

# We'll Meet Again



KELSEY PAINTER

*We'll Meet Again*

KELSEY PAINTER



We'll Meet Again by Kelsey Painter

Copyright © 2023 by Kelsey Painter

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed are not intended to represent any real persons.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Cover by Melody Jeffries

*To Christy*

*Soccer does not have cheerleaders, but this author certainly does. Without your unwavering support and enthusiasm, Billie and Ethan might never have made it to the page. I love you.*

## *Author's Note*

As is the case with most fiction, this is not a completely accurate depiction of the operations of a Premier League football club. However, I have done my best to pour my love of football into this work, and I hope that comes through. While real clubs are referenced, I am not trying to depict any actual athletes, managers, staff members, etc. working in the Premier League.

This book contains discussions of addiction, assault, death, and terminal illness. It is not intended for readers under the age of 18, as it also includes scenes of explicit sex.

## *Prologue*

*June 4, 1944*

*Upottery Airfield, England*

*Dear Maggie,*

*I can't say much, but we're stuck for a while due to the weather. Can't jump in rain and fog, can we? Anyway, I'm glad for it. I'd have hated to set off without getting word to you. And telling you just once more that I love you. Those months in Aldbourne have been the greatest joy of my life. I'm now armed not only with my rifle, but with the memories of you and our time together. The way your eyes squint when you laugh, your hair flying loose when we danced, and all those sweet, sweet kisses. I declare, you could bring a man to his knees with your kisses. I'm sure you felt mine buckle more than once. But if I keep writing about that, I'll never stop.*

*They're showing us a film to keep us busy. Mr. Lucky, it's called. The picture's got Cary Grant in it. You told me once*

*how you like him, but we never did see a picture together, did we? That's a shame. As swell of a dancer as I am, I'm an even better movie date. I hope I can show that to you one day.*

*Another thing I've been thinking about as far as our future. When I make it back, I want to marry you. I know it's not proper for me to propose with a letter, but as we get ready to face the enemy, my only regret is not making you my wife. So when I get back (I won't say "if") tell me you'll marry me.*

*I promise I'll take care of you all my life. How could I not? I love you so much, it's almost hard to believe there was ever a time we were strangers.*

*With love,*

*Your Henry*



## *Chapter 1*

“You ready?”

Ethan turned his head at his grandmother’s voice to see her primping herself in the mirror. She adjusted her once-naturally blonde curls into just the right position behind her ears before she pulled out a lipstick from her purse and swiped it on. Then she closed the visor and met his eyes. Eyes he had inherited from her - deep green and round. Her expectant expression made his nerves jump about ten levels higher than they were before.

“I think so,” he told her, and cut his truck’s rumbling engine.

He looked back out the windshield at the dark parking garage that was a perfect reflection of his mood. A family of four made their way slowly across the traffic lane. The father had one daughter seated on top of the rolling suitcase, with the other daughter strapped to his chest via a baby bjorn. The mother was struggling to carry the remaining bags while balancing an iced coffee and stuffing her cell phone into her

coat pocket. He might have laughed if his stomach wasn't all in knots.

"You remember your mama's funeral?" his grandmother asked, returning his attention to her. Leave it to Betty to speak about her own daughter's death with the nonchalance most people used to discuss the weather.

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Do you remember what I told you?" she pressed, but didn't give him time to answer before she continued. "I told you I'd hold your hand the whole time. And I'll do that now if it'll make you feel better."

True to her word, she offered her hand to him - cocktail rings, red nail polish, and all. He hesitated to take it.

"It was a little more acceptable to hold your hand when I was ten," he reminded her. "I don't reckon it'll do now I'm a grown man."

She wiggled her fingers and smirked. "I won't ask again, Ethan."

Smiling, he surrendered and placed his palm atop hers. She wrapped her fingers around it, put her free hand on top, and gave it a maternal pat. Suddenly, the walk through Charlotte-Douglas didn't seem so daunting.

"How'd you know I'm scared?"

"Well, you were so quiet the whole way here," she said. "When you're excited about something, it's getting you to hush that's the trouble."

A fresh smile threatened the corners of his lips. “This’ll be the farthest from...home I’ve ever been.”

He wanted to say the farthest from *you*, but held his tongue. To admit he was nervous about leaving her behind would earn him a sharp reprimand and a lecture about the state of her health. He knew Betty was strong - she’d raised a daughter on her own, and then a grandson. And at the age of sixty-four, she was still teaching aerobics classes three days a week. Heck, the woman still went on dates more weekends than not, which was more than Ethan could say for himself.

“It’s only a six hour time difference,” she said.

“It’s still a whole other country,” he countered.

“Where they speak the same language!” she insisted. “Well, for the most part. I have got to have subtitles on to watch *Love Actually*, but maybe in person it’s easier to understand.”

He chuckled. “I don’t think it’s gonna be like *Love Actually*.”

“It’s London, isn’t it?”

“Well, yeah, but -”

“Then why shouldn’t it be?” she cut across him. “Besides, you’re overdue for meeting a nice girl. You haven’t hardly been on a date since all that ugliness with Sarah.”

He bit back a sigh. Betty had resented his ex-girlfriend from the moment they met, claiming that Sarah was too controlling, and tried to make Ethan into someone he wasn’t. Which, now that he had unpacked that relationship in therapy, he had to

agree with. Sarah was a refined young woman who came from old money in Charleston, and Ethan's humble upbringing was clearly a point of shame for her. No matter how hard he tried to fit into her country club, high society world, it was never enough for her. He just wished she had told him that *before* cheating on him to spare him some hurt. Even two years later, it stung a little.

“Now, come on,” Betty said. “You’ve got a plane to catch, and we can’t be wasting any more time being silly.”

She released his hand and opened the passenger side door. Ethan rolled his eyes. That was Betty - her sympathy only went so far. Then, it was time to cowboy up and carry on. Following her lead, he stepped into the crisp January air, shuddering against the cold as he came around to the bed of his truck for his luggage. Just one carry on and one checked bag. When he had them secure, he faced Betty again.

“You’ll look after ol’ Lula Mae now, won’t you?” he asked.

He gave his 1971 Chevy Cheyenne a good smack on the tailgate, and yet another fleck of pale yellow paint chipped off. To most, it was a bona-fide piece of shit. But to Ethan, Lula Mae was so much more than that. She was the first car he had ever bought for himself, off a farmer about two hours outside of Charlotte, who had been keeping her on blocks. Ethan cleaned her up, replaced her engine, and put the appropriate tires on. He had considered getting Lula Mae shipped to London, but thought better of it. He was already going to stand

out enough. And he didn't want to risk anything happening to her.

“Don't be a goose, Ethan, it's only a car,” Betty said.

“I can't believe my ears!” he said with a gasp, his hand jumping to his chest. “And from my own blood!”

It was her turn to roll her eyes. “I'll take care of it, gracious alive.”

He chuckled again, and the more he did so - and interacted with Betty as if it were any other day - the more his nerves began to ebb away. He tossed her the keys. Like a cat, she snatched them out of the air before tucking them into her purse. They started toward the elevator that would take them to the entrance for departures, but Ethan stole one last look at his darling Lula Mae and said a silent goodbye to her.

He had already checked in for his flight, so he went straight to the desk to check his bag when they got inside. He thanked the girl behind the computer - Misty - by name. Her cheeks flushed a little, but she only nodded in return and called the next person up. Ethan watched his bag disappear on the conveyor belt, thinking it looked rather lonely all by itself. But then again, so was he. Or he would be once he reached security, and Betty would no longer be permitted to accompany him.

The security line was also short, given the lack of a crowd. Ethan and his grandmother came to a slow stop. She stood in front of him and looked him over, standing on her toes to run

an affectionate hand through his blond locks. Another trait he'd gotten from her, though his was more wavy than curly.

"Shoulda had this cut before you left," she muttered, half to herself.

"I'll find a good barber in London," he replied.

"Of course you will," she said, but she had already moved on to making sure the drawstrings of his hoodie were even. "Is this gonna be warm enough? It's colder than a witch's tit over there."

He snorted, even though he was long accustomed to hearing his grandmother talk that way. His mirth was cut short, though, when he realized how much he was going to miss it.

"My coat is packed," he assured her. "I'll be alright until I get to my new place."

The TSA agent began barking out instructions to take laptops and phones out, temporarily claiming Ethan's attention. When he met Betty's gaze again, he was surprised to find it so watery. She tried to blink back the tears - a move that turned out to be counterproductive, as it caused them to spill out down her cheek.

"Hey, now," he said gently, reaching out to wipe them away with his thumb.

"I'm sorry," she choked out. "I thought I was gonna be fine, but I just got to thinking about when you were a little boy and how much you've grown and just...how proud I am of you."

His chest got suffocatingly tight and his brain briefly short circuited. This had to be serious. First of all, Betty hardly ever cried. In fact, he had not seen her shed a tear since she heard that her daughter had died. Even at the funeral, she was the epitome of composure. Secondly, she rarely - if ever - just told people outright how she felt about them. He was certain this was the first time she had said the words "I'm proud of you" out loud.

"Listen to me crying and carrying on like a fool," she sniffled, drawing herself up to her full height and effectively killing the moment. "It's damn undignified."

That forced a laugh from his chest. "I'm gonna miss you too."

She smiled shakily at that. "Call me as soon as you land in New York." She paused for a beat. "And again when you get to London."

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

She yanked him into a hug. He couldn't help but bury his face in her neck, like he did when he was little, and she comforted him after a loss or when his mother did one of her disappearing acts. The same perfume she had been wearing all his life - some rosy scent he never learned the name of - percolated through him as he committed it to memory. With a deep breath, she pulled away.

"You be good now," she said. "Mind your manners over there. And always do your best. You show them English boys how it's done."

“Yes, ma’am,” he repeated. “I love you, Grandma.”

“I love you too, son,” she said quietly. “Go on, now. You’ve waited your whole life for this, don’t blow it by missing your flight.”

Time stretched around them like a rubber band, his heart keeping his feet in place, but an already signed contract pulling him toward his new obligation. The pressure broke, and he stepped away from her, but not before he bent to give her one last peck on the cheek. He didn’t really have the words for what he wanted to say, anyway. How did one thank a person who had given him every opportunity? How could anyone convey what it meant to him to have someone, just one person in his life, care enough about him to push him? And how did he express what it meant to him that she was here now, seeing him off for a dream he had barely dared to hope for?

So he said nothing, he just stepped into the line, separating his things as if it were his job - he’d been in enough airports now to have it down to a science - and stole a few more glances toward her. She remained rooted to the spot, as he imagined she would until she could no longer see him. And when he was through the scanner, she offered something like a wave, though he could have sworn she was wiping her cheeks off again. With a smile, he blew her a kiss. But finally, he had to turn and walk forward. After all, he was leaving this behind. His whole world and everything he knew, for the chance of a lifetime.



At the gate, he put his carry on down at his feet, used it as a stool, and reclined into one of the chairs, letting out a long breath. His eyes fell closed, but he quickly opened them again. The image of Betty standing there alone was one he couldn't bear. If he thought about that any more, he would surely forsake his contract, abandon all hope of the Premier League, and stay right where he was. He kept his eyes fixed on the ceiling, counting the speckles on the tile above him. A tug on his pant leg made him sit up.

He blinked in surprise. The girl from the parking lot - the one riding on the suitcase - stood before him, her hands folded bashfully in front of her, wringing a light blue shirt between them, as she rocked back and forth. She glanced back at her father, who gave her an enthusiastic thumbs up, and then looked at Ethan again. Her dimples were plum cute, especially with the mismatched pink and orange bows in her dark curls.

“Ethan Knight?” she asked quietly.

“Yes, ma'am,” he answered, offering an encouraging smile.

The girl held up the shirt, which was actually a Charlotte FC jersey, and her blush turned the shade of a red delicious apple. “Would you sign this for me please?”

“Sure, I will!” he assured her.

He reached into his pocket for a Sharpie, and found one, pulling it out while reaching for the jersey. He always carried markers and pens in places he might be recognized for occasions such as these. She relinquished the jersey to him, and it was warm from her sweaty palms. He turned it over to

the back, so he could sign the number. There, he saw his own name, and the number nine printed. It was a fish hook in his gut - a reminder of what he was leaving.

He cleared his throat. "What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Emma," she told him.

"Emma, how pretty," he said as he carefully balanced the number, which was the part he would sign, on his thigh. The cap came off the Sharpie with a soft *pop*.

"Thank you," she replied, and hesitated before adding sheepishly, "I play soccer too."

He brightened. "You do?"

She nodded.

"You play for your school?" he asked.

She nodded again.

"That's awesome!" he praised.

Her gaze dropped to the floor as she grinned. "Do you think girls play as good as boys?"

"Oh, heck yeah," he said, finishing his autograph with a flourish. "Lots of girls play even better than boys."

"The boys at my school don't think so," she said, and her face fell.

That was a sentiment he was familiar with, though he was sad to say it. Growing up in athletics, misogyny was everywhere, even when he was as young as Emma, who couldn't be older than six or so. But Ethan, having been raised

by his mother and grandmother, never carried any such disdain for women. Not even Sarah. He handed Emma's jersey back to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. She met his gaze.

"Don't you worry about those boys," he told her. "Let your talent speak for itself, and they won't have anything left to say."

That mantra had stuck with him from the time he was a scrawny six-year-old, and he'd just been pulled away from slugging it out with some kid on the other team who had started with surprisingly personal trash talk. Ethan's coach, Larry Lowe, said those exact words, and Ethan never forgot them. Or his coach.

She nodded, a determined smirk coming over her. "I will."

"Atta girl," he said.

He held up his hand for a high-five, which she happily gave him. All that shyness melted away and she crawled up in the empty seat to his left. He asked about her team (they were called the Chargers), how long she had been playing (just one year so far), and what she was going to New York for (a family visit, since they weren't able to make it for Christmas). After a solid half hour of bending Ethan's ear, her father came to collect her, and he shook Ethan's hand, and gave his own name, which was Scott.

"Thanks for indulging her," he joked.

"Not at all," Ethan insisted. "This stuff is the best part of the job."

Scott smiled softly. “We’re really gonna miss you here, man. I know the Premier League is a huge step up, but...” he trailed off.

Ethan knew exactly what he meant. “Yeah, it was a tough call. Carolina has always been home, so...anyway, it’s a big opportunity for me.”

“Yeah, I mean, it’s every young player’s dream, right?” Scott said. “But at least you got to play with the hometown team their first season, that was really cool.”

Melancholy tugged at Ethan’s heart. He was playing for Atlanta when he heard Charlotte was getting a team, and he’d immediately called his agent to work out how to get him home. It put him back within a day trip of his grandmother, which was top priority. But after the season, he got the call with the new offer, and he hardly felt he could say no to the opportunity. Not to mention the salary.

“What’s the team again?” Scott asked, drawing Ethan from his thoughts. “The one you’re going to?”

“It’s called, uh, Stanmore,” Ethan told him. “Stanmore Football Club.”

## Chapter 2

“Fuck!”

Sharp pain surged all the way up Billie’s leg from her now throbbing pinky toe. She winced as she drew her foot up to cradle it, wishing she could kick that stupid box - and all the ones stacked on top of it - but feared it would only do more damage. Cursing again, she hopped around the corner to the kitchen. Her flatmate was humming to herself over the eggs she had going in the griddle, unaware of the grouchy presence behind her thanks to her large, noise-blocking headphones.

“Tessa!” Billie called.

Tessa began to sing - a rather off-key rendition of “Fly Me to the Moon” - instead of responding.

“Tessa!” Billie tried again, to no avail.

“Let me see what spring is like on Jupiter and -”

Billie hobbled irritably over and snatched the headphones off her flatmate’s head. “*Tessa!*”

Tessa gave a start, one hand smacking against her chest and the other jumping to smooth her dirty blonde braids. Her already round brown eyes went wide like an owl's. "Ach, Billie, you can't just be scaring people like that first thing in the morning, have you no manners!"

"I'd have a lot more consideration for someone who didn't leave their shit in the hall for me to stub my toe on," Billie snapped.

"Oh, not the wee toe," Tessa said, her expression softening with sympathy. "I am sorry, Billie, but it's only a few more weeks."

"Months, you mean," Billie corrected. "Your vintage exhibition isn't until May."

"Well, you can't very well have it in the dead of winter, no one would turn up," Tessa said, as if it were obvious.

Billie refrained from voicing her doubt that anyone would come to a vintage exhibition regardless. Who would want to rummage through a bunch of dead people's forgotten items? And yet, Tessa spent most of her free time with other people as passionate about antiques as she was. The girl had spent months collecting massive boxes from estate sales and flea markets, the spoils of which were now crowding their flat. Billie felt like the place was about to burst at the seams.

"Isn't there anywhere else you can keep all this?" she asked.

"Like where?" Tessa flopped her eggs onto a plate.

“There are whole businesses designed for storage,” Billie said. “I shouldn’t feel like I’m spelunking every time I leave my bedroom.”

“Aye, well, I’ll look into it,” Tessa agreed. “Coffee?”

“Only if it’s as Irish as you are,” Billie groaned.

She sank into her usual chair at the breakfast nook. Now that the pain in her toe had dulled, she was feeling the rest of her body, from her pounding head to her aching heart.

“I heard Greg when he left,” Tessa said. “Slammed the door like a right heathen.”

“It got bad,” Billie said, heaving a sigh. “Awful, actually.”

“What happened?” Tessa asked.

“He told me he loved me,” Billie confessed. She ran a hand through the mess of dark hair that she hadn’t even bothered to brush through and squeezed her eyes shut as if that might rid her mind of the devastated look on Greg’s face.

“What’s so bad about that?”

“It started a fight,” Billie said, picking needlessly at her nails. “Because I told him I wasn’t ready to say it back.” Tessa placed a cup of coffee in front of Billie. “That’s what I get for being honest, I suppose.”

“You must have said more than that,” Tessa said, and took her seat on the other side of the table, starting in on her eggs.

“Well, yeah,” Billie admitted. “He said he thought eight months was sufficient time to fall in love, and I told him that I

disagree. For at least the first six months, everyone is on their best behavior. How can I know that I love him if I've known him less than a year, right?"

Tessa swallowed the bite of toast in her mouth. "Billie, that's fucking mad."

"It is not!" Billie insisted. "People rush into things much too quickly these days. The word love has basically lost all its meaning."

"Billie -"

"I'm not being defensive!" she cut across, having heard this sort of response countless times. *You're too guarded, or you must take a chance, or there's no love without risking hurt.* She'd heard it all before. From her parents and her sister, even on occasion from Tessa. "People are entirely too reckless with their own hearts."

"How would you know if you've never really had your heart broken?" Tessa pointed out.

Billie dropped her gaze to her coffee at that. True, she had never been in a relationship long enough to call any separations "heartbreaking," but she had seen her friends and family go through it. And - though she never admitted this, not even to Tessa - she had dreams about it. Since she was a girl, she was haunted by terrifyingly real dreams where she received a letter that caused an earth-shattering ache inside her chest and she collapsed to the ground. Over whom was always a mystery, but the feeling was so heavy, she always woke with a lump the size of a goose egg in her throat.



A fraction of that kind of pain was behind Greg's eyes last night, right before it shifted into rage...which was probably why he said what he said.

"He told me..." she paused and swallowed a sip of coffee to push down the lingering hurt in her voice. "He told me that love is wasted on me."

Tessa's coffee cup froze before it reached her mouth. She set it back down. "Can you blame him?"

Billie's mouth fell open. "Tessa! That's the cruelest thing anyone's ever said to me, and you're agreeing with him?"

"Not entirely!" Tessa insisted. "I mean, *my* love isn't wasted on you, neither is your family's, but every time a fella tries with you, he ends up sorry he ever did! Greg had the best go of it, and you're more upset about what he said to you than you are about losing him."

"Tessa!"

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Billie, love, but you're the emotionally unavailable fuck boy of your own life," Tessa said firmly.

Billie folded her arms across her chest. "That is just not true."

Tessa raised a challenging eyebrow. "Did you cry?"

"What?"

"When Greg left, did you cry?"

"God, no," Billie scoffed.

“Case and point,” Tessa said. “Perhaps I should be the lawyer instead of you.”

“Legal assistant,” Billie reminded her bitterly. “I am not, myself, an attorney.”

Tessa sighed. “I am sorry he said that to you. But maybe...it was what you needed to hear.”

“Or maybe,” Billie said. “Men are just idiots who don’t know what they’re talking about.”

Tessa shook her head and returned to her breakfast. Billie tapped her fingers on the side of her coffee cup, fuming. She ran through a mental list of every guy she’d been on more than one date with and recalled how it ended. Always, when things started to get serious. When they asked her for exclusivity or expressed some deeper affection. But Billie didn’t feel that way in return. Your heart was the one thing that was truly yours, and it could be catastrophic when broken. So how could people just give them away so freely? Like emotional swingers? She didn’t understand it.

“Speaking of idiot men,” Billie said, checking her watch. “I’ve got to get ready for work. Thanks for the coffee and sympathy, Tess - limited as it was.”

Tessa offered a mock salute. “At your service.”

Rolling her eyes, Billie left the kitchen and started back toward her bedroom, trying not to envy Tessa’s remote job too deeply. Writing for an online magazine would never be in Billie’s wheelhouse. Tessa was a creative, and her real

passions lay in poetry and vintage collecting, but those things didn't pay the bills, so journalism was a financial choice. Billie, on the other hand, didn't have a creative bone in her body, so pushing paper for the legal department of a football club made the most sense.

The law was straightforward, for the most part. It was all laid out in black and white, and interpretations were argued in an orderly fashion. It was logical, procedural, and relatively consistent. Which was why Billie loved it. Of course, there wasn't much litigation in contractual law, which was what she dealt with on a daily basis at the club, but the principles were much the same. She went to work, followed the rules, and filed things accordingly. It was busier this time of year with the January transfer window open, but Billie was grateful for that now. The last thing she wanted was to sit at her desk and stew about Greg.

She had already picked out her outfit - a tweed mini skirt with a matching blazer, a crisp button-down, and thigh high boots to go over her tights to keep her warm. She popped into the bathroom to twist her hair into her usual claw clip and swipe some mascara onto her lashes. She opened the same pink lipstick she had used for years and blotted it onto her lips. Her coat hung on an antique coat rack by the door (another one of Tessa's finds that she couldn't bear to part with), but before she went to grab it, she fetched a fresh cup of coffee in a travel mug. With transfers to deal with, she needed to be alert, and since she wasn't running on sleep today, caffeine would have to suffice.

The wind bit at her cheeks, but luckily, it wasn't too far of a walk from her flat to The Hive, home of the Stanmore FC Wasps. She didn't care all that much for football, honestly. She just watched it with her dad or Tessa sometimes. But the club paid well, and it was a step in the right direction to have a job working in a legal department. She had not gotten the courage to apply to law school yet, but when she did, she would already have a leg up on her resume when she inevitably went somewhere else. Something she needed to remind herself as she braced to deal with her boss.

Warm air greeted her when she came through the staff entrance door. Billie zipped past the front office to the stairs, her eyes fixed on her phone, checking her emails before she reached her desk to avoid any surprises. Her notebook and pens were poised and ready for the morning rundown meeting. After shrugging off her coat, she swept them into her arms and headed for the conference room. As usual, she was the first person there.

She took a sip of coffee in an attempt to get warm. The rest of the legal team began to slowly trickle in, exchanging polite greetings with each other and offering cordial nods to Billie. Being the only woman in the room, she was used to such treatment. No handshakes or laughter or nicknames for her. But she preferred it that way.

Finally, Tony arrived.

“Good morning,” he said brusquely.

If you looked up “hot shot attorney” in the dictionary, there would be a photo of Tony Corelli’s face. He was every bit the archetype from his slicked back hair to his overpriced neckties and the Rolex that Billie frequently wondered why he bothered with considering she handled the entirety of his schedule. His perfectly tailored suits showed off his excellent form; people often mistook him for one of the players. His face certainly didn’t help that, with his clean, angular jawline and fiery brown eyes.

But appearance was not the only thing he had going for him. He could walk the walk. Not only did he study law at University of Cambridge, but he had rapidly established himself as one of the most cutthroat contract attorneys in the UK. Maybe even in Europe. His first job right out of law school was with Liverpool FC, where he learned the football business from the top. Since then, he had worked for Manchester United, Chelsea, and Arsenal. He ended up at Stanmore when his university friend, Ray Rogers, bought the club after its promotion back into the Premier League, and they were determined to reach the top four and get a shot at Champions League if they could.

“Alright, lots to do today,” Tony began. “We’ve got our signing from Charlotte FC arriving -” he stopped to check his watch. “Any fucking second now, really. And a Zoom meeting with Real Madrid to swipe that Brazilian winger out from under them. Billie, what time is that?”

“It’s at ten this morning,” she answered quickly. “But I really don’t think -”

“Didn’t ask what you think, Billie, just for the time of the meeting,” he cut across her.

She closed her mouth with a frown. If he didn’t want a warning that there was no chance of getting that winger, then so be it. But the emails she had gotten from Real Madrid, and the winger himself, gave every indication this was a battle they would lose.

“We’ve also got the re-signed contracts to process, so -”

“They’re already done,” Billie interjected. “I processed all the returning players’ contracts yesterday.”

*Before my boyfriend - ex-boyfriend now - said that awful thing to me, she thought. Before I drank an entire bottle of wine to put myself to sleep after it. Before I realized I’m an emotionally unavailable fuckboy and I have no idea what to do about it.*

Tony blinked. “Oh?”

“Yes.”

He put a hand on his hip and raised an eyebrow. “Yes, what?”

She plastered a pinched smile onto her face. “Yes, *sir*.”

“Very good,” he said. “You do good work around here, Billie, let’s not tarnish it with disrespect.”

Swallowing down the scathing reply laced with profanity that formed in her head, she picked up her pen to take notes of the meeting. As if her day couldn’t get any worse. In the last

twelve hours, she'd been dumped, called on the carpet by her roommate, and now humiliated in front of half the people she worked for. A fleeting image passed in her mind of her launching herself to her feet, telling Tony off, and storming out in a great, dramatic performance, but she quickly dismissed it.

“Excuse me?”

A Southern drawl and knock at the door had all eyes turned away from Tony. There in the doorway stood a blond, rather tired, yet quite good-looking young man. He shifted his weight nervously from his left foot to his right, glancing at the floor when the attention was suddenly on him. The backpack slung over one of his broad shoulders and the rolling suitcase at his side indicated he'd just come from the airport. Not to mention the hoodie, joggers, and trainers he donned. The way he rubbed the back of his neck with a bashful humility might have been charming if not for one thing - Billie couldn't stand him.

Logically, she understood her feelings were unfounded. She was certain she had never met this man before, despite the sudden intense lurch in her stomach that told her he must have done something to upset her. She took a deep breath to try and calm herself. It was probably her frustrations with other men that were making her react this way to a newcomer. She just needed to get a grip.

“Ah, Ethan Knight!” Tony said with the warmth he reserved only for the talent. “Welcome, please come in.” Ethan stepped

timidly into the conference room. “Have you just come from the airport?”

Billie bit back a scoff at the question.

“Uh, yes, sir -”

“Please, call me Tony.”

Billie could have put her head through the table.

“If you say so,” Ethan said with a shrug. “I was trying to find the way to my new place, but my phone’s dead, and I don’t have the right kind of charger yet. I needed to sign my papers anyway, so I had the driver take me here.”

“You did the right thing,” Tony said. He gestured to the chair beside him, directly opposite Billie. “Please, have a seat.”

Ethan wheeled his luggage all the way around the table, catching it on the back of Billie’s chair. She couldn’t contain the huff that escaped her, as the motion only added to her simmering ire.

“Oh, geez, I’m so sorry, miss,” he said. “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” she said curtly, resolutely ignoring his gaze and turning her shoulder to him.

He cleared his throat and continued on around. When he finally settled into the chair, he cast another apologetic look her way, but she dodged that too.

Tony looked at her. “Billie, his contract?”

“It’s in your briefcase,” she answered. “*Sir.*”



The differentiation was lost on him. He dug into his briefcase, found the file, and let it fall onto the table with a thud. “We’ll get a photo op tomorrow when you start training, but this is the real thing.”

“I’m familiar with how it goes,” Ethan replied.

Billie finally looked at his - remarkably handsome - face. She didn’t know if it was just her, or if she had just detected the slightest hint of sarcasm from this guy.

“Oh, good, so they somewhat know what they’re doing in MLS, do they?” Tony attempted a joke.

It didn’t seem to land, as Ethan’s expression remained neutral, and he spoke kindly. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Her eyes bounced between him and Tony like a tennis match. The paralegals were watching with similar interest.

“Well,” Tony cleared his throat. “Just...you’ll find the Premier League is a standard unlike any other in the world.”

“Have you ever worked for another league?” Ethan asked, seemingly genuine.

“I have not.”

“Ah, that explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“Why you think it’s the best,” Ethan said, his tone even and polite. Billie wondered if anything sounded confrontational with that accent. “You haven’t experienced anything else.”

She blinked, a smirk threatening the corners of her mouth. Then she shook her head, refusing to be charmed by this guy. She barely so much as spoke to the athletes anymore, and she wasn't about to start up again now. She picked up her phone and began looking through the calendar for the week while Tony moved right along and guided him on what to sign. When that was said and done, Ethan and Tony shook hands like proper bros.

“Anything else we can do for you, mate?” Tony asked.

“Well, I just need a map or something to figure out how to get to my new place,” Ethan told him. “I’ve never been to London before, and until my phone gets some juice in it, it ain’t gonna be much use to me.”

“I’ll do even better,” Tony said. “We’ll have someone escort you there personally.”

“I don’t wanna put nobody out or any-”

“Not to worry, we’ll use someone nonessential,” Tony insisted. “Billie, for instance.”

Billie snapped her head up. “What?”

Tony ignored her. “Give her the address, and she’ll see you get there safely.”

“What?” she repeated, sterner this time.

“Right, see he gets anything he needs,” Tony went on, finally glancing her way. “And I’ll see you sometime after the meeting with Real Madrid.”

Billie sucked in her bottom lip to keep back the annoyed sigh threatening to escape. Narrowing her eyes at Ethan, she got to her feet. It wasn't his fault, but she hated him for it anyway. He could put on airs about being a sweet hometown boy all he wanted. She knew better. They were all the same in this industry. And if he wasn't already, he would be coaxed by the Tonys of this world into the same arrogance, the same entitlement, the same boorishness they all eventually adopted.

“Let's go, then,” she said, practically through gritted teeth.

She marched out of the room without even bothering to check he was following.

## *Chapter 3*

Ethan scrambled to gather his things, and then had to jog to catch up with Billie. Something about her was throwing him off. Sure, she was beautiful, with that perfect, oval shaped face, stunning blue eyes, and the most kissable pink lips he'd ever seen, but that wasn't what was tripping him up. The second he laid eyes on her, he felt like he'd met her before. It was impossible, of course, since he had never been to London, but recognition was there. Deep in his gut. Like when you're watching a movie and you swear you've seen one of the actors in another film, but you just can't place it.

He also couldn't figure out what he had done to upset her. But it stood to reason that her frustration didn't lie with him at all, rather with her boss and his dismissive treatment of her. Ethan was already wishing he had said something more, but he understood that could've made it worse. After all, he was new here. He didn't want to get off on the wrong foot with anyone.

She stopped so suddenly, he nearly collided with her. Reflexes built from hours of football training thankfully

prevented that. The desk must have been hers, as she was stuffing her notebook into the side drawer before slamming it shut, the pens clattering around inside. Then she snatched the coat off the back of the chair, shoved her arms through the sleeves, and whipped around to face him again.

Their eyes met. Properly. For the first time. He tried to think of anyone with more perfect blue eyes than this woman in front of him, but couldn't. They were so light, they were almost gray. And frigid like a glacier. They might have been even prettier if it weren't for the seething rage that danced behind the irises. And yet, he kind of admired it. He could have stared at them all day.

He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, we didn't get a chance to be introduced in there," he said, and held out his hand. "I'm Ethan Knight, it's nice to meet you."

Those eyes bounced between his hand and his face, but ultimately, she decided to shake his hand. When they touched, something stirred in his stomach. He felt the absurd desire to apologize for something more, even if he didn't know what. And when she released his hand, he hesitated to let go. But where was that coming from? He'd never felt so drawn to a stranger.

"Billie Axton," she replied coolly, noticeably not returning the niceties. "Where is it you live then?"

He was so distracted by the curve of her lips, it took him a moment to respond.

“Oh, uh, yeah,” he sputtered, and dug into his pocket. He’d written his new address down just in case he didn’t have his phone, and the folded piece of paper was right where he’d left it. He held it out to her and she snatched it from him to open it up. “Here it is. I’m afraid I’m not real familiar with -”

“No fucking way,” she muttered.

“What?” he asked, heart fluttering with panic.

“This is -” She stopped short and pinched the bridge of her nose. “This is the building across from mine.”

“Oh, well, howdy, neighbor,” he said.

His attempt to lighten the mood was met with a frosty look. But how was it possible that someone so angry looked so pretty at the same time? God, he needed to get a grip.

“Why would you move here?” she demanded.

Given she had just been witness to his reason for relocation, he was a little stumped by the question. “To...play in the Premier Lea-”

“No, this neighborhood,” she clarified, and waved the piece of paper in front of him for emphasis. “Footballers don’t live here, they make too much money.”

He certainly was not going to unpack the impostor syndrome he had worked on with his therapist to this woman he didn’t know. Even if he felt like he did. He fully recognized he could afford a much nicer flat than what he’d chosen - his real estate agent frequently pointed it out - but he never felt

comfortable in those places. Even his condo back in Charlotte, a modest two bedroom, felt like way too much.

“I like to live within my means,” he said with a shrug. “It’s just me, after all, I don’t need a big ol’ mansion with a bunch of empty rooms.”

She blinked a couple times, her frown beginning to fade, but she quickly reinstated it. “Right. Let’s go.”

She turned on her heel and strode away, leaving the smell of her hair in her wake. Where had he smelled that before? It was floral and sweet, with a hint of...vanilla, maybe? But he didn’t usually notice the way people smelled (besides Betty, of course). How could he remember something he had never experienced? Shaking his head to clear it, he followed her again.

He shuddered against the chilly air outside, but it was nothing compared to the cold shoulder coming from Billie. A dozen questions popped into his head that he wanted to ask her about herself, but he held them in. She was clearly not in the mood; her demeanor was like a stray cat’s. She would have to come to him. If he came on too strong, she would run from him and find somewhere else to get her metaphorical canned tuna. Not that he saw himself as some sort of nourishment, but he did want to know her better.

Still in silence, they reached his building, and they got his keys from the leasing office. The girl behind the desk - Emily, her name tag read - welcomed him warmly, not only to his new home, but to England as well.

“We’re quite excited to have you,” she said. “We’ve needed a strong striker for ages.”

“I hope I don’t let you down, Emily,” he said. “Appreciate you.”

She blinked, but smiled as she handed him the keys. “You’re welcome.”

Throughout the whole interaction, Billie was glowering at her phone, typing what must have been a novel to someone considering how long her thumbs were flitting back and forth across the screen. Remarkably, she did not need prompting to follow him to the elevator - or lift, as they called it here, Ethan reminded himself - but she still was not looking at him as they rode up. When she finished her message, she locked her phone and stuffed it into her pocket.

“Urgent message?” he asked, unable to help himself.

“Just a quick note to my flatmate,” she said shortly. “It doesn’t concern you.”

He closed his mouth, forgetting his question about her roommate. He was only on the third floor, so the elevator opened shortly after. Billie strode out first. Again, her scent hit him and triggered that familiarity he knew was completely unfounded. His brain conjured up images of her wrapped up in his arms, but they were vague. Like trying to remember a dream.

He followed her down the hall to his door. When he opened it, he was pleased to find everything his realtor had described -



a flood of natural light from the large window facing the street, hardwood floors that gleamed with fresh polish, and brand new furniture in the small sitting room. The kitchen, just off of the sitting room, was the only indication of the flat's true age, since all the appliances were leftover from the nineties. And Ethan was certain that was the latest upgrade. It would more than do for him though.

Billie wrinkled her nose. "This is it?"

Ethan shrugged. "Beats the double wide I grew up in."

"What's a...double wide?" she wondered, brow furrowing.

"Y'all ain't got trailer parks over here?" he teased.

"What, like - caravans?" she asked. "For camping?"

"Sometimes they are," he explained, holding back a chuckle. "Mine wasn't really mobile though, it was on bricks."

Her brows retreated back up her forehead. "Oh."

Silence fell between them again as Ethan retrieved his phone charger and plugged it into the nearest outlet on the kitchen counter.

"Wish I could offer you something to eat or drink," he said. "My grandmother'd have my hide for neglecting my manners."

With the surprise worn off, Billie shifted back to being terse. "I need to go anyway." She tapped the toe of her boot on the floor. "Lots to do this time of year."

“I’ll get settled in alright on my own,” he said. “Thanks for walking me here.”

She gave a dismissive “hmp” in return. “Well, good luck this season.”

“Thank you, Billie,” he replied.

She swallowed and held his gaze for a long moment. His eyes searched hers for what she wanted to say, and she did seem to have something on the tip of her tongue from the way she shifted her weight between her feet. Then she cut her gaze from his, turned on her heel, and swept out of the room. The door closed, but that scent lingered. He inhaled deeply, and more fleeting images came to him, but nothing he could make sense of. His phone chimed as it turned back on, so he shook his head and picked it up, preparing to call Betty and let her know he had arrived.



Billie shook off the odd tingling on her skin from looking at Ethan. That last moment had her shaken, and regretting several of the disparaging things she’d written about him in her text to Tessa. What sort of guy - and a footballer, at that - just casually mentioned growing up in poverty? A trailer park, seriously? And mentioning his grandmother like that - who did

he think he was? Her indignation returned. Clearly, he wanted her to drop her guard, but she was not going to let that happen.

Her phone dinged with a reply from Tessa. Billie had issued a full-on rant about this guy putting on airs of humility and kindness, and all Tessa asked was, *Is he at least a looker?* Billie rolled her eyes and returned her phone to her pocket.

She had to admit, Ethan was attractive. Even just off a plane, his hair was perfectly disheveled. And the sweats did nothing to hide his impeccable form. She had noticed it even back in the office, but in closer proximity, she had a much better view. He was tall, too.

She shook her head. *No way*, she thought. It didn't matter that he was good looking. He was just another footballer, and one who had been the catalyst for that complete humiliation in front of her colleagues by Tony. And for that, she could not forgive him. Even if she was still thinking about the softness of his smile hours later at her desk.

That evening, she relayed the whole sordid story to Tessa over a dinner of pizza and Cabernet. Naturally, they were also in their pajamas.

“Honestly,” Billie said after swallowing a savory bit of cheese and pepperoni. “It was like walking around with a cartoon character. The accent, the weird politeness - like this schtick he wouldn't drop.”

“Maybe it's not a schtick then,” Tessa said. “Sounds to me like your real problem is with Tony.”

“Oh, believe me, I’ve got my issues with Tony,” Billie said. “But Ethan Knight is just as much of a prick as the rest of them, mark my words.”

“You don’t even know him,” Tessa reminded her. “You dated one footballer, and made your mind up about the lot of them.”

Billie took a sip of wine to avoid addressing that right away. True, she had briefly dated one of Stanmore’s other forwards, Peter O’Riley, and he cheated on her. Eight times. In the three weeks they were together. His excuse had been, “that’s just how footballers are, we’re famous, women love us,” and she took him at his word. She had not dated a footballer since. Guys like Greg, an accountant, were much safer.

“They may be ridiculously fit,” she said. “But they are not boyfriend material.”

Tessa rolled her eyes before getting up to top off her wine glass. As she did, she looked out the window at the building across the street. “We should have him ‘round for dinner sometime.”

Billie nearly choked on her bite of pizza. “Have you heard nothing I just said?”

“Aye, I’ve heard it all,” Tessa said. “And it sounds like the poor thing could use a friend. He’s over there all alone in a whole new place.”

“No one put a gun to his head,” Billie scoffed. “He chose this.”

She got to her feet and joined her flatmate at the window, looking out. Just then, the curtain of Ethan's apartment moved back and he appeared in the window. Billie gave a squeak of surprise and ducked, nearly spilling her wine in the process, but Tessa didn't move. To Billie's horror, she actually waved. Exasperated, Billie tugged her flatmate down to her sub-window sill level.

"Watch it, Bills, if I spill this, I'm turning you in for alcohol abuse," Tessa said.

Billie smirked in spite of herself. "Don't wave at him, he'll think we're friendly."

"Speak for yourself, I'm very friendly," Tessa shot back. She shifted her weight to sit cross-legged on the floor. She took a sip of wine. "Besides, I still don't think Ethan's your problem."

"I know, I know," Billie said, rolling her eyes. "You want me to deal with Tony."

"Of course I do," Tessa said. "You've never let a man talk down to you in your whole life, why should he be any different?"

Billie sighed, sinking to the floor and tucking her legs beneath her. Tessa made a good point, but the difference seemed obvious. Tony was Billie's boss. If she fronted off with him, she could lose her job. And he already didn't seem to think of her as a necessary part of the team, so he likely would have no qualms about firing her if she made a fuss.

“You deserve to feel valued at work,” Tessa said, as if reading Billie’s mind. “And you deserve to make your feelings known. Just because he’s your boss doesn’t mean he gets to treat you like shit.”

Billie smiled. Tessa was right. Annoyed as she was by Ethan’s arrival - and that nagging feeling that she knew him from somewhere, but she refused to admit that, even to Tessa - her true battle was with Tony. Ethan would take to the pitch tomorrow, and she wouldn’t have to worry about him again. But Tony, she dealt with on a daily basis, and she needed to assert herself. If she wanted his respect, she was going to have to earn it, and that meant not allowing him to bulldoze over her like he had been. She took a deep breath.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll speak to him first thing tomorrow.”

“Atta girl!” Tessa praised. “Cheers to that!”

They clinked glasses and drank. Tessa went to get another slice of pizza. Billie remained on the floor a moment, going over in her head the things she wanted to say to Tony. Obviously, she couldn’t just say he made her feel like shit - it would need to be more professional than that. Words like “undervalued” and “primary job duties” came to mind, especially since nowhere in the original job description did it say that she would have to show new players around.

When she stood up, she stole a glance over to Ethan’s building. He was still standing in his window, but that wasn’t what made Billie spit out the wine she had sipped. It was that he was shirtless. If she thought he looked fit in his sweatshirt,

that was nothing compared to when it was off. Even from across the street, she could see his broad shoulders, large biceps, and six pack abs. He waved to her in that bashful way of his, which only made him all the more endearing. With a frown, she yanked the curtains shut.

“So,” she said to Tessa. “What film are we watching tonight?”

Tessa’s current project was a series of articles about feminism in classic film, so once a week, they watched a movie from before 1960 and Tessa would analyze it and review it through a period-accurate lens first, and then from a modern viewpoint.

“*Spellbound* from 1945,” Tessa said, wiggling her fingers the way people did around campfires in the movies. “Directed by Alfred Hitchcock and starring the lovely Ingrid Bergman.” She looked over Billie’s flushed face. “You saw Ethan with his shirt off, didn’t you?”

“Don’t,” Billie said firmly, and took her seat on the couch. “We’re not going to talk about it.”

“He’s quite the ride, isn’t he?” Tessa teased.

“Tess!” Billie groaned.

“I’m just saying!”

Rolling her eyes, Billie switched on the TV.

## *Chapter 4*

Billie took a deep breath. All she had to do was knock. Raise her fist and rap her knuckles against the wood. But the door loomed before her like the gates of Mordor. Something sinister was behind it, and she was merely a small creature, hardly capable of changing the world around her. Frodo Baggins had, but Hobbits were fiction. This was her real life.

Didn't that make it all the more imperative that she act?

She knocked.

"Come in!" called an impatient voice from the other side.

"Tony," she said timidly as she stepped into the office. Remembering herself, she squared her shoulders. "Tony, could I speak to you a moment?"

He didn't look up from his laptop, his fingers clattering over the keys. "If you must."

She cleared her throat and approached his desk. Behind it was a large window overlooking the pitch, and she could see the team lining up for their warm ups while a kit man laid



some cones out for drills. Billie straightened up even further, remembering Tessa's words to her. *You've never let a man talk down to you in your whole life, why should he be any different?* Drawing on her courage, Billie spoke up.

"I felt... undervalued yesterday when you had me take Ethan Knight to his flat," she began. "And when you referred to me as 'nonessential.' Playing tour guide isn't exactly my job description. I do hope my work is sufficiently -"

"Let me stop you there, Billie," he cut her off, holding up a dismissive finger while his eyes continued to scan the screen.

"Alright," she replied, swallowing her nerves. Had she crossed a line already?

"You are my assistant," he said, and only then did he finally stop typing and meet her gaze. "Your *job* is to do as I tell you. A job which - may I remind you - I only gave you as a favor to your sister for our time together in law school, not because you're qualified to work for a football club." He closed his laptop and narrowed his eyes at her, his lips drawing into a tight line. "And my job certainly does not entail catering to your stupid fucking feelings, is that clear?"

She blinked back the sudden sting in her eyes as she nodded. A dozen responses should have formed in her mind, but it was totally blank. She was so thrown off by what he said, like he'd punched her, knocked her to the floor, and then kicked her in the ribs for good measure. Three harsh, debilitating blows in a matter of seconds. And how could she reply? There was no reasoning with a man who had just laid

out in exact terms that he did not care in the slightest about how his words affected her.

“Is that all?” he asked.

Her chest grew tight and she desperately wished the floor would open up and swallow her whole. “Yes, sir.”

“Then get back to work,” he said shortly.

She didn't need telling twice. Turning on her heel, she swept out of the office, a lump the size of a boulder forming in her throat. She couldn't return to her desk if she was going to cry, there was no privacy there. So instead, she slipped down the back stairwell, yanking open the door to the boot room. Unfortunately, she was not alone. The other kit boy was there, innocently doing his job and putting boots away. He froze when she entered, a look of confusion coming over his face. He looked at his watch, then glanced around as if checking he was where he was supposed to be. Her withering gaze made the poor kid recoil.

“Get out,” she said coolly.

“Alright,” he replied, and scurried out the door.

As soon as she heard it close, she clapped both hands over her mouth to stifle the sob that had been threatening to escape for the last five minutes. She went over the interaction with Tony again in her mind. Over and over, cursing herself for freezing up the way she had. Wishing she had been bolder, braver. But she was so shocked. He was always abrasive, but didn't that cross a line? Why hadn't she spoken up for herself?

Why did she obey when he dismissed her? She had just given him the upper hand without so much as a whimper of complaint.

A tear rolled down her cheek, and she wiped it away hastily. She tried to take a breath, but it stuttered in her chest. A few more tears leaked out, and she let those fall freely. She was alone, after all. And in the boot room no less. No one would be coming in here anytime -

*Click.*

The door swung open. Billie whirled around, preparing to dismiss the kit boy again, but stopped short when she found it was not the kit boy at all. It was Ethan, dressed for training except for his boots. He stood there with his pleasant face and his warm demeanor, instantly infuriating her all over again. She practically slapped away the wetness on her cheeks, refusing to allow him to see her so vulnerable. He glanced at the label on the door.

“No, I’m definitely in the right place,” he said. He shot her a questioning look. “They cleaning your office or something?”

“I was just...” she trailed off, racking her brain for a lie, but drawing a blank. “I needed some fresh air.”

“Not sure the boot room is the best place for that,” he said. “Smells like...well, dirty shoes.” He searched her face, and his brow furrowed. “You alright?”

“Fine,” she lied. “Just...allergies.”

“What’re you allergic to?”

“Shellfish,” she answered hollowly. And it wasn’t technically a lie.

“I see,” he said, his brows retreating back up his forehead. “They are a real problem this time of year.”

A hint of a smile passed over her mouth, but she quickly buried it. She would not allow him to charm her.

“You won’t find any of those critters in the boot room, though,” he went on. He paused for a beat. “We call ‘em cleats in the States. Don’t know why. Boots is a much nicer word. Cleats sounds like a disease or someth-”

“Is there something you want?” she said sharply. “I’d like to...deal with my allergies in peace.”

“I was actually looking for Craig,” he said.

“Who?”

“The kit boy.”

“Oh,” she said. “He just left.”

“Well, this does give me the opportunity to thank you again for showing me around yesterday,” he said. “I really do appreciate you taking the time.”

She blinked, unsure what his deal was. He was thanking her? She had been nothing short of horrid to him from the moment he stepped foot into the conference room. Not only was he thanking her, he appeared genuinely concerned that she was upset. He dug into the pocket of his jacket and retrieved

an honest-to-God handkerchief. Her eyes went wide as he handed it to her.

“Wh...what’s this?”

“You ain’t ever seen a handkerchief before?” he said.

“Who the hell carries them anymore?” she shot back. “This isn’t a bloody Jane Austen novel!”

“Would it be so bad if it was?” he said with a smile. “Just take it. I’ll be bad hurt if you don’t.”

Her eyes flickered between the gift and his face as she fought the urge to correct the grammar of a phrase like “bad hurt.” A fleeting concern that this was a prank crossed her mind as well, but his eyes were too earnest. And a rather lovely shade of green, she realized, now that she was really looking at them. Tentatively, she took the handkerchief, dabbing at her eyes and nose, which betrayed her lingering emotion.

“You’re being kind,” she said thickly. “And I don’t deserve it.”

“Everybody deserves kindness.”

“No, seriously, I’ve been so mean to you.”

“I’m sure you were just dealing with your own things,” he said with a shrug. “Like you are right now. And that’s, y’know, not my pig, not my farm, there’s no reason for me to take it personally.”

She met his gaze. “Doesn’t anything bother you?”

“Well, sure,” he said. “A beautiful woman in tears bothers me plenty.”

She felt like he'd just sucked the air from her lungs. He thought she was beautiful? When he was the one who looked like one of those Greek statues in the museums? Seriously, the man was an Adonis. And he was so nice... She stopped herself once more, remembering the frustration the last footballer brought her. She dropped her gaze to the floor and wiped at her nose with the handkerchief.

“What did you need Craig for?”

“Boots, actually,” he said. “They gave me the wrong size. Something got lost in translation, I guess, but these are no bigger n’ a minnow in a fishing pond.”

He held up the boots, and she had to admit they were comically small. They might have been a large children’s size, but they absolutely wouldn’t do for a grown man.

She chuckled. “Well, perhaps I can help you.”

“It’d be mighty kind of you,” he said.

Trying not to find that endearing, she helped him figure out his UK shoe size, and they found him a pair that would work for training. For a few minutes, at least, she forgot about Tony and her wounded ego. The bruise was there, but she would poke at it later.

“Thanks a lot,” he said, lacing up appropriately sized shoes. “Hopefully I’m not too late for my first day.”

“You’re the new star,” she reminded him. “They can wait for you.”

He shook his head. “Nah, a player is only as good as the people supporting him.” He paused for a beat. “Fat lotta good I’d be if I didn’t have a defense and midfielders that can get me to the goal in the first place.”

She sighed. “If only everyone was so appreciative.”

If she were to put it in football terms, Tony put the ball in the back of the net, but nine out of ten times, Billie delivered the cross that made it possible. After a grueling run of dodging tackles and turning out of danger.

Ethan’s eyes were fixed on her face. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Fine,” she assured him. “I will be, anyway.” She held the handkerchief back out to him. “Here, I’m finished.”

“You keep it,” he said, gently wrapping her fingers around it with his own. He put his hand on her shoulder, and she had to stop herself from closing her eyes to the warmth of his touch. “See you around, neighbor.”

With that, he was gone. Her shoulder and hand still tingled from the contact with his skin. She stifled the urge to call him back, having no real reason, she just wanted... What did she want? Her hand came to rest over where his had been, and she realized that his was as familiar as her own. But she hardly knew him. And she had no intention of getting to know him better, either. So what was this feeling? She held the

handkerchief to her chest and took a deep breath. *Time to get back to work*, she told herself.



Ethan strolled onto the pitch, flexing his hand to rid it of the feeling of Billie there. But she lingered, like the smell of smoke in the air after fireworks. His palm still felt warm despite the chill in the air, and he couldn't keep his mind off thoughts of her, even though he had to focus on practice. He shook his head slightly, jogging over to the team.

“Well, Ethan Knight, nice of you to join us,” joked the manager, Donny Warren.

Coach Warren was a jovial man, stocky in stature, but with a kind, round face. If his hair and beard were gray instead of black, he'd easily be mistaken for a beefy Santa Claus. Like many managers, he once played football - for Sunderland initially before moving on to Everton - but a devastating injury brought his career to a premature halt. He still walked with a limp, but he didn't let it slow him down. He even competed on *Strictly Come Dancing* one season and won (which Ethan had learned was the UK equivalent of *Dancing With the Stars*). And he spent most of the day on the pitch instead of in his office.



An amused murmur went through the team. One of the other forwards, a tall, auburn-haired breakout star, Peter O’Riley, stood up from his toe touch and met Ethan’s gaze.

“Well, if it isn’t the cowboy?” he said, an edge to his tone. His smile felt more like a sneer. “Still on American time, are you?”

“Sorry, guys,” Ethan said. “Had a mix up with my boots.”

“What?” A horrified Craig poked his head around Coach Warren. “Oh, God, I’m so sorry!”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Ethan said with a wave of his hand. “We found a replacement pair, and I’m ready to go.”

“We?” Coach Warren asked.

“Oh, yeah, the girl from legal, Billie Axton, helped me.”

“Careful with that one, mate,” Peter said with a cocky smirk. “Billie’s a crazy bitch.”

The guy to his right, Devon Scully, the third forward, snickered. Ethan frowned, immediately becoming defensive. He hoped this team didn’t have the wrong idea about how to build camaraderie. Putting women down was not Ethan’s style. And Billie? That girl who he’d just caught crying in the boot room? “Bitch” was not the word that came to his mind. But thankfully, the rest of the team seemed to be rolling their eyes.

“Might wanna mind your manners, O’Riley,” Ethan replied with a deceiving smile. “Where I’m from, people have been shot for less.”

Peter began to bristle, but before he could retort, another teammate spoke up.

“She wouldn’t’ve had to be a bitch if you’d kept your cock in your goddamn pants,” said the goalkeeper, Jordan Frawley, and a chorus of “Oooooooooohhhh” made its way through the group. Ethan blinked in surprise. Peter looked affronted.

Jordan was perfectly designed to be a goalkeeper, with the stature and demeanor of a grizzly bear. His dark hair, angular face, and scruffy beard added to the effect, not to mention his gravelly voice, complete with his Scottish accent. He was team captain, too, which demanded a certain level of respect from them. He certainly earned Ethan’s in that moment.

“Alright, that’s enough chat, lads,” Coach Warren said. “First team versus second team, let’s get lined up. Ethan, you’re first team.”

Ethan nodded, inwardly questioning why the manager didn’t feel the need to correct someone talking about a staff member that way as well. Shaking it off, he started to jog over with the rest of the guys, but Peter shouldered past him, making Ethan stumble and shoot his new teammate a questioning look.

“Just try to keep up, cowboy,” Peter said. He wasn’t joking around anymore.

As training went on, Ethan learned about the team. Jordan was undoubtedly the leader, his stony and serious nature keeping everyone focused. Peter and Devon were close, and communicated almost telepathically, which left Ethan

struggling to fit into their rhythm on the front line. Luckily, the midfielders accommodated.

The midfield was made up of Hector Rizo, Artem Antonenko, and Osahar Shadid. Hector was a bright, bubbly young talent, and signed with Stanmore just after his rookie year at Deportivo Cali, his home city in Colombia. Artem, a sweet, warm-hearted family man, started his career at Dynamo Kyiv, but began his Premier League journey with Manchester City before moving to Stanmore just a season ago. Osahar, youthful and passionate, was born and raised in Cairo, so he ended up at Al Ahly to begin his career, and had been with Stanmore since coming to Europe three years prior. With their help, Ethan was able to score twice on the second team.

The second team was unable to break through the defensive line or Jordan. That back line was solidly built with Kâmil Murat, a Turkish national, and Fernando Barros Vidal, a Brazilian, on the right, along with Israel Etefu Amare, an Ethiopian national, and Luka Bozanić, a Croatian, on the left. All four were strong, sturdy players with - Ethan quickly learned - wicked senses of humor. They were more like a wall than a line, knocking forwards to the ground with ease, but were quick to crack a joke and offer a smile as they helped them up.

They were all proof of the club's dedication to finding the best. And strangely, Ethan didn't feel completely out of place in their midst.

After training, Ethan let the hot water of the shower rinse away the sweat and grass, as well as warm his skin. Playing helped keep him warm enough in the January air, but his ears and the tip of his nose were beginning to feel chapped. The water pressure wasn't quite as good as the shower back in Charlotte, but it wasn't enough to complain about. The cold on the other hand, he inwardly cursed. While getting dressed, Hector and Luka approached him.

“Hey, man, we're all going out for some food and beers, would you like to join us?” Luka offered.

“Well, sure,” Ethan said, touched by being included. He had been so worried about being an outsider here, but so many of them were also from other places. They knew what it was like to feel like a fish out of water.

“I'm afraid there won't be any moonshine,” Peter interjected sarcastically as he slung his bag over one shoulder.

Ethan didn't acknowledge the jab. “I don't drink at all, actually, so that's fine by me.”

“Ignore him,” Hector said, leaning in close. “He's just... how do you say... a little bitch sometimes.”

“Hey, nobody's perfect,” Ethan said with a chuckle.

Hector grinned and clapped Ethan on the shoulder. Jordan offered to drive, which surprised Ethan a bit. Jordan didn't seem like the type to participate in the social stuff. And maybe he didn't, really, he just attended. Either way, Ethan was grateful.

As they pulled out of the parking lot in Jordan's Range Rover - a pristine vehicle that was alarmingly clean, especially after Jordan revealed he had owned it for two years - Ethan decided to ask the burning question on his mind.

"So... Peter dated Billie?"

Jordan turned into traffic. Ethan's initial reaction was to suck in a sharp breath, but he remembered it flowed the opposite way here and relaxed. He was going to have to get used to that.

"It was brief," Jordan explained. "He cheated on her a lot, and most of us were witnesses to it at least once."

"Well, what's his problem with me then?"

"That's got nothing to do with Billie," Jordan said. "I mean, she helped you find your boots, what the fuck's he got to be jealous about?"

"That's what I was thinking!" Ethan said. Though he couldn't say the same for himself. Peter had gotten to be with Billie - kiss her, hold her hand, talk over candlelight - and he had somehow managed to blow it. Ethan couldn't wrap his brain around that one.

"He's pissed at you because the guy whose position you took was one of his wee mates," Jordan went on. "But he was a shit striker, so the club got rid of him."

"Oh," Ethan said. "Well...I appreciate your candor."

"Anytime," Jordan replied, and they returned to stoic silence until they reached the restaurant.

When they walked in, there was a whiskey waiting for Jordan, and water for Ethan at the team's table. They toasted to his first day - all except Peter and Devon, who stewed over their beers and walked away to strike up a conversation with a couple girls at the bar.

“Do you like Ethiopian food, Ethan?” Israel asked.

“I've never had it before.”

“Oh, you're in for a treat!” Israel said, and rubbed his hands together with enthusiasm. “This is my cousin's place, and the food is fantastic.”

“I'm looking forward to it,” Ethan told him with a smile.

“Just be grateful it's the cousin and not Israel himself,” Kâmil joked. “That man could fuck up cereal if it were possible.”

Israel flipped Kâmil off from across the table while the guys laughed. Conversation and playful teasing flowed through the team about as well as they passed to one another on the pitch. They asked Ethan about America, where he'd played before, and how he felt about coming to the Premier League, but they didn't stay on the subject of football long. Especially once the food was served.

“Damn,” Hector praised, savoring his first bite. “Is your cousin single, bro?”

“She's married to her wife of ten years, you idiot,” Israel shot back, rolling his eyes.

Hector laughed, and shook his head, muttering in Spanish.

Osahar, also sticking to water, nudged Ethan. “You married, Ethan? Got a girlfriend or boyfriend or anything?”

“Afraid not,” Ethan shook his head. “Been single almost two years now. What about you guys?”

Most of the guys were single as well. Artem was married, with a baby on the way, which was why he was also not drinking - to be in solidarity with his wife, which Ethan found very sweet. Fernando lived with his longtime girlfriend, and was planning to propose soon. And Osahar was already engaged, getting married once the season was over. The rest were casually dating. A couple of them had already caught the eyes of the single women in the restaurant.

“You seemed quite...defensive of Billie today,” Kâmil pointed out. “You like her?”

“I don’t know enough about her, honestly,” Ethan replied. “I’d like to, though. She’s...”

“Pretty?” Fernando guessed.

“Beautiful?” Hector added. “Stunning?”

“Awe-inspiring?” Israel teased.

Ethan’s face flushed, mostly because they were right, he did think those things applied to Billie. But there was something more. “I dunno. Just got a feeling about her.”

“Had to be some serious feeling going on,” Hector joked, bouncing his eyebrows suggestively. “You took *way* too long to get your boots, bro.”

The guys all laughed and clapped Ethan playfully on the back.

“Nah, but seriously, Ethan,” Luka said after shushing everyone. “If you’re interested, you should go for it.”

“You think so?”

“Absolutely,” Artem interjected. “It was terrifying to ask Larysa out when I first met her, but I’m so happy I did. Now we’re a family, and in a few months, we’ll have our son. I wouldn’t have any of that if I didn’t take a chance.”

Ethan smiled. Then Israel nodded toward Jordan.

“What do you think, Captain?” Israel asked.

Jordan swallowed his sip of whiskey and looked hard at Ethan. “You’re a striker, Knight. Shoot your shot.”



## *Chapter 5*

Ethan sat straight up in bed. Beads of sweat rolled down the back of his neck and over his forehead, but most of his skin was already sticky with it. He took a deep breath to ease his pounding heart, but that didn't help a lick; it continued to race in his chest. He threw the covers off his legs, and the cool air provided some relief. Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to push the dream to the back of his mind. That was where the memory usually stayed anyway. But his mother's scream kept ringing in his ears. With a shake of his head, he got out of bed and padded out to his kitchen for some water. The dryness in his throat was the easiest thing to correct.

It was the worst day for this. He had his first match with Stanmore in a couple of hours. But of course that wretched nightmare came back to haunt him when he was least prepared for it. As he took a couple gulps of water, his free hand floated absentmindedly to the scar on his abdomen. It was such a small thing - slight discoloration, and a measly three inches wide - but he often felt it looked like a neon sign in Vegas.

None of his teammates asked about it, to his relief, but they all had their share of scars. Exchanging horror stories would take another level of friendship. They just weren't quite there yet. He wasn't sure he ever would be.

He checked his phone, which told him it was just past one in the morning. Not too late to call Betty, he reasoned. Unless she was heading out on one of her usual Friday night dates. Suddenly, the distance between them felt even greater than the Atlantic Ocean. He was a day ahead of her already.

“Hey, sweetheart!” she chirped after two rings. “What’s going on?”

His heart twisted at the sound. God, he missed her. He cleared his throat. “I’m doing okay, just needed to...”

“Ethan, honey, are you alright?” she asked, sterner now. “I know you’ve got a big game today, but that’s no reason to be up at -” she paused, and he could picture her checking her watch. Well, her second watch. She wore two now, one with her time, and one with Ethan’s. “Great balls of fire, Ethan! You better get in bed or you’ll be too weak to whip a gnat!”

He chuckled, and some of the edge of the dream wore off. “I will, I just...couldn’t sleep.”

“Bad dream?” she asked. With all that water and hours between them, she still clocked it faster than he thought.

“Yeah,” he admitted.

“Snowy woods or the scar?”

“Scar,” he told her. The snowy woods dream hadn’t bothered him in a while, which he preferred. At least he knew where the dream about his scar came from.

“Who’re y’all playing today?”

“Crystal Palace,” he said, grateful she’d changed the subject. She always did. It was the one tactic his therapist suggested of working through this that she was capable of. “It shouldn’t be too bad. Our guys are good.”

“Are they being nice to you?”

“Most of them, yeah. This one guy - our left winger - he’s not taking too kindly to me, but apparently he was close to the guy whose job I took, so...I guess I understand.”

“Well, I don’t!” she said indignantly. “What’s not to like about you?”

“You may be a bit biased, Grandma,” he said, laughing quietly.

“I’m being entirely objective,” she insisted. “Besides, it’s not like they took that first guy out behind the shed and shot him, they can still be friends.”

At that, he full on laughed. “I guess you’re right.”

“I’m always right,” she said. She paused for a beat. “Are you meeting...anyone else over there?”

He almost rolled his eyes, knowing what she was after. She wanted to know if he had met a girl. And he’d barely been in London a week! Part of him wanted to tell her about Billie, but

what exactly was there to tell? They had interacted a couple times, and he hadn't really seen her since. In fact, he got the distinct impression she was ignoring him. She always looked resolutely away from his building when she went to work. Probably because she was embarrassed about what he'd seen in the boot room, which he didn't care a thing about, but there was no way for her to know that. All he really had was that she was pretty, and she felt familiar somehow.

“Well...” he began, but trailed off again.

Betty gasped. “You *did!*”

“How'd you know?”

“Because if you didn't you'd've just said no, flat out!” she shot back. “Who is she? What's her name? How'd you meet her?”

He heaved a sigh. “Her name is Billie, she works in the legal department at the club, and we met when I went to sign my papers.”

“Have you asked her on a date yet?” she pressed.

“I haven't really had the chance,” he said. “I want to, but...”

“But what?”

“I dunno,” he said. “Have you ever met somebody and felt like you've met them before? Like you know them better than you really should?”

It sounded stupid the moment the words left his mouth, but Betty wouldn't judge. Well, not too harshly anyway. She had

never been much of a romantic the way Ethan was. She hummed thoughtfully on the other end of the line.

“No, I can’t say I have,” she said. “Sounds like fairy tale stuff to me.”

“Well, she’s prettier than any princess I ever saw,” he blurted.

“Listen to you,” she teased. “Talking so sweet.”

He flushed and looked at the floor. This wasn’t a subject he brought up very often to his grandmother. Mostly because there wasn’t usually anything to talk about. Since Sarah, he had been on three dates? Four, maybe? None of them went anywhere. This was different, though. Every time he was near Billie, he never wanted the moment to end. He hoped chance brought them together soon, at least long enough to ask for her phone number. Then maybe they could see each other on purpose.

“I don’t know much about her, but I haven’t been this interested in someone since... I dunno, ever?” he said.

“Well, you be good to her then.”

“Of course. You raised me to be a good man, and I try my best to be that.”

“You are that,” she insisted. “But you were born with a good heart, honey. And if this girl is lucky enough, she’ll get to see it too.”

He started to protest, but he heard the doorbell ring on her end. “You got a hot date tonight?”

“Oh, Ethan, this man is gorgeous,” she said dreamily. “We met at the beach while I was out for my lunchtime walk.”

“Today?” he asked.

“Well, of course, honey, I don’t believe in wasting time!”

“I’ll let you go, then,” he said, smiling. “Good luck.”

“You too, sweetheart,” she said, voice gentler. “I’ll talk to you after the game, alright?”

“You’ll be watching?”

“I always do.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too,” she replied. “Bye-bye, darling.”

She hung up. Thankfully, she had successfully shaken off the dream. The nightmare, really, and Ethan felt like he could return to bed. His eyelids were getting heavy again. But when he closed them, he had another dream. Nicer, but more vague than the nightmare. In it, he was in a field of golden yellow wildflowers, staring up at the blue sky. Billie lay beside him on the ground, her eyes finding his when she raised her chin. Something tore at his gut because he was leaving her. For what, he didn’t know, but it was breaking his heart. He woke more peacefully the second time, despite his alarm blaring, and he groaned. Now, he had to return to the real world, with only the cold and the match ahead of him.



“Billie, for God’s sake, just sit down and watch the match,” Tessa said.

“I would, Tessa, but that seriously interferes with my never thinking about Ethan Knight ever again,” Billie replied.

She had finally confessed everything to her flatmate. That odd feeling Ethan gave her, and that he’d caught her crying in the boot room over what Tony said. And that Ethan stopped by her desk twice this week just to “say hello,” so he claimed, which Billie didn’t know what to make of at all. Tessa was sympathetic, but thought that Billie was being ridiculous, and expressed that opinion bluntly. She had accentuated it by rolling her eyes and groaning.

“I don’t really care for football anyway,” Billie added. “It’s just a stupid game and everyone takes it much too seriously.”

“I’ll not have anyone talking that way under my roof,” Tessa said firmly, and flopped onto the couch cushion.

“*Our* roof,” Billie reminded her. “We both pay rent here, you know.”

She strode to the couch and took a seat. The match had not quite started yet, as a panel was exchanging predictions about

the outcome. According to them, Crystal Palace was favored to win. Billie frowned and folded her arms across her chest.

“How can they sit there and ramble on about this stuff? There’s no way to know what’s going to happen until everyone’s out there on the pitch.”

“Well, they base it on skill level, the club’s record, their formation, and all that shit,” Tessa said.

“I know that, but statistics and numbers aren’t really what football’s about,” Billie said. “Is it?”

Tessa shrugged. “Not entirely, but you wouldn’t tell a weather man he can’t really predict anything until the hurricane’s come and gone, would you?”

“Fair point,” Billie conceded. “Although footballers can probably do just as much damage.”

“Oh, you didn’t give two shits about O’Riley,” Tessa said. “Your pride was wounded there, not your heart.”

Billie stuck her tongue out, mostly to cover the sting of the truth in that, before returning her attention to the television.

“It’s the Premier League debut of Ethan Knight,” said the bleach blonde with bright red lipstick. “What do we think of him, gentlemen?”

Of course, the rest of the panel was entirely men. Dressed in nearly identical suits and ties, their graying hair combed neatly to the side, politely waiting for her to finish her question so that they could ignore her and talk amongst themselves, as usual. Billie rolled her eyes.



“I like Knight, he’s a strong talent,” the man directly to the right began. “But I just wonder if he’s prepared for the pace of the Premier League. It’s not like MLS, you know.”

“Agreed, John,” said the next one. “So often it’s the other way around. Premier players get old, they can’t quite keep up anymore, but aren’t ready to retire, so they move to America to finish their careers there. It’s just not the same quality of football.”

“Well, that’s not taking into account his World Cup performance,” argued the third. “He was brilliant in Qatar, and has played incredible football for the US since he was, what - seventeen? Respectfully, I disagree with you both. I think Ethan Knight is reaching the peak of his career, and it’s the perfect time for him to come to Europe. It might even be overdue.”

“Coach Warren seems to have confidence in him as well,” interjected the woman.

“Come on, lady, have your own opinions, fuck’s sake,” Billie said, exasperated. She rounded on Tessa. “This is part of why I don’t like football. Misogyny is everywhere, it’s like a disease.”

“And what’s the cure, then?” Tessa returned, popping some crisps into her mouth. “Crying in the boot room?”

Billie stared at her flatmate, mouth agape. “Low blow, Tess. Very low blow.”

Tessa only smirked and took a swig of her beer.

The match finally started. Crystal Palace took possession first, but they didn't make it far before Ethan swiped the ball, turned away from his opposition, and took off down the pitch. Billie's heart skipped a beat as he neared the penalty box. Unfortunately, he didn't quite make it before the tables turned, and he was taken down by a defender, who passed it back up toward midfield. She let out a breath.

"Don't really care for football, eh?" Tessa teased.

"Fuck off," Billie muttered, and sank lower into the couch.

The match went on, both sides playing well, with Jordan Frawley making some incredible saves against the Crystal Palace offense. By halftime, the score was still 0-0, and the frustration was palpable through the screen. Especially since Ethan had had a clear shot about thirty minutes in that could have gotten them the lead, only Peter refused to make the cross and had been driven almost out of bounds. The defender kicked it past the goal line, forcing Stanmore to take the corner instead, which they couldn't make anything out of. Billie found herself upset by Ethan's frown as he jogged off to the locker room. It wasn't nearly as nice to look at as his gentle smile.

That thought made her go rigid in her seat. These feelings about Ethan - whatever they were, attraction, familiarity - were not something she wanted to address. It terrified her. Tessa was right, Billie was not really heartbroken by Peter or even by Greg, it was mostly that she was insulted. But Ethan, from what little she knew of him, was genuine. The handkerchief

she still carried around was proof of something really decent. And that kind of person had the potential to cause her brutal, lasting pain - the kind she had dreamed about and feared as long as she could remember. She had protected her heart for too long to let that happen now.

In the second half, Ethan scored. A brilliant goal right between the goalkeeper's legs that had his head turning wildly afterward, wondering how it could have gotten past him. Ethan leapt over to the sideline in celebration, his teammates pouncing on him. They ruffled his hair and pounded on his back in congratulations.

It bolstered the team. The frustration of the first half dissipated in the glow of taking the lead. And Ethan was well on his way to furthering that lead when a Crystal Palace defender slid right into his legs, studs up.

*"Referee!"* burst from Billie's lungs before she could even stop herself.

"Christ!" Tessa gasped with a start.

Billie's heart galloped inside her chest at the injustice, especially when Ethan took several moments to stand back up. The referee did blow the whistle and he issued a yellow card to the defender, but Billie wasn't convinced that was enough.

"That's a red card, isn't it?" she demanded. "That was intentional violence!"

Tessa only looked Billie up and down. Only then did Billie realize she had leapt to her feet as well. Like someone who

was...invested. Her eyes went wide with horror.

“Okay...” she said, steadying herself against the arm of the couch. “I do not care about this man, I just...”

Tessa raised a brow. “You just what?”

Billie swallowed. “I just won’t speak to him again. This...” she made a vague gesture in front of herself with her hands. “This cannot happen. I’ll keep avoiding him until we’re strangers who just happen to work for the same company.”

“I’m afraid I’ve thrown a wrench in that plan already,” Tessa said.

“How’s that?”

“I invited him over for dinner tomorrow night.”

Billie blinked, stunned. “*What?*”

“It seemed like the neighborly thing to do,” Tessa said with a shrug.

“How did this even happen?” Billie pressed. “Do you have his phone number? Did you slide into his Instagram DMs? Did you -”

“Neither, I went to his flat,” Tessa said.

“How’d you know which was his?”

“I didn’t, I just went over and knocked on doors until he was the one that answered.”

Billie sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, the picture of her spacey, Irish flatmate just appearing at stranger’s

doorways coming all too easily to her mind. “Of course you did.”

“I hope he likes pasta,” Tessa said dreamily. “Even if he doesn’t, I reckon he’s too polite to say so.” She paused. “He seems awfully kind.”

That was just the problem. Billie watched him on the screen again, the camera zoomed in on his face as he threw the ball back into play, and felt that odd stirring inside her chest when she got a look at his eyes. She shook her head.

“Alright, starting after dinner, I’m never speaking to him again,” she said firmly.

She just hoped she could stick to it. If she didn’t, the consequences could be more than she was ready to face.

## *Chapter 6*

Ethan knocked three times on the door, a bottle of wine cradled in the crook of his elbow. He'd had to ask the salesperson, a young guy named Nick, to help him decide on something good, since he didn't drink himself. But Betty taught him to never show up to someone's home empty-handed, even if they tell you not to bring anything. Tessa hadn't said one way or the other. All she told him in that dreamy voice of hers was her apartment number and that she lived in the building across the street. The latter, he already knew, having spied her and Billie peering at him through their window.

After hearing Tessa speak, he was a bit surprised that she and Billie were roommates. They seemed an unlikely pair. Billie was so polished and serious, while Tessa had a more free spirited air about her.

To his surprise, it was Billie who opened the door. His heart did its usual flutter at the sight of her. In jeans and an oversized, cable knit sweater, she looked far more

approachable than she did at work. The navy blue made her eyes seem even bluer. And her dark curls were held loosely back in a scrunchie, instead of the usual French twist or claw clip. God, she was stunning. He shook off the shock and offered a smile.

“Well, hey,” he said. “We just keep running into each other, don’t we?”

“Let’s get this over with,” Billie answered.

She turned away from the door - that scent once again triggering his desire to pull her into a hug - and disappeared back into the apartment. He followed her. This pattern of theirs was becoming quite routine now, he thought, amused. And he didn’t mind one bit.

He closed the door behind him. The first thing he noticed was a stack of boxes in the entryway, all labeled - pictures, letters, jewelry, clothing. He raised a curious eyebrow at Billie, who sighed.

“It’s this thing Tessa’s doing,” she said.

Tessa herself appeared from around the corner. “It’s more than a thing, Billie, have some respect.” She faced Ethan. “How are you, Ethan?”

“Pretty good, thank you,” he replied. He nodded toward the boxes. “So...what is that all about?”

“A couple vintage enthusiasts - myself included - are putting together a wee showcase and flea market,” she

explained. “Things we find at estate sales and secondhand shops and things of that nature.”

“Oh, cool,” he said, and it was genuine. With his lack of history in his own family, he was always fascinated by other people’s. “Find anything good?”

“I’ve got a shipment of battlefield artifacts from World War II coming from a farmer in Belgium later this year,” Tessa said. “Once the ground isn’t so hard, he says he finds things every time he tills the land.”

Ethan let out a low, impressed whistle. “That’s pretty amazing.”

“Definitely. After the showcase, I’ll be donating them to a small museum down in Aldbourne though.”

At the mention of the village - which he somehow knew about, despite not knowing how or why - his mind immediately went back to the dream he’d had before the match of him and Billie in that field together. But how were those two things connected?

“Come on in, I don’t want this sauce to burn,” Tessa said, drawing him out of his thoughts once more.

She floated back to the kitchen. Ethan looked at Billie. He forced the memory of that dream away from the front of his mind.

“How’re you?” he asked. “No more tears, I hope.”

“That was a fluke,” she shot back defensively. “Just a... glitch in the Matrix or whatever you call it.”



“Ah, I see,” he said. “So, you’ve got those allergies under control now?”

She nodded stiffly. “Yep.”

“Great, let’s have dinner,” he said. He gestured for her to go ahead of him. “Ladies first.”

She rolled her eyes, but went anyway. And again, he followed. The kitchen smelled wonderfully of garlic and spices, all wafting over from the saucepan in front of Tessa, who stirred all the ingredients around atop the burner. Ethan placed the wine on the counter where she could see it.

“For you both,” he said. “Thanks for welcoming me into your home.”

“That’s right kind of you, Ethan,” Tessa said. “We’ll crack it open now. Bills, get three glasses.”

Billie moved to the cabinet, but Ethan spoke up. “Actually, make it two. I don’t drink, so it’s just a gift for the hostesses.”

Billie paused as she reached up and looked at him, a quizzical expression on her face. And damn if he didn’t think it was adorable. “You don’t drink?”

He shook his head. “Never have.”

“That’s quite responsible of you,” Tessa added. “Can we get you anything else then? Water? Tea?”

“Sure, tea would be great,” he told her.

“Well, take a seat and Billie will get it for you,” Tessa said.

Billie did so, although she rolled her eyes at being volunteered, while Tessa continued to cook. He was still a little surprised Tessa was so good at it. She didn't seem focused enough. Upon first glance, she was spacey and maybe a bit air-headed. That whimsical tone to her voice was deceiving, though. She would not have been out of place somewhere like the Shire, but she certainly was at the stove. He sat in the closest chair at their table.

“Here,” Billie said, placing the tea in front of him. “We already had the kettle on.”

She didn't give him time to thank her before going to prepare glasses of wine for herself and Tessa. He watched her with keen eyes, savoring how nice she looked, and he almost opened his mouth to tell her so, but Tessa spoke first.

“How're you liking London, Ethan?” she asked.

“Oh, I like it just fine,” he answered. “It's a bit colder than I'm used to, but other than that I think I'll be here a while.”

“That's good news,” Tessa said. “You played well enough yesterday, I think we'll be happy to have you.”

“Thank you,” he said, and took a sip of tea to hide the flush rising to his face.

The tea was nice after walking over in the cold. It could have used some sugar, but he wouldn't dream of asking for any. Especially since Billie had already taken a seat across from him, sipping the wine. Her expression softened for a

moment as she licked her lips, enjoying the taste. His heart ballooned with pride at having pleased her.

Tessa took the sauce off the heat and added some salt to the noodles, which were boiling in a large pot. He fleetingly considered offering to help, but he had an idea of what her response would be. She'd insist he remain comfortable. He glanced back at Billie, whose eyes were on his face, but she quickly looked away when he caught her staring.

“So, have you always wanted to play in the Premier League?” Tessa asked.

Ethan took a moment to reply, as he was trying to catch Billie's gaze again. “Sorry?”

“Have you always wanted to play in the Premier League?” Tessa repeated, a smirk parting her lips.

“I didn't think I'd ever be good enough, but yeah,” he answered. “I mean, it's every kid's dream to play in a top tier league like this one.”

“Did you have a preferred club?” Billie added, and seemed to surprise herself when she spoke.

Ethan took another sip of tea to gather up his thoughts for that answer. It was a little more of himself to give than he was used to offering to strangers. But he wanted to open up to Billie.

“Uh, yeah, actually, it was Chelsea,” he said.

“Why Chelsea?” Tessa asked.

He shifted in his seat as he cleared his throat. “When I was a little boy, my mother...” he trailed off, looking for the right words. “She wasn’t well. And one time, while she was in the hospital - I had just started playing soccer, and was learning the different leagues - I wrote a letter to all the Premier League clubs, telling them what was happening and that I didn’t have a team I was rooting for yet. Chelsea was the only one that got back to me. They even sent me some autographed pictures and a kit. Been a fan ever since.” He paused to swallow. “I kinda hoped I’d get to play for them someday, but, y’know, you take the offers you can get.”



Billie could not deny the softness spreading in her heart upon hearing the story. The tender, shy look on Ethan’s face as he spoke of his mother. The smile that threatened his lips when he told them about the pictures and the kit. And the way he kept looking at her with curiosity and wonder. It all told her what she had dreadfully suspected all along - there was more to him than the average footballer, or even man for that matter, and he was genuinely sweet. Damn him. She took a sip of wine.

“That kind of story could rot your teeth, it’s so sweet,” Tessa joked.

The remark was all the more comical since she had just drained the noodles in the colander and her round glasses were entirely fogged up with steam. Billie bit her lip to keep her giggle at bay. Tessa swore under her breath and removed her glasses to clear them off with her shirt sleeve. When Billie caught Ethan's eye again, with an amused sparkle behind them that matched her own, she quickly looked away.

"So, uh, how did you two end up living together?" Ethan asked.

"Billie and I met at uni," Tessa said. "We were in some of the same courses, and we ended up working on a project together. Been best mates ever since."

The days in uni with Tessa were always ones Billie recalled fondly. Between parties and classes and dates, they had formed something remarkable. And more solid than any other relationship in Billie's life, even her sister or her parents.

"Well, she's leaving out the best part," she said. "We met because...well..." some heat rose to her cheeks to admit it, especially since Ethan didn't drink. "I'd overindulged in whatever terrible punch was prepared at this party-"

"Punch," Tessa scoffed. "More like poison, you mean."

Billie smiled and continued. "Well, some bloke I didn't know was trying to get me to go home with him, and nearly had me in his car. But Tessa - who was probably about as drunk as I was - actually leapt onto his back and started screaming for the police."

A laugh burst out of Ethan, his head falling back with amusement. It probably was hilarious to imagine. Sweet, waif-like Tessa with her round eyes and soft voice getting so defensive. But that was who Tessa was. She had more courage than most, and she stood between people and misfortune wherever she could. Even strangers.

“I gotta say, I’m impressed,” Ethan told her. “Was he arrested?”

“Afraid not,” Tessa sighed. “Fucker shook me off and ran before anything else happened.”

“Well, something good came of it,” he said. “Look where you two are now.”

“Aye, she’s followed me like a wee puppy ever since.”

“Oi, who took care of you while you had the flu before Christmas?” Billie shot back.

“Could have been anyone, I was totally out of it,” Tessa said with a shrug.

Billie rolled her eyes. “Oh, fuck off,” she muttered into her wine glass.

Chuckling, Tessa returned the noodles over to the stove top, and stirred them into the sauce. Billie watched her in order to avoid Ethan’s eyes across the table.

“Need any help, Tess?” Billie said. If she could get up and walk away from him it would be easier.

“Nope, almost done,” Tessa assured her. “All that’s left is to plate it up.”

Billie deflated. There wasn’t really enough space in their kitchen for two people to cook anyway, but that would have been a nice buffer between her and their visitor. She had half expected Ethan to comment on the size of their place, but she remembered all too well what he’d said about his own upbringing. In fact, he seemed right at home in a modestly sized place. Tessa served them first and then retreated back to the kitchen to hang up her flowery blue apron before joining them at the table.

“Well, tuck in!” she said.

Nobody needed telling twice. Billie took her first bite, and let out a soft moan at the flavor. “Holy shit, Tess, this is amazing!”

“It really is,” Ethan agreed after swallowing. “I’ve never had homemade sauce before.”

“Thank you!” Tessa said, beaming. “It’s my first time making it, I’m glad it’s not rubbish.”

“Never,” Billie said.

“You’re not just saying that because I feed you?”

“Billie doesn’t cook?” Ethan asked.

“Fuck no,” Billie scoffed.

“Billie’s a right menace in the kitchen,” Tessa added.

“You could always learn,” Ethan said, addressing Billie directly that time.

“Ach, no, therein lies the problem,” Tessa said. “Bills hates to fail. And the only way to never fail is to not try.”

Billie forced her eyes down to her plate, but she could feel Ethan’s gaze on her. Tessa’s phone rang, she excused herself to answer it (it was her mother, after all), and stepped out of the flat and into the hallway, as if she hadn’t just stripped away a core piece of Billie’s meticulously crafted armor with all the carelessness most people used to rip up credit card offers in the post.

Ethan toyed with his fork for a moment before meeting Billie’s gaze. “Can I ask you something?”

She hesitated, but nodded. “Sure, I suppose.”

“Have I done something to offend you?”

Her instinct was to look away, to avoid that earnest look in his eyes, that searched hers, and if he looked long enough, she would crack. “That’s the thing, I don’t know.”

The answer was as honest as she could be without sounding insane. Some part of her was mad at him. Her heart was drawn to him, and yet recoiled at the thought of getting too close, like it had reached out before and been burned. But there was no logical explanation for that feeling. All she was sure of was that she didn’t want to get burned again.

“Well, do you think you could ease up?” he asked. “I’d sorta like to get to know you.”



She stiffened. “Why?”

He didn’t answer right away, though he maintained eye contact with her as he mulled it over. Then he grinned. “That’s the thing, I don’t know.”

She almost smiled in return.

“What I do know is that I feel...something when I look at you,” he went on, serious now. “Like we’ve met before, but in a dream or...” he trailed off and ran a hand through his hair. “Listen to me, talking nonsense.”

Billie had to catch her breath. Her heart was suddenly fluttering against her ribcage. He felt it too? It made her feel less like she was going crazy, but it also made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

“I know what you mean,” she admitted, in almost a whisper. “Doesn’t it scare you?”

“No,” he answered readily. He leaned on the table closer to her. “It doesn’t scare me at all.”

“How can you -”

She didn’t get to finish her question before Tessa returned. The tension hung around them like a fog, but she seemed none the wiser as she resumed her seat.

“Sorry about that,” she said. “Mam had a question about her new bluetooth earbuds.” She looked at Ethan. “Parents, am I right?”

A shadow of melancholy passed over his face - so quickly, Billie was sure if she blinked, she would have missed it.

“Yeah, I guess,” he said.

“So, where were we?” Tessa asked, but answered before anyone else could. “Oh, right. Billie can’t cook.”

Grateful for the change of subject, Billie rolled her eyes. “Thanks for that, by the way.”

“Anytime,” Tessa said with a cheeky grin.

Dinner carried on casually enough, and Billie tried to put that moment with Ethan out of her mind. How could he not be scared by those feelings? What did it mean for him? And how did he want to get to know her? The way he looked at her didn’t suggest friendship. And she had never been so attracted to a friend before in return.

After dinner, Ethan insisted that he help clean up. Tessa and Billie had an arrangement that the latter would clean since the former did all the cooking. So it was Tessa’s turn to enjoy a beverage at the table while the other two worked. However, she didn’t remain at the table long. After Billie put away the plates, she started to ask her flatmate a question, only to find the table totally vacant. Without a word, Tessa had just slipped out.

“Now that is an authentic Irish exit,” Ethan said.

Billie snorted. She quickly clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the sound. It shouldn’t have been funny - the joke was corny. Bordering on a dad joke. But somehow, with his drawl,

it was amusing. She shook it off and returned to her task, putting the wine glasses back in the cabinet.

Pushing herself up onto her toes, she stretched to reach the top shelf. But unfortunately for her, she overestimated her ability to put them both away at once. One slipped from her grasp. Before she could even cry out, a large hand - Ethan's hand - caught it out of the air. She whirled around, holding the remaining wine glass close to her while she took a deep breath to ease the panic that had sent her heart rate into a frenzy.

“Let me do this,” he said.

She opened her eyes to meet his. “I can -”

“Please,” he cut across her. “I don't have to work so hard.”

There was no denying that. Ethan was almost a head taller than her. All he would have to do is raise his arm, and he would be able to reach the shelf. With a defiant huff, she held out the wine glass in her hand. From where he stood, he leaned forward and reached up.

Billie sucked in a breath. He was so close to her now. She could smell his warm, earthy scent and feel the heat from his body. His chest was right in front of her face. Why was she suddenly desperate to rest her head there? A flush rose to her cheeks as images of him this close to her - on top of her - came flooding to the front of her mind. She wanted to run her hands over that chest and feel the firmness of his muscles there. She wanted to bury her face in the crook of his neck and inhale that wonderful smell. She wanted to feel the weight of him around her and -

“There,” he said, and took a step back.

She held back a whimper of protest at the loss of his warmth. Her body shivered in spite of her effort to keep still.

“Thanks,” she said stiffly.

“No problem,” he returned, and she was certain that smile would be the death of her if she let it.

Clearing her throat, she checked her watch. “It’s getting late.”

“Yeah, I should be getting home,” he agreed. “But, uh... thanks for a great evening. I feel very welcomed.”

“Well, that’s what Tessa wanted,” she said. Perhaps without their buffer physically in the room, mentioning her would be as effective.

He looked meaningfully at her. “She’s very kind.”

Billie swallowed through the dryness in her throat. “I’ll show you out.”

She turned on her heel and left before he could say anything else. Thankfully, Tessa was only in the living room, and she got to her feet when Billie and Ethan emerged.

“Kitchen’s in order?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Ethan answered with a mock salute.

“Oh, I do like the sound of that,” Tessa said, winking at Billie. “I’ll get your coat.”

Billie let out a breath. She was already struggling with Ethan being close to her. If she helped him into his coat -

actually, touching him - she wasn't sure what her mind would conjure up then. The goodbyes passed in a blur. Ethan thanked them again, bid them goodnight, and then was gone. Already, the flat felt...emptier. Or maybe it was just Billie.

As she got ready for bed, she retrieved the handkerchief he'd given her from her nightstand. She crawled under her quilt, and then looked over the embroidered initials once more. EK, in soft, blue thread. She wondered who had stitched it. His mother perhaps? Or maybe his grandmother? He'd mentioned her before too. His father, he had yet to speak about. She was curious about his family now. Curious about him. And that was dangerous territory to be in.

"Fuck's sake," she groaned and flopped back onto her pillow.

She fell asleep with the handkerchief tucked close to her heart.

## *Interlude*

*June 10, 1944*

*Aldbourne, England*

*My darling Henry,*

*Of course I'll marry you! Heavens, how could I refuse? After losing Mum and Dad, I kept wondering why I'd left London. Joining the Land Girls saved my life, but guilt for being away from my family during that air raid made me wonder why I had been spared. I did my work in the orchard like a ghost. And then you lot arrived on our shores. I met you at that dance and lo and behold - you brought me back to life! It all makes sense now. The Lord spared me to bring me to you. Becoming your wife would be an honor. And I know Mum and Dad would be happy - they'd have adored you.*

*By now, I'm sure you've already jumped into God-only-knows, France. I read all about the invasion in the papers. I do hope you are keeping yourself safe the best you can. I'll*

*anxiously await a return letter until I see your silly scrawl in ink between my hands again.*

*As for a movie date - I suppose you're entitled to one now we're betrothed, and all. I can scarcely imagine the fun we'll have if dancing is only half as fun. (But you will take me dancing again, won't you?)*

*We shall never be strangers again, darling. What an exciting thought!*

*Love,*

*Your Maggie*

## *Chapter 7*

“Are you sure that’s what Tony meant?” Billie’s sister asked.

Stevie had finally called for one of their bi-monthly catch-up conversations, the first since they saw each other at their parents’ place for Christmas. Billie and her sister used to be closer, but since Stevie had gotten married and had two children, her life was just too busy. Not that she hadn’t been busy as a high-powered attorney either - the woman was well on her way to becoming a partner at her firm - but she had found new fulfillment in being a mother. And she was a great one.

“What else could he have meant?” Billie said. “He wasn’t speaking in riddles, Stevie.”

On her way home from the grocery store, Billie had relayed the whole thing to her sister, even the bit about Tony only giving her the job out of respect for their law school days together. Stevie was shocked, to say the least.



“It just doesn’t sound like him,” Stevie insisted. “He was always...intense, but never rude like that.”

“Are you saying you don’t believe me?” Billie said, her stomach clenching as she mentally prepared her defense in case the answer was yes.

“No, of course I believe you,” Stevie said. “But maybe he was having an off day or something. I dunno.”

“Off day or not that’s no excuse for being the prince dick of all dickhea - are you fucking joking?”

Billie halted not only her sentence but her whole body. She had just reached her building when she saw, across the street, Ethan chatting animatedly to an elderly woman on a walker, and taking her grocery bags out of her hands. Clearly, the woman was familiar with him, as she didn’t seem surprised by his offer, and she touched his arm with warm gratitude, which of course made him flash that bashful smile of his. Billie rolled her eyes.

“He can’t be serious,” she said with a groan.

“Who can’t be serious?” Stevie asked. “What’s going on?”

“Okay, you remember I told you that Ethan Knight’s living across the road from me?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Well - get this - he’s helping an old lady carry her bags in,” Billie explained. “Literally. Like a fucking boy scout.”

“And you’re upset by this because...?”

“I’m not upset about it!” Billie snapped. “It’s just - he’s - well - no one’s that nice *all* the time, there must be something wrong with him!”

“There’s something wrong with everyone,” Stevie said. “But you don’t even know him, why is -” She stopped suddenly. “Liam! Put that down!” She sighed. “Just a moment, Bills.”

While Billie waited, she watched Ethan as he slowed to the glacial pace of the elderly woman, without a trace of irritation on his face. Now that she didn’t have Stevie in her ear, she could catch a bit of their conversation as the wind carried their voices.

“And how’s your husband doing, Mrs. Harvey?” Ethan asked. “Still recovering from that fever?”

“Oh, he’s much better,” the woman replied. “Up and walking about like he was never ill in the first place, if you can believe it.”

“I absolutely can,” he said. “With a sweet wife like you looking after him, he oughta get better fast.”

Mrs. Harvey giggled and patted his arm again. “You’re awfully kind, dearie.”

Billie resisted the urge to make a gagging sound, at the risk of alarming her sister. Who the hell was this guy? A star footballer who just helped old ladies carry their groceries and knew his neighbors by name? She remembered when she brought him to his building that first day, and how he’d

addressed the woman behind the front desk by name as well. Even with Billie, he had gotten her name before allowing her to guide him to the neighborhood. She wondered where he learned such a habit.

“You there, Bills?”

Stevie’s voice removed her from her musings, and she put the phone back to her ear. “Yeah, have you got my nephew under control?”

Stevie chuckled. “Yeah, Joel’s got him.”

“And Grace?” Billie asked.

“Still down for her morning nap,” Stevie said.

Even at twenty-eight, Billie struggled to imagine that lifestyle. Especially since she had watched Stevie kick ass in the legal world for nearly a decade while she went through school and university. Sometimes, it was like Stevie had lived two different lifetimes - one as the career woman, and one as the wife and mother. Billie had always admired the former. It was a shock to everyone that the latter happened at all. But Stevie took a case for Joel, and when it was over, he asked her out. The rest was history. The two worlds would merge once Stevie finished her second round of maternity leave, of course, but she wasn’t working nearly as many hours as she was before, and she wasn’t pushing to become a partner either. But how changing nappies and wiping runny noses could be more appealing than asserting oneself in the legal field was beyond Billie’s comprehension.

Truthfully, she resented it a little bit. Stevie had the career of Billie's dreams. And she'd put it on pause for what? To conform to some patriarchal standard? True, Stevie had chosen to step back once she got married, and it was her call once again when the kids came along. But how could she choose that after all the work she put in to get to where she was? Billie couldn't understand it. And yet, watching Ethan open the door and wait for Mrs. Harvey to shuffle through, she could somewhat see the appeal of a slow, soft life. Somewhat.

"Are you planning on going back to work soon?" Billie asked.

Stevie didn't answer right away. In fact, she took so long to reply, Billie checked her phone to make sure the call hadn't dropped.

"Stevie?"

"I'm here," Stevie said. "It's just... I haven't told anyone this yet, and I'm not sure how you'll feel about it."

Billie's stomach turned. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, it's just..." She trailed off again. "I don't think I am going back to work. I think I'm going to leave the firm."

Billie nearly dropped the phone and her groceries. "*What?*"

"Well, Joel makes enough to support us, and if I go back, we'll need to hire a nanny or something, and I'd just as well like to raise my children myself," Stevie said, and Billie could hear the guilt in her voice.

“Is this something you want or something Joel wants?” Billie asked. She was pretty sure of the answer, since Joel was a gentle person and only ever supported Stevie. But she had to be certain.

“It’s what we *both* want,” Stevie insisted. “We’ve discussed it a lot, and we think it’s the best choice for our family.”

Billie was distracted for a moment as she tried to work out how to open the door to her building while keeping the phone pressed to her ear and the groceries balanced in her arms. She swore under her breath and decided to just finish the conversation outside.

“This isn’t *This Morning*, Stevie, we can have an honest chat about this,” she said.

Stevie took a deep breath. “Alright. I’m a bit scared. I’m terrified of stepping away, finding out I miss it too much, but it being too late to get back in the game. I’m terrified of finding out I’m actually a shit mum, and was better off practicing law. And I’m terrified of when the kids grow up and I’m left with nothing.”

Billie chewed her bottom lip thoughtfully, but she wasn’t sure what to say. She already didn’t totally empathize with the path Stevie was choosing, but if it was truly what her sister wanted, she needed to say something encouraging.

“For starters, no matter how old the kids get, you’ll always be their mum,” she began. “They’ll always need you. How often are you calling Mum’s house asking her about shit?”

“Almost daily,” Stevie admitted.

“Fuck, really?” Billie said, surprised.

“I have no idea how to be a wife or mother!” Stevie shot back. “I called her this morning to ask how to get a bit of hardened sauce off one of the burners of my stove!”

“Oh, what did she say?” Billie said. “Because Tessa made some the other night, and it’s still not -” She stopped herself and shook her head. “Not important. Text it to me later.”

“Will do,” Stevie promised.

“Look, whatever you decide, I’ll support you,” Billie said. “If it’ll make you happy to stay home, then do that. And if it doesn’t, re-evaluate. You’ve got loads of people on your side in the industry, you’ll find something else, alright?”

“That’s true,” Stevie said. “I suppose I’m not signing a contract or anything that says I must stick to that decision if it doesn’t work.”

“Exactly,” Billie said. “And you’re not a shit mum, okay? You’re the best mum I know, besides our own. And your little monsters are better off with you than some stranger.”

Stevie chuckled. “Thanks, Bills. I know you don’t get all of this, but one day, when you fall in love, I promise it’ll make sense to you.”

“Doubtful,” Billie said with a wry grin. “You see, I am determined to remain a cold-hearted bitch for the rest of my life.”

“That’s awfully strong language this early in the morning.” A Southern drawl from behind her nearly made Billie jump out of her skin. With a squeak of surprise, she whirled around to see Ethan standing there, the generous smile on his lips and the brightness in his eyes that made her stomach do somersaults. He nodded toward the bags in her arms. “Looks like you could use a hand.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Is this what you do? Just walk around London offering to carry the grocery bags of unsuspecting women?” Before he could answer, she went on, accusatory. “What’s the goal there? Trying to find out where I live, are you?”

His brow furrowed. “I already know where you live, I’ve been to your place.”

“Billie?” Stevie’s voice came from the speaker of her phone. “Who’re you talking to?”

“The boy scout,” Billie said, returning the phone to her ear. “I’ll call you back later, Stevie.”

“Later, Bills.”

They hung up. Ethan offered his arms, and Billie inwardly debated accepting the offer for several moments. But the bags were heavy, and she would need to open the door since she was the one with the key. With a sigh, and rolling her eyes, she handed them over. He had the decency to not look smug about it, and he followed her inside.

“Who were you talking to?” he asked as they headed for the stairs.

“My sister,” she answered.

She offered no more information. Despite her curiosity and attraction, she had to keep her distance; she had no other choice. The last thing she wanted was a guy who helped little old ladies to be the one to tell her love was wasted on her as well.

“Billie and Stevie?” he said. “How’d your parents get those names?”

“They’re really into music,” she answered automatically. She had told this story plenty of times now. “Mum got to name the first baby, and she went with Stevie Nicks. Dad got to name the next one, and so I was called Billie Jean.”

“Like the Michael Jackson song?”

“The one and only.”

She prepared herself for one of the usual responses: a judgmental, “oh, how...*unique*” or “wouldn’t be my choice, but to each their own!” Some variation of those sentiments had followed her around her whole life. But Ethan didn’t even pause.

“Well, that’s pretty neat!” he said.

She came to a stop and faced him. “You actually mean that, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”



She responded with a disbelieving scoff before continuing down the hallway. “So, when did you get so familiar with your neighbor?”

“Mrs. Harvey?” he replied. “We met my first day here. Similar to what you saw outside. I was coming back with my own groceries and saw her struggling with her walker, so I carried hers too. Introduced myself and told her which door was mine if she ever needed anything.”

There was something to be said about a man with such an instinct to help others. Especially one who was famous. For him to offer up his address to someone was pretty bold, but it stood to reason that Mrs. Harvey probably had no idea who Ethan was. That seemed to suit him just fine.

“I suppose that Southern hospitality thing is true then,” Billie remarked.

“Oh, absolutely,” he said. “We get to know our neighbors where I’m from. Living next to somebody and not knowing a thing about them? That dog just ain’t gon’ hunt.”

“I assume that means it won’t do,” she guessed.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She ignored the heat in her belly when he called her *ma’am*, but had to turn her head toward the wall so he wouldn’t see the color in her cheeks. How did this guy have such an effect on her? When they reached her door, she opened it and allowed him to take her bags all the way to the kitchen, where he set them carefully on the table.

“Where’s Tessa?” he asked, glancing around the room.

“Out with her vintage friends,” she told him. “They meet once a week for tea and brunch before they go looking for more stuff for the showcase.”

It hit her as if she’d slammed on brakes while driving in traffic. She was alone in her flat. With Ethan. Just the two of them. Anything could happen. In fact, a fleeting image of him striding over and claiming her lips with his came to her mind, but she shook her head to banish it. He had noticeably left the front door open. She cleared her throat and gestured toward the bags.

“Thanks for carrying those,” she said.

“Sure thing,” he said, and paused for a moment. “Neighbor.”

With a wink, he swept out of the flat, closing the door behind him. Once again, his absence made her chest feel like a cavern, in stark contrast to the completeness she felt when he was around.



Billie tapped her pen against her chin as she debated how to answer an email, the cursor blinking at her, mocking the blank

in her mind. Truthfully, all she could think about was Ethan and the moment the previous day. She kept picturing that sweet look on his face as he helped Mrs. Harvey in, and how he helped her as well. It had taken all her self control not to kiss him the moment she realized they were alone in the flat. But where did it come from? How had he taken such hold of her mind?

“Billie.”

She turned and looked up, locking eyes with Tony. She quickly dropped her gaze. Things between them had been... awkward since their confrontation. At least on her end. He appeared totally unfazed and behaved as if he hadn't said anything inappropriate at all. But she couldn't get past it.

*And my job certainly does not entail catering to your stupid fucking feelings, is that clear?* The statement kept ringing in her ears. She understood it well, and would not make the mistake of letting him know her feelings again.

“Yes, sir?” she said, her tone clipped.

“Take this out to Knight,” he said, holding out a packet of papers. “They want him on *Dayside London* in the morning, and he needs to sign this release.”

Billie's brows knit together. *Dayside London* was a morning show that didn't normally cover athletes. Of course, Ethan was quickly becoming a character for the press; between his accent, his weird phrases, and his oddly mysterious past, they had plenty to talk about. But the target audience for this show

was middle-aged women. What did they want with a footballer?

“Has he already agreed?” she asked.

“His agent has, and that’s enough,” Tony said. “Just bring these back with his signature.”

He dropped the papers on her desk and walked away. Heaving a sigh, Billie shrugged on her coat and headed out toward the pitch, the papers tucked underneath her arm.

The cold bit at her cheeks and nose as she made her way onto the grass. For some reason, Ethan was alone out there. He stood behind a line of balls as he let out a low breath. She stood on the touchline, watching as he settled into his stance.

“Left post,” he said, the words appearing as vapor in the chilly air.

He lurched toward the first ball, right foot swinging back. It struck the ball cleanly, and as Billie watched, the ball rocketed right into the named target with a clang that echoed around the empty pitch. He hit the right post next with equal accuracy, followed just after by the crossbar. It was as if a magnet connected his laces to the ball, making it strike precisely where he wanted. He hit all four corners and the center of the net next, barely taking a breath in between each kick.

For those few minutes, Billie forgot her purpose of being there, and she just observed, amazed.

She never really thought football took so much skill, but up close, she could see the subtle differences in the shots. He had

to carefully choose which part of his foot would make contact with the ball in order for it to go in the right direction, and which foot to use. He was stronger with his right, but his left was nothing to sneer at either. His standing leg used just as much power as the leg that was kicking. Suddenly, he seemed larger than she remembered.

When he went to retrieve the balls to line them up again, he finally saw her. When he smiled, she recognized the sweet neighbor boy from the day before, but she had a newfound respect for what he could do.

“Hey, neighbor!” he called, and jogged over.

“Hi, there,” she said, quite certain it was the friendliest greeting he’d ever received from her. “D’you know you’re going on a morning show tomorrow?”

“Oh, yeah, my agent called me about that,” he said. “Do I gotta sign something?”

“You do, in fact,” she said, retrieving the papers from their place tucked under her arm and the pen from her coat pocket. “Standard release, I believe.”

He took the items, his fingers brushing hers in a moment that nearly made her heart stop. Then she watched as he used his thigh to scribble his signature on the dotted lines throughout the packet. She hadn’t noticed how muscular his legs were, but now that she’d seen them in action, she wondered how she missed it. They were like tree trunks - strong, wide, and durable. Ethan rose up to his full height again to hand the file back to her.

“Here ya go,” he said.

“Yeah...thanks,” she said, shaking her head to clear it. “You’re...you’re quite good, you know.”

“Thank you,” he replied with a humble nod. “It’s nothing really. I bet you could do it if you tried.”

She scoffed. “No way. Not like that.”

“I’ll teach you,” he offered.

“I’ll miss,” she insisted.

“It’s a big target.”

“You’re hugely underestimating how awful I am.”

He chuckled. “Alright, forget the goal, then. How about a passing game?”

She raised a skeptical eyebrow at him. Usually, when men offered to teach her something sports-related, they saw it as an opportunity to cop a feel. To get close to her and see how far they could push the envelope before she stopped them. *If* she stopped them. But Ethan remained right where he stood, that kind look still on his face with just a hint of expectancy.

“Alright then,” she agreed, and set the papers down in the grass.

She wondered if she would regret it, but the grin on his face was almost a guarantee that she wouldn’t. His smile was like sunshine. A sliver of warmth on an otherwise cold, dreary, and gray day.

He led her out towards the center of the pitch, standing a few yards away as he placed the ball in front of him.

“I’m gonna pass it to you,” he began. “Receive it with your leg or your foot, whichever comes more naturally to you. Keep your eye on the ball, and I promise, your body will follow where you’re looking.”

She nodded, though she wasn’t quite sure she believed him. But she watched enough football to get the general idea of receiving the ball and getting it gently to the ground in order to make the next pass. It looked simple enough.

“You ready?” Ethan asked.

Billie nodded. “I think I can handle it.”

He kicked the ball toward her with a light thump, and it sailed gracefully in her direction. She lifted her leg to receive it, grateful she’d worn trousers. But the contact was not as smooth as she anticipated. It struck her thigh, but instead of dropping to the ground, it ricocheted off of her and landed about a yard away before rolling to a stop. Her skin already ached with where it hit her, but she ignored that and shot a sharp look at Ethan.

“I did just what you said!” she insisted.

He jogged over, an infuriatingly amused grin on his lips. “You’re too tense. Relax your receiving leg so it doesn’t bounce right off you.”

She blinked. “Well, that is certainly the most creative way I’ve ever been called a tight ass.”

“But, not the only way, huh?” he teased.

She narrowed her eyes at him and folded her arms over her chest. “I won’t stand to be disparaged.”

“Shoo-wee, that’s a five dollar word right there,” he returned, unfazed by her ire. “But I won’t tease you anymore if you don’t like it.”

“I don’t,” she said with a huff.

“Would it help if I said you’re adorable like this?” he asked.

She blinked, taken aback. “What?”

She’d had a lot of adjectives thrown her way, but never that one. Hot, sexy, tempting - even frigid here and there - but adorable? Not once.

“I declare, if you stamped your foot right now, my knees might give out,” he said.

She smirked. “Like this?”

She raised her right foot and stomped it back onto the grass. Not too hard, since she didn’t want the heel of her shoe to sink in, but enough for the image to be right. Ethan clutched at his chest dramatically and went to his knees, as he said he would. Her head fell back as she laughed. He looked ridiculous, but it was effective.

“Now *that* was cute,” she told him.

“Enough to forgive me?”



“Yes,” she said with a nod. “Now, show me how to properly pass to you.”

“Sure thing, darlin’,” he replied, getting to his feet.

Darlin’. Oh, boy. Oh, *no*. She liked the sound of that. She liked it far too much for her own comfort, but she didn’t let him know. Instead, she focused all her energy on listening to his instructions, because if she kept her mind on the endearment, she would only be left wondering when he might use it again. And to her own annoyance, she really hoped he did.

## *Chapter 8*

A cream colored cushion sank beneath Ethan's weight, and studio lights from above warmed his forehead. A production assistant came over to hastily powder away the shine that formed from the sweat. He stole a quick glance at her nametag so that he could say thank you properly, but she was either too busy or didn't hear him, since she didn't react and walked promptly back behind the camera.

Almost as soon as he arrived, he regretted agreeing to the interview. He knew it was part of the deal, and many of his fellow athletes did similar television spots or commercials. But this was the one part of his career that he still had not adjusted to. Fame. He was more than happy to take pictures with a fan or sign an autograph if he was recognized somewhere, but when it was all set up with the hair and the makeup and the lights - that was where he felt the most like a fish out of water.

The hosts took to the stage. One a tall, blonde woman in a pencil skirt and button down, with heels that would have broken Ethan's ankles. The other was a man in a sharp, plum

colored suit with a black shirt underneath, unbuttoned to just beneath his collarbone. Ethan once thought those people on TV didn't look as perfect in real life, but he was wrong. Even just across from him, they looked airbrushed with their perfectly concealed skin and coiffed hair. Ethan took a deep breath, banishing the impostor syndrome that was slowly creeping into his heart. *Breathe through it*, he told himself. *You have earned your place here.*

"It's lovely to meet you," the woman said, crossing the stage with her hand outstretched toward him. He got to his feet to shake it. "I'm Kiera Atkinson."

"Ethan Knight," he said politely. "Nice to meet you too."

A smile revealed her perfectly white teeth, amusement wrinkling her eyes. "God, I just love that accent. It's right out of a cartoon or something."

Ethan swallowed the sting of that down. Another reason he didn't enjoy this part of the job. He didn't sound eloquent when he spoke. People noticed his accent before they noticed him, and instantly made a judgment call about what he was like. He knew it was especially unique in this part of the world, but that didn't make it any easier to take. He slipped on his public persona mask and laughed it off instead.

"Yeah, you don't hear it much around these parts," he joked.

The man approached next with his equally dazzling smile, and shook Ethan's hand as well. "Ted Marsh. Thrilled to have you, mate."

“Pleasure’s mine,” Ethan replied.

“Two minutes,” the producer interjected before any other pleasantries could be exchanged.

Ted and Kiera went to their couch, so Ethan followed suit and resumed his seat in the chair that was catty cornered to theirs so that they were all mostly facing the cameras. He tried not to look too long at them, afraid it would only further shake up his nerves. He could play in front of a camera until the cows came home. But to talk? And mostly about himself? That was something else entirely.

Two minutes passed more like two seconds, and before Ethan knew it, they were counting down to airtime. He cleared his throat just as the producer held up two fingers, silently put one down, and then they were rolling. Cheerful, jazzy music played, and Ted and Kiera sat up ramrod straight and plastered their bright smiles onto their faces again.

“Good morning, and welcome to *Dayside London*,” Ted started off. “I’m Ted Marsh.”

“And I’m Kiera Atkinson,” Kiera continued. “We’re here with Stanmore Football Club’s newest signing, Ethan Knight. An American who carried MLS team Charlotte FC through their inaugural season, led the US men’s national team at the World Cup, and has now been promoted to the Premier League. Welcome, Ethan.”

Finally, they faced him. He nodded. “Thank you for having me.”

“How’re you feeling making the transition to England, Ethan?” Kiera asked, tilting her head slightly to the right.

“I was real nervous about it at first,” Ethan answered. “But so far the people are pretty friendly and everybody at the club has been making me feel welcome. I figure if my biggest complaint is the cold, then I’m doing alright.”

“Being from the American South, I imagine it does feel quite drastic,” Ted said.

“Yeah, I’ve never liked the cold, even as a boy,” Ethan told him. “But it’s not too bad. I tell you, playing in Canada was the worst, but luckily, I’d only ever be there a couple of days for a match.”

“Ted mentioned you growing up in the South, and I’d like to get into that a bit,” Kiera said. “As much as we love football, we’re more interested in you as a person.”

Ethan swallowed hard. “Alright.”

“You grew up in North Carolina, right?” she pressed. “Just outside of Charlotte?”

“Yes, ma’am, in a little suburb called Huntersville,” he told her. “Most people haven’t heard of it, so I generally just tell people I’m from Charlotte.”

“Is your family still there?” she continued.

“Well...” he trailed off, wondering how much to reveal. “Carolina Beach, now.”

“And who’s there?” Ted went on. “Your parents? Siblings?”

“My grandmother,” Ethan answered. “No siblings, I’m afraid.”

“Well, what about your parents?” Kiera said. “Are they happy for you or sad that you’re so far away?”

His chest felt like a boa constrictor had wrapped around it. How had this interview gotten this personal already? He hated talking about this. Why couldn’t they just ask him about football? This was too much. Everything he kept locked away and for good reason was getting dragged forward, and he couldn’t seem to stop it.

“My father has never been in my life,” he said, keeping it intentionally vague. No need to tell them he had no idea who the man was. “And my mother passed away when I was ten.”

The hosts both blinked back at him, a stiff silence coming over the studio. This was exactly why he didn’t talk about this stuff. Everyone drew back like he’d shouted an expletive in a room full of children. This was clearly not the show where people talked about tragedy, especially not the kind Ethan had been through. So he spared them the details and kept his mouth shut until they spoke again.

“That’s...quite...gosh, I’m sorry,” Kiera finally said, picking at an imaginary loose thread on her skirt. “That had to be difficult growing up.”

“That’s one way to describe it,” Ethan said.

“So, was it your grandmother who raised you, then?” Ted asked.

This, Ethan could talk about. He would proudly sing Betty’s praises for the rest of his days. That woman had saved his life, in more ways than one.

“Yeah, she did,” he said. “After my mother passed, it was just me and my grandma. Her name’s Betty - Betty Knight - and she’s the finest person I know. I miss her like crazy, but I know she’s proud of me.”

He was thankful now more than ever that she had actually told him so at the airport before he left. Otherwise, he might not have been so confident in the statement now.

“Did she always support you playing football?” Ted asked.

“She’s the one who got me into it in the first place,” Ethan said. “Before my mother died, even, my grandma put up the money to get me into a soccer program, and I had a great coach who really believed in me. And my love of the sport got me through a lot of my...grief.”

He always struggled with that last word, but his therapist had assured him grief didn’t just mean sadness. It covered the whole range of emotion he’d felt since his mother’s passing - depression, confusion, rage, all of it. And while he had healed for the most part, some wounds never went away. Same as the scar on his abdomen, it would remain a permanent fixture.

When it was clear he was not going to elaborate any further on his childhood, thankfully, the hosts talked to him about

other things - his hobbies outside of football, which he always answered with movies, and that was the truth. He loved a good film, or even a bad one if it was enjoyable, so they had plenty to discuss there until they went to commercial.

During the commercial break, the crew set up a small soccer goal on the stage and brought out five balls. When the show came back, the hosts explained that for each goal he got, the show would donate five hundred pounds to a children's hospital. Happy to oblige for that, Ethan chipped every one of them into the goal, making a point to celebrate each one in case any of those kids had the television on that morning. Just when he was thinking a TV interview wasn't so bad, the mood shifted again.

"Just one more thing to indulge us," Kiera said as they took their seats again. From the table beside her, she picked up a book. It didn't look fancy, it was a simple mass market paperback, but Ethan was suddenly anxious. "This is Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Could you read some for us?"

She held it out to him, but he didn't take it. Instead, his eyes just flickered between the book and her face. What was she getting at?

"Why?" he asked.

"To hear it in your accent," she explained. "Just for a laugh."

Ethan stiffened. It was as if a red hot iron clamp pressed into his heart. His jaw tightened and he had to take a breath. "I



didn't come here to be laughed at."

Keira only just now seemed to pick up on his discomfort. "I only meant -"

"I know what you meant," he cut across her. He was not accustomed to interrupting ladies, but he wasn't interested in her excuses. "You wanted to hear the hick try and sound dignified like you."

She blanched, her eyes fluttering as she set the book aside. Maybe it was her earlier comment that made him feel extra defensive now, but he was furious. The only purpose of having him reading Shakespeare was to laugh at him, not with him. He could be silly and fun, sure, but he would not tolerate being made to look foolish at his own expense.

"Would you agree to read lines from *Gone With the Wind* just for someone else's entertainment at how 'wrong' it'd sound?" he demanded, getting to his feet.

Ted stood up too and took a step toward Ethan. "Ethan, I don't think -"

"It don't - doesn't -" he corrected himself quickly. "It doesn't matter. This interview is over."

With that, he walked off the stage, depositing the microphone and pack into the producer's hand, who watched him go with her mouth hanging open. But he didn't look back, not even when Ted and Kiera called out to him.

His heartbeat pounded in his ears as he stormed out of the studio, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, since he was

unable to keep still. He had to move. Work the anger out of his muscles and try to relax before he got to training. Moisture welled up in the back of his eyes, but he blinked it back. He felt so betrayed. They had ripped open an old wound for exposure, and instead of humanizing him, they rubbed salt into it by trying to turn him into some sort of caricature. They wanted to put him into the very box he had spent his life trying to claw his way out of. And the worst part was, he still felt bad *for them* because he was certain he had caused a problem for the show.

He shook his head to clear it. “You’re allowed to set boundaries,” he told himself.

He’d hardly gotten the words out when his phone began to ring in his pocket. He saw that it was Martin, his agent, and pressed the lock button to ignore it. He knew what Martin would say, and he was not in the mood for a lecture. He wanted to get to training and forget the whole thing, though he knew the press would be having a field day. Social media was probably already a nightmare. He wished he could just go home.

Oddly enough, the person he really wanted to see - more than anything - was Billie. Somehow, he was convinced that just seeing her face would slow his racing heart. Her pretty eyes would make the interview disappear, at least for a moment. Squeezing his eyes shut and silencing his phone once more, he headed toward the Hive.

The first place he needed to go was the club's PR director's office. He had met her briefly on his first day when they did the photo op of him signing pretend papers to get a shot they could post on Instagram. She was a bright, bubbly young woman by the name of Nelle Hamilton. She had previously worked with models and influencers, but had ultimately decided on something more stable. Kind as she was, he had a feeling his storm out would not be well-received.

"What the fuck, Ethan?" were her first words to him when he came through her office door.

"I apologize for embarrassing the club," he blurted out quickly. "It was unprofessional, and I'm sorry if it puts you in a bind. But I cannot apologize for doing what I felt was right for me and standing up for myself."

Nelle blinked her wide, brown eyes at him, mouth drawn tight as if she was preparing to say something else, but she didn't. She only sighed.

"I suppose I can't fault you for that," she said. "Apology accepted."

"Thank you," he said. "Going forward, d'you think you could have any questions or anything like that sent over ahead of time?"

"Sure," she said.

"I appreciate you," he told her.

It was at that moment he realized that Billie was in the room, standing beside Nelle's desk, paperwork in hand, and

looking ridiculously beautiful in her usual short skirt and turtleneck. It was an absurd time to notice that her legs looked good in those boots she wore, but he couldn't help it. They always looked incredible, hitting her thigh at just the right spot. Even the black tights were sexy. He swallowed and nodded toward her.

"Billie," he said.

"You alright, Ethan?" she asked.

He wondered if the aftermath of the interview was still showing on his face. His cheeks certainly felt a little warmer, but that could have been because he was just thinking about Billie's legs.

"Yeah, I'm okay," he assured her.

He held her gaze for a couple more seconds, but cut it to give Nelle a wave and turn to head to the locker room. He wished he had asked Billie for a moment, but there really wasn't a reason to. What would he say? *I'm feeling vulnerable, please hold me?* That would be crazy considering they were only just getting to know each other.

Just when he opened the door to the stairwell, he heard his name from down the corridor. He turned his head. Billie was jogging over to him - impressive given the footwear. She slowed to a stop in front of him.

"Hey," she said, a little breathlessly. "I just...I wanted to say that..." She trailed off and took her bottom lip between her teeth, which looked so adorable that Ethan smiled, charmed.

“I’m sorry they did that to you. It was a shitty thing to do, and you were right to walk away.”

“Thank you,” he replied, voice gentle. “I, uh...” He stopped and glanced around to ensure they were actually alone. “I ain’t ashamed of where I come from. Not at all. But it’s not a joke to me either. I know I talk this way and that makes people jump to conclusions about me, but I’m not... I’m not some trailer park hillbilly, alright? I’m a goddamn professional.”

She blinked, taken aback. “I’ve never heard you swear before.”

“I don’t like to do it, but I’m real unhappy with -” He stopped himself and took a deep breath. “It’s fine. It’s over.”

“All of that is totally valid,” she said. She took a small step closer so she could reach his arm. Her warm hand made him feel like the world stopped turning. “And no one here thinks you’re a joke.”

His eyes searched hers, and he was grateful to find hers lacked any pity. There was only understanding there in her blue depths. He let out a breath, feeling the tension ease out of him as he did so. He needed to reciprocate somehow, so he closed the distance between them even further. His hand rose as if on its own accord to cup her cheek. Remarkably, she didn’t pull away.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

She only gazed back at him, an expectant smile threatening to take over her lips. What was she expecting, though? He

wanted to kiss her. It seemed like a moment where a kiss might be appropriate, but they were at work. And she was only just warming up to him. He couldn't kiss her now, no. Their first kiss needed to be a moment. A *real* moment. Like out of a movie or a fairy tale. Not just because she had been kind to him in a moment of weakness.

“Dinner,” he said suddenly, and his hand fell from her face.

Her brow wrinkled. “What?”

He cleared his throat. “I mean - well - dinner - do you have it?”

The moment the words left his mouth, he wished he could snatch them back and swallow them. God, he could have kicked himself. Or put his head through the wall. He had never been very smooth when it came to women, and it was only harder when it was a girl he really liked.

“Only every night,” she answered with an amused grin.

“I mean, would you like to have dinner with me?” he clarified, chuckling, and then remembered they had dined together before at her place with Tessa. “Just me. I'd like to take you out.”

“Oh,” she said, and that subtle pink climbed her cheeks. “Yes, well...alright then.”

“Great, how's tomorrow night?” he asked. “I'll pick you up at eight?”

“Sure,” she agreed.

“Perfect,” he said, wiping his sweaty palms on his jeans.  
“I’ll see you then.”

“See you then...neighbor,” she said with a wink.

She turned on her heel and walked back down the corridor before he could reply, and as he watched her go, it occurred to him that perhaps the interview wasn’t a total disaster after all.

## *Chapter 9*

Billie dusted blusher across her cheekbones, though she hardly needed it. Every time she thought of her upcoming dinner date with Ethan, she had more than enough color on her face. She still had no idea why she accepted, especially when she had sworn to keep her distance, but something about Ethan kept her coming back to him. When he wasn't around, she wished he was there. And when he was there, she felt...lighter somehow. Like the world wasn't so much to take on.

And yesterday, watching the interview, she had seen an entirely new side of him. Gone was the sweet Southern boy who didn't have a bad thing to say about anyone. In his place stood someone strong, capable, and sure of himself. He wasn't rude, just firm, and had drawn a hard line, seemingly without a second thought. How did he do that? Truthfully, she admired it. She had no such strength when she'd tried to confront Tony.

In the deepest depths of her soul, she found it really hot. Especially when he got fired up all over again when they were



alone. Something about his intensity when he swore was just...sexy. He was kind and gentle, certainly, but he was not to be taken advantage of. And he took his job seriously. The look in his eyes stayed with her the entire rest of the day, and well into the night. But maybe it was his touch on her face that made it linger.

“I still can’t believe you’re going on a date with Ethan Knight.”

Tessa’s voice made Billie jump with surprise and drop her compact.

“I don’t even know if it is a date,” Billie said as she fumbled around for her blush.

“It’s definitely a date,” Tessa said, rolling her eyes. “What made you agree to it?”

“It was...” Billie trailed off, searching her brain’s hard drive for any last ditch excuse, but came up with nothing. “I don’t know.”

“So can you admit you fancy him, now?” Tessa said.

“I suppose...” She stopped again. Was fancy the right word? It seemed bigger than that. And yet, they hadn’t really known each other long enough for anything more to be there. But there was undeniably *something*. “I suppose I do.” To avoid confronting her feelings, she added, “I mean, he’s fit as fuck.”

“You can’t fool me, Billie,” Tessa reminded her. “It’s more than that.”

“I know, nothing gets by you,” Billie sighed. “It’s just...it’s such an odd feeling, y’know? I’m not sure I trust it.”

“Forget about the feelings,” Tessa said with a shrug. “Just enjoy the moment and see Ethan for who he is.”

So far, that had worked out in Ethan’s favor. What Billie had to go on were the moments they had together, which showed her not only was he an incredible athlete, but a wonderful person as well. But what made him the way he was? How did he come through the ranks of one of the most prestigious international sports with seemingly no ego?

“I will,” she said. “And I’ll promise to fill you in on all the details. Though I am sorry to be missing movie night.”

“That’s alright,” Tessa said with a shrug. “You can see *Bringing Up Baby* anytime.”

“I do love Cary Grant,” Billie returned with a smile and then checked her phone. She had just enough time to do her mascara and spray her face to set her makeup. Tessa left her to it.

When her makeup was finished, Billie looked over her outfit one last time. It was a simple sweater dress, midnight blue in color, with her usual black boots. She liked the way Ethan was looking at them the other day, and she wanted him to do it again. God, what had gotten into her? She was supposed to be annoyed by this guy, but he’d somehow shifted everything he did to be endearing. Whether he meant to or not.

She gave a start when there was a knock at the door. And when she thought about it, she couldn't actually remember the last time a man had come to the door to pick her up for a date. When she and Greg started out, they met up wherever their date would be, and then they'd pick whose place to spend the night at. With Peter, he'd just pull up in his Lamborghini and text that he was parked outside. And before that...she couldn't recall either. No one had come to the door. Ethan stood out once again.

When she opened it, she was impressed even further. Not only had he come to the door, and clearly put some thought into his attire - a sweater, pea coat, and trousers - but he had brought a small bouquet of flowers. Roses, in fact. Half a dozen, long stemmed roses, tied neatly together with a golden ribbon. Cary Grant, who?

"Wow," she said, breathless. "You...you brought me flowers?"

"Is that wrong?" he said.

"No!" she answered quickly. Too quickly, so she cleared her throat to recover. "That's quite sweet, actually." She paused to take them, noticing the thorns had been taken off. She wondered if he had done it himself, it was just thoughtful enough. "Come in while I put them in a vase."

He followed her to the kitchen, greeting Tessa politely and chatting with her while Billie filled up a slender vase with water, untied the roses, and set them inside. They were the perfect size. She didn't have to cut the stems or anything. And

yet, her hands trembled as she arranged them. Why was she suddenly so nervous?

Ethan's smile provided a quick answer to that question.

"You ready to go?" he asked.

She nodded and placed the roses in the center of the kitchen table. "Yeah, actually, I am."

They said their goodbyes to Tessa, who responded with only a lazy wave in their general direction, since she was already engrossed in the movie. Which was to be expected given her love of Katharine Hepburn. Then Ethan helped Billie into her coat without her even having to ask. Once again struck by his chivalry, she thanked him, and they were out the door. When they stepped outside onto the sidewalk, he offered his hand, which she took with a shy smile.

"So, where are we going?" she asked.

"A little Italian place Luka suggested," he told her.

"What'd you do, take a poll?" she teased.

He flushed a little. "Nah, I only asked people I trust."

"Who's that, then?"

"Pretty much everyone except Peter and Devon."

Billie rolled her eyes, but not at Ethan. Just at the mention of Peter and his little henchman. "God, I hope you're not letting him get to you."

"No, not personally," he assured her. "But on the pitch, he's not passing to me, and it's costing us goal opportunities."

She couldn't deny that. In the last match, similar to what happened at Crystal Palace, Peter had been selfish with the ball, trying to make goals from tight angles instead of passing to Ethan, who was usually open or could get open quickly. If this was to be the pattern, Peter was setting up the whole team for failure.

"Have you spoken to the manager about it?" she asked.

"I haven't, but he's gotta see," he said. "Even my grandma sees it. She called me up madder than a wet hen last time it happened."

Billie chuckled. "Madder than a wet hen?"

He shrugged. "Just something we say."

She imagined his grandmother was quite protective. And maybe a little feisty too. She wondered if they would get along, but immediately shut that thought down. *Fuck's sake*, she inwardly scolded herself. *One date and you're already thinking of meeting his family? Relax, woman!*

"So, are you ready for the Man City match?" she asked to get the conversation back on a more neutral track.

"Yeah, I think so," he said. "We're doing pretty well in training, and our midfield is solid, I declare. Solid as a rock."

"It'll be your first time out of town, right?" she continued.

"Yeah, and I've been told that means it's time for my initiation," he said. "Though I ain't got a clue what that means."

She smirked. "I know."

He raised an eyebrow. "No chance of you telling me, is there?"

"Nope," she said with a firm shake of her head. "It'll ruin the initiation if I do."

"Can you give me a hint?"

"No."

"Anything?"

"Absolutely not."

"Dang," he chuckled. "Now I'm all on tenterhooks."

She gazed at him a moment, letting that sink in. He definitely didn't share a lot of common phrases with Londoners, but that one wasn't just from a different geographical area. That was out of a different time. Almost like when he offered his handkerchief. She didn't even realize she'd stopped until he slowed to stand beside her.

"You're a very unique person," she said, hardly thinking.

"I'll take that as a compliment," he returned lightly.

"It is one."

With that, she kept walking.

The restaurant was a cozy place, clearly family owned and operated, with tables so close together, turning sideways was required to get through them. True to his gentleman form, Ethan pulled out Billie's chair for her, and waited for her to be

settled before taking a seat himself. A waitress promptly appeared to take their drink order.

“Just water for me,” Ethan answered, and spied her name tag. “Thank you, Rosa.”

Rosa blinked at him in surprise, clearly unaccustomed to being addressed by name. “Uh... sure thing.” She faced Billie. “For you?”

“A glass of Cabernet, please,” Billie said.

“Be right back,” Rosa said, with one last bewildered look at Ethan before departing.

Billie met his gaze from across the table, his green eyes looking like glittering emeralds in the low candlelight.

“Where’d you learn that habit?” she wondered. “Getting people’s names?”

He cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. “Well...I’ve got some experience with being made to feel unimportant, so I decided a long time ago that I’d never let anyone I came across feel that way. I believe that starts with their name.”

She had never even thought of the importance of a name before, but it made sense. For the first three months of her time at Stanmore, Tony kept calling her Bella, and it definitely made her feel like less of a person. As if anyone could be in her position and she was just a stand in. To bother to learn someone’s name, even in a simple interaction, just to humanize them and make them feel seen was a kind of

generosity Billie could barely fathom. Especially for someone with his level of fame.

“How are you like this?” she blurted out, and when he shot her a puzzled look, she elaborated. “I mean, how is it that you’re a footballer with all this fame and money and talent, and yet...you never turn your nose up at anyone?”

“I wouldn’t be where I am if there wasn’t somebody to not turn their nose up at me,” he answered. “And believe me, people did.” He paused to swallow. “I was a poor boy from a trailer park with a...troubled mother and no father. Nobody gave me the time of day.”

“Until someone did,” she guessed, and he nodded. “Who was it?”

“My first coach, Larry Lowe,” he said. “My mom, she... Well, she forgot to pick me up from school one day, so I started walking. The soccer fields were on my way, and he invited me to play. I guess he saw potential there because I’ve been playing ever since.”

“How old were you?” she asked.

He dropped his gaze to his lap for a moment before looking at her again. “Six.”

She did not have time to express her sympathy for being neglected at such a young age before Rosa arrived with their drinks and began reading them the specials. But Billie could hardly focus. The more she learned about his mother, the more curious she was about the woman and what exactly had



happened to her. Of course, since the interview, she knew that she had passed away, but Ethan was so reluctant to speak about her, and he was exceptionally careful with his words when he did.

“So, enough about me,” he said, after Rosa took their orders. “I wanna know more about you.”

She swallowed a sip of wine. “Like what?”

“Where’d you grow up?” he asked. “Here in London?”

“Yep,” she answered. “Not far from where I live now actually, and my parents are still there. My sister lives in Chelsea though.”

“You like it?”

“Sure,” she said with a shrug. “It’s convenient, it’s what I know. I’ve traveled to other places on holiday, but London has always been home.”

“Your sister, is she older or younger?” he asked.

“Older,” she said. “By eight years.”

“Shoo-wee, that’s quite the gap,” he said. “Which one was uh...”

“The accident?” she finished with a grin.

“Well, I wasn’t gonna say it like that,” he chuckled.

“It was me,” she admitted. “Sadly, I’m all too aware that I was the result of red wine and Valentine’s Day shenanigans.”

“Ooohh, they told you the story, huh?”

“Every year on my birthday.”

“Brutal,” he said with a solemn shake of his head.

“Tell me about it,” she said as she took another sip of wine.

“But it sounds like you’ve got a nice family,” he said.

“Yeah, I do,” she told him. “And of course my parents just adore their grandkids - my niece and nephew - and with them around, it’s never dull.”

“How old are the kiddos?”

“Liam is four and Grace is two,” she said. “So, full on terrors to their parents, but free entertainment for extended family.”

He laughed, a warm, deep sound that came from his chest. The kind of sound that wrapped someone up in its arms and swayed with them. Like soft music from a record player. That was Ethan’s voice.

“Kids are great,” he said.

“You want some of your own?” she asked.

“Someday, yeah,” he told her. “It makes me nervous since I didn’t have the best example growing up, but I think it’d be nice to have a family of my own.”

A picture suddenly appeared in her mind of Ethan with a child sitting atop those broad shoulders of his, joy on their faces and in their eyes. A man with that kind of heart would make a wonderful father. She wanted to press for more, but thought better of it.

Thankfully, Rosa swung by then with their food. When he thanked her by name again, she smiled wide. Billie was mid-bite when Ethan asked a question that made her set her fork back down.

“So, you really went out with Peter O’Riley?”

She groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

He chuckled. “I only ask because I find it so hard to believe.”

“It was only three weeks, and he was constantly cheating on me,” she explained. “I ended it when Jordan sent me evidence he couldn’t deny.”

“Which was?”

“A video of him kissing another girl at a club,” she told him. “When I confronted him, he owned up to all the rest too.”

“Gotta give him some credit for honesty,” Ethan joked.

Billie snorted into her wine. When she recovered, he spoke again.

“Anyone since him?”

She turned the wine glass in half circles, the red swishing around inside, and thought about Greg and his words to her. They had been following her around like a shadow since he said them. And they haunted her especially around Ethan.

“Yeah, actually,” she said. “For most of last year I was dating Greg. He was an alright bloke, but we broke up

because..." She trailed off, fear sinking its claws into her heart. What if this scared him off? She took a deep breath and decided on the truth. "He told me that love is wasted on me."

Ethan blinked several times while that registered, and she watched as his brow knit slowly together over his eyes, as if he was trying to determine if he'd heard that right. "He said what now?"

"Well, it wasn't like he just blurted that out of nowhere," she explained. "It started because he was ready to say 'I love you' and I...wasn't."

"That is..." He let out a heavy breath. "Cruel. Wow."

"That's what I said!" Billie agreed indignantly, still miffed about Tessa calling her the 'emotionally unavailable fuck boy of her own life.' Would an emotionally unavailable fuck boy be on a date with a guy like Ethan? Billie didn't think so.

"Love's never wasted," Ethan went on. "Not even when you get hurt."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "How do you mean?"

"Love always has value," he said. "Gosh, I'd never say my love for my mother was wasted just because she passed and I was angry that I'd lost her. To say love is wasted just because it isn't reciprocated...that's just...Well, I don't think that was really love at all."

She let that seep into her heart, marinating it in the meaning. It was especially powerful coming from someone like him, who had lost so much.

“What did you do with it?” she wondered suddenly. “That love you had for your mother - what did you do with it after she passed?”

He raised an eyebrow. She’d surprised herself with the question, too. It was the sort of romantic nonsense she usually rolled her eyes at in films and books, but the way he talked about it, she couldn’t help herself. And thankfully, it only made him smile.

“Oh, I gave a lot of it to my grandmother,” he said. “She didn’t seem to mind.”

“To be expected, I suppose,” she returned with a grin.

“Some of it, I gave to football,” he went on. “And I kept a little bit for myself. I think that’s what she’d want.”

“I’m sure she would,” she said, warmth spreading from her chest to the tips of her toes.

Talking to Ethan was so much easier than her nerves led her to believe. It seemed no matter what she said, she was met with understanding. All the way through dessert, the conversation flowed. And by the time the chocolate cake they ordered arrived, Billie felt an ache in her cheeks from how much she was smiling. She had been on too many first dates to count, but this one stood out as hands down, the best.

They walked home, and Billie was thankful for the cold, as it woke her from her haze of having a full belly and two glasses of wine. Not to mention the fuzziness in her brain from the pleasure of the company. Ethan held her hand again as they

made their way down the sidewalk, their fingers clinging loosely to each other where they swayed with their steady pace. Suddenly needing to be closer, she leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder.

Just outside her building, a fleck of white floated past Billie's face that made her come to a stop. She held her free hand out and looked up. The stars were hidden behind a blanket of gray clouds, from which fell a light dusting of snow. The flakes melted upon making contact with her flushed skin.

"The snow's pretty," she said softly.

Ethan tugged his coat a little tighter around him, shoulders hunching against a cold wind. "Yeah, it's alright."

She blinked. "Wow, you *really* don't like the cold."

"It's not my favorite," he admitted, and she giggled.

"Well, would you like to come up?" she offered. "Have a cup of tea and...get warm?"

She tried to keep the suggestion out of her voice, but it was difficult to contain. After a night like this, she could hardly help wanting him. A goodnight kiss just wasn't going to cut it. Not when there was a fire in her belly and an ache between her legs just standing next to him. And the blush that came to his cheeks did nothing to subdue either of those things.

"I think we better say goodnight, actually," he said.

She dropped his hand. "Oh?"

“But I’d like to take you out again when we get back from Manchester,” he continued. “Would that be alright?”

Her mind was still reeling at being rejected. It had never happened before, so her ego was still catching itself on the ropes.

“Um...yes, alright,” she agreed hastily. “I think so.”

He tucked her chin in his hand and lifted her gaze to meet his. “I had a really great time tonight.”

Her first instinct was to question that, since he just turned her down. But he seemed to mean it. Those eyes were too honest to be lying.

“Me too,” she breathed.

She resigned herself to just the goodnight kiss. If he wanted to take things slow, she could work with that. He began to lean forward, and she closed her eyes, preparing to stand up on her toes to meet his mouth with her own. But his lips pressed into her forehead instead. She resisted the urge to stamp her foot and demand why he’d even asked her on a date. Most of her irritation melted away at the smile on his face, and his sweet dimples, but she was still confused.

“I’ll make sure you get inside,” he said. “Goodnight, Billie.”

“Goodnight,” she returned slowly. “Ethan.”

She felt so much colder when she took a step away from him. She must have looked unsure because he nodded at her, as if to confirm this was really happening, and that was all she

was going to get. With one last wistful look, she turned around and went into her building, her mind awirl with doubt about his intentions.

When she reached her flat, Tessa was still on the couch, clattering away at her laptop for her next article. She looked up when Billie came through the door.

“Tess, you’re attracted to women, right?” Billie began.

“Ach, it couldn’t be as bad as all that,” Tessa said. “You’ve had plenty of shit dates, none of those made you a wee lesbian.”

“That’s the thing, it wasn’t a shit date,” Billie explained, and she shrugged off her coat before hanging it on the rack. “It was a great date. But...I invited him up and he said no.”

“Did he at least kiss you?”

“Only on the forehead,” Billie said. “He didn’t even try to grab my ass!”

“That bastard!” Tessa cried.

Finally, Billie picked up on her sarcasm and she frowned. “I’m being serious! Why would he ask me out if he isn’t attracted to me?”

“You are dramatically overreacting,” Tessa said. “Are you so jaded you’ve forgotten what romance looks like?”

Billie blinked, taken aback. Then she shook her head stubbornly. “No, romance would have been kissing me out



there in the snow. Romance would have been coming up here and giving me a bloody orgas -”

“Billie,” Tessa cut her off. “A week ago you didn’t even like the man. Now you’re upset because he wouldn’t shag you on the first date?”

“No!” Billie insisted.

“Good.”

“He wouldn’t kiss me either.”

Tessa rolled her eyes. “Fuck’s sake...”

“Ugh, I’m going to bed,” Billie groaned.

“Right, well, make sure you clean your vibrator after you use it,” Tessa said.

“Fuck off!” Billie shot back.

She changed into pajamas and then went into the bathroom to wash her face and brush her teeth. But no matter what she did, she couldn’t get the feeling of Ethan’s lips from her skin where he had kissed her. She wasn’t upset that it remained, only that she couldn’t feel it in other places, too. With a sigh, she crawled into bed and tugged her duvet over herself. From under the pillow, she retrieved the handkerchief and looked at it, willing it to give her any answers. Or maybe even just comfort. It must have worked, as she fell asleep holding it to her chest.

## *Chapter 10*

Etihad Stadium roared to life as Stanmore took the pitch alongside the home team, Manchester City. Ethan swallowed down his nerves. Away matches always had him a bit rattled, as he fed off the energy of the crowd. When they were against him and his teammates, they were harder to drown out. Luckily, an encouraging wink from Hector helped.

What didn't help was that he had been getting radio silence from Billie since their date. Even now, his mind went to her and if she was watching. If she was, what was she thinking? Was she angry at him? She seemed a little hurt that he hadn't come back to her place with her, but he knew he wouldn't be able to resist her if she got him there. And he wanted to take his time with her. Really get to know each other before things got more physical. He considered calling to explain, but he talked himself out of that because he didn't want to seem presumptuous.

The sound of a whistle drew him from his thoughts of her. They lined up in formation on their side, Ethan in the dead

center by the ball. After taking a knee, they all stood up, the whistle blew again, and Ethan kicked the ball into play with a pass to Devon. He then lobbed it across the pitch to Peter, who took off along the sideline. Ethan snuck past the light blue shirt marking him and got open, but Peter was up to his usual bad behavior.

“O’Riley!” Ethan called, and waved to try and get his attention, but Peter was looking resolutely in front of him.

Finally cornered, Peter did pass, but backward to Hector instead of directly to Ethan. Even the Man City defender seemed perplexed by the choice, shooting Ethan a quizzical look. Ethan only shrugged and moved to get open again.

Man City forced Stanmore back into their zone, but luckily, the defense acted quickly before the Man City forwards could take a shot. Kâmil won the ball from them and passed it back up toward Artem, who surged forward. Ethan followed, all the way past the midfield and into Man City territory. Artem launched it up the field, and Ethan received it where it landed about a yard in front of him, outrunning his opponent. It was just him and the goalkeeper. He swung his leg back and punted, the pall soaring off his laces. Unfortunately, the goalkeeper was there. He snatched it out of the air and fell down on top of it.

The crowd cheered as Ethan threw his head back and groaned in frustration. Against a team like this, an early goal could be a game changer. And a much-needed boost for the Wasps’ morale in this environment. They might have even had

two attempts if Peter wasn't being so stubborn. Ethan shrugged it off and got ready for the goal kick.

The first half hour of the match remained goalless. Which was encouraging in some ways, but frustrating in others. Finally, Man City got one past Jordan and into the back of the net in the thirty-second minute. Jordan rallied Stanmore while their opponents celebrated to the din of the crowd.

Two minutes of stoppage time were added to the forty-five minute half. Man City took another shot, which Jordan knocked up and over the back of the net, but that meant they got to set up for a corner kick, which was another opportunity. And less time for Stanmore to try and get back down the field to equalize.

Both teams lined up in front of the goal as the Man City striker stood back to take it. He made solid contact with the ball, and it sailed over them. Ethan was the closest, so he jumped to meet the ball with his head and knock it away, back down the pitch toward the goal they needed, only Peter yanked down on Ethan's shoulders, going for it himself. Unfortunately, his angle was all wrong, and he sent it right into the foot of a Man City defender, who chipped it back into the net. The crowd went wild as Man City expanded their lead, and Stanmore collectively groaned.

"What were you doing?" Ethan snapped. He didn't usually shout at his teammates, but this felt out of line. Peter's position wouldn't have worked; his move was deliberate sabotage. "I had it!"

“Watch yourself, cowboy,” Peter warned, starting to turn his back.

“What is your problem with me, O’Riley?” Ethan demanded, grabbing his teammate by the jersey and forcing him to turn back around. “That I took your friend’s spot? Because if that’s it, you need to take it up with the staff, I didn’t make that call.”

Peter sneered. “You wanna have this out here, do you?”

“Yeah, I do,” Ethan replied firmly. It didn’t matter that there was a stadium full of thousands, most of which were still singing about the goal. “Because if we can’t work together then this is only going to get worse.” He gestured to the scoreboard, reflecting their imminent demise. 2-0 was not impossible to come back from, but it wasn’t easy either. Especially with only one more half left to play.

“Alright,” Peter said. “You’re an overrated, overhyped fucking hillbilly who acts like his place here is a given. You’ve got to earn your spot on this team, mate.”

Ethan frowned. He wanted to remind Peter he’d spent a whole career earning his spot on this squad and in the Premier League in general, but that wasn’t anything Peter didn’t already know, so Ethan decided to match his energy. “And *you* are a misogynistic, arrogant limey who’s selfish enough to sink this whole team for the sake of his own petty jealousy.”

Peter’s mouth fell open. The rest of the team had arrived as well, glancing between each other as they weren’t quite sure what was going to happen next.

“We even?” Ethan challenged.

Peter closed his mouth tightly, glancing away. Ethan started to go. But before he could take a step, Peter’s palms made heavy contact with Ethan’s chest, forcing him back a few steps. Reeling, he steadied himself against the goal post. The shove activated something inside him he thought was long under control. He had more than enough practice in a scrap, so he shot Peter a warning look.

“You don’t wanna fight me, O’Riley,” Ethan said.

Peter started toward him again, but this time, Ethan saw it coming, and braced himself. Years of fights in the trailer park brought back muscle memory, so he planted his feet, and pushed back with enough force to put Peter flat on his back, landing with a breathy “oof!” as he hit the turf. Ethan rose back to his full height while Peter scrambled to his feet again.

“What the fuck’s going on over here?” Jordan shouted as he jogged over, the ball still tucked under his arm.

“The fucking cowboy doesn’t know his place!” Peter yelled.

“Watch it, O’Riley,” Jordan warned.

“Taking his side, are you?” Peter protested.

Jordan squared up, towering over Peter. “That cowboy’s our best chance at scoring enough goals to win this match, maybe even a cup final. You fuck that up, and I’ll smile killing you.”

At first, Ethan thought Jordan was making some sort of morbid joke, but the way the color drained out of Peter’s face told him Jordan was dead serious. Ethan could scarcely

imagine Jordan's expression if it could strike such fear into a guy with an ego the size of Peter's. Jordan turned around and looked at Ethan.

"Get it the fuck together, the both of you," he said.

"Aye, aye, captain," Ethan said.

Peter's scowl might have made Ethan drop dead there on the pitch if looks could kill. Cursing under his breath, he jogged away. Jordan clapped Ethan on the shoulder.

"You alright?" he asked.

"All good, skipper," Ethan said.

It wasn't totally true. The business with Peter was unfinished, but it could wait another thirty seconds until they were in the locker room to settle it. By the time the whistle blew for halftime, Ethan was willing to bury it, but he could see the rage still coming off of Peter in waves, so when they reached the locker room, he was prepared for the blow up.

"Fuck you, Knight!" Peter shouted.

"Fuck me?" Ethan retorted. "You're the one who gave away that corner!"

"After you'd already missed a shot!"

"I didn't miss! The keeper saved it!"

"Same difference!"

"It's really not, but unlike *you*, I don't hold grudges against people just doing their jobs!"

“*Alright!*” bellowed Jordan, who came to step between them. “O’Riley, you can’t be such a prick that you don’t know what you did back there was fucked up.”

“I didn’t -”

“You did!” Jordan interrupted. “We all saw it, didn’t we, lads?”

“Yeah, man...” Israel spoke up. “It looked like you were playing for the other team.”

“And you might as well have been,” Artem added. “It’s your fault we’re down by two instead of just one.”

Peter glanced around, the angry stares and resentment finally sinking in. Even Devon, his most loyal companion, refused to meet his gaze, his eyes locked on his boots and his mouth turned down into a deep frown.

“You fucked it up, mate,” Devon finally said.

Before Peter - or anyone else - could respond, Coach Warren arrived. His usual jovial nature was gone, replaced with a shadow of fury, especially when he spotted Peter.

“O’Riley, you’re out for the second half,” he said. “Callum, you’re going in, so start warming up.”

“You’re benching me?” Peter protested.

“I am!” Coach shot back. “Remember that we’re on the same side out there! You don’t have to like each other, but you will - you *must* - have enough respect for the game and this



club to act like teammates!” He looked around the rest of the locker room. “Is that understood?”

A half-hearted murmur went through the locker room.

“I can’t hear you - is that understood?!”

“Yes, coach!” came the resounding chorus.

“Alright, let’s talk about strategy for the second half.”

Ethan found his gratitude difficult to shake. He had been worried that he was taking Peter’s antics too personally, which was why he ignored them for the few weeks he had been in England, but to see the rest of the team back him up was more validating than he could have asked for. He didn’t want anyone to think he was being sensitive, or causing a problem for no reason, especially when he was the new guy. Now he only wished that he and Peter could get to the bottom of whatever his problem was. He was more than happy to try and unpack it. As long as Peter was too. Coach was right - they didn’t need to be best friends, but they did have to collaborate on the pitch.

The second half began on a high. Subbing Callum in for Peter proved to be the right choice. Seven minutes in, after a gorgeous cross from Callum, Ethan sank one into the back of the net. They only celebrated a few short moments, since they weren’t in the clear yet. They would need to act fast if they hoped to equalize. With a team like Man City, it was unlikely that they would get lucky enough to catch the goalkeeper off guard a second time. They were going to have to work even harder for that.

Man City's defense did, in fact, tighten after the first Stanmore goal, so it was going to take some creativity to earn a second one. But in his heart, Ethan wanted two more. He hated to end a match in a draw. It didn't satisfy him to tie, he was always aiming to win. And maybe, with the cooperation he was getting now, they would be able to do just that.

In the seventieth minute, Ethan scored again. It was a Hail Mary, honestly. The defense was closing in on him, and he fired the ball away like a rocket with just enough force to get it past the goalkeeper, who grazed it with the tips of his fingers. Ethan celebrated by going to the Stanmore supporter's section and soaking up their cheers. He pumped his fist in the air as he took a flying leap, all to the sweet singing of the fans, their scarves lifted high as their voices. He was even hungrier for the win now.

A chance didn't come until stoppage time. Five minutes were added to the end of the match. Already, Ethan's muscles screamed in protest at carrying on. And despite the cool night air, sweat plastered his kit to his back. None of it mattered. Not when he was sprinting through the midfield, hurtling toward the goal. He knew he could take it himself, but he was heavily marked and the goalkeeper was already poised and waiting for him. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Devon keeping pace out on the right. Wide open.

Ethan made the extra pass.

Devon only allowed himself to be surprised for a millisecond, quickly recovering to smash the ball past the

keeper and into the corner of the net. The sea of blue in the Etihad fell silent, but the sliver of the stadium dedicated to the Stanmore supporters made enough noise in that moment to be registered on a seismograph. They were up on Man City by one point, 3-2, with only ninety seconds left of the game.

The final whistle blew with Man City unable to come up with another goal. The team all leapt into each other's arms as the fans began a chorus of Queen's "Don't Stop Me Now." The song had been the team's victory anthem since they were first promoted to the top division in 1980, the year after the song was released. Ethan happily joined in, relishing their triumph before going to shake hands with the Man City players still on the field.

Slowly, the crowd dwindled down, the Man City supporters trickling out of the stadium. Ethan signed a couple jerseys and posed for a few photos with the fans at the front, though doing his best to include those a few rows back as well. He was just finishing up with a selfie when Devon approached him, looking uncharacteristically sheepish.

"That extra pass, mate..." he trailed off. "I can't believe you did that. You could've had a hat trick."

Ethan clapped him on the shoulder. "It was more likely to go in if you took it. A win for the team was more important than a hat trick for me."

Devon extended his hand, and Ethan shook it with a smile. He glanced around for Peter, hoping perhaps they could move forward as well. The glory of a win could surely outweigh the

animosity from earlier. But Peter was already halfway through the tunnel back to the locker room, ignoring the press and even a couple fans that were calling out to him. Ethan decided to let it lie.

A reporter scurried over, shoving a microphone into his face. She tossed her dark hair back and smiled. “Ethan, a word?”

“Sure,” he agreed.

“How’s it feel to get a win tonight, against a team like Man City who are top of the table?” she asked.

“Oh, it feels great,” he said. “I enjoy a game that’s challenging, it’s how we get better, as players and as a team. And those boys put up one heck of a fight, I declare.”

The reporter grinned. “That last goal - did you think about taking it yourself?”

“Only for a second,” he told her. “If I took it, there was a chance it’d be blocked, and that wasn’t a risk I was willing to take, so I passed.”

“Quite unselfish of you!” she praised.

“Well, there’s no I in team, right?” he said, shrugging.

“So there isn’t,” she chuckled. “Would you say teamwork was the key that led to the win tonight?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “It was a little shaky at first, but we pulled it together, and the results are obvious.”

“The halftime sub of Peter O’Riley...” she continued asking her question, but Ethan didn’t hear it.

A distraction in the form of none other than Billie Axton appeared on the pitch, alongside Nelle, who was snapping photos for social media. The sounds and the lights all faded away, and his eyes were trained only on Billie. But what was she doing here? Did she usually attend away matches? He didn’t even think she went to the home games. She looked devastatingly beautiful in her blue coat and Stanmore scarf draped over her shoulders. Her curls wrapped into a low bun at the nape of her gorgeous neck. She laughed at something Nelle said, and Ethan swore he felt his heart try to leap out of the confines of his chest.

“Ethan?”

The reporter’s voice brought him back to his interview.  
“Sorry?”

“Did you think the halftime substitution of Peter O’Riley was the right call?” she repeated.

“Oh...uh...you know what, that’s for the coaches to decide,” he said. “We won tonight, but who’s to say that couldn’t have happened with him out there with us?”

She opened her mouth to say more, but he held up a hand to stop her.

“I’m sorry - wait, what was your name?”

“Chloe,” she told him.

“Well, I’m sorry, Chloe, but I’ve gotta take care of something,” he told her. “Raincheck on the rest of that interview.”

“Uh - alright,” she stammered, but he was already jogging away.

By rights, his body should not have been able to move at any pace faster than a slow walk, but he was too eager to see Billie. Talk to her. Explain himself a little. He couldn’t do it in front of all these people, but he could at least arrange a time for them to have a private conversation.

“Hey,” he said when he got close enough for her to hear.

She turned her head and at the sight of him, frowned. “Hey, yourself.”

“Look, I think there’s been a...miscommunication,” he said. “Have I done something wrong?”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Do you *think* you’ve done something wrong?”

“You’ve given me that impression, yeah,” he said. Seeing Nelle’s curious face out of the corner of his eye caused him to take Billie’s shoulder and lead her to the least populated part of the still-buzzing pitch, private conversation be damned. He needed to know now. “Talk to me. Tell me what you’re feeling.”

A bit of pink rose to her cheeks, which he figured didn’t have anything to do with the cold.

“I...” she trailed off, refusing to look at him. “I was embarrassed.”

“About?” he said. He had an idea this was, in fact, about him not going up with her after their date, but he wanted her to say it.

“You-”

She was cut off when Hector leapt onto Ethan’s back, still on a post-win high, and expressing it in rapid Spanish. Ethan laughed, but stopped himself at the irritable look on Billie’s face, so he eased Hector back to the ground.

“Bro, you were on fire tonight!” Hector cried. He pressed a finger into Ethan’s arm, and quickly retracted it as if he’d touched a hot stove. “Ay, caliente!”

“Thank you,” Ethan chuckled in spite of himself. “Y’all were a big part of it too, don’t forget now.” He paused for a beat, and then nodded toward Billie. “Could we have a second?”

“Oh!” Hector gasped. “Sí, sí, of course.”

“Thanks, man,” Ethan said, and they parted ways with a fist bump. He turned back to Billie, who watched Hector’s back fade down the pitch before meeting Ethan’s eyes.

“You turned me down!” she hissed.

“I did not!” he shot back.

She raised a skeptical brow at him, but he was just thankful she was looking him in the face again.

“Okay, I kinda did,” he admitted. “But I was just trying to be respectful.”

“Well, don’t!” she snapped, and immediately appeared to regret the words, as she dropped her gaze again. Ethan schooled his face so that she wouldn’t see his amusement. “I mean...obviously, I want you to respect me, but I also...” She stopped once more, the pink turning a deep shade of red. “Oh, never mind.”

He went to comfort her, but they were interrupted again. Luka was there, and slung an arm around Ethan’s shoulders.

“We’re going out to celebrate after,” Luka said. “It’s time for your initiation, Knight.”

Fond as he was of his teammates, Ethan was beginning to get annoyed himself. Couldn’t they see he was in the middle of something important? He forgave them quickly, though. A post-win high meant a drastic drop in observation ability.

“Yeah, of course,” he agreed. “I’ll meet y’all in the locker room, okay?”

Luka patted his shoulder with a smirk. “Strap yourself in, brother.”

He too, let them be.

Ethan shot Billie a pleading look. “Come out with us tonight.”

“What?” Her eyes widened. “No way.”



“C’mon, just for a little while,” he pressed, and took her hand, feeling that odd, tingling sensation he got whenever he touched her. “Let me make it up to you.”

“I dunno...”

“Please.”

Her eyes found his once more. There was still uncertainty in those beautiful eyes, but there was also softness lingering just beyond the icy blue. He placed his free hand on top of hers, sandwiching her palm between the two of his. Her gaze floated over to that point of contact and her proud shoulders dropped.

“Oh, alright then,” she said, defeated.

He grinned. “Awesome!”

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“Oh, shoot,” he said, realizing he didn’t know. “I’ll...I’ll text you, okay?”

“Okay,” she returned. “You better not forget.”

“Don’t you worry, darlin’,” he assured her. “I’ll never forget you.”

The corners of her mouth threatened to turn up into a smile, but she stopped herself. He kept looking back at her as his teammates swept him up in their crowd, chanting on the way to the locker room.

## Chapter 11

With a bribe of free drinks, Billie convinced Nelle to come with her to the karaoke bar where the team was celebrating their win. Purple light bulbs in all the fixtures created a moody atmosphere, disrupted only by a white spotlight on the stage. Hector was already there, singing “Dos Oruguitas” from *Encanto*, so soulfully that no one was talking. The only sound was some sniffing throughout the bar. Dozens of packed bodies made it warm enough that Billie immediately removed her coat. Nelle quietly ordered their drinks, and Billie paid before they joined the guys on a large sectional in front of the stage. Ethan got to his feet when they reached it, and Hector held out the last note several seconds after the song faded out.

“Hey, you made it!” Ethan’s face lit up like a Christmas tree.

Billie inwardly cursed his dimples for being so cute. She nearly forgot she was still annoyed with him for embarrassing her. Even if he hadn’t intended to. And of course he hadn’t, the man had all the malice of a golden retriever.

“Hi,” she said shortly.

“Can we talk?”

She swallowed and nodded. After checking that Nelle was alright with the guys, Billie allowed Ethan to lead her to a private room in the back of the bar. The sound of Israel’s pleasant voice singing some Ed Sheeran song cut off when he shut the door. The private room was well-lit and staged like a 1970s living room with a conversation pit in the middle, complete with a miniature staircase leading into the dark gray, wrap-around sofa. Ethan went in first and then offered his hand to Billie to help her down the stairs.

“So,” she said as she took a seat. She meant to sound rather serious and business-like, only the couch sank so much beneath her that her feet came off the floor. She gave a squeak of surprise and tugged at her skirt so she wouldn’t flash him accidentally. By some miracle, she managed not to spill her cocktail while she scrambled to get balanced on the edge of the cushion, where there was no threat of being swallowed up. She cleared her throat and fixed her hair in a last-ditch effort to regain her dignity. “You wanted to speak to me.”

Despite his amused smile, he let her off the hook. “Well, for starters, I’m sorry if I embarrassed you the other night.” He paused, and she nodded to acknowledge it. “The thing is...I’m a little old fashioned.”

“Are you?” she teased with a knowing smirk. “I hadn’t noticed.”

He smiled, dropping his gaze to the floor before meeting hers again. “I like to get to know somebody before I get intimate with them. I mean, we haven’t even had the chance to discuss STI testing or birth control or the kind of sex we might like to have together.”

Billie sputtered into her drink, completely thrown off by his sudden candor. For several moments, she blinked at him, stunned. “You’re awfully casual about this conversation.”

“If you met my grandmother, you’d understand,” he said with a grin. “She is...well, extremely sex positive, and made sure I was comfortable with the subject, so I’d have the language to communicate with potential partners.”

“And all this time I thought Southerners were prudes,” she said, and wiped at a droplet that had landed on her skirt.

“Not all of us,” he returned with a wink. “The number of times I was told ‘communication is lubrication’ is probably outrageous.”

An uncertain laugh made its way out of her, and she took a sip of her drink to cover it up. Her next question had her face burning like she had a fever, but she wanted to be certain, so she forced herself to ask it anyway. “So...it wasn’t that you don’t find me attractive?”

To his credit, he didn’t laugh. In fact, all traces of amusement fell from his face as he looked at her, mouth falling open just slightly. “Is...is that what you thought?”

“What else was I supposed to think?” she huffed out.

“I am so sorry, Billie,” he said, and moved to kneel in front of her, taking her hand in his. “Hurting your feelings is the last thing I wanna do. I think you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I just want to be responsible with our bodies and our feelings.”

She blinked, letting his words percolate. No one had ever been so upfront and honest with her before, and she found it... really hot. He was willing to open himself up, admit to her how he felt and why he’d done something. And he did it freely, without demands for anything in return. Those gorgeous green eyes blinked up at her with such sincerity, she almost whimpered.

“I understand,” she said softly.

“Good,” he returned, getting up so he could sit beside her.

“So...” she trailed off. “Do you have a set number of dates or something? What are the parameters here?”

“Nah, nothing like that.” He shook his head. “I only have one condition for intimacy.”

“Which is?”

“We’ve gotta be exclusive,” he said. “That is, you’d have to be my girlfriend.”

She blanched. “Y-your girlfriend?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “And hey, if it helps, I’d be your boyfriend right back.”

A long breath escaped her lungs. She was fresh off a breakup. She knew herself enough to know she didn't really miss Greg, but what he'd said still hung around her like a cloud. And while Ethan had his charm - she was drawn to him more than anyone she'd met before - a step in that direction was too intense. That was setting herself up for what she feared from the moment she'd met him - that she could lose him. What if she wasn't what he thought she was? What if he realized she was so much weaker than the image she portrayed of herself? Would he still want her?

“Do we have to decide right now?” she asked.

“Now?” he said. “Heck no. But I reckon we go on a couple more dates, give it some time, and then we'll have another conversation kinda like this one where we decide how we'd like to move forward.”

“Is this...healthy communication?” she said, half to herself. She hadn't intended to say it out loud, but it was there now and there was nothing she could do about it.

“First time?” he teased.

She cocked an eyebrow and shoved him playfully on the arm. “Cheeky prick.”

After a beat, he gave her hand a squeeze. “We good?”

Before she could answer, the door burst open. Billie gave a start and clutched a handful of Ethan's shirt as she sucked in a breath. In stormed Artem, Jordan, Hector, and Israel - the latter

three stumbling and laughing, holding on to each other as they did so.

“There you are!” Jordan cried, exasperated. “We’ve been looking all over for you!”

“It’s initiation time, amigo!” Hector added.

“Oh, man,” Ethan said. “What is it?”

“The FNG always closes out karaoke,” Israel explained.

“FNG?” Billie questioned, able to speak now that her heart rate had returned to normal after the teammate jump scare.

“Fuckin’ new guy,” Jordan said, and Billie giggled.

“It’s time for him to put on a show,” Artem said.

“Do I at least get to pick my song?” Ethan asked.

“Sure,” Jordan answered. “But they close in half an hour, so it’s gotta be now.”

Ethan sighed and got to his feet before helping Billie up as well. She was a bit surprised that he had no objections to singing. The idea of getting up there was humiliating to her, but Ethan had already proven the amount of courage he had. If he could be vulnerable with her like this, one on one, what was a little song in front of friends?

They all filed out of the room and back into the darkness of the main area. Fernando was holding the mic still, much to the chagrin of some locals, but initiation was too important to miss. Ethan jogged up to the stage, took the mic, and

whispered what was undoubtedly his song choice to Fernando because the latter promptly strode across the room to the DJ.

Billie inwardly scolded herself for admiring how Ethan looked in this light, though she imagined there were few lighting scenarios that would be unflattering to him. The man was gorgeous. It made what he told her all the more frustrating. But perhaps, if it went the way she feared, it would make the potential breakup easier to take if they hadn't slept together. But all thoughts of that were out the window when Ethan's song began. A few soft guitar strums and already she clocked it as a country song. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

"If our talk didn't make things clear, Billie," Ethan said into the mic. "I hope this song does."

All eyes turned on her and she sank into the couch she was on, wishing it would engulf her completely. She fixed her gaze on the title and artist that popped up on the projector screen behind him. "Let Me Down Easy" by Billy Cunningham.

*"There's a little moonlight, dancin' on the sand,"* Ethan began. *"There's a warm breeze blowin' by the ocean as you're takin' my hand..."*

She sat straight up, amazed. His speaking voice was pleasant enough, but hearing him sing? That was pretty much astral projecting her into another dimension. It was smooth and melodious, wistful and sweet. With just enough of that drawl in his accent to make it authentic. She glanced around at his teammates to be sure she was hearing it right. And she



must have been, as they were all staring at him with their mouths hanging open. But it was the words of the chorus that made her heart - which she swore for so long was made of ice - begin to crack.

*“If I fall, can you let me down easy?”*

*If I leave my heart with you tonight,*

*Will you promise me that you’re gonna treat it right?*

*I’m barely hangin’ on*

*If I fall, can you let me down easy?”*

His hope came true. She absolutely understood where he was, and maybe, with some patience, she could meet him there.

She wasn’t sure if it was his voice or the line *“lookin’ like an angel lyin’ on a blanket with a halo of hair,”* but something triggered an image to swim to the front of her mind. It was vague, like trying to recall a dream right after waking up, floating somewhere between sleep and consciousness, clutching at it before it slipped away. But a couple of details were clear - first, golden yellow flowers surrounded her; second, the late spring sun warmed her skin; and third, she lay beside a man who looked very much like Ethan as he sang to her, absentmindedly running his fingers through her hair. It was a pleasant thought. So why was it making her so sad?

She shook her head to clear it. It must have been something she dreamed, it had to be. Ethan had only just moved here, and it was still January. And as far as she could recall, she had

never laid down in a field of flowers with anyone. But why did it feel so real?

Ethan finished up the song, and the wild applause of his teammates returned her to the present moment. She joined them, plastering a smile on her face and pushing the thoughts of that field or meadow or whatever it was to the far reaches of her brain. When he approached her from the stage, receiving high fives and fist bumps the whole way over, he opened an arm up to her and she slid beneath it so she was tucked into his side. She looked up at him and smiled.

“We’re good,” she told him, answering his question from before they were interrupted.

“So, a second date is in order?” he asked.

She nodded firmly. “Absolutely.”

“Now, I really feel like a winner,” he replied.

For a moment, she considered kissing him for that. They had just beaten Manchester City for God’s sake, the man deserved a kiss if she made him feel more like a winner than that. She cleared her throat instead. “I...I think it’s closing time.”

His eyes left hers for only a moment to glance at the bar, where the bartender was closing everything down. Nelle approached and stole Billie’s attention with a hand on the arm.

“You ready to head back to the hotel?” Nelle asked. “We’ve got an early start in the morning.”

“Yeah, sure,” Billie said, looking up at Ethan. She wanted to stay and sort out firm details for her next date with him, but he was hiding a yawn behind his hand.

“Text me when you get back safe,” he said.

“Took the words right out of my mouth,” she said with a smirk.

He grinned. “Glad we’re back on the same page.”

“Goodnight, Ethan.”

“G’night, darlin, ’.”

She watched him merge into the retreating crowd of his teammates, and sighed. Nelle’s smug look turned that sigh into a huff. “What?”

“Are you two together?” Nelle wondered.

“No, it’s nothing serious,” Billie said, and for some reason, that didn’t feel like the truth. “Just...going on a couple dates. No harm in that, right?”

“Footballers are a breed all their own,” Nelle said with a shake of her head. “Watch yourself there.”

“I’m all too aware of the breed you’re referring to,” Billie returned, rolling her eyes. “You were one of the girls Peter cheated on me with, remember?”

“Unfortunately, I do,” Nelle said with a sigh. “Trust me, we were both fooled.”

“I believe it,” Billie said. She took one last look at Ethan as the door closed behind him. “But that one is different.”

“I hope you’re right,” Nelle said. “For both your sakes.”

She held the door open and Billie followed her back out into the cold night air.



The following day, with Tessa out with her fellow vintage enthusiasts, Billie had the flat blissfully to herself. After the chaos of travel, the match, and karaoke night afterward, she was ready to rest her tired body and engage in her favorite form of self care - a steaming hot bath with a glass of red wine. She even treated herself to a bath bomb as well. After lighting a few candles, she sank into the water. The heat sent tingles all the way up her spine, especially with the contrast of the cool surface of the tub making contact with the skin of her upper back. With a contented sigh, she lay back and let it wash over her.

Her mind went to Ethan the moment she relaxed. What was he up to this afternoon? How did he spend a Sunday off? What was his idea of self care? He probably needed it more than most, considering he gave so much of himself all the time. Not only was his job a huge commitment, but he was also totally unselfish. She guessed he was probably helping a neighbor with something around the house or a teammate with a skill

they needed to improve. Before she might have rolled her eyes, but now...she smiled.

From its spot on the counter, her phone dinged. She ignored it. If it was work, it could definitely wait. Her family could too, though it was unlikely they would text. The Axtons were phone call people. If it was Tessa - well, it wouldn't be Tessa, she'd be far too engrossed in her shopping. If it was Ethan, then Billie didn't mind playing it a bit aloof. It was better for both of them if she did. Already, she felt herself more invested in him than she had been in anyone before, and that was terrifying. Plus, they were taking it slow. No need to jump to the phone.

It dinged again. She closed her eyes. Another cursed alert tone came from the speaker. Then another. Finally, a triplet of tones, so whoever it was had just sent three rapid texts. She glowered at the device, briefly considering hurling it out her window.

Whoever it was clearly had something important to say, so with a groan, she hauled herself out of the tub and picked up the damn phone. It was the last person she expected. All the messages were from Tony. Puzzled, she swiped to open them, and her jaw dropped at what she saw.

Screenshots of Tweets, all with photos of her and Ethan after the match, captioned with speculation about who she was and what exactly their relationship was with each other. And she couldn't say she blamed them. Had they really been

standing so close to each other? From one angle it almost looked like they were kissing. Tony's messages were furious.

*Billie, what the hell is this???*

*Are you dating Ethan Knight???*

*I don't want him distracted.*

*HELLO???*

*BILLIE*

*ANSWER ME*

She locked her phone in panic. Her heart rate spiked not only out of worry, but rage as well. Why had all those people taken pictures? She cursed the internet and everyone on it for their proficiency for jumping to conclusions. And Tony. She was glad he wasn't there, and not only because she wasn't dressed. If he was standing in front of her, she'd have to be heavily restrained or she was certain she would choke him to death. What business was it of his who she dated? Or who Ethan dated? What did he mean he didn't want Ethan "distracted"?

She looked at herself in the mirror and squared her shoulders. She was going to have to confront him again in the morning. This time, she could not back down.

## *Chapter 12*

The hours between Sunday evening and Monday morning eroded some of Billie's resolve. But she was angry enough to skip breakfast and march right out of her flat to the street. The sight on the sidewalk almost made her forget her rage entirely. Ethan stood waiting for her, a coffee in hand and that adorable smile on his face. It amazed her how in so little time he had gone from one of the reasons she was pissed off to the sole reason she wasn't.

"Morning!" he said sunnily. "Coffee?"

"Yeah, thanks," she replied, taking the mug in hand. "You made it yourself?"

"Yes, ma'am," he told her. "And in the spirit of honesty, I'll go ahead and tell you I asked Tessa how you take it."

"Thank you," she chuckled, touched by the effort. After taking the first sip, she hummed with contentment. "It's perfect."

He grinned. "Can I walk you to work?"

She blinked, taken aback. “You don’t have to do that, you’ll be hours early.”

“I don’t mind, I usually go in a little early to lift weights and stuff before training,” he said.

She had to force the mental picture of him working out from her mind or she’d never be able to focus at work. Thankfully, he continued.

“Plus, you came outta your building huffing like the Big, Bad Wolf and I’m awful curious to find out why.”

“Ugh, just...” she trailed off, wondering how much to tell him. But he was always honest with her, so she decided to give him the same respect. “Are you on Twitter?”

“Oh, heck no,” he answered hastily. “I had an account once for about two minutes and took more abuse in that time than I had in my whole career.”

“Sounds about right,” she said, only halfway sarcastic. “Well, anyway. Some photos of us after the Man City match started circulating, and Tony was...see for yourself.”

She fished her phone out of her pocket and held it out for him to see. As he read, it occurred to her how much she already trusted him if she was handing over her phone so freely. Not that there was anything to worry about him seeing, but she somehow understood he would not take advantage of the opportunity to snoop. His eyes scanned the screen quickly, he frowned, and then handed it back to her.

“He can’t speak to you like that,” he said.



“You’re right,” she said. “Only now I’ve got to confront him and last time I tried that...well, that was when you found me in the boot room.”

“You mean there *weren’t* any shellfish around?” he joked.

She giggled. “Guilty.”

His smile was fleeting. “I’m sorry you’re going through that.”

She stole a sideways glance at him and found raw sympathy in his eyes. And she appreciated that there wasn’t anger or some other testosterone-fueled protectiveness there. He was simply being kind.

“Thanks,” she said softly.

“Are you going to take it to Donna?” he asked.

Her brow furrowed. “Who’s Donna?”

“Head of HR.”

“Oh!” she gasped. “I hadn’t even thought of HR!”

He threw his head back and laughed. “You are something else, darlin’.”

“Awfully rich, coming from you,” she shot back with a smile. “But seriously, thank you for the suggestion, it’ll help immensely if I go in with some back up.”

“With a guy like that, I wouldn’t risk taking it on alone,” he said, and she saw at last a bit of that defensiveness creeping through his easy going exterior.

“It’s just words, really,” she tried to assure him.

“It always starts that way.”

The warning in his voice and the tension in his jaw were so uncharacteristic she almost stopped walking. For a moment, she debated pressing the issue and asking what he meant by that, but as quickly as it came, it was gone, replaced by his usual cheer.

“But Donna is rock solid, she’ll help you out,” he said. “And she has an adorable little grandson whose name is also Ethan.”

She blinked, still recovering from the emotional whiplash. “Oh, does she?”

He went on, but she didn’t really take in everything he said. That grim expression on his face haunted her all the way to work, even after they had parted ways and she went to Donna’s office. Donna was as lovely and helpful as Ethan said, and quickly prepared the proper paperwork to bring to Tony. He would have to sign to acknowledge Billie had filed a formal complaint, which made her a little nervous, but hopefully it would show him that she wasn’t going to take being pushed around. Not anymore.

As they made their way to Tony’s office, Billie did want to clarify one thing.

“Just out of curiosity, if Ethan and I were dating, would that be a violation?” she asked. It hadn’t occurred to her to ask when she was with Peter since they were never serious, but she needed to know for Ethan. “Would we need to declare ourselves a couple to you or someone else at the club?”

Donna tucked a flyaway piece of her graying bangs behind her ear. “No, not necessarily. You haven’t got final say over his contract or anything, so it’s not like there’s an ethics issue. And there aren’t any formal rules against an employee dating one of the athletes.”

Billie breathed a sigh of relief. But only for a second. They had finally reached Tony’s office and now her stomach twisted inside itself. *You’ve done nothing wrong*, she told herself. *He’s the one who crossed a line.*

Donna opened the door, but when Billie looked inside, she was surprised to see that Tony was not alone in his office. Beside his desk stood Peter, running a hand through his auburn curls and sighing irritably.

“There’s really nothing you can do?” he was asking.

“Nothing,” Tony replied. “Your contract is solid for the next two years unless another club makes an offer and no one’s reached out.”

Billie’s brow furrowed. Peter wanted to change clubs? It was a bit late to bring that to the table with the transfer window closing in just a few days.

“Ah, Debbie,” Tony said upon spying the women in the doorway.

“Donna,” she corrected, while Billie resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Billie here’s filed a complaint, and we need to look over it.”

He turned shocked, irate eyes on Billie, who returned with the most smug look she could muster. Anything to hide how scared she actually was. Her stomach turning earlier had just been a warm up - it was full on doing flips now, especially under his withering gaze.

“Has she?” he said, his voice like steel. Without looking, he addressed Peter. “Give us the room, O’Riley.”

With a huff, Peter made a swift exit, resolutely ignoring Billie as he did. Donna laid out the documents and explained the complaint. It had several layers to it - contacting Billie outside of working hours, his tone in the messages, as well as the subject matter. Tony made no protest, but as he signed his acknowledgement, his eyes shot daggers in Billie’s direction. So much so, she wondered if - in her effort to put the matter to bed, she had thrown down the gauntlet instead.



Ethan’s muscles fired with the effort he put into pushing the bar off his chest, each rep helping to relieve him of his worry for Billie. He had been witness to Tony being a bit of a jerk when he first arrived, but those texts were something else. They were demanding and controlling and everything Ethan hated to see. Especially from someone who had so much

power over her. He had seen texts like that before on his mother's phone when she was struggling, and it had turned into something...much worse.

It was especially concerning to hear Billie had intended to confront her boss alone, but thankfully, Ethan reminded her of HR for what it was - a resource. Only now he was kicking himself for forgetting to ask her to let him know how it went. His brain was flooded with every horrible thing that could happen - most of it hyperbolic, of course - and now, even the exercise wasn't helping to distract him.

Placing the bar on the rack, he sat up. First, he got water, and then he reached for his phone. There was nothing from Billie, but to his surprise, there was a text from Coach Larry. Its cryptic nature made his heart skip a beat. It said: *Hey Ethan! Got a minute? I've got some news.*

He frowned at his screen. That was never a comforting sentence. If someone had good news, they usually said it was good. But bad news was just...news.

*Hey Coach,* he texted back. *I've got some time. What's up?*

Instantly a FaceTime call came in. Ethan answered. Coach Larry's cheerful face appeared on the screen, that paternal grin on his face, his eyes crinkling in the corners. His smiles always reached his eyes.

"Ethan!" Coach said brightly, and Ethan's spirits rose a little. Maybe it wasn't so bad after all. "How are you, son?"

Ethan couldn't help but smile back. "I'm good, Coach. London's...it's an adjustment, but I'm enjoying it."

"You're having a helluva season, too," Coach Larry said. "That Manchester City match had me about coming out of my chair! Well done!"

"Thanks," Ethan said with a chuckle. "I learned from the best."

"You know I love you, kid, you ain't gotta suck up to me." He paused. "Betty tells me you met a girl. How's that going?"

Ethan resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Of course she had. "It's...it's going real well."

"She nice to you?"

"She's a sweetheart."

"Good! You nice to her?"

"Yes, sir. I learned that from the best as well."

Ethan didn't have a relationship in his home to look up to growing up, but he recalled with great fondness the way Coach Larry always looked after Mrs. Lowe. He doted on her - bringing her water during hot match days, sending her flowers just because he thought of her, and never letting the romance fade between them. "Gotta date your wife, boys," he always said. "Your wedding day is only the beginning of a lifelong love story." The other boys groaned, but Ethan held that message close, making a firm decision that day - he would never be the man his father and grandfather were. He would be good.

“Ah, I’m just doing the husband thing,” he said humbly.  
“The best thing a man can be is -”

“The person their loved ones need,” Ethan finished.

Larry chuckled. “I don’t think any athlete I’ve ever coached paid as much attention to the things I said as you.”

“Probably not.” Ethan cleared his throat, remembering the reason for the phone call. “So, uh...what’s this news?”

Larry’s smile faded. “Well...now, this ain’t exactly easy to say, I’m still processing it myself, but...I wanted you to hear it from me before you saw something on Facebook or whatever else.”

Ethan pushed down the plethora of awful things that popped into his mind. “Oh?”

“Son, I’ve got cancer,” Larry said. “Late stages. They’ve given me about six months.”

The words slammed into Ethan’s heart like a fist, making it reel backward as it throbbed. The one good man Ethan had known, who had taught him the sport that became his career, who he still spoke to regularly, but all of a sudden regularly didn’t feel like enough. Six months? That was just past the end of the season. Not enough time for Ethan to get back to the States and get time to say...goodbye? Thank you? Sorry?

He swallowed the lump in his throat. “Oh.”

“Yeah, it’s a shit sandwich,” Larry went on, cutting his gaze from Ethan’s for the first time all phone call. “I’m making my

peace with it, getting my affairs in order and all that, but I just wanted to tell you myself. As close to in person as I can.”

“Well, I...thanks for letting me know,” Ethan said, clearing his throat to rid his voice of the rust in it. “Gosh, Coach, I’m so sorry.”

“Nah, don’t go feeling sorry for me,” Larry replied, a hint of his smile returning, but it was watery. “I’ve lived a life I’m real proud of. I’ve loved and laughed and I got to see a player I coached represent his country in the World Cup.”

Ethan let out a breath and blinked back the mist welling up in his eyes. Seeing his very first coach in the stands on the world’s biggest stage for sports was unforgettable. Could it really be that was the last time they would see each other?

“I have no regrets,” Larry said finally.

“Wish I could say the same.”

“None of that, now, son. The best thing you can do for me is play your absolute best in your career, and live a life that you’re proud of. So when it’s your turn, you won’t have any regrets either.”

Ethan sniffled. “Yes, Coach.”

Larry grinned once more. “That’s more like it. I’ll let you get back to your workout, and I’m looking forward to your match this weekend. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Sounds good.”

“Love you, kid.”



“Yeah, love you too.”

They hung up. Memories that were impossible to stop surged to the forefront of Ethan’s mind. The first time Coach Larry had invited him to play on that hot September afternoon. The way he pushed Ethan to be better, not only on the pitch, but in his life. And after his mother died, how Coach Larry and his wife were the first people to show up with a casserole. Long after Ethan had gone pro, Coach kept in touch - mostly on occasions like birthdays or Christmas, but the thought of now going through even a normal day without the assurance that Coach was there...it wasn’t possible.

How could the clock just keep ticking? How could the sun just shine on? How could the world just carry on turning when Ethan’s was crumbling around him? He wasn’t sure he could lose so much...again. The only thing worse would be something happening to Betty.

Heaving a sigh, he looked at his phone, opening up the most recent messages from Coach Larry, from before this phone call. He had texted on New Year’s Day - *Happy New Year, Ethan! Can’t wait to see you succeed in the Premier League! So proud of you, kid!* Ethan had replied, *Thanks, Coach! I won’t let you down!* And now, he was mentally kicking himself. He should have picked up the phone and called. He should have suggested getting together soon, his schedule be damned. He should have made the time because now they were out of it.

The weight room started to swim, so Ethan squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. He hated to do it, but he couldn't train today. He couldn't even think about football. Not when the man who introduced him to it was dying. And right now, all of Ethan's passion for the sport was going with him. With his heart in his stomach, Ethan texted Coach Warren, explaining he wasn't feeling well (which wasn't totally a lie), and that he wouldn't be able to make it to training. Straight from the weightroom, he gathered his things and headed back to his apartment, which felt about as far from home as possible now.

## *Interlude*

*June 15, 1944*

*Carentan, France*

*Dear, sweet, beautiful Maggie,*

*You have truly made me the happiest man in the world! The second we get back to England, I'm marrying the heck outta you! Then I'll kiss your pretty little lips off! You don't know how bad I've needed the hope you've given me.*

*It hasn't been easy here. We lost a lot of guys in the jump. And now, as we battle our way through France, we lose even more. Every day, I hear another name that makes my heart sink to the bottom of my chest. Hell, even the guys I didn't like too much, hearing they got killed makes me sad. Just because I didn't care much for them doesn't mean they didn't have folks at home who did.*

*You are keeping me going, my darling. Thoughts of you, a wedding, movies, and dancing - all of it drives me to stay alive and fight like hell so this thing's over as soon as possible. "Berlin by Christmas" is the saying around here. I hope that's true. Will you pray for it, honey? Pray extra hard for us, please. The sooner I get back to you, the better. I need you like I need air to breathe.*

*Your soon-to-be husband,*

*Henry*

*P.S. - I know supplies are limited right now, so as soon as I can, I'll be sending my reserve chute to you. It's silk, so it should make a mighty fine wedding dress. Perks of marrying a paratrooper!*

## Chapter 13

Ethan couldn't recall the last time he'd spent this long on the couch. But in an emotional crisis, there was only one thing to do - have a *Lord of the Rings* movie marathon. He'd adored those films since he was twelve, when he saw the first one at a friend's birthday party. The story was just so hopeful and uplifting. And he always got sucked in, despite the countless viewings he had accrued over the years. So, for a couple of hours, he could forget about football and that a dear friend would soon be gone.

Just before he started *Return of the King*, there was a knock on his door. He got to his feet with a stretch, padding over to the entryway, when it struck him he probably should put a shirt on. But he was already there and in a rare moment of laziness. With a shrug, he turned the knob and opened it anyway.

"Hi the - woah," Billie stopped herself mid-greeting as her eyes raked over his torso. She cleared her throat and dragged her gaze back up to his. "You look...dashing."

Delighted as he was to see her, he couldn't bring himself to be amused. He forced a half smile for her sake. "Thank you."

"I heard you missed training today," she said. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," he lied, running a hand through his hair. "Just... something came up."

"Your breakfast?"

He shook his head. "Nah, I, uh...I got some bad news."

Her eyes flashed with sudden concern. "Are you hurt? Is your grandmother alright? What -"

"Take it easy," he cut across her gently. "Betty and I are just fine. Remember my first coach I told you about?"

"I do."

"He's got cancer. They've given him about six months."

"Oh, fuck," she said. "God, I'm - I'm so sorry, Ethan." She paused for a beat. "Bet you wish you drank right now, huh?"

A laugh burst from him before he could stop it. Her shoulders sagged with apparent relief, since she likely immediately regretted the words. They probably should have offended him, but he found it too funny to care. God, he adored her already.

"Wanna come in?" he offered, and opened the door a little wider.

"Is that a violation of our agreement?" she asked.

“I’m capable of keeping my hands to myself.” He raised a skeptical brow. “Are you?”

She bit her lip. “Would it be too much to ask you to put a shirt on?”

“Not at all,” he said with a chuckle.

With that, he backed away from the door to let her inside. While she looked around, he ducked into his bedroom and snatched his Charlotte FC hoodie from his bed. He pulled it over his head as he entered the kitchen. Her eyes were still on his abs, but with a more perturbed look than before. She pointed to his scar.

“What happened there?”

He pulled his sweatshirt down over it and sighed. “Nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing.”

“It’s not a very nice story, darlin’.”

“It’s a scar, Ethan, I’m fully prepared for something gruesome.”

He walked around her into the kitchen to open the fridge. “Can I get you something before we get started on my tragic backstory? Tea? Water?”

“Tea, thank y - wait, our tea or your tea?” she asked.

“My tea,” he said. “Ice cold and sweeter than apple pie.”

Her lip curled in disgust.

“Hey, don’t knock it till you try it,” he said.

“Oh, very well,” she reluctantly agreed.

Smirking, he retrieved a glass from his cabinet, filled it with ice, and poured some from the pitcher he had. He made one every three days or so. Sweet tea was a staple growing up, and he needed to feel close to home today. He even put a straw in it for her. She picked it up like he’d handed her a grenade.

“It ain’t gonna bite you, Billie,” he said as he laughed.

She sniffed it. “It doesn’t seem too dangerous.”

With one last anxious glance at him, she put her lips around the straw and took a sip. He watched her face transform from apprehensive to perplexed to...pleased? Her brows retreated up her forehead and the corners of her mouth turned up. Then she swallowed.

“That’s actually quite nice,” she said. “I mean, it’s practically a dessert, but it’s surprisingly refreshing.”

“Glad you like it.”

“Can you tell me your horrifying story now?”

“Okay,” he said, taking a deep breath. Her eyes were glued to him. “When I was nine years old, I got stabbed.”

She spewed into the straw, and droplets of tea flew out of the cup. “*What?*”

“Don’t freak out!”

“It’s quite too late for that!” she cried. “How did that happen? Is someone after you? Who the fuck stabs a nine-year-old?”



“I will say, I’m flattered by your concern,” he said with a grin and leaned just a touch closer to her.

She put her hand on his chest and forced him back a step. “Oi, keep your sheepish charm away from me and answer my questions.”

He heaved a sigh. “I was trying to defend my mother.”

“From...a robber?”

“Her heroin dealer.”

Her eyes went wide, and for the first time, he found he couldn’t look at them for too long. He knew what he would find if he did. After the shock came the judgment, and he couldn’t take that. Not from anyone, but especially not from her.

“Oh...blimey,” she said softly.

“That’s one word for it,” he said. “She was an addict before I was born, but she never could get clean and stay clean.”

*Not even for her son,* he thought, with that old, familiar, guilt-ridden bitterness.

“Is that how she -” Billie stopped and cleared her throat. “Is that how she died?”

“Yeah,” he choked out and swallowed hard, squeezing his eyes shut in an attempt to banish the memory of that day. “I came home from school and found her in the bathroom. I, uh...called an ambulance, but...she was already gone.”

The sound of her heels stepping across the floor made him look up. She had set down her tea and crossed into the living room to his bookshelf, atop which sat the handful of framed photographs he had brought with him. One was of him and Betty on the day he made his MLS debut, and there was a triple frame that contained pictures from his first match through his high school years. On the end was a photo of Ethan and his mother when he was seven or eight. He held his first trophy, and his mother knelt beside him, kissing his cheek. That photo was the focus of Billie's attention.

"She was beautiful," she said.

She turned to face him, and this time, he didn't look away. No one ever said that after learning the truth of what happened. Most people had questions about how his mother was allowed to keep him or remarked about how awful it must have been to grow up with her. Billie's kind sympathy made his chest feel like molten lava.

"You think so?" he asked.

She nodded. "What was her name?"

"Laura...Laura Knight."

"Laura," she repeated, and turned back toward the photo. "You look more like your grandmother, but...the dimples. Those are Laura."

He strode over and really looked at the picture for the first time in ages. His mother had missed a lot of games, but she made it to that final, which explained the smile so big it nearly

split his face in half. Not only did they win, but she was there to see it.

“She was awfully generous to share those with me,” he said lightly.

“It really was kind of her,” Billie replied. She met his gaze again. “Can I ask...what became of your father?”

“Hard to figure out if you don’t know who he is,” he said.

She blinked, taken aback. “You mean, you really have no idea?”

“My grandmother said it was likely one of two men,” he explained. “The first was...the guy who stabbed me, actually. Sometimes, if Mom didn’t have the money, she would...well, she would pay with a different kind of currency.”

“Jesus...” Billie said under her breath.

“The other option was a truck driver she met at the diner she worked at,” he went on. “He was a kind man, apparently, but just passing through town. She didn’t know enough about him to find him after he’d gone.”

“Well, it must be him,” she said with a definitive nod. “No way you’re the son of someone capable of stabbing a child.”

He smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’ve always hoped so.”

“Have you ever tried to find out?”

He shook his head. “Honestly, I don’t care which of them is my father.”

Her brow furrowed. “How do you mean?”

“I’m neither of their son,” he said, and nodded toward the picture of his mother. “I’m hers.”

The corners of her mouth turned up into a soft smile and he swore he heard her sniffle. “Can I give you a hug?”

“I really wish you would, darlin’.”

She cast herself into his waiting arms, tucking her head beneath his chin. That warm, vanilla scent washed over him from the top of her head. He rested his cheek there and took a deep breath, letting himself sag against her.

Ethan was surprised by the ease with which he admitted all of this. It should have made him feel as vulnerable as if she’d stripped him naked, but with Billie, it wasn’t. It helped that she approached it with curiosity and understanding. She didn’t see him differently now or put him back in the box of “poor white trailer trash” he had grown accustomed to. His last girlfriend - Sarah, of course - had actually recoiled at the story. Billie embraced him and told him his mother was beautiful. How had he gotten so lucky to find her?

“Thank you,” he murmured into her hair.

“What for?”

“Being so understanding,” he said. “My ex...well, when she heard the story, she told me to lie to her parents if it ever came up around them. She was real ashamed of my...history.”

She pulled away to look at him and blinked several times. “She...what the fuck?”

He bit back a smile. "I know, I should have seen that breakup coming from -"

"She seriously asked you to do that?"

"Yeah," he said with a nod. "She set a lot of expectations for me that I wasn't able to meet."

"Well, she sounds like proper cu-"

He cut her off by tugging her gently back into his arms as he chuckled. He didn't like talking badly about his ex, even if Billie's defensiveness was absolutely adorable. "That'll do, darlin'."

She rested her head back on his chest. He didn't want her anger - not when he was so enjoying her tenderness.

"Thanks for being here," he murmured.

She looked up and met his gaze. His heart did a backflip.

"Of course," she said. "I'm relieved you even let me in, I wasn't sure if you wanted to be alone or if -"

She stopped short when he tucked her hair behind her ear. "Now that I've met you, darlin', I'm not sure I ever want to be alone again."

He watched the mist form over her eyes before she blinked it away. For a moment, he thought about kissing her. Showing her just how much it meant to him that she showed up for him. But he realized it would have been selfish, so he held back. If they were going to kiss, it needed to be about both of them, not just for himself.

“Have you been watching *Lord of the Rings* all day?” she asked suddenly with a glance at the TV.

“I have, it’s something I gotta do when I’m feeling sad,” he told her.

“Would you like some company for the last one?”

“I’d love it.”

They parted, and he held back a rolling shiver at the loss of her touch.

“I’ll just pop back home and change,” she said, starting for the door.

“Nonsense,” he replied, taking her hand to stop her. “You can borrow something of mine if you’d rather not go back out into the cold.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Darlin’, I just served my heart to you baked at three-fifty degrees in a honey glaze,” he said. “You help yourself to whatever you want.”

She chuckled and, with one last soft look at him, disappeared into his bedroom. He tried not to think too hard about the fact that she was in his bedroom. Getting undressed. Shaking his head, he got fresh glasses of tea and ordered some pizza on his phone. She emerged in one of his Stanmore FC sweatshirts and joggers, both of which were greatly oversized on her, but she looked adorable. To his pleasure, she had also helped herself to a pair of fuzzy socks. The urge to kiss her was even more powerful.

“Not how I imagined I’d look on our second date, but I am quite comfortable,” she joked.

He shook his head. “Oh, heck no, this ain’t a date.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No, this is just...a friendly hang out,” he said. “With that being said, you look plum cute.”

“Thank you,” she said, tucking her hair back with a laugh.

He followed her over to the couch, setting their drinks down on the coffee table before taking a seat beside her. Their thighs were touching, which sent a bolt of electricity up his spine, but he took a deep breath before his mind went places it shouldn’t.

“So, *Lord of the Rings* is your version of self care, is it?” she asked, and he was immensely grateful she spoke first.

“It’s one version,” he said. “My other major one is country line dancing.”

“Country line dancing?”

“Yeah, like you’d do at a honky tonk or -” he stopped himself at the blank look on her face. “You have no idea what that is, do you?”

“Not a clue,” she admitted.

He smiled. “Well, a honky tonk is really just a bar. But a lot of them have a dance floor, and different songs have different dances. Like...the electric slide, but country music specific.”

“And that’s how you make yourself feel better?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “My grandma used to take me with her all the time, and it was a blast. I declare, it’s impossible not to smile when you hear Boot Scootin’ Boogie.”

She stared at him. “Are you taking the piss?”

“No!” he laughed. “Why would I be doing that?”

“I just refuse to believe there’s actually a song called...Boot Scootin’ Boogie,” she said, and he saw her struggle to get her mouth around the words. It sounded so wrong, but so cute at the same time.

“It’s very real,” he assured her. “If we were in Charlotte, I’d drive you out to Coyote Joe’s right now.”

“Okay, you’re *definitely* making that up,” she teased.

“Well, what do you do to cheer up after a bad day?” he challenged.

“Soak in a bubble bath and drink wine, like a normal person!” she retorted.

His head fell back with laughter and he picked up the television remote. “Sounds classy, for sure.”

“It’s amazing, you should try it sometime.”

“Maybe I will,” he said. “But right now, I need to see orcs get stabbed.”

“Fair enough, play the movie.”

He did, and Billie’s head came to rest on Ethan’s shoulder. That action alone made him feel like a bigger hero than if he



had saved all of Middle Earth himself. But it also reminded him of something.

“Hey,” he said with a gentle nudge, and she turned her face to look at him. “How’d it go with Tony today?”

“Oh,” she replied, and glanced away. “Fine.”

The brief stiffness in her body told him she wasn’t telling him the whole truth, but her tone indicated she wasn’t interested in discussing it further. He put his arm around her shoulders and brought her a little closer.

“Good,” he said simply. “Let me know if you need any help there.”

“I will.”

He didn’t quite believe her, but for now, he would let it lie.

## Chapter 14

*You free after the match against West Ham? I've got an idea for our second date.*

Billie stared at the text, finger hovering over the send button. Never in her life had she spent so much time agonizing over a text message to a man. But she found something she knew she simply must show Ethan, so she felt she had to take the initiative. After their movie night, he hadn't made any firm plans, but she understood. Between learning that his childhood hero was dying, and then telling her the awful story about his mother, she didn't blame him for being emotionally tapped out for one day. He still showed up with coffee the following morning to walk her to work, and he seemed almost back to normal. But there was just a little less light behind his cheerful, green eyes that she couldn't help but notice.

She was determined to make him happy. If anyone deserved to be treated to a night out, it was Ethan. After learning about his life, she was even more impressed with how upbeat he was. With everything he had been through, he had every right

to be angry and resentful, but he wasn't. He walked through the world with kindness, leading with his heart, and offering it freely to someone like Billie. Who was beginning to feel less and less deserving of it. She knew herself to be closed off and a bit self-centered. But perhaps, if she could reciprocate his level of generosity, she might feel the playing field even out a bit.

So she was sending this text. Wondering if it sounded too casual or too serious or too eager. Should she split it up into two messages or would that be too desperate? Would he see double texting as needy?

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” she scolded herself with a shake of her head. “Send the damn message, you coward.”

She finally did. The little blue bubble appeared with a gray “delivered” beneath it. She watched with bated breath for it to turn to “read” with the time stamp. Though logically, she knew he was probably in the locker room already and too busy to send a response, she wanted one right away. She must have manifested it out of sheer will, because a second later, a gray bubble with three dots appeared on the screen. Her heart skipped a beat.

*For you? I'm always free, darlin'*

A beat passed while Billie caught her breath. Then he texted again.

*Looking forward to seeing what you've got in mind*

She texted back quickly.

*You'll love it. Can you be at mine around 7?*

She didn't even have time to lock her phone before he replied.

*Yes, ma'am*

She grinned. Then she wished him good luck at the match before heading to the Hive herself. As an employee, she always had tickets if she wanted them, but hadn't really cared enough about the team to take advantage. Ever since Manchester City, though, she found herself quite invested. Especially since if they beat West Ham today, it would bump them up to sixth place in the league. For the first time, that really mattered to her.



The smile on Ethan's face when Billie opened the door for him came as no surprise. Stanmore beat West Ham United 2-1, narrowly avoiding a draw in stoppage time thanks to a pass from Ethan back to the midfield, letting Artem shoot from the wing and right past the goalkeeper. The stadium roared, Billie right along with them, thrilled that they were moving up. Ethan was making such a difference at the club - and beyond it as well.

“Congrats, you!” she greeted excitedly.

“Thank you!” he replied. “I only got the first goal, though, Artem did the rest.”

“With an assist from you,” she reminded him. “You’re well on your way to taking us to the Champions League for the first time.”

“Really? We’ve never been before?”

She shook her head. “Maybe you’ll really shake things up and win us the FA Cup too.”

“Now, that is more manageable,” he said with a chuckle. “But, tell me what you’ve got planned for tonight.”

“It’s a surprise,” she said.

“Are surprises an English thing?” he joked. “I keep being told to wait and see.”

“This one’s much more worth it than the karaoke, honest.”

“I’ll follow you anywhere, darlin’.”

She beamed at him, and after letting him help her into her coat, he was true to his word and he followed her lead. Their destination was across town, so Billie ordered a car for them. But Ethan insisted on opening the door for her at least. He held her hand all the way there, and she had no objections. In fact, she wished he would hold her a little closer, like he had while they were watching the movie. Just intertwined fingers didn’t feel like enough.

They arrived at last, and when Ethan saw the name of the place in neon blue, his face lit up like a fireworks display.

Mouth falling open, he looked at Billie.

“No way,” he breathed.

She nodded. “Oh, yeah.”

“You really - how could - there’s a honky tonk in London?!”

Billie giggled and nodded again. It had taken some searching, especially since she wasn’t sure how to spell “honky tonk” at first, but she figured it out and found a little place owned by a couple of Americans who had moved from Arkansas, and brought country line dancing with them. And her embarrassing Google search history was worth the delighted look in Ethan’s eyes.

Before they got out of the car, he gathered her up in his arms, giving her a gentle squeeze. She closed her eyes at the comfort of his embrace. She wasn’t sure she had ever felt safer anywhere. And for some absurd reason, it also occurred to her that since meeting Ethan, she had not dreamed that dream about the letter and the gaping heartbreak that came with it.

“This was so thoughtful,” he murmured into her hair. “Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome,” she said with a contented sigh. “Can you do something for me?”

He leaned away to look her in the eyes. “Sure, anything.”

“Can you teach me the dances?” she asked sheepishly.

She had carefully schooled her face into a look of confidence, but slowly, she let it slip, allowing him to see that

she was actually...nervous. Understanding seeped into his gaze.

“You got it,” he promised.

Assured, she led him inside.

The place was packed, to Billie’s surprise. Music rocked between the walls, and the crowd stepped in time to the tune, turning to face a different wall just as Billie and Ethan walked in. Whatever song was on had an extended banjo solo, which made everyone cheer as they did jazz squares and turned again to face the back wall. Billie briefly wondered if they had somehow been transported out of England. But apparently the idea of line dancing was more popular than she anticipated. Suddenly, Ethan had her in a bear hug again.

“You’re the best!” he called over the music.

“D’you want to grab something to drink before we get started?” she asked. “I may need some liquid courage.”

He retrieved his wallet and handed her his card. “Get whatever you want, darlin’.”

It took her a moment to recover from how attractive that was.

“What? No, I’m supposed to be treating you!”

He put the card in her hand. “I insist.”

Barely hiding her smile, she headed for the bar, while he made his way to the dance floor. Billie ordered a beer, but

while she waited for it, she heard a conversation between two women at the bar that made her freeze.

“Is that Ethan Knight?” the first woman wondered, tossing her balayage blonde hair over her shoulder.

“Where?” asked the redhead beside her, turning her head to look around.

“There.” The first pointed directly to where Ethan was getting in line to dance.

“Shit, I think that *is* him!”

“God, he is so fucking fit. Wonder if he’s here with someone.”

“So what if he is? Football’s got a goalkeeper, doesn’t mean you can’t score.”

They burst into a fit of giggles. Billie’s stomach turned to acid, and she pinned the bartender with a look. “Actually, a shot of tequila, please. A double.”

She needed all the liquid courage she could get. She knew she was going to look foolish without knowing the dance, but if Ethan was her net, she was going to be goddamn Mary Earps. After downing the clear liquor and letting it warm her from her belly to the tips of her fingers, she marched out to the dance floor.

Ethan greeted her with a thrilled smile. The song was changing just as she arrived.



“Okay, this one’s pretty easy,” he said, wrapping his arm around her. “Three eight counts, are you ready?”

“I think so,” she said, nodding. She resisted the urge to look over her shoulder at the bar.

“It goes - two taps with your right heel, two with your left,” he began, and showed her how it was supposed to look. “Then in quick succession - right, left, right, and then a flick like this.” He demonstrated once again, and on the flick part, turned to the left on the ball of his foot. “Now from here, you have two grapevines - one to the right and one to the left,” he went on, accentuating each with a clap. “Then, we take two rocking steps forward and make a lasso,” he explained, and showed her circling his hand over his head. She tried not to get too distracted by the motion of his hips as he did. “And the last part is easy, just four hops back.” He did that as well for good measure.

“I think I can handle that,” she said.

They got in line as the song picked up, and Billie chanced a look at the girls. Hand in hand with Ethan, she saw their faces sour with envy. While he wasn’t looking, she flipped them off.

She followed Ethan’s instructions as best she could, and it worked out much better than when he tried to teach her to receive and kick the football around. She got messed up on the flick and the turn at the same time, but he got her in the right direction, somehow managing to shield her from anyone else’s sight when she blundered. And yet, she couldn’t help but feel

like with him at her side, it wouldn't have mattered if people saw. The song blared on.

*“Yeah, heel, toe, dosey doe, c'mon baby let's go boot scootin’*

*Cadillac, blackjack, baby meet me out back*

*We're gonna boogie*

*Oh, get down, turn around, go to town*

*Boot scootin' boogie!”*

Her mouth fell open as she looked at him. “It *is* a real song!”

“What'd I tell you?” he shot back, laughing.

The sight of him with his head thrown back in amusement, dancing so joyfully, made her stop in place, nearly knocking into him. Another vision, like the one of the meadow, came to her. Like a memory that she wasn't quite sure belonged to her, and yet, there it was, as clear as the room before her. In fact, it was another dance hall, only instead of country music, a swinging jazz band played. Ethan was not in his t-shirt and jeans, he was in a button down and trousers with suspenders over his broad shoulders. His voice echoed in her mind, a faint, “*Told you I was the best dancer in the whole Airborne!*” And then he laughed again, and she laughed with him.

She shook her head, and Ethan - real, present-day Ethan, was in front of her, coming into focus, his face inches from hers, clouded with concern.

“You alright?” he asked.

“I...” She trailed off, the image lingering in her mind before it vanished, and she had to catch her breath. “I think so.”

His furrowed brow told her he wasn't convinced. “You look like you've just seen a ghost.”

*Something like that*, she thought. But she didn't know how to explain it without sounding like she was losing her mind. Because it was happy and pleasant, just like the meadow, but it was also making her chest ache.

“I'm fine,” she assured him with a shaky smile. “Honest. What's the next one?”

His eyebrows started a slow retreat back up his forehead and he took her hand. “You'll like this, it's a classic. *Any Man of Mine* by Shania Twain.”

“That one, I have heard before,” she teased.

“And it involves a lot of stomping, which I know you're good at.”

Pushing the picture to the back of her mind, she followed his lead once more, carefully copying each step he showed her. She did, in fact, enjoy the stomping and ease of the movements. But the best part by far, from that song and into the next, was the elated look on Ethan's face. Nothing else mattered in the world. Not her worry about looking foolish, not the strange visions and feelings - none of it was as important as seeing him grinning like he was in that photo with his mother. She had brought him a little piece of home.

Finally, there was a song that was a partner dance. Ethan shot her a look at the switch, but she let him know she was fine with a nod. He took her hands and led her to the outside of the floor so they could go at their own pace. He showed her a basic rock step and triple step, and with that, she would have the tools to make it through the song.

“I’m trusting you,” she said.

“Lucky for you, I’m the best dancer in the Premier League,” he joked.

For a moment, the breath left her lungs, and she stood rooted to the spot. “What did you say?”

“I’m sorry, do you know a better one?” he asked. “I was just kidding.”

“Of course, I just...” she said, trailing off. “Never mind.”

He didn’t press her for more as the song took off at full swing, and he held her hand.

“Give me a bit of resistance here,” he called over the music. “It’ll help me lead you!”

“Alright!”

With some tension in her arm, she obeyed. It came quite naturally to them, dancing together this way. She wondered if it had anything to do with the dreamlike images she kept seeing, but since she wasn’t even sure if they were real, she couldn’t totally accredit it to that. Maybe it was just...them.

As the song reached a high note - literally, as the singer held out the line "*Norma Jean Riley's gonna marry me!*" - Ethan spun Billie into his arms. She turned to look at him. He held her closer, his arms linking firmly around her waist. Their eyes met, and she knew right then that he was going to kiss her.

And holy shit, did he kiss her.

His soft lips met hers, and immediately, she thought she might melt into a puddle. Her heart hammered against her ribcage, ready to fling itself into Ethan's waiting hands. He moved his mouth expertly with hers, as if they had been kissing for decades. As if he was born to kiss her, and she him. The music, the crowd, and even her own thoughts, were gone. All that existed, hanging in that moment, was Ethan's kiss.

When he pulled away, she whimpered, her lips tingling for more of his already. His hand on her cheek was only a brief placation.

"Thank you for doing this tonight," he said. "It's the most thoughtful thing anyone's ever done for me."

Her brain was still scrambled from the kiss. Hell, her whole body was on fire for him. And all he'd had to do was kiss her. Hastily, she tried to form a reply. "Yeah, of course."

"You wanna get some fresh air?"

*No, I'd literally suffocate for more of your mouth,* was what she wanted to say, but she knew she couldn't. They were taking it slow after all.

The bar had a back patio, and the cold air admittedly felt good on Billie's hot and sweaty skin. Though whether it felt like that because of the dancing or the kissing was hard to tell. He turned her to face him.

"You good?"

She shook her head. "Kiss me again."

He happily obliged. His hands came to either side of her face and he backed her up into the brick wall of the building. Her arms coiled around his neck, pulling him closer, closer. She needed him pressed all the way up against her. His tongue licked at her lower lip and she opened for him. He moaned right into her mouth. Her knees gave out, but it didn't matter because he pulled her up until she was wrapping her legs around his waist. Her lower belly churned with fresh, white-hot desire.

"Ethan, please," she breathed as his lips made their way to the tender skin of her neck.

"Please what, darlin'?"

"More, I need you."

To her immense displeasure, he pulled away. "We gotta have a talk first."

"Okay," she said firmly. "Let's have it. Right now."

He chuckled, and she cursed the throbbing between her legs at the sound.

"We gotta save something for our next date."

She groaned. “You’re killing me.”

“Look, it ain’t easy for me either,” he said, and she had no choice but to believe him given that she could feel his semi-hard bulge right against the inside of her thigh. “But it’s like I told you. I want us to be sure.”

“I am!”

He shook his head and pushed her hair behind her ear. “We gotta talk when we’re both clear headed.”

“I can be clear headed in like, five minutes.”

“Judging by those pretty pink cheeks of yours, I’d say not.”

She deflated. “Not tonight, then?”

“Sorry, darlin’, no dice.”

She lifted her hand to his face and traced the corner of his mouth with the tip of her finger. His eyes fell closed to her touch, and she let herself drink in the sight of his cheeks equally red and flushed as hers. Affection settled into her heart.

“You will kiss me again, won’t you?” she asked.

“Now that, I can do as long as you like.”

He claimed her mouth once more, and they stood there for what could have been hours, days, or years. Billie didn’t know. All she could keep in mind was him - Ethan, Ethan, Ethan, like a refrain of a favorite song. If his kisses were any indication of what was to come, she had *a lot* to look forward to.

## Chapter 15

Without so much as a warning, Valentine's Day arrived, and with it Billie's third date with Ethan. She already assured him she didn't want him to make a fuss since they weren't official, and she was certain he wouldn't. But her stomach was knotting up in panic anyway because of the all-important conversation looming before them. She still wasn't sure if she was ready to be his girlfriend. In fact, she felt less ready than before. She had never met anyone like him. So thoughtful and generous and *good*. And who was she? Certainly not someone who learned everyone's name or helped her neighbors or offered consolation to crying people she barely knew. It all convinced her that she didn't totally deserve him. And in order for him to understand her lingering doubts, she was going to have to tell him that.

She was so deep in thought that when her phone rang, she startled. After taking a breath, she picked it up, thinking it must be Ethan. But to her surprise, it was Stevie. Three days



before their scheduled catch-up phone call. Brow furrowed, she answered.

“Hello?”

“Billie, thank God!” Stevie gasped. Billie frowned at the panic she heard in her sister’s voice. “Listen, I’m so, so sorry, but d’you think you could watch the kids tonight?”

Billie blanched. “What?”

“Joel’s father’s just had a heart attack and we’re trying to get to hospital.”

“Holy shit, is he all right?”

“We don’t know yet, but we don’t want to upset the kids,” Stevie explained. “Can you take them?”

“What about Mum and Dad?”

“They’ve already left on holiday.”

Billie sighed, for the first time irritated with her parents’ sweet, enduring devotion that led them to take a trip every year for Valentine’s Day.

“I’ve...I’ve never been alone with them before,” Billie said. “And I sort of had plans-”

“You’ll be fine, all they need is some dinner before you put them to bed,” Stevie interrupted. “Please. We’re halfway to the car, we can bring them right to yours.”

Billie chewed her lower lip. “I - oh, very well.”

“You’re a gem! We’ll be there as soon as we can! Thank you so, so much!”

Before Billie could say anything more, the line went dead. This threw the roughest of wrenches into her plans with Ethan. Who she realized she needed to call immediately and let him know she wouldn't be available. Maybe it was for the best. Who knew what the pressure of the holiday might make them say?

He picked up on the first ring. "Hey, darlin'!"

Fuck, this was going to be harder than she thought. "Hi! Listen, I'm so sorry to do this, but -"

"What's going on?" he asked.

She didn't hear irritation or even disappointment in his voice. Just concern. Most men didn't have such an unselfish reaction to being let down.

"My sister and her husband have an emergency, and I've just been stuck with the kids for the night. I'm afraid I've got to cancel our date."

"Shoot, is everything alright?"

Again, not the slightest hint of anger.

"Her father-in-law had a heart attack," she told him. "We don't know how he is yet."

He paused for a beat. "You need help with the kids?"

She blinked. "You don't have to babysit with me."

"Not what I asked, darlin'."

She heaved another sigh. She would actually appreciate the help since Tessa was out for a movie screening with a couple

of girlfriends who were celebrating singlehood today. But it seemed like an awful lot to ask of him. Then again, she wasn't asking. He was offering. Like he always did.

“It would help to not be outnumbered, yes,” she admitted.

“I'll be right over.”

True to his word, Ethan arrived even before the kids did. When she answered the door, he looked her over hungrily, his eyes darkening as he bit his lip. She hadn't gotten to change out of the black bodycon dress she'd put on for their original plans, but it pleased her to know he found it attractive. She made a mental note to wear it again when they had their raincheck date.

“Hey,” he said.

“Thank you for coming,” she said. “Really, you didn't have to.”

“It was worth it just for the view.”

That made heat rush to her cheeks. She glanced at the floor, clearing her throat. “Come in, you.”

“Gladly.”

He stepped over the threshold and followed her into the flat. When the door swung shut, he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her right into his chest, planting a sweet kiss on her lips. Even that was enough to make her feel weak. The power of Ethan's kiss made her convinced he needed to be on a government watchlist or something. That mouth was a weapon of mass destruction.

“Had to get that out of the way,” he said when they parted. “Before the kids get here and I won’t have another chance.”

“Mhm,” she said, sighing.

Her eyelids fluttered as she took in a deep breath, trying to collect herself. He released her when there was another knock on the door, but she hesitated to leave his arms. He actually had to give her a small nudge. Stevie was there, Grace on her hip and Liam next to her, holding her hand.

“Hi, Auntie!” Liam said brightly.

“Jesus, Bills,” Stevie said, looking her up and down. “You didn’t have to get all dressed up for these two.”

“I didn’t - oh, never mind,” she said with a groan. “Hand them over, then.”

She reached for Grace, who whined at first at being separated from her mother, but quickly nuzzled right into Billie’s neck. Liam’s eyes suddenly went round as an owl’s and Stevie’s mouth dropped. Ethan had appeared behind Billie.

“Hi there!” he said sunnily. “I’m Ethan Knight.”

He shook Stevie’s hand, who shot Billie an impressed, albeit bewildered look, and then he knelt down in front of Liam, who was still too starstruck to move.

“Hey, bud,” he said gently. “You ready to hang out with me and your auntie for a bit?”

Liam nodded slowly, too stunned to speak, which surprised Billie. Usually, her nephew was a ball of energy around everyone, even strangers.

“Cool!” Ethan went on. “Come on in, we’ll find something fun to do.”

“Bye, Mum!” Liam called over his shoulder as he followed Ethan into the living room.

“Love you!” Stevie called back, and then leaned in closer to whisper to Billie. “Are you dating Ethan Knight?”

“I - I think so?” Billie answered. “We were *supposed* to have a date tonight to talk things over.”

“Shit, I’m so sorry. I had no idea you had plans.”

“Is it really so shocking that I’d have a date on Valentine’s Day?” Billie asked, just on the edge of being offended.

“No, of course not, but...wow, Ethan Knight, really?”

“Yes, really, now go. Your husband needs you.”

“Catch me up on everything later?”

“Of course.”

She kissed her sister on the cheek, and with one last goodbye to the kids, Stevie was gone. Billie was impressed with her sister. Grace and Liam didn’t seem to have a clue that anything was wrong. Somehow, Stevie and Joel had maintained enough composure to not upset them. Billie swallowed down her nerves and headed to the sitting room, where Ethan and Liam were already seated contentedly on the

couch, pulling up something to watch on the television. Now that the initial shock had worn off, Liam seemed perfectly at ease. In fact, he even crawled into Ethan's lap, which made Billie's heart do an unexpected flip.

Grace lifted her head at the sound of the theme song of some cartoon show, so Billie joined the boys on the couch. Then Grace settled too, leaning back against Billie's chest. The iron grip she had on her stuffed dog finally relaxed. Billie ran an affectionate hand through her niece's hair.

"This would be fine if I had any idea what to feed them," she admitted quietly to Ethan.

"You got pasta?" he asked.

She nodded. "I think so."

"Just boil the noodles, and put butter and salt and pepper on it, they'll eat fine."

"It doesn't seem very nutritious."

"They're at auntie's house," he said with a smile. "Besides, better a bad meal than no meal at all."

She shot him a sympathetic look. "Got some experience with that, have you?"

He replied with a sad nod, his eyes still fixed on Liam. "Some."

She pressed her lips to his shoulder. He kissed her back on the forehead.

“Think you can handle another?” she asked, indicating Grace with her head.

He patted his free leg. “Plenty of room here.”

Without protest, Grace allowed Billie to shimmy her over to Ethan’s lap with her brother, and he held both children secure in his strong arms. Her heart gave another lurch, but she got up anyway and went to the kitchen. Luckily, she knew where everything was from putting the dishes away, and Tessa kept the pantry well-organized. While the pasta boiled, she ducked into her bedroom to change into joggers and a tank top.

Ethan turned out to be right, of course. Liam ate better than Grace, who had to be distracted, which Ethan did gladly, making faces at her and blowing raspberries until she shrieked with laughter, allowing Billie to sneak bites in.

Playtime was especially entertaining. Ethan started to teach Liam to play football with a little three quid imitation ball that Stevie had found, and Liam was obsessed with. Grace on the other hand, wanted only to bounce on Billie’s knees and giggle. But an hour or so in, both children were showing their weariness. Grace cuddled up closer to Billie, her eyes falling closed, and Liam led Ethan back to the couch to sit down, getting promptly back into Ethan’s lap. His head slumped against Ethan’s shoulder within minutes of getting still.

“Hope he’s having good dreams,” Ethan said.

“He seems quite peaceful,” Billie remarked, if her nephew’s still face and deep breaths were any indication. “Are you worried?”

“When I was about his age, I started having my first recurring nightmare,” he confessed. “This crazy dream where I was in this dark forest and I was cold...colder than cold. I’m talking bone-chilling. And there were all these explosions around me that I had to dodge. It was real scary. You ever dream anything like that?”

Her stomach twisted into itself the longer he talked, like she had heard this before and it was triggering some deep-rooted fear she hardly dared to acknowledge. It was nothing like her old dream, but it reminded her of that. Somehow, the dreams were connected, his fear a direct counterpart to hers. She was on that floor in her dream because he was in the cold in his. It didn’t make sense, but in her head - or rather, in her heart and soul - it was obvious.

“I...I used to dream I got a letter that made me collapse,” she told him. “I can never remember what it said or who it was from - I mean, no one writes letters anymore - but...whatever it was completely devastated me. It’s why I’m so afraid of... loss, I suppose.”

A month ago, she might have anticipated him thinking it was silly or dramatic, especially compared to his, but she knew him better than that now. Ethan would never judge her. And she found understanding there when she looked into his eyes.

“Sounds intense,” he said. “Do you still have it?”

She shook her head. “Not since I met you.”



“Yeah...come to think of it, I haven’t dreamed mine since I met you either.”

Her chest heaved in a way that would have put a Regency heroine to shame. His eyes flicked down, noticing. He cleared his throat.

“Should we, uh...get these kiddos in bed?”

“Oh, um, yeah, I think so,” she said.

When they rose from the couch, the children stirred awake. Billie almost groaned with frustration, but Ethan thought quickly.

“Y’all ready for a bedtime story?” he asked.

“Yeah!” Liam cried, while his sister kicked her little feet wildly with excitement. She got Billie right in the ribs, but to her own surprise, Billie didn’t mind it.

“Alright, then you gotta get jammies on and teeth brushed,” Ethan said. “Last one to it’s a rotten egg!”

Liam slid off the couch and raced down the hallway, his sister toddling along behind him. Ethan eventually scooped her up and carried her the rest of the way. By the time they reached the bathroom, Liam was already at the sink, standing on his toes to get his toothbrush under the water.

“I won!” he cried.

“Hey, good job, bud,” Ethan replied, and offered him a high-five.

Quite a bit more effort went into getting Grace down, as they had to change her diaper, but Billie was impressed to see it didn't intimidate Ethan at all. He made that little girl giggle through the whole process so it went as smoothly as possible. It was baffling that changing a diaper could look so good. Finally, it was story time.

They all gathered in Billie's room. Ethan reclined on the bed, and the kids got on either side of him, while Billie looked through the diaper bag for a story.

"Looks like Mum packed *Goodnight Moon*," she said. "That alright?" They nodded from their places under Ethan's arms. She smiled softly. "You want Auntie to read it, or Ethan?"

"Ethan!" they cried in a chorus.

Billie's mouth fell open. "What? I've known you both since the day you were born, and after a few hours he's your favorite?"

"Are *you* a footballer, Auntie?" Liam said.

"No, of course not."

"Then you're just not as cool."

She folded her arms over her chest while Ethan hid a snicker behind his hand. She threw the book at his chest. "Fine."

He shot her a cheeky look as he opened the book and began reading, his voice smooth and tender. Grace nodded off before he was finished. Liam yawned and snuggled down close, but asked Ethan to read it one more time, and eventually he drifted

off as well. Billie watched, turning to absolute mush at the sight. Maybe Stevie had a point about being more into the whole domestic thing when you really cared about someone. Ethan carefully detached himself when the kids were sound asleep, and he pulled Billie's quilt over their shoulders. Then, he crept over to Billie.

“Do we cut the light off or do they sleep with it on?” he whispered.

“They like it switched off,” she replied quietly.

He nodded, and turned the switch down with a soft click. Together, they left the room and closed the door gently behind them. With the children settled, they stepped back into the sitting room. Billie knew exactly what she wanted to say. She no longer had any doubts. But Ethan started.

“So, I know we were supposed to talk, but if you -”

“I want to be your girlfriend,” she blurted out.

A slow smile spread across his face. “You do?”

She nodded. “I...I don't know that I've ever felt more sure of something than this.”

“You're not just saying it because you're turned on?”

“No, I swear,” she assured him. “Ethan...you are truly one of the best people I've ever met. The fact that you even showed up here tonight shows me the kind of man you are. You're so sweet and thoughtful and warm. And - now this is just an added bonus - you're not hard to look at.”

He laughed. "You're not so bad yourself."

A smile tugged at her lips. "And...how are you feeling?"

"Darlin', I've been crazy about you since the moment we met," he said. "Even in that conference room when you were madder than a wet hen, I thought you were beautiful. And since then, I've come to see that you're passionate and smart and funny - as well as gorgeous. I'd consider myself real lucky to be your boyfriend."

"Well, get over here then, Mr. Lucky," she replied with a smirk, her heart so full it could burst.

He made it to her in two strides, gathering her up in his arms, and his lips were on hers before she could say another word.

"Stay with me tonight," she said breathlessly when they parted for air, and he nodded before kissing her again.

## Chapter 16

Because Ethan had no words to describe his happiness at Billie's desire to be his girlfriend, he felt the only option was to kiss her. Her mouth was beautiful and open and willing, and he felt her melt into him, her arms hooking around his neck to stay upright. His arms wrapped fully around her, needing her closer. He wanted contact in every place possible.

"Oh," she said, and pulled away. He almost whimpered in protest. "And the other things you wanted to discuss. I'm on the pill, but would prefer to use condoms as well for now. I was tested last month and all came back clear."

"Hey, me too," he told her. "Got it included with my physical when I signed with the club."

She smiled. "Now, as far as the *kind* of sex...do you mean, like, kinks and stuff?"

"Yeah, you got any?" he asked with all the nonchalance he could muster.

She shook her head. "I'm quite vanilla, I'm afraid."

“Works for me,” he said. “I’m vanilla too.”

They shared a quiet laugh. He hooked her chin on his finger and tilted her head back so they could lock eyes again.

“One other thing,” he said. “Is there anything off limits?”

Her brow furrowed, puzzled. “How do you mean?”

“I mean...I don’t know your history, if there’s ever been an experience that wasn’t consensual or pushed a boundary for you,” he told her. “I don’t want to trigger you.”

“Oh,” she said. “No, nothing like that. But that consideration? Very hot.”

He chuckled. “I like to cover all my bases.”

“I believe they’re covered.” She paused for a beat, taking her bottom lip between her teeth. He wanted to kiss her again so badly, he ached. “Can I say one more thing?”

“Of course,” he assured her.

“I’m not certain I deserve you.”

That gave him pause. In his mind, there was nothing she was not worthy of. He hardly believed he was in her league, so it surprised him to hear she saw it the other way around.

“What are you talking about?”

“I just...you’re so good to everyone and I’m...not,” she said. “I mean, I’m not sure I’d have offered to help you babysit tonight if our roles were reversed.”

“So?”

She blinked. “What d’you mean, ‘so’?”

“Darlin’, if you and I were exactly alike, this would be one boring relationship,” he said. “I offered because I *wanted* to, not because I expect you to do the same.”

She frowned. “So you *do* think I’m selfish.”

“Not what I said,” he replied quickly. “I mean, the only reason I had the opportunity to offer to help was because you helped your sister first. You also came to check on me when I missed training, and took me line dancing to cheer me up. You’re not selfish, Billie. Far from it. You’re...impressive.”

The words spilled out of him faster than his mind even formed them. Like they really were coming straight from his heart. They seemed to satisfy her as well if that smile on her pretty pink lips was any indication. He needed to get back to them as soon as possible.

“Well...that’s quite nice to hear, thank you,” she said.

He moved his hands up to cup each side of her face. “Good.”

A light sigh escaped her mouth and her eyes held his gaze. “Can you go back to kissing me now?”

He didn’t answer with words, only his mouth, reclaiming hers with all the passion of a man returning from war. He was that desperate for her. When her hands slid up under his hoodie his brain nearly short-circuited. He knew he was in trouble if a touch that light almost had him coming undone.

“Want this off,” she hissed, tugging his hoodie up now, and only parting from him just enough to slip it over his head. It hit the floor and he saw her frown when she realized he had a t-shirt underneath. “Must you wear so many layers?”

“In this cold?” he shot back. “Absolutely.”

She rolled her eyes. He cut her some slack and took his shirt off himself. She studied him with a fire behind her eyes, unlike anything he’d seen from her before. She had seen him shirtless a couple of times, but this was different. This time she could look at him without shame or guilt. She could even reach out and touch him, which she did, her warm palm sending an electric shock up his spine when it made contact with his bare chest.

“Fuck, you’re amazing,” she said, almost under her breath, and her hand slid down to his abdomen, her fingers just barely grazing his scar. Every muscle flexed under her touch, every part of him longing to be nearer to her.

He took her chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting her head back so he could look her in the eyes. She drew in a sharp breath at the sudden intensity, but he couldn’t hold back any longer.

“You want me, darlin’?”

“Yes,” she breathed.

“Tell me how much. I wanna hear you say the words.”

He heard her breath get shorter as her chest heaved. He felt her racing pulse at her throat. He watched her mouth part and



her eyes darken with desire.

“I want you, Ethan,” she said. She peeled her tank top off over her head, leaving her in just her bralette, her hard nipples peeking through the powder blue lace. “I want you to touch every part of me you can reach.” She rid herself of the bralette too, and he thought his knees might buckle, especially when she ran her fingers over her gorgeous breasts. “I want your mouth here.”

He yanked her close and lifted her into his arms, her legs wrapped around his hips. He remembered that feeling from their night at the bar. He’d gotten himself off to the memory of it. She was so hot that night, he’d almost given in. Now he was free to go as far as she would let him. He took one pebbled nipple into his mouth, and she gasped. He wanted her to make that sound again, so he flicked his tongue over the tip. She shivered and held him closer.

“Keep going, baby,” he urged her. “Tell me what else.”

“Put me on the couch,” she sighed. “Wanna feel you on top of me.”

He obeyed, laying her down gently. He kept his mouth on her breasts, cupping one with the hand that wasn’t at her waist, kneading until she whimpered, pushing her chest towards him for more.

He started a trail of hot, open-mouthed kisses up her chest and all the way to her throat, nipping slightly at the soft skin of her neck. His knee pushed her legs apart; she rutted her hips so her center grazed his thigh. She shuddered.

“Been thinking about these thighs, baby?” he murmured into her neck.

She nodded. “Want them there. Wanna grind on them.”

The thought of her using him to get off had him reeling. He pushed his leg right up against her, rocking as he sucked on one of her perky nipples. Her chest was as flushed as her face. She arched her back and choked out a moan, the friction warming her up between her thighs.

“Tell me more,” he said softly. “What next, baby?”

“Take these bloody joggers off.”

“Yours or mine?” he asked with a grin.

“Mine first.”

“You got it.”

He hooked a finger into the waistband of her pants and tugged them off, tossing them over the back of the couch. Her legs fell slowly apart, letting him see the dark, wet spot on her panties. Knowing he’d gotten her so worked up made him even harder; it almost felt painful now, but he wanted more from her before he took care of himself. He ran a slow hand up her perfect thigh.

“Take these off too,” she said, toying with the lace top of her underwear. “Want your mouth there now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She grinned at that, and he readily obeyed. God, she was exquisite. Holding her gaze, he bent down, lining his mouth up

with her pussy. He licked her slowly, reverently, worshipping her as if it was an altar between her thighs. Those thighs he hadn't stopped thinking about since the first time he saw them in those boots she wore. Now they quivered on either side of his head as he worked her clit with his tongue. She writhed beneath him, moaning, her breath catching.

“Fuck...” she whined. “Don't stop.”

Stopping was the last thing on his mind; he never wanted to leave this space right here, feeling her warmth around him, tasting her. To show her that, he hummed against her, and her breath hitched in her throat. Her hand flew to his head, lacing her fingers in his hair and pulling him even further into her.

He knew she was getting close as her legs began to tremble against the couch cushions and her grip on his hair tightened. Her breathy whines went up an octave with every exhale. She couldn't keep her hips still, so he had to hold them in place. Her head fell back, and finally, with a hoarse cry of his name, she came undone.

Her hips swayed gently as he coaxed her down from her high. In fact, he didn't actually remove his mouth until she tugged on his hair and pulled him up for a searing, fiery kiss. She moaned into his mouth, which made him all the more eager to be inside of her, but he wouldn't go there until explicitly asked. And for the moment, he was content with her lips. He could have kissed her right there on the couch for the rest of his life and been happy. But she broke away to catch her breath.

“So good...” she sighed. “Fuck, Ethan...”

“You want more?” he asked.

She nodded. “Please.”

“How do you want it?”

“Want your fingers.”

“Yeah?”

She took his hand and brought it right to her mouth, slipping his first two fingers between her lips. Somehow, it felt more erotic than if she'd just reached for his dick. When his fingers were properly coated, she put his hand between her legs herself. He bit back a groan.

“Damn, baby,” he sighed. “You're wet enough as it is.”

It was true. Her cunt was soaking. He sank two fingers inside easily, his thumb finding her clit and rubbing soft, slow circles on it. He crooked his fingers toward himself inside her, prodding until he found her g-spot. He knew he had when her hands clapped around his biceps and she cried out, “Right there!”

“Tell me how it feels, darlin'.”

Ethan always thrived on feedback. He needed to know he was doing the right thing, whether he was on the pitch or in the bedroom. But especially with Billie, he wanted to hear how it was for her. He needed to be sure he was doing enough to please her.

“So good, babe,” she panted, rocking against his hand. “Fuck, it feels so good. I need you to make me come again.”

“Wanna come on my fingers?” he teased.

She nodded, her breath stuttering when he picked up the pace on her clit. He worked her up with that consistent pace, watching the rise and fall of her chest, and the way her back came up off the couch when it was especially good.

He had seen a number of beautiful sunsets. And breathtaking mountains. Flowers and beaches all over the world. None of it compared to the vision beneath him. Billie having an orgasm was the most stunning thing he had ever witnessed. He watched her as if she were in slow motion - the steady rhythm of her body, her sweet mouth as she chewed her bottom lip, the way her hair careened over her shoulders. She was a goddess, a work of art, a force of nature, and he was just counting his blessings at being allowed to be a witness. And proud he was the one to draw it from her.

Her second orgasm had her lying boneless beneath him, though she did manage to pull him in for another kiss. He swore he could get drunk on her kisses.

She tugged at the waist of his sweatpants. “More,” she whined. “Want your cock.”

He nearly groaned with relief. He loved watching her come, but it was making him ache. Even sweatpants were beginning to feel too tight. He was grateful he hadn't worn jeans. Especially now with her outright admission, he was pretty sure his dick was hard enough to cut diamonds.

“Yeah?” he asked. “How do you want it?”

She pushed on his shoulders. “Wanna ride you.”

“Fuck,” he sighed.

She smirked, clearly proud that she got him to swear, but right then, he didn't even care. It was usually reserved for situations like this anyway. He sat back, tugged his pants and boxers down his thighs, and kicked them off the rest of the way. Then he helped her up to straddle him, one leg swinging over his lap. With one hand, she took his chin and pulled him in for a kiss. With the other, she reached between their bodies and took hold of his cock, giving it a stroke that made him jerk up towards her with a moan.

“Hold on, baby,” he said. “Let me get a condom.”

He started to move, but she held him in place. “Actually... since we're both clear on our tests, I wouldn't mind skipping it.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes, I'm sure.”

“If you change your mind, just say the word, alright?”

“Alright.”

He held her by her hips. She descended slowly, her tight, wet heat taking him inch by agonizing inch. But that little gasp that escaped her throat when he was fully sheathed inside of her was worth it. Her nails bit into the skin of his shoulders.

She let out a filthy little moan matched only by his own. She opened her eyes and met his gaze.

From the moment he met her, he felt like he had known Billie from somewhere else before. But when their eyes locked in that moment, the feeling hit him like a tidal wave. Suddenly, the room around him was swimming, and they were somewhere else - a barn, actually - though how he knew that, he wasn't sure. It was still Billie on top of him, but her hair was much shorter and tied back with a headscarf. The discarded clothes beside them were a pair of overalls and a uniform with an eagle patch on the arm.

“Hey.” Billie’s voice called him back to the present moment, along with her hands on either side of his face. Concern shone in her eyes. “You alright?”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat and wrapped his arms loosely around her waist. “I’m fine, darlin’.”

The downturn of her mouth told him she wasn't totally convinced, so he took care of that with a kiss. She sighed into him and nibbled at his bottom lip, which made him lurch up into her. She gasped again, and fuck, he wanted to make her sound like that some more. He put all thoughts of whatever vision he'd had to the back of his mind. With this beautiful woman, how could he even think about anything else?

He moved his hands down her back to take hold of her soft, round ass, earning another sweet moan from her. Then she began to move, rocking and rolling her hips. He thrust up to

meet her, and they found a perfect rhythm within seconds, like they had been making love this way for years.

A tightness in his lower belly let him know he was getting close. And how could he not? Watching her come twice for him, and now seeing her tits bounce as she rode him, left him breathless, aching to come inside her. From the way she was clenching around him, he was sure she was getting close to another orgasm as well. He slipped his hand between them and found her clit with his thumb again, stroking it back and forth to the same cadence of her hips.

“One more, baby,” he pressed. “One more for me, please.”

She captured his mouth in another blazing kiss.

“Together,” she whispered, her breath skating over his skin and sending a shiver down his spine.

They picked up the pace, bucking wildly into each other as they hurtled toward the edge. He began kissing her anywhere his lips could reach - the corner of her mouth, her jaw, her neck, her collarbones, and the swells of her breasts - leaving blooms of red from the scrape of his teeth in his wake. She held him tight and a strangled moan left her throat as she hit her peak, and he toppled over right behind her with a groan of her name. Their lips came together like magnets as they slowed, easing each other back down while their hearts galloped away.

She pressed feather light kisses against his lips while they caught their breath, and he returned them with equal tenderness. His mind was spinning, totally in awe of what had



transpired between them. She dropped her head into the crook of his neck and hummed.

“Feeling good?” he asked between pecks to her shoulder.

He felt her nod. “Mmm, yes.”

“You need anything?” he continued. “Water or -”

“Ethan,” she said, sitting up to look him in the eyes. “I’m perfect. Just...hold me for a little longer, yeah?”

“As long as you want, darlin’,” he promised.

He would sit on this couch and hold her until he died if that was what she wanted. He would do anything for her.



A knock on the door woke Ethan up. Billie was still in his arms, but she didn’t move, so he got up as carefully as he could, finding his sweatpants and pulling them on. She must have been out hard, because he barely contained a curse as he stubbed his toe on one of Tessa’s many boxes, but the sound didn’t make her stir. Shooting the box another glare, he went to the door. It was Stevie and her husband. Ethan’s face got warm; he wished he’d thrown on his shirt, though the couple seemed unfazed. He was familiar with the kind of exhaustion he saw in their faces.

“Hey, guys,” he said quietly. He looked at Joel. “Your dad okay?”

“He’s stable,” Joel said. “They’re keeping him a couple days to monitor him.”

“I hope he gets well soon,” Ethan replied.

“Thanks, mate.”

“Where’s Billie?” Stevie asked.

“Asleep on the couch,” Ethan told her. “The kids are in her room. Y’all come on in.”

They did so, stepping softly over the threshold. Joel went right down the hall toward Billie’s room, but Stevie hung back, turning curious eyes on Ethan. He flushed a little under her examination.

“Are you and Billie...together?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yeah, we are.”

She grinned, and he saw the resemblance between them in her smile. “That’s good to hear.”

Joel returned with one child in each arm. Stevie relieved him of Grace, and then thanked Ethan profusely, and asked him to send her gratitude along to Billie as well. He assured her that he would and bid them goodnight, closing the door behind them. Then he padded back over to the couch.

Moonlight pooled into the room from the window, illuminating Billie’s skin in a pale glow. She was absolutely stunning. Since their first meeting, he knew he stood on the

edge of a cliff, sticking his foot out while he calculated the risk of falling for her. As he looked at her now, he understood there was no turning back. He took the leap.

*Interlude*

*July 10, 1944*

*Utah Beach, Normandy, France*

*My love,*

*I am coming home to you.*

*Henry*

## Chapter 17

“Well, well, well, look who made the front page of *The Sun!*” Tessa teased.

Billie walked out of her bedroom, adjusting the kit Ethan had gifted her - his own, of course, name and number printed clearly on the back, Knight and 9. She wished the kits didn't have so much yellow, as she never felt the color suited her, but oddly, after three weeks of being with Ethan, she found it rather flattering.

“Who?” she asked, finishing her low ponytail.

“You and Ethan,” Tessa told her, and revealed the cover.

There they were, Billie and Ethan, hand in hand as they emerged from a coffee shop. Billie was looking out toward the sidewalk, but Ethan's eyes were on her. Just looking at it made her cheeks flush, it was so reminiscent of how he looked when he first saw her without her clothes on. He adored her just as much in a situation as mundane as getting coffee.

“If you look up ‘smitten’ in the dictionary, there ought to be this photo of Ethan,” Tessa said.

Billie chuckled. “He is quite fond of me.”

“And are you as fond of him?”

“Yeah...” she paused for a beat. “I think I am.”

Part of her started to worry that once she had agreed to be his girlfriend, he might not put in the same effort as before, but she couldn't have been more wrong. Ethan still walked her to work every morning, got her coffee, and on days he had to leave early to get to a match, he left flowers and a note on the pillow beside her. He was caring and thoughtful and totally doting. Not to mention the mind blowing sex.

Tessa was looking hard at Billie. “Son of a bitch, I think you really are.”

Billie rolled her eyes and held her hand out. “Let me see that article.”

She scanned the first paragraph. *Stanmore FC striker Ethan Knight has started making himself quite at home here in London, it read. Knight, 26, has evidently entered into a relationship with Billie Axton, 28, a legal assistant at Stanmore. The pair have been spotted throughout the city, and after some speculation on social media, the couple confirmed their relationship on their respective Instagram accounts.* There was a screenshot of Ethan's latest post, a candid picture of Billie sipping her coffee at his kitchen table, captioned: *Views.* She smiled at the memory, and then read on.

*The scandal in all this is that Miss Axton dated Knight's current teammate, Peter O'Riley, just over a year ago, they wrote. No word yet on how O'Riley's taking it, but that could explain the tension we've been seeing on the pitch.*

She stopped reading there. "Of course they brought up Peter just to stir up drama that isn't there."

"Did they really?" Tessa asked.

"You mean you haven't read it yet?"

"No, I only picked up a paper to start wrapping some antiques up."

Billie chuckled. "Well, there is a bright side."

"What's that?"

"I look fucking fit in this picture."

Tessa laughed and looked at it again. "You really do, Bills, shall we have it framed?"

"Fuck off," Billie teased and started toward the door. "I'll see you after the match, yeah?"

"Best of luck joining the - what was it?"

"WAGs," Billie said. "Wives and girlfriends."

She had received an invite from Osahar's fiancée, Nadia. Apparently, they had a box to themselves where they watched the matches each week. Of course, Larisa, Artem's wife, was only at home matches these days since she was due to have her baby in another month or so. Also joining them was Fernando's soon-to-be fiancée (and Billie was sworn to secrecy

there), Astrid. Unlike the other two, she hadn't met Fernando until after he moved to England, but they had been together ever since. As Billie headed out, she wondered if looking at them might give her insight into her own future with Ethan.

"Hey, Billie!" Nadia greeted when she arrived.

Nadia was a stunning woman with a warmth that shined through her deep brown eyes. Billie admired her dedication to supporting the club - her hijab matched her fiance's jersey.

"This is Larysa," Nadia said, pointing to the beautiful blonde woman in a maternity dress that perfectly showed off her baby bump.

"Nice to meet you," Larysa said.

"Likewise," Billie returned. "And congratulations, by the way."

Larysa smiled and rubbed her belly. "Thank you."

"And this is Astrid," Nadia went on, indicating the devastatingly gorgeous brunette to Larysa's right.

"Holy shit, you're beautiful," Billie blurted out.

"Thanks," Astrid chuckled. "I should hope so, my job depends on it."

"Actress?" Billie guessed.

"Model."

"Sounds about right."

They were all as kind as they were pretty. Nadia, Billie learned, was a professional makeup artist, which made sense



because hers was flawless. Larysa was a competitive ballroom dancer, but was, of course, taking a break for a while to have her son.

“Fancy a drink, Billie?” Astrid asked. “It’ll just be us since Nadia doesn’t drink and Larysa obviously can’t at the moment.”

Larysa smiled and shook her head, but rubbed her belly with affection. “Believe me, I am very jealous.”

“Yeah, I suppose I’ll have a pint,” Billie said. “But let me get it. I’m the new girl, I’ve gotta pay my dues.”

“I’ll let you,” Astrid joked.

“Be back in just a moment.”

Billie stepped out into the concourse, heading toward the first place that sold beer. As she stepped in line and checked her phone, she heard a familiar voice behind her.

“Well, you certainly move on quickly.”

She turned her head. “Greg?”

There he stood, in a Stanmore kit, but glowering at her like she was sneaking over from the Liverpool supporter’s section. She folded her arms over her chest. If anyone had a right to be angry it was her. He was the one who said that awful thing - *love is wasted on you.*

“Saw the article in *the Sun*,” he practically spat. “I suppose I was right then.”

“We broke up over two months ago,” she reminded him. “I’m allowed to move on. You should think about doing the same.”

“That is just like you,” he scoffed. “Never mind that I was in love with you. No, you’ve got your fresh, footballer boyfriend now, like I never even existed.”

She frowned. Did he really think he was blameless? This breakup certainly had him showing his true colors. The victim complex on this guy was astounding.

“Look, I’m sorry that I hurt you -” she began, but he cut her off.

“Spare me that,” he said. “Face it, Billie. You’re cold and you’re selfish. You’ll break his heart just like you do to everyone else.”

She bristled, drawing herself up to her full height, and prepared to tell him that his feelings were not her responsibility and he could fuck right off for accosting her like this, but she stopped. She asked herself - *what would Ethan do in this situation?* She released a breath.

“I am sorry,” she repeated, gentler this time. “Whether you believe me or not. I’ve found someone who makes me really happy, and honestly, Greg, I wish the same for you.”

With that, she turned on her heel and left him stricken where he stood. She was proud of herself for being polite, but rage still simmered in her stomach, along with a dash of fear. Greg had voiced her worst nightmare - that this wouldn’t work out.

That her hesitancy would get the best of her and she or Ethan - maybe even both of them - would end up devastated. She ordered an extra beer and drank it down before returning to the box.



Ethan slung his kit into the laundry hamper, defeated. Literally. They lost to Liverpool 5-1, so the locker room was silent with their shame. He went over every goal opportunity he'd had during the match, mentally kicking himself for all the misses. But Liverpool's defense had been spectacular, and neither Ethan or anyone else was able to break through them. Their only goal was from a penalty kick. The loss put them back in seventh place in the league, and it was Ethan's first loss with Stanmore. All the other matches had been wins or draws.

"Alright, listen up, all of you," Jordan said. All eyes turned to the captain. "We got stomped out today. In our own house. Feels like shit, right?"

Murmurs of agreement went through the room, from Ethan as well.

"Now's the time to dig down deep," Jordan went on. "Channel all the fucked up shit inside you and use it to make

you better. I want everyone back here tomorrow to go over the tapes. Understood?”

They all nodded. Ethan sighed and flopped down to sit on the bench, holding his head in his hands. He should have been better. He would have to do even more tomorrow. Watch the tapes, and then get out on the pitch and push himself. When he felt the weight of someone beside him, he turned his head to find Jordan there.

“You played well today, Knight,” he said.

“Not well enough.”

“One loss isn’t the end of the world,” Jordan continued. “Besides, we’ve got a much bigger match coming up.”

Ethan was well aware - the FA Cup quarter final. Stanmore had never made it past that stage before, and the speculation across social media and among pundits was that Ethan was the best chance they had at making the semi-finals. But after today, he wasn’t so sure. And Tottenham Hotspur, their opponent, was playing well. They beat Chelsea today 3-2.

Jordan’s heavy hand clapped Ethan’s shoulder. “Put it behind you, mate.”

“I’ll try,” Ethan said. “I don’t ever wanna let y’all down again.”

“You’ve never been guilty of that, Knight.”

Ethan smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Thanks.”

“If you want, I’ll stay after tomorrow and we’ll work on some different shots, all right?”

“That’d be perfect, Skipper, thank you.”

They shook hands on it.

At that moment, the door to the locker room burst open. The team collectively jumped with surprise, as that wasn’t usually how Coach Warren came in once he got done with the press on the pitch. But it wasn’t Coach Warren. It was Billie, hanging onto Astrid’s arm for dear life while she stumbled, laughing at a volume Ethan had never heard from her before. Nadia and Larysa followed behind, Nadia stepping quickly up to catch Billie when she tripped.

“Sorry to come barreling in, lads,” Astrid said, and she nodded toward a still-giggling Billie. “But this one’s had one pint too many, I’m afraid.”

Ethan got to his feet and relieved Astrid of Billie’s weight. She sagged against him. He could smell beer on her breath and see the rosiness of her cheeks. Her skin was warm too, making him wonder if she had already been sick.

“Hello, love,” she slurred, looking up at him. “My God, you’re sexy after a match.”

He looked at Astrid, stunned. “How many did she have?”

“No idea,” Astrid shrugged.

He looked at Billie again, whose wide eyes were fixed on Jordan. What possessed her to get this drunk? Was something wrong? What did he need to do?

“You’re like, a foot taller than a person’s supposed to be,” she said, and Jordan frowned.

“Okay,” Ethan stopped her, turning her towards his locker. “Billie, what’s gotten into you?”

“Waaaaay too much alcohol,” she admitted freely. Her eyes found her picture taped on the back wall of his locker and she stiffened. Her lips began to tremble. She looked back at him. “We’ve got to break up.”

His heart dropped into his stomach. Not only was he hearing world-ending words from his girlfriend, his whole team heard them too. They were all watching, as it was impossible not to. Peter let out a snort.

“Fucking figures,” he said. “Knight can’t control his woman.”

“Fuck you, Peter, you fucking two pump chump,” Billie shot back.

She didn’t have the high ground very long, as she leaned too far back on the bench and toppled over it with a yelp. The team was laughing, but Ethan couldn’t be sure if it was at Peter or Billie. He struggled to find amusement in either of them. His face burned with humiliation as he helped her back to her feet.

“You ready to go?” Jordan asked quietly. “I can give you guys a lift.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Ethan accepted. “I’ll change at home, I just wanna get out of here.”

Jordan nodded and picked up Ethan's bag, freeing Ethan to hold Billie up. He tried to ignore the pitying looks on his teammates' faces as they made their way out.

They made it back to Ethan's place in two minutes flat. Ethan thanked Jordan profusely before practically dragging Billie into the building and up to his floor. She was singing, dancing poorly, and attempted several times to start a make out session in the hallway. Finally, he made it to his apartment, pretty certain it had taken more effort to get her there than he had spent in the whole ninety minutes of football he'd just played. He was grateful he hadn't showered, since he was sweating all over again. Once she was seated on the bed, he knelt in front of her.

"Hey," he said seriously. "What do you mean we gotta break up?"

"You're too good for me," she whimpered. "I'm so cold and selfish and I hurt everyone. D'you know why?"

He shook his head. "No, darlin', I don't."

"Because I'm a coward," she said in a whisper. "I'm afraid all the time. Did you know I want to go to law school?"

He blinked, taken aback. She had never so much as mentioned it to him. "I - no, I didn't."

"I've wanted it since I was a girl," she went on, still not enunciating properly. "But I'm so fucking scared I won't get in. Like, the idea of it not working scares me so much that I don't even try. And I do the same thing to people. I never let

anybody close because I'm terrified of getting hurt. That's why we need to break up. Because I'm gonna hurt you. You, the kind of person who keeps a picture of me in his locker - and a real picture, not one with my tits out or anything."

"That's...wow, that's a lot to take in all at once," he took a deep breath to slow his racing heart, and met her gaze. "First of all - and I don't mean this to be a caveman - but if anyone else in that locker room is getting a clear view of your tits, then you need to call a coroner because surely, I'm dead." She giggled. He started untying the laces of her shoes. "Second, I dunno who put all this nonsense in your head about being selfish, cold, or cowardly, but I hope I never find out. For their sake mostly." He set her shoes aside. "And finally, I'm not sure you're in the right mindset to make a final call on breaking up. You wanna put it off until tomorrow?"

"Yes, I think so," she nodded. "That way we can get a shag in."

"Absolutely not," he said firmly. "You're going to bed."

"But you're coming with me, right?"

"No, ma'am. You are way too drunk and there are rules about things like that."

She frowned, her lower lip jutting out into an adorable pout. "But where will you sleep?"

"On the couch, like a gentleman," he said. "I'm gonna get you something to sleep in, alright?"

She heaved an irritable sigh. "Very well."



He went to his dresser and retrieved her favorite pair of his sweatpants and a t-shirt. After helping her change, he got her some water and a couple aspirin. She took two of them, and he left another two on the nightstand for her to take when she woke up. Then he pulled the comforter over her shoulders and kissed her forehead. She was asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.

With Billie settled, Ethan hopped in the shower, letting the hot water wash away this disaster of an evening. First the loss, and now all this with Billie. He had never been drunk before, but he had been around enough drunk people to know that often a lot of truth came out under the influence of alcohol. The thing about law school certainly didn't come out of nowhere. She had been holding onto it, and something made her spiral enough to drink so heavily she finally admitted it to him.

It shouldn't have been a big deal, but it nagged at him the entire time he bathed. They had been together for weeks now, and were friends before that. Why hadn't she ever confided an aspiration like that in him?

Honestly, it reminded him of the dream she told him about that night they were babysitting. About receiving a letter and whatever news it contained had her on the floor and heartbroken. Had a dream really made her so resistant to hurt or rejection that it made her keep everyone and everything at arm's length? His old nightmare made him hate the cold, but it didn't give him anxiety like *that*. That was a whole other level that he was certain he was not equipped for dealing with.

And frankly, if getting rip roaring drunk was a coping mechanism for her, he wasn't sure he could handle that either. Her behavior was totally out of line, and his face still burned from embarrassment. For the first time, he was actually angry with her.

But the big question, the one that frightened him more than anything was - what else was she keeping from him?

## *Chapter 18*

Billie woke with a pounding in her head. Groaning, she turned over, bleary eyes taking in the room that appeared to be swimming. She wasn't at home. This was Ethan's room, but he wasn't in bed with her. She pushed herself to sit up, clutching at her head when it hammered in protest. On the nightstand were a couple aspirin and a water bottle, ready for her consumption. She took the aspirin quickly.

Even with the help of medicine, she wobbled at the lingering pain behind her eyes when she got out of bed. She hadn't been that drunk in years. In fact, she couldn't even recall the end of the match, much less how she ended up back at Ethan's and in his clothes. The last thing she remembered with absolute clarity was talking to Greg, of all people, and how shitty he made her feel. Pushing her hair out of her face, she stumbled out to the kitchen.

Ethan was sitting at his table, coffee in front of him and scrolling on his phone. He looked up at the sound of her steps. He didn't smile.

“Hey,” he said coolly.

“Morning,” she replied, searching his face for any sign of what he was feeling, but he was stoic.

“You still wanna break up?”

Her stomach dropped out and she gaped at him. “W-what?”

“That’s what you said last night,” he said. “You’re so afraid of hurting me that you just wanna throw in the towel.”

“Ethan, I didn’t mean it,” she said, though she didn’t know how convincing it was. She still carried Greg’s words like chains around her neck - *selfish, cold, you’ll break his heart*.

“Didn’t you?” he challenged.

She almost flinched at how harsh he sounded. “Of course not. I’m sorry if I worried you, but -”

“You did a lot more than that,” he said. “You totally humiliated me in front of my teammates too.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. It wasn’t as if she had done that with the intention of hurting him. One mistake and suddenly he was acting like this?

“Well, *excuse me*, but we can’t all be perfect like you, Mr. Golden Boy! Us mere mortals have some flaws and get drunk every once in a while!”

His jaw clenched. “You think this is easy for me? Being the way I am?”

“Clearly, since you seem to expect it from me!”

“Well, it’s not!” he cried, getting to his feet. “I’ve worked damn hard to be a good person, Billie, but a stunt like that doesn’t make it any easier!”

“Fine, I’ll take the pressure off,” she snapped, and started for the door.

He caught her by the wrist. “Oh, no you don’t. We are gonna talk this out.”

“Don’t speak to me like I’m a child.”

“Don’t treat me like a stranger.”

Her frown deepened and she wrenched her hand free, but did not try to leave again. She didn’t speak, either. Stubbornly, she folded her arms over her chest and raised an expectant eyebrow. She watched him school his face to disguise his anger.

“Fine, I’ll start,” he said. “I don’t put on any airs about who I am. I’m not perfect. And I’ve never asked you to be. All I ask is that you open your heart enough to let me in.”

“I have let you in!”

“Not completely, you haven’t!”

“Don’t presume to tell me what I’m feeling, you -”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me you wanted to go to law school?”

“*What?*” she cried. He couldn’t have shocked her more if he’d slapped her. “Where is this coming from?”

“You did an awful lot of talking last night, darlin’, I learned some things.”

Her mouth fell open. He had never used that endearment with so much venom before. “Are you seriously pissed at me because I -”

“Yeah, I am!” he shouted. “Suddenly, I feel like I don’t even know you! I had to find out this huge thing - your life’s ambition for God’s sake - while you’re drunk as all get out!”

“Why does it matter so much?”

“Because it makes me feel like you don’t trust me!” He paused for a beat to take a breath and run a hand through his hair. When he spoke again, his anger was gone. “Jesus, Billie, I’m giving this everything. Am I enough for you?”

She blinked, softening at the sudden uncertainty in his tone. Her arms fell back to her sides. “How do you mean?”

“I mean, that I’ve always tried to be good enough for the people in my life,” he said. “It didn’t work for my ex, I couldn’t be the high society man for her.”

Billie seethed all over again at the memory of the things he’d told her about Sarah. From the speech and grammar classes he had taken to try and correct his accent to the way he hid his family history from her social circle. No matter how high he jumped, she kept jerking the bar out of his reach. Ethan didn’t talk about her much since he assured Billie he had healed from it in therapy, but clearly, it still had some effect on him.

“I try to be the best player on the pitch, but I still let down my teammates yesterday,” he went on. “Hell, I tried to be a great son, but it wasn’t enough for my mother to ever get clean and stay clean.” He held her gaze heavily. “So, I’m asking you now. Is there something about me you don’t feel totally confident in? Am I enough for you?”

Her eyes welled up and her throat got tight. She hated herself for making him feel that way, for letting him doubt himself for even a moment. He was more than enough, he was everything. “Of course you are.”

“Then what’s -”

She threw herself at him, holding him around his waist. He braced himself and wrapped his arms slowly around her shoulders. She pressed her lips into his chest.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

He rested his cheek on top of her head. They stood there in silence for several long moments, breathing deeply and letting their hearts get back in sync. She did need to let him in, at least a little bit. She knew that. If she let these feelings fester, it would ruin them. Finally, she looked up and met his gaze.

“I ran into Greg at the match,” she said. “He started in on me, talking about how he’d seen our article in the paper, and how I was only going to break your heart like I did to him. I let it get to me, and I’m sorry, Ethan.”

“I forgive you,” he said softly, and kissed her forehead. “But why did that affect you so much? He’s just a sour ex-

boyfriend.”

She had to chew on that for a moment to find the right words. But how did she explain that? Her irrational fear of falling in love in case she lost it. It didn't make sense to anyone, not even her closest friend or her family.

“I...I think because maybe I'm afraid it's true,” she said. “I've had the thought myself, and it scares me.”

“The dream?” he asked, tucking her hair behind her ear.

The fact that he remembered and made the connection was so touching that when she blinked, a tear slipped down her cheek. He wiped it away with his thumb.

“Yeah,” she told him. “I know it's silly, but I...I don't know, I can't get past it. I've got this wall up to protect myself from the hurt in that dream because it always felt so real to me. I can honestly say I've never been in love before.”

“Well, that's not too bad,” he said. “I've only been in love once, and it does hurt like hell when it ends.”

She winced. “And you aren't afraid now?”

“I sure was last night,” he said. “But now that I understand a little better, I think I can handle it.” He dragged his thumb tenderly along her jawline. “It's seeped into other things too, hasn't it?”

She nodded. “That's why I haven't applied to law school. And why I never told you about it. Like Tessa told you that day you came to dinner, I hate to lose. I hate to fail. I don't know if I can handle it.”



She had made every excuse possible to her family for her not applying, even with an offer from Stevie to help her. It wasn't the right time or she wanted to save more money, anything other than telling them the truth. But she knew she could tell Ethan. In her gut, she felt that she could trust him. He was safe.

“I think you'll surprise yourself if you take a chance,” he said. “I hate that I didn't play my best yesterday, but I'm still gonna show up for training this afternoon and give it my all.”

She held him tighter, nuzzling her face back into his chest. She heard him swallow.

“And as a kid, I lived my whole life in fear that my mother was gonna die, but all that worrying didn't stop it from coming true,” he added. “All worry does is rob us of the joy of the moment.”

She gripped handfuls of the back of his shirt and nodded. A sob threatened to emerge from the back of her throat, and in the spirit of their conversation, she let it out. She had never cried in front of a boyfriend before. Part of her wanted to obey her instinct to leave and save herself the humiliation of being vulnerable. Instead, she held on tighter.

“I feel like shit,” she said into his chest, her voice muffled by the fabric of his shirt.

“Hey, now, none of that,” he replied, gently rubbing her back. “It's probably just the hangover kicking in. Those things'll put a real hitch in your giddyup.”

A laugh burst out of her at that and she pulled away to look at him. “I really am sorry.”

“I really do forgive you.”

“Did I say anything horrible?”

“You did call Peter a two pump chump in front of the whole team,” he said, a smile tugging on his lips. “Which almost makes having a fight with you worth it.”

She giggled. “I bet it didn’t do you any favors though.”

“I’m not too worried about it,” he said with a shrug. “Now, can I make you some breakfast? We gotta get something on your stomach.”

“You want to make me breakfast?”

“Yes, ma’am. And then I’ve gotta go to training, but I bought you some bubble bath and bath bombs since I wasn’t sure which you prefer. So you just go in there and relax however you like. And there’s Cabernet on the counter in case you need a little hair of the dog. But if not, I got tea, too. Your kind and my kind.”

She blinked slowly. “You did all that...even though you were angry with me?”

“Of course,” he said. “That’s what you do for the people you lo-” He stopped short and cleared his throat. “The people you care about.”

Billie’s heart caught in her throat with what she knew he was about to say. Ethan was in love? Was he holding back now

because he didn't want to scare her off? She didn't want that. But at the same time, she wasn't sure she was ready to say it back. Would it make a difference to him if that was the case? Clearly, he wasn't totally ready to say it, he'd just checked himself. What surprised her most was that for the first time, she could see herself getting to that point. She could picture - rather easily - falling in love with Ethan. But was she ready for what that meant?

“Ethan?” she said quietly.

“Yeah?”

“Please don't call me darling when you're angry with me anymore.”

She knew it was absurd to be fixed on that in such a moment, but she couldn't help it.

“You got it,” he said with a gentle smile. “I'll only call you darlin' when I'm totally happy.”

She kissed him. “Thank you. For everything.”



*“Come on, Stanmore! Come on, Stanmore! Come on, Stanmore!”*

The whole stadium chanted, Billie among them, pushing the team as best they could. They were tied 1-1 with only three minutes of stoppage time left in the game. And whoever took the win here would head to the FA Cup semi-finals. At Wembley. Tottenham Hotspur was favored to win, and had played an incredible game so far, but Stanmore had too, holding them to one point and defending the draw. But this match had to have a winner.

For a heart-stopping moment, it looked like the Spurs were going to take it, when one of their forwards took a shot right from outside the box. Luckily, Jordan was there to snatch it out of the air, and he lobbed it all the way back across the pitch.

Billie's eyes found Ethan there, carefully keeping an onside position so that the pass would count. From where she stood, it appeared to be a good pass, but she stole a glance at the official on the sideline. He didn't raise the flag. Ethan took off.

His support arrived within seconds, and right on time, as the Spurs defenders had him quickly surrounded. Unable to take the shot, Ethan passed it back to Artem. Larysa grabbed Billie's hand. Billie gave it a comforting squeeze. But Artem didn't have an out, so he switched the pitch and sent the ball sailing to Osahar. Billie's free hand found Nadia's. Astrid was on Nadia's other side, hands clasped as well.

Osahar leapt into the air for a header, turning it back in Ethan's direction. Ethan jumped, struck the ball with head as

well and right through the goalkeeper's arms. It swished into the back of the net. The final whistle blew.

The stadium erupted. Ethan barely made it to the ground before his teammates pounced on him, all smiles and cheers. Billie and the girls all wrapped each other in a group hug, incoherent screams of joy between them as they jumped up and down. "Don't Stop Me Now" echoed through the stands, the players inciting the crowd to sing it louder, while the Spurs walked slowly off the pitch, heads hanging.

"Billie!" Astrid called, tapping her on the shoulder. "Look!"

Billie followed where she was pointing, and with a gasp, saw that Ethan had leapt over the boundary and into the stands. He jogged up the stairs, accepting handshakes and high-fives, but moving quickly, making a beeline for the box Billie was in. He caught her eye and grinned. She met him, beaming as well, and leaned over the railing.

"What are you doing?" she cried over the din. "You should be out there celebrating!"

He shook his head. "All I want now is your pretty mouth, darlin'."

He pulled her in for a fervent kiss, his hands lacing through her hair, holding her close. She could smell the sweat and grass all over him, but she didn't care. They were going to the semi-finals. Ethan had taken them there. So for a moment, she could forget about everything else and just be proud to be his.

“You’ll be there? At the semi-final?” he asked when they parted for air.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” she promised him. “Not for the world, Ethan.”

## *Chapter 19*

Billie rocked into Ethan's hand, his first and middle fingers buried inside of her while his thumb kneaded her clit with expert pace and pressure. She felt herself clenching as she was coaxed toward the edge, the skirt of her dress bunched around her waist and knickers pushed to the side. The door of the supply closet was not sufficient to muffle her desperate whines, so Ethan covered her mouth with his own. She already missed his hot breath on her neck.

He kept his motion steady and sure, consistent and strong. His hands worked on her as well as his mouth did. Like there were magnets on the tips of his fingers that made them reach just the right spot to drive her wild. It felt so good, she couldn't keep kissing him. She needed air in her lungs and his mouth on her throat.

"Fuck," she said as she sighed. "I'm so close."

"I know, baby, I feel you," he whispered back. "Let it go for me."

She fisted handfuls of his shirt and held on tight as her head fell back against the wall.

“That’s it, baby,” he went on.

A guttural moan started to come from her throat as her orgasm hit her, but he clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle it. White exploded behind her eyes and her hips jerked violently toward him as he eased her back down from the high. He replaced the hand on her mouth with his lips, letting her moan into him before she had to catch her breath. While she did, he kissed her jawline, cheeks, and temples. Anywhere he could reach on her hot, flushed skin.

“Ethan,” she sighed, pulling him closer so she could rest her forehead on his chest. “Fuck, baby...”

He kissed the top of her head. She whimpered when he withdrew his fingers, the emptiness making her shift further towards him. He rearranged her panties and dress so politely, she almost laughed. He just fingered her until she came on his hand...twice, and yet he was determined to treat her like a lady.

“You want me to take care of that?” she asked, nodding toward the erection straining his trousers.

He shook his head. “I’m fine, darlin’. We better get back or someone will realize we’re missing.”

“It’s a huge party, I doubt anyone has,” she said with a giggle.



Nelle had decided to throw a club-wide baby shower for Artem and Larysa. Robbed of her usual morning orgasm because they had woken up late, Billie took the first opportunity to steal away with Ethan, quickly finding a supply closet and ducking inside. He just looked so damn good in a suit. To her delight, he didn't question it.

"I still think we shouldn't test our luck," he said. "Especially once they start opening gifts and stuff."

"Are you joking? That's the best time to be missing, everyone's focus is on the parents-to-be."

"And miss the look on their face when they see we got them that rocker? I don't think so."

She laughed and rolled her eyes. "Fair enough."

She had him wait while she cracked the door and peered out. The corridor was mercifully empty.

"Coast is clear," she told him. "I think we can sneak back without anyone noticing."

The shower was being thrown at the club, so on the way back to the suite, they had a view of the pitch, the afternoon sun beating down on it. Billie came to a stop, a naughty question on her mind, and she pulled Ethan to a halt as well.

"Have you ever shagged like...on the pitch?" she wondered, a teasing grin on her lips.

He chuckled. "That's a little too bold for me. There's not many times there aren't eyes on that thing, and I won't apologize for wanting my view of you all to myself."

“You’re not so bad yourself, you know,” she said. “Your chest gets all flushed and hot and -”

“You better ease off, darlin’, or we’re gonna have to go right back in there.”

He nodded toward the supply closet. She took her bottom lip between her teeth and looked at him, eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Billie, we’ve been gone long enough,” he said with an amused shake of his head. “I promise I’ll make it up to you when we get back to my place.”

“Ugh, alright then.”

She let him lead her further down the hall, his arm draped lazily over her shoulders. She wrapped hers around his waist. And even though she could have gone a couple more rounds, she was content with simple touches. Soft intimacy. She never felt like this with anyone else. Even with boyfriends in the past, she wasn’t interested in even holding hands, much less walking together practically attached at the hip. But she found herself wanting that closeness with Ethan almost constantly. Like she couldn’t get enough of him. Or, she sometimes feared, because it meant their time together was limited.

That feeling mostly came to her at night. She’d be asleep beside him, then wake with a start, suddenly terrified that he was gone. She would catch her breath and look at his face, studying every feature as he slept - the shape of his nose and the curve of his lips - committing it all to memory in case she lost him.

Logically, she understood the fear was unfounded. Ethan gave her no reasons to doubt his commitment to her. He wasn't going anywhere. Sometimes, when she couldn't sleep, she woke him up, and he reassured her of his presence with strong arms around her. In his embrace, she was able to sleep again.

Just as Ethan went to open the door back to the suite, it swung in, revealing Tony. Billie had kept her interactions with her boss to a minimum since the texting incident, and he seemed just as keen to avoid her. He gave her instructions, addressed her occasionally in meetings, but otherwise pretended she didn't exist. Which was why what he said could have knocked her over with a feather.

“Ah, Billie. I was just wondering if I could have a word.”

Ethan's arm stiffened protectively around her shoulders. He was especially wary of Tony, which she understood, given his past seeing his mother get bossed around and mistreated. But Billie always reminded him she had backup. This was a professional environment, and she wasn't in any real danger. Still, Ethan frowned as he looked at Tony now.

“Sure,” Billie agreed, though she wondered what could possibly be so important he needed to address it at a baby shower.

Tony glanced sideways at Ethan. “Could it be alone?”

Ethan narrowed his eyes, but Billie put a reassuring hand on his chest. “It's alright.”

“You sure?” he asked, leaning over to murmur it in her ear.

She nodded. “I’ll be just a moment.”

He kissed her temple, and with one last warning look at Tony, returned to the party. Tony cleared his throat. Hardly looking at Billie, he started back down the way they came. Billie followed. Once out of earshot from the door, they stopped. Tony looked out at the pitch, something like hunger coming over his features.

“You and Knight seem awfully happy.”

“We are, actually,” she said. “Is that what you wanted to speak about? Because it’s not against any rules or -”

“Spare me the lecture, you’ve already made me well aware,” he cut across her. It was the first acknowledgement of her complaint since she filed it. “All I want to say is that I have plans for this club. Signing Ethan Knight was in pursuit of those plans.” He looked at her. “We could win the FA Cup. We could compete in the Champions League next season with some of the best clubs in Europe. He’s going to make club history.”

Confused, her brow furrowed. These were all things she already knew. Things she had also pointed out to Ethan herself. But Tony spoke differently. As if Ethan was a secret weapon about to be unleashed instead of a person. And Ethan would never stand for someone attributing all their success to him instead of sharing it with his teammates or the coaching staff.

“I don’t doubt that at all,” she said. “He’s wonderful. But he wouldn’t be that wonderful without the support he has in the back and the midfield.”

“Don’t say that as if you know what you’re talking about,” he scoffed. “Besides, that isn’t my point.”

“Well, you’d best make it then,” she said, folding her arms over her chest.

He looked sharply at her. “Getting bold, are we?”

She didn’t answer, only continued to look expectantly at him, hoping her deep breaths didn’t betray the way her heart was racing.

“My point, Billie, is this,” he said. “Your fling with Knight has not been a problem so far. I would advise that you don’t let it become one.”

“Or what?” she challenged, ignoring the urge to argue the use of the word “fling.”

“Or there will be a swift reminder about who is not replaceable at this club,” he said, looking at the pitch. Then he met her gaze again. “And who is.”

He left it at that, striding past her and back toward the party. Billie was fuming. That was why he wanted to speak alone, so she would have no witnesses and no proof this time. And he did it at the baby shower because it wasn’t an official club event, just something Nelle put together out of the kindness of her heart, so they weren’t technically at work. This was a carefully planned attack, and she felt properly ambushed.

She needed this job if she had any hope of going to law school so long after university. And with Ethan's encouragement, she had started looking at applications and putting documents together. She wouldn't make the deadline for the fall semester, but she had a real shot at starting next January. But she would need money as well as the experience. And Tony knew that.

Worst of all, the football world was a boy's club. If she were let go from Stanmore, it was unlikely she'd get a chance somewhere else if Tony got the word out it was because she dated one of the players and therefore his performance suffered.

The message was clear - she may have won a battle, but he was officially declaring war. Her whole career hung in the balance.



Ethan didn't get much time to worry about Billie and what Tony was saying to her. Coach Warren had come to the conclusion, in what could only be alcohol-induced thinking, that a baby shower was the best place for Ethan and Peter to work out their differences. As soon as Ethan came through the door, Coach dragged him over to where Peter stood at the bar.

Nelle was either very smart or very stupid to get an open bar for this occasion, and that distinction was yet to be determined.

“Alright,” Coach began. “Let’s talk about this like men. Peter, I’ll open the floor to you.”

“Pass,” Peter grunted, and took a sip of whiskey. From the looks of it, it wasn’t his first. His normally styled hair was falling out of place over his forehead. He had also loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt. And his eyes were a touch glassy.

Coach frowned, but pressed on. “Alright, Ethan. Anything you’d like to share?”

“I’m not the one with the problem, Coach,” Ethan said. “If there’s something to be aired out it’s from him.”

“He’s got a point there,” Coach said. “C’mon then, Peter, let’s have it.”

“If he was on fire and I had a glass of water, I’d drink it,” Peter spat.

A humorless laugh burst from Ethan’s chest. “Gotta give you some creativity points on that one, O’Riley.”

Peter only flipped him the bird as he took another swig.

“Lads,” Coach said, exasperated. “Surely there’s a way we can work this out. I need you both on the pitch. So be serious. Tell me what’s going on.”

When neither Peter or Ethan spoke up again, Jordan, who had been watching with a bemused smirk, stepped closer to offer his guess. “Is this about Billie?”

Peter scoffed. “Please, anyone could have her.”

Ethan’s stomach turned. “Watch your mouth.”

“You don’t need to defend a girl like that, cowboy. She’s probably got Tony’s cock in her mouth as we speak.”

“Hey!” Ethan barked, and swiped to grab Peter by the collar, but Jordan stepped between them to hold Ethan back. “I told you to watch your mouth.”

Peter only sneered. “Have I struck a nerve?”

“You say whatever you want about me, O’Riley, but you will not disrespect her,” Ethan shot back. “She’s my girlfriend.”

“For now.”

Ethan narrowed his eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Billie is what she is,” Peter said, swirling the whiskey around the bottom of his glass like a Bond villain. The effect was short-lived since he swayed on the spot, catching himself on the bar. “I won’t say slut since you’re so easily riled up.”

Ethan struggled against Jordan, but unfortunately, the goalkeeper had a grip like iron. Which was probably for the best since all Ethan could think about now was punching the smug little smile off Peter’s stupid face.



“Awfully rich coming from you,” Ethan said. “You’re the one who cheated on her.”

“Only because I knew what was coming,” Peter said. “I never took Billie seriously. And neither should you. Shag and bag is practically her life’s motto. Tell me, how soon did she try to sleep with you?”

Ethan didn’t answer, his mouth turning into an impossibly deeper frown.

“First date, wasn’t it?” Peter guessed, and it made Ethan’s chest clamp like a vice grip to know he was right. “She was the same with me. So I knew right away the kind of woman she was. I heard about the poor bloke that came after me who made the fucking mental mistake of falling in love with her.” He paused to finish off his drink. “My problem with you, Knight, isn’t that you’re taking your turn with her. You should enjoy it. My issue is that you got signed before anyone else even got a chance at the number nine spot.” He looked meaningfully at Coach Warren then. “And there were - there *are* - people who could have done it.”

Jordan dropped his arms from their place around Ethan’s middle. Ethan stood rooted to the spot. Coach blinked and shook his head, taken aback. He started to open his mouth to reply, but Peter didn’t give him the time. He put his empty glass back on the bar and started to walk away, headed for the exit. Ethan willed Coach Warren to speak up, to put his foot down, and set Peter straight about speaking that way about a staff member, or anyone for that matter. But he didn’t. He just

watched Peter walk away. At the last moment, Peter turned around again, a wicked gleam in his eye as he met Ethan's gaze.

"If I see Billie on her knees out there, I'll tell her to crack on."

Ethan lunged toward him again, but was stopped once more by Jordan. Peter walked out with a cruel laugh.

"It won't make you feel any better," Jordan said.

"Wanna bet?" Ethan grumbled, straightening his shirt.

"I had no idea..." Coach Warren said, looking at the floor. "He never said he wanted to play center forward."

"How much say do you have over signings, though?" Ethan asked.

Coach shrugged. "Not much, but I'd have happily given him an opportunity to...I wish he'd spoken up sooner."

"He's always been comfortable and successful on the wing," Jordan said. "Scored goals from there too. Why would you move him if what he's doing has been working?"

Had Peter not just said all those awful things about Billie, Ethan would have gladly suggested playing a false nine, and just giving Peter the opportunity he was so desperate for. As it was, Ethan was no longer interested in being polite or generous to that asshole. So he held his tongue. If Peter wanted the chance, he was going to have to pry it from Ethan's cold, dead hands.

## Chapter 20

*“ Must be doin’ somethin’ right, I just heard you sigh, you lean into my kiss and close those deep blue, need you eyes ,”* Ethan crooned along to the Billy Currington song playing from his phone.

Billie emerged from the bedroom with a smile, coaxed out of slumber by the smell of pancakes, and Ethan’s heart jumped at the sight of her with her hair all mussed and wearing nothing but his jersey, boyshort panties, and some fuzzy socks. Unable to help himself, he spun her into his arms, earning a sweet giggle, and began to sway to the beat of the music. Her head rested on his bare chest. She was still warm from sleep, so it was optimal cuddling time.

Moments like this helped him forget the things Peter said at the baby shower. Not that he set much store by Peter’s opinion. Ethan didn’t even tell Billie about it, instead letting her vent to him about Tony, who was worrying Ethan more and more by the minute. Men like that, who enjoyed backing people into corners, were dangerous. Part of him hoped Billie

would go ahead and seek employment elsewhere, as much as he would miss seeing her every day. She seemed to consider the suggestion, but hadn't said anything else about it.

And as far as Peter, Ethan was almost certain the guy was just jealous. Ethan already knew that Billie had never really been in love before, and the number of partners she had before him (and when she slept with them) was none of his business. He kept telling himself that those men just hadn't done enough to earn Billie's love. For her to be standing there in his arms, laughing with him, and letting him lead her...it all meant that he was different. It had to.

"You are going to have to let me go at some point," she said softly. "Or your pancakes are going to burn."

"So they burn," he said with a shrug, and captured her lips in a kiss.

She broke it off, which only stung a little bit. "I also want coffee."

"Well, sit down, I'll get you some," he told her.

"I've got it," she insisted, detaching herself from him. "Seriously, you've got to flip those."

He moved over to the skillet. She was right of course, the pancakes were a touch too brown on the side that had been cooking, but still edible. The skillet fit four, and he flipped them all while Billie helped herself to the coffee he'd already made. She had teased him once about using a percolator, but he argued that since it was electric, it wasn't totally outdated.

And once she tasted the coffee it made, she didn't complain again.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?" she asked after taking her first sip.

"I think we are," he said. "We've been working really hard."

The day of the FA Cup semi-final had come quicker than he anticipated. They would be playing Arsenal, a club they had ended in a draw with earlier this season. He wasn't terribly concerned. If it went to a penalty shootout, he was confident in Jordan's goalkeeping abilities.

"Who're you hoping wins the other semi-final?" Billie asked, as if reading his mind. "Chelsea or Liverpool?"

"Tough to say," he answered. "I mean, Chelsea's kinda my dream club, I hate the thought of taking them on for a cup final."

"And you haven't played them in the regular season yet," she pointed out.

"Exactly. I mean, the team has, but not while I've been with them."

"And Liverpool?"

"I'd love a re-match after how the last one went," he said. "But for the FA Cup...that's a different kind of pressure. They really gave us a shellacking."

"But they don't have as much to prove," she said. "They've won FA Cups before. There's no way they want it more than

you lot do. And honestly, that's half the battle."

She took another sip of coffee. He plated up a few pancakes and served them to her, along with some syrup, which she drizzled over them. He got his own plate as well and cut off the skillet.

"We're kinda getting ahead of ourselves," he said. "I mean, there's no guarantee we'll beat Arsenal tomorrow, they're having a great season."

He took a seat beside her at the table, and she took his hand, meeting his gaze and holding it.

"You'll win," she said firmly. "I know it."

He grinned. "You know, it's a shame this sport don't have cheerleaders because, I declare, you'd be a great one."

She smirked. "I would look fit as fuck in one of those little outfits, wouldn't I?"

"You'd look dynamite, darlin'."

She giggled and went back to her breakfast as Ethan started on his. They had only a few moments of peaceful silence before there was a knock on his door. He shot Billie a bewildered look.

"You expecting anyone?"

"It's your home," she replied through a laugh.

"Be right back."

He got to his feet and went to the door, looking through the peephole just to be safe. What he saw made his heart skip a

beat. He yanked the door open with a grin.

“Grandma!” he cried.

“Surprise!” Betty said, throwing herself into his arms..

Laughing, he caught her and pulled her close, breathing in her familiar scent, relishing in the feeling of her hugs. It was hard to believe they had already been apart for nearly four months. But she was just the same. Her outfit was put together and stylish, along with her carefully selected jewelry and makeup. It was the most welcome sight.

“What are you doing here?”

“You think I’d miss my grandson playing at Wembley Stadium in the FA Cup semi-final?” she shot back. “You couldn’t keep me out of that game with a firehose.”

He chuckled and let her inside. “Where are you staying?”

“A hotel nearby,” she said. “I didn’t want to intrude on -” She stopped short when she spied Billie at the table, who looked mortified as she attempted to cover her legs a little with the jersey. “Well, something like this.”

“Hi,” Billie said, her voice breathy and several octaves higher than usual. “I...so desperately wish I had on trousers right now, I’d be much more delighted to meet you.”

Betty threw her head back and laughed. Billie visibly relaxed, her shoulders sagging and letting out a breath.

“Oh, honey, believe me, I’ve been caught in much less than that,” Betty said. She strode over and extended her hand. “You

must be Billie. I'm Betty, Ethan's grandmother, and I'm definitely pleased to meet you, britches or no britches."

Billie shook her hand, her cheeks still glowing pink. "Nice to meet you too."

"My goodness, you are even prettier in person," Betty went on.

"Oh, that's very sweet of you, thank you."

Ethan went to the kitchen and got his grandmother a cup of coffee.

"Thank you, sweetheart," she said, warming her hands on the mug. "I thought it'd be better to come to London closer to spring, but it's still colder than a well digger's ass over here."

Billie snorted, earning a smile from Betty.

"You're just spoiled living at the coast," Ethan said. "You should have been here in January. *That* was cold."

"I do love living at Carolina Beach," she said wistfully. "I'm grateful to you every day, honey."

"For what?" Billie asked, glancing between them.

"Ethan never told you?" Betty asked. "When he made his first million, he bought me my beach house."

Billie's wide eyes found Ethan's gaze. "Really?"

He nodded bashfully, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, I did. After everything she'd done for me, I wanted to give back to her."



“And I tell you, I have the most fun living down there,” Betty said. “I got everyone at the Sea Witch watching the Premier League now.”

“The Sea Witch?” Billie questioned.

“The local bar,” Betty explained. “I think the manager was about ready to wring my neck since I was badgering him so much, but after a couple of dances, I won him over. Now they show all your matches without me even having to ask!”

Billie opened her mouth as if to ask further, but from behind Betty, Ethan warned her with a shake of his head not to. They were only just meeting, it would probably shock Billie to learn the tricks Betty had up her sleeve in order to get her way with men. Billie stuffed a bite of pancakes into her mouth instead.

“Did you make breakfast, Ethan?” Betty asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, it’s only right seeing as you’re probably wearing this girl out every night.”

Billie choked, and Ethan resisted the urge to roll his eyes. There truly was no stopping Betty. Billie reached for her coffee and took a sip, her eyes watering. Ethan went to her and leaned over the back of her chair to kiss her on the head.

“You alright, darlin’?” he asked.

“Yeah, thanks,” she answered hoarsely.

Betty finally took a seat at the table and settled in.

“Now,” she said. “I wanna know everything. How y’all met, your first date, all the details. I mean, nothing explicit, of course, but between my schedule and Ethan’s we don’t hardly get time for phone calls.”

Ethan started, with Billie interjecting here and there to tell her side of things. It warmed his heart to see the two of them chatting so easily with one another. Betty told him once that Sarah had paved the way for any future girlfriends because all they had to be was Not Sarah in order to win Betty’s approval. But Ethan knew his grandmother well enough to see that what she found in Billie so far, she genuinely liked. It was all the more evident when Billie had to head home, but happily agreed to accompany Betty to the match. As soon as the door closed and Billie was gone, it felt like something was missing.

“Told you it was gonna be like *Love Actually*,” Betty said, making her way to the couch.

At that, Ethan *did* roll his eyes. “I don’t see how it’s at all like that.”

“Well, it’s not exact, but you found love, didn’t you?”

That gave him some pause. He knew what he felt for Billie was strong, and oftentimes, beyond description. If he had to put a word on it, “love” might be the most appropriate.

“I...” he trailed off. “Yeah, I think so.”

Betty beamed. “I’m happy for you, Ethan. She’s a lovely girl.”

He joined her on the couch. “Can I confess something to you?”

“Of course, honey.”

“Sometimes, when I’m with Billie...” He paused and swallowed hard. “I see things.”

“See things?” she questioned, her brows knitting together over her eyes. “Like what?”

“I dunno, they’re kinda jumbled,” he said, and sighed. Now that he was saying it out loud, he realized how crazy it sounded. “It’s hard to explain.”

“Give me an example.”

“Well, once, while we were...” he cleared his throat. “Um. Together. I...for a second it was like I was somewhere else.”

“That good, is she?”

He shot her a serious look. “Grandma, please.”

She put her hands up innocently. “I’m just saying!”

“I mean, literally,” he went on. “I wasn’t in her living room anymore, I was in a barn. The clothes beside us weren’t our own, and yet, they belonged to us somehow. We were different people, but still ourselves. And it was only for a second, but... I dunno, it felt so real.”

“Any other times like that?” she asked.

“Yeah, actually,” he said. “We were making dinner at her place one night, and she played one of her roommate’s vinyls. Vera Lynn. And I swear, I’d heard the song before, though I’ve

never been into stuff from that time. And when I held her in my arms to dance a little, the same thing happened. We were in like, a dance hall, and in my gut, I felt like I was saying goodbye.” He met her gaze. “And I keep having this dream where she and I are lying in a field of flowers. Yellow flowers, and I get that same feeling. Like it’s the last time I’m gonna see her.”

Betty looked away and out the window, toward Billie’s apartment, though the curtains were drawn, so they couldn’t see in. Her expression was difficult to read. Her brow was still drawn and her lips were turned down. He hoped he hadn’t revealed too much and she was about to have him committed.

“Y’know, honey, this reminds me of those dreams you had as a boy,” she said. “About being that snowy forest with all the explosions and such.”

“I remember.”

“Have you been having those as well?”

“Not since I met her, no.”

“Well, I’m no professional, but it sounds to me like...maybe Billie is healing something inside you. Life ain’t been easy for you, sweetheart, you’ve struggled and fought for so much. And now you’ve found something that brings you peace. Maybe it’s a sign from the universe that you’ve earned what they call a happily ever after.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You really believe all that?”

“Hell if I know,” she sighed. “But if you can think of a better explanation, I’d love to hear it.”

He shook his head, and chuckled. “Nah, I think I like that one.”

It was true, he did enjoy the idea of Billie being his happily ever after. Their story wasn’t a fairy tale - far from it - but perhaps it had a bit of magic about it. It certainly felt that way. After a beat, he looked at Betty again, the other thing plaguing him with worry coming to the surface.

“You talked to Coach Larry?”

“I went to see him, yes,” Betty said. “He’s under hospice care, but at home, so he’s comfortable.”

“I wish I had more time. I’ve been meaning to call him again, I just -”

“He understands, Ethan,” she assured him with a pat on his hand. “He’s happy just to get texts. And it’s less work for him too, even talking wears him out these days.”

He chewed his lip, unable to rid himself of the guilt. He wished he could make the trip to go see him, but with the matches coming up, there was no way. More than anything, he wanted to bring Billie to meet his role model since he was six years old. The person who made Ethan Knight not only the athlete, but the man he was today. For her.

“He’s so excited for you,” Betty went on. “I hardly got in a hello before he was asking how you like the Premier League and how he can’t wait for the FA Cup. So I told him, I said,

‘Larry, you are not allowed to die now until you see our boy lift that trophy.’ And he agreed, so you’ve got some time.”

He tried to smile but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. Betty squeezed his hand.

“I know it’s still a shit sandwich,” she said, with all the sympathy such a phrase allowed. “I’m sorry, honey.”

“I’m sorry too,” he said, dropping his gaze to their clasped hands. “Thanks for coming, Grandma. And for being sweet to Billie and letting me know all this...it means a lot.”

She pulled him closer to kiss his cheek. “You just go out there and make us all proud tomorrow, alright? Me and Billie and Coach Larry too.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

## *Chapter 21*

Billie was already fond of Ethan's grandmother, but by the time they walked into Wembley Stadium together, she was totally in love. She took Betty to a pub to get a couple pints before the match, and Betty ended up winning them after beating the publican in a game of darts. She also told Billie about the first time Ethan played football; while he had moments of brilliance, he also tripped himself on the ball and landed so hard he got grass in his teeth. Billie only felt the slightest bit ashamed for laughing at that. And as they took their seats at the match, Betty spoke to so many people on the way that she endeared herself to half the Stanmore supporters section. In the time it took Billie to get them some snacks, Betty had several people walking by their aisle and calling to her.

“Oi, Betty! Come on, Stanmore, yeah?”

“Oh, Betty, darling, do let us know if you need anything.”

“Betty, your grandson's gonna get us a win today, alright?”

She acknowledged each with a sweet, Southern reply. Bewildered, Billie shimmied through the row to their seats, handing Betty a bag of crisps.

“Look at you, Miss Popularity,” Billie teased.

“I think it’s just that Ethan’s my grandson,” Betty replied with a wave of her hand.

“It must be you. I’m his girlfriend, and no one’s addressing me by name.”

“Well, maybe between the two of us, they’ll forget about Ethan altogether.”

Billie snorted and took the first bite of her crisps.

“Billie, can I ask you something?” Betty asked, suddenly serious.

Billie met her gaze, surprised. “Sure.”

“How is Ethan doing? I mean, really? Is he too worried about Coach Larry? Is there too much culture shock here? I wanna know everything, and you see him every day.”

“Oh,” Billie said, wiping the salt off her fingers on the leg of her jeans. “Honestly, he’s happy. I’ve asked him here and there if he’s homesick, and - at least he tells me - that he’s fine. He likes London and the Premier League. As far as his coach...he’s only spoken to me about it a handful of times, and he always seems quite calm. I don’t think he likes to think about it.”



“Alright, that sounds like what he’s telling me,” Betty said. “I just wanna make sure he’s being honest and not just saying things so I don’t worry. He does that a lot.”

“Does he?”

Betty nodded. “Ever since his Mama went, he’s always tried to be as...self-sufficient as he could. I think he just never wants anyone to worry about him the way he worried about her. I swear, the boy was ten years old going on one hundred.”

“Well, now I’m wondering if he’s telling *me* the truth,” Billie half-joked. Was there anything Ethan wasn’t saying? He had always been an open book. She hoped he never held back to spare her feelings. Although, he hadn’t when they had their first fight, so that was encouraging.

“I think it’s different with you,” Betty said. “You’re his girlfriend, his partner. He’d feel more comfortable sharing the load with you.”

“I suppose.”

“And he is...very fond of you, Billie. More so than I’ve ever seen him. And when Ethan is dedicated to something, he gives all of himself.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Billie said with a smile. “He’s got a bigger heart than anyone I’ve ever known.”

“He can’t do anything half-assed. It’s why he never drinks, why he works so hard on the pitch, and why he commits so completely to someone he...cares about.”

The hesitation made Billie stiffen. It was so similar to when Ethan almost said that he loved her. Had he made such a confession to his grandmother already and she almost revealed it? Or was Betty just trying to find the right words because Billie and Ethan hadn't said "I love you" yet? She hoped it was the latter, because she was not ready for those words. What she had with Ethan was unique and powerful, but that was a place she hadn't reached. If Ethan was there, she hoped he kept it to himself for a little bit longer. She dreaded the thought of him leaving her like Greg had. While it was true Ethan was not like her ex, she still worried things like this might make him change his mind about her.

"I mean, shoot," Betty went on. "He ever tell you about Lula Mae?"

Billie's brow furrowed. "Who the bloody hell is Lula Mae?"

"His truck," Betty chuckled. "This vintage Chevy he found for sale on a farm when he was sixteen. He was so dedicated to that thing he learned how to fix it up all on his own. And I don't know what he did, but it drives like a dream to this day. All because he put in the hard work and showed it some love. That's the kind of person he is."

Billie smiled softly. She could easily picture teenage Ethan, working tirelessly in a garage after practice, purely for the love of the vehicle. Putting his blood, sweat, and tears into learning every part of it. Ethan, steadfast and dedicated as always.

“He is wonderful,” she said. “And come to think of it, I think I’ve seen a photo of him in a truck. Is it yellow?”

“Yes!”

“I have seen it then. He actually named it?”

Betty heaved a sigh. “He did.”

“Lula Mae?”

“Afraid so.”

“Oh God, I fancy an absolute wanker.”

Betty threw her head back and laughed. “I hope you tell him that. Keep him humble.”

Billie giggled. “Believe me, the second I get the opportunity I’m taking the absolute piss out of him.”

“Atta girl.”

As the players finished warm ups and retreated into the locker room, Billie found Ethan quickly; he was clapping Osahar and Hector on their shoulders as they made their way across the pitch. Her lips turned up at the smile on his face. If he was nervous about the match, it didn’t show in the least. She wondered now, based on what Betty said, if he always held it together for his teammates. Turning her head, she caught Betty gazing at her.

“You really care for him, huh?” she said.

“I really do,” Billie assured her. Even if she wasn’t ready to drop the “L” bomb - it was too risky right now and she wasn’t sure her heart could take it if things didn’t work out - she knew

what she felt for Ethan was meaningful. It always made her chest feel warm and tender. And she wanted to assure his family that she didn't take it lightly. "In fact, it often feels...a bit otherworldly."

Betty raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

Billie took a deep breath. But if all Ethan had said about Betty was true, then she probably wouldn't judge. Even so, it felt crazy to admit out loud.

"Sometimes," Billie said. "Around Ethan, I get these...visions."

"Visions?"

"Yes. They're not crystal clear - well, snippets of them are - but they're more like when you've just woken up and are trying to remember a dream."

Betty crossed one leg over the other thoughtfully. "Give me an example."

"Well, when I took him dancing, there was a moment I felt like I saw us somewhere else. In a dance hall with old-timey jazz playing. And he was wearing suspenders, I remember that. It was only for a second, but they're all so fleeting, I can't get a grip on them."

"Have you ever had dreams that you couldn't explain?"

Billie blinked. "I...yes, I have."

"Tell me about them."

“I have one where I get a letter with what must be something horrible on it, because I fall to my knees and start sobbing,” Billie blurted out. “Or, at least I used to have that dream. I haven’t had it since I met Ethan. And yet...I can’t shake the feeling that it’s still coming for me. For us. This horrible loss and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.”

Betty drummed her fingers over her chin, looking pensive. “That’s unusual.”

Billie thought that was rather an understatement. Like calling a giraffe “quite tall.” But she waited for Betty to go on.

“You and Ethan have had such an effect on one another,” Betty said. “He told me he’s been having a similar experience since he met you.”

“Has he, really?”

Betty nodded. “He has. But apparently you’re both too scared to confront it.”

Billie’s face heated up at that. So there *was* something Ethan wasn’t saying. But she wasn’t exactly offering it up either. She just never imagined that he was experiencing it as well. It seemed too far-fetched, too out there. Hell, she hardly believed them herself. But maybe validating each other was the solution. If only that didn’t scare her so much.

“So...you think I should talk to him?” Billie asked.

“I do,” Betty said. “Before you take the absolute piss out of him.”

Billie chuckled. “Alright, then.”

“Now enough of that sappy stuff. Let’s watch some football!”

She let out a cheer and their whole section followed suit.

A few minutes later, the opening ceremonies began, and with them, the start of the game. As soon as Arsenal kicked the ball into play, Hector received it and started up the pitch toward the goal, but was dispossessed before he could try to pass. Stanmore was on the defense, keeping pace with the Arsenal forwards, whose sudden and intense pressure had them in the box already. One of their forwards took a shot, but a header from Israel blocked it. Kâmil received it on his chest and booted it back down the pitch toward Peter. He ran down the sideline, but a defender caught up with him, forcing him to kick it away. Since Ethan was heavily marked in the center, Peter passed it to Devon, who was open on the other side of the pitch. Ethan turned away from the two defenders on him and took off down the center to get open. Devon delivered a near perfect cross and Ethan took a hasty shot. The stadium held its breath.

A collective groan left the Stanmore section when the Arsenal goalkeeper tipped the ball up and over the net, holding Stanmore to a corner kick. As they got in place for their set piece, Betty leapt to her feet.

“Come oooooooooooooon, Stanmore!” she bellowed.

The foursome of men with their faces painted in front of her laughed, and then led the section in cheering, “*Come on,*

*Stanmore! Come on, Stanmore! Come on, Stanmore!*” Billie joined them, uncaring that her voice would be hoarse if they kept it up the entire match.

Osahar took the corner. It swung in right to Peter, who jumped to meet it with his head. The contact was good, but his aim was just a touch too far, and it bounced off the near post before rolling out of bounds. The cheers died down as everyone returned to their seats. The team spread back out across the pitch for a goal kick.

“You dated that O’Riley guy?” Betty asked.

“Unfortunately,” Billie answered.

“I’ll say. The man can’t finish.”

Billie clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the howl of laughter at the back of her throat.

At half time, to the frustration of Stanmore and Arsenal supporters alike, the score was still 0-0. Billie and Betty made their way to the restrooms, keeping brave faces, but truthfully, Billie was concerned.

“Arsenal look really good,” she admitted quietly.

“But they’ve got nothing to show for it,” Betty reminded her. “And we’ve had some good chances.”

It was true. Ethan had several shots on goal, but the keeper was earning his paycheck today for sure. Hector and Peter had both gone for it as well, but it either went wide or the keeper was there. On the plus side, Jordan was on his game too. The Arsenal forwards had taken quite a few more shots than

Stanmore, and Jordan hadn't let a single one past him. There was still another forty-five minutes of regular time, but Arsenal was attacking so well, Stanmore was having to play out of the back, which wasn't their strong suit. Billie hoped that Coach Warren figured something out at halftime. Anything to make it work.

"Ethan will be gutted to lose this," Billie said. "They've all come so far."

"Well, it's not like it's their only shot at a trophy," Betty said. "Right?"

Billie shook her head. "We're still in fifth place in the Premier League, and a whole twelve points behind the leaders. We didn't qualify for the Champions League or Europa League last season. And we got knocked out early in the Europa Conference League. The FA Cup is the only realistic bit of silverware at this point."

"Well, hell fire, y'all got more leagues over here than anyone could possibly know what to do with," Betty sighed. "No wonder Ethan's busier than a one-legged man in an ass-kicking contest."

Billie giggled. "That's really just the tip of the iceberg. On the plus side, the more cups are up for grabs, the more opportunities there are for different clubs to win."

"I guess so, but how do you keep up with it all?"

"The trick is to keep up with your club, and pretty much say fuck it to everything else."



“I like your style, Billie.”

In the second half, Stanmore came out much stronger. Unfortunately, that also meant more aggression from the defense. At the sixtieth minute, Luka grabbed a runner’s shirt during a tackle, earning himself a yellow card. Arsenal’s forwards drew another foul right outside the box, setting them up for a free kick in an even more ideal position.

“Fuck, we always struggle to defend set pieces,” Billie groaned.

“Not today we don’t,” Betty replied, and took Billie’s hand firmly.

Billie understood now where Ethan got his positivity. His unyielding hope. She talked about Ethan’s commitment and determination, but Betty herself must have instilled it in him. When Billie wasn’t sure she could admire any two people more, they showed her this. She smiled, and gave Betty’s hand an affirming squeeze. She was going to believe too.

To a roaring stadium, Jordan blocked the free kick.

It carried on that way for much of the second half. Billie felt her heart in her throat as each team created chance after chance, but neither were able to get the ball in the back of the net. She had to admire the defenders on both sides, as well as the keepers, as both teams’ attackers kept hitting a wall, even after both managers had used up all their subs. Fresh legs couldn’t break through either.

Until the eighty-seventh minute. Hector had the ball and raced up the pitch, dribbling carefully to avoid the Arsenal defense. He passed to Artem in the center, who sent it straight to Osahar, a couple yards ahead. Ethan was open, but just barely. Osahar made the pass anyway, and thankfully, Ethan got it and escaped the defender with a clever turn. He headed straight for the goal. Billie's hand found Betty's to her left, and their fingers intertwined without even looking.

Peter was wide open on the left, but Ethan either didn't see him or was choosing to ignore him, despite Peter clearly gesturing for the ball. Billie wondered if anything else had happened between them to make Ethan play selfishly, even just for a moment. In a rather risky move, he faked like he was going to shoot from just outside the box, which drew the goalkeeper off his line. Ethan was able to sprint around him and take a clear shot at a now undefended goal. The ball swished right into the corner of the net as the Stanmore supporter's section went absolutely wild.

Billie and Betty looked at each other, screamed, and leapt into each other's arms, jumping up and down to the beat of the cheering fans. Beer rained down on them. Yellow smoke plumed from the lower sections, fogging up the stadium. The pandemonium only continued when the final whistle blew, since only a minute of stoppage time was added. Betty and Billie got high-fives, hugs, and offers for drinks from everyone around them.

The press surged onto the pitch, Ethan their primary target, and those that couldn't reach him swarmed in on Coach

Warren. Billie took a moment to watch him, how he lowered his head and smiled with humility. The bashful look on his face as he spoke into the microphones. He had just done this incredible thing, and he was still the same. Her chest got that warm, fuzzy feeling he gave her. She had to admit to herself that if she wasn't in love with him already, she was certainly teetering on the edge of it.

Betty and Billie ran onto the pitch along with the other friends and family members as soon as they were allowed. Betty, uncaring that Ethan was in the middle of an interview, rushed forward and engulfed him in a hug. He chuckled and hugged her back before introducing her to the reporter, a middle-aged man with jet black hair, slicked back to reveal a handsome, angular face.

“Betty Knight, what a charming name,” he said.

“You think that’s nice, you oughta hear my phone number,” Betty replied with a sly grin.

Ethan rolled his eyes but left her to it, taking the opportunity to get to Billie. Immediately, he lifted her into his arms. Her legs wrapped around his waist and she planted a kiss on his lips, so sweet and adoring and triumphant, she didn't even hear the camera shutters snapping rapidly around them.

“Hope you aren't too tired,” she said when they parted, running a hand through his hair before she leaned in to whisper huskily in his ear. “I've got such good plans for celebrating.”

## *Chapter 22*

They couldn't get through Ethan's door fast enough. After dropping off Betty at her hotel - though she assured them she wouldn't be staying there long with that reporter's phone number secured - Billie and Ethan went straight back to his flat. They didn't even make it to the hallway before their lips were locked, hot and needy, all teeth and tongue, frenzied for one another. Finally, once in the safety of the flat, Ethan's hands were all over Billie - grabbing her ass and her hips, kissing her neck with a kind of hunger she hadn't seen from him before.

"Ethan," she moaned, letting her head fall back to expose more of her skin.

He answered with a grunt as he pushed her back against the wall. Her legs subsequently turned to jelly, but he held her up with his hips. He rocked into her, and she felt his half-hard cock against the inside of her thigh. Gasping, she gripped handfuls of his shirt.

“Ethan,” she said again. “Can’t we at least make it to the bedroom?”

“We can go wherever you want, darlin’.”

She pushed on his shoulders to make him look at her and she shook her head. “Tonight’s about you, FA Cup finalist.”

His smile turned her insides to mush. He took her hand and let her plant her feet on the ground before leading her into the bedroom. She immediately started undressing. Her Stanmore scarf went first, followed by her jacket, kit, and jeans. His green eyes, usually so bright, darkened as he looked over the lingerie she’d bought just for this occasion.

“Damn, baby,” he said. “All this for me?”

She nodded and turned slowly to give him a complete view. The pale yellow lace, as close to Stanmore’s primary color as she could get, added to how sheer it was. The bra had no cups, so her hard nipples were clearly visible, and the thong left nothing to the imagination. Ethan’s red cheeks let Billie know she’d done well, but she decided to ask anyway just to tease him, “You like?”

“I love it,” he told her. “God, you’re gorgeous.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Now sit down on the bed, handsome.”

He did as she instructed, an enthusiastic smile on his face. She strode over to him, taking her time so he could get the image burned in his brain. When she claimed his lips in a kiss, his tongue darted out to meet hers. She had to remind herself

not to get caught up in the kiss itself, she had more she wanted to do for him. Her hands found their way to his shirt and started undoing the buttons. Meanwhile, her lips trailed down to his jawline, and to that place behind his ear that always made him moan.

“I wanna make you feel so good,” she whispered, pushing his shirt off his shoulders.

“You do that every day,” he said.

She smiled and kissed his cheek. “God, you’re so fucking sweet.” She openly ogled him with his shirt off afterward. “And hot.”

He laughed and pulled her in for another kiss. Ethan kissed her more than anyone she’d ever dated or slept with. Not that she complained, he was great at it, but something about it, beyond the incredible technique, always made her arousal shoot through the roof. It was how badly he craved her. Like kissing alone was enough for him, he didn’t even care if they made it to the rest. Just the touch of her lips was everything he needed.

So it came as no surprise that when she got on her knees between his legs, he shot her a questioning look, but it disappeared as soon as she cupped him through his jeans. His eyes fell closed and he groaned, rolling his hips toward her. She pressed her lips to his chest, creating a fiery trail from over his heart all the way to his denim waistband. She could see the flush all over his skin, even in the low light.

“You look gorgeous like this,” she said, popping the button on his jeans.

“You should see you.”

She smirked. “You like it, don’t you? Me on my knees for you?”

“God, yes,” he said with a sigh.

She kissed his lower stomach again. “It’s only right, after all. You’re a winner, Ethan.” Her hand slipped beneath his boxers and found his cock, hard and ready for her. “A champion.”

She pulled him free and licked a stripe all the way up his shaft, swirling her tongue around the tip. He gasped, his hand finding the back of her neck like a magnet. When she took him in her mouth, his eyes rolled back in his head and he let out a filthy moan. The sound was so sexy, Billie found herself rubbing her thighs together to ease the mounting tension between them.

She didn’t often get to go down on him. Usually, he made her come once or twice when they got started, and while she always offered to reciprocate, by then he was desperate to be inside her. So she realized she would have to insist, and start with it if she wanted to treat him. And she did. If she could make him feel a fraction of the pleasure he so often gave to her, she’d consider it a blow job well done.

Slowly, she lowered her mouth, taking him as far as she could without gagging (because she knew if she did, he’d put a

stop to this), and with one hand, grasped the remainder of his cock. She started a steady, even rhythm with her mouth and hand moving together, applying even pressure as she went. Ethan drew shallow, rapid breaths the longer Billie dragged her lips over him, and she went until he whined, hot and needy for her.

Making him feel this good had her ready to combust. His mouth in that perfect “o” shape, his hair falling onto his sweaty forehead, one hand fisted in her hair with the other around the sheets - it was magnificent. She couldn’t even help herself when her free hand floated between her own legs, dipped into her thong, and her middle finger found her clit, wet and swollen already.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “You look so good touching yourself, holy - *oh!*”

She picked up her pace, rubbing herself to the same cadence she used on him. When she moaned around him, his hips jerked forward, pushing him deeper into her mouth.

“Oh, God, I’m sorry!” he gasped. “You alright?”

She came off him slowly, stroking him to compensate for the loss of her mouth. She smirked at the tightening of his muscles as she did. “I’m perfect, darling.”

She started to go again, but he stopped her. Gently, he cupped her face in his hand and tilted her head back to meet his gaze.

“Please,” he said. “I gotta be inside you, baby.”



“How do you want me?”

He blinked. “What?”

She got to her feet, unhooked her bra and tossed it to the side. His eyes flicked to her breasts before returning to her face. That is, until she stepped out of the thong as well, and he licked his lips at the sight of her. Nothing made Billie feel sexier than the way Ethan looked at her in moments like this. He had seen her naked dozens of times now, but he always gazed at her in awe, like it was the first time.

“How do you want me?” she asked again, running her fingers through his hair. “And don’t think about how you think I want it. How do *you* want to -”

She didn’t finish before he grabbed her by her rear and yanked her towards him. She was practically on his lap. He kissed her. Rough and raw. For the first time, she heard a rumble come from deep inside his chest.

“Want you from behind,” he murmured.

She bit her lip as her pussy clenched with anticipation. “Then that’s what you’ll get.”

While she crawled onto the bed, Ethan stood up and shimmied out of his jeans and boxers. Teasing, she wiggled her ass at him, until his palm made swift contact with one of the cheeks. Not really spanking her, but with enough force behind it to surprise and further arouse her. He gripped her tight. She felt herself get wetter.

“Hips up,” he said.

She obeyed, lifting herself just a couple inches off the bed while he placed a pillow beneath her to give a better angle. Her head dropped forward and she let out a moan when he plunged two fingers inside her. At the same time, his lips pressed into the small of her back. With each thrust of his hand, he kissed his way up her spine, until she was caged beneath him. Wanton, helpless need had her pushing her hips back towards him. He pulled his fingers out and lined himself up at her entrance, making her whine when he only dragged the tip of his cock through her slick folds.

“Ethan, please,” she whimpered.

She felt his blazing, ragged breath on the back of her neck.

“Mine,” he growled, and sank into her.

She keened beneath him, arching her back and letting her head fall against his shoulder. The heat in her belly swirled around like a tornado. Ethan wasn't possessive, which she always respected, but hearing him claim her like that made every hair on her body stand up and her cunt squeeze him tight. God, she wanted to hear him say it again. She *needed* to hear him say it again.

“Mine,” he repeated as if reading her mind, and he started to drive into her at a dizzying pace. She tried to push back to match him, but he held her firmly in place, his fingers digging into her skin like they never had before - like he wanted to leave a mark.

“Yours,” she moaned back. “Only yours.”

He groaned and moved faster, wrapping an arm around her hips to get his fingers to her clit. With his strokes reaching the perfect angle inside her, and the pressure on her clit, she clenched around him, the spring in her belly wound tight. She was so close, so close, so close.

“There,” she sighed. “Just like that, Ethan, God, *yes*.”

“I got you, baby,” he said hoarsely.

He continued his steadfast rhythm, as consistent in the bedroom as he was outside of it. And somehow, each thrust got better, brought Billie closer to the edge, made her moan a little louder. Fuck, she was nearly there. Her legs were quivering. Then she felt his lips, soft and tender on her shoulder.

“Come for me,” he whispered.

Her lungs tightened. Stars flashed behind her eyes, and she completely unraveled, spasming around him so much, he stilled inside her, his own release overlapping with hers. She shuddered. Her body felt like warm liquid and she collapsed onto the bed, him right behind her, still inside and grinding slowly as they came down from their respective highs. His heavy breath on her skin made her shiver, but he only held her closer. He murmured her praises into her skin, and even though she couldn't hear them over the pounding of her heart, she felt them.

“Well,” she panted, unsure if it was the room spinning or her mind. “I hope you feel properly congratulated.”

He laughed and kissed her shoulder again. “I feel like I’ve already won the whole damn cup.”

She hummed contentedly. “Let me roll over, will you?”

“Okay, but I wanna be back inside you right after.”

“You’re already hard again?”

“With you, darlin’, it’s difficult not to be.”

Giggling, she nudged him up and off of her so she could turn onto her back. He hovered over her until she was ready, then settled his hips between her legs, pushing gently back into her. She gasped, still sensitive from the orgasm, but enjoying the fullness of having him there. The feeling was warm and comfortable, like one of her self care baths.

“You okay?” he asked, voice raw with affection as he traced her jaw with his thumb.

She nodded, her eyes falling closed. “Feels good.”

He kissed her softly, in that unhurried way he always did after sex, then rested his head on her chest. She wondered if he could hear her heart beating, or perhaps its desire to leap from the confines of her ribcage and surrender itself to his care. She pressed her lips to his sweaty forehead.

“I really am proud of you,” she said.

He turned his face to meet her gaze. “It was one goal.”

“It wasn’t one goal, it was *the* goal.”

“You’re too good to me, darlin’.”

“Honestly, Twitter is probably going mad right now with video of that.”

“I don’t wanna talk about Twitter.”

“I’m sorry, was there something else on the agenda?”

He silenced her with a deep, leisurely kiss. She smiled against him and pulled away to look him in the eyes.

“What would you like to talk about then?” she asked.

His eyes searched hers, the green depths shining with warmth. “You know what you remind me of?”

“What’s that?”

“The air after a summer rain in Carolina,” he said. “You can smell the moisture and the earth. And when you look out, you can see steam rising from the pavement.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Is that because I’m so hot?”

“No,” he chuckled and shook his head. “No, I think it’s because you’re starting to feel kinda like home.”

That honesty he always led with came through in his gaze, and she opened her mouth to respond, but closed it again. What could she say? It was one of the most romantic things anyone had ever said to her. So why did it scare her so much?

## *Interlude*

*October 1, 1944*

*Aldbourne, England*

*My darling Henry,*

*First of all, I already miss you terribly. It's barely been two weeks since you were shipped out again, but it might as well be two years. That "Berlin by Christmas" rumor had better be true or I'll go mad missing you.*

*Second, I've just come back from seeing the doctor, and I'm sad to say it isn't the news we hoped for. Apparently, we aren't the only ones struggling right now. Rationing has affected people's health in every aspect, it seems, and it certainly doesn't help that I exert myself so much in my work on the farm. I am sorry, darling. I so badly wanted to give you something extra to fight for. To tell you it would not only be me waiting for you, but the family you always dreamed of. Can you imagine what a precious little thing we could create*

*together? I'm certain there would be no child with two parents more devoted to each other and to him.*

*It probably is better this way, seeing as I don't particularly fancy the idea of our child being conceived in a barn. When the war is over, we can try again in a house of our own. In London, perhaps. Or, if your family is open to it, we could go to live near them. I love England, but I love you far more, so where you go, I'll follow.*

*The hope and the dream will have to serve as your motivation for now. I keep you all in my prayers and I hope to see you soon.*

*All my love,*

*Your Maggie*

## *Chapter 23*

An unseasonably warm spring sun beat down on the practice pitch at the Hive, making the grass appear lush and green and getting the Wasps themselves much sweatier than they were accustomed to. Though they were so busy, none of them seemed to notice.

Ethan made firm contact with the ball through his forehead, launching it back the way it came and toward Israel, but before he could see what Israel would do, Ethan had to run to the other side of the net and prepare for his next strike. The drill was not one he'd ever done before - something Coach Warren called "football tennis" - where the players could use any skill they pleased to pass the ball (except for their hands, of course), but it had to sail over the net placed in the middle, and could only bounce once on the other side. The difficult part was that after striking the ball, they had to immediately run to the opposite side of the net in a continuing loop of their teammates, so they never knew who exactly was passing, when they might receive it, or what kind of pass it would be.



The idea was to keep everyone on their toes and develop quick reactions to the unexpected. If you missed the ball, you were out, so the thinning line made it that much harder. Barbs and trash talk were exchanged faster than the ball itself, but it didn't take away from the laughter. Ethan couldn't recall the last time he had laughed so much at training.

Finally, it was down to just Ethan and Hector, putting Ethan on edge. Hector's passing accuracy was higher than anyone else's on the team, and he had the speed of a hare during hunting season. It helped that he was barely twenty years old, but Ethan was no chump. He pushed his tired legs around the net as quick as he could and stuck out his foot, just managing to catch the ball on his laces and send it Hector's way. But it didn't have enough power on it to take the young midfielder by surprise, so Hector - just to show off - dove into a bicycle kick. Ethan went for it, but it struck the ground, missing his boots by just inches.

Hector leapt into the air and cheered. "Ayyyyy, suck it, gringito!"

The team burst into laughter. Ethan rolled his eyes as he collapsed onto the pitch to catch his breath.

"Ugh, I'm old," he groaned.

"Fuck off," Jordan said, standing over him and clapping him on the shoulder. "Rizo's just a walking shot of espresso. Up you get."

Ethan's muscles resisted the idea of moving, but Jordan's proved to be stronger willed. With a reluctant grunt, he was

pulled to his feet. Hector jogged back over. How he had the energy after all that was beyond Ethan.

“You gonna be alright, bro?” Hector asked, a cheeky grin on his face. “Or should I say... abuelo?”

“Te odio,” Ethan grumbled back.

Hector chuckled as they clapped hands and bumped shoulders affectionately. The little bit of Spanish Ethan had picked up from playing with so many teammates from Latin and South America had quickly endeared him to Hector.

“Alright, well done, lads!” Coach Warren called, and they all formed a school circle around him. “I hope you enjoyed that little exercise.” He paused for a beat. “We’ve got some big matches coming up, so I really wanted to remind you all that this is supposed to be fun. No matter what the outcomes are, we should all count ourselves quite lucky that we get to play our favorite game for a living.” He looked around, meeting their gazes. “That being said, we’re gonna kick the shit outta Chelsea this Saturday, right?!”

“We’re gonna fuck ‘em up!” Jordan cried back, and each person bellowed their agreement with phrases like “That fourth place spot is ours!” and “We’ll turn those Blues black and blue!”

“Alright, let’s run some set pieces,” Coach Warren said with a smile. “Football tennis was a warm up.”

Ethan tried to push down his nerves as the match against Chelsea grew closer. It was the regular season game, since

Liverpool won that semi-final, but even without the pressure of the FA Cup - it was his dream club. They were tied to a core memory and part of the reason he pursued football as hard as he had. If he played well enough, he hoped to catch their interest before the summer transfer window opened up. Not that he was unhappy at Stanmore, but he was thinking about other options. As it was, Ethan locked in his focus as they lined up for a short free kick Coach Warren wanted to try.



*Two minutes to half time, Ethan reminded himself. Two minutes to show up.*

And showing up was needed. Chelsea was only up 1-0, but going to halftime goalless wasn't ideal. If they could equalize before the break, it would keep the morale up when they went to the locker room. Unfortunately, Chelsea had possession. One of their forwards found some space and made a break for it, hurtling toward the goal.

Ethan surged towards him, support coming up the side in the form of Peter. Ethan's attempt to dispossess the Chelsea man was nearly successful, but the latter gained a touch of speed and held Ethan back with his arm. However, that opened him right up to Peter, who slid to tackle him.

The tackle was so hard and fast, not only did Peter catch the Chelsea forward's legs, but Ethan's as well, sending them both toppling onto the pitch. Ethan hit the ground first, and the Chelsea forward fell on top of him, smashing into his chest and knocking the wind out of him. A grunt burst from him when he caught an additional elbow to the gut as the Chelsea player started to get up. The sound of the whistle was faint as Ethan tried to draw breath.

"Oh, fuck, sorry," the Chelsea player said. "You alright, mate?"

Ethan gulped for air. "Yeah, I'm good. Not your fault."

The referee arrived, blowing her whistle again and showing a yellow card to Peter, who gaped at her in what could only be false astonishment. When Ethan felt Jordan's arms lifting him up, he realized where they were. Inside the penalty box. This would be a penalty kick for Chelsea. While he didn't doubt Jordan's ability, it was never an easy pill to swallow. Especially when there was no need to make that foul.

Peter was towering over the ref to argue his case, but she held her ground with a firm look. "You didn't play the ball, O'Riley, it's a yellow."

"Have VAR look at it," Peter insisted. "I definitely played the ball!"

"Back off or I'll book you again for dissent."

"Is this a fucking joke?"

"Here we go," Ethan groaned, rolling his eyes.

“Something to say, cowboy?” Peter rounded on Ethan.

“Just let Rachel do her job, man,” Ethan said. He learned her name when she called their match against West Ham United. “And maybe in the second half you won’t give away any more points.”

“Fuck you,” Peter spat.

“See, this is why you didn’t get the position you wanted.”

The moment the words left his mouth, Ethan regretted saying them. But a small part of him felt like it was justified. Not only was Peter much more argumentative with women referees, he was clearly in the wrong here, and he needed to be put in his place. He marched over to Ethan and only stopped when their noses were within inches of each other. “What the fuck did you just say?”

Ethan squared his shoulders. “I *said*, this is why you didn’t get the position you wanted, you conceited little-”

“Hey!” Rachel stepped between them, a hand on each of their chests. “Both of you settle down. O’Riley, the booking stands. Knight, I don’t need your protection.”

Ethan opened his mouth to apologize, but didn’t get the words out before Peter shoved Rachel out of the way. She didn’t fall, only stumbled, but that was enough for Ethan to see red. He grabbed Peter’s shirt.

“Hey!” he bellowed. “Don’t you dare put your hands on her!”

Both teams had rushed over, though the Chelsea guys quickly realized it was an in-house dispute and hung back. Rachel once again tried to put distance between them, but her stature and frame were too petite for the two hardened athletes she was trying to control. Ethan felt the weight of Jordan's glove on his shoulder, but he shrugged it off.

Peter's lip curled into a sneer. "Funny, I thought it'd bring back rather fond memories of home. It was a trailer park, wasn't it?"

"Take it easy, both of you," Rachel interjected.

"Let it go, Ethan," Jordan added.

"Oi, are we taking this penalty or what?" wondered one of the Chelsea players.

Ethan and Peter were zeroed in on one another, animosity sparking between their gazes. Ethan tried to control his breathing, to force himself into calm, but the smug look on Peter's face was impossible to ignore.

Ethan frowned. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, but I think I do," Peter continued. "So was it your father who made you so sensitive? Or perhaps your mother had someone different every nigh-"

Peter didn't finish the sentence before Ethan sank his fist into his teammate's nose. He felt a sickening *crack* beneath his knuckles. Blood burst from Peter's face as he careened backward with a cry, clutching at his now-crooked nose. The

kindling had burst into flames, and white hot rage coursed through Ethan's veins. He didn't care how it looked. He didn't care when Rachel held up a red card and blew her whistle. He struggled against his teammates as they tried to pull them apart. The pitch and the crowd faded away as Peter lunged towards him.

Ethan saw Peter's fist from a mile away, dodging it easily, and on instinct alone, punched him again, this time catching his cheekbone. Peter's head snapped back, but Ethan yanked him toward himself so they were only centimeters apart again.

"Don't fuck with me!" Ethan warned through clenched teeth.

Peter reared his head back like he was going to ram it right into Ethan's, but finally, Jordan got his arms around Peter's chest and dragged him away, despite the way Peter railed against him. Rachel stood in front of Ethan, jockeying him toward the touchline, with assists from Hector and Israel, who were on either side of Ethan and pulling him along by his arms.

*"Hey!"* she screamed. *"Get back!"*

Coach Warren was suddenly there, trying to bargain with her, but it was too late.

"I'm sorry, Coach, but they've both got to leave the pitch," she said. "Both of them threw punches, they'll both be booked with a red."

Coach turned furious eyes on Ethan, and only then did Ethan feel some guilt about what he'd done. The gravity of his actions were like sudden sacks of bricks strapped to his shoulders. The team was down to nine men with him and Peter being sent off. This match would take a miracle to win now.

“Coach, I -” Ethan began, but Coach Warren cut him off.

“Get to the dressing room,” he snapped. His eyes found Peter, who was being pulled away from Rachel by Jordan, who had to practically throw him over the touchline. “Both of you.”

With one last glower at Rachel, Jordan, and then at Ethan, Peter stormed inside. Ethan hung his head and followed.

Peter immediately went to the physio's, no doubt to get his nose reset, but Ethan sank down onto the bench in front of his locker, hands shaking from the shame of what he had done. He looked at his knuckles, purple bruises already blooming across his skin, and then held his head in his hands, cursing himself for letting Peter get to him, for allowing his anger to control him. He was fully prepared for the chewing out Coach Warren would have for him.

Only, it didn't come. At half time, Coach Warren resolutely ignored both Peter and Ethan, and went over tactics with the team. They couldn't sub in for anyone sent off with a red, so he moved Luka up to the midfield and Hector up to the front with Devon. Somehow, that made Ethan feel worse. If he just got yelled at and told what an idiot he was, maybe he could move on. But the message came through loud and clear: if you



can't act like a member of the team, you won't be treated like one.

The fifteen minutes passed in a blur. Peter huffed around as he got showered, changed, and prepared to leave, but even when the second half started, Ethan was still on the bench as if he were nailed to it. The sound of high heels clicking in the doorway made him finally look up.

"Billie," he said, just barely managing her name with the rust in his voice.

"Hey," she replied gently, and started to come inside.

"You can't be in here during a match," Peter said, and she froze.

Ethan shot him a sour look, and then faced his girlfriend. "Come on in, darlin'."

Her eyes bounced between them a moment as if she feared she may get them going at it all over again, but Ethan's pleading eyes must have convinced her to go his way. She started toward him.

"Whatever," Peter scoffed. "Fuck you, cowboy."

With that, he was gone. Ethan looked up at Billie as she stood before him, her eyes shining with sympathy.

"What happened?" she asked.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "I messed up."

Setting her purse aside, she climbed into his lap, her legs on either side of his hips, facing him, and cradling his face in her

hands. “What did he say?”

“It doesn’t matter, I shouldn’t have -”

“Ethan,” she cut across him. “What did he say?”

His eyes welled up and he buried his face in her neck. Letting out a sob, he told her exactly what he remembered. She held him close, her arms like pillars holding him upright as he felt himself crumbling.

“I really messed up, darlin’,” he choked out when he finished. “This was my chance to show what I’m capable of to a club that means so much to me, and I let something stupid -”

“It wasn’t stupid,” she said, running her gentle fingers through his hair. “What Peter said was totally unacceptable, and I hope you explain everything to Coach Warren when he asks you about it.”

“I should have been better,” he insisted. “I ain’t had a red card since I was six.”

She blinked. “Good Lord, really?”

“Yeah. I mean, I still got in fights, but those were at the trailer park, not on the pitch.”

“Well, every streak must come to an end at some point,” she joked, and he attempted a laugh, but it came out as more of a huff. “Seriously, though. No one should tolerate the things Peter’s said to you. I’m surprised you held out this long.”

“Fine timing, isn’t it?” he said bitterly.

She took his chin and tilted his head to meet her gaze. It struck him how beautiful she was all over again. If nothing else, he was lucky to have her.

“Listen to me,” she said. “One mistake does not erase an entire career of incredible work. If Chelsea are interested in you, I don’t think this will dissuade them.”

“I’m not so sure.”

He was fairly confident he blew it. Behavior like that was not the impression he wanted to leave with anyone - not Stanmore or Chelsea or any of the little kids in the stands that looked up to him. Coach Larry’s words rang in his ear again - *Let your talent speak for itself, and they won’t have anything left to say*. He certainly let that fall to the wayside.

Billie pulled him in close again. “I’m sorry, Ethan.”

He didn’t answer, instead closing his eyes and resting his forehead on her shoulder. Suddenly, the room around him was shifting, and he was having another moment like the ones he’d described to Betty. The loss he felt was heavier than a match, it was more like...death. Memories swam before him that were definitely not his own - the muddy countryside of France, a deep trench, shouting over the din of gunfire, and a body lying in the dirt. Then he was in Billie’s arms, but she looked different - she was in a dress, her hair was out of her face and in victory rolls. She whispered consolations in his ear, telling him his friends were heroes.

“Ethan?”

The present-day Billie came back into focus. Ethan took a deep breath to steady himself, but his chest heaved like he'd run a marathon. He got missile lock on Billie's face, needing her to keep him grounded.

"I...I saw something," he told her.

She raised an eyebrow. "What?"

His grip on her hips tightened. "I...I don't know, I can't explain it, but..." He paused to swallow. "Billie, sometimes, when we're together, I -"

The ringtone of his phone cut him off. He wanted to ignore it and address the odd look in her eyes. He expected her to be confused and look at him like he was speaking another language, but that wasn't what he saw. Her brows were relaxed, her eyes expectant, and her mouth was neutral - no quizzical frown or anything.

"You..." she said, surprising him with the breathlessness of her voice. "You should answer that."

He held her gaze a moment longer, debating pressing the issue, but the phone kept ringing. He wondered if it was possible for it to get louder without actually adjusting the volume. It sounded that way. Holding her steady, he reached back and snatched his phone off the shelf in his locker, biting back a sigh when he saw the name - Martin. He answered anyway.

"Hey," he said.

“Ethan, are you serious?” his agent said incredulously.  
“You’re throwing punches now?”

“I’m sorry,” Ethan said. “Things got heated.”

“Clearly!”

Martin continued, but Ethan hardly heard the rest. He was entirely preoccupied with Billie, who was avoiding his gaze. By the time he hung up, she was back to normal, already offering more words of encouragement about what he could say to Coach Warren. Ethan wanted to go back to what he’d seen - everything he’d been seeing since he met her - but the moment was gone. He could only hope it would come up again soon.

## *Chapter 24*

“Ah, Ethan,” Coach Warren said upon opening the door to his office. “Come on in.”

Ethan nodded and stepped over the threshold, the chatter in the locker room dying down as Coach closed the door behind him. The office was pretty standard for a manager at this level - a white board in the corner with different tactics drawn out, a calendar on the wall with the month's matches marked, a bookshelf with biographies of the legends of the sport as well as a few about the game itself. Only on the desk did Coach have any personal items - school pictures of his two children. The boys resembled their father in complexion, but had darker hair and leaner frames. They couldn't have been older than nine and eleven. Ethan looked away and met Coach Warren's gaze.

“So,” Coach began and took a seat. “Why don't you give me your account of what happened at the match against Chelsea?”

Ethan followed suit, sitting in a chair across the desk. “I’ll start with an apology. I know it was unprofessional and I cost us the match. I’m sorry, Coach.”

“Apology accepted. But I know you well enough now to understand how out of character that was. So tell me. What happened?”

Ethan thought that was pretty graceful considering that loss had put the nail in the coffin of their Champions League hopes. Their loss, plus the results around the league, put Stanmore into seventh place. There was time to come back, but getting to the top four was...unlikely, to say the least.

He took a deep breath. “He insulted my mother, sir. He pushed Rachel and then he spoke...disrespectfully about my upbringing.”

He told the story in full. It was easier now that he’d told it once to Billie, though his stomach still churned when he recalled Peter’s specific words. Saying them out loud made him feel like he was choking. It was unpleasant, but he got through it.

Coach Warren sighed and leaned back in his chair. “I see.”

“I know I shouldn’t have let it get to me,” Ethan said. “I let everybody down, and I take responsibility for that. But I can’t let that behavior - misogyny - go unaddressed.”

“Ethan,” Coach said, an exasperated edge to his voice. “This is a football club. It’s certainly not the place to discuss women’s issues -”

“Respectfully, sir, misogyny is not a women’s issue, it’s men’s,” Ethan said. “It’s up to men to call other men out on that stuff. And frankly, you’ve let all of us down in that department by letting Peter off the hook talking the way he does.”

Coach’s brow furrowed as he frowned. “How do you mean?”

“I mean, on my first day here, he was using derogatory language about Billie. He did it again at the baby shower, and judging by what I’ve seen, she’s not the only one he treats that way. Every time, you’ve let it slide, leaving it to me or Jordan to say something. Guys like Peter are poison, Coach.”

“And why do you suppose he’ll respond to me if not you or Jordan?”

“We’re his peers, there’s no real consequences from us. But you’re the manager, his boss. It’s gotta come from someone whose respect he needs.” He paused to take a breath. “It does bother you, doesn’t it? The way he acts?”

“Of course it does,” Coach said.

“Then you need to act soon. Peter has influence - in the dressing room, on the pitch. People look up to him.” He nodded toward the photos on the desk. “Kids look up to him. What kind of example do you want them to see?”

Coach looked thoughtfully at the pictures, drumming his fingers on the desk. Then he met Ethan’s gaze again and raised an eyebrow. “Awfully rich, given the circumstances.”



“I know I messed up,” Ethan said. “But Peter crossed a line.”

“I agree,” Coach said. “That doesn’t absolve you, though.”

“I know.”

A beat of silence passed between them as Ethan searched for something else to say. There was no overturning the red cards, of course, so he and Peter would be sitting out the next match as well. And Ethan felt like he’d said his piece.

“What do you suppose the solution is?” Coach asked. “Can there be any peace between you and Peter?”

Ethan shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know. He started all this, and I was willing to let it go, but some of the things he’s said are...it’s way beyond trash talk or anything like that.”

“And you’re unsure if you can forgive them?”

Ethan swallowed and nodded. “Yeah.”

“Well, I know I can try to be better about addressing his remarks,” Coach said. “But this...situation between the two of you is beyond my capabilities. I’ve never coached two people more averse to one another.”

“He’s the one who -”

“I know,” Coach interrupted, raising a hand. “I know he started it. But you’re both unwilling to finish it. And I need you both on the pitch. Especially if we want to have any hope of winning the FA Cup.”

Ethan slumped a little in his seat, defeated. He knew it was unreasonable, but the idea of being the bigger person when it came to Peter was about as pleasant as swallowing a pair of jeans.

“I don’t think it’s likely we’ll ever be friends, Coach,” Ethan said.

“I’m not asking for that,” Coach replied. “All I’m asking for is cooperation.”

That didn’t seem completely out of the realm of possibility. Ethan was certainly not best friends with every teammate he’d ever had. But similar to Coach, it was never like this. He had never been so thoroughly disliked in so little time.

“I’m going to tell you the same thing I told him,” Coach went on. “Sort it out. Or neither of you will play in the FA Cup final.”

Ethan’s mouth fell open. “Coach!”

His heart rioted against his ribcage. To miss this match would be crushing. Everyone would be watching - Billie, Betty, Coach Larry. He could not, under any circumstances, sit that one out.

“I’m not risking the trophy, Ethan,” Coach said. “I’ll do my part as you suggested. The rest is up to you and Peter.”

Ethan scrambled to find the words, his brain still recovering from the storm Coach had dusted up. “I...yes, Coach.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Now get dressed and I’ll see you on the pitch.”



Coach's threat must have been as effective on Peter as it was on Ethan. The following week, Peter ignored Ethan rather than instigating confrontations, and Ethan matched that energy. He would take a cold shoulder over a snide comment any day. And if they carried on this way, they would both get what they wanted - a spot in the starting eleven against Liverpool in the FA Cup final. *At least we have that in common*, Ethan told himself. With a common goal, hopefully the cooperation that Coach Warren was looking for would follow.

After training, Ethan left the dressing room and headed upstairs to retrieve Billie. Their walks home together gave him more comfort now with the prospect of missing a match looming ahead of him that weekend. He wanted her at his side constantly. However, the concern about what happened - or rather, didn't happen - after the fight at the Chelsea match, still haunted him.

Each time he thought he got the courage to ask her if she had been struggling with these visions as much as he was, he convinced himself he read too much into her expression in the locker room. He was emotional, tired, and worried about a million other things. He'd just had one of the visions, it was possible he was misremembering the look on her face as well.

On the other hand, his curiosity was rapping on the back door of his mind like a nosy neighbor. What if she was going through that and was too scared to tell him? Would it be helpful if he ripped off the metaphorical bandaid?

Then he thought - what if she isn't experiencing that? Would she think he was crazy? Would it scare her off? The last thing he needed was to lose Billie at a time like this. It seemed especially imperative when she stood up from her desk and flashed him that stunning smile of hers.

"Hello, darling," she said, and planted a sweet kiss on his cheek. "How was training?"

"Okay," he told her. "Kinda weird playing second team, but hopefully next week, things will be back to normal."

"I'm sure they will be. Peter behaving himself?"

"For now, thank goodness. He must want to be in that final as bad as I do."

She rolled her eyes. "Honestly, you'd think Father Christmas told you he'd put you both on the naughty list this year."

"Woah, darlin'. Have you ever been on the naughty list? Because it's no fun. I declare, there is no worse feeling."

She giggled. "I seriously doubt *you* were ever on the naughty list."

"I was, once," he joked. "For fighting. And I'd venture a guess that good ol' Saint Nick has slapped my name right back on there as a repeat offender."

“Well, I hope you’ve resigned yourself to it,” she said. “Because when we get back to yours, I intend on the two of us engaging in further naughtiness.”

He pulled her into his arms. “That so?”

She nodded, a mischievous smile parting her lips. “Several times, in fact.”

“For that, I’ll gladly get coal in my stocking.”

He claimed her mouth with his own, and her arms coiled around his neck. When she pulled away, he held back a groan.

“Just give me one moment to get my things,” she said.

He nodded, releasing her. While she gathered up her purse and jacket, Ethan glanced at his phone; he’d just gotten an email from Martin with the subject line “New Offers?” Brow furrowed he began to read.

*Hey Ethan. Just checking in to see if any other clubs have reached out to you directly? I’ve got radio silence over here, and I’m not too happy about it. Recent events excluded, you’ve had an incredible season and there should be some interest. I know the summer transfer window is still a way’s off, but it’s really never too early. I’ll put some feelers out on my end.*

*Martin*

*PS - are you interested in other clubs besides Chelsea? Man City, perhaps? Or maybe somewhere other than England? Let me know.*

Ethan read over the email again, his mouth turning down.

“Something wrong?” Billie asked.

“I dunno,” he said. “My agent just asked me if I’ve gotten any interest from other clubs.”

“A bit early, isn’t it?” she said. “There’s still loads of time before the transfer window.”

He shook his head. “No, something’s weird. He’s never... consulted me on the process before. If he’s worried, there’s a reason.” He sighed and lowered his phone. “I must have really messed up with that fight.”

“That can’t possibly be it,” she said firmly, tucking her finger beneath his chin and turning his face toward hers. “Most athletes get into a fight or two in their career.”

“With their own teammates?”

“I’ll admit, that part is less common, but the point remains. You haven’t ruined everything with one punch.”

“It was two punches,” he reminded her. “And they’re starting to feel like nails in my coffin. Or my career’s coffin, anyway.”

She stood on her toes and kissed him softly. “Give it some time. There’s still a lot of football left to play, plus the cup final. When you win that, I’m sure Martin will have more offers than he’ll know what to do with.”

A sudden, overwhelming wave of affection washed over him as he held her gaze. The chill that had once been behind her eyes was gone, replaced with a fiery determination. It was almost as if he could hear his heart, screaming at him - *Tell*

*her! Tell her you love her and want to marry her and have babies with her and hold her every night for the rest of your life! Now is as good a time as any!*

He shook his head to squash that down. It was better, he realized, to let Billie take the lead on such things. He would obviously be honest if she asked him, but he didn't want to freak her out, especially with how her last relationship ended. He would never be cruel to her like Greg had been, but he didn't want to overwhelm her and have it all blow up in his face.

"Can't say I ever took you for an optimist," he joked instead.

"Ugh, I know, it's revolting," she replied with a sarcastic grin. "But I suppose that's what I get for hanging around with you all the time."

Smiling, he kissed her again. "It suits you."

"You think everything suits me."

"Well, everything does!"

She giggled. "I'm sorry to delay the naughty appointment we've got, but I just need to nip to the loo."

"Go ahead, I'll be here."

The restroom was just across from her desk. He watched her disappear inside before looking at the email again.

*Not getting anything sent to me directly, I guess they're waiting to see how the rest of the season plays out. Are you*

*worried?*

*Ethan*

The bathroom door opened and Billie emerged, shaking excess water from her hands. He watched her smile - beautifully, as always - at the janitor, Jim, who handed her a couple fresh paper towels. He assured her he was just going in to restock, but didn't want to make her uncomfortable. She thanked him by name, tossed the paper towel in his rolling trash can, and then made her way back to Ethan as she slung her purse over her shoulder.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yeah, I'm just finishing my reply to Martin,” he said. “One sec.”

*PS - I'm open minded about other clubs, but nothing outside London. My life is here now.*

He pressed send. “Let's head home.”



## *Chapter 25*

Billie looked down at the dry, dead grass whispering beneath her boots. She didn't recognize the boots - brown, leather, and worn as if she had been working in them for years. Neither was she familiar with the dungarees she wore. The denim was caked with dried mud, especially around the hems. She looked out at the field. Where there was once bright, golden flowers, there was now only dusty, beige earth. The gray clouds and bitter winds of winter had taken the flowers and the sunlight.

It had taken more than that. Or so she feared.

She turned her wedding ring around her finger, another thing she wasn't sure she had seen before. It was a simple thing, a plain gold band, and somehow, it felt more valuable to her than all the jewels in the crown. Her eyes burning, she ventured further into the meadow, to that place they had shared in the springtime before he left. Even without the flowers, she knew it as well as her childhood home. A different winter had claimed that.

Slowly, she sank to her knees, recalling with an aching heart the last time she lay here. It was in his arms and he whispered that he loved her. She blinked. Tears spilled out from her eyes, falling to the ground. The earth soaked it up like rain.

She dipped her hand into her pocket, retrieving his most recent letter, though “recent” didn’t really apply to it anymore. It was from well before Christmas, which had come and gone. Would the new year bring the news she hoped for? Or perhaps it would bring the worst news of all...

She shook her head. It couldn’t be.

Even so, here she was. Why she felt it would be more powerful to pray for him here, she didn’t really know. Yet she was sure there was power in this place. It was where they met, where they said their first goodbye, and where they knew each other as husband and wife for the first time. He had returned from Normandy. Surely, he could return from what the papers called “The Battle of the Bulge” as well. An icy wind tore through the meadow, seeping through her coat and chilling her down to her bones. She shivered and pulled it tighter around her.

“Bring him back to me,” she said to whoever might be listening. Her lips quivered and she swallowed the lump in her throat. “Please. I’ll never love anyone else as long as I live. Bring him back. Bring him home.”

She choked out a sob and held the letter close to her heart, hoping beyond all hope that these were not his last words to her. She had already lost so much. She couldn’t lose him too.

Billie sucked in a breath and sat straight up in bed. Chest heaving, she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and looked around. Through the dark, she could still make out her bedroom. She was not in a field somewhere in the countryside. She was safe at home. It was not winter, but spring, summer on the horizon. She was no one's wife, but Ethan's girlfriend. All facts she had to tell herself three or four times before she started to believe them.

Her heart still pounded. The dream felt so real. She had been looking through the eyes of someone she couldn't possibly know, and yet they didn't feel like a stranger's...they felt like hers. She shook her head. No way. It wasn't possible. It defied all logic.

Although she had to admit, since Ethan came barreling into her life, these visions and dreams had only gotten more insistent and clear, refusing to be ignored. The dream with the letter was gone, but replaced by things like this. And this one was the most vivid of all.

She wanted to talk to him about it, as Betty suggested. They had discussed dreams before, after all, and he'd been wonderfully understanding. But every time she thought about bringing it up, she was less convinced it was a good idea. If Ethan was also having these experiences, did that necessarily mean what he and Billie were seeing was the same thing? Sure, they *felt* tied together, but feelings weren't facts. What if, in spite of all of it, they weren't connected and it meant they needed to seek out something else? Something other than each other?

She certainly wasn't going to fall back asleep after having that thought. Wrapping her dressing gown around her, she stepped into her slippers and headed for the kitchen. When the mind was troubled, there was nothing for it but a cup of tea, at least according to her mother.

When she entered the kitchen, she saw she wasn't alone; Tessa was there already, humming as the kettle warmed up.

"You're the best, Tessa."

Tessa did a double take as she glanced up. "Ach, you startled me! Tea, Bills?"

"Yes, please."

Billie took a seat while Tessa retrieved a second cup from the cabinet. She stole a glance at the clock, which told her it was nearly two in the morning.

"What's woken you up?" Billie asked.

"I haven't even been to bed yet," Tessa answered with a sigh. "This article's giving me some trouble, and I'm on a deadline." She looked around. "Where's Ethan tonight?"

"His place," Billie said. "Since he's got the final tomorrow, we agreed it was best to sleep apart so he can get plenty of rest."

Tessa shook her head. "Hard to believe the FA Cup final's already here."

"I know. I hope he is actually sleeping and not just worrying himself to death."

“Is that what’s keeping you up?”

Billie shook her head and dropped her gaze to her lap. “No.”

Tessa put their cups of tea on the table and took a seat across from Billie. “What is it then?”

“I...” Billie trailed off. “I had a dream.”

“A sex dream?”

“No!”

“Ach, fair point, if that were the case you’d still be in your room, not out here with me.”

“*Tessa.*”

“Sorry.” Tessa paused and got up to get biscuits from the pantry. They were Billie’s favorite, with chocolate coating on top. “D’you want to tell me about it?”

Billie watched the tea as it steeped, turning the water a golden brown as white steam floated out the top. She’d lost track of the number of times she went through this routine with her mother when she first started having the dreams about the letter. Though she was certain it was not the letter she - or whoever that was - held in the dream she’d had tonight. That letter brought hope, not grief. But how did she know that?

She took a cookie. “It was really odd.”

“My favorite kind,” Tessa said.

Billie explained it to her from the beginning, sparing no details. Tessa listened without interrupting, only nodding here

and there when Billie stopped to sip her tea. When she finished, Tessa looked thoughtfully at the biscuit in her hand.

“That is peculiar,” she said. “And it’s not one you’ve ever had before?”

Billie shook her head. “It was new. And yet...I dunno, it felt more like memory. Which can’t be because I’ve never been to Aldbourne.”

Tessa blinked. “It was in Aldbourne?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Not until just now. Before, you only said ‘a meadow some where.’”

“Did I?”

Billie struggled to remember. It seemed obvious to her that it was Aldbourne now, though why was a mystery. She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Ugh, what the bloody hell does any of it matter?” she said. “It can’t possibly mean anything. They’re just dreams.”

Tessa took so long to answer, Billie opened her eyes to make sure her flatmate was still there with her. Thankfully, she was, but her gaze was fixed on her cup, her fingers drumming along the side of it.

“Dreams are often more powerful than we think,” Tessa said. “And I don’t mean that in a Freudian psychology way. It comes from somewhere deeper.”

“Such as?” Billie asked.

“The soul, the heart, however you choose to define it,” Tessa answered with a shrug.

Billie raised a skeptical brow. “This isn’t going in an Irish folklore direction is it?”

Tessa rolled her eyes. “You’re just jealous that our folklore is better than yours.”

“It is not!”

“Is too, and I know that because you English have colonized every culture more interesting than your own.”

“You spoke to your mother today, didn’t you?” Billie joked.

“I did, but that isn’t the point here,” Tessa said. “Though she still isn’t too fond of you.”

“I can’t help that I’m English.”

“Aye, so you can’t,” Tessa sighed. She took another sip of tea. “The point is, perhaps you’re going through a transformation of sorts.”

“But what does that have to do with -”

“I can’t tell you what exactly the dreams mean, I’m no interpreter. But Billie...they must mean *something*. Don’t you agree?”

Billie mulled that over in her mind for several moments. Tessa had a point. Dreams this often, which seemed to center the same story, people, and theme, could no longer be swept under the rug as coincidences. Especially since they had seeped into the waking world as well.

“But...could it really be Ethan that’s caused all this?”

“It’s all been different since he got here, hasn’t it?” Tessa replied. “And I’ve seen a change in you even in daily things. You smile more, you learn people’s names - and just the other day when you stubbed your toe on one of my boxes again, instead of swearing you said ‘good golly, Miss Molly!’”

Billie sputtered into her tea. “I did no such thing!”

“You did, I swear it,” Tessa said. “I actually checked your room for drugs after that.”

Billie chuckled. “I can’t say I blame you.”

“Anyway, the general thesis of the night is - Ethan’s changed you. And your subconscious or your soul or whatever it is, must be manifesting itself in these dreams.”

Billie straightened up. “That’s it!” She gazed at her flatmate in wonder. “That’s exactly it. Ethan’s just made an...impact on my life, and I’m still adjusting to it. It’s only been a few months after all. So maybe, after some time, it’ll sort itself out and stop.”

“Seems possible,” Tessa said.

“So there’s really no need to speak to him about it.”

“Hold on, that’s not what I -”

“You’ve been immensely helpful, Tessa, thank you,” Billie cut across her and stood up to take Tessa - still protesting - into a hug. “So glad we had this chat.” She kissed the top of Tessa’s head, muffling her grumbles. “Love you, goodnight!”



She sailed out of the kitchen, ignoring Tessa's last ditch cry of "Billie!" as she made her way back to her bedroom.



After ninety minutes, two fifteen minute halves of extra time, and stoppage time at the end of each half, Ethan's legs were on fire as he lined up for the penalty shootout. Regular time ended in a 2-2 draw, and neither side scored during extra time, so here they were, everyone exhausted and out of breath, but still determined. A hush fell over Wembley as the first Liverpool player stepped up to take his penalty shot. Ethan held his breath - a pretty remarkable feat considering how hard he was panting. Luka's hand squeezed Ethan's shoulder. Israel's jaw tightened. All of them willing Jordan to block this shot.

He didn't.

One half of the stadium cheered and the other groaned.

The Liverpool goalkeeper took Jordan's place and Peter moved up to take the first penalty kick for Stanmore. For the first time ever, Ethan wanted only good things for Peter. They had actually collaborated on the equalizer in the second half of regular time, Ethan making the cross, and sending the defenders toward Peter. Peter took a shot, but it bounced off

the back of one of the Liverpool players, so Ethan headed it back into the goal. They nodded at each other in acknowledgement before their teammates came over to celebrate.

This time, Peter's shot went into the back of the net. Ethan pumped his fist in the air, and offered his hand for a high five as Peter jogged to the back of the line. Incredibly, Peter clapped his hand like a real teammate.

Jordan was unable to block the next Liverpool kick too. Luckily, Hector sank his shot into the net, keeping Stanmore's hopes alive. Back and forth it went, until both teams had secured four penalty shots apiece. Liverpool's fifth man lined up in front of Jordan, who quickly wiped the sweat from his brow. The ball sailed off the boots of the Liverpool player and right into... Jordan's gloves! He pulled the ball into his chest, landing hard on his side. The Stanmore supporters roared, and Ethan let out a breath.

Now it was down to him.

"You got this," Luka said, thumping his fist into Ethan's chest encouragingly.

Jordan came over and pressed his forehead to Ethan's. "Bring it home, Knight."

Ethan swallowed and nodded. "Aye, aye, Captain."

"You could do this in your sleep, Ethan!" Hector called from somewhere down the line.

The rest of the team murmured their agreement. Ethan knew he was capable. He made shots like these, and many more difficult, every day in training. But in training, he never felt like he had anvils strapped to his shoulders. This was different. The FA Cup, potentially Stanmore's first, was up to him.

He stepped up to the ball. His heart pounded. His tired muscles tensed. He wasn't sure if the sound was coming from the crowd or the blood rushing in his ears. He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly through his mouth, drowning everything out. He fixed his gaze solely on the ball, letting Wembley fade away - jeers and cheers alike. It was just him, the ball, and the goalkeeper.

He surged forward, planted his left foot firmly, and let his right foot swing back. He struck the ball with his laces, sending it rocketing right past the goalkeeper, who dove in the right direction, but he wasn't quick enough. The ball brushed his fingers and swished into the top of the net.

Ethan's shout of triumph was drowned out by the deafening din of the Wembley crowd. His teammates engulfed him, their native languages mixing with English, all screaming that the victory was theirs. The tightness in Ethan's chest released. He blinked back the sudden mist in his eyes. His legs wobbled, but luckily, Jordan was there, gathering him up in a hug and holding him upright.

"You fucking did it!" Jordan cried, pounding Ethan's back.  
"You really fucking did it!"

Ethan let out a shaky laugh. When Jordan let go, he stepped aside, revealing Peter, who looked - along with thrilled - a bit sheepish. He extended his hand. Ethan, with a grin, shook it.

“Well done,” Peter said. “Cowboy.”

“You too,” Ethan chuckled.

He still couldn't quite bring himself to hug Peter, but luckily, it didn't seem like Peter was there either. He let go of Ethan's hand and went to embrace Devon. Hector and Artem leapt on Ethan next, ruffling his hair as they congratulated him. Ethan's face flushed a little under all the praise, but clearly he didn't need to remind them that Jordan's save was what made Ethan's shot count. Israel was on Jordan's back, whooping and declaring the goalkeeper “The Scottish Wall,” Fernando chanting his agreement.

Ethan made his way over to the Liverpool player whose shot had been blocked. He was crouching in his spot on the pitch, his head in his hands. Ethan knelt in front of him, touching his shoulder to let him know he was there.

“Hey,” Ethan said gently. “Y'all played one heck of a game. Don't beat yourself up.”

He shook his head and chewed his lip. “Yeah...thanks, mate.”

Ethan patted his shoulder and stood back up to join his team again.

The ceremonies passed in a blur, but Ethan committed to memory receiving his medal from Prince William and the

moment he and Jordan got to lift the trophy. Confetti burst from the cannons behind them. The crowd continued with thunderous cheers. The flash of cameras was so rapid, he wasn't quite sure where to look. At this point, all he wanted was to share this moment with Billie.

She arrived with the rest of friends and family. Larysa gently carried her newborn son over to Artem and shared a kiss with her husband. Nadia flew into Osahar's arms and he spun her around before kissing her sweetly. Astrid did the same with Fernando. Billie, however, had tears in her eyes and a frown on her lips. Ethan's brow furrowed.

"I'm so sorry, Ethan," she said, mouth trembling. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry."

"What is it?" he asked, taking her hand as his heart skipped a beat.

"I just got a text from your grandmother," she told him, and swallowed hard. "She was watching the match with Coach Larry, and he..." She paused and sniffled. A tear slid down her cheek when she blinked.

"He what?" he pressed, barely managing to get the words out with the tightness in his throat. Deep down, he had a feeling he knew what she was going to say, and it would be a punch in the gut, but he needed to hear it to believe it was true.

"He passed away," she choked out. "Just moments ago."

Ethan went to his knees.

## *Chapter 26*

“Shit!”

Billie hurtled into her kitchen and snatched a cloth off the handle of the fridge, frantically waving it in front of the oven in a desperate attempt to prevent the smoke alarm from activating. To no avail, since when she opened the oven door, a plume of smoke came out that made her eyes water.

“Shit!” she choked out through a cough.

Covering her mouth in her t-shirt - or Ethan’s t-shirt, rather, but she had claimed it weeks ago - she bent to peer inside the oven, where the cake she had attempted was - thankfully - not aflame, but black as charcoal on the top. Groaning, she grabbed two oven mitts and pulled it out. The moment she set it on the stovetop, it collapsed in the middle. She huffed, deflating herself.

“Fucking hell,” she mumbled.

Now she had no cake and her flat stunk of burned food. Sure, it was temporary, but Ethan was flying to the States in

the morning and she had hoped to surprise him before his trip. She should have waited for Tessa. She was only at a dinner with friends, it wouldn't have been much longer. But truthfully, Billie had pictured herself presenting Ethan with a sweet treat, looking entirely domestic and ready to comfort him.

With a sigh, she pulled out her phone and started to order some delivery instead. Before she got to, though, she heard the door open and Ethan's voice coming from the entryway.

"Woah, everything okay in here, darlin'?" he called.

"I'm in the kitchen!" she returned.

He appeared within seconds, brow furrowed, his gaze flicking toward the disgrace on the stove before returning to her face. "What happened?"

"I...well, I wanted to bake you a cake," she admitted. "As you can see, it was a rather dismal attempt."

His lips turned up into a soft smile. "Hey, I'm just touched that you tried. That's a big step for you, especially in the culinary department."

"Tessa did warn you that I'm a menace."

"I'm still proud of you."

She tried to smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. Ethan was already at the window, tugging it open to let some fresh air in.

"This is what happens when I try things," she complained.

“It was one time,” he said. “You think the first time I kicked a ball it went straight into the back of the net?”

“I’m sorry, was that not the case?” she joked.

“Heck no. It hit the post and then flew back right into my face.”

She laughed as he pulled her into his arms and kissed her cheek. “That does actually make me feel better.”

“Good.”

He kissed her properly then. She wrapped her arms around his neck and stood on her toes to get as close as possible. She wanted to get as much of him as she could before his trip. He decided that he was going to stay a few weeks with Betty after Larry’s funeral, since he was going to miss the final match of the regular season anyway. And Billie was missing him already. It felt sad and pathetic to admit to herself, but she couldn’t ignore it.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, cupping his cheek.

“Okay,” he said. “I, uh, spoke to Mrs. Lowe - Coach Larry’s wife - and she told me -” he stopped short, swallowing. “She told me he saw me lift that trophy. It was just after that he took his last breath. And she assured me he went peacefully.”

Her eyes watered right along with his. The days following the FA Cup final were brutal - Ethan had gone numb, until he wasn’t, and then he cried for almost an entire night. Billie had never felt so helpless. He swore up and down that just being with him was all he needed, but she wanted to do more, so she



booked his flight for him, and she was the one who suggested he take some extra time to reconnect with his roots.

“I’m so sorry,” she told him for what was probably the thousandth time that week.

“I’ll be alright,” he replied.

“I really wish I’d gotten that cake right.”

“You want me to eat it?” he said earnestly. “Because I will if it’ll make you feel better.”

“Don’t you dare. It smells dreadful enough in here without adding sick to the mix.” He chuckled as she rested her head on his chest. “Besides, I’m supposed to be making you feel better, not the other way around.”

“Well, this’ll do just fine,” he said. “I got everything I’ll ever need right here in my arms.”

She closed her eyes and hummed contentedly. A beat passed as they rested a moment together.

“Billie.”

“Yes?”

“Come with me.”

Her eyes snapped open. She pulled away to look at him. “What?”

His pleading gaze made her heart constrict. “Come home with me. I’d...I really need you at the funeral.”

“Oh, blimey, I...” she trailed off. “I’m sorry, Ethan, I can’t. You leave tomorrow and it’s far too last minute for me to get

off work and -”

“It’s not for a couple days,” he said. “You can fly over later. As long as you make it by Saturday, you’ll be fine.”

“Well, there’s also the transfer window opening up and they’re really going to need me at the club.”

“It doesn’t officially open for another two weeks.”

“There’s a ton of prep work involved and -”

“Billie.” His soft expression had hardened as hurt seeped behind his eyes. “Why don’t you tell me why you *really* don’t want to go?”

Panic sank its sharp teeth into her heart. “I just...I don’t know, Ethan, don’t you think it’s a bit...I dunno, odd? I never knew your coach, I don’t want to just show up to his funeral unannounced.”

“You’re my girlfriend, nobody would care,” he said.

“I would!” she insisted. “Besides, we haven’t been together very long. Isn’t it a bit soon to be doing things like this together?”

His brow furrowed. “Heck no.”

“Well, I do. I mean, this is a family moment. I know you weren’t actually related, but -”

“No, I know what you mean.”

“Good. Because what happens if you and I break up? The memory of that funeral would be forever tainted by my presence.”

His arms fell from around her as he took a step back. At the look on his face, she wished she could snatch words out of the air and stuff them back down her throat. His downturned mouth and wounded gaze told her she'd said exactly the wrong thing. But he asked her to be honest, and she had been.

“Are we breaking up?” he asked, rust in his voice.

“No,” she said, wondering when that lump had appeared in her throat. “I was just saying, y’know, hypothetically.”

“Okay, *hypothetically*, why would we break up?”

She groaned. “You’re getting caught up on the wrong thing. Anything could happen, we don’t know.”

“Exactly, we don’t know!” he cried. “We could be together forever!”

“But there’s not a guarantee!”

“There could be if you let it!”

She drew back as if he’d swung at her. The wall that Ethan had been so sweetly chipping away at began reinforcing itself as she braced for the onslaught. The hurt she knew was coming. The only question remaining was whether she and Ethan would make it through to the other side of this conversation with minor flesh wounds or fatal blows.

“I thought we were making progress with your fears,” he said. “To find out you’re still waiting for the other shoe to drop...that sucks.”

“I didn’t say that,” she said.

“You didn’t have to. When I asked you to be there for me, your first instinct was to wonder what happens if this all falls apart. What else am I supposed to make of that?”

She swallowed and dropped her gaze. He had a point there, for which she had no counter argument. Only that she had no idea why she was like this, but he already knew that.

He scrubbed a hand over his face and heaved a sigh. “I thought...I thought things were different with us.”

She looked up and met his gaze. If only he knew just how different it was with him. The way he affected her and the things he made her see. She didn’t have words for it, so all she could say was, “They are.”

“I’m not so sure.” He paused for a beat. “I have reassured you every way I know how. But some part of you is still convinced that I’m going somewhere. That I’m just like every other guy. No matter what I do, it’s not enough.”

Pressure behind her eyes made them well up. “I’ve told you before that it is. Don’t you believe me?”

“I did believe you, but at some point, Billie, your actions and words gotta line up,” he said. “Now’s your chance to show me, not just tell me.”

“You’re not being fair,” she said. “I’m not like you, you know.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I can’t just wear my heart on my sleeve or jump right into something. I’m not a person who does big gestures and things

like that -”

“You’re not?” he challenged. “Because you agreed to go out with me. You took me out line dancing. Hell, you even took a shot at baking a cake for me. You’re not exactly somebody I’d call a coward, Billie.”

“But I was awful at dancing and this cake looks like shit! And I totally misread you when we had our first date and let it fuck everything up!”

“It didn’t fuck everything up, we made it this far!”

“Only because you sought me out to fix it!” She paused, taking a deep breath. “My point is, I screw these things up, Ethan. I’m not good at relationships, no matter how many times I’ve tried. And while it has been different with you, I can’t just suddenly let go of the past as if it still doesn’t affect me. Maybe with more time -”

“We’re out of time,” he said. “I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“What are you saying - this is the *only* way I can prove how much you mean to me?” she asked, folding her arms over her chest.

“No! It’s just...it’s a really big way. More important than any match or the FA Cup final or whatever else. This was a man who meant a lot to me. Who half-raised me.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t mean to sound ungrateful for all you’ve done for me. Truly, I don’t. I just don’t know how I’ll have the strength to say this goodbye without you at my side.”

“I just...I can’t, Ethan. It’s too much, too soon.”

His shoulders dropped with defeat. He slid his hands into his pockets, his gaze finding the floor as he chewed his lower lip. “I gotta tell you, I’m disappointed.”

“I’m sorry for that, but I can’t, I can’t go.”

He heaved a sigh and glanced out the window before meeting her eyes again. “I don’t think this is...what I thought it was.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “How...how do you mean?”

“I think maybe...I’m asking something of you that you aren’t able to give,” he said. “And that ain’t exactly wrong, but maybe it means that you and I just...aren’t a good fit for each other.”

Alarm jolted through her chest like it was a defibrillator. This couldn’t be happening. She had somehow managed, despite her best efforts, to even make Ethan pull away from her. Part of her was clawing through that wall, desperate to let him in, while another part of her screamed to put it back and protect her from this pain.

“Don’t,” she barely managed to say. “Don’t do this.”

He sniffled. “I think I’ve got to.”

“Ethan -”

“Billie, I care about you too much to let you trap yourself with me,” he said. “Shoot, I may even love you. And sometimes that means letting something go.”

Tears stung her eyes, and she blinked them away, shaking her head. This couldn't be happening. She tried to draw breath, but her lungs felt too tight.

"Please," she said. "I'll try. Really, I will. I'll come to the funeral, just don't do this."

"Billie," he said gently, but she shook her head again. She didn't want to hear her name, she wanted *darlin'*. Now more than she ever had. "It wasn't an ultimatum, I don't want you to come if you feel this strongly that you shouldn't."

"I changed my mind."

"I know you didn't."

"Ethan, please." Was she begging? She wasn't sure, but she did know she had never so fiercely wanted a man to *not* leave her. Peter, Greg, and all the others, she had let walk out the door without protest. But Ethan... "Let me show you I can do this."

"That's just the thing, I don't want you to feel backed into a corner," he said. "I want you to *want* to go. To *want* to be there with me. Not because you have to, but because you chose it."

"I'm choosing it now!" she insisted.

"Not really," he said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Billie. I wish things were different."

She sucked in a breath. This couldn't be happening. It was crumbling and it was all her fault. She should have been braver. Why didn't she just agree to go to the damn funeral? Why had she let it come to this? She fucked it all up. And now

her heart...was actually breaking. She could practically feel it splitting right down the middle.

His warm hand on her face made her look up to meet his eyes. Those beautiful green eyes she had come to adore. To love. Fuck, she loved him. She loved him and she let her fear keep her from him. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“I want you to know...it wasn’t wasted,” he said.

She froze. He pressed his lips to her forehead. Then he was gone, a great, cavernous hole taking his place. Her heart jackhammered against her ribcage, as if trying to follow him out. The kitchen swam around her. Any minute now she would wake up and it would just be another dream - after all, it felt so like the one with the letter. It couldn’t be real. In a few moments, this endless abyss left in Ethan’s wake would be filled again by his embrace. She wouldn’t be falling, a scream trapped at the back of her throat. She wouldn’t be -

The front door closed.

Billie shattered.

Tessa found her hours later, still sobbing on the kitchen floor.



## *Interlude*

*January 15, 1945*

*Noville, Belgium*

*Mrs. Margaret Owens,*

*I regret to inform you that your husband, Sergeant Henry Franklin Owens, was killed in action on January 1st, 1945 during a shelling in the Bois Jacque woods. I wish we could have gotten word to you sooner, but we were completely cut off and are only just now able to send and receive mail again. I've enclosed all your letters to him along with his belongings. Know that they brought him courage and comfort throughout these long, cold nights.*

*I know it is painful, but Henry's sacrifice was not for nothing. A line that never seemed to move finally has, and he was an important part of the defense of Bastogne. Against a relentless enemy, he fought bravely, died a hero, and will be forever honored in his country's memory.*

*For his service and your own, we thank you.*

*Signed,*

*Ronald M. Fletcher*

*Commanding*

## *Chapter 27*

Billie opened bleary eyes, swollen from crying. Even though it had been days since Ethan left her, she still reached over to the other side of the bed out of habit, finding only the empty sheets and a harsh reminder that she had not dreamed it. He was really gone.

She pushed herself out of bed and began getting dressed for work. Robotically, she went through the motions of pulling her trousers on, buttoning up her blouse, and twisting her hair into a claw clip. When she was finished, she hardly remembered doing it. The last thing she recalled with any real clarity was the sharp, stabbing pain when Ethan told her goodbye. She wasn't sure how the world could keep turning, how life could just go on, when she so desperately needed it to slow down so she could pick herself up off the floor.

She slipped out the front door quietly in order to avoid Tessa offering to make her breakfast, and made her way down the street toward the Hive. Like poking at a bruise, she looked up at Ethan's window, imagining him there and waving at her,

or the way he would come out the door with a coffee for her. But the curtains were drawn, and the only person who emerged from the building was Mrs. Harvey, his elderly neighbor. She beamed and waved to Billie, who attempted a smile - though it turned out more like a grimace - and waved back.

“Morning, Mrs. Harvey!”

“Good morning, Billie!”

Both women continued on their way. Billie wondered about the last time she’d greeted a neighbor. She was fairly certain she had never done it, not until she met Ethan. Then she considered the cost of moving.

Her workday passed in a haze. The transfer window opening did provide some distraction and kept her busy, but she lacked focus, having to read emails several times before she registered what they said and misfiling several items of paperwork, which she thankfully corrected before anyone noticed.

Just before she signed off for the day, Tony approached her desk. “Billie, there are some files of players I’m interested in pursuing on my desk. I’ve got a meeting in a few minutes, can you go grab them and start looking into their current contracts?”

She didn’t even feel the need to remind him that in the time it took him to ask her to get the files, he could have walked them out here himself. She just got to her feet.

“Sure,” she said blankly.

He blinked. “Well...alright then.”

He headed for the conference room. She swept into his office on autopilot, spotting the files right away, stacked up next to his computer’s monitor. Heaving a sigh, she picked them up. When she did, her hand nudged the mouse, which made the screen light up. Tony had left his email inbox open. She started to head back to her desk, but Ethan’s name in one of the subject lines caught her eye. Curious, she checked who the sender was. He was a representative at Chelsea.

She glanced at the door. Tony was in a meeting at the end of the day, which meant he was likely taking whoever it was out for drinks afterward, especially if they reached an agreement. There was time for her to check the email if she wanted to. Holding the files close to her chest like a shield, she used her free hand to click on it.

Her eyes widened as she scanned the screen and took in the email chain. The first was the representative from Chelsea reaching out to let Tony know the club was interested in Ethan, and Tony declined. The Chelsea rep came back with an offer attached, and again Tony refused. The last email was the most damning. Another offer, but Billie was copied along with Ethan’s agent, Martin. The problem was Billie was certain she had never received that email. And Martin must not have because if he had, Ethan would have told her about it, as the date on the email was before they...before he left.

Just to be sure, she checked her phone, scrolling to the right date, and scanning through subject lines. She definitely did not receive that email. She re-read the way her email address was typed by the sender, but everything was spelled correctly. So why hadn't she received it? And furthermore, why did Tony's emails insist it was Ethan himself who was uninterested in a transfer? Hastily, she snapped photos of the screen. She'd send them to Martin herself if she had to. She scrolled through them to make sure she had everything before tucking her phone into her pocket and then she went to mark the message unread again.

The sound of footsteps made her straighten up. Her heart thundered against her chest, whether from fear or rage, she couldn't tell. Likely, it was a healthy mix of both. But this was the final straw. Tony could fuck up her life all he wanted, but she would not allow him to ruin Ethan's chances. She drew herself up to her full height, so she looked confident when he walked into the room.

"Forgot my phone," he said. "Find those files alright?"

It was a needless question. She was holding them in her arms. To make a point, she set them back down on his desk.

"This message from Chelsea about buying Ethan's contract," she said. "Why didn't I receive it?"

He narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb. Why didn't I get that email, Tony? And am I the only person who was blocked from it?"

“How about you explain what you’re doing going through my computer?” he shot back.

“Stop avoiding the question!” she cried. “What have you done?”

“I did what I had to!”

He paused, as if surprised at himself for answering. Taking a deep breath, he met her gaze.

“I told you before that I had plans for this club, Billie,” he said. He started towards her like a panther on the prowl. “And I will do whatever it takes to make it happen. Whose business is it if emails get lost in cyberspace?”

“But they weren’t lost, were they?” she challenged. “Tell me, did you do the hacking yourself or did you hire someone?”

He stopped right in front of her, towering over her, a dangerous gleam in his eye. The corner of his mouth kicked up into a smirk. “You’ve got no proof.”

“I do,” she said. “I’ve got it on my phone now, and all I’ve got to do is send it to Ethan’s agent.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Do that, and you’re fired.”

“Fire me, then. I don’t care. I won’t let you take this chance from him.”

She started to move past him but he stopped her, snatching her arm.

“I’m warning you, Billie.”

He squeezed so hard, his fingers felt like irons. She winced and tried to pull free of his grasp, to no avail.

“Let me go,” she said with more confidence than she felt.

“I won’t let you ruin this for me.”

“And I’ve already said I won’t let you take Ethan’s dream from him.”

“He never has to know the difference.”

“I’ll know!” she cried. “And beyond Ethan’s fate, what you’re doing is wrong! How many others have you prevented from moving?”

“That’s none of your concern,” he snapped. “Give me your phone.”

“No.”

“Billie -”

“No, you are so selfish,” she went on. “You say you want what’s best for this club, but you’re only looking out for yourself! These athletes aren’t even people to you! The only thing you care about is how things make you look, you prick!”

“Watch your mouth!”

“Fuck you!”

The heavy impact of Tony’s palm on her cheek sent her reeling, the sound cracking like a whip through the empty office. Pain exploded beneath the left side of her face as she stumbled backward and fell to the floor. Her skin stung and her flesh throbbed. Did she cry out? She didn’t know, the



sound of her blood rushing drowned out anything else. Until her scalp began to burn and she realized Tony was hauling her back up, but only to her knees.

“Where’s your phone?” he demanded.

“Fuck you!” she cried again.

He spied it in her back pocket and made a grab for it, but she was too quick for him. She turned her body around so it was on the floor and out of his reach. His fingers released her hair, but she wasn’t able to breathe a sigh of relief. He pinned her beneath him with his forearm across her collarbones. Dangerously close to her throat.

“This doesn’t have to be difficult,” he said. “Hand it over.”

“Get off me!”

A wild struggle ensued. He grabbed at her again and she did her best to shove him away - by his chest, his shoulders, his face, whatever she could reach. Unfortunately, Tony was strong - much stronger than Billie, and he was able to force her to turn her body. But she was faster than him, so she grabbed her phone out of her pocket and hurled it across the office. It slid to a stop just in front of the door. With a growl, he shoved her down and got to his feet. Billie remained on the floor and grabbed him around the ankles. With a cry, and every ounce of strength she could muster, she tugged him back down. He hit the carpet with a heavy thud.

“Goddammit!” he huffed, and kicked at her.

She dodged his shoes by centimeters. There wasn't enough time to get all the way up, so she crawled as fast as she could to try and get past him, but he didn't let her. Seizing her painfully by the thigh, he yanked her back towards him. With her free leg, she shoved her knee into his ribs, but he used the momentum to cage her underneath him once more.

She struck out at his face with an open palm, but he caught her wrist. He saw the other one coming, and grabbed that as well, securing them over her head. Before she could knee him in the groin, he sat on her legs, his weight totally immobilizing her.

“Let me go!” she demanded.

“You know I'm not going to do that,” he replied through a ragged breath.

Her mind spun with what she could do. But physically, she was locked down. With no other options, she opened her mouth and screamed at the top of her lungs. Cursing, Tony wrestled with his tie to get it loose enough to tug over his head. She appreciated how difficult it was for him being limited to one hand. Still, she screamed. Someone, somewhere would have to hear it before he was able to silence her. He already had his tie off and it was headed straight for her mouth.

“What the fuck is going on here?”

Billie looked up at the looming figure in the doorway. The stature and accent were unmistakably Jordan. Her heart soared with relief.

“Help me!” Billie cried.

It hardly needed saying. She barely got the words out before Jordan lifted Tony off of her and body slammed him into the desk. Finally free, she clamored over to grab her phone before she scrambled to her feet. But she had to lean against the doorframe to stay upright on her trembling legs.

Jordan had Tony firmly on the ground. “You like putting your hands on women, do you? Feel like a big man, huh?”

“Jordan,” Billie said breathlessly. “He’s been hacking emails and phones so none of you can leave the club. I found out and confronted him.”

Jordan turned furious eyes on Tony. “Has he?”

“Can you hold him until the police get here?”

“This piece of shit isn’t going anywhere, Billie.”

She nodded and dialed, her hands shaking. She realized she was shivering. Sweat coated her hairline and back, but she was freezing. And then, everything was a blur.

The police arrived, along with a medic, who wrapped her up in a blanket and informed her it was probably shock and adrenaline making her cold, so they fetched her some tea. She gave a statement to the officers. The owner of Stanmore, Ray Rogers, arrived, and Tony tried to appeal to him, but after hearing from the police and Jordan what took place, he fired Tony instead. Tony was taken away in handcuffs.

Throughout all of it, all Billie could think about was Ethan. As kind as Jordan was, she wished it were Ethan’s arms

around her to give her comfort. And most importantly, she wanted him to know he hadn't ruined his chances over the fight with Peter. His dream club was seeking him out. He'd be so happy. Even if they weren't together, that was all she wanted for him.

"You alright?" Jordan asked, returning her to the moment.

"I'm sore," she said. "But I think I'll be fine. I've just got to get this offer to Ethan's agent."

Jordan scoffed. "You gotta be fucking joking."

She met his gaze. "Why would I be joking?"

"Because you've just been assaulted by your boss. Right now, you only need to worry about yourself. Get home and get some rest."

She shook her head. "No, this first. It's too important."

"If you must," he sighed. "Then I'll see you home, alright?"

"Thank you," she said with a nod. "For everything tonight."

He only grunted in response, but she took that to mean "you're welcome." He stood by her desk like a sentry while she worked. But thankfully, no other threats presented themselves. Billie put together an in-depth email describing Tony's interference, attached the pictures from her phone, and sent it to Martin. It wouldn't be right to reach out to Ethan directly. But she could do this one last thing for him.

When she finished, she logged out of her computer and began gathering her things. All of her things. She put as much

as she could into her purse, and the rest into her lunch bag. She hadn't kept many personal things there anyway. Jordan watched her curiously.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I sent two emails,” she explained. “One to Ethan's agent and the other to Ray Rogers with my resignation.”

His eyes went wide. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I don't think I could come back after all this.”

Just the thought of returning to this scene made her shudder, and yet...her heart was heavy. True, she hadn't enjoyed working for Tony, and football wasn't exactly her passion, but this was the place she had met Ethan. Just down the hall in that conference room, her life had changed forever.

Jordan nodded, giving her a contemplative look. “Ready to go?”

“I am.”

## *Chapter 28*

Wooden pews groaned under the weight of about three hundred attendees as they all resumed their seats after a half-hearted rendition of “Be Thou My Vision.” The pastor led the congregation in a short prayer, and then invited Ethan up to give the eulogy.

Through the whole service, Ethan was in a fog. Or a dream, maybe. There was no way that little brown box contained the greatness that was Larry Lowe. The program listed his life simply as 1957-2023, as if a mere hyphen could cover the story of such an incredible, influential man. So how could it be real? He kept thinking if he pinched himself, he would wake up back in London with Billie under his arm and this would all be gone.

Ethan cleared his throat as he reached the very real podium, hardly aware he had even moved. The sound echoed through the sanctuary, so he knew he was in front of a microphone. Shaking, he retrieved the words he’d written on his flight home, with his heart still breaking not only for his coach, but

for losing Billie as well. After everything, he still wished she was with him. He needed her like he needed air.

“Hey, everybody,” he began, but he had to clear his throat again now that he’d thought about Billie. “I, uh, probably should introduce myself before I get started here. My name’s Ethan Knight. I play for Stanmore Football Club in London. And Larry Lowe was my very first coach.”

He got a couple cheers and claps from the crowd, and he looked out to spot a few of his old teammates from those days - guys he mostly kept up with over Facebook and Instagram. He sent them a nod of gratitude.

“The first time I met Larry Lowe, he gave me my life,” he continued. “And I’m not just saying that. He started me on a path that led to my career - one that brought me plenty of trophies and more happiness than I could have even dreamed of. But he taught me more than just football - er, soccer, sorry. I’ve been in England too long.” He paused as a chuckle went through the crowd. “Point is, he taught me things outside of sports that have stayed with me ever since.”

He took a deep breath. This part was going to be the hardest.

“Like how to show up. When my mother passed, Coach and Mrs. Lowe were the first people at our front door. They brought us chicken casserole, which fed me and my grandmother for a week. But he came back to our house every day after practice to check on me until I was ready to step back onto the field. All without ever pressuring me. In fact, he

didn't even talk to me about soccer. Sometimes he just sat with me and we didn't say anything. And when I was finally ready to come back, he didn't make a big fuss about it. Just put me in the squad like it was any other day. That was the moment things felt normal for me again.

“He taught me a lot about loss. It's hard for kids to understand, especially when we practiced and worked so hard, it felt unfair to come up short. But he taught us that each loss is an opportunity. It ain't the end, it's a starting point, and from there we had the chance to learn something and grow. So the first time I failed a test - in English, I remember - I only allowed myself half an hour to beat myself up about it before I went to my teacher and asked her how I could do better, and I started tutoring. And you may not know it, hearing me talk, but my grammar actually improved.”

That earned him a couple more laughs.

“And when I asked a girl to homecoming and she said no, I - well, I actually took that one pretty hard. But I learned that I could have just as much fun with my buddies as I could with a date.

“Fun was also an important part of Coach Larry's teachings. Win, lose, or draw, he reminded us we were privileged to get to play our favorite game as often as we did. Because of him, I've been able to remind myself daily how lucky I am to live out a dream. Although sadly, I haven't been able to convince any other coaches that a post-loss locker room dance party is



the real cure for keeping morale up. Which is fine. My playlists could never be as good as Coach Larry's."

More watery smiles from the audience. Even the corners of Ethan's mouth turned up at the fond memories of jumping around to classic rock with his teammates, Coach Larry among them, teaching them what headbanging was.

"I thought of him when I made it to the Premier League, and I was so scared at what a change it would be. Not only leaving a league and a club I enjoyed, but moving to a whole new place. When I got on the plane, I was terrified. But by the time I landed, I was telling myself, 'This is an adventure!' And I had...probably the greatest adventure of my life."

He knew most people would assume he meant helping bring Stanmore up to its highest ranking in club history, securing a Europa League spot, and winning the FA Cup. But truthfully, it was none of those things. Billie Axton proved to be a greater adventure than all of that combined. He found his eyes scanning the crowd for her face in spite of himself. He looked back down at the paper to remind himself what he was supposed to be doing.

"I remember once telling Coach it was a shame he didn't have children of his own. He pointed to the wall of photographs hanging up in his office of every team he'd ever coached and he said, 'What do you mean? I've had hundreds of children.'"

He met Mrs. Lowe's eyes there, and she dabbed at them with a handkerchief. Even that had Ethan mentally kicking

himself, as his mind went right back to Billie and that afternoon in the boot room, when she'd questioned his having a handkerchief. He shook his head.

“He was...the finest man I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. And he taught us all not only to be great athletes, but great people. I hope we'll all carry those lessons with us forever. He gave me my life, and I will always choose to honor his.” He folded up the paper. “Thank you.”

Organ music rang throughout the sanctuary as Ethan stepped down and headed back to his seat, his eyes locked on Betty, who felt like the only thing keeping him standing up. She squeezed his hand as he took his spot next to her.

“That was beautiful,” she whispered.

He only swallowed and nodded.

A reception followed at the Lowe's south Charlotte home. Betty immediately went to get a glass of wine and hug Mrs. Lowe. Ethan got a plate of food, to go through the motions, but didn't take a bite. He wasn't hungry, he just didn't want to alarm anyone by standing around empty handed. A couple of his elementary school teammates came over and spoke to him, clapping his shoulder and such, but he didn't really hear them. He smiled and nodded the best he could.

Over their shoulders, he spotted Mrs. Lowe, standing in front of a line of people waiting to speak to her. He remembered being in that position when his mother passed, standing next to Betty, whose hand was firmly in his as she promised. Mrs. Lowe was certainly more graceful than Ethan

ever was, offering sweet smiles and gratitude for every guest. Ten-year-old Ethan had stared hard at the floor, letting his grief stew until Mrs. Lowe touched his shoulder gently. He looked up at her and she offered him a Coke. She didn't say any of the usual platitudes, she just...gave him something to give him a boost.

Tossing his plate in the trash, he made his way over to the refreshment table and picked up a glass of white wine. He carried it over to where Mrs. Lowe stood now, still receiving guests, and when he reached her, put his hand on her back. She turned, and he held the glass out to her, returning her gesture from over a decade ago.

“Oh, my, thank you, Ethan,” she sighed, taking it. “I’ve been needing something to wet my lips, but it’s hard to break away.”

“No problem,” he replied. “Thought that might be the case.”

“Thank you for your eulogy,” she said. “It was lovely.”

“I’m glad you thought so. I’ll, uh, let you get back to -”

She stopped him by wrapping her fingers around his forearm. “Actually, I’ve got something for you. Do you have a moment?”

He glanced at the crowd. “Do you?”

She smiled. “For you, I’ll make time.”

She excused herself, and then Ethan followed her into the hallway and up the stairs. She led the way to the master

bedroom, so he stood by the doorway while she crossed the room to the dresser, opening the top drawer.

“It’s not much, but...he wanted you to have it,” she said, her eyes shining as she held a small black box out to him. “You were very special to him, Ethan.”

He blinked away the wetness that welled up in his eyes as he opened the box. Inside was Coach Larry’s watch. The one he used to time their runs and set pieces and check to make sure they never ran over time for practice. Ethan had seen it nearly every day growing up. He ran a gentle finger over the face.

“I can’t...” he trailed off. “I can’t accept this, it’s -”

“He wanted you to have it,” she said again. “Really, he did. It was in his will and everything.” She paused for a beat. “I know it’s not fancy like those Apple Watches people wear these days, so it can’t count your steps or anything, but -”

He cut her off by pulling her into a hug. It surprised her at first, but she leaned into his embrace and rested her head on his shoulder.

“I love it,” he said. “Thank you so much.”

She pulled away to look him in the eyes. Up close, he could see the exhaustion in hers, they were red and puffy, but still as kind as he always remembered. They watered anew as she looked him over.

“He always had such a soft spot for you,” she said. “And he was so proud.”

She gave his hand a squeeze. He drew a deep breath. “And I was proud to know him. Still am.”

A tear slid down her cheek as she attempted a smile. She wiped it away.

“Oh, my,” she said. “We’re getting awfully mushy up here, aren’t we?”

“I’d say it’s allowed,” he replied.

She cleared her throat. “So...I heard you were seeing somebody back in London. Did you bring her with you?”

He stiffened and released her hand. Losing Coach Larry was like an open wound. And every time he thought of Billie, it was like someone had thrown salt on it. The sting was so raw. He almost flinched away from it.

“We, uh...we broke up,” he choked out.

“Oh,” she said, with sympathy in her voice. “Well, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry too. But I’ll be alright.”

He wished that were true. Since leaving London, he’d hardly slept. He missed Billie so much, each thought of her felt like a fist slamming into his chest, knocking the wind out of him. And when he closed his eyes, all he could see was her face. Her laughter rang in his ears. The warm, vanilla scent of her lingered around him like smoke. He woke one night, his arm already reaching out for her, only to find the cool cotton of an empty pillow. For a fleeting second he wondered which

would be more painful - another day without Billie or walking into head on traffic.

He returned his focus to Mrs. Lowe and offered his arm. “Ready to face the masses again?”

“As I’ll ever be,” she joked, and slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow.



The rhythm of the waves crashing against the shore was soothing, but not soothing enough for Ethan to feel sleepy. He gazed out at the moonlight reflecting on the rocking water, glimmering along the crests, and he longed for Billie. With a wistful sigh, he leaned against the railing of Betty’s back porch, rubbing the headache out of his temples.

After the funeral, Ethan and Betty left for her Carolina Beach home. He’d always enjoyed the coast, and hoped that going would help him feel like it was a real getaway. But nothing stopped his thoughts of Billie.

The more he thought about it - and he thought about it constantly - the worse he felt about what he said. Maybe he had jumped the gun by asking her to go to the funeral. Maybe he should have been more understanding. But then again, he

still wished that she had been. And in his heart, he knew he deserved someone who was willing to be there for him.

On the other hand, he wondered if he had let his own fear get the better of him. He didn't want to be in another relationship where he was doing all the giving. And he knew Billie was trying. So why didn't he just let her try at her own pace? That brought him right back around to him needing her to push through when he was so low. The back and forth in his mind was relentless, especially now that the funeral was over and there was nothing else to occupy him.

The only thing he knew for sure was that he missed her terribly. There was a hole in his heart where she used to be, and he felt the chasm every time he breathed.

“What are you doing up?”

He turned around at the sound of Betty's voice. She pushed the screen door open and stepped through, wrapping her bathrobe tighter around her against the cool ocean breeze.

“Couldn't sleep,” he told her.

She let out a low breath. “Billie?”

He didn't answer for a long moment. “Yeah.”

“Are you ready to talk about it yet?”

He'd only told his grandmother that he and Billie broke up, but hadn't shared any of the details with her. Mostly because he was afraid he'd totally break down if he described it. And Betty might tell him he was stupid to let the love of his life go

over something like a funeral, and that would only make him feel worse than he already did.

“I don’t wanna keep you up,” he said.

“My feet hit the floor, so I’m up for several hours at least. Might as well talk.”

He started to sigh again, but it all came spilling out of him. He told her everything, from the burned cake to the moment he walked out of Billie’s front door. She listened intently, without once interrupting, and when he was done, he looked uncertainly at her.

“Was I wrong?” he asked, his heart in his throat. He couldn’t discern anything from her expression; if she would take his side or Billie’s.

“No,” she said, and his shoulders sagged with relief. “But neither was Billie.” She paused for a beat. “Which raises the question - why can’t it be fixed?”

He hung his head, eyes finding the outline of his socked feet. “I really hurt her. No matter my reasons, I did end up like every other man in her life. I think if I tried to talk to her now, she’d turn me away. And that’s if I wanted to talk to her in the first place. I’m not sure I do.”

“I think you’re both being stubborn,” she said. “And sometimes, the best way to get an apology is to give one.”

“But I -”

He stopped when his phone chimed. His first thought - a hopeful one - was that it was Billie, but when he looked at the



screen, it was not her name attached to the notification. It was Martin. His brow furrowed. Martin was emailing him at this hour?

“Who is it?” Betty asked.

“Martin.”

“At two in the morning?”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Well, go ahead and see what he wants.”

He stared down at his phone. If Martin was contacting him now, it had to be important. When he opened the email, he stepped backward right into the railing of the porch.

Betty was beside him in a second, taking his arm.

“What’s it say?”

He shook his head in disbelief. “I’ve...I’ve got an offer.”

“From?”

He met her gaze. “Chelsea.”

“Oh!” she gasped, throwing her arms around his neck. “Oh, Ethan, congratulations!”

He held her close and whispered his thanks into her shoulder. After taking so many hits between the red card, losing Coach Larry, and breaking up with Billie, he finally had some relief. He already knew he would accept it. Not only was Chelsea the club he’d always dreamed of playing for, but it would put more distance between him and Billie. And perhaps that would be enough to move on.

## *Chapter 29*

“Breaking news out of Stanmore Football Club - owner Ray Rogers has sacked the club’s head attorney Anthony Corelli. Rogers confirmed the reason for letting Corelli go was the attorney had been hacking phones and emails to stop unwanted offers for players, putting an effective halt on even discussions regarding transfers. Rogers also revealed Corelli allegedly attacked the lower level employee who discovered the hacking, and that employee has since resigned on their own terms. The club released a statement today, reading: We at Stanmore Football Club strive for excellence, and that requires honesty and integrity. We are deeply distressed by the actions of Mr. Corelli, and intend to fully cooperate with law enforcement on the charges brought forth, not only on the club’s behalf, but also on the behalf of one of our team members, for whom we wish nothing but the best in their endeavors moving forward. We also send sincere apolo-”

The TV went black, cutting off the Sky Sports reporter mid flip of her hair. Billie turned her head toward her flatmate.

“Hey, I was trying to see if Ethan took the Chelsea offer!” she protested.

“It won’t be finished yet, and you know that better than anyone,” Tessa replied. “Stop torturing yourself.”

Billie huffed, but having no real argument, didn’t retort. It made her feel pathetic, scrolling social media and watching hours of sports coverage just to get a glimpse of what might be going on with him because she’d rather die than reach out directly and risk him turning her away. Again.

“How’s your face?” Tessa asked.

“Fine,” Billie said. “Still sore, but fine.”

“Can I have a look?”

Billie nodded, and Tessa approached her left side, hinging at the waist to get a better view. The bruise was still a purplish blue and right along her cheekbone. The swelling had gone down after a couple days of cold compresses, but it still had a dull ache anytime she touched it.

“It’s getting some green in the middle,” Tessa said.

“Gross,” Billie said with a disgusted frown.

“Gross it may be, but that means it’s healing.”

“If only the rug burns would catch up.”

Billie had not anticipated so much pain from a tussle on a carpeted floor, but the skin of her elbows was raw and tender. Itchy, too, which made it all the more insufferable.

“Want to change the bandages?” Tessa offered.

Billie nodded. “Yes, please.”

Tessa disappeared into the kitchen and was back within seconds, first aid kit in hand. Billie only winced a little when the band aids came off and Tessa dotted a cooling cream onto the angry red skin.

“D’you think Ethan will take the offer from Chelsea?” Billie asked.

“I imagine it’d be hard for him to turn down the pay increase and a club he’s loved since he was seven.”

Billie chuckled. Of course, it was that simple. And Ethan wasn’t afraid of reaching for things that were good for him. Even if he was, he did it anyway. She missed his readiness, his assurance, his courage. So much so, she was trying to muster up some of it for herself. Which was why she had plans with Stevie to take a night during the week to send out applications to law school. Billie figured if she could survive the hurt of losing Ethan, the sting of rejection from law school wouldn’t be so bad. And if she was accepted, she’d have something to look forward to.

“There,” Tessa said with finality. “Good as new.”

“Thanks, Tess.”

“Can you help me with something now?”

“Sure, anything.”

Tessa had been absolutely doting on Billie since the breakup and the following nastiness with Tony, so Billie was more than happy to return the favor.

“Would you mind going through a couple of the boxes I’ve got for the showcase?” Tessa asked. “It’s a lot for just me.”

“Yeah, alright,” Billie agreed. “It’s not like I’ve got anything else to do.”

*Besides crying my eyes out a little more, but that can wait until after dinner,* she thought.

Tessa smiled. “Right you are. Don’t move, I’ll go get one.”

Billie watched her go into the entryway, pick up the topmost box, and carry it back over to the couch where Billie sat. She set it on the coffee table, and cracked it open. Already, Billie could smell the must of age wafting out. Across the side, the name Maggie Owens was scribbled in black marker. Billie’s brow furrowed.

“Maggie Owens?” she said, scooting to the edge of the couch. “Was she famous?”

Tessa shrugged. “Nope, her things were found in a little flat here in London.”

“I swear I’ve heard that name before. Has she got any family around?”

“The box came from a friend of a distant relative, but we couldn’t find any direct descendants or anything like that. Seems the poor woman was alone most of her life.”

“How sad...” Billie trailed off.

“Just go through and see what you can find that’s in good condition, and we can probably use it,” Tessa said. “When

you're finished, let me know, and I'll bring you another box.”

Billie gave her a thumbs up.

At the top of the box was a file containing Maggie's official documents. According to her birth certificate, she was born Margaret Ann Meadows on November 1, 1919. Funnily enough, she was born at the same hospital Billie was. In 1939, Maggie volunteered for the Women's Land Army, and moved to Aldbourne to work at an orchard outside the village. Billie learned from an attorney's notice that within her first year at the farm, Maggie's parents were killed in an air raid in London. Their family home was destroyed as well. Billie's heart sank to think someone so young could lose so much. It appeared she was an only child as well, so she carried her grief alone.

Among the documents, Billie also found Maggie's marriage license, which raised her spirits a little. In July of 1944, Maggie married an American paratrooper named Henry Franklin Owens. Billie looked around, but found no other birth certificates, so the couple must not have had any children.

Beneath the file was a smaller box, tied up with a red ribbon. The worn edges and ripped upper right hand corner showed the age of it. Gingerly, Billie tugged the ribbon loose and took the top off the box. Inside was a massive stack of letters, all with Henry listed as the recipient. There was no physical address on them, just his name and the year. With a half-smile, she noticed Maggie wrote her y's with the same tail as Billie did. Curious, she flipped the stack over to the bottom,

and found a different scenario. Going back to 1944, just before the D-Day invasion of Normandy, there was a letter from Henry to Maggie at the address of the farm in Aldbourne.

Carefully as she could, she opened the fragile envelope and pulled the letter out. *Dear Maggie*, it began, and with a sharp pang, she noticed Henry wrote his i's with the same loop connecting them that Ethan did when he wrote her little notes. The first couple of lines were about the weather, but as she read on, nearly swooning at how romantic this Henry guy was, one line in particular made her suck in a quiet breath - *I declare, you could bring a man to his knees with your kisses.*

*I declare.* Just like Ethan used to say.

She shook her head. Henry was probably also from the South, where plenty of people used that phrase, especially in his time. She pressed on.

The letters had the kind of romance usually only found in fiction, though with authentic simplicity between two such people. Henry was sweet, funny, and apparently an incredible dancer. Maggie was devoted to him, and generous with her love. She frequently wrote to Henry about the things she and the other girls got into - and they were quite the shenanigans for the 1940s - and Henry always told her how much the stories cheered him up wherever he was. The words felt so familiar, like Billie had read them in a book or seen them in a movie, but she couldn't quite place it.

Remarkably, it didn't pain her much to read them either. At first, she expected this kind of tooth-rotting sweetness to

increase her own heartbreak tenfold, but she found it more comforting than anything.

There was a brief break in the letters between July and September of 1944, when Henry was back from France, and they got married. Then he shipped out again to Holland. In November of that year, Henry's letters slowed, though Maggie continued writing dutifully. By December, his letters stopped altogether. And from January 1945, Billie found a letter that was from neither Henry nor Maggie.

She stopped herself halfway into reaching for it. Her heart rate quickened and she found herself suddenly cold. This letter loomed before her like a mysterious locked door, and she was afraid of what she'd find on the other side of it. She wasn't sure how, but she knew it would hurt her. Hand trembling, she picked it up anyway.

*Mrs. Margaret Owens, it began, and Billie gulped. I regret to inform you that your husband, Sergeant Henry Franklin Owens, was killed in action...*

Billie dropped the letter like a hot plate. Her heart slammed against her chest. It was the letter from her dream. She knew it not by its content, but by the overwhelming devastation it brought. All consuming grief washed over her from her head to her toes, so heavy she was certain she was drowning. The room swam around her as her eyes welled up.

Memories flooded to the forefront of her mind, clear and vivid, passing over her vision like a beloved film. Henry getting her - or Maggie, rather - close to him by playing keep



away with her basket of fruit from the orchard. Sitting on Henry's lap, staring into his stunning green eyes while his mouth kicked up into a smile, with precious dimples on each side. Twirling into Henry's arms while a jazz band played on the radio, Vera Lynn's voice warbling through the speaker. *We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when, but I know we'll meet again some sunny day...*

Billie squeezed her eyes shut. It didn't make sense. How did she have Maggie's memories? How did she even know that they were Maggie's? Why did Henry look so much like Ethan? She shook her head.

When she opened her eyes again, her sitting room came back into focus. She was breathing hard. The letter was on the floor between her legs, but she didn't pick it up. She sprang to her feet and looked into the box. A few other boxes were stacked up inside and she grabbed the first one. Beneath it was...glass?

Curious, Billie picked up the remaining smaller boxes and placed them on the coffee table. At the bottom was a shadow box which contained a stunning, silk wedding dress in pristine condition. The one Henry had sent her his reserve chute to make, according to the letters. Billie's heart was so soft now it could have been fondue. She ran a hand over the glass casing, wondering what that dress must have felt like on the bride.

Which reminded her what she'd gone looking for - pictures.

She had to see, to *know*. The first smaller box she opened contained trinkets, and - she almost stopped breathing -

Maggie's wedding ring. The second one had more letters, but a quick glance told her they were from friends - she recognized a few names as the other Land Girls Maggie worked with on the farm. The third box had what she needed.

Right at the top was the wedding portrait. Billie sucked in a sharp breath. There in black and white, smiling back at her, was her own face.

It was beyond resemblance, it was *identical*. From her hairline to her chin, not a freckle was out of place. The arch of her eyebrows, the curve of her nose, the length of her jaw - every feature was the same. She was certain that if the photo was in color, she'd find the same shade of blue in her eyes and pink on her lips.

She turned her eyes to Henry, and found what she expected - the exact image of Ethan. His hair was combed neatly back and covered with a garrison cap, but that darling, darling smile was unmistakable. There they were, in another life.

And Billie smiled.

It all made sense now. Of *course* she was afraid of loss, she had lost her whole family once before. Of *course* she didn't give her heart to just anyone, she was holding out until she found him again. And of *course* it scared her when she did because he had been taken from her the last time.

Billie went back to the letters, flipping through the ones Maggie had written after Henry's death. She continued to write to him, and from what Billie could glean after skimming the contents, they were more like diary entries, they were

just...to Henry. Maggie, in her heart, had kept him updated on everything in her life. She never fell in love or married again, and in 1994, she told him that she was diagnosed with cancer, and was refusing treatment.

*My love, she wrote. It is time I joined you.*

That was the final letter.

Billie had never thought much of the idea of soulmates. But there was undeniable proof right in front of her, and it made all the pieces of her life start to fall into place. Nothing else explained her dreams, visions, and fears she never could make sense of. She was Maggie and Maggie was her. And in her desperation to spare herself the pain of a familiar sorrow, she had thrown away her happiness with both hands.

But this time, there was no war that could claim his life. The only battle to fight now was a way to win him back.

And of course she had to win him back. She had already lived one lifetime without him, and she refused to do it again.

Quickly as she could without damaging them, she gathered up the box of letters and the picture and carried them to her bedroom, placing them carefully on her nightstand. After one last look at them, she moved as fast as she could.

Yanking open her closet door, she dug out her small suitcase, knocking it against the wall as she dragged it over a pile of shoes. It flopped open as she tossed it onto the bed. She tugged open her dresser drawers, snatching up whatever she put her hands on and hurling the garments into the suitcase. It

didn't matter what clothes she wore. She just needed to get to Ethan.

She attacked her bathroom next, swiping her skincare and toothbrush into her arms all at once, the bottles clattering together. She eyed her shower, debating bringing shampoo, but decided against it. Better to not have to make another trip, for she didn't have seconds to spare.

Tessa appeared in the hallway just as Billie was heading back to her room. "What in God's name are you doing?"

Billie didn't even look at her.

"There's shampoo in America!" she called over her shoulder.

Bewildered, Tessa followed her into the bedroom. Billie still paid her no mind, she only packed up her things and began wrapping the box of letters inside of a pullover to keep them safe.

"What are you on about?" Tessa demanded. "What's it to you if they've got shampoo in America?"

"I'm going there to get Ethan back," Billie said firmly, tucking the box safely into a corner before closing the lid of the suitcase and zipping it up. Finally, she met her flatmate's gaze. "He's not going to die this time."

Tessa blinked, taken aback. Then she folded her arms across her chest and frowned. "You are turning into a right head melter, Billie Axton. What the fuck's going on with you?"

"I'm going to get Ethan!"

“Aye, so you are, but that was the only thing you’ve said in the last two minutes that’s made any damn sense!”

Billie took a much-needed deep breath. Her heart was still pounding and her blood was pumping like she’d just run a marathon, but she could hardly help it. She was so excited to have answers at last. To have something she could show Ethan to prove to him it wasn’t irrational. That she could get past her fears now that she understood them.

“The reason Maggie Owens was a name I recognized is because she’s me. Or rather, I’m her. I know it sounds fucking...mad, but I swear, if you look at the photographs, you’ll see. I was so afraid of losing Ethan because I’d already lost him once.”

Tessa’s eyebrows started a slow retreat back up her forehead. “What?”

“Ethan and I are soulmates,” Billie said. “Literally, soulmates.”

“But that’s - what do you - how -”

“I don’t have time to explain, but look at the photos, you’ll understand. Right now, I’m going to Heathrow and booking the first flight to Charlotte I can get.”

She picked up the suitcase and moved past her flatmate, who remained rooted where she stood.

“Billie!”

Billie turned, her hand on the knob of the front door. “Yeah?”

“Good luck.”

## *Chapter 30*

The early hour and heavy cloud cover meant Ethan had the beach mostly to himself. He'd finally gotten to sleep during the night, but only to find himself in the old, familiar dream of the snowy woods. He woke up cold, and decided the best thing for it was a warm ocean breeze. It cleared the goosebumps away. If only there was something he could do for his aching heart.

He knew he should be excited. In a few weeks, he would be heading back to London to sign papers with the club of his dreams. He would leave Stanmore, and all the mistakes he made there behind him, namely his bad behavior with Peter. There would be people he'd miss, though. Hector and Jordan, but mostly...mostly Billie. He longed for her with every fiber of his being, down to his bones. Each time he thought of her tenderness, her fierce looks, or the way she made him laugh, he felt like a whole half of his body had been removed.

With a sigh, he took a step, sand sweeping around his feet as he started at a leisurely pace down the shoreline. A walk

would clear his head. He walked closer to the water, where the tide could wash over his skin, hoping it would keep him grounded and present.

Despite his best efforts, his mind wandered. Once again, he went over his last conversation with Billie and doubted his resolve. The same arguments came to him, both on his side and on hers.

No amount of internal turmoil or unpacking it with Betty would change what happened. And yet, the idea of moving on from Billie felt impossible.

Returning to Betty's house, he was momentarily surprised to see her standing on her porch. He checked his - Coach Larry's - watch, and was even more surprised. It was barely seven in the morning. If Betty was up, she'd be inside with her coffee and avocado toast, appreciating her view from her kitchen counter. As he got closer, though, he saw it was not Betty standing there. This woman was much younger, with dark brown curls whipping in the wind.

His heart skipped a beat. For a fleeting second, he thought he must be dreaming. Billie couldn't possibly be here in Carolina Beach. Could she?

He shook his head. Knowing his grandmother, it was probably a local girl she was trying to set him up with to get his mind off of Billie.

The young woman slowly came down the wooden steps, a little unsteady as she reached the sand, but grabbed the railing before she fell. Ethan came to a stop and simply watched her,



trying to control his breathing as his heart hammered away with anticipation.

She took her shoes off and set them on one of the stairs before making her way properly onto the beach. She had something tucked into the crook of her arm, holding it close to her body, but he couldn't make out what it was. She lifted her free hand to shade her eyes and scanned the shoreline, freezing when she spotted him. Ethan almost considered taking a step back and making a run for it, but decided against it. Better to let this girl down easy now and then have a serious discussion with Betty about boundaries.

The woman came closer. With a painful twinge, he recognized the sweater Billie wore the first time he came to her place for dinner. Midnight blue and oversized and adorable. Her stature and frame, the way she tucked her hair behind her ear...Ethan could see her but could hardly believe it - it *was* Billie.

His first instinct was to sprint over to her, take her up in his arms, and kiss her until she fainted, but he knew he couldn't. He could, however, start towards her, which he did, carefully controlling himself so that he didn't break into a run in his eagerness to be close to her again. Hurt as he was that she hadn't made it to the funeral, a larger part of him was delighted she had come at all. Time slowed around him as he made his way, the beach seeming to stretch the more he walked, and his stomach did backflips.

Finally, they were within two feet of each other. They both stopped.

“Hi,” she said, and her uncertain smile almost made him drop to his knees and start groveling.

But there was something else about her face that made his jaw tighten. A fading, purplish bruise on her left cheekbone, going all the way to her hairline. His heart clenched. Who was the idiot that put their hands on her and what had given them that death wish? He took a deep breath to steady himself.

“What happened there?” he asked, pointing to the bruise.

Her cheeks flushed and she covered it with her hand. “Oh! It was...well, it’s quite a long story there, and...there’s something more important that I’ve come to tell you.”

He frowned at her reluctance, but didn’t push. “If it’s about the transfer to Chelsea, I already accepted it. You didn’t need to come all this way.”

“Have you?” she asked, and then hastily shook her head. “Sorry, that’s not why I’m here either, though I’m glad you did. Your paperwork isn’t exactly my business anymore.”

He dropped his gaze so she wouldn’t see how much that stung. “Yeah...I guess not.”

“Oh, no - I just - I meant - it’s not because of - of us,” she clarified, and he looked up to meet her gaze. Good God, he missed those eyes. They were even more beautiful than he remembered. “I mean, I don’t work at Stanmore anymore. I left.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.” She paused for a beat. “That’s part of the story regarding my face, but still, not why I’m here.”

“Well...why are you here then?” he asked, a tentative hope bubbling up in his chest.

“For you.”

That hope shot all the way through him like it was straight out of a cannon.

“Ethan, I...” she trailed off, taking her quivering bottom lip between her teeth. “I am so sorry I let you down. I’m sorry I let my fears get the best of me. But...if you’re open to hearing it, I’d like to explain why.”

He was still reeling that she’d come for him. She was so brave. Much braver than him, he couldn’t even get the courage to send a text. Much less take a flight halfway across the world. And she must have driven from Charlotte to Carolina Beach. That would be a long four hours at...God, she must have started around three in the morning.

“I’d love to hear it,” he said.

She presented a box - the item she had tucked safely in her arm. It was browned with age, with a rip on one corner, and secured by a thin red ribbon. Carefully, she untied it, removed the top, and retrieved what appeared to be a black and white photograph. Ethan stepped closer to help shield it from the wind. She held the picture out to him.

What he saw nearly bowled him over. His breath hitched in his throat as he looked at...himself? In a World War II paratrooper uniform, the screaming eagle on the sleeve, standing beside Billie in a wedding gown.

“This is Henry Owens, and his wife, Maggie,” Billie said. “They met in Aldbourne in 1943, when the American soldiers came to the village in the months before D-Day, and they fell deeply in love.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I...that’s clearly -”

“You and I, I know,” she cut across him. “It was us...before. I probably should have told you sooner, but Betty told me you were having visions and dreams. Just like I have.”

He blanched, momentarily humiliated that Betty would reveal their private conversations, but then she said that last part. “You...you had them too?”

She nodded. “I told you about the one with the letter, but there were other things too. I saw them at a dance, making love, lying in field of -”

“Yellow flowers,” he finished.

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. He’d seen it all too, the memories swam to the surface as she spoke. Because that’s what they were. Not visions or dreams. But that realization sent a chill down his spine. The snowy woods with the explosions...

“What -” he stopped and cleared his throat, dreading the answer he knew was coming. “What happened to them?”

She swallowed hard. “The letters tell the whole story, so if you want, we can sit and you can read through -”

“No,” he shook his head. “I mean, I will read them at some point, but I need to know how the story ends first.”

“Well, they were quite passionate, these two. They planned for a whole life together after the war, with children and a home of their own. Unfortunately...” She paused to take a breath. “On the first of January, 1945, there was a shelling by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge. And Henry didn’t survive.”

Ethan squeezed his eyes shut as the memory rushed over him. His lungs stinging from battling the cold air as he ran, his voice hoarse as he shouted frantically to his comrades - “Find a foxhole! Get some cover! Find a foxhole!” Slivers of trees rained down around him. He could hear the tinkling sound they made as they struck his helmet. He spotted a young private on the ground, cowering in the snow. He yanked the young man to his feet. “Get yourself to a fox-”

Nothing.

Gasping for breath, Ethan opened his eyes. He was back on the beach and Billie was before him, gazing steadily at his face.

“You remembered, didn’t you?” she asked.

He nodded slowly, still not quite believing it. “I...yeah.”

“Maggie lived the rest of her life alone,” she told him. “She never loved anyone else, and she kept writing to Henry about

her life. Until she passed away. The year I was born.”

“I gotta sit down,” he blurted out, and didn’t wait for her to answer before taking a seat in the sand, facing the ocean.

She sat beside him, crossing her legs underneath her body. He wanted to ask for her hand, but refrained. He wasn’t sure he was there yet. He wasn’t sure of anything, really. Only that he was still hopelessly in love with her. Perhaps even more so now.

He had never given much thought to the idea of soulmates or past lives. Not that he was a skeptic - he always figured just about anything was possible. And it did make the things he’d experienced make more sense. But this was almost too good to be true. Or too tragic. He hated the idea that he’d abandoned Billie, whether he intended to or not. He shook his head again.

“This is...it’s just...”

“Mad, I know,” she said. “But it explains everything, doesn’t it? The dreams, the feelings, and...why I was so afraid of losing you. I’d done it before and it was...a horribly lonely existence. I can’t do it again, Ethan. Please, please forgive me so I don’t have to.”

He turned wide eyes on her. A tear made its way slowly down her cheek.

“We finally found each other again,” she choked out. “But now...there’s nothing to take you away from me and I’m so sorry I didn’t realize it sooner.”

He looked out at the ocean again. Try as he might, he couldn't stop the tornado of thoughts and questions in his mind. One moment, he was just Ethan Knight, and the next, he realized he was somebody else - this Henry Owens guy - at one point. He held up the photo again, studying their faces, still stunned at how alike they were. How was this sort of thing possible? The evidence couldn't be denied. Especially because the happiness in the picture was exactly how he felt when he and Billie were together. It was why he felt the way he did when he first laid eyes on her. In his soul, he had recognized her.

"I'm sorry too," he finally said. "I shouldn't have pressured you to -"

"No, I was wrong," she said. "You had every right to ask me to be there for you. I was just hoping that now that we know this, we could move forward. Together."

She said the last word almost like a question. He met her gaze once more.

"I gotta know something," he said.

"Anything, I'll tell you."

"Take Henry and Maggie out of it for a minute and be honest. How do you feel about me? Just Ethan."

Her expression softened, warmth coming into her eyes and a hint of a smile on her lips. "I love you, Ethan. I love your courage and your compassion. I love your weird sayings and your laughter. I love how you learn the name of every person

you meet. I love the man that you are now. And I have been waiting for you all my life.”

At this point, he was fully prepared to pry open his chest and completely surrender his heart to her. It was in her hands anyway.

Tucking the photo into his shirt pocket, he reached over and cupped her face, gently wiping away the dampness on her cheek with his thumb. Her eyes - red and puffy, but hopeful - searched his as she sniffled.

“I love you too, Billie,” he said.

Relieved laughter burst from her chest. “Do you, really?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

With that, he kissed her. It shouldn’t have been possible to kiss with how widely they were smiling, but somehow they managed. Billie climbed onto his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling herself as close to him as she could while their lips moved in time with the tide.

“I missed you,” she whispered. “Fuck, Ethan, I missed you so much.”

“I missed you more,” he replied, holding her flush against him.

She pulled back to look him in the eyes again. “This is it, yeah? No more messing about, it’s you and me, right?”

“You and me, darlin’,” he assured her with a squeeze. Because who else could there possibly be after nearly eighty



years of being apart? They were set in stone now. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Me neither.”

A sudden warmth on his face made Ethan look up. “What d’you know? The sun came out.”

Billie turned to look and the brightness so illuminated her skin, she was like a goddess. She grinned. “So it has.”

They were still kissing when the first vacationers arrived to start their days.

## *Epilogue*

### *One Month Later*

“Need any help with that?” Billie offered, nodding toward the plates Betty got down from the cabinet. “I’m not the best cook, but I can certainly set a table.”

“I’ll let ya,” Betty said, and handed them over.

Billie set them around the table, followed by silverware and water glasses. The past couple weeks here had been heaven. Ethan was wonderful, though she did see a bit of his temper when she told him what happened in Tony’s office. She only got him calm after assuring him Jordan came to her rescue in plenty of time, and she was pressing charges against Tony.

Betty was bewildered, but understanding about the connection they’d discovered. The three of them had spent nearly every day on the beach, relaxing and soaking up sun. Billie had never been so tan - London was so often covered in clouds and rain. Ethan still mourned the loss of his coach, but

the gift of the watch comforted him. She often found him looking at it with a fond little smile.

Unfortunately, their last night in Carolina Beach had come. Far too soon, in Billie's opinion, but Chelsea was ready to get Ethan started. The new season would begin next month, and he needed to be in top form.

To give them a good send off, Betty made one of Ethan's favorite meals - a pot roast with green beans, potatoes, and carrots. She had it cooking slowly in the crock pot all day, and the whole house smelled like perfectly seasoned meat. Billie spent most of the day outside, not only to enjoy the last few hours of great weather, but also to avoid her stomach rumbling every time she passed the kitchen.

"Y'all got everything ready?" Betty asked.

"I think so," Billie replied. "We'll be able to check in on our phones, which saves us some time. Though we'll still need to leave here around four tomorrow morning."

Betty huffed. "I swear the way these airlines operate is fucked up as a football bat. Your flight's not till noon!"

Billie chuckled, making a mental note to put "fucked up as a football bat" somewhere in her vocabulary. "Well, international flights always take longer to get through with all the extra security. And Ethan's a bit fussy about being early."

"Oh, you don't have to tell me, honey," Betty said as she took the lid off the crock pot, releasing a plume of steam, and

she poked at the roast with a fork. “Speaking of which, where is he? This is about ready.”

“He’s outside, saying goodbye to Lula Mae.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.”

“I’ll go get him,” Billie said through a laugh.

They’d be taking Billie’s rental car back to Charlotte, so Ethan was having to part ways with his beloved truck once more. Only this time, he decided he would eventually have it shipped over. He told Billie he fully intended on making London his home, and that meant having Lula Mae around.

Admittedly, it was a great truck. He’d taken her out in it several times since she arrived, and it drove wonderfully. Not that Billie was the best judge of vehicular quality, but it was smoother than she expected, and well maintained on the inside. Ethan had put a lot of love into it.

Billie hurried down the front stairs. Jazz music floated from the truck’s cab, and she heard Helen Forrest’s voice crooning - *Kiss me once, then kiss me twice, then kiss me once again, it’s been a long, long time.* The tailgate - a word Billie never thought she’d need to know the meaning of - was dropped, and she could see Ethan’s trainers poking out from the bed. She came around to the end and found him lying on his back and staring up at the stars.

One thing he had added to the truck since Billie’s arrival was a makeshift bed in the back. He put down two mattress toppers covered with a sheet, a couple blankets, and what felt

like about fifty pillows. Billie often blushed just looking at it, recalling the things that had taken place there.

“Hey, you,” she said, giving his leg a good tap.

He raised his head to look at her. “Hey, darlin’. Care to join me?”

“Your grandmother’s nearly got dinner ready.”

“Just for a minute.”

He flashed her that sweet, dimpled smile of his and of course she gave in. After he helped her up, she crawled over to lay beside him, finding her designated spot beneath his arm. From there, she could hear his heart beating steadily. She looked up, following his gaze, and admired the beautiful sight. The stars were so much clearer here, showing up in abundance and glittering against the inky black sky. Like diamonds against black velvet. She never got views like this in London. She’d miss them.

“Can we come back next year?” she asked him.

“We can come as much as you want,” he told her. “Warms my heart that you like it here.”

“I love it here,” she said. “Although at some point, I do want to see more of Charlotte. Where you grew up and things like that.”

“It ain’t as pretty as this.”

“I don’t care about pretty. It’s a part of you, so I want to see it.”

He pressed his lips to her forehead. "I'll never say no to you, darlin'."

The song switched to Vera Lynn's rendition of "I'll Be Seeing You." Billie shifted more onto her side so she could see Ethan's face.

"You're really into this stuff, aren't you?" she asked.

"It's just so familiar," he replied. "And now that I know why, I can just enjoy it."

"I know what you mean."

Billie had always felt a melancholic ache in her heart when she heard the music of that time, and Tessa often had it playing. But now, it brought her comfort. It relaxed her and wrapped her up as if she were in Ethan's arms.

"We may have to steal some records from Tessa," she said.

"Don't you dare," he warned. "We'll offer a bribe, like decent people."

She giggled and settled further into him. "Speaking of Tessa, d'you think I should tell her to find another flatmate?"

"You wanna move out?"

"Well...I just thought, y'know...you and I might want to... live together."

He raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

She nodded, but was suddenly nervous. Were they not on the same page? She thought, after everything, he too would

want to start their lives together. And didn't that begin with sharing a home?

"You don't think it's too soon?" he asked.

She shook her head, pushing down the sting of that remark. Though she couldn't say she blamed him. "How could it be? We've got a lifetime to catch up on, after all."

He scrubbed a hand over his chin thoughtfully. "A lifetime, huh?"

She sat up and looked at him, her heart quickening at his unreadable expression. He sat up too, fishing into his pocket. She watched with bated breath as he pulled out a little red box. She clapped a hand over her mouth when he opened it to reveal a glimmering diamond ring, cushion cut and stunning, even in the darkness. It took every ounce of control she had not to swear.

"That a promise, darlin'?"

She yanked him in for a kiss.

"Yes," she breathed into his mouth. "It's a promise."

He kissed her back, fiercely and adoringly, passionate and strong. Everything he was, was in his kiss. He would be all her kisses for the rest of her days. She would share every dance, every holiday, every moment with him, and to her immense surprise - that didn't scare her one bit. She wanted it, wanted *him*, forever. No decision in her life had ever been easier.

"Okay, okay, lemme put this ring on your finger," he said breathlessly as they parted.

“Oh, blimey, yes, of course,” she said, and held out her left hand. It trembled, not with fear, but with barely contained excitement. She was fairly certain her whole body was vibrating.

He slid it on, and it fit perfectly. Before, she had been terrified that a ring on her finger would feel more like heavy chains than a reason to swallow a squeal, but not with Ethan. She let it out and relished the delighted look on his face.

“You really like it?” he asked.

“It’s perfect.” She kissed him again to accentuate her point. “You’re perfect.”

His cheeks went pink. “I dunno about that. Maybe we’re perfect together, though.”

She smiled and cupped his face in her hands. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

They kissed some more, losing themselves in each other, finally sure that they had all the time in the world.



## *Acknowledgments*

First, I would like to thank my family, who have encouraged my writing since the time I was six and writing stories about an alien and a cowboy who were best friends. I'm blessed to honestly have too many people to name individually, but I love you all very much. Especially since I'm sure there were parts of this book that made you uncomfortable, I'm even more grateful that you powered through.

Second, thank you to my lovely editor, Trisha. I'm so grateful for all the feedback on the book, and tips on publishing that I'd be so lost without. You were my first author friend, and I appreciate you so much!

Third, Melody Jeffries, thank you for your wonderful cover design and all the hard work you put into making it even better than I could have imagined.

Next, Christy, my dearest friend and platonic soulmate. I dedicated this book to you, but I can't go without thanking you as well. You were the first person to hear the idea behind this story, and your love of it gave me the courage to put it into

words. Thank you for your enthusiasm, for work shopping all my different ideas with me, and pushing me to actually write week to week. Truly, without you, this book would not have happened.

Finally, I thank you, the reader! I hope you enjoyed this story as much as I enjoyed writing it. Without you, we authors would be nowhere. Thank you so, so much for choosing my book to spend your time with.

## *About the Author*

Thanks again for reading! A little about me, I grew up in Charlotte, NC, where I still live today, and have been writing since the tender age of six. While my stories have matured, my passion for them has never faded. I'm a lifelong reader as well as writer. I'm also an avid soccer/football fan (and Chelsea fan – go Blues!) and amateur ballroom dancer.

Keep up with my upcoming books on my website:  
[www.kelseypainterbooks.com](http://www.kelseypainterbooks.com)