than people who are only friendly with you because of your last name. I find it far easier to simply shut people out.”

“Surely not everyone at Weybridge wants to use you.”

“You'd be surprised,” he replied. “I've learned it's better to have a few good friends than a horde of false ones.”

“You’re talking about Kaden and Luther?”

Noah nodded. “I’m not sure I would have survived high school if they hadn’t been here with me.”

I couldn’t imagine growing up and not trusting the intentions of the people around me. Then again, I’d been completely screwed over by my friends back home because I’d been too trusting. Perhaps Noah was right to keep only a select few people close.

“You’re lucky you have them.”

“Very lucky,” he agreed.

My hand lifted to my neck as we spoke, and I traced my fingers across the star necklace Cress had given me. I’d only met her and Anna a few weeks ago, but it felt like I’d known them for years. If I’d realized anything this week, it was that these girls were keepers and that I should never be afraid of being anything but myself around them. They accepted me no matter what, and it seemed similar to how Noah felt about Luther and Kaden.

Noah sped through the countryside along a winding road that cut between open green fields. I’d only been into town a few times since I’d arrived at Weybridge, but we were driving in the opposite direction, so I had no idea where we were. The sun was out, and the scenery was beautiful, so I didn’t mind waiting a little longer to see what Noah had in store for us.

Eventually, Noah slowed the car and turned onto a gravel path. My curiosity only escalated as we drove alongside a high wire fence with nothing but open space on the other side. At the end of the road was a large shed, and as we drew near to it, Noah turned the car through a wide-open gate and into the fenced off area. Several small planes and a helicopter were sitting by the shed.

“Uh, Noah, where are we going?”

His face brightened with a beaming smile. “Somewhere very special.”

“That’s not an answer...”

“It’s all the answer you’re getting right now.” He winked. “I don’t want to ruin the surprise.”

Noah didn’t say anything else as he pulled up beside a small jet plane. The staircase was lowered to the tarmac, and my heart leaped with a mixture of excitement and anxiety. Noah jumped from the car and came round to open my door for me.

“I hope you like flying,” he said, still grinning widely.

I was too shocked to respond. He wanted to take me up in a plane? I mean, I should have figured as much considering he’d brought me to an airstrip, but it was only just hitting me now.

His expression started to fall when I remained in the car. “You don’t like flying?”

“I don’t know.” I hesitated. “I’ve never been in a plane before.” I realized I’d been stalling and stepped cautiously from the vehicle.

“Never? Seriously?”

“Seriously.” My palms sweated at the thought. I wasn’t afraid of the concept of flying, but I was a little nervous. “This is crazy. You know I would have been fine with just grabbing a burger at Toddy’s. It’s not too late if you want to change your mind.”

“I don’t want to change my mind,” he replied. “But if you don’t want to fly, we can go to Toddy’s if you like...”

He was being super sweet, and I imagined he must have gone to so much effort to organize this for me, so I quickly shook my head. “No, let’s go on the plane. You only die once, after all.”

“We’re not going to die.” He rolled his eyes and chuckled before he took hold of my hand to lead me toward the plane.

One of the crew walked down the stairs as we approached and shook Noah’s hand. “How are you today, Mr. Hastings?”

“I’m good, thanks, Arthur. This is my friend Isobel. She’s going to be coming with us today.”

The man gave me a warm smile. “It’s a pleasure to welcome you on board, Isobel.”

I smiled and nodded in response. I was still too nervous to decide if this was also going to be a pleasurable experience for me.

Noah led me up the stairs to the plane, where a hostess was waiting to welcome us. I was struggling not to gape as we entered the cabin. It was open and gorgeous with white leather seats and beautiful wooden tables. There was even a flat screen TV on one of the walls. Noah got us settled next to each other on a couch before the flight attendant brought us over a couple of glasses of champagne.

“I can’t believe you did this.” I struggled to contain my awe. “How did you organize a plane?”

“It wasn’t too difficult,” he replied. “It’s the company jet.”

Noah’s surname was everywhere. It was engraved across one of the walls and embroidered on the seat cushions. Even the little napkins on the table had Hastings written on them in gold lettering. If I hadn’t been so distracted when we’d arrived, I imagined I would have also seen Noah’s last name splayed across the tail of the plane.

“Wow, this is really incredible.” I was still in disbelief. I couldn’t fathom how much money a business needed to make to own a private jet, but it had to be a lot. “I guess your family’s company must be really successful.”

“Looks can be deceiving.” Noah replied in a low voice.

I wasn’t really sure what to make of his comment so I decided not to press him on it. His definition of success must have been very different than mine. He probably thought they needed a bigger plane.

“Your family is in pharmaceuticals, right?”

“Right.” Noah’s expression had become more reserved, and it made me wonder how he felt about it all.

“Cress mentioned that you’d be taking over one day.”

“That’s the plan.” His voice lacked any emotion, and he became fixated on the window. I could tell he didn’t like talking about his family business, and I wished I’d never brought it up.

“Sorry, I understand if you don’t want to talk about this with me.” I didn’t want to start our date in a negative way, and my curiosity wasn’t worth upsetting him.

“It’s not that I don’t want to talk about it with you,” he said, glancing back at me. “It’s that I don’t really like talking about it at all.”

“That’s okay. We can talk about something else.”

“It’s fine,” he continued. “It’s just that things with the business recently have been...complicated. A lot has happened that’s putting added pressure on my grandfather, and he ends up passing it on to me. I always knew there was the possibility I would step up to run the business when my grandfather retired, but recently, it’s like I don’t have a choice.”

“Is there something else you’d rather do?”

His eyes swirled with a mixture of emotions. “I’m not sure. I just don’t like the idea of my future being decided by someone else.”

“Have you told anyone this?”

“I told my dad before he...” Noah paused. “Well, there’s only one person that matters these days and my grandfather wouldn’t understand. He’s all I’ve got now. I can’t disappoint him.”

“He’s family. I’m sure he would listen.”

“Not my grandfather.” Noah let out a dry laugh. “I’ve learned by now that you don’t tell William Hastings anything he doesn’t want to hear, especially if it affects the company. He doesn’t see a difference between himself and the business, and he expects a similar commitment from me.”

“That seems a little extreme.”

“That’s my grandfather.” Noah shrugged before he shook his head, and his expression lightened a little. “Sorry, that got

deep real quick. I promise the rest of our date won't be so intense."

"I don't mind intense."

He smiled. "No, but I think I should at least wait until date number two or three before I unload all my baggage on you."

"Oh, so there's going to be another date, is there?"

"I hope so."

My stomach fluttered in anticipation. I already liked the idea of another date with Noah. And it wasn't the fact he'd organized a private jet for us that had me wanting more alone time with him. There was so much more to Noah than met the eye, and I felt like I could spend a lifetime unraveling the person he was when he wasn't wearing his cloak of indifference.

The plane jolted as it started to move forward, and I reached out and grasped Noah's hand tightly. A flash of embarrassment shuddered through me, but Noah gave my hand a squeeze in return. "You ready to fly?"

"Uh-huh." I wished I sounded slightly more confident. It was difficult to combat the nerves bubbling in my chest. My feet had always stayed firmly on the ground, so I had no idea what to expect. Noah kept hold of my hand as the plane started to accelerate. It was probably sweaty and gross because my nerves were getting the better of me, but I couldn't bring myself to let go.

I felt like I was being pushed back in my seat as the plane gained momentum, and when it lifted off the tarmac, my stomach seemed to drop back down to the ground. Vibrations shook the plane as we climbed higher, and the engines roared as they powered us upward. The takeoff was much less smooth than I had imagined it would be, and I gripped Noah's hand tighter and tighter.

"It's okay," he whispered in my ear. "I've got you."

I was staring straight ahead of me, but I slowly turned to him. Noah was smiling sweetly, and when my gaze met his, I felt the nerves drift away. As if by magic, the noise churning



around us seemed to quiet, and I felt a wave of calm come over me.

“Take a look.” Noah nodded to the window. “The view is worth the take off.”

I leaned over to look out the window and watched as trees and fields and towns drifted below us. I became more excited and less uncertain the longer we were in the air, especially once big fluffy clouds began to move past the window. I’d always figured it would freak me out to look down on the world so far beneath me, but the whole concept was a little surreal. I especially loved when we broke out above the clouds and they formed a blanket below us. It was like getting a little glimpse of heaven.

“It’s kind of magical up here,” I said.

“Yeah, it is.”

I turned and found Noah was watching me rather than the world below. It was all too easy to get lost in Noah’s eyes, but as I stared at him, I realized I was still holding his hand, and I quickly let go.

“Sorry,” I murmured. “I forgot I was still holding on for dear life.” I’d been squeezing his hand so tightly I really hoped I hadn’t hurt him.

“You’ve got a pretty firm grip,” he said, giving his hand a shake.

“You should have said something!”

“Well, I didn’t want you to let go.” He reached out and linked his fingers between mine once more. “I liked it.”

I liked it too. It was crazy how something as simple as the feel of his skin against mine set my heart fluttering or how the way he lightly brushed his thumb over the back of my hand sent tingles all through my body. I’d thought the view outside was magical, but in truth, we could have been anywhere right now, and it would have felt just as surreal.

“So, are you going to tell me where we’re going yet?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“You won’t even give me a small clue?”

“Not even a hint. I don’t want to ruin the surprise.”

“Maybe I don’t like surprises...”

“Trust me, you’ll like this one.”

The smile he gave me was so open and genuine. When Noah smiled like that, it was impossible not to like him—and impossible not to want to fall deeply and madly in love with him. Noah’s smile was lethal, a heartbreak in the making. I wasn’t supposed to be falling for him. I was supposed to be protecting myself from getting hurt again. Somehow, I was here with my heart in my hands, open and vulnerable, as I contemplated offering it once more.

All I could think as I stared up at Noah was that I couldn’t stop myself from wanting him, even if I tried. Falling for him felt inevitable. And if falling for him meant I was going to get my heart broken again, I was in serious trouble.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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The flight lasted for a couple of hours before we landed at another small airstrip. I had no idea where we were, but the sun felt warmer against my skin, and there was a light breeze that reminded me of the ocean. It had only been a few weeks since I'd seen the sea last, but I desperately missed it and hoped that maybe we had made our way to the coast somewhere.

Noah was still as ambiguous as ever as he led me over to a waiting car, and once I was comfortable in the passenger seat, he handed me a blindfold.

"Put this on." He winked as he passed it to me.

"Is this a date, or are you kidnapping me?"

He laughed as he started the car. "You don't have to wear the blindfold if you don't want. I just really want to see the look on your face when we get to our destination."

"Okay, okay." I pulled the blindfold over my eyes and tied it behind my head. "You're really building up this surprise, whatever it is."

"It'll be worth it, I promise."

Although I couldn't see him anymore, I could hear the playful tone in Noah's voice and imagine the smile on his face. No matter how hard I tried, I still couldn't guess where we were. The plane had landed somewhere quite rural, so I figured we weren't going to a city. And from the salty sea air, I was almost certain we were by the coast. Given the way the date had played out so far, Noah was probably taking me to

some extravagant restaurant or a luxury beach property his family owned. I had to wonder if my jeans were really appropriate for either option.

“When you said you wanted to take me on a date, this really wasn’t what I expected,” I said. “And does the school mind that we’ve just flown away on a jet? Like, surely this is the kind of activity that needs parental permission.”

Noah chuckled. “I think the school is used to its students doing what they want, parental permission or not. Especially the seniors. As long as we’re back come Monday, they won’t care.”

“We *are* going to be back by Monday, right? You haven’t flown me to France or something?”

“No, I can reveal that we’re definitely not in France.”

“I should hope not.”

“We can always go to France next weekend though.”

“Ha, ha, very funny.”

“I’m not joking.”

I shook my head. “I don’t even have a passport.”

“I’m sure that could be arranged.”

I frowned. Although we were joking around, I felt the disparity between Noah and I more than ever. He flew on private jets and popped over to France for the weekend just because he could. This experience was fun and all, but it wasn’t my life. I couldn’t imagine it being more than a onetime thing. I’d been happy enough with the idea of a simple date, and as much as I was enjoying spending time with Noah, it felt like maybe he’d gone a little overboard.

When the car started to slow, my stomach tensed with curiosity and excitement. The date was far too extravagant for me already, but I was still eager to see what surprise Noah had arranged.

“We’re here,” he said as the car pulled to a stop.

I was practically bouncing on my seat as Noah came around to open the door for me, and my hands itched to lower my blindfold. I'd never been surprised this way before, and even though recent events had made me very wary of surprises, I was somewhat enjoying the anticipation.

Noah gently helped me from the car and positioned me so I was facing in a certain direction. He slowly pulled the blindfold from my eyes. "Okay, you can look..."

I blinked my eyes open and gasped. The scene before me was achingly familiar. Tears started to gather in my eyes when I saw the faded blue-and-white-striped awning and the old Beach Street Café sign. I thought my heart might explode with the frenzy of emotions that wanted to burst from me as I realized where I was. Noah had brought me home.

"I heard the pecan pie is really good here," he murmured.

I could barely form words to respond. I was in a total state of shock as I stared at the one place in the world I'd wanted to be these last weeks. "You brought me home?"

"Yeah, is that okay?" He sounded so uncertain, and as I turned to him, I could see a nervous look in his eyes.

"Are you kidding me? This is incredible." I threw my arms around his neck and buried myself in close to him. I was overwhelmed by the smell of him, by the feel of his strong body holding me close, and by the fact he'd gone out of his way to make me so happy. My mind was racing, trying to contemplate how something that seemed so impossible was actually happening.

When I pulled back from him, I quickly brushed my palm across my cheek to wipe away the tears that had escaped my eyes. "We're really here?"

"Well, I had something else planned, but it sounded like you really missed home this week. I could easily get you here, so why wouldn't I?"

"You're kind of amazing. You know that, right?"

He gave me a warm smile in response. "I think that's the first time someone's told me that and I've wanted to believe

them.”

“Well, believe it because you are officially my favorite person.”

“Cress will be bummed.”

“Probably.” I laughed. “Come on.”

I grabbed Noah by the hand and pulled him through the front door and into the café. It was mid-morning, so the restaurant was quiet. The breakfast rush was over, and lunch hadn't begun. The familiar sound of the doorbell chimed overhead as we entered, and Norma looked up from where she was cleaning one of the tables.

“Oh, Isobel, sugar, you're home!” She dropped her cleaning cloth on the table and rushed over to give me a hug. The slight scent of cigarettes clung to her clothes, and the familiar smell was enough to make my eyes tear up again. I'd missed this so much.

“What are you doing here?” Norma asked as we separated. “And who's the hunk?”

“Oh.” I laughed as she gave Noah a thorough once-over. “Norma, this is Noah. One of my friends from school.”

“Oh, honey, no girl can just be friends with a boy like that.”

“Norma!”

“What? It's true. If I were fifty years younger...”

I smacked her on the arm, but Noah chuckled in response. At least he found this whole thing amusing.

“It's a pleasure to meet you,” Noah said, holding out a hand in greeting.

A small smile formed on Norma's lips as she ignored his hand and pulled him in for a hug too.

“Norma,” I groaned.

Noah laughed, and from the smile on his face, I could tell he didn't mind that she was a little overly affectionate.

“Is Mom around?” I asked before Norma could embarrass me further. Knowing my luck, she was going to continue talking about what she’d do to Noah if she were fifty years younger, and I really didn’t want to hang around to find out.

“She’s out back in the office. She didn’t tell me you were coming today.”

“She doesn’t know. It’s a surprise.”

“Well, I couldn’t think of more perfect timing. She’s missed you.”

“I’ve missed her too.” I actually hadn’t realized you could miss a person as much as I’d missed my mom.

I took Noah by the hand once more and led him through the kitchen to the office. It was so comforting to hear the clatter of pans in the kitchen and inhale the rich scent of fresh waffles. No matter how long I spent at Weybridge Academy, this would always be my home.

When I reached the office, I knocked on the door even though it was slightly ajar. My mom was at her desk, her head bowed over her keyboard. She slowly looked up, and her eyes widened with surprise when she saw me standing there.

“Isobel?” It took her a moment to overcome her obvious shock, but she barely missed a beat before she jumped from her desk and ran over to me.

She gathered me in her arms, and as she held me tightly to her, I felt like I was truly home. The scent of her lavender perfume enveloped me as much as the warmth of her arms. We must have stood there for five minutes before she finally let me go.

“What are you doing here?” she gasped. “You’re supposed to be in school!” I couldn’t quite tell whether she was excited, happy, angry, concerned, or all of the above, and I realized she was probably worried that I’d run away.

“Don’t worry, Mom, I haven’t skipped any classes. My friend has a plane, and he brought me down on it this morning.”

Mom's brow clenched with confusion as she noticed the boy standing behind me. He was kind of impossible to miss, given his size and those bright green eyes.

"Mom, this is Noah."

"The friend..." Mom sounded thoroughly unconvinced. I mean, given that he looked like a supermodel, I wasn't surprised she had similar doubts about my friendship with Noah as Norma did.

"It's nice to meet you, Ms. Grace," Noah said.

She gave him a cautious smile. "You too."

I somewhat understood why mom was acting so wary. After the way Levi had treated me, she was as untrustworthy of guys as I was supposed to be. I hoped she'd relax a little though. Did she really need to act so cold toward him?

"Noah, why don't you head back out to the restaurant so I can have a quick catch-up with my daughter. Order anything you like from the menu. Norma will help you out."

"Sure, thank you." He smiled politely at my mom before glancing at me.

"I'll catch you out there in a minute."

He nodded and quickly disappeared back the way we'd come.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Isobel, you left school without asking me and got on a plane with some boy you've just met. I don't even know how I'm supposed to react to that."

"Mom, it's okay, seriously."

"I know you miss home, but you can't just leave school and fly around the country without letting me know where you are."

I was a little shocked by the way she was reacting. I'd missed her so much, and when I'd discovered I was home, I hadn't thought about anything else apart from the fact I'd get to see her.



“Well, perhaps it wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t sent me away without a proper goodbye,” I replied. “I’ve barely spoken to you since I arrived at school, and this week, we haven’t talked at all. Seriously, Mom, why haven’t you been answering my phone calls?”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Too busy to call me back?”

“Yes, too busy.” Her whole body deflated as she spoke, and as I looked at her more closely, I realized how completely exhausted she seemed. She had bags under her eyes like she hadn’t slept in days, and her skin was a sickly shade of white.

I suddenly felt scared. “Mom, is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine. At least, it will be.”

“Are you having troubles with the café again?”

“It’s nothing you need to worry about. Just, with the Starbucks opening, we didn’t make as much money this season as I hoped.”

How did she expect me to not worry about that? “Why didn’t you say something? Is there anything I can do to help?”

“It will turn around. It always does. Just seeing you now is more help than I could have ever asked for,” she said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to get upset. You just took me a little off guard, but I’m so happy to see you.”

Tears welled in her eyes, and I gathered her up in another hug. Now that we were hugging again, I could feel she’d lost weight. The stress was clearly getting to her, and I hated that I hadn’t been here to help her manage it. How had I not noticed she was struggling so much before I left?

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the plane. Noah surprised me with the trip. But I’m not sorry for coming here,” I said. “And seeing you this way, you’ll be lucky if I even go back to school.”

“Isobel, you have to go back.”

“But how can I leave you like this?”

“Because, like I said, I’m handling it. I’ve been having a bad week, and it doesn’t help that I miss you terribly, but everything will be fine. I promise.”

I studied her face, weighing her words. Mom had always told me when things had gotten bad before. And if she believed she’d get on top of them, I had to trust her. “Well, if it’s not, you know I’ll be straight back here...”

“Okay, but next time, you run it by me first.” She raised her eyebrows at me as she waited for me to agree, and I slowly nodded.

“Deal.”

“Okay, good,” She straightened her clothes and stood tall. “Now, have I made the worst impression ever on your new boyfriend, or do you think we could start over?”

“*Mom*. He’s not my boyfriend.”

She cocked her head to one side as she studied me. “With one look, I could tell that boy is crazy about you. If he’s not your boyfriend, he definitely wants to be.”

I wasn’t sure I agreed with her, but it was hard to argue. Noah wasn’t at least somewhat interested in me that way considering he’d flown me here on a private jet. It was crazy and extravagant although probably not all that unusual for someone in Noah’s position. I decided to simply ignore my mom’s comment.

“I should probably get out there and make sure Norma isn’t trying to read Noah’s palms or something,” I said.

“Yeah, she’s probably telling him he’s going to end up with a gorgeous blonde who has the world’s most beautiful smile.”

My eyes widened with fear. “Do you think we’re already too late to stop her?”

“I don’t know.” Mom chuckled. “But let’s get out there just in case she also plans to tell him his future holds ten kids and a dog too.”

I was going to die of embarrassment if she had.

“Hopefully, I can rectify the awful welcome I gave him,” Mom continued. “I know I worry about you too much, but that’s no excuse for not being more friendly. Do you think he’ll give me another chance?”

“Yeah, I think so. Just so long as Norma hasn’t already scared him off.”

We walked out to the restaurant arm in arm. Noah sat at a table that was already loaded with food. Noah was a big guy, but even he seemed slightly daunted by the huge spread laid out before him.

“I swear I just asked for the pancakes, and Norma brought me all of this.” Noah held his hands up in front of him as if he was expecting us to accuse him of ordering too much. His tone was a mixture of guilt and surprise, and it made me laugh to hear him so bewildered.

“Yeah, Norma has been trying to fatten me up for years,” I explained.

“It’s her calling in life,” Mom agreed with a smile. Her eyes fell upon Noah, and a brief flicker of uncertainty shot through his gaze. He seemed apprehensive after their initial encounter, but the fact he cared about whether my mom liked him filled my chest with warmth.

“I’m sorry if I wasn’t very welcoming,” Mom said to him. “I wasn’t expecting to see Isobel, and I thought she might have run away from school. It’s really nice to meet you, Noah, and I’m glad to see Iz has made at least one good friend at her new school.”

Noah’s shoulders relaxed, and his expression warmed as he smiled at me. “Well, I’m happy to be considered one of Isobel’s good friends, and I can assure you we haven’t run away.”

“So I’ve heard,” Mom replied. “Though next time you both decide to leave school for the weekend, I’d like to be told first.”

“Of course,” Noah agreed.

Mom seemed happy with his response and gave an approving nod.

“Would you both like to join me for some food?” Noah continued. “I can certainly eat a lot, but I’m afraid this is too much, even for me.”

I eased onto the seat beside him. “I’d be impressed if you could finish a whole table full of food.”

“Are you challenging me to eat it all?” There was a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Because I’ll give it a good go.”

I laughed and shook my head. “No, you don’t need to prove your manliness to me by consuming three days’ worth of food.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I also happen to love our hash browns.” I reached over and grabbed one off an overflowing plate, taking a bite before Noah could try to claim it as his own. “You joining us, Mom?”

She was still hovering by the table watching the two of us. From the gentle smile on her face, I could tell she was already warming to Noah. She flushed when I caught her looking though and quickly took a seat.

“I’ve already eaten, but I could use some coffee.”

Eating breakfast with Mom and Noah was surreal. Weybridge was so different from my home, and having Noah here felt like two worlds were merging. I didn’t think they could work together, but it felt strangely natural. Now that Mom and Noah had gotten over their awkward introduction, they chatted like they’d known each other for years. I didn’t say all that much, but it was only because I was too busy soaking in the moment.

I still couldn’t believe I was here sitting with my mom and with Noah Hastings, of all people. Just a week ago, I had been convinced there was no way someone like Noah could accept someone like me. But today had me falling hard and fast for the guy. It was really hard not to like someone who went to so much effort to try to make me happy. Not only had he noticed

how much I missed home, he'd actually gone and figured out a way to bring me here.

When the lunchtime crowd started to filter in through the door, Mom had to get back to work. "How long will you both be here?" she asked.

"Not nearly long enough," Noah replied. "We have to get back later this afternoon." He gave me a sad smile, like he wished he didn't have to put a limit on our time here. I couldn't complain though because he'd given me something so precious just by helping me enjoy a few hours with my mom.

Mom seemed to share my sentiment because she gave me a soft smile. "I'll make sure I get some more time off after lunch so we can say goodbye," she said. "Why don't you two go explore the town before you leave?"

"I'd like to see your home," Noah agreed. "We'll have to leave here around three though, so we better get exploring."

I let out a small laugh. He would have seen practically the whole town on our drive here, but he looked so eager I didn't want to tell him that. "Okay, let's go."

## CHAPTER THIRTY

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Showing Noah around my hometown was far more enjoyable than I expected. He didn't seem to mind that we avoided the glamorous shops and restaurants on the foreshore. Instead, I took him to my favorite places, like the old candy store that made its own homemade treats and the doughnut van that usually had a line a mile long in the summer.

There was the graffiti-covered alleyway with a portrait of the ocean that was popular with visiting Instagram influencers and the lighthouse that overlooked the bay. Each time I showed Noah another part of my home, it felt like I was revealing another part of myself. He loved each and every bit of it, and I hoped he also liked the more he saw of me.

I saved the best part for last. After the lighthouse, I took Noah down one of the winding paths that led to the ocean. I didn't take him to the main beach our town overlooked. Instead, I took him to a small secluded cove none of the tourists seemed to know about.

I pulled my shoes off as soon as we reached the shore and breathed in the salty air as my toes sank into the sand. There was a gentle breeze today, but the sea was surprisingly still, and the water wasn't its usual deep shade of blue. Today it reminded me more of Noah's green eyes.

The beach was small and protected by headlands that jutted into the water at either end of the sand. I'd always appreciated the spot most in the early morning light when the

sun's colors danced across the horizon, but even in the middle of the day, there was something enchanting about it.

“This is our best kept secret,” I said, gesturing toward the water. “None of the tourists know it's here. So you often get the beach all to yourself.”

“I can see why you keep it to yourselves,” Noah replied.

I shared a smile with him. “And now you've seen Rapid Bay. There's not much here, but it's home.”

“It's beautiful,” Noah said. “And much more peaceful than growing up in New York.”

Everyone thought Rapid Bay was beautiful, but hearing Noah say it meant more to me than I expected. It almost felt like I needed him to approve of where I was from. I guess I wanted reassurance that maybe we weren't as different as I feared. “I love it, but it must feel a bit boring compared to life in the city.”

“I'd much prefer to live here,” he murmured.

I thought perhaps he was simply being nice. Living in Rapid Bay might have meant being close to this beautiful beach, but life here wasn't always simple, and it definitely wasn't easy. There was no way Noah would want to live here if it meant stressing over money and squeezing into a tiny apartment above a café. That wouldn't be Noah's life if he lived here though. No, he'd be living like a prince in one of the large homes on the foreshore, so life here probably did seem appealing to him.

“I'm serious,” he said, having caught my doubtful expression. “You have people here that really care about you. I'd give anything for that.”

I was surprised it was the people rather than the place that appealed to Noah, and I didn't like the flicker of sorrow that flashed across his gaze. It made me wonder what his home life was like. I knew his dad was gone and his mom was rarely around. I'd lived my whole life without a dad, but my mom was the closest person to me in the world. I couldn't imagine

what it must be like for Noah without either of his parents in his life.

“You mentioned before that your grandfather is there for you though, right?”

“I guess.” He shrugged. “It’s not quite the same. He doesn’t worry about me like your mom worries about you. He wouldn’t care that I’d left school and borrowed his jet unless he needed it for business. Then he’d be furious. He is many things, but a grandfather is not one of them. I’m just a piece of clay he’s constantly trying to mold into shape. He wants me to be just like him and doesn’t care what it takes to make me that way.”

I had no idea how to respond. Noah’s face had turned hard, but his voice was filled with pain. He was looking out to sea like he wanted to dive in and swim away from all his problems. I felt like maybe I’d gotten a glimpse into his world after meeting my father. Matthew wanted to make me more like him—more like a LaFleur—but I still had my mom so I didn’t feel pressured to cave to Matthew’s demands like Noah did with his grandfather. Plus, I’d only had to deal with it for a couple of weeks. Noah must have been putting up with that pressure his whole life.

I couldn’t find the words, so I reached out and took Noah’s hand in mine. I gave it a tight squeeze, and he glanced down at our entwined fingers like it confused him, like he wasn’t sure how to react to the offer of support.

“I’m sorry your family isn’t there for you like they should be,” I said. It broke my heart that he didn’t have someone looking out for him—that the one person constantly in his life only wanted him if he acted a certain way. That wasn’t family.

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not. Even the toughest of us need to feel loved, and I think you deserve it more than anyone.”

His brow creased, and he turned away from me slightly. “You’re looking at me like I’m damaged.”



“No, I don’t think you’re damaged, but it sounds like you’re trapped in the image of what people want you to be. I feel like I’m just starting to see the real you, and I like it so much better than the guy you show the world. The guy they force you to be.”

He shook his head, unable to meet my eyes. “No one wants to see the real me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Luther had told me Noah was the heart of their group. I hadn’t believed it at the time, but it was so easy now to see why. He cared deeply—almost too deeply. And the fact he did so despite not being surrounded by love himself growing up only made him more special.

He slowly faced me again. “You really think that, don’t you?”

“It’s hard not to after what you’ve done for me today.”

Noah reached out and tucked a stray piece of hair behind my ear, making my heart beat faster. It was impossible to ignore the connection between us when he was so close, and the invisible strings that tied us together seemed to pull taut, edging us closer still.

He drew in a deep breath as he gazed at me. “It would be so easy to fall in love with you, Isobel.”

Out of context, those words would have left me feeling giddy, but his voice was quiet, almost strained, and given the glimmer of uncertainty I caught in his eyes, I knew there was more he wasn’t saying.

“But...” I whispered, urging him to continue.

“*But.*” He flinched slightly at the word. “After seeing your home today, I wonder if it would be such a good idea.”

“I thought you liked my home...” I stopped as the truth hit me. “You didn’t realize I was quite so poor. That I’m not good enough for you.”

“No.” He quickly shook his head. “*Hell no.* If anything, you’re too good for me. My life is complicated, and I don’t

want to drag you into my family mess. You deserve so much better than that.”

I nodded. Not because I agreed with him but because I could relate. I had a family mess of my own, and my life was no longer as simple as it once was. It felt tangled and chaotic, and his words were the reality check I needed. They were the warning I’d been waiting for. And yet, despite all reason, I’d given up trying to accept this was a bad idea.

“Shouldn’t it be up to me what I do or don’t deserve?”

“It should,” he murmured. “And I’m far too weak when it comes to you to try and convince you otherwise.”

I stared out at the ocean as I processed what he’d said. “You’re not the only one who’s weak.” It took me a moment to realize I’d whispered the words aloud, and when I glanced at Noah, I could see he was waiting for me to explain.

“I’ve felt something between us since the moment we met,” I said. “I tried fighting it, but you can see how well that’s worked out for me...”

“Why did you want to fight it?”

I didn’t know what to tell him. I’d had such a long list of reasons a few weeks ago, but it had been getting shorter by the day. I had to just be honest with him.

“I recently had my heart broken,” I started. “It nearly wrecked me. I’m still piecing myself back together, so I guess I was worried that if I were to trust a guy with my heart again so soon and the same thing happened there would be nothing left to fix.” I blew out a long breath. “The thing that worries me the most is that we’re so different. How could a pair like us ever have a future?”

“There’s nothing wrong with being different.”

I let out a sad laugh. “You’ve seen where I come from, and it’s nothing like the world you live in. I don’t fit in. I probably never will. It feels like we’d be destined to fail.”

He didn’t say anything as he stared into my eyes. His gaze was discerning, and a lump formed in my throat because, as

much as I wanted him to be logical, I also wasn't ready to give up on the connection between us.

When he finally spoke, his voice was deep and his eyes unyielding. "You say that like it's already written in the stars," he said. "As someone who has had their fate mapped out since the moment he was born, I can tell you that it doesn't matter how much has been planned. At the end of the day, we are the ones that decide whether to accept it."

He was closer to me now. Standing so near I could feel the heat of his body against mine. His hand crept up to caress the side of my face, and I leaned in, unable to fight the pull I felt to him.

"Whatever this is between us," I whispered. "It could end in disaster."

"Then let's make it worth the pain."

His gaze heated as he leaned in, but he stopped just inches away from my lips and hovered there for a moment. I couldn't decide if he was giving me a chance to pull away or testing himself to see if this was really what he wanted. If he thought I might have found some sense in these last few minutes, he was sadly mistaken. Didn't he realize my heart and my head had lost all reason when it came to him?

Like two waves finally reaching the shore, we crashed together with unstoppable certainty. It was as though we were two magnetic forces being denied each other and finally succumbing to the pull that constantly drove us together.

All it took was one brush of his lips against mine, and I knew there was no going back. I kissed him deeply and without thought, completely swept up as I felt his hands circle around my waist, pulling me closer. He kissed me as though he had no lingering doubts and with the kind of determined intensity that left me with no option but to give in to him. And I was more than happy to surrender. My mind, body, and soul had all rebelled against caution, and even if I wanted to, I knew I couldn't walk away.

I'd toyed with the idea of Noah. I'd known he was a bad idea. And that was before he had kissed me. His kiss was both the worst and best kind of torture because I wasn't sure if I'd ever be able to give him up now.

"Isobel," he groaned when he finally pulled away. His eyes burned like they were consumed by fire, and as he looked at me, I felt as if the blaze had spread to my skin.

How could a guy make you feel this way just by looking at you? How could someone's lips completely erase your mind of all thought?

He took a small step away from me. It was the smallest of gaps, but with it came the ability to think clearly once more. It was like my brain had been deprived of oxygen and suddenly took a gasping breath in.

"I don't want to break your heart," he said. "I can't promise you forever, but I can promise you our differences won't tear us apart. If anything, I think they might be what keep us together."

"You really think that?"

"I do. But, even so, you should know I've never had a girlfriend, and I'm not very good at trusting people or opening up. I want a relationship with you, but I don't want you to get hurt because of me."

"Then don't hurt me." I'd been prepared to walk away from him, but after that kiss, I wasn't sure if I could. I'd never felt that kind of passion before, and I didn't think I could simply ignore it now that I knew it was there.

He let out a humorless laugh. "You make it sound so easy. I can only control so much of my life."

"But you can control your heart."

"I'm not sure I can anymore," he said. "Not when it comes to you."

I closed the distance between us once more. Screw being able to think straight. I was tired of trying to do the logical thing. Especially when there was nothing logical about Noah

and me. We made no sense together, but sometimes the best things in life came from the least likely of places.

“Are you sure about this?” he said as I drew close. “Don’t kiss me again unless you’re all in. You’re not the only one who doesn’t want to get hurt...”

I gave myself one breath to reconsider. One moment to try to talk myself out of it. But it was too late, and I was too far gone. I’d been falling for Noah since the moment I’d fallen on top of him in the woods.

I reached up and wrapped my arms around his neck. We were never going to stop this relationship from failing if we gave up before it even began. “I’m all in.” I kissed him again.

I could feel his smile against my lips as he kissed me back. “Does that mean you’ll come to the White Ball with me next weekend?”

“Only if you’re prepared to hobble out of there at the end of the night. I’m a terrible dancer.”

“That’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.” He chuckled. “Who needs feet when I have you?”

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NOAH and I had to rush as we made our way back from the beach to the café. We’d both gotten a little caught up in our beachside kisses and had completely forgotten the time.

“It was really nice to meet you,” Noah said to my mom as we exchanged goodbyes. He held out his hand to her, but Mom pulled him in for a hug.

“I hope we see you here again soon, Noah,” she replied.

He was smiling as she released him. “I hope so too,” he added before turning to me. “Take your time. I’ll wait out by the car.”

“But we’re late for the plane,” I said.

“It can wait.” He winked at me and then smiled, which set my heart racing. I couldn’t seem to stop looking at his lips. Had I really kissed them? It felt like it was a dream.

“See. Totally crazy about you,” Mom said as Noah closed the restaurant door closed behind him. “And I think you might be crazy about him too.”

My cheeks warmed as I realized I’d been staring after him. “He asked me to be his girlfriend on the beach,” I said.

“That’s lovely.” Mom smiled and nodded, but she didn’t seem as excited as I might have expected. She seemed more cautious.

“Why do I get the feeling you’ve got more to say about this?” I asked.

My mom sighed, and she looked a little defeated, like she’d much prefer to keep her thoughts all bottled up. “I *am* really happy for you both,” she said. “I just want you to be careful. He comes from a very different world than you with all those expensive things. A relationship with him won’t be as easy as you might think. Trust me, I know.”

“You’re talking about Matthew, aren’t you?”

She slowly nodded. “Your father and I had a whirlwind summer romance. He tried to charm me with expensive dinners and luxurious gifts, but I wasn’t really interested in those things. I was only interested in him. He was funny and handsome and the sweetest boy I’d ever met. We had a wonderful time together, but when the summer ended, reality hit.”

“What do you mean?”

Mom hesitated, and I could see she was finding it hard to dredge up the past. “Matthew had to return to college, and he invited me to come with him. I thought about it a lot, and a part of me desperately wanted to go. It would have been so easy. He was going to pay for everything to make it happen. But I’d visited his home already and seen the life he led. I knew I would never fit in there, so I stayed here.”

Her eyes fell to floor as she recalled the memory, and it was hard to read her emotions. I couldn't tell whether she regretted the decision or not.

“A few months after he left Rapid Bay, I found out I was pregnant with you.”

“What did you do?” My mom rarely spoke about Matthew this openly, so I was hanging off her every word.

“It was Christmas by then,” she continued. “I went to visit Matthew at his home in New York so I could tell him about you. I had a whole speech planned and everything, but the moment I rang the doorbell, I forgot everything I wanted to say.”

She laughed and shook her head at the memory, her gaze still dipping low rather than meeting mine.

“Thankfully,” she said. “Matthew wasn't there. I was almost relieved at the time because, with all the pregnancy hormones rushing through me, I would have been a blubbing mess if I'd had to tell him in person. So, I chickened out. I wrote everything down in a letter, left it with his butler, and came home.”

“And...” I prompted her.

“I received a note in response.”

“What did it say?”

“I can remember it word for word.” My mom's eyes closed as though she was trying to shut out the memory. “It just said: *Candice, this is all I can offer you. I'm sorry. Goodbye.* There was a check in the envelope.”

“You're kidding me?”

“I wish I was,” she said, shaking her head. “Of course, I tore both the note and the check to pieces. I was devastated at the time, but it didn't take me long to realize that it was probably for the best. I knew I didn't belong in that world, and I'd made the right decision to stay in Rapid Bay.”

She was standing taller now and looked directly at me.

“Once you arrived, I was so in love with you that your father’s presence in your life didn’t matter to me anymore. The last seventeen years haven’t always been easy, but I wouldn’t trade a moment of that time for anything.”

My mom stepped forward, and I opened my arms to pull her in for a hug, squeezing her extra tight. I wished it hadn’t taken me escaping from school on a private jet and Noah becoming my boyfriend for her to finally tell me what really happened between her and Matthew, but I was glad she had. It was probably a good thing she hadn’t told me sooner, or there was no way I ever would have agreed to meet with my father.

“How am I supposed to pretend I don’t hate his guts after learning this?” I asked when I pulled back from my mom’s embrace.

“I didn’t tell you this to make you angry with him,” she said. “And there’s more to the story. I think you need to hear your father’s side. I just wanted you to have your eyes open when it came to the kids at this new school. People who have the kind of money your classmates grew up with come from a very different world to us.”

“Noah’s not like that,” I said.

“I’m not saying he is,” she agreed. “I just want you to be careful and go into this relationship with a clear head.”

“Okay, I will.” Even as I said the words, I had to wonder how honest I was being with myself. I’d already abandoned a whole lot of caution when it came to Noah. Was I already being too reckless with my heart?

I knew Mom had been burned before, but that didn’t mean a relationship with Noah would end just as badly. Still, I couldn’t help but look at him in a different light. Was Noah the kind of guy who thought he could make his problems disappear with a check in the mail too? I hoped I never had to find out.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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“How did the date go?”

I looked up from my breakfast bowl as Lily lowered herself into the seat at my side. I was the first of my friends to arrive at breakfast, and the rest of the table was empty. It was Monday morning, so I knew I'd be lucky if my usual group joined me at all. Cress had a meeting with her dance coach this morning, and Wes would be at training. Anna usually ran in just before the bell rang, and Sawyer didn't always join us, so I was somewhat glad for Lily's presence.

“It was pretty amazing. Noah flew me down to see my mom.”

“What?” she gasped. “Wow, that's so romantic.”

It was very romantic, but I don't think Noah had even been trying for that. He was just concerned I missed home and wanted to make me happy, which made it all the more amazing. We'd hung out all of Sunday too, spending the day lazing at the lake down by the old boat shed. We both must have been exhausted from the day before because we hadn't talked that much. There was something so comforting about just being near Noah though.

“So, are you guys official, or are you just seeing where things go?” she asked.

“Well, he told me not to kiss him unless I wanted a relationship with him.”

“And...”

My cheeks flushed. “He’s a really good kisser.”

Lily gave a small squeal. “This is so exciting.”

“I thought you weren’t a huge Noah fan?”

Lily’s gaze fell to the table, her forehead puckered. “I don’t really know him,” she said before lifting her eyes to me. “But I see the way he looks at you in class. If a guy looked at me that way, I’d melt into a puddle of mush.”

“A puddle of mush?” Lily sure had a unique way with words. “What even is that?”

“*That* is the dream.” She gave me a wistful smile. “All girls want a guy who can turn their bones to jelly with one look.”

“Has a guy ever turned you to jelly?”

“Not unless they’re in one of my romance books. The boys at school just don’t compare.”

“They might if you give them a chance,” I suggested. I would have agreed with her when I first arrived at Weybridge, but now I thought Noah was better than any guy in a book could be.

“You’re really into him, aren’t you?” she said, studying me closely.

“Yeah, I kind of am.” It was weird to admit it out loud, but I couldn’t deny my feelings for Noah anymore. Things were moving so fast between us. We’d only been on one proper date, after all. But I felt like we’d shared things that bonded us closely. He was beginning to drop his defenses around me, and I was starting to see the guy he truly was when he wasn’t trying to protect his heart and live up to the expectations of those around him.

“Mind if I sit here?”

I started grinning when I saw Noah standing behind me. His hair was still damp from his morning shower, and there was a wide smile on his face as he peered down at me. He wasn’t wearing his school tie today, and his shirtsleeves were

rolled up to reveal his strong forearms. I really had a thing for his forearms—it was weird.

“I thought you always sat at *your* table...” I said, playing with him.

He bent down and rested his arms on the back of my chair, leaning in close so his breath tickled my cheek. “Are trying to get rid of me, Crash?”

“No, I just feel like it would do you good to realize you can’t always get what you want.”

He chuckled under his breath. “I think I’m going to sit with you anyway.”

“I kind of figured you would.”

He moved to take the seat next to me, and as I turned, I saw Lily’s eyes fixed on us. Her mouth was hanging open slightly, and she looked like a rabbit trapped in headlights.

“I need to get going.” She quickly rose from her seat.

“Lily, you don’t have to leave.”

She shook her head and gave me a brief smile. “I’m meeting a teacher before class, but I’ll see you later, Isobel.” She darted from the table before I could object.

“You scared away my friend.” I turned an accusing gaze on Noah.

“I didn’t mean to. I just wanted to sit with you.” He looked slightly guilty, but he couldn’t really be blamed. It wasn’t like he’d growled at Lily or made her feel unwelcome.

“I’m glad you did,” I said. “Aren’t you hungry though?” I nodded at the empty space on the table in front of him.

“I ate in my room earlier,” he explained. “I’m always starving after my workouts and often don’t make it to breakfast, so I have a secret stash.”

“So, why are you in the dining hall?”

“There’s a certain girl I wanted to see.”

“Oh, really? Where is she?” I glanced around the room pretending to look for someone, and Noah laughed before he took hold of my hand and squeezed it. “You know I’m talking about you.”

I smiled as I focused on him. “I mean, I hoped so.”

He lifted a hand and lightly stroked my cheek. “No need to hope. It will always be you.”

This guy always knew the right things to say, and I melted a little in response. Perhaps Lily was right about the way Noah looked at me. My bones were feeling kind of mushy as his green eyes locked on to mine.

“We’re sitting with the newbie now, are we?” Luther slumped into the chair Lily had vacated, and Kaden took the one on his other side. “Well, isn’t this fun?”

Noah lowered his hand from my face, and I rolled my eyes as I turned to the two boys. Fun wasn’t the word I would have used to describe Luther’s arrival.

“Oh God.” Anna said, as she also appeared at the end of the table. “The one time I show up to breakfast on time. Please tell me this isn’t going to be a regular thing.” She scrunched up her nose in Luther’s direction.

“This *is* going to be fun.” Luther’s grin only grew in response. “What do you think, boys? Meals at the newbie’s table from now on?”

“I’m not so sure,” I quickly replied.

“Seconded,” Anna agreed before glancing in Noah’s direction. “No offense, Noah. We like that you’re dating Isobel, and you’re always welcome. I’m just not a big fan of this whole package deal...” Her eyes darted in Luther’s direction once more.

“Are you talking about me?” Luther asked. “I’m cut.”

He didn’t look offended in the slightest. If anything, given his smile, I think Anna had just made his day.

“We’re just visiting this morning,” Noah said.

“Yeah, Anna, so no need to get your panties in a twist,” Luther added.

“Please don’t talk about my panties.”

“Why? Aren’t you wearing any?” Luther fired back.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” She was practically purring at him.

“Sorry, maybe this was a bad idea,” Noah whispered to me as Luther and Anna continued their banter.

“I mean, it’s terrible but also kind of entertaining to watch.”

He chuckled under his breath. “Those two could have their own reality series. Just stick them in a room together and start the cameras rolling.”

“That would be great TV,” I agreed. “I do feel bad for Kaden though; he’s kind of stuck between the two of them.”

Kaden was resolutely staring at the food on his plate, pretending he couldn’t hear anything at all. It was quite an impressive feat.

“Perhaps next time you could come sit at our table instead,” Noah suggested.

“No one other than you three sit there though.”

His eyes crinkled at the corners. “I think we can make an exception for you.”

“You *think*?”

I didn’t hear his response because Anna’s voice was louder. “God, Luther, do you kiss your mother with that mouth?”

Noah and I shared a look before we burst out laughing. He leaned back in his chair as if he was trying to make himself comfortable. “I guess we should just sit back and enjoy the rest of this morning’s show.”

“I guess we should,” I agreed with a laugh.

Despite the fact Anna and Luther were on a mission in life to drive each other crazy, breakfast was actually kind of fun with Noah and his friends sitting with us. Wes and Sawyer joined, and even Cress managed to make an appearance before the morning bell rang. It was the lightest I'd ever seen Noah at school. He was cracking smiles and laughing despite the fact the dining hall was full with other students. For once, he didn't seem to be hiding within himself, and I loved every minute of it.

As we were leaving the dining hall, I realized I'd left my laptop back in my room. I told Cress to head to our first class without me, and I hurried back to the dorm to grab it. It made me late for English, and by the time I returned to the main school building, the corridors were empty. I rushed up the staircase that led to the top level and was almost to class when Veronica stepped into my path. She'd appeared out of nowhere, and I tried to walk past her, but she moved so she continued to block me.

I folded my arms over my chest as I looked her in the eyes. "What do you want from me now, Veronica?"

She let out a derisive snort. "You and Noah won't last."

"Uh, okay. Thanks for the heads-up." I tried to get by her again, but apparently, she wasn't done with me as she firmly stood her ground.

"He's not actually serious about you. You know that, right? You're just some fling to him. He'll soon grow bored with you and discard you like the trash you are."

I had to swallow down my anger before I responded. "I didn't realize you cared."

"Oh, I don't. You just need to know that Noah and I belong together and we'll *be* together. You're just a passing distraction."

My jaw clenched as I stared at her. "Look, Veronica, I don't know what's happened with you and Noah in the past, but it's clear you like him. And I know it must hurt seeing him with someone else, but you can't get angry with me because it

didn't work out with you guys. Standing there trying to make me feel bad isn't helping anyone."

Her eyes briefly widened, but she quickly controlled the reaction, and a smug smile touched her lips. "Oh, Isobel, I'm hardly angry with you. If anything, I feel *sorry* for you. I mean, Noah's so embarrassed by you that he's taking me to the White Ball this weekend."

I had prepared myself for Veronica to come at me with another hurtful insult, but her comment stole the breath from my lungs. "What are you talking about?"

"Noah and I are going together," she repeated.

She must have had her wires crossed because Noah had asked me to go with him to the ball just two days ago. I knew Veronica and Noah traditionally went together, so maybe she was confused?

"I think you need to talk to Noah because he's asked me to go with him," I said as gently as I could.

"I think you're the one who needs to talk to him." Veronica sounded so certain. "Just last night, he was saying how much he can't wait to go with me."

I didn't want to believe her, but a hint of doubt started to creep into my mind. Why would she lie? All I'd need to do to find out if she was making it up was have one conversation with Noah.

"Look, don't take it personally," she continued. "That's just the way the world is. Guys like Noah don't take girls like you seriously." She turned on her heel and stalked away before I could respond.

I stared after her in a state of shock. I wanted to give Noah the benefit of the doubt. I really did. But it was so easy to believe Veronica when the things she said made sense. I'd known from the start that I was far better suited to serving Noah's coffee than being his date to a formal ball.

I walked to class slowly, as though I was in a trance, and sat at the desk next to Cress without saying a word.

“Is everything okay?” she whispered. The teacher had just entered the room, and the class was starting to grow quiet as he began scribbling on the board.

I gave her a tight smile and nodded. “Everything’s fine,” I whispered.

Veronica was seated right in front of me, and she must have heard my reply because she shot a knowing smile over her shoulder at me.

Cress glanced between the two of us, and a small crease appeared at her brow as she focused on me. “Are you sure?”

“Yep. It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

At least, I hoped it was nothing. Noah and I had always seemed like an impossible match to me, and as much as I liked him, it was easy to make me question if he really felt the same way.

I wanted to trust Noah. And I wanted to believe he hadn’t changed his mind about me. That he hadn’t decided I wasn’t good enough to take to the school ball. But one run in with Veronica and I was suddenly questioning everything about us. As much as I hated to admit it, Veronica had gotten under my skin, and after a couple of days of bliss, I was already worried things were about to come crashing down around me.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

---

I waited until that night to confront Noah about the ball. I'd been wavering back and forth all day about whether I should say anything. I didn't want to come off as one of those suspicious girlfriends who freaked out over nothing. But I also just wanted to hear the truth from Noah's lips.

It was late by the time I finally worked up the nerve to visit him. I'd never been in the boys' dormitory before, and I had no idea where to begin looking for his room. Thankfully, I ran into Wes as I entered the building.

He smiled as he caught sight of me. "It's very close to curfew for a visit to the boys' dorms, isn't it?"

"This place has a curfew?" I joked. I knew about the rule, but it seemed like the kids here did what they wanted most of the time.

"You wouldn't think it." Wes laughed and scratched the side of his face. "I just meant I'm surprised to see you here so late."

"Oh, yeah, I was looking for Noah."

"Ah, *the boyfriend*." He wiggled his eyebrows at me.

"Stop."

"Hey, I didn't say there was anything wrong with that." Amusement played in his eyes.

"No, but you're making fun of me. I swear it's like you actually want to lose your title as the nice twin."

“Sometimes I like to spice things up.”

I shook my head and smiled. “So, do you know which room is Noah’s?”

“Yeah, I actually sleep just down the hall from him, so I’ll show you the way.”

I followed Wes from the foyer and up a set of stairs to the third floor. Our building was noticeably different. While we had plush white carpets and crisp white walls, their dormitory was trimmed with rich woods and deep blue colors.

“I missed our study session tonight,” Wes said as we walked.

“Yeah, I still can’t believe Miss Constance gave us the weekend off. I thought we were going to be drowning in economics homework all year.”

Wes leaned in close and lowered his voice as he replied. “My guess is that she had a big night on Thursday night and hadn’t planned our lesson for Friday.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Did you see the size of her coffee cup Friday morning? It had *hangover* written all over it.”

“Ha! You think? Maybe she was just being nice.”

“I doubt it. She’ll probably give us double the work to make up for it this week.”

That was a terrifying prospect. “So, what did you get up to over the weekend?” I asked.

“Not a whole lot. Sawyer decided he wanted to cash in our bet on Saturday night and kicked me out of our room. I ended up sleeping on one of the common room couches.”

“Really?”

“Yep. One thing is for sure about Sawyer; he takes our bets incredibly seriously.”

“And here I was thinking the one thing I could be certain about with Sawyer was that he’s a terrible influence when it

comes to drinking.”

“Well, there’s that too,” Wes agreed. He slowed and gestured toward one of the doors that lined the hallway. “Here we are.”

“Thanks, Wes.”

“No problem at all. Normally, I’d expect Noah to kill any guy who led a girl to his room, but I’m hoping he’ll make an exception for you.”

“Well, if he doesn’t, your secret is safe with me.”

Wes pointed a finger at me. “I’ll hold you to that.”

He turned and left me standing by Noah’s door, so I took a deep breath in and knocked.

“Come in,” Noah called out.

I slowly cracked the door open, and stepped inside. His room was much like the corridor with deep navy walls and dark wooden accents. There was only one large bed, so it seemed Noah didn’t have to share. He wasn’t currently in his bedroom, and as I turned to search the rest of the room for him, he stepped out of the connected bathroom.

My throat went dry when I saw he was only wearing a towel. His chest was bare with a smattering of water droplets clinging to his skin. I’d seen Noah topless before, but there was something so intimate about seeing him in nothing but a towel. Surprise lit his eyes when he saw me, and I realized I was staring.

“Shit.” I quickly spun to face the wall.

Noah let out a deep laugh. “I’m getting a sense of déjà vu here.”

“You said to come in!”

“Yep, this definitely feels like it’s happened before.” He was still laughing, but my cheeks were hot with embarrassment. It didn’t help that I’d been totally checking him out. “Give me a sec, and I’ll change.”

I heard his light padded footsteps as he walked over to one of his drawers, and I swallowed deeply as I heard his towel drop to the ground. It was a miracle I managed to keep my breath slow and steady because my heart was racing.

“Okay, I’m decent.”

I relaxed slightly when I saw he’d put on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt. He ran his towel through his hair as he watched me, looking far too sexy and decidedly not decent.

“So, do you normally let people into your room when you’re half naked?” I asked.

“I could ask the same of you, Crash...”

I winced at the memory, making him chuckle.

“No one normally bothers me in here,” he explained. “If someone’s knocking, they usually need something important.”

“So, you thought it was an emergency?”

“Or one of the guys.” He lifted one shoulder. “I’m much happier it’s you though.”

Heat filled my cheeks again, and I turned from him. Noah had a way of getting to me without saying much at all. I started to inspect his room as I waited for my flaming cheeks to settle. There wasn’t all that much in here. Just a bed, some drawers, and a desk. A guitar was settled against the far wall and a pile of novels were stacked on his bedside table. I had to withhold the urge to walk over and inspect the pile. What would a guy like Noah read outside of assigned books for class?

“So, do all the guys have their own room? Or are you just lucky?” I asked as I slowly studied the surroundings.

“One of the perks that comes with having the surname Hastings, I guess. There are a few others who don’t have to share, but most of those guys are prefects who pulled some strings.”

“Uh-huh.” I was still struggling to look directly at Noah. Now that I’d gotten over the initial shock of seeing him half

naked, my mind returned to the reason I had come. I swallowed down my nerves as I faced him once more.

“I had a run-in with Veronica today.”

His easy expression became tense as he looked at me.

“She’s not very happy about us dating, which I understand,” I continued. “It’s obvious she likes you. But then she told me you were taking her to the White Ball. Is that true?” I hated how pathetic I sounded. I really wasn’t this girl. I did want Noah to be honest with me though.

He didn’t answer right away, and after a few seconds, I could only assume the worst. “It *is* true?”

“No.” Noah finally found his words. “Well, not exactly.” His whole demeanor had stiffened, and he looked upset. “I haven’t asked her to the ball, and I certainly haven’t agreed to go with her. We go to this thing every year together, so she’s probably just assumed that nothing has changed. I’ll have to have a talk with her.”

His explanation should have put my mind at ease, but I still felt apprehensive. “Noah, she told me that you spoke with her last night and told her you can’t wait to go with her...”

“She what?” He took a quick step backward. “I didn’t say anything like that to her. I didn’t even see her yesterday.”

“Then why would she think that?”

Noah paced toward the window. He leaned on the frame and looked out at the darkened lake and the forest beyond. His eyes were narrowed, and his forehead was firmly creased. When he faced me again, he let out a heavy sigh.

“I spoke with my grandfather last night,” he said. “I told him I’d invited you, and he wasn’t happy. He may have decided to take matters into his own hands and told Veronica how much I was looking forward to it. It sounds like something he would do.”

“But you didn’t invite her?”

“Hell no. I can’t imagine spending the night with anyone but you.”

My heart swelled in response, but my mind was still whirring. “I still don’t understand. Why would your grandfather go behind your back like that?”

“He probably hoped it would force my hand and I wouldn’t have a choice but to go with her.”

I couldn’t believe his grandfather would be so manipulative, but Noah didn’t seem all that surprised. “Why does he care so much?” I asked.

He drew in a deep, almost reluctant breath. “My grandfather is in the middle of a major business deal with Veronica’s parents. He seems to think the whole thing will fall to pieces if I don’t take her to the ball.”

“Surely, he’s exaggerating?”

“I wish he was. But a lot of his deals hinge on personal relationships rather than figures or words on paper,” he said with a grimace. “And our families have been pushing us together for as long as I can remember. He thinks it would be too humiliating for Veronica if I pull out now and her parents will blame him.”

He returned to pacing back and forth between the window and me, and I could feel every ounce of his frustration in his powerful strides. “I just wish he didn’t have to involve me,” he said. “It makes me feel like I’m letting our whole family down. Like the fate of the Hastings empire rests solely on my shoulders.”

I didn’t say anything as I tried to wrap my mind around it all. I couldn’t pretend to understand why this was so important to his grandfather. But one thing I was sure about was that I hated seeing how much pressure Noah was under and how it pained him to let his grandfather down.

“Maybe you should just take her...” I suggested.

“What? No—”

“Noah. It’s just a stupid dance, and I can see how hard it’s going to be for you if you don’t do this.” Noah’s grandfather was the one family member he had left, and it was clear how

being put in this position was tearing Noah apart. If I could make it easier on him, why wouldn't I?

"It will be harder for me not having you by my side." He rubbed a hand down the side of his face, like he wasn't sure what to do. I knew if I asked him to take me to the dance that he would, no question, and that was enough for me.

"Just take Veronica. It's not like you have to marry her."

Noah blanched.

"You won't have to marry her, right?"

"No, of course not." He blew out a breath. "I guess all I'd have to do is arrive with her and make small talk with her parents for a while. I'd be yours for the rest of the night."

"So why is this even a problem?"

"Because I don't want to spend one second of the ball without you, and I never want to let you down."

I tried to roll my eyes at him, but my heart distracted me with a small flip because I knew how much he meant it.

"And after what Veronica did to you with those posters..." he continued. "Well, she's the last person I want to be seen with."

"It's okay, Noah, just go with her." I didn't particularly like insisting, especially because it was *Veronica*, but it felt like a small sacrifice if it would make Noah's life easier.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Isobel Grace." He stepped toward me so he was just inches away. "You. Are. Amazing. I'm sorry this isn't going to be the ideal second date."

"Well, no, it's not," I agreed. "I guess I'll just have to make you promise you'll be spending most of the night with me."

A small, uncertain smile crept onto Noah's lips and he leaned toward me so his forehead rested against mine. "I

promise most of my night, all of my smiles, and every single dance will be with you, Isobel.”

“You don’t smile in public so that shouldn’t be hard.”

He chuckled. “I can’t seem to help it when I’m with you.”

His attention dropped to my lips, and that one simple movement sent a charge of energy into the air and tingles racing across my skin. I think he felt it too because he slowly reached up and cupped my neck in his hands, and his thumb trailed wickedly across the soft skin of my jaw. I shivered as the light tickling sensation moved down my neck and across my shoulders.

His mouth was only inches from mine. He wasn’t kissing me yet, and every breath his lips hovered close to me felt like a form of torment. In one sudden movement, his lips captured mine. His kisses were hot and intense. My hands dug into his shirt, grasping him tightly as he worked at destroying any doubt that plagued my mind about us.

The girls at school wanted Noah for many things—his looks, his wealth, his status, and even his prowess on the soccer field. What they didn’t realize was that his kisses outstripped every one of those reasons. Noah might have been great at soccer, but he was a damn pro at kissing.

When our lips finally parted, I felt dizzy, and it was only after I’d caught my breath that I realized my phone was buzzing.

“You going to get that?” he asked with a confident smile. It was like he knew he’d completely blown my mind with his kisses.

I quickly checked my phone and saw my father was calling. He’d tried to get ahold of me several times over the last week, but he always called at the most inconvenient times. There was no time less convenient than right now, so I quickly put my phone away.

“It’s just my father. I’ll call him back later,” I said, wrapping my arms around Noah’s neck. “I’m kind of busy right now.”



“Oh really? I guess that means you want to kiss me again.”

“That wouldn’t be completely terrible.”

“Wouldn’t be completely terrible? You could give a guy a complex with talk like that,” he said. “Maybe I need to practice my kissing.”

“Hmm. I think you might have to. But it could take a while.”

“Well”—he grinned—“I guess we better get started.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

---

“Are you really okay with Noah taking Veronica to the ball tonight?” Anna asked.

It was Saturday afternoon, and we were getting our hair and nails done at a beauty salon in town. The place was fully booked up with Weybridge students, so Anna was keeping her voice down to make sure we weren't overheard.

“I told you already. I was the one who suggested he go with her. It's fine,” I muttered.

“He really wouldn't be going with her if he didn't feel like he had to,” Cress added, giving me a reassuring smile. “I know my cousin, and I can tell he's crazy about you.”

“I still don't like it,” Anna grumbled.

I wasn't totally on board with the whole thing either, but I understood why Noah had little choice in the matter. It really didn't help that Veronica had been all over him this week. She always seemed to be hovering around Noah and took every opportunity she got to touch him. He never responded to her advances, and I knew he had to put up with her because his grandfather was doing business with her parents, but it still made me uncomfortable.

“I'm just glad my parents don't choose my dates for me,” Cress said. “I could think of nothing worse than being stuck all night with a guy I didn't like.”

“You're only saying that because you're going with Sawyer,” Anna grumbled. “It's the best of both worlds. You both get to arrive at the event with a hot date, but because

you're going as friends, you get to leave with whoever you like. I wish I'd thought of that."

"You didn't have to agree to go with Angus," Cress said.

"I know." Anna let out another grumble. "But he's hot. *So hot*. And when he asked me to go with him, I forgot for a moment what an ass he is."

"How could you forget?" Cress laughed. "That's all you ever complain about."

"Yeah, but we were at the boathouse party, and I'd had a few drinks, and he was kind of kissing me when he asked me, so I think my brain kind of short-circuited."

"We really need to find you a new hook-up buddy," Cress said.

Anna slumped in her chair. "Ugh, we totally do."

The conversation turned much lighter after that as the girls started making plans for after the ball. The event itself was apparently a bit of a drag because so many parents attended, but the party afterward was meant to be awesome. Everyone was heading to Luther's house, and according to Anna and Cress, the party lasted all night and people didn't head back to their dorms until the sun came up.

I wasn't so keen on the crazy party part, but I was looking forward to having Noah back once the formalities of the night were through.

We spent several hours at the salon before Cress drove us back to school. We were walking back to the dormitory when we spotted Wes pacing up ahead. He was on the phone, speaking quickly and quietly, and from the way he kept gripping at his hair, he seemed stressed. His usual friendly smile was nowhere to be seen, and I had a bad feeling that whoever was on the other end of the call was giving him bad news.

He hung up as we approached and let out a heavy sigh as he tucked the phone away in his pocket. It wasn't until he looked up that he realized we were there.

“Oh, hey, guys.” His voice was melancholy, and it wasn’t hard to see that he was upset.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

He traced his hand across his jaw as he looked at me. “Sarah just canceled on me for the ball tonight. She was supposed to be coming down for it, but something’s come up, and she can’t make it.”

“Oh no,” Anna gasped.

“She couldn’t have told you sooner?” I asked.

“Guess not,” he replied.

Cress reached out and squeezed his arm. “Wow, that really sucks.”

Wes nodded, but he looked far more miserable than I would have expected. A part of me wondered if there was more to his disappointment than simply his girlfriend not coming tonight. He’d told me she didn’t make time for him when he planned a surprise trip to visit her in New York a couple of weekends ago, and I had to wonder if things were a little rocky with them. I hoped she had a good reason for letting him down tonight because he didn’t deserve to get ditched at the last minute.

“What are you going to do?” Cress asked, her voice soft and gentle.

“I guess I’ll have to go stag.” He shrugged. “My dad’s supposed to be coming, so he’ll expect me to be there.”

“You should go with Isobel!” Anna practically yelled the words, and she was grinning widely as she looked between the two of us. “Just as friends, obviously. She doesn’t have a date either because of the whole Noah situation. At least you both wouldn’t have to rock up alone this way.”

Wes seemed unsure as he looked at me and then back to Anna.

“Really?” It wasn’t clear whether Wes was asking Anna or me.

“Yeah, of course,” Anna replied. “Cress is going with Sawyer as friends. You two can go together. This way we all have a date.”

“What do you think?” Wes was looking directly at me now. “I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes, but it might not be so bad if we went together. As friends, of course.”

“I don’t—”

“Don’t be silly,” Anna interrupted, clearly worried I was about to ruin her grand plan. “Noah won’t mind, and by the end of the night, I’m sure we’ll all be hanging out together anyway.”

Maybe she was right. Noah would be busy putting on a show for his grandfather for the first part of the dance. There was no reason why I shouldn’t have some fun while I waited for him. I slowly started to smile. “Yeah, okay, it actually sounds really great.”

“You sure?” Wes’s expression had clearly brightened.

“Yeah, I think we’d have a good time together.” I was also relieved knowing I wouldn’t have to arrive at the ball on my own. And if I couldn’t go to the ball with Noah, I was glad I got to go with Wes.

“Great.” His face transformed with a wide smile, and I found myself echoing the look in return. Wes’s sweet smiles were contagious.

“This is going to be fun.” Cress clapped her hands together in excitement. “You can come meet us beforehand with Sawyer, and we can all head across together.”

“Sounds perfect,” Wes agreed. “I better go get ready. I’ve got to look good if I want to impress my hot date.” He winked at me, and the gesture reminded me far too much of his brother.

I folded my arms over my chest. “We’re going as friends, Wes, so you can’t say I’m hot.”

“As your friend, I can’t be expected to lie.”

“But—”

“Just accept the compliment, Isobel. I’ll see you later.”

He was still smiling as he left, and I felt a little better myself. I hadn’t exactly been looking forward to going to the ball alone, and I knew Wes would be good company. Knowing Veronica, she’d be all over Noah tonight, so I was going to need someone to distract me.

“Thanks for suggesting Wes and I go together,” I said to Anna as we continued back to the dorm. “I’m almost looking forward to tonight now I know I won’t be going alone.”

She waved my thanks away. “It was nothing. Though I have to admit, I’m kind of jealous. I wish my date had zero expectations of me tonight.”

I laughed at the sour expression on her face. “If Angus is all that bad, just ditch him and come hang with us.”

She perked up a little at the idea. “You make a good point. Although, knowing my luck, he’ll kiss me, and I won’t be able to resist him the rest of the night.”

“You’re hopeless,” I said with a laugh.

“Completely.” Anna smiled, and her eyes seemed to cloud over briefly as she became lost in her own thoughts. “Kisses are my kryptonite.”

“Me too,” I agreed.

Once we got back to our room, we all got dressed in our formal white gowns. I was surprised to find I’d actually arrived at school with one already packed for me. The stylist Matthew hired must have known about the White Ball because the dress they’d selected was perfect for the occasion. I’d tried it on earlier in the week to make sure it fit, but it was only now with my hair elegantly twirled up and my makeup done that I didn’t feel like a total impostor. I was surprised by how well it suited me, and for the first time since I’d arrived at Weybridge Academy, I finally felt as though I looked like I belonged.

“Damn, Isobel, I wish I had your legs,” Cress gushed as I stepped into the bedroom. The dress had a fitted bodice with a long slit that reached high up my thigh. I never would have picked something quite so revealing myself, but as soon as I’d

touched the material, I'd fallen in love with it. It was crafted from the softest silk that had a gorgeous shimmer when it caught the light. I'd never worn something so luxurious before, and the dresses I'd worn to dances back home all paled in comparison.

"I wish I had your booty," I replied.

"Well, I have been doing extra squats all week to look good in this dress." Cress wiggled her butt in my direction, and I laughed as I swatted at her to keep it away from me.

"And we all know you both wish you had my boobs," Anna said, walking in behind me. Her dress had a low-cut front that really drew the eyes to her cleavage. There was no denying it; she was right.

Cress started to laugh. "Our nicknames should be Tits, Legs, and Ass."

"Ah, I love it!" Anna exclaimed. "We should get matching tattoos with our new nicknames to celebrate."

I didn't want to dampen her enthusiasm, but I couldn't help but lift an eyebrow in response. "You really want to walk around with the word tits tattooed on you?"

"Hell yeah, I do," Anna shot back. "If anyone asks about it, it'll be a great excuse to tell them how great my tits are."

I burst out laughing. "How have I spent seventeen years without you guys in my life?"

"I know, right?" Anna agreed.

Now that we were dressed, we spent the rest of the time before the ball listening to music and putting the finishing touches on our makeup. Just before eight o'clock, there was a knock at the door, and Anna went to answer it.

She grinned as she started to pull it open. "Legs, Ass, your dates are here," she called over her shoulder to us.

The door opened wide to reveal the twins both standing in the entrance with equally confused looks on their faces. They were always strikingly similar, but their matching expressions and tuxedos made them look more identical than ever.

“Do I even want to know what you’re talking about?” Wes asked.

“I definitely do,” Sawyer said, a cheeky grin forming on his lips as he stepped through the door. With the tall, athletic Montfort twins now in the room, it suddenly felt a lot smaller.

“Those are their new nicknames,” Anna said with a proud expression on her face. “And mine is Tits, just in case you were wondering.”

“Are you planning on telling absolutely everyone?” Cress gently slapped Anna on the arm.

“Everyone who will listen.”

“I can totally see where you get the names from,” Sawyer said as he ran an assessing eye over our outfits. “You girls look hot. If I didn’t actually like you, I’d probably want to bang you.”

Wes had walked over to stand near me, and I leaned in close to him. “I can’t tell if that’s a compliment or not,” I murmured.

“It’s the biggest compliment you can get from Sawyer,” he said with a laugh. “You do look beautiful though, Isobel.”

I flushed at his compliment. “You look quite dashing yourself.”

“Thanks.” He smiled and tugged proudly on the lapels of his jacket.

The twins were both wearing matching tuxedos, and if I didn’t already know who was who, it would have been nearly impossible to tell the two boys apart. Wes’s hair wasn’t gelled back like his brother’s, and it was easy to tell it was him when you looked into his kind brown eyes.

“So, who wants some vodka before we get this party started?” Sawyer grinned, offering a hip flask.

Cress and Anna happily took a swig, but I quickly shook my head when he held it out to me. “I’m not letting you be a bad influence on me tonight, Sawyer.”



He winked. “The night is young, Grace. Don’t make declarations you don’t intend to keep.”

“Oh, I’m keeping this one,” I muttered.

Sawyer moved on to offer a drink to his brother, but Wes also refused. “I think I’ll follow your lead, Isobel. If I have too many drinks, I’ll probably start spilling my guts about Sarah ditching me tonight.”

I reached out and gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. “I’m sorry she bailed on you.”

He smiled and shrugged. “I guess it’s not all bad. I do get to take the infamous *Legs* to the ball, after all.”

“Shut up!” I swatted a hand against his chest, and he laughed. “Who’s to say I’m *Legs* anyway?”

He glanced down at the long slit that cut up my thigh, and my cheeks heated under his gaze. “How could you not be?” he asked.

My throat restricted slightly, and for a moment. I had to remind myself that Wes was just a friend—a really hot, sweet friend who happened to have a girlfriend. He also wasn’t Noah. He didn’t come close.

“We should get going,” Anna said. “I’m meant to be meeting Angus there in a minute.”

“He’s not coming to get you?” Wes asked. It wasn’t hard to miss the judgmental tone in his voice.

“Nope. Angus is a dick.”

“Yeah, remind me, why are you going with him again?” Sawyer asked.

“Because his lips are my greatest weakness,” Anna said, a hint of defeat in her voice.

Sawyer scoffed. “Angus? Really?”

“Yeah, the guy has skills.”

“Huh. I’ll have to ask him what his secret is.” Sawyer had a thoughtful look on his face as he considered the idea.

“No need,” Anna immediately responded. “I can tell you right now what it is. He has this way of curling his tongue—”

“Why don’t you guys talk about this later!” Cress practically leaped forward to interrupt them.

I nodded, relieved Cress had stepped in before we all had to hear about Angus’s tongue. “Yeah, we don’t want to be late.”

“We aren’t done with this conversation,” Sawyer said, pointing at Anna who nodded firmly in response.

Cress and I began to usher everyone from the room before Anna and Sawyer could start up another conversation we didn’t want to be a part of. We left the dorm and headed across the courtyard to the main building. I’d been at Weybridge a month now, but I hadn’t come close to exploring the entire school in that time. To get to the ball, we walked to the far end of Esher Hall where people were gathering outside a set of wide-open doors.

The women were all dressed in gorgeous white gowns while the men wore tailored tuxedos that fitted them perfectly. I’d never seen so many people all dressed so beautifully before. The air practically radiated with wealth and privilege. I smoothed my hands over the front of my dress, once again caressing the unfamiliar feeling of smooth silk. I might have looked the part, but I was still worried people could see I didn’t belong in this dress, let alone this school.

“Ugh, there’s my date,” Anna groaned. She reached out and swiped Sawyer’s hip flask from his hand before taking a long drink. She grimaced as the alcohol hit her mouth, but that was the only sign of discomfort as she quickly knocked the drink back.

“I’ll see you guys inside,” she said, giving a miserable scrunch of her nose before she marched over to greet Angus.

I skimmed my eyes over the waiting crowd, looking for any sign of Noah. It was the first time since we’d started dating that I wasn’t completely sure whether I wanted to see him or not. As much as I understood his situation, I hated

knowing he'd have Veronica on his arm tonight, and it wasn't something I particularly wanted to witness. I felt slightly relieved when I couldn't find him among the huddled crowd outside the entrance.

"You ready for your first Weybridge event?" Wes caught my attention as he took my arm in his.

"Sure, let's go," I replied with an empty smile. The truth was, I wasn't ready. Not even close. Thoughts of Noah and Veronica had wedged their way into my mind. And even with Wes by my side, I had a bad feeling this night was going to be far more difficult to endure than I'd imagined.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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The ballroom inside Esher Hall was strikingly elaborate. Tall pillars lined the walls, and glistening chandeliers twinkled overhead. The room was already filled with people dancing as a large orchestra played a classic tune from their spot on a raised stage at the far end of the room. I'd never felt so out of place in my life.

"God, I hate these things," Cress said as the twins went to get us drinks. "I wouldn't have bothered coming if my parents weren't going to be here."

"Your parents are here?" I was a little surprised as Cress hadn't mentioned it to me. I would have expected her to spend some time with them today if they were going to be in the area. Especially since Weybridge Academy was in the middle of nowhere.

"I mean, they said they were going to try and come when we talked earlier this week, but knowing them, they've jetted off to some remote island for the weekend and forgotten all about it."

"Wouldn't they let you know either way?"

"They can be a bit flighty." Cress shrugged. "I love them to death, but they're not the most reliable parents. How about you. Is your mom coming?"

"I wish." I'd considered telling Mom about the ball, but she was already so stressed with the café, and I didn't want her to feel bad she couldn't make it. She would have needed to

take the weekend off work, and given how things were going, I knew there was no chance it would happen.

As I was watching Cress, I noticed her gaze lock on to something behind me. Her whole body tensed, and an angry look entered her eyes.

“What are you looking a—” I turned to see what had caught her attention, and immediately wished I hadn’t. Noah had just entered the ballroom with Veronica on his arm. His face displayed his infamous mask of indifference, but it didn’t stop my stomach from curdling as Veronica clung tightly to him.

She looked beautiful tonight. They both did. Like they were made for one another. If it weren’t for the cold look in Noah’s eyes, I’d probably have burst into tears. I knew this wasn’t what he wanted. And yet, it was impossible not to feel hurt as I watched on.

Cress lightly touched my arm. “Why don’t we go see how the twins are getting on with the drinks?”

I nodded and let her drag me away. Avoiding Noah was going to be my new mission for the night. I just had to grit my teeth and bear it until he was finally through with whatever formalities were expected of him.

“I’m so sorry he’s here with her,” Cress said as we made our way through the crowd.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I told him to come with her.”

“But only because you could see how much Noah hated letting his grandfather down. I hate that William always gets his way with Noah.” Anger laced her voice. “He’s always abusing their relationship, and it drives me crazy.”

“I can’t imagine how hard it must be for Noah.”

“I know,” she agreed. “He’s constantly torn between what he wants and what his grandfather commands, and if there’s any conflict between their needs, it’s always Noah’s that get pushed aside. The company always comes first. I sometimes think William knows how worried Noah is about losing him and plays on his fear. It’s sick.”

I felt a wave of sorrow for Noah wash over me. He always acted so strong, but I couldn't imagine what it would be like growing up without both parents. And it was heartbreaking that he was constantly worried about losing the one parental figure he had left too. William Hastings sounded like a piece of work. What kind of person would knowingly abuse their relationship with their grandson in that way?

We found the guys just as Sawyer was slipping a hundred-dollar bill to a waiter in exchange for a few glasses of champagne from his tray. When I caught his eye, he grinned and offered a glass to me. "Ready to join the dark side yet?"

"Screw it," I said, grabbing the glass before taking a long drink.

"That's our girl," Cress said with a smile.

"I knew it wouldn't take much to get you on board," Sawyer added.

"I might as well have one too." Wes reached out and took a glass for himself.

We lifted our glasses in a quick toast and then drank our champagne before any of the adults noticed. I wasn't sure they were all that bothered about students drinking. The parents didn't seem to mind. I was more worried about the teachers who were walking around the ballroom with discerning eyes.

"We should dance," Sawyer said, placing his empty glass down on the closest table.

Cress didn't need any convincing and happily took his arm as he led her onto the dance floor. I hesitated and shared an uncertain look with Wes. He had a similar expression on his face, and I let out a laugh. "We're going to make a scene, aren't we?"

"I promise I won't accidentally punch you."

"And I'll try my best not to step on your toes."

He grinned and held out a hand toward me. "Let's just shuffle about and hope no one notices."

“Okay, but if there’s an injury, we call it quits for the night.”

“Agreed.”

Dancing with Wes wasn’t nearly as embarrassing as I expected. We probably looked awkward to anyone watching us closely, but at least Wes was easy to talk to, and it was much nicer than spending my time worrying about what Noah was up to with Veronica.

We were halfway through our second song when I felt a presence at my side. “May I cut in?”

My stomach flipped as I recognized the voice, and I slowly peered up into my father’s ice-blue eyes.

My arms dropped from Wes’s shoulders as I faced Matthew head-on. “What are you doing here?”

“Attending my daughter’s first school ball, of course.” He turned his attention to Wes and held out his hand. “Matthew LaFleur, Isobel’s father.”

Wes straightened, and his eyes widened with recognition. “Wesley Montfort.” He shook my father’s hand firmly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir, my father has many good things to say about you.”

“Ah, one of August’s sons. Is your father here tonight?”

“He intends to be,” Wes replied. As he let go of my father’s hand, he caught my eye, and I could tell by the confused look on his face he was wondering how the hell he hadn’t known Matthew was my father.

“Excellent. I hope to see him later,” Matthew responded. “Now, if you’ll excuse us. I’d like to dance with my daughter.”

Wes nodded and stepped back. He hovered in place for a second, still glancing between Matthew and me. I could practically hear the cogs whirring away inside his head as he considered what he’d just learned about me, but he composed himself and hurried away, disappearing into the crowd of dancers without another word. I was more concerned by the fact I was now alone with my father, and I couldn’t help but

feel betrayed by Wes for leaving me with Matthew. I let out a sigh and stepped into Matthew's waiting arms, unable to relax as he started to guide me around the dance floor.

We danced in silence for several minutes. He held me at a distance, and it seemed that neither one of us could relax. It didn't help that there seemed to be a slightly pained expression on Matthew's face whenever he looked at me. I found myself wondering if maybe he disproved of the dress I wore.

"Is there something wrong?" I finally asked him. "You keep looking at me strangely."

"No, there's nothing wrong. I'm sorry, you just remind me very much of my sister tonight. You look a lot like her. I hadn't noticed until now."

"I have an aunt?"

"Yes, but..." His voice trailed off before he took a deep breath. "I'm afraid she died a few years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Thank you," he said, bowing his head. "She would have loved to meet you. Especially tonight. An event like this was more her scene than mine."

We both fell silent again, and it was hard not to feel a little sympathy for my father. I couldn't imagine what it was like to lose a sibling, and I wondered if they were close. Given the way he'd been looking at me, I got the feeling that he missed my aunt terribly. I didn't know what to say. I wanted to know more about my aunt, but I was still brimming with anger toward him after learning how he'd treated my mom.

"I tried to call you several times this week," Matthew said. "To let you know I was planning to come tonight."

"Oh, that's why you were calling."

"Yes."

"I just assumed it was your butler on the line."

Matthew stiffened, but his expression didn't change. If there was one thing he appeared to be good at, it was



maintaining an air of composure. I, on the other hand, felt ruffled by his sudden appearance. I hated that he'd taken me by surprise tonight, and I wished I'd answered his calls this week so I could have told him not to come. I didn't want to see him, let alone in such a public place. And I was only putting up with him now because I didn't want to cause a scene.

"I know you're still angry with me," Matthew said.

I huffed and looked away. Would I ever not be angry with him?

"But I hoped that if I came here tonight you might let me explain."

I shook my head. "Why do you think I'd listen to you now? I finally managed to get my mother to open up about what happened between you two. And if you thought I was angry before, it's nothing compared to how I feel now."

"Just give me five minutes," he said. "I know what your mother has told you doesn't look great on my behalf, but she didn't know the full story until very recently."

His expression was drawn, and his eyes were pleading with me to give him a chance.

"You have until the end of this dance," I said. It felt like a much more generous offer than he deserved, but my mom had told me there were parts of the story only he could tell. Perhaps it was worth a listen.

"Fair enough." He drew in a deep breath. "I guess I'll get right to it. The truth is, I didn't know you existed."

I stilled in Matthew's arms as his words pummeled into me. The admission felt like a punch to the gut, and it was the last thing I expected to come out of his mouth. I felt breathless and confused. I didn't know how to voice a response.

"I only found out about you a couple of months ago," he continued. "And since the moment I discovered I had a daughter, I've been doing everything in my power to be a part of your life."

“That can’t be true.” I refused to believe him. “Look, if I’d known you were going to lie to me...” I went to step from his grasp, but he held on a little tighter.

“It’s the truth, Isobel,” he said. “Please, you gave me until the end of the song. I just need another minute.”

“Okay.” I was struck by how different he looked, so vulnerable and open, as his eyes pleaded with me to listen to him. “Go on, but your time is running out.”

He slowly started to guide me around the dance floor once more as he continued. “Candice never told me she was pregnant. She sent a letter explaining the situation, but I never received it. From what I can gather, my parents intercepted the letter. I’m not sure what they were thinking, but I guess they were hoping, if they hid the truth from me, the whole situation would go away. And it did. Until my father died and I found your mother’s letter in his safe. It was seventeen years too late though.”

I was speechless, and my mind raced as I compared my father’s story with the one Mom had told me. There was one thing that didn’t quite add up. “What about the note and the check my mom received from you in the mail?”

Matthew frowned slightly. “Your mother told me about that when I first reached out to her,” he said. “It was the first I’d heard of it, and it didn’t come from me. My parents must have sent it, hoping she was just looking for money.”

“Well, she wasn’t,” I said. “She tore it up.”

“That doesn’t surprise me at all.” Matthew let out a long sigh. “I don’t know why your mother didn’t come and speak to me. Why she didn’t call me. But I don’t blame her for what happened. All I know is that I’m certain our lives would have been completely different if that one piece of paper had made it into my hands. I promise you that.”

The song had come to an end, and we stopped dancing as everyone around us applauded the orchestra. Matthew and I stood like statues though, staring at each other.

“That’s all I can really say in that one dance,” he finished. “But I hope that you’ll give me another chance to talk about this. And I hope that one day we’ll have an opportunity to dance together again.”

He slowly released his grasp on me before he turned and walked away. I felt numb after listening to Matthew’s explanation, and I was somewhat grateful he’d left rather than waited for a response. I didn’t know how to process what he’d told me.

My grandparents had kept me a secret from my father and tried to silence my mom with money. It seemed impossible to believe, and yet I felt like Matthew was telling the truth. I was starting to understand this world of wealth and power, and his story fit right in with everything else I’d heard while at Weybridge.

Fingers brushed against my arm, and I looked up to find Noah staring down at me. His face had been a mask earlier when I’d seem him arrive with Veronica, but now he was showing me a gentle smile. “You look a little lost out here,” he said.

I let out a laugh, immediately feeling more relaxed now that he was with me. “I always feel a little lost on a dance floor.”

“Can I steal a dance with you?” he asked.

“I don’t think it’s considered stealing if I’m already yours.”

He grinned and swept me up in his arms. I felt so small with Noah wrapped around me, and every inch of my body buzzed from the contact. I wanted to get caught up in the moment with him, but my conversation with Matthew was still rolling around in my head.

“Is everything okay?”

I looked up and found Noah watching me with a look of concern. I’d been waiting for him all night, but now all I could think about was my father. I needed to shelve everything I’d just learned and try to digest it later, at a time when I could

properly process it all. For now, I just wanted to enjoy the ball with Noah.

I pushed Matthew from my mind and smiled back at Noah. “Yeah, everything’s great.” And it was because we were together. “I’m surprised I managed to tear you away from your date so early in the night. Shouldn’t you still be with Veronica?”

“I’m right where I’m supposed to be,” he said. “I agreed to come here with her, but if I recall correctly, I promised you all the dances.”

“You did.”

“And when I saw you alone on the dance floor, I knew I had to whisk you away before someone else did,” he continued. “You look gorgeous tonight. I’m the envy of every guy in here right now.”

My cheeks warmed as I shook my head. “You’re just saying that.”

“Am I? Because none of them can take their eyes off of you.”

I swallowed nervously and glanced around us. He was right. People were looking our way, but it was far more likely they were interested in Noah rather than me.

“See?” he prompted.

I had to laugh. “You always like to be right, don’t you?”

“It’s not a matter of liking to be right; it’s knowing I’m right.”

I rolled my eyes. “And what if all those people looking at us are doing so because of you? You did arrive at the ball with a different date, after all. That’s good gossip.”

“Well, we know how much they like gossip. But if they’re looking at me instead of you, they’re idiots.” He reached up and cupped my neck with his hands, tracing his thumbs lightly over the skin as he looked into my eyes. “Because you’re the only one I see.”

He lowered his lips to mine and chastely brushed them with a kiss. It might have been brief, but it made my pulse race. Was I ever going to get used to how my body reacted to Noah?

“I’m glad I promised you all my dances,” Noah said as he lowered his hands to a more appropriate dancing position. “Because now that I have you in my arms, I’m not sure I’ll be able to let you go.”

“Well, luckily, you don’t have to.” I felt the same way. It had hurt to see him arriving with Veronica tonight. But now that part of the night was over and I had him in my arms, I didn’t want to let go of him either.

We continued dancing for several more songs. I usually hated the dance floor, but I didn’t feel nearly so clumsy when I was swaying in Noah’s strong arms. I probably wouldn’t have complained if we’d stayed on the dance floor all night, but eventually the principal halted the orchestra to welcome everyone to the ball.

He had just started to address the crowd when Noah grabbed my hand. “Let’s go get some fresh air.” There was a sense of urgency in his voice, and he glanced past me as he started to pull me from the room. I looked over my shoulder to see what had caught his attention and saw an older man watching us, a deep frown denting his lined face. The way he was looking at me made my stomach dip with anxiety.

Noah tugged on my hand, and I lost sight of the man in the crowd. I’d only caught a glimpse of him, but it was enough to leave me curious. It felt like Noah was running away from him.

“Is everything okay?” I asked as he led me outside to the courtyard in front of Esher Hall. With everyone inside now, the night was quiet and we were completely alone. I was hoping he’d explain why that man had spooked him, but Noah just smiled lightly.

“That speech is the same every year.” He shrugged. “It goes on forever. I might fall asleep if I have to listen to it

again. Besides, I'd much rather spend my time hanging out with you. We can go back inside once the music starts again."

I didn't think he was lying, but he wasn't telling the whole truth either.

Noah lifted his eyebrows. "You're sad to miss the speech?"

"No, it's just that..." My voice trailed off as the playful look in Noah's eyes disappeared. His attention was on the entrance to the ballroom. I turned as the man who'd been watching us walked through the doors, following us from the building.

He was tall and broad for a guy his age, and he walked as if the world might crumble beneath his every prideful step. He held himself in a way that radiated power and with the kind of confident authority that I imagined instilled both fear and respect in those who crossed his path.

When his eyes landed on us, he marched toward us. "Noah, what is the meaning of this?"

Noah gripped my hand a little tighter.

"Grandfather, I didn't realize you were coming tonight."

"I can see that."

Noah cleared his throat and tried to smile, but it didn't meet his eyes. "But I'm glad you are here. This is Isobel. The girl I was telling you about. Isobel, this is my grandfather, William Hastings."

Now that the man was standing right before us, I could see the resemblance between the two of them. Noah had his grandfather's firm jaw and green eyes, but it was the way the old man managed to dismiss me with one sharp look that I thought was their greatest similarity. I'd seen Noah give that same look to other people countless times.

I swallowed and tried to give him a warm smile I didn't feel. "It's nice to meet you, sir."

Noah's grandfather barely glanced my way before he returned his focus to Noah. "I don't give a damn who this girl is. Where's Veronica?"

“She’s inside. I came with her as you requested,” Noah said, his voice sounding smaller than usual. “But I wanted to be with Isobel.”

“Apparently, I’m going to have to spell things out to you a little more clearly in future. You’re supposed to be ensuring the Cordeaux girl has a nice evening. What do you imagine her parents will think if they see you sneaking off into the shadows with the help?”

“*Grandfather!*”

I guessed that meant William knew where I came from. Noah sounded far more outraged than I felt. I was no longer ashamed of my past, but I didn’t particularly want to hang around while William Hastings continued to look down his nose at me.

I gently let go of Noah’s hand. “I should go so you can talk with your grandfather,” I murmured.

“You don’t have to leave,” Noah replied.

But I was already taking steps away. There was no way I wanted to get caught between these two. I’d already had more than my fair share of family drama tonight.

“Isobel, there you are.” I turned to see my father walking from the ballroom. “I have to leave and was looking for you to —” He stopped suddenly when he caught sight of Noah’s grandfather, and he seemed to push his shoulders back as he came to stand at my side.

“William,” my father said in greeting.

“Matthew?” William’s expression darkened. “What are you doing here?”

The tension between the two of them was palpable, and it wasn’t hard to work out they not only knew each other but they also weren’t on friendly terms. I shot Noah a confused look, but he appeared just as lost as I was.

Matthew rested a hand on my shoulder. “My daughter attends Weybridge Academy.”

“Your daughter...” William looked at me properly for the first time, and his gaze turned my veins to ice. He quickly spun to face Noah. “You’re telling me that you’ve been dating a *LaFleur*?”

Noah’s skin seemed to pale, and his expression shifted from confusion to shock as his eyes darted in my direction. “He’s your father?” He took a step back from me. “Matthew LaFleur is your father?”

I slowly nodded, but I was completely lost as to why that seemed to be a problem. I didn’t get a chance to ask because William Hastings kept talking, his voice quaking with emotion.

“*That family...*” he hissed at Noah. “I will not have you associating with them.”

“I-I didn’t know,” Noah faltered, his eyes darting between me, Matthew, and his grandfather as though he was looking for someone, anyone, to help him understand.

“I don’t care,” his grandfather snapped back. “Your relationship with this girl ends now.”

The man’s words sent a jolt of fear straight to my heart. He wanted Noah to end things with me? Surely, I’d misheard.

“Noah, he can’t be serious.” I reached out to him, but Noah recoiled and refused to meet my gaze.

“Believe me, girl, I am deadly serious.” William Hastings’ eyes sparked with anger as he glared at me. His whole body was tense, and his fists were clenched at his sides. I could practically feel his disdain radiating from him.

“Come, Noah. We’re leaving.” William snapped his fingers and started back toward the ballroom.

“Wait...” Noah started to speak but paused when his grandfather stopped and turned.

“Noah,” he snarled. “I said we’re leaving.”

Noah seemed frozen in place, watching as his grandfather ordered him to follow. His face was still covered in confusion,



disbelief and pain, but slowly the anguish seemed to fade, his shoulders sagged in apparent defeat, and he started to nod.

“Okay,” Noah murmured. “Just give me a minute.”

My heart sank at Noah’s response, but William looked satisfied and gave his grandson a brief nod, folding his arms as he waited near the large ballroom doors.

My father cleared his throat, pulling his attention from Noah to look at me. “Isobel, I did warn you,” he said.

“But why?” My voice broke as I spoke. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m afraid it just cannot work.” Matthew slowly shook his head, and there was a hint of sympathy in his eyes. “I’m sorry, but I think this might be the one thing William Hastings and I agree upon.”

I was stunned into silence. Was I the only person who didn’t know what he was talking about? Noah certainly did. His shoulders seemed to slump even further at my father’s words. His head was low, his eyes fixed on the ground, as though he was trying to hide himself from what was happening.

Matthew rested a hand on my shoulder. “This is for the best.”

I shrugged him off and glared at him. “I don’t really care what you think is best for me.”

“Isobel...”

“Weren’t you leaving?”

Matthew hesitated. He looked like he didn’t feel comfortable walking away, but my expression was firm, leaving him no choice. Matthew and Noah’s grandfather might not want us to be together, but this wasn’t up to them. This wasn’t their decision.

“Please, just go,” I said.

Slowly, Matthew released a breath. “Okay, I’ll let you two talk.” He still didn’t seem certain about leaving me with Noah,

but he turned and walked back to the ballroom. Thankfully, he didn't loiter by the open door like Noah's grandfather who was still watching from a distance. I might not have been happy with Matthew right now, but at least he was willing to afford Noah and I some privacy.

I turned my focus to Noah. The silence that stretched between us felt cold. I was so confused by what had just happened, and the fact Noah still refused to look directly at me only worried me more. His gaze remained on the floor, and I knew he was trying to think, but I didn't want him processing all this without talking to me. Not when I was so thoroughly in the dark.

"Noah, I don't understand. Why do your grandfather and my father want us to end things? You're not going to listen to them, are you?"

"I'm sorry, Isobel," he whispered, still unable to meet my gaze. "This is just how it has to be."

"But, why? Noah, if you could just explain..."

His grandfather cleared his throat in the distance, an obvious indication he wanted us to hurry up. I tried to ignore the old man as best I could, but it was almost impossible to pretend he wasn't there when I could feel his lethal scowl tracing across my skin.

Noah glanced at his grandfather briefly and his shoulders squared as their eyes met. For a moment I thought he might be about to tell his grandfather to go to hell, but then he took a deep breath and turned his hard gaze upon me.

"Explain?" His eyes flashed with anger. "I think you're the one that owes an explanation. Why did you keep this a secret from me?"

I shook my head, taken aback by his outburst. "I wasn't trying to keep anything from you."

"Really? How come you never spoke about your father with me? I asked you who it was that warned you to stay away from me, and you wouldn't say. It was him, wasn't it?"

I opened and closed my mouth several times as I tried to figure out how to respond. I'd spent so long worrying about what Noah and my friends would think when they learned about my life back in Rapid Bay, but I never deliberately tried to hide the truth about my father. Now it appeared to Noah as though I'd lied about both. Even if that was the case, I still couldn't understand why he was so angry with me. His grandfather and my father were the one's trying to break us up, but all his frustration suddenly seemed directed at me. I looked toward the ballroom and saw William Hastings still glaring down at us.

"You can't honestly expect me to believe you were oblivious to the feud between our families," Noah continued, his voice growing louder.

"Feud? What feud? Noah, I don't even know what you're talking about. Yes, Matthew warned me about you, but I just assumed it was because you had a bad reputation with girls. I didn't know about any of this!"

He folded his arms across his chest. "Don't play dumb with me. So, why'd you do it? Why'd you lure me in? Was it just a sick joke? Or was your family trying to ruin mine more than it already has?"

"That's bullshit, and you know it. I didn't try to lure you in, and I wasn't trying to ruin you. I had no idea there was some tension between your family and my father."

"*Some* tension?" Noah scoffed as though my comment was utterly ridiculous. "That's the understatement of the century."

I ignored him and continued. "I thought you trusted me."

"If we could trust each other, you would have told me who you really are."

"You know who I really am," I said. "You've met my mom. You've been to my home. *That's* who I am."

"And yet, the one thing you kept from me is the one thing about you that means we can never be together."

His words almost struck my legs out from under me. We could never be together? It didn't sound possible. It was clear

Noah must have reasons to dislike Matthew, but I couldn't understand why it mattered so much to him that I was his daughter. I hadn't done anything wrong. "This is all because of my father? Noah, I barely know that man."

"But he *is* your father."

"Yes, we've established that." Now I was the one growing angry. "And I've only met him twice before tonight. I told you I didn't know him growing up. Matthew LaFleur was just a name to me until a month ago. You have to believe me."

As Noah stared at me, I thought I could see the anger briefly dissipating from his eyes, like he was realizing I was telling the truth and the fight was draining from him. I thought that might mean we were reaching a turning point, but the feeling didn't last long. From the look on his face, I could tell that it didn't matter what I said. As far as Noah was concerned, we were over. He hadn't moved a muscle, and yet I could see he was drawing away from me.

"Noah..."

He flinched as he heard his name. "It doesn't matter," he said. "It doesn't matter that you didn't know. It doesn't change the fact we can't be together."

"But why?"

Anger flared across Noah's face once more and he took two powerful steps forward so he was standing right in front of me, towering over me, his green eyes staring straight into mine. "Because your family is the reason the Hastings empire is in tatters," he growled. "The reason my father's legacy is hanging by a thread, and the reason my grandfather and I must do all that we can to save it. My family has lost everything, and it is all because of your father."

My heart started racing. I knew I only had moments to convince him to reconsider, just seconds to make him realize none of this was my fault, that I was nothing like my father. But how could I argue with someone who had already made up their mind? His eyes were empty now, and I could see he

was shutting down on me—distancing himself in a way there was no coming back from.

He turned toward the ballroom, and my stomach dropped with the movement. He was really breaking up with me.

“Noah, please, don’t do this. You said we had the power to choose our own fate. You promised our differences wouldn’t tear us apart.”

He turned his head just slightly, but he kept his eyes from meeting mine. “Like I said, Isobel. This is just how it has to be.” Without another word, he walked across the courtyard toward the ballroom doors, where his grandfather was waiting. William Hastings nodded at his grandson, a stern but satisfied look on his face, and then led him back inside the building, leaving me alone with nothing but the cold night’s empty embrace and tearstained cheeks.

I stood there, shaking as I watched Noah leave. Each step he took was like a dagger straight to my chest. Even after he was gone, I couldn’t seem to move, and I stood in the deep shadows of the courtyard slowly turning numb from the cold that chilled my bones and seeped into my heart. I had no idea how long I stood there. I didn’t really care.

“Isobel?”

I heard a voice in the distance and the crunch of gravel as someone ran up behind me.

“Isobel!”

Strong hands grasped my shoulders, and I slowly peered up into Wes’s gentle eyes. I must have looked far more wrecked than I felt because he immediately pulled me into his arms.

“What’s wrong?” he murmured.

I shook my head, unable to respond. I couldn’t seem to form the words to explain that Noah and I were over. Every time I opened my mouth to try, my brain turned to mush. I’d trusted Noah with my heart, and all he’d done was tear it to shreds.

Wes pulled out of our hug and looked me in the eyes. “Do you want to get out of here?”

“Yes.” I managed to croak the one word.

He pulled his jacket off and laid it over my shoulders as he led me away from the ballroom. I was grateful he didn’t ask any questions. I wasn’t even sure what I would say.

I’d known Noah and I were too different.

I’d predicted things with him would only end in pain.

I’d hoped that perhaps the risk was worth it.

But there was nothing sweet about having your heart destroyed when the shattered pieces left behind were too broken to put together again.

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Isobel & Noah’s story continues in Book 2

[Sweet Temptation](#)

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexandra Moody is an Australian author who writes romance novels for young adults. She lives in Adelaide with her husband, son and their naughty dog. When she's not busy writing, you'll find her reading or spending time with her family. She loves to travel, is addicted to caffeine and has a love/hate relationship with the gym. She can often be found on [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#).

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*For more information:*

[www.alexandramoody.com](http://www.alexandramoody.com)

[info@alexandramoody.com](mailto:info@alexandramoody.com)

