

THE BAYVIEW ROMANCES BOOK 2

AGAINST
THE

Current



LILY SEABROOKE

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Against the Current

Bayview Romances Book 2

Lily Seabrooke

*For everyone
who's had to decide
between love and the world
and who's had the courage
to choose
both*

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Chapter 1

Priscilla

Bayview was always so beautiful this time of year. Sitting here by the edge of the pool, my feet kicking in the water as Harper splashed in front of me, still getting the hang of the butterfly I was showing her, it felt like I was breathing in life itself. A cool autumn breeze brought snapped-off leaves in golden colors whisking through the air at the edges of the pool, a crisp blue sky with the warmth of sunshine cutting through the September chill, and me? For a minute, I felt at peace.

“You’re getting better,” I said, slipping into the water as Harper came to a panting, breathless stop at the edge of the pool, her face red from exertion. She was a pretty woman in her mid-twenties, dishwater blonde hair that she normally took meticulous care of and had it in a sleek shoulder-length bob but right now was matted to her neck and shoulders in the water. With tattoos creeping up over her neck and down her arms, she had a harder image than I’d expected from the young bakery owner, but over the year or so I’d known her, it turned out she was the softest, sweetest human being. She just liked to put on an image.

I didn’t let her know we could all see through the image, anyway. I’d always had a knack for reading people beneath the surface. I’d freaked out enough people by telling them what they were feeling, so I just kept it to myself these days. With Harper’s little tough-girl façade, though? I think it was an open secret.

Harper wiped the water from her face, which was useless with the water dripping from her arm. “Getting better at what?” she said. “My dying fish impression?”

“Don’t beat yourself up,” I said, splashing water playfully at her.

“Perfection takes practice. And practice means making yourself look silly.”

“So there’s the confession. I do look silly.”

“We all look silly when we’re swimming. A sensible person would just walk.” I shoved her shoulder lightly. “Another two laps. I’ll go with you and keep an eye on your form.”

“Fuck me,” she groaned, but she took off from the wall, diving into the butterfly stroke again, and I followed alongside her.

The pool was quiet right now—Hazel and Paisley had been the last to leave, and now it was just the two of us still putting in some extra hours. Harper had come to me halfway through my practice and asked me for help on improving her form, and I’d been able to tell there was something more to it—something else weighing on her that was dragging her here to ask me for help with her form—but I wasn’t going to push her. I was training for the competition. She wasn’t even on the swim team—she was trying to run from something. And you didn’t ask what someone was running from until they stopped to catch their breath.

And eventually, she did. She came up at the wall again after another two laps, and she collapsed on the side of the pool, not even stopping to complain this time—just lying there with her arms spread out over the concrete, staring off towards the wrought-iron fence with the golden-leafed bushes past them. I drifted up alongside her, giving her a minute before I spoke.

“So…” I started. “Now can I ask why you came around looking for swimming instruction?”

She sighed hard, resting her head on the concrete, turning to look at me. “You don’t believe I just wanted some exercise?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Nobody exercises like that just to get some reps in.”

“Like what?”

I gestured to her. “Like that. Like your whole spirit’s in it. There’s a desperation to how you move, to how you swim. Like you’re angry at something. The way you hold tension in your jaw…”

Harper laughed drily, turning away. “You’ve got a competition coming up. You should probably be more focused on practicing than on analyzing my facial structure.”

“I’m just saying, I’m here if you need someone. You’ve been so sweet to me ever since I moved out to Bayview, I just want to do a little something…”

The gate creaked, and I looked over and felt my heart skip a beat or sixteen at the sight of Annabel coming around the muraled stone wall at the entrance, beaming and waving at us. “Hey, you two. About time you dragged your ass to practice, Harps. I didn’t know you were hanging out here.”

I felt my mouth dry up at the sight of her as if I hadn’t just seen her two hours ago at the end of practice. To be fair, she was prettier than the last time I saw her. She was every single time I ever saw her.

“I just needed to get out for a bit,” Harper said, shifting up to sit on the pool wall. “Priscilla was whipping me senseless to get my butterfly right.”

I pulled myself up out of the water and sat next to her, trying to figure out where to let my eyes rest. Annabel was still wearing her casual two-piece swimsuit she’d worn to practice earlier, a jacket thrown over top now, and I was never able to help my eyes wandering just a little... the long toned stretch along her stomach, her sides. I got knots every time I saw her. “I wasn’t whipping anybody,” I laughed. “Harper’s been doing really well.”

“I’ve been looking like a dead fish,” Harper said.

“The butterfly isn’t an easy one,” I said.

“Girl’s right,” Annabel said, dropping to sit next to us, dipping her feet in the water. “And there’s probably no one better suited to tell you every detail imaginable about the butterfly stroke in this entire town than Scil. I mean, maybe if you count me, but... let’s be real, nobody wants to listen to me talk about swimming.”

“Priscilla does,” Harper said drily, and I cut in with a flop in my stomach before I had to shove Harper face-first into the water.

I’d gone over a full year without Annabel seeming to figure out that I was completely head-over-heels for her. Every other living, breathing person in Bayview seemed to have noticed long ago, but Annabel was still clueless, and honestly, I needed it to stay that way.

I couldn’t help it, though. Annabel was beautiful. Not just physically—although she was, tall and slim and toned with a sharp, striking jawline and deep blue eyes that seemed to cut right through me when she looked at me, a striking red pixie cut, and that ever-present boyish grin, the vitality there in her expression.

But it was a lot more than that. Annabel was just... so alive. And it lit something up inside of me I’d never figured out how to turn off. I hadn’t even realized I liked girls until that first practice session with her, when she held my hands for a technique, and I’d looked her in the eye and been useless

for a full five minutes to think about anything other than wanting to kiss her. That had left me dizzy and disoriented for about a full week back then.

The only problem was, Annabel was my coach. She'd get fired from the league if she dated me. So it was hopeless, and I needed to get over this.

Well—that and I had no chance with her. I had no doubt I'd be able to get her into bed with me if she weren't my coach—she'd slept with about every queer girl in Bayview at this point—but she'd never in a million years lower herself to dating me.

So I'd watch from afar. And *not* let Harper blow my cover, no matter how much she tried every time she was in the same space as me and Annabel.

"What are you doing back, Annabel?" I said, speaking over Harper, a little too quickly. "Did you miss the water? Find out the bakery was closed and you came out here to shake down Harper into giving you a cake?"

"Don't give me ideas," Annabel said. "A cake sounds damn good. I was looking for you."

Small miracle I didn't pass out and fall face-first into the water. "Er... h-how come?"

She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled her hand out, tenderly holding a small chain. She held it out to me and dangled a necklace—my Saturn pendant. "Hazel caught up to me, said she had your pendant in her pocket. Asked me to take it to you because she was too lazy to come back here herself."

My chest ached at how delicately, how carefully she handled the thing—as if I wasn't throwing it around and banging it on everything all the time. I knew it could take a punishment. But Annabel treated it like it was precious, when I'd never even told her why it was precious. "Thank you so much," I said, taking it and feeling a nervous lump in my throat as my fingers brushed her hand. "I had no idea I'd lost it."

"Also just wanted the opportunity to check in and make sure you're okay. There is such a thing as too much practice, Scil. Don't break yourself."

"I—I know." I looked down, squeezing the pendant in my hand. "We were just finishing up anyway."

She put a hand on my shoulder, and—as if she hadn't touched me casually like that a million times over the past year and a half, I felt a keen awareness of the warmth of her hand on my skin. "I know you're taking this seriously. And trust me, I'm no one to discourage that. But you're a human being, Scil. Be gentle." And with that, she pushed herself up to her feet,

turning back to the gate. “All right, I’m gonna go chill in a bubble bath with pinot noir and a smutty romance novel or something. See you both.”

I laughed, waving as she left. “See you tomorrow, Annabel,” I called, and she glanced back over her shoulder meeting my gaze for one charged second before she gave me a playful smile and pushed on ahead.

I think I was staring at where she disappeared for about a solid minute before Harper cleared her throat, jerking me back to awareness.

“You should just kiss her or something,” she said, giving me a wry smirk. I flushed, shaking my head.

“I-I’m not—that’s—oh my god, Harper, you can’t just say something like that.”

“I think I can. In fact, I think I just did.” She gestured in the direction Annabel had left. “You know her as well as I do. She’d be stoked to have a pretty girl kissing her.”

I looked away. “Harper. You haven’t told her how I feel, right?”

“I don’t know why on earth it should be necessary for me to say it when the way you gaze at her feels like it’s going to make you pregnant, but whatever. Everyone in this town has told her how you feel. She still doesn’t believe it.”

I hung my head, clutching my pendant in my hand and staring at it. She leaned back on the concrete, looking up to the sky.

“She’s right, you know. I feel like I never see you away from the water these days. I know you’re a genius at this, but you can’t push yourself too much.”

I squeezed the pendant tighter before turning and shoving it in my bag, lying next to my outerwear at the edge of the pool. “This season’s different.”

“Oh yeah?”

“We’re up against the Cedarcrest Wolves.”

She sighed. “I don’t know how to tell you this, but even you aren’t outswimming a wolf.”

“Oh my god, Harper. It’s a team in the league.” I kicked at the water. “Annabel’s last competition as an athlete. I’m sure you’ve heard about it.”

Harper chewed her lip. I shouldn’t have said it—Harper never liked when anyone harkened back to when she and Annabel were dating, back when I moved to Bayview. I just couldn’t help sometimes being a little... jealous, maybe. “Yeah. Beaten at the last second.”

“It was the Wolves who took the surprise first-place everyone thought

she was going to win. And... this season it's the Wolves who everyone expects to win." I hugged myself. "It's the two-hundred-meter butterfly event, same one Annabel did. I need to beat them. For her sake."

She was quiet for a long time before, suddenly, she clapped a hand on my back. I jolted a little, stifling a gasp, and she grinned at me. "I'll be watching," she said. "And I'll cheer when you overtake the asshole from the Wolves."

I softened, giving her a sweet smile. "Thank you..."

"And I'll bake you a celebration cake once it's done. Sounds good?"

I bit back a smile, nodding. "You're the best. So... I told you what's on my mind. Penny for your thoughts?"

"Keep your penny. They're rotten thoughts anyway." She hunched forward, staring into the crystal blue surface of the water, her expression suddenly looking tired, haggard. "I mentioned I was entering a cake-decorating contest, right? I got fourth last year—"

"And you were going to get first this time," I said. I'd remembered—it had been a week ago—but with the way Harper had been looking dejected and desolate since then, I figured she didn't need someone prying into it.

"Yep," she said, her voice hollow. "And I did."

"What?" I turned on her.

"Got it. First place."

"Oh my god—Harper, that's amazing." I moved towards her, putting a hand on her arm. "You never said anything! Congratulations. I know—"

"I feel like shit."

"Well, yes... I can tell, but I didn't want to point it out."

She laughed. "Ever tactful."

I paused before I ventured carefully, "Why... do you feel bad over it?"

"What the hell was I doing it all for?" she said, voice bitter, shaking her head. "Great. Now I'm the number one cake decorator in the region. At least for this year. Maybe it'll even draw some extra customers. I can put it up in the shop, keep it as bragging rights for life. Give me some legitimacy. Maybe take it further. The winner from the year before last ended up riding the success to a national baking show. Maybe I could do that too." She shrugged. "Or maybe who fucking cares?"

"Well... plenty of people would care a lot about that, but if you don't care about it, that's okay."

She hung her head, squeezing her fists. "What the hell's wrong with me,

Scil?”

Her voice cracked like rough concrete, and I swallowed back the lump in my throat and put a hand on her back. “What do you mean?” I whispered. She shook her head.

“It’s been a year. A whole damn year. More than a year. I healed. I got over it. Hell, she went out with Emberlynn, and I didn’t care.”

So that’s what it was. I pursed my lips, looking down at the concrete between us as the wind picked up higher. “Do you... want to walk with me?”

She snorted, pushing herself up to her feet. “Cooldown exercise?”

“Mm-hm.” I stood up with her, but she rolled her eyes, avoiding my gaze as she picked up her things by the poolside.

“Yeah, yeah. Sure. Lead the way.”

It was a quiet while later, once we were walking through the low-hanging canopies and drooping willow curtains of Patton Ridge Park, that Harper finally spoke.

“You always know exactly what I actually need, don’t you?” she said distantly. I shrugged, playing it cool as I walked alongside her, hiking my bag up my shoulder.

“Walks are nice.”

“You know exactly what’s getting me, too, don’t you?”

I looked away. “I have an idea, but I won’t make any assumptions. I want you to tell me everything you want to tell me.”

“Go ahead and say it.”

I paused, just listening to the leaves crunching under our boots as we walked, the wind whispering in the thick foliage. “Getting first place was your distraction from the heartbreak of Annabel leaving you. You felt better because you had a different purpose, aside from her. And now that you’ve gotten it...”

She sighed hard, stopping mid-stride and turning to me, her hands shoved in her pockets and a miserable look on her face. “I don’t know why I’m dumping all this on you. You have enough on your plate, between... classes and athletics and...”

I put my hands on my hips, sticking out my lower lip. “This is you looking down on me because I’m younger, and I won’t stand for it.”

“It’s not that—”

“It one hundred percent is that. Look deep inside your soul and tell me it’s not that.”

She threw her hands up. “Okay, fine. You’re barely old enough to drink, so it feels weird.”

I folded my arms, just glowering at her until she gave up.

“All right, all right. Yeah. Fine. You’re right. I guess I never actually got over Annabel, I was just distracting myself with this. The moment I got home from the competition, I just found myself staring at her contact on my phone, wanting to call her.” She kicked at the dirt. “I don’t even want her back! I wasn’t happy being with her! But...”

I chewed my lip. “But you loved her. You don’t have to be happy and in a good relationship with someone to love them.”

“Ugh.”

I squeezed her arm, softening. “You’re amazing. I hope you know that. Getting first place is really cool, and you should be really proud of it. But... I don’t think getting frustrated and lost looking for your purpose is anything uncommon.”

She laughed drily. “Talk about a cliché, huh?”

“Clichés exist because they do happen to people.”

“So... what?” She shrugged helplessly, looking out to where we caught a glimpse of the pond between the low-hanging branches. “I have to find my purpose in life? Tall ask.”

“I dunno. Why not just find a purpose for now? Something you care about doing.”

She made a noncommittal noise. I raised my eyebrows.

“Um... or you could try finding somebody else. You haven’t dated anybody since then, have you?”

“Technically—no.”

“Technically?”

“Nothing. Forget it.” She shook her head. “Not once. I was focusing on cakes. But,” she said, giving me a wry smile, “do you really think you’re the one I should be taking love advice from? You’re the one more hung up on Annabel than I am.”

“I’m not—that’s—” I flushed, turning away, shoving my hands in my pockets. “Oh my god, Harper. You don’t get it.”

“I get that Annabel’s completely oblivious about you.”

“She’s not *oblivious*, just... ignoring my feelings... on purpose.” I hunched my shoulders. “I’d only get hurt if we addressed things, anyway. We could never do anything like that. She’s my *coach*, Harper. She’d get fired in

a heartbeat.”

“I really don’t think she’s deliberately ignoring your feelings,” she deadpanned. “As far as I can tell, the dumbass just genuinely doesn’t get it.”

“Hey!” I whirled on her. “She is *not* a dumbass. She’s the smartest—”

“I get it. I get it. Sorry for insulting your idol.”

I fumed, just a little. “Ugh. I don’t need help getting together with her. I need help... getting over her.”

“That’s quite the ask...”

“I’m serious, Harper.” I hunched my shoulders further, shrinking more and more into myself. “I’ve... made myself a promise. I’m going to get over her. Before the end of this season. I’m going to avenge her in the league, and I’m going to let that be closure. For her. And for us.”

She arched her eyebrows, looking at me for a long time, before she said, “You’re serious?”

“Deadly.” I looked down. “So... in a way, maybe we’re in this together, you know? Figuring out how to get rid of these feelings.”

She snorted. “The *getting over Annabel* team assembles, huh.”

“I mean, I can’t blame us. She’s really—”

“I don’t want to hear your latest round of acclaim for your goddess.”

I felt my face burn, a fluffy, happy sensation tingling in my chest, but I pushed it aside. I wasn’t going to get like this. Not over Annabel. Not anymore.

Chapter 2

Annabel

“And I worry maybe she’s just been kissing the wrong person and it’s getting her down?” Paisley said, which would have been fine if it weren’t the first thing she said when I answered the phone. I paused, hoisting my bag up my shoulder, casting my eyes up to where the sky ran a crisp blue strip between the tall gables of colorful roofs.

“Pais, do you want to back up and start with what the fuck you’re talking about?”

“Oh. Sorry. I got excited. Hi, Annabel! How’s it going? Swimming? Sleeping with a girl?”

She didn’t need to know I wasn’t doing the whole sleeping around thing anymore. She was a terminal gossip. It would get to her sooner or later. “I don’t answer the phone doing either of those,” I said. “I’m out on a grocery run. Who’s kissing the wrong person?”

“Well—I don’t know. She might not be. *Anyway*, if you’ll stop interrupting me. What was I saying?”

“Don’t know. I didn’t interrupt you.”

“Oh, yeah. Gwen!” Her voice was suddenly pressing. “Look, I heard someone say that someone heard that someone was thinking lately—”

“Oh boy.” I took the turn down the painted alleyway off Brook Street, where the brick wall covered in street art and lined with drooping plants at the top was edging in close towards the houses and little boutique shopfronts.

“Seems like she’s really bummed and out of it. You know the rumors going around about her and Charlie, and Charlie’s notoriously fickle. I also heard maybe she went on a date with Josh, and... well, I think that’s enough said.”

“Gonna be honest with you, Pais, I don’t even know who Josh is, but I’m sure it’s enough said. So you want me to check on her, because otherwise your little gossip-riddled brain will shrivel up and die?”

She laughed. “Why else would I move to a cozy place like this one? I need the goss. Besides, she’s my friend, and I care about her. Please? You’ll do this for me?”

I was already at Gwen’s house, having known what she was going to ask for the second she brought up Gwen, but I wasn’t letting this go that easily. “Eh... what’s in it for me?”

“I’ll—um—I’ll keep a lookout for hot heteroflexible girls staying in the cabins at the north end!”

I hunched my shoulders, drawing myself tighter. I wasn’t playing that game anymore. And I needed people to catch on faster, just... without me having to say anything. “Pass.”

“*What?* Oh my god, it’s like I don’t even know you. How about a sushi dinner? My treat.”

Finally. “Fine. I’ll check in on her. Don’t skimp out.”

“You’re the best.”

I paused. “Out of curiosity—why couldn’t you come check on her yourself?”

“Oh, uh...” She suppressed a screechy, nervous giggle. “No reason! Just busy. Busy being... busy. Gotta bounce!”

She hung up. Very busy being busy. I put that away in the corner of my mind to never think about again, and I shoved my phone in my pocket and knocked on Gwen’s door.

“I’m not here,” she called from inside. No matter how wild Paisley and her gossip fetish were, I had to admit, she was right more often than not. Gwen’s voice was small and a little shaky. I knocked again.

“Hey,” I said. “It’s me. Just dropping by. Do you want to get food?”

“I’m not here,” she repeated. I knocked again.

“People who aren’t there can’t respond.”

“Yes they can.”

I hung my head. I had an afternoon to kill. And Gwen was my friend, stubborn as she might have been. I had time for her. “I’ll get onion rings and come back to share them.”

She didn’t say anything, which was how I knew I’d won. I called ahead to let Jeremy at the pub know I was dropping by for onion rings, and the

speed demon he was, he had them coming down fresh on the counter right when I arrived, stepping in through the doors into where the air smelled of cheap beer and fried food. Jeremy, the quintessential pub owner with a bulky build and a thick beard, grinned at me.

“Gwen having a special day?” he said, taking my card and swiping it.

“She seems to be a bit down about something. Probably work stuff.”

“Good friend, being right on the ball for her. Tell her Marsha and I say hi. And Dingo, too. Heard your voice on the phone and saw me making onion rings and said Gwen’s gonna be eating good.”

I shot a wave across the bar at where the middle-aged man sat with a leather jacket and sunglasses inside, the guy who had some real name but nobody knew what it was and just called him Dingo for the big dingo he had on the back of his jacket, and he gave me the standard dude-slight-head-nod greeting. In another world, he might have creped me out. Not in this one, where I knew he spent his time in here pursuing his side job of writing historical romances. Whatever floated the guy’s boat.

“Thanks, Jeremy,” I said, taking the bag, before I frowned at the register. “This isn’t the—”

“Take the discount and go. It’s for a sad girl. Who would I be if I charged someone full price for taking care of a sad girl?”

I’d argue, but it wasn’t like coaching a small swim team made me rich. I took the bag with a grateful smile. “You’re the best, big guy. Tell Marsha I said hi.”

Somehow, clouds had already swept in by the time I got back out into the street, a low gloom on the distance looking like rain. I never knew what I was getting, living by the beach. Luckily, I made it back to Gwen’s house with plenty of time still, and I knocked before I pushed the door open and kicked my shoes off in the entrance.

“Gwen?” I called into the house. “Are you in the kitchen?”

“No,” she called from upstairs. I walked up the winding stairway, squeezed into a tiny townhouse with a too-big window and too many plants on the walls and suspended from the ceiling, and I found Gwen sitting at the desk in her bedroom, a cup of tea in front of her, staring blankly at the wall and stirring the tea over and over and over and over.

“Hello,” I said, knocking on the door. She jumped, turning to me with fire suddenly burning in her eyes.

“It’s rude to sneak up on someone like that,” she said. I raised my

eyebrows so high they might have left my face.

“That’s the exact opposite of sneaking up. That could not have been less sneaking up.”

“Just give me the food and tell me how much I owe you,” she muttered, snatching the bag and turning back to the desk. I kicked the ottoman out from in front of the bed and sat down next to her, resting my elbows on my knees.

“You’re not paying for a thing. Come off it. Jeremy already knocked, like, half the price off anyway since he knew I was getting it for you. Spill. What happened?”

She sighed, turning back to the desk with a heavy expression as she unwrapped the packaging and, solemnly, took an onion ring and bit in. She let out a long, tortured sigh, like either the onion ring was a punishment or some divine ecstasy she couldn’t bear. Knowing her, it was the second. She had the depth of a cardboard cutout when it came to food.

Gwen was the oldest of our little set of friends—me, Harper, Gwen, Paisley, and Emberlynn—at thirty, and apparently she’d taken the idea of being the oldest to heart with how she styled herself, always wearing crisp suit jackets with button-up shirts that could stand up straight in hurricane-force winds. She had glasses and a severe blonde bob with dark roots grown out, and if it weren’t for the overly-cute button nose with the turned-up tip, she’d probably look like the villainous businesswoman here to pave paradise and put up a parking lot. As it was, she just looked like she was trying too hard to be one.

“Nothing happened,” she said, finally.

“Uh-huh. Let’s try the truth this time.”

“No.” She ate another onion ring, talking through a mouthful. “Don’t wanna.”

“What are you, four years old all of a sudden?”

“Talking is awful. I hate talking. Especially about... topics.”

“Topics. That’s a wide net you’ve cast.”

“I’d make it wider if I could.”

I snatched one of her onion rings. I deserved it, and they were small anyway. Gwen took a wet wipe—because of course she had wet wipes just *handy* like that, like how every single element of her life was neatly organized around her—and wiped her hands clean before she folded it neatly in quarters and dropped it in a trash can. She took a long sip of tea, staring out the window at where the sky was growing darker and the first raindrops

were splashing across the plants on the terrace behind the house, and finally, she set her tea down with a sigh.

“My girlfriend isn’t here.”

“Uh—what?”

She shot me a withering look. “What, do you not know what a girlfriend is? *You*, Earth’s biggest lesbian, have never heard of a girlfriend?”

I sat up straighter, furrowing my brow. “Since when were you—”

“Since never, I guess. Isn’t that what it feels like?” She spun her seat around with a heavy sigh, kicking the rolling chair away from the desk and over to sit by the window, casting a moody glare out at the dark sky.

“I didn’t think the rumors about you and Charlie—”

“I’ll bite you. I’m not dating Charlie. We play chess together.”

I sighed. “Of course you have a secret *chess friend*. Only you, Gwen. But then...”

She kicked one leg up over the other with a frustrated groan. “I guess you wouldn’t know, would you? I guess no one would know, would they? How would anyone? I might as well not have one.”

“You might as well not, because I don’t have half a clue what you’re talking about.”

That did it, finally. She collapsed in her seat, hunching forwards, and hung her head. “Yeah. I guess you wouldn’t. Her name’s Kay. And she effectively doesn’t exist, because she lives a thousand miles away.”

I winced. “Ah. I get the picture now.”

She shot me the dirtiest look I might have ever seen. “What the hell does that mean?”

I put my hands up, placating. “As in why you’re frustrated with feeling like she’s not even there...”

The fight went out of her as quickly as it appeared, and she dropped her gaze to the floor. “Well... yes. And this is now the third time her plans to visit me here have fallen through at the last minute. So I guess I’m just... a little... tired. Of feeling like I don’t even exist to her. Of feeling like I’m not a priority. But what does that matter? Why would you care?”

I shrugged. “Maybe we can try the old *because I’m your friend?* Might be an outlandish one.”

She sighed. “Might just be,” she mumbled. I shifted my seat closer, and I softened my voice.

“Can I ask how long...”

“Two years.” She ran a hand slowly down along the glass, fingers squeaking against the surface as she went down, staring out at where raindrops started streaking against the outside. “Seven hundred days, almost exactly, and zero of them where I have actually gotten to—I don’t know—hold her hand, hug her, kiss her, anything.”

I grimaced. “I’m sorry.”

“You were supposed to ask how exactly I know it’s almost seven hundred days to the day.”

I paused. “How exactly do you know—”

“It’s none of your business.”

I stared. After a second, she cracked me a small, wry smile.

“Sorry. Couldn’t help it.”

“Do you actually want me to ask—”

She turned back to the window. “She was supposed to be here for the two-year anniversary on the tenth.”

“Ah...” I followed her gaze. “That’s awful.”

“No. Here I thought it was a great, lucky joy for me.”

“Why can’t she make it?”

“Work. Family. Money. Cold feet. She hasn’t said that last one.”

I pursed my lips. “That really sucks. I’m sorry. You think it’s just that she’s... not ready?”

“Has to be. Right?” She scoffed. “I probably could have figured this out ages ago. It was a tell when she said I couldn’t go visit her, it had to be her visiting me. I should have figured it out then, right?”

“Did she say why?”

“Lives close to her family. Not out to them.” She dropped her gaze to the floor with a dry, heavy sigh. “Dating is a migraine. Maybe you have the right idea. Maybe I should just get on Tinder and spend my time riding attractive people and then we ignore each other until we want to do it again.”

It felt like my whole body contracted into itself just hearing it—not only hearing it, but hearing the suggestion that was how I lived. And it must have pushed me over the edge, because I grimaced and I heard myself say, “You know, I’m done with casual.”

She raised her eyebrows high at me. “Yeah? You find someone who actually makes you want to settle down with one person?”

I avoided her gaze. I didn’t like to think back to it—how I left Harper essentially because I couldn’t sit still with one partner. How I was on cloud

nine for a while dating Emberlynn, where we had an open relationship and she didn't mind who I slept with, so long as I told her about it first and got tested after. It hadn't been right for either of us—we were incompatible on a deep level—but it had been guilty, self-indulgent fun. “No,” I said, my throat tight. “Just... you know. Decided to calm down. Be happy by myself for a while.”

She studied me for a long time before she rolled her chair past me, back to the desk, sipping her tea again. “Well, I hope it's going well for you,” she said. “Wouldn't have guessed it as your next move, but you deserve to be happy in whatever situation you're in.”

I winced. Every little bit we talked about it just felt like twisting the knife. “You too. And I'm sorry it's not...”

She let out an exasperated sigh. “Not what? Not anything worth keeping? Not bringing me anything other than wondering all the time if I'm not fucking good enough for her to see me?” She caught herself, steadying herself with a long breath. “Sorry,” she said, her voice lower, looking down at the floor. “I'm just...”

“You don't need to apologize.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “I don't want to talk about Kay. Or think about her. Promise you won't tell anyone? I don't need Pais hearing about this.”

“Yeah, I can only imagine. I promise. It stays between us.” I paused. “Er—can you do the same for the fact that I'm not doing casual anymore? I don't want Paisley—or anyone else, for that matter—getting on my case about why.”

“I don't let secrets slip.” She gestured me to the onion rings. “Let's take these back to the kitchen and gorge ourselves on salty fried food until we forget our responsibilities.”

Well, Gwen knew how to throw a party.

We sat around the kitchen table and talked about nothing at all, chattering about work drama and small-town goings-on until the tea ran out and the generous heaping of onion rings ended up a handful of crumbs at the bottom of a paper wrapper, and finally in the long silence that settled over us, Gwen staring out the window as the rain finally cleared up and rainbow light refracted through the clouds in shafts that spilled across the leaves of plants behind the house, she asked, “When is your competition?”

I pursed my lips. “This weekend.”

“That’s the one where Priscilla got you to book a single room with her in hopes she can get in your pants, right?”

I snorted, looking away. “Even if Priscilla were into me—”

“Which everyone in this town but you knows that she is.”

“—then it wouldn’t matter. I don’t sleep with my students, you know. Generally considered bad form.”

Gwen shrugged, turning back to the window. “Well... she won’t be your student forever.”

“It’s still frowned upon even with a *former* student. And even if she *were* interested in me and even if it didn’t matter that she’s my student—I told you I’m not doing casual.”

She laughed drily. “I don’t think Priscilla’s looking for casual. I think Priscilla’s looking for serious.”

“Absolutely not. She’s straight, anyway. Mostly.”

“*Mostly* is the keyword. You notice how she started adding the *mostly* on there right after you and Harper broke up?”

I scrunched up my face. “Which was *also* when Aria came to town, and I don’t blame her for Aria being the exception.”

“You’re dense enough osmium would float on you.”

I didn’t know what it was about Gwen that got to me. It wasn’t like it was the first time someone tried convincing me Priscilla was on some kind of love quest to conquer my heart. But for some reason, it still hung on me long after we said our goodbyes and I left, which was unfortunate, because it was still circulating in my head when I ran into Priscilla maybe half an hour later.

I should have just walked on by. It was Paisley’s bookstore, anyway, and Paisley anything just spelled trouble. Her bookstore was like some kind of fever dream where you came out of it not sure if it really existed—no help that it was open about four hours a week and usually in the middle of the night—so I normally wouldn’t have even looked. But maybe I just felt her presence tugging on the corners of my awareness. It wouldn’t have been the first time with that girl.

And normally I would have been content to look through the window, see her there, and move on. But the way she was struggling trying to reach something off the top shelf? Talk about a cliché. She was going to drop a book on her own head.

Plus, the way she scrunched her face up when she was trying to reach something was the kind of cute where you couldn’t not help her.

I pushed in through the door and walked up behind her, straining so much going up on her tiptoes that she didn't notice me, and when she fumbled her fingers at the edge of the bag she was reaching for and stumbled, almost losing her balance, I put a hand on her back, steadying her. She jolted at the sudden touch, but I reached up past her and pulled the bag off the shelf, handing it to her.

"I'd hate to watch you pull a bookcase onto yourself," I said, and she drew a sharp breath, eyes wide before she broke into a soft smile, a blush spreading over her cheeks. She always blushed easily. I'd be lying if I said it wasn't cute.

"My hero," she said. "Thanks, Annabel."

Gwen's words lingered in my head at the sight of her like this, looking up at me through her lashes, a gentle rosy blush over her cheeks, but I pushed them away. It wasn't like Priscilla wasn't pretty—she was a little shorter than me, with a lean build toned from all the swimming, long hair in a soft, muted sort of ash blonde that framed her face, gray eyes with the longest natural lashes I'd ever seen, always fanned out and making her look effortlessly like some kind of beauty model. With a contoured face and a narrow jaw, full lips and the kind of annoyingly soft complexion I could never manage myself, she was all too pretty. And that was a major part of why I couldn't get lost in thought about how maybe she was *secretly pining for me*.

I shrugged, taking a step back. "I'm hardly a hero. I just don't have anyone to pull a surprise victory against Cedarcrest if you fall with a bookshelf and land in the hospital."

She snorted, rolling her eyes with a smile. "Uh-huh. And once I graduate, you're going to just happily watch me tumble off a cliff or something?"

"Depends on how far away you are, if I'm sitting down, how comfortable I am..."

"Come off it," she laughed, elbowing me playfully. "I know you'd never let something happen to me. Even after I graduate, I know I'll always be your butterfly girl."

It was hard to describe exactly what it was about her—this odd sense of connection I'd always had to her—but maybe my *butterfly girl* wasn't far off the mark. The connection in coaching her to win the 200-meter butterfly specifically—like there was a part of me inside her.

Which was definitely the wrong way to word that.

“Yeah, you got me,” I said. “Maybe I’m just a little sentimental. New bag?”

“Yup. My water resource management textbook tore clean through my last one. I’d been meaning to go to the university store to get a replacement, but I saw Paisley’s was actually open for once...”

“Could have just told me. I probably still have an old bookbag lying around somewhere.”

She laughed, a little shyly now, avoiding my gaze. “I wouldn’t want to steal your stuff, Annabel. You already give me everything. Just let me do this for myself.”

“Bold of you to assume I’m not just trying to clear trash out from my basement, but all right. Where are you headed after?” I found myself alongside her, starting towards the register, and she walked close to me. She’d always stuck close to me—half a step closer than other people would stand. Had always seen me as some kind of... protector, I guess. And I wasn’t going to jeopardize that by being the creep thinking things about her like what Gwen was talking about.

She shrugged. “I need to get some studies done, so...”

“Do you ever take a break?”

She smiled sweetly at me. “I think of our practice as a break.”

“Uh-huh. You one hundred percent never take a break.”

“I’ll take it a little easier after the swim meet,” she laughed. “Well, I need to get dinner too...”

“I’m getting groceries and heading home to make dinner. You could mooch off my dinner if you want to focus on studying.”

She scrunched up her face again. “You’re offering me things again.”

“Yup.”

“Oh, fine,” she laughed, ducking her head. “Thanks. That would actually be amazing.”

“Well, you got me. Anything for my butterfly girl.”

For some reason, that freaked her out a little, drawing her shoulders tighter and looking away sharply. Maybe I wasn’t supposed to call her that, after all?

It was cute, though. Suited her. Shame if she decided she didn’t like it.

Chapter 3

Priscilla

Harper always looked so bright and ready in the mornings. In my wildest dreams, I could do that, too.

“Morning, Scil,” she said, as I set down the brioche on the counter. “You’re earlier than usual today.”

“Shorter trip today, that’s all,” I said absently, going through my purse for my wallet, and I dropped it when she asked,

“Yeah? Where from?”

“Oh, uh—” I fumbled the wallet between my fingers, dropping it on the floor with a *clink* as the metal clasp hit the wood, and I stooped to pick it back up. And to hide the way I was suddenly flushing scarlet. I took the opportunity of ducking down in front of the counter and out of her sight to say, “I was hanging out at Annabel’s—”

“Scil, did you sleep with Annabel? After we’d just—”

“No!” I stood up and shoved my card into her hands, useless to meet her gaze. “Oh my god. She caught me out on the town and said I was working too hard, so she made dinner for both of us so I could just hang out at her place and get more studying done—”

Harper hung her head. “Leave it to her to pull something like that with you. I swear, she’s trying to torture you.”

“It’s not like that,” I mumbled, adjusting the brown paper bag for my brioche a little too attentively. “She’s just trying to be supportive, because she knows I’m doing a lot. She’s *really* kind. Just always going so far out of her way for people...”

Harper sighed with a wry smile as she handed my card back with my receipt. “So, getting over her is going well.”

“Ugh. Not the best ever. I think...” I wrung my hands. “I wonder if maybe I just need to get out there. Find someone else. You know?”

She leaned over the counter, giving me a long, studying look before she hung her head. “Yeah, maybe.”

It was kind of written all over her face, and—I’d wondered for a long time anyway what was her holdup around dating. She’d always kept it just below the surface, but when it came to finding love, there was something there that even my weird knack for reading people’s minds couldn’t figure out. I’d figured she just needed space, but... something said she wanted someone to ask.

“How come you haven’t?” I said softly, and she shrugged.

“Been busy. Making cakes. Stuff like that.”

“Mm-hm...”

“Yeah, I guess I don’t really know.” She shrugged helplessly. “Maybe I just don’t know what I’d look for.”

“Dating can be hard to figure out. Um... that’s coming from me, as someone who’s never figured it out.”

She quirked a smile at me. “I dated tons of people in college. Tons of people I shouldn’t have. You seem to have a bit more... sense.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t go that far,” I laughed. “Just... er... I had a boyfriend when I started college, and we broke up at the end of my first year. And it messed me up for a bit. So I guess I’ve just been kind of... afraid.”

She studied me for a bit before she said, “You want someone who makes you feel safe, even when you’re on an adventure. Someone to protect you, look after you in a way.”

“It’s not like that,” I shot, my face hot, and she raised her eyebrows.

“Ma’am, I didn’t even mention Annabel yet.”

“Oh... er... r-right.” I fiddled with the bag, looking down. “Um... maybe. Yeah. Maybe I just need to start looking. I’ll never just... coincidentally bump into the love of my life.”

“Or even just the love of *for now*. Not everything happy has to be forever.”

I chewed my lip. “Yeah. I guess you’re not wrong. But the same thing goes to you, you know?”

“Please.” She put a hand up. “I’m not emotionally prepared for reversals. Don’t you have classes to get to?”

“I do.” I stood up straighter, shoving the receipt in the bag and picking it

up. “But we’re still in this together, okay? I feel a lot better being in it with you.”

“I’m not looking for somebody else,” she said, a little too quickly. She wouldn’t meet my gaze. I couldn’t parse what it was. She already had somebody she liked, maybe? If so, she kept it locked down.

I softened my voice. “Okay,” I said. “Then... an interest. Something to make you feel rich and whole.”

“Like cake decorating? And that can end the same way?”

I gave her a slight smile. “Not everything happy has to be forever...”

“Dammit. Walked right into it.” She laughed, pushing away from the counter and standing up straighter. “All right, you,” she said, waving me towards the door. “You’ve got classes to get to. And I’ll... think about something I can do to occupy myself. Something to be happy in. And I’ll let you know. Sounds good?”

I held the bag closer to my chest, nodding, a big smile spreading over my face. “Sounds good. Thanks, Harper.”

“Thank you. Now get a move on, Anders is at the door and I know he won’t be browsing long before he’s at the counter.”

I bumped into Anders at the door, the old man who was in here every day buying a mini-cupcake for his wife—that and for the sense of connection, the joy at seeing the familiar bakery again written all over his face as he stepped inside—and he smiled warmly at me.

“Morning, Priscilla. Heard you have a competition tomorrow, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir. We’re cautiously optimistic about it.”

He shook his head with a tired smile. He’d long since given up on stopping me from calling him *sir*. “Good luck. To all of you. Nancy and I are rooting for you. Oh, and—win or lose, make sure you check in with Annabel if you can, okay? I know how much you mean to her, and I can only imagine...”

I ducked my head, feeling my face heat up again. I didn’t think I meant that much to her—not when she was beautiful and desirable and she could have any girl she wanted—but I wasn’t saying that. “I know. I’ll do my best for her. Lord knows she already does her best for me all the time.”

“She’s a good one, that kid.”

Well, it wasn’t like I was going to disagree. Plus, it was nice hearing him refer to Annabel as *kid*, the same as me. We were only four years apart,

but twenty-one and twenty-five felt like a world of difference. But I could only imagine in Anders's eyes, we were both just kids.

Not that it mattered when I would never stand a chance with Annabel anyway, but it was nice.

I pushed out the door, my breakfast in hand, and I breathed in the sweet, crisp smell of the autumn air, turning down the street and pushing on in the direction of the train station.



"Well, here's us," Annabel said, swiping her card in the door ahead of us. My heart pounded way too hard, knowing full well what this actually was—Annabel and I checking into the room I'd insisted we book together, just because *I felt safer around her*—but the feeling of Annabel taking me to a hotel room with just the two of us—

I only noticed I'd frozen up a little bit outside the door when Annabel looked at me, concern etched across her face.

"You okay, Scil?"

"I'm—sorry. Yeah, I'm good. Just lost in thought."

She pinched her lips together, studying me, before she nodded and headed into the room. "If it's competition nerves, it's okay to say so, you know," she said, raising her voice a little over the sound of my rolling suitcase. Annabel, of course, just carried a backpack.

"I-I know. It's a little bit of nerves. Just—uh." I stopped in the doorway, a dizzy feeling in my stomach at the sight of the room, Annabel sliding her backpack off onto the couch. She turned back and gave me a look.

"Are you sure you're okay? You really don't look too good."

This was a single room. I'd... expected two beds. "No! I'm good," I said, fighting back the blush and losing. "Just... um... I thought we were staying in the same room? This is just... a single..."

"Oh, yeah." She fell back on the foot of the bed, kicking her shoes off. "They only had two doubles, and trying to squeeze in the whole team... well. Either way, I don't move much in my sleep, so relax."

Relax? *Relax?* That was easier said than done. Was I supposed to share a bed with Annabel? *Annabel?* I wouldn't get a minute of sleep. "All... right," I said, my voice shaky. Annabel knotted her brows at me, leaning

closer.

“I can sleep on the couch or something if you prefer—”

“No! I’m not putting you on the couch. Just...” My brain was fried. I shook my head. “Sorry. I just haven’t shared a bed with anyone since... er, yes. I don’t mind it. I just wasn’t expecting it.”

“If you kick me in your sleep, it’s my solemn duty to overlook it.”

Ugh, even this was probably frowned upon by the coaching association. The rules weren’t as strict in a small league like ours, but I’d be getting Annabel in trouble if they found out I’d convinced her to share a bed with me.

I was putting my foot down after this. No more connection with Annabel. No more visits to her house, no more hanging around with her after practice, no more going to social events with her. If I wanted to ever in my life get over her, this was going to have to be the last time—the last little indulgence I gave myself.

So I guess at least I’d let myself indulge until then.

“I’ll kick you a lot, then,” I said, and she grinned.

“I can take it.”

“I have strong legs, you know.” I set my suitcase down and sat on the bed, lightly, heart racing, next to her. She grinned, elbowing me playfully.

“I know. But I can take it. I’m pretty tough.”

I looked down. “Hey... um... how are you feeling?”

“That’s what I should be asking you.”

I stuck my tongue out at her. “Well, I asked you. So deal with it. You’re always taking care of us, looking after us. I want to know how *you’re* feeling. And I know you know why.”

The laugh and smile faded from her face, and she sank backwards until she was spread out on her back in the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

“I’m feeling okay,” she said, finally.

“That wasn’t convincing at all, you know.”

“It was worth a try.” She slung an arm over her head, turning to look at me. “It hung over me for a long time, you know. I’m not going to lie. That moment when the girl from the Wolves pulled ahead of me right in the last second—it might have been the worst gut punch I’ve had in my life. I kept playing it out in my head a million times after, imagining if I’d just done a little better, if I’d just gone a little faster, if I’d just paced myself a little better, if I’d just practiced a little more.” She turned back the other way,

looking out the window, the morning sky bright and clear and blue. “I want you to win the butterfly event. For myself, but mostly for you, because I don’t want you to feel that same way I felt. I’m not going to talk in half-measures and say things like *I’m proud of you no matter what happens*. I am. You already know that. But you also have what it takes to win this, and that one, I don’t think you know.”

I frowned. “I know my abilities.”

“I know you sell yourself short and don’t think you’re worth getting everything you want. How much have you really thought you’ll get first place?”

I paused, hanging in the uncertainty of the question. Annabel sat up, and she turned to face me—entirely too close. Dark blue eyes penetrated through my thoughts, the faint freckles on the bridge of her nose showing under the glow of the halogen light, and the perfect little defined pout in her lower lip—my chest ached to kiss her, but I squeezed my hands tight and pushed the feeling down.

“You are amazing,” she said, her voice carefully measured. “And I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, you can do this.”

“I’m not that—” I started, my voice shaky, but she put a hand on my upper arm and stilled me, my heart racing wildly at the touch. I couldn’t put my thoughts together with her this close, looking me directly in the eye, her hand on me...

“You are. You’re an inspiration, Priscilla. And even before we step one foot in that hall, I am damn proud of you.”

“I—I—” I felt my head spinning, still having a hard time putting words together. My chest was tight, and I struggled to breathe, feeling my heartbeat in my chest, my throat, my face. Finally, I think I blurted the wrong thing, because I said, “A-Annabel, I can’t—breathe when you’re looking at me like this—”

“What? Oh. Sorry.” She furrowed her brow a little, backing away and giving me more space, and I felt myself burn realizing what I’d just said.

“Um—s-sorry—just—uh—”

“No prob,” she laughed, and genuinely, it was like there was nothing there. I should have been relieved. Instead, it felt like the cold, clammy feeling of rejection. “Point is, Scil, you’ve got this. So if you’re asking how I’m feeling? That’s your answer. It’s that you’ve got this and I’m just glad I’m on your team.”

Well, we definitely played for the same team. I wasn't saying that, though. By miracle, I managed to keep it from slipping out. "I asked how you're feeling, and you went and gave me a whole essay answer in order to make it about me."

"I'm so nervous I feel like I'm gonna throw up. That's your real answer."

"Okay, same," I laughed. "Great. I'm glad we can finally get on the same page."

She grabbed her backpack from the couch, unzipping it. "Luckily for us, Gwen gave me some of her peppermint tea, and that always does the trick for calming me down. Want some?"

It didn't matter if it was peppermint tea or elephant tranquilizers, nothing was calming me down if it was something I was sharing with Annabel in a one-bed hotel room while she sat right next to me. But it couldn't hurt. "Sure," I said, relaxing into a smile and just letting myself watch, my heart aching with fondness and the odd sense of domesticity, as Annabel went about brewing tea for the two of us.

Time went by all too quickly. We finished our tea and joined the rest of the team in the lobby before we headed out to the sports hall, and then it was the whole team pacing in the locker room for the longest time while Annabel went up and down the line giving us pep talks, warmup moves. And before I knew it, I was giving Hazel a huge hug gushing how she was going to kill it out there, and then we were watching her in the 50-meter freestyle.

Maybe by some cruel fate, the 200-meter butterfly was the last event, and the rest of the team was all worn and exhausted by then, and between two third-place finishes and one second-place, I was the last hope for a gold medal.

But Annabel didn't say anything about that when she caught me in the locker room heading for the door. She just stood in front of me, directly facing me, and she put her hands in mine and squeezed them, and suddenly I couldn't think about the event anymore.

"Want me to hold your pendant for you?" she said, and I swallowed.

"There's no need to—"

"It's for luck, right?"

God, I was so in deep for her. My chest ached horribly, but I smiled and I gave her a tiny nod.

"It's, um... my mother's. I'll tell you more about it later, if you like."

You can hold it and say hi to her. Maybe introduce yourself. I've said so much about you, I'm sure she's excited to meet you."

A brief look of surprise flashed over her face, and then she melted into the sweetest, softest smile I'd ever seen. "I'm gonna disappoint the hell out of her," she said.

"Hey! You are not," I laughed, shoving her.

"We'll be cheering for you. Together."

I nodded, my heart pounding entirely too hard right now. "Thank you. I'll, um... I'll make you proud. Both of you."

There was something so tranquil about the moment of competition, like the eye of the hurricane. As much as everything swirled destructive and chaotic around it, standing here at the edge of the pool, lined up next to the other contestants, there was peace. Here in the middle of the crowded hall, countless people watching—my eyes went to where Annabel stood with the other coaches at the side of the pool, and she flashed me the pendant.

I had no room to regret anything here.

When the whistle went off, we dove.

Chapter 4

Annabel

It wasn't like it was a surprise. Cedarcrest should have been swimming in a national league, not a regional thing like this. They wildly outclassed the rest of us, and they had a former Olympic gold medalist as a coach. It was no wonder they'd swept the golds here. And it was no wonder the girl for Cedarcrest took off like a shark in the water the second she hit the pool, leaving Priscilla and the others in her wake.

But it wasn't like I liked it. Not after the whole speech I'd given Priscilla in the hotel room. I really did believe. But ultimately, it all came down to luck.

The other coaches were loud—they were every time—chattering and cheering as the swimmers went head-to-head, even with how the 200-meter stretched on seemingly forever. But for once in my life, I wasn't chattering with them.

I sat back on the benches, and I squeezed the hell out of Priscilla's pendant, the metal cold in my hand, and I whispered to it.

"She's doing amazing," I said. "You'd be proud."

And then the crowd erupted around us, and the coaches edged forward, and I jumped to my feet and inched as close as I could watching as the swimmers all went into the final lap, touching off the walls and pushing on for the last stretch, and faster than I'd seen her move in my life, Priscilla tore on ahead. I saw her streaking past the others, neck-and-neck with the girl in the Cedarcrest black, legs kicking powerfully with each stroke underwater, my heart pounding as the tension built through the hall, and then the shrill of the whistle blew as Priscilla slipped in a hair's breadth ahead of the Cedarcrest girl, fingers brushing against the wall. The crowds exploded into

cheers and whistles, applause erupting from every angle, and not far away, the rest of my team jumped from their seats throwing themselves on each other in hugs, and I think the only person holding still in silence was me, as the pendant slipped from my hand and dangled by the chain around my wrist.

From the pool, her face lit up in exhausted elation, Priscilla turned to me, and she waved. And I held up the pendant, because that was all I could say right now, and all that needed to be said right now.

The damn girl had done it. We were in the big leagues.



Priscilla kept remarkably calm the whole time through the photos and the celebratory dinner afterwards. Judging by the look on her face the whole time, I think she just hadn't really processed that it had happened.

The whole team laughed and cheered and celebrated loudly, even though we'd only performed third best at the swim meet as a team—Priscilla's gold carried all the spotlight, and everyone but Priscilla used it to brag the entire night, including Hazel lunging forward to tell the hostess at the restaurant that we needed a table for twelve *with a special seat for the gold medalist*. I had to reassure the poor girl that a regular seat for the gold medalist would do just fine.

After an evening of dinner and partying at a nearby club—I was the designated driver and watched as half the team drank themselves wild—I got everyone back in one piece to the hotel, and it was only once we were back in our room that Priscilla finally really reacted.

I'd barely shut the door before she turned back on me, her face brimming with a million emotions, tears welling in her eyes, and she said in a small, wobbly voice, "Did I actually do it?"

I relaxed back against the door, a smile spreading over my features. "You did, Scil. You beat Cedarcrest."

She sniffled, and then she threw herself on me in a crushing hug, squeezing me tightly. I caught her and held her close to me.

"I can't believe—"

"Then let me tell you until you do believe," I said. "You fucking did it, Scil."

She laughed, wild and breathless, and she buried her face in my shoulder

laughing there for a while until I realized she'd transitioned from laughing to crying, softly, gently, against my shoulder. I squeezed her tighter, stroking her hair back.

"Hey," I whispered. "Hey, it's okay. We're all so damn proud of you."

"Are you?" she said, her voice small, weak, wavering. I stepped back from the hug, holding her by the shoulders, and I tried to meet her eye, but she looked down.

"Of course we are, Scil. No one can ever take this away from you. No matter what happens, you'll always be the girl who won gold."

She sniffled, hunching her shoulders, and when she cried harder, I pulled her back into another tight hug. She was there crying against my shoulder for a while before she said, "But I... what if... is..."

"It's okay, Scil. It's okay. You can take your time. Everything's okay."

"Is this it for me?" she said, straining the words out. "Did I peak? Is it all just downhill from here?"

"Oh, Priscilla," I laughed, giving her another squeeze. "The very fact that you're asking that question is exactly why I know it's not like that."

She paused. "What... do you mean?"

"People don't peak because they hit some milestone they can never reach again. People peak because they hit some milestone that makes them settle there and call it quits. Something that makes them decide it's the end of their story. So... do you want this to be the end of your story?"

Breathlessly, wordlessly, she shook her head. I stepped back from the embrace, holding her by the shoulders, and this time moving to look her in the eye even when she pulled away shyly. She met me with wide eyes, a warm flush spilling across her cheeks, and her lips parted as she looked at me. "No," she breathed, something almost mesmerized in her expression. "No, it's... I don't want it to be."

"Then this is just the beginning." I squeezed her gently. "And I can't wait to see where you end up, Scil."

"Oh, Annabel," she breathed, the words falling out like she didn't even mean to say it, and then with a million different emotions in her eyes, tears welling in the corners, she shut her eyes, cupped my jaw in her hands, and she kissed me.

She—kissed me.

I froze up for a second, eyes wide, my heart missing a beat and my mind doing racing laps around the building and getting nowhere—Priscilla was

kissing me. Her lips were incredibly soft pressed up against mine, and she smelled like the pool and her lilac shampoo—an overwhelming sensation and the desperate urge to kiss her back. Something lit up inside me with a fiery roar, and my body ached for me to hold tight onto her, kiss her fiercely, and see all the other things she wanted.

Internally, I recoiled from the thought—taking advantage of Priscilla for something awful like that—and it was the splash of cold water I needed to come back to reality and break away from the kiss, pushing back from Priscilla, breathing suddenly difficult. Her eyes flew open, but I was expecting something more like shock and confusion in them, not the aching longing that was there in her face.

“Annabel...” she breathed, touching her lips. “I am so sorry. I shouldn’t have...”

This wasn’t what I needed. Emberlynn was going to laugh at me. Probably ditto for Harper, Gwen, Paisley, and everybody else I’d ever known. *Dammit*. It wasn’t like I hadn’t always known on some level, just... denying it to myself because I needed it to not be true. I wanted to kiss her again.

Maybe I could make it still not be true. Hide from it for a while. I put on an awkward smile and scratched my head, looking away. “You’re running high on emotions right now. I get it. Um—do you need to get to sleep?”

She was quiet for a long time before she crumpled up into herself, sinking back against the wall. “I’m really sorry. I... don’t know what got into me. I’m just a little... overwhelmed. Yeah. Maybe I’ll just... get ready for bed.”

Dammit. I didn’t want her to get ready for bed. I wanted to kiss her again.

I had to sit with it as Priscilla shut herself in the bathroom to get ready—sitting on the bed staring down at myself wondering what the hell I was doing. I knew what I should have been doing—as the coach, I needed to be the mature, responsible party, step back, distance myself from this. I needed to tell Priscilla directly something like *as much as your feelings are flattering, I’m your coach, and we can’t pursue anything like that*. Needed to go book myself a different room, if nothing else.

But my chest and my body ached with the way I wanted her. I’d never consciously let myself realize it, but the moment she’d kissed me, the whole spell was broken, and the whole illusion came shattering down. I knew damn

well how she felt about me. And I'd been damn comfortable crossing personal boundaries that should have been between a coach and a student, because I wanted her, too. I just hid it all away in the back of my mind because I *hated* that I wanted her.

But if I went and changed rooms right now, it would raise questions. We'd never escape the topic from the rest of the team. And I'd have to go forever dealing with the questions, the gossip.

No. I was going to be a mature adult. I was going to have the conversation with Priscilla, discuss things through logically with her.

Except once she came back out of the bathroom, wearing pajamas and avoiding my gaze, I found myself caught up in self-questioning, and I quietly stole past her to take my turn in the bathroom getting ready for bed.

When I came back out of the bathroom, Priscilla had turned the overhead light off and left the room in the moody orange glow of the light on the bedside table. With still neither of us saying a word, I moved stiffly and sat on the bed, both of us hanging awkwardly there waiting for some signal, before I sighed.

"Priscilla—"

"I'm sorry," she breathed, looking down at the bed. "I'm *really* sorry. I know I shouldn't have done that. I know it's wrong. I just... I've wanted you so much, for so long..."

Okay, so we were having the conversation. I took a long breath, sitting up straighter.

"Priscilla..." I started, and she winced. I made myself keep going. "I don't want you to think I'm... upset or angry or anything. It's... flattering, that you feel that way. I just—"

"I know," she whispered, wringing her hands in her lap. "I'm so sorry."

Dammit, the poor girl looked like she'd just had her soul crushed to dust. My heart ached for her in so many ways, and the one that floated to the top above all of them was that I didn't want her gold-medal victory getting ruined by this.

"Priscilla," I sighed. She flinched, hunching her shoulders like she was expecting something to hit her.

"I—I'm sorry."

"I'm your coach. You're my student. It would be incredibly irresponsible and an abuse of my position to do anything like that."

"I-I know. I'm really—"

I rubbed my forehead. “Scil, that doesn’t mean I don’t want you too.”

She snapped her head over to look at me, eyes wide. “What?”

“I probably shouldn’t have taken up coaching. I should have known I’d be weak to something like this.” I sighed, sinking back against the headboard, looking up at the ceiling. “You’re very beautiful, Scil. And it’s true that I feel... connected to you in a way I don’t with the others. And that’s pretty messed up of me, and I shouldn’t even be admitting this, but the last thing I want is for you to feel like you’re not wanted.”

“I... but...” She put her hands to her chest, and she gave me the world’s most killer puppy-dog eyes. “Does that mean you... feel... the same way?”

“I—well—” My throat was tight, my face burning now. “I probably shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Annabel.”

“I feel—responsible for you and your wellbeing, as your coach—”

“Oh my god, shut up.”

“Okay! Fine!” I put my hands up. “Yes, of course I do. And yes, I guess when we’re sitting down here talking about it, I’ve known for a while how you feel, and I guess I just didn’t want to admit it because I’m not supposed to feel the way I do. Just...” I hunched my shoulders, looking down. “I’m going to get fired if anyone finds out I said that, so please don’t repeat a word of it to anyone. I really shouldn’t be doing this.”

I saw Priscilla go through a full range of emotions before she sank into the softest little smile, tears welling in her eyes. “You’re just saying that to make me feel better about myself, you jerk.”

“Trust me, if I had any self-control, I would be pretending I’d never felt a thing and checking myself into a different hotel. You know what I’m like, anyway.”

She went wide-eyed. “What you’re like... about what?”

“Ugh. About women.” I sighed, collapsing back against the headboard again. “You probably shouldn’t be wanting me to begin with. I’m nothing but trouble.”

“But then—you actually do,” she said, teary, through a laugh, looking at me like I was the best thing to ever happen to her, and I really didn’t know what to do with that. “You actually want me.”

“Yeah, I guess there’s no use trying to deny things at this point.” I rubbed my forehead.

She threw herself onto me in an embrace that did some absolutely

terrible things to my heart right now—the feeling of Priscilla’s smaller form pressed up against me, arms wrapped around me, and her face buried in my collar as she laughed breathlessly. She was only a bit smaller than me, and she was every bit as fit and toned, so it was strange that she should feel so... small, so precious, so delicate against me, like she was something I wanted to hold lightly and cherish. My butterfly girl.

Dammit. I wasn’t supposed to be thinking things like that.

“I feel like I won two gold medals today,” she laughed against my collar. “I’m... glad. Really glad. That I’m not the only one. All this time, I thought you were ignoring my feelings because you didn’t feel the same way...”

“If I didn’t, then I’d politely let you down easy. Sadly, this hasn’t been as simple.” I paused. “Also—this does not compare to a gold medal. I’m just —”

“If you even *think* about finishing that sentence, I’m going to fight you,” she said. “You really have no idea just how much I’ve felt about you... how much I’ve cared about you. How much time I’ve spent thinking about you...”

I was normally better in situations like this, but normally in situations like this, I was trying to progress things, not stop them. It gave me a nervous tangle at the thought of Priscilla just... thinking about me. I wondered if she’d had the kind of daydreams about me that I’d had about my crushes when I was younger. I put a gentle hand on her back. “Well... I shouldn’t be telling you any of this. So it should mean something that I *am* telling you. You’re... a certain kind of... weakness of mine.”

She laughed, squeezing me. “I hoped I might be,” she said dreamily. “Your... butterfly girl.”

I’d criticize if I hadn’t just been thinking that myself. I looked away. “We should... stay apart from one another,” I said, my voice strained. “Put more distance. I don’t want to jeopardize either of our careers.”

She squeezed me again, but it took a minute before she spoke, her voice low. “We’ve already said all of this, you know. It’s already... inappropriate, in the eyes of the league.”

“Yeah. I know. But we’ll—”

“So we’re already keeping tonight secret...”

My stomach flopped, my heart jumping into my throat as I looked back to her. “Priscilla—if you’re suggesting what I think you’re suggesting, we absolutely can’t—”

She pulled away from the embrace, and she looked up at me with weapons-grade puppy-dog eyes. “It doesn’t have to amount to anything. In the long term. We can keep it secret just like we’re keeping everything else here secret. And maybe if you just... maybe we can have closure. If we admit to everything and we just have... one... kiss.”

This was the worst idea I’d heard in my life. At least, I knew logically that it was, but it sure didn’t feel like it in the moment. *God*, I just wanted to take her, feel her lips against mine, press her into the mattress and kiss the life out of her. She was so beautiful, so precious, and the way she looked at me made me want to give in and do all the things we were hiding from. I put a hand over my mouth, turning away.

“Priscilla. You know as well as I do that I can’t possibly—”

“But you do want it,” she said, her voice just barely a whisper. I groaned.

“I... ugh. Yes, Priscilla. I do. But it’s not just about whether I want it or not. I—”

“If we don’t,” she whispered, and she caressed her fingers up my arm, and it was everything I didn’t need right now. It shot fire through my body, electricity up my spine, and I arched into her without meaning to. She looked up at me through her lashes as she continued. “Then we’ll just keep thinking about this forever... so...”

“I...”

“We both have these feelings,” she said, caressing her fingers higher, up to my shoulder and then slipping to my side. I needed to stop her. I just didn’t really know how. “So maybe we just need to... get it out of our systems? Experience it? Or we’ll always keep having these thoughts and feelings...”

I closed my eyes. “Priscilla...”

She lowered her voice even further, barely a breath, close to my ear in a way that sent shudders down my spine as she trailed her fingertips down my side. “You’ll be helping me give it my all,” she said. “Making me a better swimmer...”

“How, exactly?” I cracked an eyelid, but seeing Priscilla right now was not a good choice—not this close up, where I could feel her breath on my neck, where I could count her individual lashes. *God*, she was beautiful. So achingly gorgeous it made my chest hurt. “What’s the plan here?” I said, and she laughed, a light and playful laugh as she brushed her fingers up my side now, up towards my face, where she danced her fingertips along my lips.

“Because... I’d be trying my best to impress you and see if it makes this happen again?”

I let out a breathless laugh. “That’s your plan?”

“I’d train like I never have in my life,” she said, a smile tugging at her lips. “You’d be making me better...”

“I’m trying to be responsible here, Scil.”

“Please,” she whispered, and she shifted to straddle my lap, hovering just above my face. I felt the heat from her body blazing against me, inches away, and that look in her eyes was pure desire as she looked at me—wanting me achingly. And god, I couldn’t get enough of being wanted like that. I wasn’t a good person. I couldn’t be a good person any longer.

“Dammit, Scil,” I breathed, letting my hands fall to her hips. “Just a kiss. And just tonight.”

She looked like I’d just handed her the world on a platter, her expression melting in bliss. “Annabel,” she whispered, that sweet and delicate little voice like I was the best thing to ever happen to her, and she fluttered her eyes shut, sinking against me as her lips met mine, and the guilty rush flooded through me as I closed my eyes and kissed her back, holding her tightly against me.

Chapter 5

Priscilla

I was kissing Annabel. I was *kissing Annabel*. The thought ran warm, blissful circles in my mind, lighting up every part of me as our lips met, cradling her jaw in my hands, holding her like the precious, beautiful, perfect human being that she was.

She was so soft, so warm. Her lips tasted sweet on mine, and I wanted to keep feeling them forever. We kissed slowly, every millisecond of it charted forever in my mind, and my body ached for her—a deep physical ache suddenly for so much more than just a kiss. All the times I’d seen her flirt and play around with other girls, all the times I’d heard about her latest fling. I didn’t want to just be her fling, but if that was all I could get of her, I’d cherish it more than the gold medal.

I just wanted her. Anything. And everything.

Shakily, hesitantly, testing her reaction, I deepened the kiss, taking her lower lip gently between mine. The response was instant and physical—she jerked her hips up against me with a soft, low moan, and it shook me to my core. I gripped tighter at her, and I touched my tongue to her lips, emboldened. Annabel met me readily, gripping tighter at me and pulling me against her, and I surrendered myself to the sturdy hold of her arms as she nipped lightly at my lower lip. It sent pleasure bolting through my body, and I moaned against her, not even caring how it sounded, not even caring what it looked like.

Annabel broke away from the kiss, the moment heated and dizzy, and instantly I felt cold longing for the touch of her lips again. “Priscilla—” she started.

“Did I do something wrong?” I said, my voice soft and low, and she bit

her lip, her gaze flicking down me. I wanted her to look at every part of me. I wanted her to take me in, look at me, think things about me—wanted her to want me, to have me, to get pleasure from me.

“It’s not—please—” she said, straining for words, wincing. I raised my eyebrows high.

“Am I... hurting you?”

“No. Just... it’s...” She looked away. “Dammit, Priscilla. What do you *think*?”

It took a second to set in, and then my heart jumped when it did. “Annabel... am I turning you on?”

She sighed through her teeth, a frustrated sound, still not looking at me. “What do you think is going to happen when a beautiful woman sits on my lap with her tongue in my mouth, Scil?”

I was turning her on. I’d never known anything so deliriously happy. I laughed, mostly just for a loss of what to say, what to do. “I want you to get turned on,” I heard myself whisper, and she let out a short, sharp breath.

“Priscilla Sorenson, we cannot have sex. This is already too much.”

I bit my lip, just the mention of us having sex sending a thrill through my body. “But you... want it?”

“Oh my god. What am I supposed to say, Priscilla?”

I pressed my lips against her cheek, kissing and speaking softly against her skin. “I want you to want it. It makes me feel like I’m the most beautiful person alive...”

“Dammit, Priscilla, I—of course I want it,” she said, straining her voice. “But that doesn’t *change* anything. I’m—we’re—”

“I love that,” I whispered, my chest aching with how much I wanted her, and I slipped a little lower and pressed a kiss to her neck. She arched her back against me with a groan that sounded equal parts frustrated and aroused. “It’s okay to be turned on. I am... too. Let’s keep kissing.”

“Priscilla—”

I looked up through my lashes at her. “Unless you don’t want to?”

“No, I—dammit,” she groaned, before she pulled me back into a kiss. My heart shot into my mouth as our lips met again, as we moved together again, and as the aching need flooded my body while we kissed, slow and hot and sensual. I tugged lightly on her bottom lip, and she teased her tongue along my lips until I parted and granted her access, and I gave myself over to her as her tongue slipped into my mouth, meeting mine in a movement of raw

heat and passion.

We kept going in the heat of the moment, the fire burning higher and hotter inside me, until she pulled back with a helpless look, brows knotted in a kind of beautiful agony.

“Priscilla,” she pleaded, her voice straining, desperately holding herself back. I’d never heard my name sound so beautiful. So erotic.

“I want to take my top off,” I whispered, and she bit her lip, hard, looking away.

“Priscilla, I can’t hold myself back much longer. I need to stop. I need to... not do this, not be this.”

I undid the top button of my shirt. “Just for tonight?” I whispered.

“It’s not—”

“We’re already keeping this all secret. And we don’t have to have sex. Just... I want to kiss you with my shirt off...”

She closed her eyes. “If you don’t think kissing someone topless can lead to sex, I don’t know what to tell you, Scil.”

“I’m using plausible deniability.”

“Well. I appreciate the self-awareness.” She cracked her eyelids just as I undid the second button down on my shirt, and her eyes drifted there—like I was too much for her to resist. Like I was someone beautiful who Annabel couldn’t resist. *Annabel*. The feeling was everything.

“Do you... like the way I look?” I whispered, undoing the next button down, and then moving down to the last one. Annabel spoke like she was in a trance.

“You’re so beautiful...”

I needed her so badly. It felt like I’d never make it out of here alive if she didn’t take me, do everything she wanted with me. Every part of my body ached for her to touch me, to taste me, to feel me. I undid the last button, slipping my shirt down off my shoulders, and I pushed my chest out, feeling my face burn at the bareness. “I want you to do everything you want to, Annabel...”

“I can’t,” she whispered, but she already was—she moved her hands up my bare sides, starting at my hips, arching at my chest, and coming hesitantly to my breasts. I bit my lip and nodded, beckoning her on.

“Please, Annabel. I want you so badly...”

She cupped her hands over my breasts, thumbs brushing my nipples, and it felt like my whole body came alive at the touch, electricity pulsing through

me. I let out a sudden gasp, a wild moan, and I moved my body with her as she kept teasing her fingers over my nipples.

“Oh my fucking god, Priscilla, I—”

“Please.” I bit my lip, my voice coming out as this small, pitiful noise. “I’ve wanted you for so long...”

“This didn’t happen,” she whispered, and she bent down and pressed a kiss to my collar. It felt like everything falling into place all at the right time, a sensation of having every need and want in my life fulfilled all at once, a total bliss that slipped through me and out to the very ends of my being, and I caressed a hand through her hair with soft moans and gasps as she kissed her way down to take my nipple in her mouth.

I closed my eyes, letting out a shaky groan at the raw intensity of the pleasure. This was actually happening. I was having sex with Annabel. *Sex. With Annabel.* I adored this woman, everything she was, everything we were. I needed her so badly—

She went back up to press her lips to mine again, and we met in a heated, fiery kiss, nipping and sucking lightly at one another’s lips, and I found my hands exploring her body, searching until I tugged her shirt up over her head, and her breasts spilling out filled me with an aching want, a deep-seated need I never knew I could even feel.

“I want to touch you,” I whispered, running my fingers over her shoulder.

“Dammit. Please. I need you right now, Priscilla.”

It felt like my body would come undone just from hearing her say that. “Anything you want,” I whispered. “I want to know what kinds of things you fantasize about... what kinds of things turn you on...”

She pulled me into another kiss, hot and overflowing with desire, and she moved my hands to her breasts—the feeling of her soft breasts in my hands coursed through me with an aching pleasure, and I moved my hands gently over her, taking in every inch of her. Teasing my fingertips over her nipples. It must have been Annabel’s weakness, because she arched hard into me with an out-of-control moan, kissing me harder until she broke off, and then—as if this whole thing wasn’t already a wet dream, a personal fantasy enough for a lifetime—she took me by the back of the head and guided my mouth down to her breasts. Aching with pleasure and need throbbing through me in equal measures, I took her nipple in my mouth, sucking, licking, playing with it as Annabel whispered my name, again and again, interlaced

with rough, breathy curses, brushing my hair back.

I loved every second of this. Every single moment was perfection. I think I could have cried right now.

“Fuck, Priscilla, I need—you—” she groaned, and she slipped a hand down my front, reaching between my legs and stroking up my bare thigh. I broke off from her breasts, throwing my head back with an aching cry of pleasure as the touch of her fingertips on my skin sent electric heat through me, aching pleasure building in my core, and I found myself giving in—surrendering myself over to her as she lowered me onto my back.

I lay desperate on my back underneath her, legs spreading wider of their own accord, as she looked down at me with a burning want, a need, a hunger in her eyes—a *want* that made me feel like the most beautiful, desirable woman in the world, and I whimpered with need. My underwear was soaked through, my legs trembling, and my hands gripped against the sheets of their own accord, desperate to hold onto something, anything, and stay in this moment forever.

“I want to touch you,” she said, her voice throaty, warm, dark. Helpless, I nodded, letting out the tiniest meek noise of need, and she slipped a hand up my thigh until she cupped the front of my underwear, her fingers touching my sex through the soft fabric and sending me off to another universe. I arched my back, going to let out a moan of wild pleasure but finding my voice had abandoned me, and arching myself up off the bed with my lips parted in wordless, soundless ecstasy.

Annabel looked at me with fire in her eyes as she slipped my underwear down, and I felt like it was coursing through every part of me as she looked at me, laid out bare beneath her. She let out a shaky breath, running her hands down my front, down my thighs, and I shut my eyes and let out a tiny groan as she whispered, “God, you’re so beautiful...”

“Please, Annabel, please—I want—”

“I know.” She danced her fingers down my front, and gliding, skating over my skin, she slipped them down between my legs, dipping in between my folds and flooding me with the sensation of her, of everything I’d ever dreamed of, all the things I’d ever fantasized about. I buried my face in my shoulder, suppressing the gasps and the aching moans, and I gave myself over to her as she worked her fingers skillfully over my most sensitive area, bending down and capturing me in a kiss.

The moment could never last long enough. I wanted this to be forever.

Wanted to stay here in this hotel room and let Annabel do everything she wanted with my body for the rest of time.

She didn't rush, though—she must have sensed my longing, the aching desire for this to keep going, because she took me slowly, gently, teasing me higher and letting me back down before she took me again. She was so skillful, so masterful, like she just knew everything about my body, everything about how to make me feel good. She controlled me and took me through everything I could have ever wanted—she was better than I'd dreamed of, anything I could have dreamed of. Of course she was, though. Only a woman with as much experience as Annabel...

It was a beautiful forever before she took me to the edge and had me riding there in exquisite agony, begging and pleading in half-formed words and crying her name again and again, before she whispered in my ear that she wanted me to come, and she worked her fingers through me so beautifully, so perfectly—

I felt like I left the world altogether, like my spirit melted inside me and glowed in the few moments of indescribable bliss. And slowly, breathing hard, I reformed a different person, physically exhausted as if I'd just run a marathon, and my body glowing, tingling in satisfaction. I came back to earth a different woman—a woman who'd had sex with Annabel.

It took a long time to come back down from it. But Annabel held me, gently, never rushing.

"You're so incredibly sexy," she whispered, propped up above me, looking down at me with that warm look in her eyes that made me feel tingly little knots inside me.

"You too," I breathed. "I want you too..."

She raised her eyebrows. "I—"

"Please, Annabel. I'll do anything—everything—I want you to feel good."

She winced. "Dammit. How am I supposed to say no to you? Right after you came?"

I slipped a hand down between her legs, and my heart jolted at the warmth there, the intense heat through the fabric of her underwear. Annabel's sex. I think there was nothing I wouldn't have done for her. "Please," I whispered.

She ground her hips into the touch, letting out a shaky gasp. "Fuck, Priscilla," she groaned. "I can't... not..."

“Please,” I whispered again, more insistently this time, as I slipped my hand inside her underwear. I’d never touched another woman like this before, but touching Annabel felt so right—so perfect. Feeling her blazing hot and wet for me was the most incredible thing, and the way Annabel collapsed onto her elbows on top of me when I touched her, letting out a small cry of pleasure—I needed her. Needed to do everything to her.



It was somewhere late into the small hours of the night where Annabel and I both lay there, naked and spent after a pair of mind-blowing orgasms for me and a pair for her that she seemed to enjoy just as much, and we fell into a blissful, satisfied quiet that went on just a little too long and turned into something anxious, nervous, uncertain.

Finally, she started with a quiet whisper, saying, “Priscilla...”

My chest felt tight. “Annabel?”

She winced, looking away. “I... you know I...” She cleared her throat, starting again. “I don’t want to take advantage of you. Or risk our coaching arrangement if this gets out. This... I shouldn’t have...”

I put a hand on her collar, gentle, delicate. “Please. Don’t blame yourself. I’m the one who asked. Um... several times...”

“Still... it’s my responsibility to be—well—the responsible one. I should have—”

“Shh.” I put a finger to her lips, whispering low. “I know there were risks. And that technically speaking we... weren’t supposed to do this. But it was worth it to me. I promise I’ll keep it secret.”

She let out a frustrated sigh. “I am... incredibly sorry. I’m supposed to —”

“Shh. Don’t be.”

“But—”

“Don’t be.”

She sat up, turning away, picking up the pajama shirt off the floor and pulling it on. I... don’t know if she recognized that it was my shirt. Annabel wearing my pajamas was suddenly my new favorite sight.

She hunched forward, hugging herself. “I didn’t want to be like this,” she murmured. I sat up straighter.

“Like what?”

“Like... this. Unable to help myself. Like usual.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry. This isn’t helping. What I mean is...”

I put a hand on her lower back, slipping under the shirt and reveling in what were probably going to be my last few touches of Annabel’s naked body. “What do you mean?”

“Forget it. I just shouldn’t have—”

“No, I absolutely won’t forget it. I’ll write it in my notebook and look at it every day specifically so I won’t forget it.”

She gave me a wry smile. “You always were... willful, Priscilla.”

Despite the anxious situation and the way my heart was pounding, I couldn’t help smiling back. “Is that a veiled insult?”

She looked away. “On the contrary, it’s something I find frustratingly attractive. Well, I really shouldn’t be talking about this to you, but we’ve done worse tonight. I just mean... I thought I was more... in control than this. That I wouldn’t just have sex wantonly.”

I swallowed down the lump in my throat. I hadn’t been able to place what it was that had been bothering her recently, but if that’s what she was saying...

“You don’t... feel okay with your sexuality?”

“Depends on what you mean. If you mean being a lesbian, I am very okay with that. If you mean the fact that I’ve slept with half the girls I’ve ever met and have people I don’t even remember having taken to bed... yeah, no, I don’t.” She hung her head. “After Emberlynn and I broke up, I told myself I’d stop being *like* this. And so far, it seems like I’ve done a pretty poor job.”

“But... why?” I breathed, caressing my hand on her back. “Did something happen with you and Emberlynn that made you want to change?”

“Just—I—you know.” She hunched her shoulders, drawing in tighter on herself. “I want to be a better person. Amount to something other than flings.”

I stared at her for a second before I shifted closer to her side, dropping my voice lower. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it,” I said. “I mean... I enjoyed how—er—experienced you are. And you’re—well—I mean—you’re *beautiful*. If you want to use that to get the attention of other women, you know, it’s your body, and it doesn’t say anything bad about you if you do.”

She sighed, kicking at the floor. “You always were the softest person I

know, Scil. It's just..."

"You seem so... scared, Annabel," I whispered, holding her gently against my side. "Like you're afraid it makes you broken. I promise it doesn't."

"I didn't say anything about being broken—"

"But you're thinking it, aren't you?"

"No. Not... exactly." She winced, looking down. "Just... wondering why I'm different. Wondering if it means I'm doing something wrong. Turns out dating is hard for me. I want more than anyone is willing to..." She shook her head. "And more than that, I don't know how to settle down and commit. It drove off Harper. It kept me from taking things seriously with Emberlynn. And I just wonder what everyone else has that I don't, or what I have that everyone else doesn't. How I can fix myself."

I paused. "That sounds like you're saying you're broken."

She cleared her throat. "You know, I guess it does. Just... it's not that dramatic. Just wondering what my fundamental problem is that makes me impossible to deal with." She shrugged. "Maybe that is dramatic. Maybe I'm being too dramatic. Maybe I should just shut up and stop talking about things like this to my own student, but it's hardly the first line we've crossed."

She always talked more when she got nervous, but she almost never got nervous. It was rare to get her in this state. Rare and special that she chose to show it with me. I put a hand on her leg, gentle, steadying. "Everyone's different, Annabel. The way you are isn't worse. I like you so much... in exactly the person you are."

She looked down with a small, tender sigh. "Thank you. Er... nobody finds out tonight happened, you know."

I laughed, shifting closer to her side. "Our little secret..."

"Mm. Our little secret." She met my eyes, and my stomach flopped—that soft, fond look in her gaze, like she was cherishing me. I couldn't find any description for how it felt. "Well, maybe we file that away and... call it congratulations for your gold."

I stifled a wild giggle, blushing furiously. "So if I get another gold—"

"Come on," she laughed, an awkward edge to her voice, looking away. "You shouldn't tempt me. You're... incredibly beautiful and hard to..." She shook her head, giving me a measured smile. "Let's... put this behind us, okay? Back to regular, you and me. But at least we'll both... know."

I pouted just a little, but either way, I knew she was right. I was

supposed to be getting over her. I'd told Harper I'd be getting over her—we'd be getting over her together. We were going to find someone else, be happy in other ways. And that way we'd keep Annabel's career safe.

But at least now we'd know. And I'd never have to go on wondering. She *did* like me too, even if I had to imagine it was a little more... surface-level than the way she occupied all my waking thoughts and most of my sleeping ones, too.

"Thank you," I said, putting a hand on her thigh and looking up at her. "For... everything. And for tonight. This was the most incredible experience of my life."

She stood up, and I, admittedly, felt a little bit proud seeing how shaky her legs were. "It was amazing for me too," she said. "And... now this never happened."

"Just one more time first," I whispered, gliding to my feet and falling headlong into her, sinking into her arms, and she met me in the sweetest, most longing kiss I could dream of.

Chapter 6

Annabel

The party was fun and all, but attending it alongside Priscilla may not have been the best idea. Not that I'd had a choice. Paisley had helped herself into my house through the window and set up a surprise party, and Priscilla and a few of the others on the team came back to my house to pick up the stuff they'd left there before we'd all taken off for the event, so we were mostly caught off-guard when I pushed open the front door and Paisley jumped out from behind the couch screaming like a banshee and almost knocking over a lamp. Poor Priscilla looked like she'd seen a ghost, jumped and cut off half a scream, while Jack—my swimmer with a gorilla chest that looked a little weird on a regular body and who I'm pretty sure had a crush on Paisley—just grinned and cheered a little too much.

“Oh my god, gold medal champions,” Paisley said, running from where she'd tripped over the table towards us, and she shoved me out of the way to give Priscilla a crushing hug. “*Priscilla*, you've gotta forgive me, I was watching the stream online and I totally fell asleep for your part!”

Priscilla, who'd frozen with her hands up when Paisley tackled her, didn't move an inch. “Er... I forgive you. The butterfly is a weird-looking one to watch anyway.”

“What Paisley fails to mention,” Harper said, leaning back against a column looking at her fingernails, “is that she was asleep for about two thirds of the entire thing.”

Paisley, a scrawny thing with wild brown hair sticking in every direction around her, like a bird's nest in a tornado, with big round glasses and a pair of tiny shorts like she always wore even into the dead of winter, turned and shot Harper a look, hands on her hips. “I'd forgotten to sleep the night

before! I was busy working on my project!”

Harper raised her eyebrows. “When she says *project*—”

Paisley waved her arms wildly. “Oh my god, don’t *tell* them! It’s a secret! Death penalty for breach of confidentiality!”

Jack grinned. “You can tell me more about your project. I’d love to hear.”

Paisley beamed back at him. “No chance in hell. Okay! Let’s get Priscilla her victory cake and make sure Annabel only gets, like, the teeniest-tiniest piece ever.”

I probably deserved it, anyway. A coach who fucked her student didn’t get the full slice of cake. Fair was fair.

Admittedly, I didn’t feel as tripped up with guilt about it as I should have. I would still readily admit I shouldn’t have done it, but... seeing the way Priscilla had glowed? The way she’d carried herself all this morning, like she was the most beautiful, desirable woman in the world—I wanted her to feel that.

So I was probably going to hell, but hey, I was already destined for it anyway. I was okay with this.

At least until I sat at the table next to Priscilla, and with us all squeezed in this tightly around a table for four, I could feel her body heat radiating against me. And she kept glancing up at me at the exact moments I’d sneak a glance at her, and it would send a rush through me as I tried to focus on the food and whatever the hell Paisley was rambling about at the moment.

She’d really been incredible. I’d been with a lot of people, and not one of them had ever been quite like Priscilla, especially not on the very first time—someone who just *wanted* with every fiber of her being, who was so intensely into the moment that it felt like she’d been experiencing it as a religious epiphany. It made sense it was her—she’d always been the type to express her wants, her desires, that intensely. She’d always been in the moment. That was a big part of why she was unparalleled in the water. And that was a big part of why, now that I’d let myself go there, I couldn’t stop thinking about her.

It was a while at the party before Gwen even said a word, and she eventually left to go to the bathroom, and she was gone for a little too long. I excused myself from the party and the chatter and the laughter after her, and I found her sitting on the terrace behind the house, staring up at the sky. I slid open the glass door behind her, stepping out with her, and she jolted until she

looked back and saw it was me.

“Got tired of Priscilla trying to eye-fuck you?” she said, and I managed not to react, with some great force.

“Mostly I got concerned about you apparently going to the bathroom out here.”

“The bathroom is a metaphor.”

“For... sitting on the ground?”

She gestured to the brick. “Floors are made for sitting on.”

Whatever. I sat down next to her, and she gave me a tired smile.

“Congratulations,” she said. “I didn’t properly say it. To you, Priscilla, and also to Hazel, Matthew, and Connor.”

“I think you’re the only person who’s actually had a comprehensive list of who got medals.”

She put her chin in the air. “It’s not my fault I’m the only one who pays attention.”

“Thanks. Priscilla’s gold was completely unexpected. And yet...” I looked up to the sky, a few puffy clouds drifting through a pale blue sky, a cold October breeze picking up. “And yet at the same time, I’m not at all surprised.”

“She was doing it to try convincing you to fuck her.”

Well, apparently it worked. “No matter how much of a crush she might or might not have on me, she still has other reasons to want to do well.”

She gave me a dry smile. I shrugged.

“I mean it. The girl’s driven. You wouldn’t necessarily think it looking at her—she’s quiet, shy, reserved. Doesn’t speak out. But day after day it’s her putting in the work. When you take the time to get to know her—to look beneath the surface—she’s one hell of a big dreamer.”

She stretched her arms out, looking ahead. “I don’t know much about her, honestly. She’s a student at Lakeside. That’s about it. I’ve never been able to break through to her. But I’m not the one she’s wildly in love with.”

While I was... maybe forced to admit now that she did like me, *wildly in love* seemed like a stretch. “She’s studying environmental sciences.”

“Is she?”

“Mm-hm. Wants to get into sustainable development. Resource management...”

“Cute couple. She could be the good one to balance your hedonism.”

I elbowed her. “And helping people reach their full athletic potential and

achieve their dreams is a hedonistic career, is that it?"

"You obviously do it just to spend your time around girls in swimsuits, so..."

"Even if that were true, having a single man on my team would ruin it, and you know that."

She laughed, a small and dry thing, but a natural one. "Touché. Well, you're good for one another then. Happy couple who likes helping people."

"Ugh."

"What? You like her, too, don't you?"

I rubbed my forehead. "Oh my god, Gwen. I'm her coach. It would be wildly inappropriate if I did."

She shrugged. "It would be wildly inappropriate if you did anything with those feelings, not just if you had them. People just have feelings. And from my experience managing people, the worst way to make sure people don't feel something is to tell them not to feel it and give them no space to say if they do."

I sighed, hard and heavy, putting my hands up. "Okay, she's cute. And it's really touching just how much she cares—about swimming, and about everything she does. She kind of inspires me. It's an honor being her coach. I'm not going to say she's not attractive."

"There. Feel any better for letting it out?"

I did—a weight melted off my chest, relaxing at just having named the thing churning around inside me—but I was feeling petulant. "Not in the slightest."

"So, now that we've gotten here, how long before you admit she likes you?"

I sighed, hanging my head. "Okay... maybe she likes me."

She gave me a wide-eyed look. "Damn. That event did a number on you. Did she tell you?"

Kissing me probably counted as telling me. I looked away. "What she said is a private matter."

"She actually told you. How'd it go?"

"Ugh—look, we talked things through, and we're okay, all right? It's probably going to be a bit awkward at times during practice, but we'll get back to our normal rhythm. And it's better to have things out in the open."

She sighed, sinking back against the house siding. "You're smarter than I think you are sometimes. Yeah. Better to have things out in the open..."

I studied her for a while before I said, “So... want to tell me now why you’re sitting on the floor of my rear terrace?”

She looked down at her feet. “Just... moping about Kay. She was supposed to be getting here tomorrow. I still ended up setting up my house to have her over. Now I’m in a nice, tidy house with nobody in it.” She shrugged. “I’m pathetic, aren’t I? I should just call it off already. She clearly doesn’t give a damn about me, about this relationship. Hell, given the way she refuses to let me go see her, even just to meet her halfway, I wouldn’t be surprised if I’m just the other woman. But I don’t... want to.”

I chewed my lip. “It’s... understandable. You’ve actually put care and effort and feeling into this relationship. You want it to work, to be okay. It’s hard to have those feelings be one-sided.”

She hugged herself. “I just don’t want to go through the starting stages of a relationship again, that’s what it is. I don’t want to date. Dating sounds like a nightmare. I don’t want to have a bunch of awkward first encounters. I don’t want to go through getting to know somebody, never knowing when I’m going to stumble upon a red flag the size of Texas. That *sucks*. I never liked replacing things. I always want to repair them if possible.”

“Well... a relationship isn’t really a *thing* in the same way, so...”

“Yeah, you don’t say. Here I was thinking I could just send it in to the shop. Silly of me.”

“The other person has to be cooperative if you’re going to fix it. But I get it. It sucks feeling like the effort you put into this is going to be for nothing.”

Gwen looked back to the distance, a far-off look in her eyes. “Yeah. No kidding.”

I watched her for a long time before she stretched out, standing up.

“So,” she said, “what’s up now that Priscilla took the shiny gold?”

I stood up with her, tasting the ocean on the breeze, a cool, damp wind on my neck and in my nose. “Thanks to our good placements—thanks to Priscilla’s gold—we have another competition next month. And then one more for the year at the start of December. Cedarcrest isn’t at the next one—they’re the school to beat—but they’re projected to sweep the final one. Of course, they were projected to sweep this one, too.”

“Well, take good care of Priscilla, then. Don’t break her heart, or she won’t be able to swim.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ve told you, it’s not...”

“And I’ve told you, don’t bother lying. You’ve finally figured it out, so at least be honest with yourself.”

Well, I wondered about that. No matter how much Priscilla liked me, I knew swimming was her first love, her real love. But I wasn’t naïve. I knew those feelings fluctuated in the moment. And at this point, I had to admit I had the power to break her heart.

I looked down. “I’m obligated, to, though.”

Gwen, who was turning back to the door, paused halfway, raising her eyebrows at me. “Obligated to lie to yourself?”

“Not that.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“I’m sure. I *mean*, I’m obligated to...” I gestured. “To break her heart, I guess. We can’t do anything like that. I’m her coach.”

Gwen studied me for a long time before she sighed, turning back to the door. “Guess so,” she said. “So just make sure you let her down easy.”

She stepped inside without giving me the chance to respond, and it left an aching feeling in my stomach. She’d changed on a dime, and I wasn’t sure why. I knew I was doing something wrong. I just wish I knew what it was.

The party stretched long into the evening, as parties usually did with Paisley involved—the girl had zero sense of social norms and customs, and even though I adored the demon who had taken on the form of a young human woman, I still had to kick her out of the house eventually. Hazel took her time grabbing her stuff and heading out, and she shot me a grin on her way out.

“Be good to Scil, okay?” she said, and I frowned after her.

“I’m not—” I started, but it was like talking to a wall—Hazel turned away and shut the door behind her. I was of half a mind to chase her down and tell her there was *nothing* to worry about—accidental one-night-stands notwithstanding—but footsteps padded softly behind me and I glanced back to where Priscilla walked out of the kitchen, her bag hoisted up on her shoulder, and the softest, sweetest little smile on her lips.

“Was Hazel just yelling something about me?”

I gave her a hopeless shrug. “Ask her. Hazel speaks her own language. I don’t know it.”

She smiled shyly, looking down, avoiding my gaze. “Er... Annabel... it’s, um—it’s just you and me here right now, right?”

Oh, god. This was not a conversation I needed to be having. I

straightened, putting on a polite smile. “Nope. My mom’s in the bathroom.”

She rolled her eyes, smiling. “Patched things back up with her, did you?”

I’d only mentioned in passing one time, ages ago, that I’d cut off contact with my parents. Still... no surprise that Priscilla paid attention. She’d always had a keen sense for people. I leaned against the wall, casting my gaze out at where night settled in deeper over Bayview. “Just us, yeah. Something on your mind?”

“Ugh, you know I’m shy. You can’t make me say it.”

The problem was that she was cute when she was getting too shy and embarrassed to say something. But I wasn’t *supposed* to be teasing her and enjoying how cute she got like this. I put on my professional posture and look and everything, and I spoke quietly. “If this is about last night—we should probably leave it there.”

“I know. Just...” She crossed her arms, looking down. “Do you regret it?”

Regret it? That was a hell of a question. “We... definitely shouldn’t have—”

“That’s not an answer to the question, Annabel.”

I sighed, a hand to my forehead. “No. I don’t. Not nearly as much as I’m supposed to.”

She suppressed a smile, touching a hand to her lips. “I, uh... I don’t either.” She looked shyly up at me through her lashes, holding my gaze for a second before she broke, looking away. “I just... want you to know that I’m... going to get over you.”

My stomach lurched. I denied to myself that it had happened. “Are you?” I said, halfway between amused and confused. “Er... is it normally planned like that? It’s polite of you to give notice.”

“I like you.” She kicked at the floor. “Er... a lot. And I knew all along that I could never have you. But... knowing that you like me too is better than anything I’d dared to hope for. And last night... it was perfect. In every way. So I want to—to close things off on that note. On a happy note where we both know where we stand and we’ve had an amazing night together, too.”

This was the ideal outcome—the perfect setup in every way. We’d both settle for what happened, Priscilla would get over me, and we’d put our little... encounter behind us.

For being a perfect outcome, though, it *hurt*. It felt like a blade wedged between my ribs, and I hated myself heatedly for the way my mind swirled around the idea of rejection.

It shouldn't have felt like it. Priscilla had talked about being with me like it was some kind of miracle. But I couldn't help wondering if it was a polite way of telling me she'd lost interest after one night.

Wasn't that what it always came down to? I was good for a few nights, nothing more. And I should have known getting too intimate with people would only poke at those bruises.

But I wasn't dumping all that on Priscilla. I was the coach here. And I was just grateful for her discretion. I gave her a soft smile, and I put a hand on her arm. "I think you're right," I whispered. "Last night was amazing. And even though I'm not supposed to be acknowledging it anymore... thank you for spending that night with me. And I'll be happy seeing you move on, seeing you find someone new."

Of course, it was Priscilla Sorenson, so I should have known better than expecting that would work. Vulnerability flashed over her eyes, a worried look on her face. "Is something wrong?" she whispered. "You seem so... sad, all of a sudden."

Dammit, this girl. I looked away. "Just... guilty. I know you don't want me to be, but... I've had you hung up on me for so long. I feel like I've taken away some huge portion of your life."

She looked down, blushing. "I think... liking someone from afar is also a happy way to be. You've made me better. I don't regret a thing."

It was for the best that Priscilla was moving on. She deserved a hell of a lot better than me. I put on a smile. "Good luck. If you're still exploring your sapphic side, I have a whole binder of contacts."

She snorted. "You can keep your binders of sexy lesbians. I'm just going to... live life and see what happens. Um..." And with a nervous look, she inched closer, rose onto her tiptoes a little, and she pressed a soft, sweet kiss to my lips, tasting like her tangerine lip balm, before she pulled away with a blush on her cheeks and a finger to her lips, smiling shyly. "Take care, okay, Annabel? And... you too, you know? I hope you're able to find your happily-ever-after soon. Even though I'll, uh—be jealous."

I put on a thin smile. "I'm... trying to find my happily-being-myself right now, if we're being honest."

She raised her eyebrows. "Are you not...?"

I shrugged. “We all fluctuate in life. Getting lost and forgetting what we need to be happy is as sure a thing as that it’ll rain sometimes.”

She stared for a second before she turned away. “Well,” she said, “if you move to the desert to get away, let me know. I’ll visit the desert to see you.”

Dammit, where did she get off being that cute? I fumed internally watching her go, heading out the door and shutting it lightly behind her. She always did that—moving lightly, barely making a sound, leaving a room and shutting the door gently. Landing like a butterfly. My butterfly girl.

Priscilla wasn’t the only one who had some getting-over to do.

Chapter 7

Priscilla

“Hey, you,” I said, looking up with surprise as Harper stepped into the hall. The gym was quiet right now—it was mostly our team that used the indoor pool, and we were still recovering after the competition. I’d needed to get Annabel—and that last kiss, and that look in her eyes I hadn’t been able to read—out of my head, so I’d found myself at the water again, and I’d been enjoying it alone for the past hour until Harper walked in with an intense resolve, shoulders hunched. “Everything okay?”

She took off her shirt, down to a swim top, and shimmied out of her pants to a mismatched swim bottom before she fell face-first into the pool, a huge splash sending water out in every direction. I pushed away from the wall, turning back to her as she fumbled back above the water, and it took until then for her to respond.

“I’m fine,” she said.

“Um... sure. And I’m the Queen of England.”

“Congrats on your new position.”

I glanced back at the door to the rest of the gym, chatter and laughter from beyond. I picked out Paisley’s voice, and I looked back at Harper. “Did something happen between you and Paisley?”

“She just... gets on my nerves sometimes.” She floated back against the pool wall, looking up to the ceiling, and she folded her arms. “She’s the one who dragged me here to the gym, and then I realize I absolutely have to get away from her or I’m going to murder her.”

I stifled a laugh. “You say it so fondly, though. You really are good friends with her, aren’t you?”

She grunted. “That’s a stretch...”

“How did you two meet, anyway? It’s been years and years, hasn’t it?”

“I want you to guess exactly how I met Paisley.”

I chewed my lip. “Er... she came into the bakery and started causing a fuss and being dramatic?”

“Perfect score. Someone get you a second gold medal.” She pushed off from the wall, swimming clumsily but steadily, and I pushed on alongside her, slowing to her pace. “So, how’d things go with Annabel? You shared a room at the competition, right?”

“Oh, er... yep. It was fine. You know she takes her position very seriously.”

She touched the far wall of the pool and whipped back around to me, sloshing water across my front. “Uh-huh. So, the reason you two kept *looking* at each other like that at the party?”

“Oh—er—” I felt my face burn, and my thoughts were suddenly tangled. I wrung my hands under the water. “I don’t think there was anything in particular...”

She raised her eyebrows. “Damn, but I never see you like this. Did you sleep with her?”

“No! I wasn’t—I didn’t—er...” I froze, deer-in-the-headlights. I watched panicked as Harper’s eyes widened slowly. “Um... we didn’t do anything like that.”

“You slept with Annabel,” she said. “How did *that* happen?”

“By—not happening,” I shot, my face so hot it was probably going to boil the pool. “It didn’t happen. I didn’t sleep with Annabel!”

“Uh-huh. I guess I don’t need to ask how it happened. Annabel would sleep with a plank if it had boobs.”

I gave her the harshest glower I think I’d ever mustered up. “Hey! That’s not true. It’s not fair to her to reduce her to that.”

She put her hands up. “Well, don’t let me say anything negative about your girlfriend.”

“She’s not my—” My voice wasn’t normally in that octave. I swallowed and tried again. “We’re not—” Still not convincing. I was batting a thousand. Harper just raised her eyebrows. I looked away, face burning.

“Oh my god, Harper, I mean it. We’re not dating or anything like that.”

“You just had a one-night stand. How... unsurprising from her.”

“It wasn’t on her, I’m the one who asked—” I stopped, eyes wide. “Er... I mean. It’s not like we...”

She sighed, waving me off. “Please. You fucked Annabel. Let’s not beat around the bush.”

I hung my head. “Oh my god. You seriously cannot tell *anybody*. Not a single person. You have to promise. We could both get in huge trouble for it.”

“I’m not Paisley. I’m not going to gossip about it.” She slumped backwards over the side of the pool, staring up at the ceiling. “So, getting over her is going real well, huh?”

“I... think so, actually,” I mumbled, looking down at the water. “I think it helped. You know. Give closure. Finding out that she likes me too, that she’s attracted to me the same way... and, um... having some time with her...”

“You don’t need to use vague language. I’ve had sex with her, too, you know. Nothing really that will surprise me.”

“Oh—I, uh—kind of forgot about that.” I’d been hoping I’d be able to handle Annabel getting together with somebody and not get too jealous, but the thought of Harper having been Annabel’s girlfriend was already crushing. I wasn’t doing well. “Either way, I... told her how I feel. And that I know we can’t go there anymore, and that I’m going to... you know... move on.”

She inclined her head. “Well. How would you be up for a double blind date this weekend?”

Not if it wasn’t with Annabel. I pushed the thought out of my mind. “Er... is this something you’ve been planning?”

She closed her eyes with a heavy sigh. “It’s apparently something Paisley’s been planning. Setting me up on a blind date. Behind my back. She said she could organize a double one for you, too. I figure it could be more... survivable if we were at least in it together.”

“Oh, um...” I froze, hanging awkwardly there in the water, just drifting. It was a great opportunity. I knew I wasn’t going to find the motivation anytime soon to go looking for dates. Having one handed to me—even a bad one—could only help. And doing it alongside Harper meant it couldn’t get too awkward or too sketchy.

But everything inside me rebelled against it. Everything I could possibly have been, done, or thought—I wanted to push back and fight and scream. It felt like giving up, the idea of going out with someone other than Annabel—like it would finally seal the fact that I could never have her—and it hurt. A lot.

“Great,” Harper said. “You look as excited as I am.”

“I’m... excited...” I said, with just—so much conviction. “I think it sounds fun.”

“Perfect. One of us can have fun, then.” She sank back against the wall. “You do know you don’t have to do it.”

“I... should.” I grimaced. *Should* was not the best word for the situation. She raised her eyebrows at me, and I sighed. “Okay. Maybe... thinking about it... getting over Annabel isn’t going very well. I kind of only want to go out with her. But... this will be a good way to try pulling my feelings back down to earth.”

She studied me for a while before she relaxed into a tired smile. “I always liked your practicality,” she said. “All right. It’s a deal. Paisley wouldn’t tell me who they are, but it’s two guys. It’s been years since I went out with a boy, so... I’ll be counting on you to make sure I don’t say anything too gay.”

I folded my arms. “Oh, so I’m the emissary to the straight community?”

She smiled. It was nice seeing it from her—finally relaxing a little. The tension faded from the corners of her eyes, and it was clear she was starting to see the blind date as a small thing, a casual thing without too much weight. “You always struck me as the heteroflexible type. You know, *Annabel, the one exception—*”

“Come off it,” I laughed, splashing water in her direction. “I like girls, okay? I like boys better, but it’s not just Annabel. I just didn’t realize until... you know. Also, how do you know the guy’s straight, if you don’t even know who he is? He could be bisexual.”

“Paisley would one thousand percent mention if he were bisexual. She identifies people first by whether they’re gay and second by name.”

I put my hands up. “All right, all right. Let’s go hit all the straight-girl clichés and see if we can charm the nice heterosexual men. I swear, dating women doesn’t mean you forget how men work.”

“I’ve barely even hung out with men outside of Oliver in years. You don’t know that.”

“Okay, ridiculous. Well, you’re here, and I’ve got an entire... not-breakup’s worth of pent-up emotions, so I’m going to swim the hell out of you. Keep up or I’ll kick water in your face.”

She pushed away from the wall and joined me as I turned to the length of the pool. “That’s exactly what I was looking for,” she said lightly. “Let’s

go until I drown. That'll solve my problems."

I normally would have been concerned hearing something like that, but the relief and the settling ease was written all over Harper's face. She'd be okay. She just needed someone else to go through things with her.

Wasn't that all she'd ever needed? The idea gave me a distant sinking sensation. I wasn't bringing it up, not for my life, but Harper was the last person I could ever see forming a successful relationship out of something with a total stranger.

But I wasn't questioning Paisley. I'd learned that was useless.

∞∞∞∞

I didn't even notice Harper standing over me until the third time she'd cleared her throat. I shot her a lazy, dejected look, where she was silhouetted against the golden ombre of the autumn sun, standing by the wrought-iron fence at Jenna's café in the town center.

"Hey," I said. "You look cute."

"Never in my life heard that delivered so flatly. Someone kill your hamster this morning?"

"No, not my hamster. Just my dreams and my pride." I tugged the paper out of my bag, waving the sheaf at her. "Got my essay back."

She took it and wrinkled her nose. "Oh, I see. You're the kind of person who sinks into a deep, irrevocable despair over an eighty-six percent."

"Let me have my deep, irrevocable despair." I snatched the paper back, hunching my shoulders. "The athletic program is strict, you know. I could get screwed over if my GPA drops too low. Taken off the team and everything."

"Why do I suspect you're not even close?"

"You'd be surprised. I'm not *always* perfect." Still, even with an eighty-six on my essay, it wasn't the right mood for the date day. I shoved the papers back into my backpack and stood up, slinging it over my shoulder. "Okay. Are you ready?"

"Ready? To sit there and talk about cake decorating and how much I hate laminating dough, with some guy I've never met in my life?" She put her hands up, palms to the sky. "Ready as I'll ever be. You feeling more optimistic than me?"

No. "I'm trying to. I think it's only fair to give them a chance."

“And how much do you actually believe that?”

I winced. “Thirty... five percent?”

She pursed her lips, nodding, turning to the café. “Higher than I thought. All right. Let’s do this thing.”

Jenna’s café was a cute, charming place full of big plants and pop-art paintings that gave the place a modern, bright atmosphere. The bossa nova playing over the speakers lightened up the space, and I queued alongside Harper to where Sam, Jenna’s maybe-boyfriend if the rumors were to be believed, who’d recently started working at her café and only stoked the rumors, was doing his tricks behind the counter flipping cups high into the air and catching them behind his back.

“Hey, Harper,” he said once we got to the counter. “And... er... Priscilla, right?”

I stood up straighter. “That’s me.”

He grinned. “Annabel’s girlfriend?”

I sagged. “That’s... not me.”

Harper rolled her eyes. “Tall flat white for me and whatever Scil’s getting, I’ll cover it.”

Sam didn’t miss a beat, still grinning. “Harper’s girlfriend? Man, I can’t keep up with what the sapphics are doing.”

Harper clicked her tongue. “Sam, remember I have blackmail on you.”

Sam put his hands up. “I suddenly forgot everything I was saying. Hi, thanks for choosing our delightful café today. Tell me, Miss Priscilla, what can I do the honor of making for you today?”

Despite the change in tone, he didn’t really seem worried about whatever blackmail Harper had on him. I think he just liked the fun of screwing with her. “Just a small black coffee, please.”

“Thought college girls were supposed to order triple unicorn frappuccinos.”

I folded my arms. “In the first place, Starbucks hasn’t offered a unicorn frappuccino in years. It was a one-time specialty drink. Secondly, it didn’t have coffee in it, which means a *triple* would be three times zero. Lastly—let me have a boring drink, Samuel O’Callaghan.”

He grinned wider. “Boring drink’s all yours, ma’am.”

It wasn’t long before we both had our drinks, and with a groan, Harper caught sight of Paisley across the room, beaming at us. She waved us over and gestured us towards a table by the window, where a pair of men probably

in their mid-twenties sat chattering nervously to each other.

“Behold my brilliance,” Paisley said. “Two men, both attracted to women.”

Harper raised her eyebrows. “That’s not the rare commodity you seem to think it is, Pais.”

Paisley grinned wider. “Their names are Simon and Brendon. Brandon?” She made a face. “Actually, better just ask them, I wasn’t paying attention, I was thinking about dinner.”

Harper narrowed her eyes. “Pais... where the hell did you find them?”

“Oh, relax,” Paisley laughed. “Which one’s hotter, Priscilla?”

I scratched my head. They were both... fine, I guess. Nothing to complain about. One taller, white, with dark hair, while the other one was East Asian, blond hair with dark roots grown out. Neither one of them was bad-looking. Just... was I really supposed to sit down and just start getting to know someone? Going from zero?

I hated giving up. Hated starting from zero. I didn’t want to do this anymore. I just wanted to run to Annabel.

“Er... Simon,” I said, making up the first thing to mind. Paisley beamed, no clue I had no idea which one Simon was.

“Guess Bindal’s yours, Harps.”

Harper raised her eyebrows high. “Now he’s Bindal?”

“Look, I told you, I was thinking of dinner. Anyway, you’re both stunning knockout hot blondes, so go sit down and say hi and that’ll be the end of it.”

Harper looked away. I frowned, suddenly catching on something that didn’t seem to make even the slightest little bit of sense, but—there was only one way she could have gotten frustrated like that and averted her gaze at Paisley calling her a *stunning knockout hot blonde*.

But—Harper, of all people, having a secret thing for Paisley, of all people? It would explain why she was so upset about Paisley setting her up on a blind date, but... it didn’t make sense in any other way.

“Fine, whatever,” Harper muttered. “Let’s get this over with. I don’t want to see your face again for the next week, Pais.”

Paisley stuck out her tongue. “Sucks to be you. I’m gonna see you at—” She caught herself, eyes wide. “At... nowhere! Nothing’s happening on Thursday.”

Harper shot her a look. “Paisley.”

“Nothing’s happening! Gotta bail,” Paisley said, and before anyone could bat an eyelash, she’d spun on her heel and bolted out of the building, using the staff exit. Sam didn’t seem to notice.

I watched for a while where she vanished before I scratched my head. “She’s... energetic.”

Harper raked her fingers through her hair. “Won’t be anymore once I murder her.”

“Please don’t. Annabel thinks she’s hilarious, and I wouldn’t want her to be sad.”

“We’re here to get over Annabel, remember?”

I winced. “R-right. Okay. Um... well. Shall we?”

Harper greeted the two of them cordially, giving me a polite introduction, but I just withered under their smiles. It felt like an oppressive sinking feeling sitting down across from them—the endless well of time that needed to be filled, of memories that needed to be made before they’d come close to a fraction of anything Annabel might have been.

I couldn’t just get over her. Not like that. I *knew* that. Why was I trying?

“I’m Simon,” the tall one said, before he thumbed to the one with the bleach blond. “This over here’s Calvin.”

Paisley wasn’t even close. “It’s really nice to meet you,” I said, my voice a little thin, wobbly. Calvin gave me a polite smile, but he didn’t say anything.

I felt like I was going to be sick. I listened as Harper led the conversation—it was always the way for me. Disappear into the background. Blend in. Watch from afar. That was how I’d learned the way people put everything in their eyes, in their faces—watching from afar, with no emotional stake, everything was clear. And I watched it all play out from a cold, distant third party.

Harper was covering up her real feelings, hard, forcing laughter and small talk and smiles. Calvin seemed to notice, his guard going up. Wary. Like he’d been jerked around by someone like that before. Simon took her at face value—too nervous to really read into it. He was the kind of person who dumped over-intimacy when he was nervous, talking too much, spilling too many personal details of his own life and laughing too much. He had all the trappings of someone who’d once had to bridge gaps and play nice, play peacemaker, get everyone laughing cordially. Harper kept glancing out the window, and I couldn’t help but wonder if maybe she was thinking of

Paisley, and whatever it was that had really happened between them.

No. I wasn't upset that I'd have to learn everything about a person from the beginning again. I was upset that I'd have to have someone else learn everything about me from the beginning again, when nobody ever seemed to look at me when I was disappearing. Nobody seemed to give me the same piercing look that I found myself giving to everybody.

Nobody except Annabel, of course. Of course I'd fallen hard for her, when she took me apart in a single gaze. When she was the one who looked at me and told me how I was the one with the most drive, underneath the surface. That I was the one who dreamed the hardest, who lived out her passions the most intensely. Who else in the world had ever figured *that* out?

My mom. And Annabel was the only person to care about her pendant, too.

"Sorry," I said, the first thing I'd said in fifteen minutes, standing up. "I just need to run to the bathroom, but—please keep talking without me."

I'd barely gotten into the bathroom before I collapsed over the sink, crying softly to myself.

I was terrible at this.

Chapter 8

Annabel

Things went back to normal between me and Priscilla after the party at my place, which was blessed relief and definitely not at all frustrating on some level I wouldn't acknowledge. We wound down from our intense training schedule, after the swim meet was wrapped, with less rigorous training and more water games, everyone laughing and shouting together as they tossed balls and chased each other around the pool. And when Priscilla left the pool and sat at the edge, I sat with her, not saying anything. I knew the girl well enough to know she needed noninvasive company—someone there to keep quiet by her side.

The weekend after the swim meet and that party where she'd given me that last kiss—the one I couldn't get out of my head—I'd caught her at the pool late in the evening, swimming too hard, too fast. It was quiet in here—the Bayview gym wasn't exactly the busiest place, and outside the summer, the pool was basically just our team—so I sat by the end of the pool and waited until Priscilla came close to the edge before I called her name gently.

“Scil—”

Not gently enough. She still screamed.

She whipped towards me, flinging water as she went, and between the sudden shriek and the splash of water in the face, I lost my balance and tumbled forwards into the pool, fully clothed. Priscilla went wide-eyed and red-faced right away, hands to her mouth.

“Oh my god—I'm so sorry—”

“This shirt was due a wash anyway,” I said drily, kicking back towards the wall and pushing myself up out of the water. Priscilla reddened further, focusing a little too intently on my shirt—an unfortunately chosen white

dress shirt that clung wet and see-through to my skin, the outline of my bra showing through. “I’ll... be a second to go get changed,” I said, which jerked her back to the present, only just seeming to realize she’d been staring at me. She swallowed hard.

“S-sorry. I’m really sorry.”

Well, it wasn’t the first time she’d gotten me wet. But I wasn’t saying that.

Not much later, I slipped into the pool, more on purpose this time, changed into my competition swimsuit, and she avoided my gaze. It took some effort not to address the tension that stretched out between us, the air of things unspoken that felt as thick and tight as fabric weave.

“You know—” I started, and she winced.

“I’m really sorry.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I’m not here to say anything mean or angry, you know, Scil.”

“Oh.” She relaxed against the pool wall next to me, looking down. “Sorry. I’m a little jumpy.”

“I can tell. That’s what I’m worried about. You look like you’re furious at the water. I know you take your training seriously, and I like that you do, but you’re going to hurt yourself swimming like that.”

She sighed, pushing off from the wall again, taking to the water with a slow, casual freestyle instead. I kept up next to her, giving her the time she needed to formulate a mumble.

“I guess I just... needed to get things off my chest.”

“Well, lucky you’ve got a coach here to make sure you do it without pulling anything. Want to do a few laps together to make it burn?”

She shot me a grateful smile. “I swear, you’re like my guardian angel. Just... showing up when I need it. That’d be great.”

I dove into the butterfly, putting the speed on while Priscilla kicked hard keeping up next to me. I took it easier than she’d been putting herself through, making sure to pace ourselves, and we went long instead—across the pool again and again until Priscilla dragged herself, exhausted, onto the side. I moved next to her, pretending I wasn’t completely wiped out too, and I lay beside her staring up at the slightly grimy skylights showing the night sky above, clear right now and full of stars.

Without a word, Priscilla shifted to the side and grabbed her bag, tugging it closer and pulling out her pendant. She laid it on her chest, staring

up at the ceiling, and I glanced over at her.

“Can I ask how long you’ve had that?” I spoke quietly, and she didn’t look at me, chewing her lip.

“Right before I started going to Lakeside, so... three years.”

“It’s beautiful.”

She laughed. “It’s a cheap thing my mom bought online. I think it was ten dollars.”

I shrugged. “The value’s more in the personal significance, isn’t it? It clearly means a lot to you.”

She sighed, dropping her arms by her sides. “I know this... sounds weird.”

“I’m listening.”

She glanced at me, a nervous, vulnerable look flashing across her expression. “Do you... want to meet her?”

My heart missed a beat. The softness in her expression, the vulnerability written into every part of her as she asked—it ached deep inside my chest. “Your mom?” I said quietly, and she nodded.

“Yeah. Next weekend.”

Maybe I should have said no, maintained my boundaries, but this was clearly something she needed support with. And it would break her heart if I said no.

Besides, she kept this whole world she was a part of all to herself, locked up tight, and only I got to see it. I’d be lying if I said that didn’t mean a lot.

“I’d be happy to,” I said. “I’m free all weekend. Where to?”

She relaxed with the sweetest, most grateful smile I’d ever seen, eyes practically glowing. “No need to go far,” she laughed. “She’s coming here.”

I paused. “Er—your mom?”

“Who else?” She scrunched up her face. “Not to the pool. She doesn’t swim. It’s the family’s greatest embarrassment. Just to Bayview.”

I opened my mouth, stared at her, and closed it again. I felt a tingle of heat in my cheeks. “She’s still alive?”

Priscilla sat up, face heated. “What? How old do you think I am, it’s a shock my mom’s still alive?”

I sat up with her, hands up. “No, just—the way you were talking about her pendant—”

“Oh my god,” she laughed, shoving my shoulder. “No, my mom’s not

dead!”

“Don’t you live here alone? Where is she?”

She rolled her eyes with a snort. “Last I heard, the deadbeat’s in Thailand.”

“*Thailand?* And she’s dropping by.”

She settled into a dry smile, but a fond one. “She was the one who had her rebellious phase instead of me. Once my dad died, she realized she’d never really done anything other than be an obedient daughter, an obedient wife. Her parents were really traditional and didn’t raise her as anything other than—you know, loving wife, caring mother. So she wanted to start her own business and explore the world.”

“And she just left you?”

“There’s no need to say it like that.” She shrugged. “She didn’t just up and leave on a whim. She talked to me about it for a while, wanted to make it clear I was still her highest priority and she wouldn’t do anything that would get in the way of my life and development. Once I was an adult and I got into Lakeside, I told her I could handle myself, and that she should go for it. She gave me the pendant when she left.” She cradled the pendant with a soft smile, gazing fondly at it. Something I couldn’t place ached in my chest at the realization it wasn’t miles off from how she looked at me. “I know it’s weird, but I’m glad she’s doing it. She’s a good role model. Knowing it’s okay to live my own life and never stop following dreams... even in times where it might inconvenience someone else, you work it out with them, and you never give up.”

Here was another thing she clearly never told anybody else. It should have been in confidence as a student to her coach, but it felt much more intimate. “Explains a lot,” I said lightly, and she gave me a look.

“Is that an insult?”

I laughed, hunching forward, looking out at the water rippling across the top of the pool. “Nah. It explains you. You’re quiet and gentle, but you refuse to give up on the things you know you want, you know you need. You’re not afraid to dream. I, uh... I think she taught you well.”

“I—Annabel,” she mumbled, voice suddenly flushed with embarrassment, and I glanced at where she was red-faced, looking down at where she fussed with her hands in her lap. “You can’t say things like that. You’ll be the death of me.”

We were supposed to be putting distance between us. But Priscilla drew

me like a magnet. “Hey,” I said. “You’re our gold medalist. Something’s gotta explain your success.”

She huffed, looking away. “That’s why she’s coming here.”

“To celebrate your gold?”

“Yeah. My extended family’s very... well, my great-grandfather immigrated from Sweden, and they still hold on tight to their Swedish heritage. Very traditional. Which, among other things, means we’re all supposed to learn swimming in school and be good at it. My mom is terrible in the water, so me doing well at it is her only redemption.”

I settled into a fond smile, watching the way she stared off into the distance. Whatever had been bothering her earlier was miles and miles away, back to the soft, sweet smiles and the radiant passion she always kept right beneath the surface.

I liked her like this. A little too much.

“So, the rest of the family isn’t visiting to congratulate you because they think it’s too pedestrian?”

She laughed. “They don’t know. But if they did? Probably.”

“Not close with them, I’m guessing?”

She screwed up her face. “I met them, like, three times. My mom was never on very good terms with them. When she was talking about traveling, she offered to have the extended family help look after me and be there for me, but... they seem really mean-spirited, so I decided to just be my own little free spirit.”

“Floating like a butterfly. It suits you.”

“Mm.” She pulled her knees up into her chest, gazing fondly out of the corner of her eye at me. “I appreciate how you just... get it without being weird about it. Most people are weird about me not really having family anywhere around, being happy with my mom flying around the world...”

“Well...” I chewed my cheek. “You know my family—”

“They don’t deserve you,” she said, swiftly, decisively. I smiled wryly.

“I didn’t even say anything.”

She put her hands on her hips. “I said what I said.”

“You know nothing about them. They could be the loveliest people alive —”

“You’d better get your hearing checked, because I said what I said.”

I laughed, putting my hands up. “All right, all right. The wrath of Priscilla is done unto them. Either way—you know you’re always going to be

safe from judgment here. Family's what you make it."

"Mm." She nodded, smiling sweetly. "And... er... you'll keep this all secret, right?"

"Of course."

She looked down. "I don't normally talk about these kinds of things... I know it's a bit too personal."

"Hey, I'm listening." I put a hand on her shoulder, ignoring all the feelings of sense and reason telling me why I needed to stay the hell away from her before I got lost headfirst in my feelings again. "We can't do our best if we're distracted by thoughts and feelings. I'm here to support you. Including emotionally."

She smiled softly at me, and then right when my defenses were down, a loaded look passed over her face, and she glanced at my lips—just an instant before she looked away again, but it might as well have been a lit match in gasoline for *just an instant*. Fire spread through me in a blink, and I had to work to suppress it. "Thank you, Annabel," she whispered, and I swallowed, following her gaze out to the far end of the pool.

"If it helps, I can tell you something, too."

"That would actually help a lot. I feel like I'm talking too much."

"I was adopted."

She looked sidelong at me. "Really?"

"Mm. That's a big part of why it was so hard to get away from my parents. You'd think it might be easier—none of the *but they're your only blood relatives* kind of bull—but it's really not. Everyone tells you how you owe them everything, they did the kindest and most selfless thing for you, you're supposed to be subservient and groveling thank-yous to your saviors all the time..."

She screwed up her face. "I never even thought of it like that... I'm sorry. That must be awful."

"And of course they tried it too. How dare I disrespect what they did for me by being a lesbian?"

She wrinkled her nose. "What did I tell you? They didn't deserve you. Next time around, you'll listen to me the first time."

I laughed, hands up. "Next time I'll know better. Er... just don't tell anyone that either. I don't like talking about my family much. But I know you keep quiet about yours, so... since you shared first..."

"Thank you." She put her hand on mine, where I'd set it back down on

the concrete, and the touch was just—just a *little* too intimate. Just past the point of plausible deniability. But we didn't address it—the smaller shape of her hand, warm and soft on top of mine, slender fingers squeezing lightly. “It's our secret.”

One of several. I brushed the thought away. “So, when I meet your mom, what should I call her?”

“Oh—just use her first name, or she'll laugh at you. Linnea.”

“I don't know. She sounds intimidating.”

“She's not,” she said lightly. “I've mentioned enough about you to her that she—” She caught herself, screwing up her face. “Er... I mean... well, you've—come up once.”

That was definitely more than once. It gave me a nervous feeling thrumming through my chest, thinking of Priscilla talking about me to her mom. All the things she might have said. I probably should have taken that as my cue to back out. I'd missed a lot of those cues so far. “Well,” I said, “I guess we'll have to wait and see. Whether I call her Miss Sorenson just to have her laugh at me.”

“I mean, it's your prerogative if you want to get chewed out,” she laughed, eyes sparkling, and she looked down at the concrete between us. “Um... thank you.”

“Thank you. It's no small honor to meet her.”

“Not that. I mean, that too. Just... you know when I'm not doing well, but you never push. You always have a way of just... sitting there with me and making things better.”

Right. That's what this was. I was sitting with her and making things better—working for her wellbeing so she could bring her best to her practice. “Do you want to talk about what's bothering you?”

She sighed. “I went on a date earlier today.”

It felt like water splashed in my face—again. My stomach twisted with an uneasy sensation, and I tried to tell myself it was just because I was worried what they'd done to make her so uncomfortable. “It didn't go well, I'm guessing?”

Anyone else would have bought my casual tone. Priscilla wasn't anyone else. She gave me a look that said a million things, glancing up at me through her lashes with that gaze steeped in all the ways she wanted me, and it ached more than I could bear. *Dammit*. I was losing, badly. “Nothing went wrong,” she said, her voice barely there. “It was... perfectly fine.”

And didn't that just say the whole damn story right there? I remembered all too well when I was trying to get over Harper, and the first time I went on a date afterwards, how it felt like gutting myself. How the prospect of dating anyone after Emberlynn seemed like torture.

And I'd learned from those mistakes. Or I thought I had. But here was Priscilla, soft and vulnerable with me, and I wanted her.

I put a hand on her arm, and she drew a small, short breath, looking up at me wide-eyed. "You shouldn't feel the need to pursue anything that doesn't feel right," I said quietly. She pursed her lips, turning away sharply, and I regretted it when I saw her hunching her shoulders.

"You can't say things like that to me, Annabel," she whispered.

"I..."

She stood up. "Thanks for helping me practice. And listening to me."

"Priscilla." I stood up with her, catching her hand as she started away. "Hold on—"

"I can't *hold on*," she said, her voice drawn tight as she tugged her hand away, still not looking at me. Her words shook, just a tiny quiver as she gathered up her things and pulled clothes on over her swimsuit. "If I *hold on*, I'm going to kiss you. And I... have to go," she said, her voice falling off to just a breath, and I couldn't find it in me to say anything, do anything, as she took off for the door, leaving me there by the pool.

Dammit, this woman. And dammit, myself.

Chapter 9

Priscilla

The next week was torture. Not only did I have to deal with the fallout of the B on my essay and the awkward nerves around Annabel after I'd ruined the moment on Saturday blurting that I wanted to kiss her, but I had to deal with Paisley showing up at my apartment on Wednesday, too, knocking at my front door for about six straight minutes until I finally opened it.

"Oh my god, you're going to destroy your knuckles," I said, and she beamed.

"Hi, Priscilla! Fancy running into you here."

I didn't give her the dignity of a response. She didn't deserve it.

It didn't seem to bother her, though—she just beamed wider. "So... how did the date go? Did you and Sean hook up?"

"Neither of them were even *named* Sean."

"Details." She waved me off. "Hey—are you free tomorrow?"

I winced. "Er... another blind date?"

"It's a secret party, and you're invited." She winked. I studied her carefully, holding onto the doorframe.

"And... who else is invited to the secret party?"

"Oh, only everyone. It's gonna be the most rocking party in all Bayview."

"This... doesn't sound like a secret party."

"*Whatever*. Just tell me you're gonna be there! We're snagging the community space in the Hampton Plaza for it, so show up or you're square."

"By the way, how..." I hesitated just for a second. "How did you know where I live?"

Her expression darkened. "Paisley has her ways."

“Well, that’s not terrifying.”

She shoved a bundle wrapped in brown paper into my hands, beaming as she backed away. I had no idea where the bundle had even come from. She didn’t have a bag on her or anything—just seemed to materialize the thing. Some days I thought Paisley might have genuinely been a failed wizard kicked out and exiled to live in the regular world. “Here—it’s a gift for you. Bringing honor to Bayview and all that. Okay, I’ll see you at the party at seven tomorrow!”

“I didn’t even say I would...” I started, but Paisley was already down the hall and disappearing into the stairwell, and I’d never liked raising my voice, so I guess I just accepted it. Trying to say no to Paisley wouldn’t have worked, anyway.

I shut the door, turning back inside, and I sank onto the loveseat by the window to open it, tearing open the brown paper wrapping.

And naturally, she’d gotten me... cheese. A block of specialty cheese from the fromagerie next to her house, along with a note.

Victory cheese is the best cheese.

Victory cheese? Was this some kind of Bayview tradition I’d somehow missed?

I mean, I wouldn’t be surprised at not knowing the traditions. I’d moved here to go to college at Lakeview, the local university, so I still felt like an outsider in a lot of ways. Every time I attended events, I felt like I was trespassing, like I’d only gotten an invitation to be polite and I hadn’t actually been supposed to show up. The cultures and traditions of the place were still a mystery, a little bit.

But somehow, I was pretty sure victory cheese was just a Paisley thing.

When I turned the note over, though, there was smaller script on the other side. Thanks for being there for Harper lately. She’s needed someone who’s good at attentive listening.

I held the note for a long time, a feeling in my chest I couldn’t exactly name.

I guess I was going to a party tomorrow. A secret party everyone was invited to.

∞∞∞∞∞

“Something’s bothering you today,” Annabel said, appearing over my shoulder as I was toweling my hair off, sweaty and sore and spent from an intense training session. I avoided her gaze—the locker room was busy right now, the rest of my team all talking and laughing in a swirl of activity around us, but somehow any time Annabel approached me, it felt like an intimate little bubble for just the two of us.

“Just thinking about the secret party later that everyone’s invited to.”

She gave me a dry smile. “Oh, that. It’s Emberlynn and Aria.”

I whipped my head up. “What?”

“They’re coming back for a surprise visit. Emberlynn told me. Don’t tell anyone, though. They want to keep the surprise. She just said I could tell you about it because she knows you’re easily startled and you should be prepared for a commotion.”

I felt my ears burn. “She said that?”

She grinned. “Yep. But if she asks... I never shared that part.”

Maybe Emberlynn had a better read on me than I’d thought. The cool music producer with her rich girlfriend—I’d kind of thought she was a little too good for me, too good to be paying attention to me. But... well, she was a Bayviewer at heart.

Still, it wasn’t that eating at me so much as... well. Annabel’s heart had gotten turned upside-down when she and Emberlynn broke up. And the thought of Emberlynn coming back, having an excited reunion with Annabel—stirring up whatever old feelings Annabel was hung up on—it kicked up such an ugly churning of jealousy that I wanted to hide, both out of the jealous feelings and the shame at feeling them.

“It’s my secret to the grave,” I mumbled. “So... why did Paisley come to my apartment specifically to invite me?”

She raised her eyebrows, draping her towel over her shoulder and leaning against the wall. “She came to your apartment? How does she even know where you live?”

I shrugged helplessly. “Paisley... has her ways.”

“Who knows. Well, it’s Paisley, so probably because she was bored and thought it was a good idea. But still, Emberlynn always liked having you at parties, too. That time you didn’t show up to the hangout at the pier, she was asking about you, wondering if you were okay.”

I folded my hands at my waist, looking away. “I didn’t mean to worry anybody...”

“The point isn’t that you’re worrying people, just that people like having you around and miss you when you’re gone.”

I wondered about that. I’d never planned to stay in Bayview—it was a cozy place to live that was so effectively attached to Lakeside University that we shared a gym, and Lakeside just so happened to be the university that offered me an athletics scholarship. Rent had been cheap for a cozy one-bedroom above an art shop, and I’d only ever seen the place as a checkpoint, not an end goal. People weren’t supposed to know me, get attached to me enough that they missed me when I was gone.

There was a reason I kept myself at a distance, a reason I read people and didn’t let them read me. I was only ever a tourist. But Annabel saw through me too easily, understood me too well. Maybe Emberlynn had, too. And maybe even Paisley had picked up on me a little bit.

I chewed my lip. “Do you think I should go?”

“To the party?”

I nodded. She frowned.

“Do you not want to? You don’t have to, but you always seem to have a good time.”

I always had a good time because Annabel was always there and dressed up nicely. But it wasn’t like I disliked being around people and things happening, too. “I do,” I mumbled.

She softened, taking a step closer and putting a hand on my upper arm. My pulse skyrocketed at the closeness, at the tenderness of the touch—at the way I could smell the orange-blossom scent of her conditioner, coming through stronger with her hair wet after swimming. The only thing it could ever make me think of now, though, was the way it had been wrapped around me like a blanket back in the hotel room, where she’d been on top of me, touching me, taking me...

“You’re welcome to come,” she whispered. The lowness of her voice sent a shudder racing down my spine, and I swallowed hard. “You’re a part of the community, you know. People like having you around.”

“I—I didn’t mean it like—” But I fumbled, face red, because that was exactly what I’d meant it like, and I hadn’t been ready for Annabel to figure me out quite so easily. She quirked a smile at me.

“Well, just a guess. If it’s that you’re afraid of being too close to Paisley in case she comes up with a fun idea for a game and gets someone hospitalized, I’d understand that.”

“Well—I’m not *not* worried about that, but I don’t think avoiding the party would save me, frankly.” I hugged myself. “Just... am I supposed to be?”

“Supposed to be worried about Paisley?” She shrugged. “She’s survived this long, somehow.”

“Not *that*. Am I supposed to be... you know... a part of the community?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Why wouldn’t you?”

My face burned, and I turned away, breaking the spell of closeness, the intimacy where the thoughts I was supposed to keep inside slipped out. “It’s—nothing. I’m just worrying too much. Worrying people don’t want me around, that’s all.”

The way she knotted her brows said she didn’t believe me, but she didn’t say so. “People do. I promise. Me and Paisley and Emberlynn and Harper—Gwen’s fonder of you than she lets on, too.”

I snorted. “Gwen doesn’t like anybody.”

“Generally. But she occasionally makes an exception.”

I ducked my head. “I’ll... see how I’m feeling once it’s almost time.”

She gave me a knowing smile, a far-off smile, studying me for a while, before she spoke gently. “Well, I... hope I get to see you there.”

That one little comment hung on me, looping over and over through my head as I sat in my apartment that evening after classes, staring at my vacant eyes in the living room mirror.

I knew what I was doing. I was tempting myself with too much closeness—too much intimacy. Acting like I was a member of society here to stay. And I needed to stay away.

But my pendant hanging against my collar was hard to get out of my head. And so I did something I hadn’t done in a long time.

She didn’t pick up for a while—it was really weird and random to call without warning first, so I could hardly blame her—but she picked up on the fifth ring sounding breathless. “Hey, sweetie,” she said, her voice tense despite her efforts to sound casual. “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

It had been ages since I’d last heard my mom’s voice. It felt weird every time, but suddenly there was a lot more respect for the way she just *did* something that she really wanted, so it had drawn me to her number in my phone.

Either way, I was probably scaring her half to death.

“Hi, Mom,” I said, settling into one corner of the loveseat, pulling my knees into my chest. “Sorry for calling out of nowhere. I promise I’m fine. I just wanted to check in on how everything’s going with the flight...”

“Mm-hm. Making sure you still have time to clean your room and finish your homework before I’m back?” Her voice was relaxed now, even if she still sounded confused. “I did most of my packing last night, so I’m just going to throw the rest of my stuff in there once I’ve had my coffee and I’ll be good to go.”

I paused, glancing out the window. “I kind of forgot it was morning there.”

“What’s really going on, honey? You can talk to me.”

I wondered how much I could. I’d been happy for her going away—doing the things she needed to do for herself—but still, someone felt more distant when they were on the other side of the world. “Can you remind me how long you’re staying in Bayview?”

“Two weeks. I paid for flexible booking, though, so if you want me to stick around longer—or if you get sick of me checking to make sure you’re eating enough and want me gone sooner—I can change it.”

“I’m curious what you’ll think of it here. I like it a lot.”

“I’m glad,” she said, voice brighter. “You know I was worried when you were going off to some strange place I’d never even heard of for college...”

“Bold words from the one who’s been to seven countries since then.”

“Touché. I’m glad you and Annabel are so close. Have you made a lot of friends there?”

A nervous sensation rippled through me. “I mean... Annabel’s my coach, above all else, so I don’t know how much she counts as a friend...”

She laughed. “Isn’t she barely four years older than you? I promise, she’s just another kid like you trying to find her place. If she feels like your friend, odds are, she’s your friend.”

I wondered how she’d feel about that if she knew... more about me and Annabel. “I guess. She’s really good to me.”

“She’d better be,” she said lightly. “I’d hate to have to fight her if she’s not. She’d have an advantage if she could get us into the water for the fight.”

“Mom. You can’t fight Annabel.”

“I will, if she treats you wrong.”

I paused, an anxious stutter in my chest. Suddenly this was sounding less like we were talking about a coach and more like we were talking

about... I mean, in the first place, who took their coach to meet their mom? But Mom didn't even know I was bisexual, and I was just reading into it all the things I wanted to see. "I promise you she's not. I think you'll like her."

"Well, then I look forward to meeting her," she said, and in the background, I could hear her pouring coffee and sitting down. I cleared my throat, pushing down the anxiety thrumming in my gut.

"I've met a lot of other people too... Annabel's friends, mostly. They're all really nice. It's just... I guess it's just a little weird when I know I won't stay here. How do you do it? I mean—I assume you make friends and meet people when you're going places."

My heart was pounding harder than it should have been for a simple question like that. Mom took it in a relaxed stride, sipping her coffee before she replied. "Yeah, I'll give you, it's a little weird," she said. "But even if you're not planning to leave, nothing lasts forever, right? I certainly wasn't planning for your father to leave, but... it doesn't mean I regret being close to him."

I pursed my lips, nodding slowly. I'd liked my dad—well enough, at least. But my mom had really loved him, and she'd never fully healed from losing him. That kind of thing probably stuck with you forever. "I guess so."

"Sometimes I like to think of it another way. If you're only going to spend so much time with the people around you, what's it matter if you make mistakes? You have to make bad decisions to grow, and when you know everything's only temporary, you get to make those bad decisions without too much consequence."

"I've never heard of someone's mom telling her to make bad decisions before."

"Well, here I am now," she laughed. "I know it sounds weird, but I mean it. I've said awful things and hurt people and I've learned how to apologize, how to make things better. I've been with the wrong people and learned how to fix it. I've gone too far and lost things with someone I care about, and now I know better. I'd never have done any of it or learned from any of it if I'd thought I'd have to live with those consequences forever. I think there's a gift in knowing you're going to move on."

I stared down at my phone for a long time, trying to place the nervous, racing sensation in my stomach. Finally, she laughed.

"You're short-circuiting at the idea of doing something imperfectly, aren't you?"

“No—it’s not that—”

“Oh, isn’t it?”

“Well—yes, it is, but—” I shook my head.

“We can’t do everything perfectly, Pris,” she said, her voice softer. “You have to choose whether to do the small, short-term things perfectly, or the long-term project of your own life. You’re my top-grades, athletic-scholarship, gold-medalist precious little baby. Of course I’m proud of you doing everything well. So just... make sure you’re prioritizing what you’re doing well.”

I swallowed, hard. A text came in, and I glanced at the notification on the screen—a message from Annabel, saying she was heading to the party now, asking if I was coming.

I pursed my lips.

“I guess so,” I said, quietly.

“Proud of you, baby girl. I can’t wait to see you soon.”

“Yeah. Me too.” I shifted forward in the couch. “I’m heading out to a party with some friends—”

“Oh, a party, huh?”

“It’s nothing weird or sketchy. Just... um...” I scratched my head. “My friend’s sister’s girlfriend... er... Annabel’s ex-girlfriend... um... someone we know well is visiting from New York.”

She laughed. “You live in a small town, for sure. Well, go enjoy your party, then. Drink responsibly.”

“I don’t even like alcohol.”

She snorted. “You’re more responsible than your own mother by miles. I don’t know whether to be proud or embarrassed. I need to go pack up the last things, so I’ll hang up here, but I’ll let you know when I’m getting on the plane. I love you, Pris.”

“Love you too, Mom.” And this time, I was on my feet the second she hung up, texting Annabel back.

I’ll be there! I know you’d miss me too much otherwise.

Chapter 10

Annabel

The air was unseasonably warm for a mid-October night, which I doubted Paisley had actually planned ahead for. Still, it turned out to be a lucky coincidence, with the covered patio that joined the West End Bar and Grill and the shopping hall inside Hampton Plaza filled with people already all chattering and laughing over drinks before the clock even hit seven. Paisley met me at the edge of the patio as I came up the dim, tree-lined path that ran as stone pavers behind the painting studio, and she waved excitedly with her self-satisfied grin, leaning so far over the railing her feet actually came up off the ground behind her.

“Hey, you bum,” she said. “I’m glad you decided not to be late today, or you’d miss the... nothing. The party. Just that.”

I leaned against the railing, giving her a look. “Pais, I already know what the party is for.”

She looked like I’d just stabbed someone in front of her. “Oh my god. She told you?”

“Mm-hm.”

“That monster. I’ll skin her alive.”

“This is why you’ve been so manic lately? I know you haven’t even been yourself without your other half around.”

She stuck her tongue out at me. “Yeah, yeah. Get lost. You’re uninvited.”

I vaulted over the railing, waving to where Kyle and Connor were already here, along with Hazel, who had, unsurprisingly, helped herself to the food before the event had started. “Guess I’m inviting myself, then,” I said, making a beeline for where Harper and Gwen were sitting together, Harper

listening patiently while Gwen complained about someone.

It was a nice ambiance in the pre-party glow, the faint rays of the sun still visible on the horizon but all the lights on around the patio, people chattering inside and around the buildings, and a casual levity in the air. I joined Harper in listening to Gwen complain, but I could barely pay attention to any of it—I found my treacherous eyes scanning the crowd the whole time searching for Priscilla.

She knew I'd *miss her too much otherwise*. That damn girl always read me like a book. Like a picture book. With audio accompaniment. And unfortunately, Harper caught me scanning too much, because when Gwen had gone to the bathroom and left the two of us at the table, she shifted closer to me and dropped her voice.

“Looking for your girlfriend?” she said, and I frowned.

“I don't have a girlfriend, Harper. Given that you hang out with Pais, I assume you'd hear in about two seconds if I got a girlfriend.”

She smiled wryly. “I don't have to hear it from Pais, I'm friends with Priscilla herself.”

I sighed, sipping at my drink. “Priscilla isn't my girlfriend. I don't date my swimmers.”

“You just stick to casual with them?”

“Not that either.”

“Still,” she said, leaning back in her seat with a dry smile. “Something's changed, huh? Not just in her, but in you. Something about the way you look at her.”

My chest clenched tighter. “Harper.”

“You know you're my friend and I care about you. But Priscilla's my friend, too. Don't jerk her around.”

“I'm not jerking anything.” I scrunched up my face. “I wish I'd said that differently.”

“You like her,” she said, not a question but a statement. I sighed, hanging my head.

“Do you want me to? You seem invested.”

“You're dodging the question, huh?”

“Yeah, I am.”

She moved closer, dropping her voice to the smallest whisper. “I already got her to admit to what happened at the competition, so... you might as well drop the act.”

I tensed. “Ah. Well. Shit.”

“So, what is it? Just casual with your swimmers?”

I rubbed my forehead, looking away, watching the occasional passerby glancing at the party, the streaks of thin, wispy clouds drifting in front of the moon overhead. “Just nothing. Just... one particular decision I should not have made.”

“Regret it?”

“Honestly? No. I’m supposed to, but no. Yeah, I like her. But that’s where it has to end.”

She sighed, deflating as she stared off into the distance, and she was quiet for a long time before she let out a tiny whisper. “Is there a girl whose heart you haven’t broken, Annabel?”

“Paisley.” I wrinkled my nose. “Can’t see the appeal in doing anything with her.”

Harper frowned. “Oh... yeah. Yeah, true enough.”

That was a weird reaction. It also wasn’t the point right now. I looked down. “I’ve been trying, okay? I hate it as much as you do.”

“Hate what?”

“My—that I’m like this.” I kicked at the ground. “Shallow and driven by something like... wanting intimacy. All the time. I wish I could just cut it out of my own body.”

She stared at me for a long time, lips parted, and I was uncomfortable enough under the attention I was starting to consider just bailing before she spoke. “I didn’t know you felt that way.”

“Yeah, well, why would I, right? I’m just the girl who sleeps around all day, every day. The girl who can’t even keep it in her pants around her own swimmer.” I sighed hard, shaking my head. “Forget it, okay? Just... please don’t think I’m like this because I’ve chosen to be.”

“I mean...” She looked down. “I know I was upset—”

“Please. Forget it. If you’re asking about Priscilla, I promise to put her wellbeing first. I’m not going to do anything that hurts her.”

And I must have summoned her by saying her name, because it was right at the end of the sentence that the door squeaked open not far to my right, and I glanced at where Priscilla stepped out onto the patio, and *dammit*, she looked good. Entirely too good in a slim black dress with gold accents, the kind of svelte dress with thin straps that stirred things in me I didn’t want to acknowledge. Her dark smoky eyeliner and layered mascara fanned out on

her long eyelashes—she always looked good, but she'd clearly pulled out all the stops tonight.

Or maybe I just had sex with her on the mind. It wasn't my fault I couldn't stop replaying the way she'd looked under me, the way she'd sounded when she came on my hand. The way she'd felt when she slipped her hand into my panties. But that was exactly the kind of thing I was trying to figure out how to stop thinking.

"Hey, you two," Priscilla said, lighting up as she came over towards our table. "Sorry I took so long. I hadn't been sure if I was coming or not until the very last minute..."

I glanced at my phone. "You're right on time. I just got here early because I don't have a life. I'm glad you could make it. How are you doing?"

"Well, thank you. Really well." She slid into the seat next to me, and I *think* it was accidental when she brushed her leg up against mine. "Don't let me interrupt you, though. What were you talking about?"

"Er—" I started, awkward under the knowing smirk Harper gave me. "Personal development, I guess."

Harper stifled a laugh. "That's one way of saying it. Have you recovered from the devastating blow of an eighty-six on your essay yet?"

Priscilla pouted. I cut in with my hands up. "Hey, let her have high standards for herself. You keep shooting for first place in the cake-decorating competition, you should know what it's like."

Harper looked away. "Yeah... well, I'll get it one of these days."

She was hiding something. But it didn't really matter, because that was when a loud chatter erupted from one end of the plaza, and I turned to where people stood from their tables talking loudly and crowding around Emberlynn Morgan Wood, in the flesh, here with the taller figure of her girlfriend Aria, their hands linked. My chest ached suddenly and viscerally at the sight, and I didn't want to know why.

Cheering and laughter ran through the crowd, and Priscilla looked concernedly to me. I waved her off, relaxing in my seat.

"Just our surprise guest," I said, trying to sound casual. "I told her I'd be waiting for her to fend off the crowds when she first showed up and to come see me after."

"*Surprise guest* being—" Harper stood up, red-faced. "Oh my god. You knew and you didn't *tell* me?"

She took off in the direction of Emberlynn, and Priscilla, settling into

her seat, gave a nervous smile in her direction as it was just the two of us left at the table. “Emberlynn’s popular, huh?”

“Hey, so are you. You leave Bayview and make a surprise reappearance, and people will do the same for you.”

She pushed out a small, sad smile, her gaze down on the table. “I don’t know about that...”

I reached across the table and put my hand down on hers—a rush at the contact, once again just a little too intimate, but neither of us pulled away. “Trust me. I promise. You’re a lot more wanted and appreciated than you realize.”

She looked up at me, eyes wide, a soft blush spilling across her cheeks before she cast her gaze sharply away. “You’re way too sweet to me. Flattery doesn’t make me a better swimmer.”

“You consider maybe I just want you to know nice things about yourself because I like you?”

She pursed her lips, and she was quiet for a while before she murmured a tiny whisper. “You can’t say things like that...”

My first instinct was to take it back, to apologize. But I’d be lying if I took it back. “Well,” I said, my voice just a whisper, “then I’ll just think them, instead.”

She bit down hard on one corner of her lip, her blush deepening. I knew I should have pulled back—that I *needed* to. But I’d never realized just how badly I wanted her.

Paisley’s voice exploded in my ear. “Oh my god, you useless clod,” she said, grabbing my arm and yanking me to my feet. “Move it! You’re supposed to join in the special greeting celebration!”

“I—would say no if you didn’t have the most inexplicable iron grip,” I said, limply pulled along after her.

The crowd around Emberlynn and Aria was loud and chattering, and it took a second for me to even get through to where Emberlynn looked a little overwhelmed—Aria just looked vaguely amused at it all.

“Annabel,” Emberlynn said, giving me a lopsided smile once she finally came face-to-face with me. “Didn’t I tell you to sit back and wait, or did you get too excited to come look at my girlfriend?”

It wasn’t like Aria wasn’t worth checking out immediately—Aria Macleod, inexplicably Paisley’s sister, was a gorgeous tall woman with long brown hair and that thing with the perfect, picturesque dash of freckles over

her cheeks. She carried herself like a million bucks, mostly because she was—her first entrepreneurial venture had hit the jackpot and won her a wild amount of money, but she'd always been humble about it and was in the middle of running a smaller second venture just to see what she could do without sheer luck.

She was popular among all genders, and with good reason, but it wasn't like Emberlynn wasn't attractive herself—I'd dated her, so it stood to reason I thought so, anyway. The shorter of the two, with blonde hair at her shoulders and warm brown eyes, Emberlynn had maybe the world's most infectious smile, a sort of effortless likability and charisma in how she walked and presented herself, and it had only increased in New York.

But frustratingly, no amount of checking out *either* of them felt like it would ever get my mind off Priscilla.

"I tried to sit and wait," I said lightly. "Paisley about picked me up and carried me here, telling me I had to celebrate you."

"Of course," she sighed. "Something goes not according to plan, so obviously Pais is involved..."

"I can hear you," Paisley called from not far away. Emberlynn called back to her.

"Good, I don't have to raise my voice, then."

I laughed, putting my arms out for a hug, first for Emberlynn, and then for Aria, who gave me a small smile. "Welcome back," I said. "It's great seeing you both again."

"It'll be great seeing a bed again," Aria sighed. "I had to get up at five this morning and make a meeting. Because Satan was feeling especially spiteful the day he invented meetings before nine AM..."

Emberlynn laughed. "This is why I like freelancing. I woke up at ten today, rolled out of bed, and heated up some frozen waffles."

With so many other people all crowded in around us, it was a loud, chaotic chatter, but it was hard to beat the kind of vitality and glow in the air. Everyone laughed and shared drinks and gushed stories about things Emberlynn and Aria had missed, and they both talked about Emberlynn's struggles collaborating with a host of other producers now that she was working for the big labels, about Aria's so-called *self-important begging* that she described most of entrepreneurship as. It was a warmth, a familiarity that made me happy to be a part of the town, of the community, and it carried me even after the crowd and chatter got to be too much and I bailed out, heading

for the bathroom on the far end instead of the close one, just to get some peace and quiet.

Tucked away at the far corner of the Hampton building, it was empty right now, quiet except for the running of the waterfall half-wall, but I barely got out of the stall and finished washing my hands before the door swung open, Priscilla sweeping into the room with an intense look in her eyes, a hundred things there I couldn't read.

"Hey," I said, stepping out of the way of the stall. "Sorry. I'll—"

"I don't like it," she said, her voice a low, husky breath. I did a double take.

"Er... the bathroom?"

"Emberlynn."

"I... won't tell her you don't like her."

She pursed her lips, and she took a step closer, backing me up against the wall. My pulse spiked, and a subtly sweet smell of vanilla and florals reached me—a rich, complex perfume Priscilla was wearing. I was weak to perfumes. Dammit.

"I'm not doing very well," she breathed, looking up at me through her lashes. "I wanted to get over you, but even just seeing you talk to Emberlynn... it makes me so jealous I want to scream."

Dammit. I needed to handle this delicately, be mature, be practical. But her in that dark, smoky makeup, that dress hugging her figure, and that *look* in her eyes—it muddled my thoughts and sent them wildly off in every direction. Visions flashed through me of how she'd looked spread out under me gasping my name, and it tensed up a knot in my stomach, a primal feeling that drove me past any logical decisions. "Priscilla... we shouldn't be here right now," I managed. She put a hand to her chest.

"Why, Annabel?" she whispered, her voice rich, dark, husky in that way that dripped with desire. "Tell me why I can't... stop... feeling this way. I don't want to watch you flirt with Emberlynn knowing I can't have you. Tell me you're not flirting with her."

"I'm not flirting with her." I chewed my lip. "I don't want her, Priscilla."

"You know I can see through you. There's so much in your eyes when you look at her. Why?" She put her hand on my arm, trailing up my skin slowly, and it sent fire coursing through me. "Why don't you look at me like that? And why can't I stop thinking about it?"

“I...” I took a shaky breath. “It’s nothing like that, Scil.”

“You’ve been different ever since you left her. Why? And why does it look like you’re back to yourself when you look at her?” She slipped her hands to the front of my shirt, gripping my collar tightly. “And why am I so possessive of you when I know I can’t have you at all...?”

“I just...” I winced. “I just decided to be different after her. That’s all. And when I see her, it just reminds me of what I used to be—”

“What you used to be? What is that?”

I couldn’t take this any longer. The awareness of her body so close to mine was like fire burning through my veins, a tingle that coursed over my skin, burning every nerve. The scent of her perfume was consuming my mind, and I couldn’t take my eyes off the birthmark on her neck I wanted to kiss, nip at, see the way she reacted like she had the other week. “You know what I used to be,” I said, my voice tight. “Going from one night with someone to the next. Insatiable.”

She bit her lip, hard, tugging harder on my collar. “You want to do it again, don’t you? It’s written all over your face.”

I knew what else was written all over my face. Luckily I wasn’t the only one. Priscilla’s expression was strained like she’d die if I didn’t take her right now. “It’s better this way,” I started, but she stepped in closer, her front pressing against mine. I felt the heat of her body against mine, and it coursed through me.

“Not if you’re looking like that,” she breathed. “Just... give in...”

I managed a shaky breath. “You want me to go sleeping around everywhere? That’s your idea to cure the jealousy?”

She let out a sound I’d never once heard from her before, something like a growl, gripping at my sides through my shirt. “I don’t *care* if you sleep with everyone in town, just so long as I’m the main one. I want you so badly I can’t breathe.”

Christ, I didn’t need Priscilla being such a perfect little fantasy for me. Maybe it didn’t matter how much was on the line if we got found out. Maybe that just meant we had to not get found out.

I was just human—an animal with a body that craved things. And Priscilla left me breathless and antsy in a way where I couldn’t focus on anything else.

Chapter 11

Priscilla

I think I might have been high. I wasn't sure what happened.

I'd been sitting at the table watching the way Annabel's whole body language changed when she talked to Emberlynn, and I'd been drawn taut with my head churning. I'd played a game of tug-of-war with myself, between my feelings and my best efforts to suppress the bubbling jealousy, and when she went off to the bathroom on the far end of the building, I lost the battle. My body moved without me, and I didn't really come to until I was pressed up against Annabel in the bathroom, both of our faces heated, her hands on my hips, mine gripping her sides wherever I could, fire running through my veins, and it jerked me out of the haze like a cold shower when footsteps clicked from outside the door and the handle turned.

I sucked in a sharp breath and pushed away from Annabel, a cold sensation pressing into my head, but Annabel caught me off-guard—she grabbed me by the arm and tugged me into the next stall, shutting the door behind us. My heart shot into my head leaving me dizzy and breathless as she clapped a hand over my mouth, holding me into her, and she whispered *shh* in my ear, just a breathy enough whisper for me to hear.

God. My whole body went limp against her, giving into her completely. I wasn't even doing it consciously—just feeling myself move in exactly the ways she directed.

As the other person walked into the bathroom, fumbling around in a bag, doing something at the mirror, Annabel whispered in my ear. “You shouldn't encourage my worse instincts.”

I *really* wanted to. I bit my lip hard, feeling her hands gripping me, holding me into her as the person outside the stall finished up what they were

doing, washed their hands, and headed back out of the bathroom. The second they'd shut the door behind them, I let go of all the tension with a small, desperate cry of need. I rolled my head back to look at her, my vision swimming with how badly I wanted her, needed her. "Try me," I whispered. "I want to see your worst instincts."

She bit her lip, something flashing over her expression. "You're playing with fire."

"And you're not, dragging me into private and holding me like this?"

A smile flitted over her lips before it turned into something hungry, taking me in. "You want to talk about jealousy," she growled, slipping her hand down my body, down to touch my thigh through my pantyhose under the hem of my dress, and I let out a breathless cry against her. "Who's this you're talking about a date with?"

"I—it was nobody," I gasped. "I went on a blind date someone set up for me. I was hoping it would get you out of my mind, but all it did was make me realize nobody can make me feel like you do..."

She hiked my dress up, dragging her fingers up higher. It sent dizzying waves of need and pleasure throbbing through me, and I got chills at her voice in my ear. "And you came in here to shove me against the wall, tell me to give into my base instincts... you want to tell me what exactly you're angling for here, Priscilla?"

"I—" My face burned, embarrassment tingling through me, but I found I couldn't turn down anything she told me to do. "To—for you to—I want you to..."

"You want me to what?"

"To—take me. I need you. Again."

Her hand crept higher, up my thigh, heat building explosively through me, until her fingers slipped across the seat of my pantyhose, caressing me. I let out another desperate cry, burying my face in my shoulder trying to suppress the noise, but the way her fingers against me felt like fireworks and pyrotechnics in my core—I couldn't control myself. Annabel was the only one who controlled me right now.

"So, what happened to *only tonight*?" she murmured in my ear, and I bit my lip harder. The way she held me so I could barely move, the feel of her fingers through the pantyhose coarse, rough, but expert against me—it mixed into some heady cocktail that put all my logical thoughts somewhere far away.

“It wasn’t... enough,” I pleaded.

“You really want to see me at my worst?” she said, her voice sharpened. I nodded.

“I’d do anything for you. I... want to be your fantasy...”

She slipped her hand up higher, hiking my dress up and diving down with her fingers inside my underwear, and I gasped as she dipped her fingers down through where I was embarrassingly ready for her.

“This is what you want?” she growled. “For me to take you in the bathroom.”

“Any—anywhere.”

“You’ll have to be quick. And quiet. We can’t raise questions going back to the party.”

I nodded weakly. “And... you...?”

She slipped two fingers over my clit, running small, tight circles against me, and my legs gave out at the raging heat and crashing pleasure of the touch, falling against her, her arms and her body against me the only things holding me up. “My house,” she whispered, her voice and her fingers the only real solid things right now. “After.”

“Mm. Anything...”

“Good.” She picked up the pace, driving me higher, higher, waves of pleasure rolling through me until it felt like I’d come apart. I’d never felt anything like it in my life—Annabel such a master with her hands that it was like she knew my own body better than I did, knew how to pleasure me in ways I’d never felt. I suppressed cries of pleasure as best I could, but when the bathroom door opened again, Annabel had to shift her hand to my mouth and muffle all the desperate, needy noises I made, not slowing down even as two people came in, two girls talking to each other right outside the stall. The exhibitionistic thrill lit up my whole body in burning pleasure, and between the heightened senses lit up to maximum and the skill Annabel touched me with, I fell apart.

She pushed me over the edge and into a wild, crashing orgasm, racking through me with the other girls standing right there not six feet away, muffling my voice down to desperate, tiny gasps of pleasure that Annabel swallowed up into her hand.

The two girls left not long after my orgasm had subsided, and Annabel held me through the shakes as I sank against her. Weakly, I turned back and leaned in for a kiss, driven by the hot delirium, and Annabel’s lips meeting

mine in a slow, open-mouthed kiss sent so much fiery awareness flooding through my body that I hadn't even really come down from my orgasm before I wanted another one, to do it again, to offer myself up for her as many times as she wanted.

She broke off the kiss, stepping back, slipping her hand back out of my underwear and letting my dress back down, and then with a hungry look crossing her expression, she licked my wetness off her fingers. I felt my knees buckle just watching it.

"That's one, at least," she said, her voice low, dark, dirty. "If we're talking about my fantasies."

"Can... can I still... your house...?"

A smile flickered over her lips, but there was something vulnerable there, something almost nervous. "Still not backing down?"

"Backing down? Was that supposed to convince me to back down? Do you have any idea how convincing works?"

She bit her lip, smiling through it. "You really do mean it, huh?"

I folded my arms. "You know me. I don't back down."

"I do." She cradled my chin between two fingers. "My house. After. I know you're messy down there, but you can sit with it as a reminder for the rest of the party."

Obediently again now, I nodded, a rush going through me. "I... will."

"Good. I'll go out first. Wait a while so it doesn't seem like we're going together. See you out there." She kissed me again, and it left me reeling, spinning for a long time as I sank against the wall staring up at the ceiling, my body still thrumming with the pleasure on a million different levels.

I liked her worst instincts. A lot.

I had a hard time focusing on anything through the party. Even after I'd washed my hands and done as much as I could in the mirror to make it look like Annabel hadn't just turned my world upside-down and taken me in a bathroom stall, I headed back to where the party had moved inside as the night got cooler, and I sat down next to Harper, Annabel was still spinning in my mind. I deliberately put space between me and her, but across the table, she met my eyes with that intense gaze, a hunger just under the surface. I didn't think anyone else would be able to see it but me, but it still felt like a thrill, like she was putting it on for all the world to see.

I tried to act normal through the rest of the night, laughing as Harper talked about the drama with the other people in her business block, but my

mind was anywhere else. Racing, picturing Annabel's house, wondering where, and what...

A hand on my shoulder jerked me out of my reverie, and I turned back, face heated, to where Emberlynn tapped me on the shoulder with a soft smile. "Hey," she said. "Long time no see."

I almost laughed. Suddenly I wasn't feeling so jealous seeing Emberlynn. I had all the Annabel I could want. Emberlynn could strip naked on the table in front of Annabel, and I wouldn't even give it a second glance. Well—I probably would have, because that would still make a scene, but—

"Hi," I said, reining my thoughts back in. "It's generous of you to take the time out of your very busy schedule tonight to say hi to me..."

She smiled wryly. "By busy schedule, you mean everyone wanting to ask me in coached language how much my girlfriend makes?"

"Essentially." I gave her a light hug, hands on each other's upper arms—I wasn't that much of a hugger, but more importantly, Emberlynn looked so drained I felt like she'd have crumbled if I hugged her too tight. "Welcome back to Bayview. I'm sure you've missed the... nosiness."

"More than you know." She shoved her hands in her jacket pockets, grinning. "I've tried to live without the signature charm of this place, but it's no use. I'm set for life."

I wondered what it was like to have that kind of certainty. "Well, Bayview's lucky to have you."

"Bayview's lucky to have you. And so is Annabel."

Ugh, I was predictable as anything. I felt my face flame up in an instant, and I hugged myself. "That's—it's not—we're nothing like that—"

She raised her eyebrows, giving me a lazy smirk. "I was talking about you scoring the team its first gold since Annabel's..."

"Oh. Er. Um... right." I scratched my head. "I forgot... that I did that."

She glanced over my shoulder, looking at where Annabel was laughing loudly with Paisley and Hazel, both of whom seemed to be competing to... I wasn't sure. Fit the most crackers in their mouths? I'd never understood either of them.

"But," Emberlynn said, "if Annabel is ever going to get her head out of her ass and realize how you feel—"

I hugged myself tighter. "It's not like that."

"If it *were* like that, she'd be very lucky to have you like that, too." She settled into an easy smile. "You'd be good for each other, I think."

“I...” I shrank further into myself, feeling my face burn. “Did you come back to Bayview just to make me shrivel up like a raisin?”

“Not specifically, but it was pretty close to the top of my agenda. Argue with Paisley, eat Harper’s cake, show off my hot girlfriend, make Priscilla shrivel up like a raisin. In that order.”

I looked away. “Even leaving my own feelings aside—I’m sure she could do a lot better.”

She shrugged. “I think you’re underselling yourself, but who’s measuring better, anyway? Annabel’s seemed out of it ever since she and I broke up. She seems better with you around. I think that’s what matters. You make her feel good being herself.”

“I... I guess, maybe.” I ducked my head. “But it’s a moot point.”

“You should just tell her.”

Not... really any use in that now. But to be fair, I also didn’t know what I was arguing to begin with. I had no idea what Annabel and I *were* now. Was this going to actually just be tonight? Were we going to have a lot of *just tonights*? Was this going to become a full-fledged fling?

I knew *girlfriends* was off the table, but I’d take anything that was on the table.

“She’s my coach, you know,” I mumbled. “It’s... inappropriate.”

“Yeah, well, Aria is Paisley’s sister, and I wasn’t supposed to go for her either. But you find a way.”

Finding a way. That was one way to describe what Annabel and I were doing now. “I... don’t know.”

“Well, no need to know anything right now.” She waved me off. “I’m going to sit down. My feet are killing me. But congratulations on your gold medal. I’ve seen you training, and I know you sure as hell deserve it.”

“Emberlynn,” I heard myself call as she was starting away, and she stopped, looking back at me.

“Yeah?”

I flushed, suddenly too awkward to put words together. “Um...”

She smiled. “You can say it. Weirdness won’t faze me. I’m Paisley’s best friend.”

Touché. I ducked my head. “What... was it like? Er... being with Annabel...?”

She studied me for a second before she took a step closer again, dropping her voice. “I give her a hard time, but Annabel’s wonderful,” she

whispered. “We weren’t right for each other, but I was really happy with her. She talks a lot about her hedonism, about how she likes to indulge in every good thing she can find, but she’s one of the most selfless people I’ve ever known. And I think she could use someone who really cares about her. So... she’s worth fighting for, I’d say.”

I swallowed, my whole face burning with awareness, but I nodded. “I... thank you.”

She paused, eyebrows raised. “She’s... well, only if you’re okay with an open relationship. She doesn’t like to settle down.”

I wondered about that. It felt like it was missing half the story. But I laughed nervously, looking away. “I know.”

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help out. I’m in your corner.”

I mumbled an awkward thank-you, and I stood there for a while wondering how it was Emberlynn could just be so settled, so relaxed, so confidently able to say the things she felt, before I sank back into my seat.

And this time, Annabel’s eyes were warm embers fixed on mine, something softer there, sweeter. It was amazing how many sides to her there were—the dirty fantasy of the girl who took me where I stood, the intense and driven girl who made me better in all the ways that mattered, and the soft, sweet girl who was there for me when I needed someone, tender sharing her own fears and worries with me.

I think I’d officially given up on getting over her. My mom was right. I was only here for so long. I was going to dive in headfirst, make the bad decisions, and let it burn itself out instead of trying to hold myself back, to be delicate, to not break anything.

I tingled with awareness once the party was winding down and everyone was filtering out, the crowds trickling down. Annabel gave me a loaded look as she left first, and my heart hammered the whole time sitting there making conversation, waiting my turn to leave once it was less suspicious.

Harper headed for the door not long after Annabel, pausing to give me a look. I stepped to the side with her, off the path in the front of the building and under the shade of a magnolia tree, and she scratched her arm.

“Hey. I wanted to ask your advice.”

“Um... shoot.”

“It’s about Paisley, so trust me, I want to.” She pursed her lips. “She’s trying to set me up on another date with Calvin. I didn’t... dislike the time we

spent together, so... do you think I should...?"

I blinked fast, looking at her expression, drawn tight and avoiding my gaze. Maybe I should have been more delicate, but I'd put that behind me, so I said it outright. "I know this is weird, but do you, um... do you like Paisley?"

"Very, very little."

"No, no. I mean—you know—do you *like* her. Like—"

She made a face. "I'd rather drink poison out of a tailpipe."

I folded my arms. "I don't know if that's true."

"What, you think I'm harboring secret feelings for Paisley I can't acknowledge?"

"*Can't* is a strong word... I just think you don't want to. Maybe because you think people would think of you a certain way if you went out with Paisley."

She raised her eyebrows so high they almost left her head. "You're actually serious about this, aren't you?"

"Uh, yeah." I put my hands on my hips. "You can't lie to me. You know it's no use."

She put a hand to her face. "Oh my god. I don't know how to convince you there's nothing I could want less."

It was written over every inch of her face, her body language, that she was embarrassed, trying to hide it. I couldn't wrap my head around it, but there was zero doubt at this point that Harper actually, honest-to-god had feelings for Paisley. I couldn't for the life of me figure out what kind of dynamic they were supposed to have, but... there was something cute about it. "If... hypothetically... you did," I said. "What would be the reason you can't just tell her?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Because I don't like her, and she doesn't like me, either. It was just—" She frowned. I blinked.

"What was just what?"

"It's... nothing. Forget it. I think I'll accept the date."

"*Harper.*" I cut in front of her as she turned away. "What was just what?"

"*Nothing.* I'm not into Paisley."

"Did you have some kind of—"

"We didn't do anything!"

They definitely did something. Did Harper have some kind of

unexpected one-night-stand with Paisley, and now Harper was longing for her but was sure the feelings were unrequited? I wanted to keep asking, the curiosity eating me alive, but I wasn't getting any answers out of her. I took a different tack, relaxing.

"I don't think you should go on a date with someone if you're not feeling it," I said, and she made a face.

"Is this because of Paisley?"

"No. In general."

She groaned. "I have to do *something* if I want to make progress. Getting over her..."

Her wasn't Annabel after all in this case, was it? Maybe neither of us were actually trying to get over Annabel. "If you're trying to get over her," I said, conveniently leaving out who the *her* was, "then going on a boring date is only going to make you wish you were with her."

She was quiet for a long time before she sighed, raking her fingers through her hair. "Yeah. I guess you're right. I'll... yeah. Thank you. I'll tell Paisley I'm not interested. And... you?"

I looked away. "I think I had my fill of blind dates."

She studied me for a while longer before she sighed, turning back to the street. "Sounds good. Well—thanks for talking this through. I'll see you around, Scil."

"See you," I said, drawing myself up to my full height, and the second she was out of sight, a rush coursed through my body, the tingling awareness at the idea of Annabel at her house.

My feet carried me quickly and quietly, checking around my surroundings and trying to stay out of view as I made my way to Annabel's house, slipped inside, and barely got my shoes off inside the door before she caught me, looking at me with that hunger in her eyes as she trailed a hand up my arm.

"Still not backing down," she said, more a statement than a question. I tipped my head down, looking up at her through my lashes.

"Never," I whispered. "I don't back down."

She darted her tongue out and swiped it over her lips, and it sent a churning sensation through the pit of my stomach. "You took a while. I was wondering if you'd show."

"Someone caught me on the way out, but all I could think of was you..." I fell into her, running my hands up her sides. She moved her hands to my

shoulders, but she paused at the straps of my dress, her voice hesitant.

“Priscilla... there’s no going back from doing this—”

“I know.”

“God, I love the way you *want*.” Her voice was a hot, throaty thing, and my pulse spiked as she slipped my dress straps slowly down my shoulders. “I’ve been thinking about doing this all night. Wondering how easily this dress would come off.”

A rush of numbing pleasure flooded through me, and I ducked my head. “Very easily. I was... hoping you’d think about that when I put it on.”

“I want to see you in things like this more often.”

I bit my lip. “If it means you’ll be thinking about me...”

“Nonstop.” She slipped my straps down and tugged my dress free, and it slunk down my body, falling to the floor around my ankles, leaving me in my bra and my underwear and pantyhose, still mussed from earlier. Annabel bit her lip, looking me over, before she took me by the hand and led me upstairs. My mind blank with the way I needed her, the intensity of this moment, I couldn’t do anything but follow—couldn’t do anything but let her take control, lead me to her bedroom, and push me roughly down into the bed.

I watched, captivated, as she stripped out of her shirt, stepped out of her pants, and shimmied out of her underwear, before she stripped me out of my underwear too and fell onto me in the bed, capturing me in a hot, sensual kiss. I gave myself over to her as our hands explored one another’s bodies, and when she dipped a hand between my legs, I let out a cry, pleasure racking my whole body.

“Annabel—I want you—”

“I know. I promised you my turn. But I’m going to enjoy first feeling how much you like this.”

It was agonizingly beautiful, her hand between my legs, teasing through my folds, through my wetness, before dipping inside me. I moved with her in increasingly desperate gasps and cries, melting into the feeling, but she pulled away before I could go too much higher, flipping around onto her back and guiding me down between her legs. The hunger in it, the way she took me however she liked—pushing me down between her legs to pleasure her, gripping my hair, looking down at me—I’d never known anything could be such a wild, fiery turn-on.

I savored every touch, every taste of the moment, dragging my tongue up along the length of her and taking in the way she arched against me with a

groan of pleasure. It took a second of getting used to—the taste of her against my tongue, the way she moved against my mouth—but I was addicted to the sounds she made, to how she gripped at my hair, to how she wrapped her legs around my back and held me into her. Before long, I couldn't get enough of her, enough of how she tasted. I buried my face deeper against her, and I obeyed her every little instruction, guiding me on how to pleasure her best.

It felt like it might have pushed me over the edge when she started getting close, calling out my name in short, desperate gasps, rough-voiced curses, gripping hard at the sheets, gripping hard at my hair. She pressed me tighter into her, and I lost myself in the overwhelming, heady sensation of her flooding me as she let out a cry, bucking her hips against my mouth, grinding against me with her muscles contracting underneath me as she came, long, hard, throbbing against me.

“Oh my... god, Priscilla,” she gasped, coming down shakily from the orgasm, guiding me up her body to take me in a long, slow kiss. “You're so fucking good with your tongue.”

“Mm. I want to learn more how to pleasure you...”

She bit her lip, a wild look passing over her eyes. “I swear, how are you real?”

I heard myself laugh. “Maybe I'm not. Maybe I'm just a dirty wet dream, and you should treat me like it.”

“Seriously, you seem so innocent all the time and then...”

I bit my lip hard. “Do you... think I should stop being like this?”

“Not in the fucking least. I want you to come on my mouth now.”

I'd do anything for her, but that wasn't really a hard ask, if we were being honest.

Chapter 12

Annabel

Waking up to Priscilla wearing one of my shirts and a pair of panties, curled up on the edge of my bed, was hardly the worst sight in the world.

I was supposed to be feeling guilty over this. Hell, it should have been racking me with guilt, tearing me apart. But looking at her like this, sleeping so peacefully with her hair cast messily across her face, it felt right. And maybe I was a cocky enough douchebag to think everyone *else* was wrong—the people who said Priscilla should have been off-limits, the people who said I was too unreliable and couldn't commit, couldn't settle down. Maybe the real right answer was just that Priscilla was damn beautiful, and I liked her a little too much.

Or maybe I was just awful and unrepentant. That one was also possible.

I slipped down ahead of her to the kitchen, and feeling a little corny, I made pancakes. It wasn't like I was a genius in the kitchen, but I was good enough to use box mix without burning anything, and eventually, soft padding footsteps called my attention to where Priscilla came into the kitchen just when the sun was starting to rise. A faint coral glow from the window cast colorful shadows in the messy lines of her hair, over where she was giving me a smile that was both the sweetest thing in the world and so nervous I wanted to hug her and tell her everything would be all right.

"Good morning," she started carefully, walking so lightly into the kitchen—touching down gently on each footstep like a butterfly. She paused, breathing in the air, before she gave me an odd smile. "Annabel..."

I held up a pancake turner. "Pancakes?"

"That's so cute," she laughed, a soft blush spilling over her cheeks. "I would love some. Um... anything I can help with?"

“Want to make coffee? I’ll show you where everything is.”

The intimacy of the little gesture wasn’t missed. Her blush deepened, and she nodded, smiling sweetly up at me through her lashes.

We had pancakes along with scrambled eggs—I was normally a fan of breakfast sausages, but Priscilla was a vegetarian, and I found myself wondering if maybe I could stock vegetarian sausages in my freezer. Was that a sign of me liking her too much?

Either way, Priscilla sitting at the table to my side, lit in the gentle golden glow of the sunrise, her hair still messy, eating pancakes—it was the cutest sight I’d seen in my life, and I could definitely get used to it.

“Thank you,” she laughed, buttering her pancakes meticulously. “This is so sweet...”

“You have a full day of training and classes ahead. I just have coaching and then I’m slacking off for the weekend. I’m mostly just trying to power you up.”

She stifled a giggle. “Fueling me up, huh?”

“Hey, you’re our gold medalist, and we have another competition before too long. We’ve got to take good care of you.”

She looked away. “Mm. And that’s what I am, a gold-medal swimmer?”

I leaned back in my chair, following her gaze out the window. “You might be some other things on top of that.”

“Oh, I see.”

I took a second, sipping my coffee, before I said, “You’re trying to ask what we are, aren’t you?”

“Er—” She swallowed hard and cleared her throat, fidgeting with her hands, her bravado suddenly all gone and replaced with the most adorable nearly cross-eyed blush. “Well... I was just...”

“If it helps, I’m also wondering what we’re supposed to be now.”

She sank over the table, her head hanging. “Okay. That helps. Er... so... you don’t know.”

“We aren’t supposed to be doing this,” I said lightly. “But... we’ve both seen where it leads when we try not to.”

She coughed lightly, rubbing her arm, looking away. “I... apologize. I feel like it keeps being my fault.”

“You say it like it’s a problem. I want it, too, you know. Badly.”

She chewed her lip. “I was thinking that... you know. I’m only in Bayview until I graduate. So I don’t want to have any regrets. I know it’s

risky. But I want you.” She looked down, kicking at the floor. “But maybe also it’s... not fair to you if I’m only staying until I graduate.”

I was starting to spot a pattern with women falling in fast and hard and close, a connection with fiery intensity, and then it ending. I wondered if it was me—just that everything ended eventually and I always expected too much. Besides, she’d probably have gotten bored of me before long anyway.

“Better to have it now and lose it later than to never have it,” I said, leaning across the table, and I put a hand on hers. “If you’re really... okay with it.”

She rolled her eyes. “You talk about your *worse instincts* like giving me the best sex I’ve ever had is criminal.”

“Well—er—” I scrunched up my face. “It’s one thing to say that now —”

“Try me.” She turned her chair to me, leaning forward, frowning at me. “I want to explore all the things you think about. I want to know them all.”

I bit my lip, a heat blossoming through my face and down through my body. “You’re not supposed to say things like that,” I said.

“I said, try me. I’m not afraid of you.”

“Not that. Just because we have to be at training in an hour and a half, and you’re going to turn me on.”

She bit her lip. “I... think it’s amazing that I *can* turn you on, though.”

“You have no idea.” I caressed a hand up her arm, indulging myself in the guilty pleasure of it all, and when she rolled her head back with a low, hazy moan at the touch, I was gone. “Priscilla—”

“God, I want you,” she murmured.

I guess that settled what we were. If I was being honest, it was a little scary. I’d thought she would be afraid. Thought she would back down after the first time or two.

A dirty little fantasy of a secret fling with the sexiest woman I’d ever laid eyes on—one who was against all the rules, everything I wasn’t supposed to want. The perfect embodiment of everything I was trying not to be.

But Scil didn’t seem to mind.

“You should be careful what you’re saying,” I said, caressing my hand across her neck, up to her lips. “If you’re not careful, I’ll see how quickly I can get you off under the table right now.”

She closed her eyes. “Annabel, you are absolutely terrible at making

threats.”

Breakfast ended up a bit rushed. I didn’t regret a thing, though. Except maybe that we only had time to get her off, and I’d have to take care of myself later.

Seeing Priscilla there at swim practice was a strange feeling like being between two worlds at once, but she didn’t give any indication anything had happened. Once she got into the water, she was completely focused, her mind set in that intense, all-consuming way she did. And she hadn’t been lying when she said it would make her a better swimmer. I had no idea why or how, but she trained with an intense determination new even for her, going on until the point where she was white-faced from exertion, collapsed on her hands and knees at the side of the pool, as I knelt next to her with a bottle of water and a cold press for the part of her lats I knew were always the first to get hurt for her when she pushed.

Hazel knelt next to her too, tapping her on the shoulder. “Still alive?”

Priscilla gave her a wild-eyed look, still breathing hard. “Barely. Somehow.”

“Well, Coach is taking good care of you.” She winked, and Priscilla scrunched up her face, blushing hard. I gave Hazel a wry look.

“Don’t you have a life to get to?” I said, and Hazel rolled her eyes.

“Okay, you coy ass. Don’t keep Scil around for *special practice* too long, she’s got calc with me today.”

“I’m not missing calc,” Priscilla called, but it was no use—Hazel was on her way out the door not listening to anyone, as usual. I set the cold press against her back as she took a drink of her water, rolling her eyes.

“Out of curiosity, have you ever once missed a class?”

She laughed, wiping her mouth after finishing taking about half the water bottle in one go. “Once, yeah. You’d think I must have had the greatest excuse in the world, like someone just died or something. I somehow just... forgot. A class I had at the same time every week. I was so mortified I barely slept that night. I still don’t know how it happened.”

“You have a lot going on. It’s natural you’d forget something, somewhere, at some point.”

“Thanks, but I’m still planning on never forgiving myself.”

“You probably passed the course with no problems anyway.”

“I only got a B, and I never want to repeat that experience.”

She was entirely too good for me. I shook off the thought with a smile.

“When is your mom getting to Bayview?”

She brightened. “Tonight. She’s in the air right now, but it’s a long flight.”

I squeezed her shoulder. “It’s nice seeing how excited you get to see her.”

She looked away, blushing just a little. “It’s been a while...”

“I can imagine. When am I meeting her?”

She ducked her head. “Er... whenever you like. She doesn’t have a busy work schedule here or anything. She runs her own business remotely, but she’s taking time off to be here with me. But—tomorrow? You can come join us for lunch, if you... want.”

Given the situation Priscilla and I had suddenly found ourselves in, there was something... loaded about going to meet her mother. But I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious what kind of woman raised a girl like Priscilla.

And I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to tempt fate, blur the lines, and see just how close I could risk getting.

“I’d love to,” I said. “But I reiterate that I’m gonna disappoint the hell out of her.”

She rolled her eyes, laughing, and she shoved my shoulder. “You’re such a liar. She’s going to love you. And I’m really proud to... um...” She scratched her head. “Forget it. I should probably be getting ready for class soon...”

I stood up, offering her a hand. “I won’t keep you.”

She avoided my gaze, and she didn’t say a word. I pursed my lips.

“Is something wrong?”

She was quiet for another second before she spoke in a whisper. “There’s no one else around right now...”

My stomach dropped, and then it flooded with a thrumming sensation. “You’re trying to tempt my worse side out again.”

“As long as it takes to get you to realize it’s *not* a bad thing. And... um... then probably still longer after that.” She bit her lip, casting that look up through her lashes at me that I was always weak for. A bit of yesterday’s perfume came out with the water, too, and by power of association, it sent a deep hunger through me. “I *really* want you, Annabel.”

A better woman would have found a polite way to let her down easy. I wasn’t a better woman. “In the shower,” I whispered. “And I can take my turn now.”

She closed her eyes with a soft noise slipping out of her mouth, like just the idea itself sent pleasure rippling through her. *God*, she was hotter than I knew what to do with. Except that I knew exactly what I wanted to do with her. “Yes please,” she murmured, and I bit my lip, gesturing her to the bathrooms.

∞∞∞∞

I should have known better than to leave my house unlocked in this town. I wish it had been burglars, but instead I opened my front door and found myself standing in the doorway staring at where Paisley was draped over my couch, eating my chips. She waved like she was supposed to be here.

“Hey,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“I wonder,” I deadpanned, stepping inside the door and taking my shoes off. “You get foreclosed on or something?”

“I saw Gwen waiting for you to get back to your place, so I was kind enough to show her the door was unlocked. And voila. She’s in the kitchen making some tea for you both. I’m on the couch eating your chips.”

“So you are.” I sighed, walking past her and towards the kitchen. “You know, they’re having a Friday market showing in Hampton Plaza in fifteen minutes. They’re bringing cheese for, like, a fifth the price.”

“Shit, really?” She rolled off the couch, landing on all fours on the floor and jumping to her feet. “Oh my god, I’m on cloud nine. Maybe you’re good for something after all, Annabel. See you!”

She took off. Gwen peeked her head out of the kitchen. “Since when was there a Friday market showing?”

“There isn’t. Tea’s ready?”

She gave me a serious look. “I brought the Starland Darjeeling.”

“I’m sure that means something to you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Your girlfriend would pick up on it. It’s my good tea. For special occasions. You don’t deserve it, but it’s fine. I brought shortbread from Harper’s to bribe you into letting me in, but that turned out to not be necessary, so I’ll just share them with you.”

“I’m locking every door and window from now on,” I sighed, following her into the kitchen. “And once again, I do not have a girlfriend, Gwen.”

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed the difference. You’ve been different. So

has Priscilla.” She took a teapot, setting down two teacups—her own, which I guess she just brought with her because mine weren’t good enough for her tea—before she poured ever so delicately, ever so elegantly. I sat down in front of one of them, not bothering to wait for her signal and interrupting her whole tea routine, but if she was going to break into my house, I had some ground to stand on by being rude to her little tea ceremony.

“We’ve gotten a bit more comfortable since the awkwardness after the swim meet. We know where things stand. That’s all. Now, do you want to tell me the real reason you brought your good tea and bribery shortbread to talk to me?”

She sat down with a sigh, cradling her tea and staring down into the surface. “It’s such a gentle marbling,” she whispered. I rubbed my forehead.

“Try making sense?”

“The tea. You see how the color falls off towards the edges, but gradually, spread out over a long difference.”

I raised my eyebrows. “That’s what you wanted to show me?”

“Just admire it. It’s a precious blend. It’s rare for the color to shift so gradually that you don’t even notice until it’s completely different.” She held up the cup. “Plus, look at the body. You can see just looking at it how light and delicate it is. But just smell it once and you can see how complex and developed the flavor is.”

I smelled it. “Smells like tea.”

“You boor. Fine, whatever. Let’s drink.”

Admittedly, it tasted nice. Something lighter and sweeter than a regular tea, but not in a sticky-sweet sugared-tea way. Almost fruity, but not quite. It was a nice tea. I just didn’t want to know how much it cost.

Finally, Gwen set down her cup with a frustrated sigh, and she said, “I’m going to break up with Kay.”

“Oh—” I almost spilled my tea. “Oh, wow. That’s huge. I’m proud of you.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Patronize me again and I’ll hit you.”

“I’m not. That takes a lot of courage after all this work you’ve put into trying to fix the relationship.” I leaned over the table towards her. “Breaking up with someone I’ve needed to break up with is the hardest thing I’ve done. Taking home golds is easy in comparison. I imagine you feel the same way about... consulting stuff.”

“*Consulting stuff.*” She sighed, suddenly just looking put-out, looking

down into her tea. “I don’t like saying it, but you’re right. The agency folding was easier than this.”

“Of course. Because there’s an element of the personally-invested that gets into this. The work side can be a challenge, but when the personal side gets hard...”

“Then it sucks donkey balls.”

“Er—exactly. I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

She hung her head, and she was quiet for a while before she spoke softly. “I’m... scared of how it will go.”

“I can imagine. You care a lot about her. You don’t want to hurt her.”

“It’s not that.”

“You do want to hurt her?”

She glowered. “Do you have any identity outside of being difficult and horny?”

I turned my palms to the ceiling. “You read me for filth. That’s me. Tell me what it is, then?”

“Just...” Her expression faltered, and she looked back down, dropping her voice. “What happens next?”

“After breaking up with her?”

“I’m not scared of the conversation. I’m scared of the minute after the conversation ends. I’m scared of when we hang up the call and then I just sit there in the silence knowing I don’t have a girlfriend anymore. Knowing she’s on the other side broken to pieces. And my heart hurts so much picturing her... without me. It isn’t that I think she’s nothing without me or anything like that. I’m not you.”

I smiled drily. “You were deep in that train of thought before you realized you hadn’t insulted me in a minute, and you decided to go with the first thing to mind.”

“Mm. That’s exactly right. You actually seem respectful in breakups, so it was a lousy attempt at hurting you. I’ll do better next time.”

“I will eagerly await it.”

“It’s just that I know she’s going to have to go through the daily motions. Chop wood, carry water. And I know I’m going to be in her thoughts for every part of it. It breaks my heart to think of her going to the shop and not texting me pictures of her haul. It breaks my heart to think of her starting up her game and having no one to talk to while she plays. I don’t think the conversation will hurt her much. But it’s going to be a death by a

thousand cuts for her in the days, weeks, months after. And it makes me so damn sad I just want to scream.”

I pursed my lips. “I get that. And I won’t pretend it isn’t going to hurt. But... people surprise you, too. That’s how a person grows. I think she’ll hurt, and I think she’ll heal, and I think she’ll grow. And I think all of it will happen faster than you’d imagine.”

She chewed her cheek, her brows knotted in that aching concern.

“I know you’re sad thinking about the minute after. But what about the month after? When she’s able to smile and laugh with all her friends again, reconnect with an old friend to play her game with, go shopping alongside all her friends... what if you think about her then?”

She pursed her lips, nodding, tears biting at her eyes. I politely pretended not to see them.

“You’re doing well,” I said. “You’re both going to end up happy after this.”

“We’ll see about that,” she rasped.

“We will. In two weeks, if you’re not feeling better, I’ll buy you onion rings again. How’s that sound?”

She closed her eyes, nodding. “Onion rings sound good. Thanks, Annabel. Maybe you’re not half bad.”

“Thanks. I’m trying to get it down to a quarter bad. I think I’m okay with keeping it there.”

She gave me a lopsided smile, something rare in its openness, before she settled into a distant look out the window, cradling her tea. “Does Priscilla know you like her too?”

Well, here was a thorny topic. I scratched my head, looking away. “I imagine she’s probably figured it out... I’ve found there’s very little I can hide from her.”

“Most likely. So you haven’t told her outright?”

A little white lie never hurt anyone. “No, not really. But I’d still be surprised if she didn’t know.”

She sighed. “It’s a shame. I feel like Priscilla would be perfect for you.”

I rubbed my forehead. “I don’t know if you’re trying to encourage me to stay away from her or kiss her.”

“If you *must* know, I care ever so slightly about you and your wellbeing, and I want you to be happy. And you seem to be happy around Priscilla.”

I looked down. “Don’t worry. We’re close either way. We’re doing

something together tomorrow that... she might want kept private. You can ask her for the details.”

Gwen frowned. “I don’t want to know about you two having sex.”

“That’s what you think of? You seem a little inclined to jump to the idea of sex, huh, Gwen?”

She folded her arms, looking away. “I have a girlfriend of two years I haven’t gotten to have sex once with. I’m deprived.”

“Refreshingly open of you.”

“I’m going to whore myself out for a solid week after Kay and I break up. I know Will was checking me out not long ago. Maybe I’ll go get naked in front of him and see where it leads me.”

About fifty-fifty right now if Gwen was just learning to embrace her own sexual wants and needs, or if she was having a full mental break. Either way, I’d have criticized myself bitterly for thoughts like that, but they felt... encouraging coming from her. “Maybe try something a bit subtler,” I said. “I do also think there’s something there with Charlie.”

“Ugh, I’d believe it, now that you mention it. I’ll get naked during chess, too.”

“If you two engage in kinky sex chess, then don’t tell me about it.” I paused. “Actually, maybe do. I’m morbidly curious how that would work.”

She gave me a grateful smile, finishing her tea before she set the cup down gently. “Thank you.”

“Let me know how it goes, okay?”

“I will. And... enjoy your date with Priscilla tomorrow.”

I frowned. “It’s not—”

“I know. And I know it can’t be. But enjoy it anyway.” She stood up. “I forgot about the shortbread. It’s all yours, I guess. I’m going to go have the worst call of my life.”

“Good luck, Gwen. I’ll be with you all the way. You can call me after if you need to.”

She nodded, expression tight. “Thank you. I... might. Even if it’s just to scream in your face.”

“Also allowed.”

“You’re better than I give you credit for. Slightly.”

Well, I’d take it.

Chapter 13

Priscilla

“Hey,” I laughed, my heart suddenly turning into mush at the sight of Annabel rushing into the café, stepping in out of the freezing-cold morning air. “Dare I ask what the box is?”

She sat down at the window bar next to me, shooting me a sly smile. “Tell me your mom likes cake.”

My chest was all butterflies. She was really... taking this seriously. I wondered how much that meant. And what it meant that I wanted *desperately* to be Annabel’s girlfriend, even though I knew it could only last so long. “Is there a person alive who doesn’t like cake?” I laughed, but it came out nervously.

“Dark chocolate with a whipped cream cheese filling and candied lemon peel?”

“That sounds absolutely divine. You bought her a cake?”

“I bought you both a cake. I guess if she doesn’t like it, at least you will. I was hoping maybe you got your tastes from her, and she’d be a fan if I stuck close.”

How did she even *know* my taste in cakes? I must have mentioned it offhand once. I wanted to scream. How in the world was I ever supposed to find another Annabel? An Annabel I could actually be with? “You’re amazing,” I said, smiling at her in what I hoped was a polite neutral but I was pretty sure was all but heart eyes. I’d... somehow never been quite as good at veiling myself around Annabel as around other people.

She’d dressed like she was taking it seriously too, in loose trousers and a forest-green blazer and scarf that made the red of her hair pop. I felt underdressed in a sweater and jeans, but if I’d dressed well to match her, it

would probably start to feel too much like a date.

Which was unfortunately exactly what I wanted, but... even with the things we were now, that was off-limits.

She gestured to the café counter. “Coffee for you before we head over? My treat.”

“No way. You bought a cake. I’m treating you.”

“You’re—”

I put a finger to her lips, the touch of my skin brushing her lips a little too electric right now. “Let me treat you. You have no choice.”

She laughed, relaxing in her seat. “Just a basic black coffee for me, please. I really appreciate you, Scil.”

I practically danced all the way to the counter, floaty feelings bursting through me. Behind the counter, Sam was juggling his cups again, and when he finished getting Nancy her black coffee, he grinned before he cast a glance between me and where Annabel sat by the window. He leaned in close, lowering his voice.

“So... Annabel’s girlfriend now?”

I flushed hot. *No, but we do have sex now* probably didn’t fit the situation. “I’m nobody’s girlfriend, Sam, okay? Er... two black coffees. Small.”

He grinned. “You’re picking up Annabel’s tab? I thought she was the type to treat her date.”

“Sometimes I want to treat my date.” I scratched my head. “Er... not that she’s my date. Ugh. I just wish. Kill me.”

“You should tell her. She likes girls a lot.”

“So she does. How much do I owe you?”

He laughed, turning back to pull two black coffees and setting them down on the counter. “Girl’s shy, huh?” he said. “All right, all right. I’m just saying, it’s always the right moment for love. That’ll be five twenty in American dollars and cents.”

“How many people try paying in other currencies?” But I paid him five twenty in American dollars and cents, and I joined up with where Annabel gave me a grateful smile at the door, taking the coffee and sipping at it.

“Bliss,” she said. “I owe you one.”

“You made me pancakes yesterday. We’re definitely even.”

“That was self-indulgence on my part. Your mom’s not staying at your place, is she?”

I followed her out the door and into the bitter chill, the wind whipping against my neck. I pulled my jacket tighter, and when Annabel slipped her scarf off and wrapped it around my neck, I felt like I'd die of happiness. Still, I protested. "You can't give me—"

"I hate that scarf. Don't you dare give it back, or I'll never forgive you."

This woman. I wanted to marry her and argue over silly things like what kind of draperies to hang at the wedding hall. "She's not. It's way too tiny, and neither of us wants family relationships that close. She rented out Jenna's mom's upstairs unit, so it's over on Mack Street."

"Well, lead the way, then."

We stuck close together walking down the road towards Mack Street, where we headed past the old church and the market and turned at the pastel-yellow walls of Jenna's mom's house. We took the creaky wooden stairs up the side and up to the deck with its own front door, a tacky-sweet doormat and creeper plants around the door, and I knocked hard. If my mom got caught up blasting music on her headphones while she was lifting and didn't notice me knocking, it wouldn't have been the first time.

Annabel straightened her back. "Any last-minute things I should know to do or not to do?"

"She grew up with my grandparents' cooking, so if she offers you some kind of freaky peanut banana curry pizza, just... say you're full."

"I'd try it..."

"Don't. She'll love you too much and try to take you with her when she goes back to Thailand." I raised my hand to knock again, but footsteps creaked from inside and the door unlatched and swung open, and I must have been psychic, because Mom was wearing her workout clothes and a little bit of sweat, her face flushed.

She was taller than me and with a different build—I'd taken after my dad in that regard, who had been the shorter of the two—but she had the same gray eyes and the same cool blonde hair, hers kept in a practical bob. The biggest difference between us had always been the light in her eyes, the vitality she carried herself with, but when I'd seen her last night and today, I realized it wasn't that far off from what I saw when I looked in the mirror now.

"Oh, Pris," she said breathlessly, stepping in for a hug. "I'm so sorry. I thought you said two. This—"

"This is Annabel, my—er—my swimming coach. Annabel—"

Annabel held out the box. “I brought you a gift to apologize for the intrusion, Miss Sorenson.”

Oh my god, she’d decided to be difficult. Who was surprised? Predictably, my mom scoffed, folding her arms. “*Miss Sorenson*, please. We’re not doing business together.”

Annabel grinned. “Priscilla told me not to call you that or you’d yell at me, so I wanted to see if it would work. It’s nice to meet you, Linnea. Here’s a cake I bought you to apologize for encouraging your daughter’s addiction to gold medals.”

Mom’s smile could have lit the galaxy. She’d always been quick to decide how she felt about a person, and it felt like everything in the world had all lined up for me all at once, a boulder-sized weight off my shoulders that she liked Annabel. “You’re scheming something, I can tell,” Mom laughed, taking the cake. “No one just buys a cake for their friend’s mom without looking for something. Luckily—I’m very susceptible to cake-based bribes. Thank you, Annabel. Come in, I’m going to give you as much of this cake as possible so I don’t eat it all absentmindedly.”

The place was cute, if a bit... kitschy. Mom led us into the kitchen, where she set out plates and forks and *oohed* and *aahed* over the cake, and Annabel asked her about her work, about Thailand, about her travels. I barely said a word—sat at the side with my heart glowing watching the two of them get on like old friends, because how could Annabel *not* charm someone on the first meeting?

I really was genuinely falling in love with her. And that was really, really dangerous.

“Pris told me a lot about you,” Mom said, once we were sitting together with slices of cake, and I blushed, ducking my head. Mom went on without seeming to notice. “You were the most recent one before Priscilla to get the Lakeside team a gold medal?”

“Yep. Three of them, one in my junior year and two in my senior year. Two in the two-hundred-meter butterfly, one in the fifty-meter. If I’d known I’d have every former college athlete’s dream come true and have someone sit down and ask me exactly what medals I got, I’d have found wherever I shoved them in my closet and brought them here.”

Mom laughed. “Maybe next time. So you do the same event as Pris.”

“Yep. And she’s better than I am.” She shrugged. “If it weren’t for Cedarcrest walking all over everyone else, she’d be wearing plate mail of

gold medals.”

I cleared my throat. “You don’t need to flatter me, you know.”

“I *do* know,” she said. “I already used the cake as a bribe, so now you can trust what I’m saying is true and not just flattery.”

Mom smiled, but there was something else there. “That explains how you’ve gotten so close to her, if you’re coaching her for the same event you specialized in. I was really worried about her not being able to make friends off in Bayview, with how shy and quiet she is, but she seems happy here. And I think you’re a big part of that. So... thank you.”

I ducked my head, my face burning. “Mom. Can I bring one person to meet you without you embarrassing me?”

Mom rolled her eyes. “Oh, come off it. What’s embarrassing? That you weren’t sure getting to a new place how you would fit in with the people there? Trust me when I say that’s one of the biggest human universals.”

“Sorry, Scil,” Annabel laughed. “I’m taking your mom’s side.”

I huffed. “You *both* like embarrassing me, and I already know that.”

“Well,” Mom said, with a sidelong glance to Annabel, a smile playing on her lips, “if we have a shared interest like that, I think we can get along.”

We went for a while talking over cake, until finally, Annabel checked her phone and excused herself, standing up from the table.

“I said I’d be at Emberlynn’s place at five, so I’d better go,” she said. “Thank you so much for having me. It’s been great meeting you, Linnea. And I don’t say that often about people who can’t swim.”

“Oh, getting in a cheap shot at the end, are you, Annabel?” Mom snorted, a grin flashing on her lips. “Fine, fine. Get on out of here. See if I invite you back, then, if that’s how you’re going to play it.”

“I’ll offer you another cake bribe? I’ve heard you’re susceptible to that.”

“Contemptable. I’d completely fall for it. Please, take half the cake for that friend you’re going to see, if you leave it here then I’ll eat it all and feel sick.”

Annabel, despite her protestations, ended up with half a cake back in the box, and she gave me a charged look on the way back to the door, a knowing smile on her lips. “Come drop by Emberlynn’s too after you’re done,” she said. “We’d love to see you there. And we can hang out after.”

I hoped the flush I felt in my cheeks didn’t show, the not-subtle *hang out* conjuring some... images. “Mm. It’s a plan.”

Mom watched Annabel go, and once she shut the door behind her, the

two of us fell into a loaded silence for a long time. Finally, Mom spoke with a sort of gravity to her voice.

“So,” she said. “Annabel’s lovely.”

I smiled softly at her, not sure why my heart was pounding. “I’m really glad you think so. I think I’m really lucky to know her.”

“Thank you,” she said, quietly. “For letting me meet her. I don’t want to be tacky and embarrass you, but being so far away from you for so long... I love what I do, but I miss you terribly. And you letting me into your world a little—it means a lot.”

I fussed with my hands on the table, looking away. “Well, yeah. Even if it’s awkward to say it, I love you. I’m not shy about letting you know the things that are important to me.”

She smiled gratefully, leaning over the table towards me. “Do you know what you’re doing after graduation, Pris? It’s coming up fast.”

“Er—not the slightest idea.”

“Well, if you want to see the world, you can always come with me.”

I wasn’t sure why the thought gave me knots, an awkward lump in my throat. It took a second of the churning in my stomach for me to place it.

“Thank you,” I said. Mom raised her eyebrows.

“That was a long pause.”

My heart wouldn’t slow down. I wrung my hands in my lap trying to push the feelings down, but they shot to the top like pushing a floater underwater. Finally, I heard myself speaking in a small, fast voice. “Hey—Mom. There’s something I think I should... tell you.”

“I promise you you’re safe to tell me anything at all, älskling.”

“It’s that... I... well, I’m not... strictly heterosexual.”

God, who said it like that? Words were big and lumpy in my throat and I couldn’t get them out except at odd angles. Mom went wide-eyed, her lips parting, and we sat there in the world’s most awkward silence for half a second before she said, “You’re gay?”

“I’m not—well—” My face burned, and I focused on where I was wringing my hands white. “I’m bisexual, I guess. No—I don’t guess—I *am*, just—” I gave up, gesturing feebly for words.

“Oh—well—sweetheart.” She came around to my side of the table and, without a word further, she pulled me into a hug. My heart was trying to beat its way out of my chest, and it helped me keep my senses straight if I held onto my mom and squeezed her so tight it felt like one of us would break. “I

love you no matter what, Priscilla. That's a promise."

My throat was so tight I could barely breathe, and I felt like my vision swam. I swallowed a few times before I managed a tiny voice. "So what's the *but*? Because I feel like there's a *but*."

"*But* in that case, do you... need to tell me something about you and Annabel?"

God, this whole thing was a mistake. I flushed hard, pulling away from the hug and looking away. "It's not... we're not girlfriends."

"So what's the *but*? Because I feel like there's a *but*."

Why did I even bring this up? I felt like I was going to die. I wanted the ejector seat. The trapdoor. A smoke bomb to vanish with. I hugged myself tightly. "But I like her. A lot. And... er... she knows that. And she likes me, too. But... but she's my coach. And I'm her student. So that's why... er..."

She put a hand on my back, a soft smile breaking out over her features. "Oh, sweetheart."

"Please forget I said anything. It doesn't matter. Annabel and I are just friends."

"I know that's hard. So it probably comes across badly if I say I'm... happy for you."

I furrowed my brow. "What?"

"You remember when you were dating Gavin?"

I cringed so hard it felt like I'd crumple. "Oh my god, Mom, why are we doing this?"

"He was nice, but you seemed like you were just going through the motions. Like you were in it because it felt easier than not being in it. This?" She gestured between me and the direction Annabel had left in. "Whatever's happening and whatever happens, this is different. This is big and real and scary and all the other things that this life is all about."

I chewed my lip, keenly feeling my heartbeat against my chest, in my hands. Mom softened.

"I never... you know... expected it. That you might be with a woman. I've known plenty of gay people, and I guess I just... got this idea that I knew what it looked like and that I'd be able to tell if you were."

"We don't all look the same, Mom."

"I know. Although I know three butch lesbians I genuinely can't tell apart sometimes. It's not my fault they all have the same haircut, they all wear the same muscle shirts, and they all have carabiners."

I paused. “Okay, that one... is a thing.”

“So I shouldn’t be surprised. But I want you to know I love you no matter what. And... honestly, you could do worse than Annabel.”

I flushed hot, ducking my head. “I guess... if I’m being honest, it was having a crush on Annabel that made me realize... you know.”

“There’s a term for that, isn’t there?”

I paused. “Are you... thinking of *gay awakening*?”

“That’s it!” She laughed. “So what does that mean, you were gay sleeping before?”

“Oh my god, Mom.” But I couldn’t help a laugh too, and she pulled me into another hug.

“I don’t care how many dresses there are at your wedding, just so long as you have smörgåstårta there.”

“Thank you...” I squeezed her so tightly it made my arms ache, but it eased up the knot in my throat. I sniffed back tears, and it was only when I did that I realized they were there. “It... probably doesn’t matter. I can’t possibly be with Annabel. Even if we could, I’m going to graduate and leave. And I’m probably going to end up together with a man.”

She snorted. “Please. Even if you married the straightest man in the world and had six straight kids, it would still matter to me that you are. And it still matters to me that you told me.”

“I... thank you.” I pulled away from the hug, wiping my eyes. Without a word, Mom cut me another thin slice of cake, and without a word, I started eating it. It was a minute like that before I heard myself speak. “I’m... really glad you like Annabel.”

“She’s charming and easy to talk to, but more than that, I get the feeling she genuinely cares about you and wants the best for you. If you *were* to date Annabel, well... I would be proud of my beautiful daughter and her beautiful girlfriend.”

“I—Mom, please,” I said, my face suddenly hot and tears budding in my eyes again. “You’re embarrassing me. Again.”

“Oh, I haven’t even started. Let me get started about how I would *love* to have a beautiful daughter-in-law who’s as talented a swimmer as you are ___”

“Mom—”

“And what kind of cute swimmer kids the two of you would make, of course.”

“Mom, we can’t even *make kids*, thank god.”

She paused. “Thank god?”

“Er...” I blanked. She stared at me.

“Priscilla—”

“Please forget I said that.”

“Have you had sex with Annabel?”

“Oh my *god*.” I put my hands over my face. “Mom, we’re not—”

“We absolutely are talking about this. She’s in a position of power over you. She didn’t pressure you into it, did she?”

“What—no! Oh my god.” I raked my fingers through my hair. “She’s perfect and wonderful, she wouldn’t dream of it. She’s always telling me we can’t do anything because she’s my coach. I’m the one who... ugh, *Mom*.”

She folded her arms. “You’re going to have to tell me, or I’m going to ask increasingly awkward questions until I hear what I need to hear.”

“Oh my god. I’m the one who... made a move on her. I’m the one who initiates. I mean—initiated. Er—”

“You’re *still* having sex with Annabel. This wasn’t a one-off thing.”

“Mom. Oh my god. Please.”

“Are you having safe sex? STDs can spread between women, too, you know.”

“Oh my god—yes, Mom, she’s clean.”

“And she’s going to stay that way? She’s not having sex with other people too?”

“Well—er—” I was terrible at this. Mom raised her eyebrows, and I gave up. “Oh, for crying out loud. She’d get tested if she had sex with someone else.”

“You talked about it?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Before the first time?”

“Oh my god. Admittedly, no. Are you disappointed in me?”

She clicked her tongue, smiling. “Deeply. Oh... look at you, Pris. I’m proud of you.”

“For having sex with a woman?” I wasn’t sure if my voice was a tired groan or a strained squeak at this point.

“That’s your own business, *älskling*. This whole thing. Look at you, living your life fully, having these experiences... and to think at one point you were our shy little girl who never came out. Now you’re coming out in

all kinds of ways.”

“Oh my god, leave the gay puns out of this.” I slumped over the table. “It’s a ridiculous mess and I’m a ridiculous mess.”

“Hey. Easy there.” She put a hand on my back. “You ready to hear the greatest secret of adulthood? We’re all ridiculous messes, sweetheart. Into our nineties and on. But you never learn, you never grow, if you don’t get into those messes and figure out what life *is*.”

I chewed my lip. “I... guess.”

“Bonus points if you don’t pick up an STD along the way.”

“Oh my god, Mom. If we could never talk about this again, that would be amazing.”

“And Annabel makes you happy and alive and more *you* than I’ve ever seen before. So I’m happy it’s her.”

I kicked at the floor. “We can’t even...”

“Maybe not. But you figure out a way.”

“Even aside from her being my coach, I’m leaving after graduation.”

She paused. “Do you want to?”

“What? Of course. It’s my plan.”

She shrugged. “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face. Or even more jarring, fall in love. The only plan that matters in life is planning to follow your heart. If your heart tells you to fly away and see what’s out there, then you book that one-way ticket and don’t look back. If your heart tells you to give it a try with Annabel, to leave your old plans behind and see what you can find with her, then you tell her how you feel and you see how it goes. Shockingly little in this life is permanent, Pris. You can always reverse these decisions later. So don’t make yourself unhappy just to follow a plan that you could always pick back up later if it becomes the right time for it anyway.”

I stared at her for a long time before I softened back into my seat, looking out the window. Mom followed my gaze.

“It’s looking like it’ll storm soon,” she said. “Do you need to head out to—what-was-her-name’s place?”

“Emberlynn?”

“Is she the friend’s sister’s girlfriend, Annabel’s ex-girlfriend—”

“That’s the one.”

“See, you wouldn’t even be the only gay couple here.”

I scratched my head. “There’s actually a lot... for some reason...”

Emberlynn and Aria are together, Paisley and Harper are both gay and I think there might be something between them, Gwen is bisexual too...”

“And it feels like home here, doesn’t it?”

I stared out the window, at the market across the street, busy right now with the Saturday crowds milling through, people I recognized bumping umbrellas through the street. “I guess maybe it does,” I said, quietly.

Chapter 14

Annabel

The party at Emberlynn's place was lovely. She'd always been the quintessential hostess—making everyone feel at home, including with a full vegetarian pot roast for dinner, just to make sure Priscilla didn't get left out.

We had music and drinks and laughter together, and Paisley was somehow both more at peace and more unbearably Paisley than ever before. Aria made Emberlynn shrivel up into a ball by playing one of Emberlynn's newest productions over the house speakers, and I got to catch up with Harper on the latest on the drama in her business block. Charlie had shown, too, and she and Gwen were just a *little* friendlier than usual. I took it as a good sign. Healing, and all that.

But I couldn't lie. The best part of the party was when Priscilla showed up. I knew I was in too deep with the girl, just based on the way it felt like there was nobody in the room but the two of us the second she walked in, and how comfortable and right it felt when she sat down next to me and made the two of us into a cohesive unit.

I'd felt the same thing sitting alongside Emberlynn at events when we were together, and with Harper, too. But there was something more to it with Priscilla—a closeness, an intimacy, like the two of us spoke our own secret language and everyone else was just an onlooker to us. The butterfly girls.

Once the party was winding down, Priscilla caught me standing in the back, leaning against the fence, breathing in the cold air of the autumn night, crisp with the smell of fallen leaves. She slid the door quietly shut behind her as she stepped out, and she shoved her scarf into my side.

"You do know you can't give me *all* your possessions," she said, eyes twinkling.

“I told you, I can’t stand that thing.”

“Uh-huh. You just said that so I’d keep it, but like... I can’t just steal all your stuff.”

“I want you to have it.” I turned to face her, leaning my hip against the fence. “Unless you don’t want it?”

“Well—it’s a very lovely gesture.” She held it closer to her chest, looking down. “I just feel bad, I guess, is all.”

“I like seeing you wear it. It makes you feel closer.”

She swallowed, a nervous look flashing over her eyes. I realized a half-second too late I wasn’t supposed to say that. “Well... if you’re sure. Thank you. I’m going to start getting you things, too, you know. And then everyone’s going to know.”

It was a cute comment and a sweet thought, but buried there was the crux of it all—*everyone was going to know*. It was probably pretty clear at this point to our close friends—Gwen and Harper and honestly, probably Emberlynn, too. But we couldn’t afford to have it get out beyond the people who knew us—and back to the league.

But we knew the risk we were taking.

“We’ll have to make it subtler,” I said lightly. “Get each other chocolate as gifts instead, so we can eat the evidence.”

“You’ll get me out of shape.”

“You exercise twenty-five hours a day. You can eat a square of chocolate.” I nodded back to the house. “Enjoying the party?”

“Mm. It was so sweet of Emberlynn to make a whole vegetarian version just for me.”

“She adores you. And everyone else does, too.”

She ducked her head. “Maybe I’ll cover for buying you gifts by buying everyone else gifts, too. Everyone’s so nice to me.”

“Just make sure you buy me the nicest gift.”

She laughed. “What do you want for a gift, then?”

“Mm...” I let my eyes roam down over her body, the cute casual look with the Lakeside University sweater and loose jeans. Loose was easier to take off. “You, probably,” I said, dropping my voice. “With... maybe... your wrists tied together behind your back.”

Her pupils dilated, and she took a small, sharp gasp that seemed to come involuntarily. “I—oh—wow.” She bit her lip, a flush spreading over her face. “Tonight...?”

“If you want it.”

“You—know that’s a gift for me too.”

I winked. “Then maybe we’ll have to keep doing it to try catching up.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” She put her hands on her hips. “And you could just ask to keep doing it.”

“So shoot me dead for trying to flirt with you, Scil.”

She stifled a nervous little giggle, doing a bad job with it, and she flung the scarf around her neck. “Your place, or...?”

“Yours. It’ll be suspicious if you keep appearing around my area.”

“Mm. I’ll go back first, then.”

“Good. I’ll see you soon.”

And I did. I hung around a bit longer to listen to Aria talk about her fumbles trying to get her latest prototype to market, and then I said my goodbyes and slipped out into the night, taking a side route at the park and cutting across a grassy patch and under an old oak tree to get to Priscilla’s place from the back, and when I texted her telling her I was at the door, she texted back saying the door was unlocked. I figured she was probably in the bathroom or something and that was why she wasn’t getting the door for me, but it turned out it was because she was sitting at the end of the couch, wearing a set of lacy black lingerie and an absolutely unbelievable *fuck-me* look.

“Hey,” she said, her voice throaty. “Um... I got these... just yesterday.”

“I... wasn’t expecting a gift quite so soon.”

She bit her lip, smiling wildly through it. “Do you... like it?”

“I hope you know I’m never going to be able to *not* fuck you senseless if I see you in them.”

She stood up, walking slowly towards me, hips swaying as she did. “Well,” she murmured. “Isn’t that a shame?”

How did this girl just scream sex appeal in everything she did? I was not going to keep it together long around her. Her legs in garters, a sheer lacy bra I could see the dark pink of her nipples through, and a lace thong I could see had already gotten wet while she was waiting for me—she was custom-designed to fit my dirtiest fantasies.

I met her halfway across the room, my hands on her hips. “I was planning on giving you all the attention, but after seeing you like this, I think I’m going to need to take my turn first...”

“I’ll do whatever you want.”

“God, it’s a turn-on when you say that.”

She bit her lip, smiling. “I was genuinely just offering, but that’s good to know too.”

She was so damn perfect like this. And she looked amazing tied up on her knees between my thighs shortly after, as I sank back in the armchair, holding her by the back of the head and pressing her against me. And then fucking her face-first into the couch, taking her panties off under her garter belt and fingering her from behind—I’d barely just come on her mouth five minutes before, but I ended up touching myself while I took her, too, and I came less than a minute after she did, and the two of us collapsed onto the couch before we ended up in the bed, Priscilla’s legs spread as I took her on my mouth.

And we were both lying there recovering from it all, breathing hard, when I turned my head to look at her, where her hair was fanned out over the pillow, that look of satisfied exhaustion on her face.

“Much better than a scarf,” I said. “I need to up my gift game.”

“This was a gift for *me*, you know.”

“Uh—hardly. You should see yourself in that lingerie.”

She licked her lips, a smile playing over her expression. “I am... glad you like it.”

“You’re seriously an unbelievable fantasy, you know. I don’t know how you’re real.”

She bit her lip. “I don’t know what you’ve been telling yourself, but I *like* your fantasies. All the dirty parts of them. I want to be a part of them.”

I paused. “Have you ever worn a vibrator in your panties?”

She went wide-eyed. “I... can’t say that I have.”

“A remote vibrator. You know—for the next time we’re at a social event together.”

She let out a sharp breath. “Annabel. You’re going to kill me.”

“It’s another fantasy I have. Take it or leave it.”

She buried a nervous giggle in her shoulder. “Um... take it. Please.”

I turned my head to her. “Are you serious?”

“It sounds hot...”

Dammit, I liked this. Guilty pleasure had never been so... pleasurable. “Great. It’s a plan.”

I didn’t dare push things further by staying longer at her place, so I cleaned up and gave her a longing, lingering kiss before I slipped out, back to

my place, and I stayed there for a long time, just... thinking about her. I ended up with my phone in my hand, just looking at her picture—not even a sexy picture, so it was like I didn't even know myself. Just a picture of her across the table when she was showing off an inordinately lavish ice cream sundae we'd gotten on one of our swim meet trips.

I really wanted a whole camera roll full of pictures like that. To just go on dates with her and live a happy, cute little life with her. And maybe—just maybe—this time it could work. Maybe she didn't think I was shallow, and she liked me being all the things I was, and maybe she liked the person she was when we were together.

And maybe she was my student, and once she graduated, she was going to leave. And maybe even the fling we had was too much.

But I found myself in my texts, the conversation log with Priscilla pulled up, and I typed out *I really like you* and I stared at it for a long, long time before I deleted it and typed something different.

My phone just reminded me about the photo with the ice cream sundae at Fairy Godmother last year and now I want to get ice cream again sometime.

She replied too quickly after. I wonder if she'd also been staring at my name in texts. Oh my god, that thing... I felt sick for a week after eating it. Which means we should totally do it again.

I really liked her. We're on the same page. Tomorrow?

I'm in. And then another text shortly after. By the way, I came out to my mom.

I almost dropped my phone. Are you serious? Oh my god, Scil, that's huge! How did it go?

Awkward as hell. But well. Really well. Thank you.

Then the ice cream is to celebrate it. You'll have to tell me all about it.

Ugh, I don't want to. It's so embarrassing. And then right after, Thank you, Annabel.

Celebrating her milestones with an ice cream date was *hardly* appropriate. But maybe I just figured if she was leaving anyway, then I didn't need to be appropriate.

∞∞∞∞∞

Hazel sprawled out on the bench, kicking. “I don’t want to swim ever again.”

I shrugged. “All right. I’ll take you off the team.”

She groaned, rolling and falling off the bench clear onto the locker room floor. “You’re such a bully, Coach. I don’t know what Scil sees in you.”

Priscilla shut her locker, leaning back and looking at her. “You’re the one being petulant, Haze. Don’t insult her.”

Hazel pushed herself up to sit upright on the bench, rolling her eyes at me. “Scil would defend you if you committed murder. Get a room.”

“You’ll be fine,” I laughed. “I get it feels overwhelming right now. But we’ve been training our asses off. You’re talented. You’ll do well. And however well you do is something to be proud of just because it’s a mark that you’ve come all this way.”

“Ugh, boring. I just want to be showered with gold medals without putting any effort into anything.” She kicked the floor, looking at Priscilla again. “Scil! If I die tonight, you’ll get the gold for me tomorrow, right?”

Priscilla scratched her head, her hair still damp from the shower. “Objectively speaking, if you died tonight, it would probably throw off my performance...”

“Ugh, a swim meet tomorrow and a calc exam on Monday and I’m not even allowed to die.” Hazel hung her head. “Who’s the monster who invented calculus, anyway?”

“Newton,” I said, at the same time Priscilla said, “Leibniz.”

“I hate you two,” Hazel said, standing up. “Fine, I’m going home. I’ll see you tomorrow morning, bright and early, Coach. And I’ll complain the whole drive.”

“I am sure that you will...” I watched her go as Priscilla settled in by my side, smiling softly at me. I couldn’t help the soft warmth in my chest looking back at her.

It had felt like I’d been dating her properly all the last week—first going out for ice cream on Sunday, and then I took her to the library on Monday on the pretense of that she needed books and I just wanted a trip down memory lane of the Lakeside campus library. That didn’t explain going to the museum together after, even though it seemed like it did in the moment—I’d said something about a book and she’d said something about how the author was connected to something that was somewhere somehow related to something in the museum, and then we were there.

One way or another, we kept ending up in places like that. And just like I'd been thinking, I kept photos of it—snapping pictures of her and of the two of us together, little things that meant nothing in a moment and meant everything when I was alone at the end of the day, keeping our distance and playing it cool, and I would flip through them all just to see all the different facial expressions she had. She was so secretive so much of the time, but so expressive at the same time. I could have written entire books on all the ways she showed her feelings. On the difference in every little eyebrow quirk and what it meant. I think I'd started studying her closer because I knew if I could figure out how she worked then I'd be able to unlock the best swimmer we had, but these days? These days it was out of something very different.

“Feeling okay for tomorrow?” I said, and Priscilla ducked her head.

“I'm feeling... fine.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I'm feeling so nervous I want to throw up.”

“Ah. A familiar sensation.” I put a hand on her back. “Just swim like you're in practice, Scil. I'm proud of you no matter what happens.”

“Mm...” She nodded, but she lowered her gaze, a dark look on her features. These days I was finding I couldn't just leave her being sad.

“But even though I say that,” I said, dropping my voice, “I know you're going to get this. You didn't peak, Priscilla. You're not the type of person to peak.”

“How—” She shot me a wild-eyed look. I gave her a knowing smile.

“It's not like I forgot what we talked about. Besides, it's pretty clear what you're thinking.”

“No it's... not. It's really not.”

I winked. “I'll see you in the morning, okay, Scil? Sleep well.”

“Thank you...” She swallowed. “You too, Annabel.”

She used to at least call me Coach when we were in the gym. I think she just avoided the word entirely for me now. Too many things it implied.

I liked being her Annabel better than I liked being her coach.

But I was probably a little too obvious about it. When we arrived at the sports hall the next day, eleven o'clock and bustling, unloading a van squeezed in with a swim team simultaneously exhausted and hyped-up, I'd barely gotten inside before Graham pulled me aside, the league head coach, and we squeezed into the locker room while it was still churning with staff, standing off in the corner.

“Hey, Annabel,” he said. “Going all right?”

“Yeah, good. Just sick with nerves all around, but that’s nothing new for these events.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

“Something up?”

He scratched his head. He was a tall guy, a little over six feet, with a shaggy head of dishwater-blond hair, and it always made him look a little confused and lost—tall and gangly with a bird’s nest of hair—but today he looked particularly concerned.

“No, nothing much,” he said. “Just... er. I heard some rumors, some people speculating you’re dating one of your students.”

Ugh, and here we were. It felt like a knot getting pulled tight in my stomach, but I smiled wryly. “I wouldn’t trust rumors coming out of Bayview. Gossipy place. I promise I’m not dating my students. I know the rules, Graham.”

“Yeah. I know you do. But rumors are bad in and of themselves. We don’t want the integrity of the league getting compromised, even just to a false rumor.”

I pursed my lips. “Yeah... I get that. What are these rumors?”

He scratched his head. “Uh—it’s nothing to worry yourself about.”

“It’s literally something you’re telling me to worry about, Graham. What’s the idea?”

He drew himself up taller, and it was a second before he said anything that I realized what was going on here. “Just some of the league speculating you’re having some kind of romantic relationship with someone on your team. I just need to—”

I folded my arms. “Graham, are you being painfully awkward about this because I’m gay?”

“What—” He reddened, putting his hands up. “It’s not like that.”

“Who is the student I’ve supposedly been inappropriate with?”

He furrowed his brow. “Er... Priscilla Sorenson.”

“Not so hard to say her name now that I’ve broached the subject of how I’m a lesbian, is it?”

He swallowed, hard. Never thought I’d be calling it a lucky break my boss was homophobic, but here was a glorious opportunity to distract from whether Priscilla and I were dating, while he tried to look like he was a loyal devotee of the nondiscrimination clause. “Annabel, I want to be very clear

we're accepting of swimmers and coaches of all—"

"Congrats on being the last person in the entire league to find out. Although I guess it's harder to tell if you're looking for someone to be straight?"

He scowled. "I'm not telling you to be straight, Annabel, just to watch yourself around your students. No matter what gender they are."

"Right." I relaxed back against the cold metal of a locker, putting my hand up. "Well, I'll make sure not to raise more concerns and rumors with Priscilla, and I'll also forget this whole incident today just happened. Sounds good?"

"Yes. Of course. That's all I'm asking for—just to be careful and not make people think anything is going on. Especially if..."

Oh, *this* was juicy. I raised my eyebrows high. "Especially if what?"

"Well—you know." He waved me off. "Forget about it. What's important—"

"Forget about what?"

"We can talk about it more later, if you want. We need to get things set up."

I sighed. "Roger that, Chief."

"Priscilla's very talented. I think she could have a bright future after graduation, too."

I relaxed my shoulders, letting my arms drop, taking in the sound of chatter and clatter all around—people rushing in every direction, getting ready. "Do you have something to back that up?"

"I do, actually. Julia from Cedarcrest was impressed with Priscilla's performance and passed along a lead. A regional team that trains for the Olympics—they like a few of the boys on Cedarcrest's team, but they weren't impressed by the girls' team. Julia thinks Priscilla could make it, though. She's willing to get Priscilla onto the team if she transfers over to Cedarcrest."

It felt like a rush of air from my lungs. Sending a kid to an Olympic training team was huge, especially since I knew exactly which regional team he meant. And honestly—knowing Priscilla—I wouldn't be surprised if she went all the way. She'd always had a knack for that.

She really did deserve a hell of a lot better than me.

"I'll bet she could," I said, finally. "Transfers to Cedarcrest? Before graduation?"

“It’s going to be with the new year, so... during winter break. She’d finish the semester here and then move to Cedarcrest. Of course, it’s still just planning at this point.”

Here I’d gotten complacent, thinking I had a whole more year left. The logistics never could have worked, but that was me—just living in the moment. Hedonism to the end. “I’ll tell her about it. I’m sure she’ll be interested.”

“Good. Thanks, Annabel. I’ve got to get back to work, but I’ll send you the information.”

“Thanks, Chief.” I watched him go, and then I breathed out, long and slow, leaning back against the wall and staring up at the ceiling.

I really did take to all the wrong girls.

Chapter 15

Priscilla

I was terrified, barely holding it together, the whole way up to the water, and it was only when I saw Annabel off to the side and she held up my pendant with that knowing smile that I got to relax. I breathed in the air—the smell of chlorine bittersweet in my nose, the pool water stretching out in front of me—and when the starting whistle blew, I dove.

Just swim like you're in practice. So of course I did. I swam like I was back in our pool and Annabel was there on the sidelines telling me when to go harder and when to let up, and in my head she was pacing out my two hundred meters. *Not too hard right now. Steady pace.* She'd always talked about giving it ninety percent of my all, and it came naturally now, the other swimmers disappearing so it was just me and the water and Annabel there on the side, and when we came into the final stretch, I pushed, hard. And when my fingers touched cool concrete, I heard the whistle blow, and instead of the dizzy sensation last time where I wasn't really sure where I was or what just happened, this time I settled down at the end of the pool with a calm satisfaction.

A second gold medal. I *did* have it in me.

The team swarmed me with laughter and cheers like before, and like before, Annabel pulled me into the biggest, most crushing hug after I got out of the pool. It was laughter and photos and a rush of it all as I held onto the gold medal in breathless exhilaration, but what I wasn't expecting was to have my mom show up for me, too, once we'd gotten off to the side.

I'd just been getting mauled with hugs and congratulations by Olive, the smaller girl who did the breaststroke with a manic energy like she was trying to kill somebody but somehow did well with it, when I noticed her standing

there at the corner of the hall, leaning against the frame of the door up to the bleachers, and I fumbled away from Olive, my stomach dropping.

“Mom?” I sputtered. “I—what are you doing here?”

Hazel looked wide-eyed at me. “You have a mom?”

“What—like I just poofed out of thin air?”

Mom turned her palms to the ceiling. “What do you think I’m doing here, Pris? I’m hardly the custodian. I’m here to embarrass you in front of your friends.”

“Oh my god. You didn’t need to come out all this way just to—”

“I flew in from Thailand to see you, I can go two hours to watch you perform.” She stepped into the crowd and pulled me into a tight hug, and I squeezed her back, my face burning as everyone watched. Next to me, I heard Hazel sputter.

“Your mom’s from Thailand?”

“Ugh, god, Mom, I’m never living this down now...”

Mom dropped her voice low. “Congratulations, sweetheart. I’m so damn proud of you.”

“Ugh.” I buried my face against her shoulder, catching a glimpse of Annabel, standing behind her, giving me a knowing smile. That damn woman had probably known all along. Probably gave her live updates about where to show up and scored her the best seat, too, judging by her facial expression. I could read Annabel like a book.

Hazel put her hands on her hips. “You have a hot mom who will fly in from Thailand, and you never—”

“*Hazel.*” I swatted her. “Oh my god. If you call my mom *hot* in front of me one more time—”

I didn’t have a chance, though. Mom was always good at winning people over, and we only managed to shake her once we were at the restaurant for our victory parade, and only because she said she needed to give me privacy to celebrate with friends without my mom over her shoulder. I swear everyone talked more about my mom than about the gold medal, but I didn’t really care. People around me talking about these things I normally kept quiet—knowing me—it was... sweet. It was also unbearable and overwhelming, but it was sweet.

The problem was that she was there again after dinner, once we’d gotten back to the hotel to crash—a little less exciting sharing a room with Hazel than when I’d shared with Annabel last time—and she was there in the rear

garden behind the hotel, my mom sitting with Annabel at a bench by the fountain, just talking.

I stood at the doors for a while, watching—hanging there in the lobby by the sliding glass doors staring at them like a creep, but I couldn't shake this deep aching feeling in my chest. Watching how Annabel and my mom, the two biggest people in my life, talked so easily, so effortlessly.

It burned suddenly behind my eyes, and I swallowed back tears I didn't know where they were even coming from. I could read both their expressions from here—Mom so unreservedly happy for me, proud of me, and that look like she was appraising every little thing Annabel was doing and finding nothing but good. Annabel looking like she'd finally found someone who shared her specific interest.

I guess that interest was me. And it made my head spin knowing it *wasn't* just because of my golds.

I blinked back my tears and I slid open the door, stepping out into the garden with the two of them, and Annabel was the first to spot me, lighting up and waving. “Scil!” she called. “Hey. Your mom and I were just saying things that would mortally embarrass you.”

“I'd really... really believe it.” I sat down next to Annabel, a flush through my face at the closeness. Mom laughed.

“It was sweet of her to hold that pendant for you,” she said, and I tensed up.

“Oh... uh... that.” I laughed nervously. I'd forgotten that I hadn't told Mom how I'd kept the pendant. “Yeah. She's, um... very supportive.”

Mom rolled her eyes with a dry smile, and she gave Annabel a loaded look. “I can be a scary woman when I want to,” she said. “Just a friendly warning.”

Annabel cocked her head. “Should I be worried?”

“You tell me.” Mom stood up, stretching her arms out. “Be good to Priscilla, and we won't have any problems. Well... I should give you two a minute. I need to get to bed. I'm still jetlagged.”

“Uh—Mom.” My face burned, but she didn't stop for anything, just giving me a knowing smile as she headed back towards the building. I shot Annabel a helpless look, and she raised her eyebrows, looking between me and Mom.

“Did you... mention anything about us to her?” she said quietly. I ducked my head, face burning.

“Oh my god. Not... willingly.” I ducked my head. “When I came out to her, she... er... started asking questions about us.”

An anxious smile played over her lips. “Does she... by any chance, secretly hate me now?”

“No! Not at all.” I folded my hands in my lap, hunching forwards. “Look, I tried my best not to say anything.”

“Did you tell her that I’ve tied you up?”

“Thankfully, she didn’t ask that many details.” I dragged my hand over my face, lowering my voice to a mumbled whisper. “That we, um... you know, that we have sex. She wanted to make sure you weren’t pressuring me into it. And that we were, uh, being clean.”

She laughed, a smile tugging at her lips, but there was something so sad under the surface. Something she hid well. “That suits Linnea. Well, the whole time I was organizing her surprising you here—”

“I *knew* that was your doing—”

“—and sitting out here with her, she hasn’t seemed like she wants to kill me, so I’ll take it.” She sank backwards in the bench, kicking one leg up over the other, casting her gaze skyward. “Hey, Scil. Why do you swim?”

“I—what?” A heavy weight settled in my stomach. There was a finality about her she didn’t usually have. “Well... because I like it and I’m good at it, I guess?”

She was quiet for a while before she said, “You go harder than anyone I’ve ever known. So I know you have a dream, Scil. What is it?”

My heart was pounding in my chest all of a sudden, my throat tight, a clammy feeling in my hands. “A... dream? In swimming?”

“In life. I know so many of these little things about you, but I don’t know what your dream is.”

“I don’t... I don’t know.” I fussed with my hands. “To win gold medals. To do well.”

“And then?”

I hugged myself. “I don’t know...”

She put a hand on my shoulder. “You don’t have to,” she said, softly, pulling my attention up with a flutter in my heart to where she smiled softly at me. “Sometimes dreams find you.”

“I... do you think?”

She smiled. “Have you ever wanted to train for the Olympics?”

I gave her a nervous laugh, one that felt awkward in my throat, like it

came up the wrong way around. “I don’t think I’m *that* good. Cedarcrest wasn’t in the meet today. A gold medal here—”

“Cedarcrest is why I’m asking. The Cedarcrest coach—I think you’ve met Julia—she’s sending a couple of her boys to a regional team that trains for the Olympics. She isn’t sending any of the girls on her team, and she asked if she could try sending you.”

The Olympics. I stared at her for a second before I forced up another awkward laugh. “Er... what?”

“Like I said, sometimes a dream finds you.”

“But—oh my god.” My voice sounded like it was coming from someone else, like I was watching myself from above. Everything was a little... hazy. “Are you serious?”

“Completely. The league head passed it along to me.”

“Oh my god.” I put a hand to my forehead. “But... me?”

“It’s no guarantee you’d actually go to the Olympics, but the team sends a pretty good number of swimmers. And genuinely, I think you have what it takes.”

“But I don’t... I can’t...” What was wrong with me? I should have been celebrating, laughing, dancing. Instead, I felt sick to my stomach.

“You definitely can,” she laughed, but there was something else there in her expression, a heavy weight behind her eyes. She kept it in that secret place where only I could see, and that broke my heart so much more than if she’d just carried it right out in the open. “I’ve told you so many times. You’re so much better than you’ve ever given yourself credit for.”

I didn’t want to go to the Olympics. What was wrong with me? That should have been my dream. There was no way it *wasn’t*. I’d regret it for life if I missed this. But for some reason I just wanted to throw it all away.

For some reason. I knew what the reason was.

It didn’t matter. I’d accept it. I’d say goodbye to Annabel, go and train, and I’d find what my dreams were. Mom was wrong—maybe shockingly little in this life was permanent, but this wasn’t. If I passed up this chance now, I’d never get it again.

And I knew I was too scared, too small, to actually voice those things. To voice those worries, that loneliness.

So it caught me by surprise too when I wrung my hands in my lap and I said, “But... what about us?”

Annabel looked at me with wide eyes, and I couldn’t bring myself to

meet them. “Us?” she said. I hunched my shoulders.

“Annabel, I can’t lie to you. I’m in love with you.”

The words tumbled out of my mouth in a breathless avalanche, and it left me with my heart racing more than the entire competition had. Annabel let out a small sound I couldn’t read, a breathless sound as she stared at me, but I wasn’t brave enough to look right at her, to say it to her face.

Finally, she let out a short, frustrated sigh that broke my heart then and there.

“The league head also told me rumors were starting to get around,” she said, her voice distant, dry. My stomach lurched as I looked at her.

“Rumors... about...”

“Us.”

“Oh, god. You’re in trouble, then?”

She shook her head. “Not for now. Luckily, he seems confused about the idea of queer women, so he didn’t buy the rumors and just told me that I should be careful not to do anything that would cause rumors. But... that won’t last long.”

Everything hurt. There was so much suddenly all at once, and my gold medal felt like it was years ago instead of hours ago, but above all else, all I could feel was that my whole body ached—a sinking, sagging weight that dragged me down. I shouldn’t have said I loved her. This would have been easier if I’d pretended my feelings were smaller.

“So... we need to stop,” I murmured.

She slumped forward, resting her elbows on her knees, hanging her head. “Scil, I’m really sorry.”

“Please, don’t be.” I squeezed my hands. “I’m the one who should apologize.”

“You’ve got an amazing future, Scil. And it’s a lot bigger than me. I’d never be able to live with myself if I got in the way of that.”

“That’s not true.” My voice cracked. “It’s not bigger than you. I only have any of it because of you... because of all the things you’ve helped me become.”

She smiled at me, and there was so much tenderness and sadness there at the same time, it made me want to break down crying on her. “And I am damn proud of it. But you’ve outgrown me. Just promise me you’ll remember me.”

“Oh, you can’t say *that*,” I said, my voice cracking and shattering into a

thin, wobbly thing soaked with tears. “Annabel. You’re going to make me cry.”

“Easy, Scil.” She stroked my hair back, and I was suddenly counting every little gesture like that—wanted to catch them all and bottle them up, like fireflies in a jar, stolen moments that were meant to be fleeting flashes in the night captured and killed trying to hold onto them. “You can cry. I’m going to be honest with you, I’m going to cry in my room after this, too.”

“Dammit, you,” I choked, sinking against her, not even caring how much we were out in the open right now—I threw my arms around her and I squeezed her tight into me, trying to etch into my memory the way she smelled, the way she felt in my arms. “Why did you have to go and... and make me realize I could feel these things... just to rip them all away?”

She sighed, casting her gaze to the cloudy sky. “You knew I’m nothing but trouble.”

“That’s not *true*. You’ve been so amazing... made me so damn happy. You’ve been so good to me, Annabel. You’re so much better than you’ve ever realized.”

She sighed, resting her head against the top of mine. “I wish I really were all those things you think I am, Priscilla.”

This *awful*, awful woman. If only I didn’t love her from the bottom of my heart.

I closed my eyes. “I’ll go,” I whispered. She tensed up.

“To the Olympic team?”

“To the Olympics. It’s a promise.” I squeezed her. “And you’re going to watch. And you’re going to know it’s all for you.”

She let out a frustrated sigh. “Priscilla, you can’t spend your whole life devoting it to me. Do it for *yourself*.”

“No.”

She paused. “Was that just an outright *no*? Not even a qualified one? From Priscilla Sorenson?”

I pulled away from the embrace, looking up at her through tear-streaked eyes, and I forced a smile. “If you’re wondering where I learned to be more assertive, you have no one to blame but yourself.”

She laughed, and there it was—the same sadness that was streaked in big, ugly smears all through my heart, there in her eyes, too. But she smiled through it, in that way that I think only I could see through, and she brushed my hair back. “Well,” she said. “Don’t I look the fool now?”

“Mm-hm.”

She leaned in closer, and my heart ached at the proximity—how close she was, how far away she was, all at once, and she rested her forehead against mine.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, and I felt myself choke on it. I fought back the tears, but what use was there in that?

“Don’t be,” I breathed, closing my eyes, holding onto her arms, just holding onto the moment as much as I could. “Don’t be.”

Chapter 16

Annabel

Someone had an awfully rhythmic *knock, knock, knock-knock-knock*. I was afraid it was Paisley, here at my house to ruin my life as usual, but when I opened the door, I did a double-take at the sight of Linnea there, giving me a cautious smile, holding a box.

“Linnea,” I said. “I see you’ve finally tracked me down.”

“Mm-hm.” She gestured the box at me. “I bought you a cake to say thank you for taking such good care of Pris, but I wanted to ask you a question to decide whether I should hand it to you or throw it at you.”

Well, this didn’t bode well. I didn’t even want to think about things with Priscilla lately, but I should have known Linnea wouldn’t let go of things that readily. I put on a polite smile. “Er... any chance you can ask the question through the window?”

“Can I come in?”

“I guess that’s a no. Sure thing. I’ll put on some coffee for you, in hopes it might persuade you to share some of the cake with me and not throw it at me.”

“Crafty work. I’m impressed. I take mine with a little cream, but milk works fine if it’s all you have.”

She knew she had the upper hand in this negotiation. But to be fair, she’d have had the upper hand even if she didn’t threaten to throw things at me. Everything to do with Priscilla just made me want to roll over and give up, ever since that whole conversation two weeks back.

The worst regret of it all was that we’d been out in public, so we hadn’t even gotten the dignity of a last kiss. And the parting hurt. The parting hurt more than I was used to them hurting, and that was saying something.

I still saw her at practice sometimes—she was already starting side lessons with Julia, so she was only in with me a day or two a week—but everything there had grown so cold, so distant.

I gave her lessons, she thanked me at the end with a polite smile, and then she was out the door. But it was probably for the best it ended like this and not like the others—where things fizzled out until it felt like she didn't want me anymore and had just gotten used to me there. As it was, she'd go off, swim in the Olympics, dedicate her illustrious wins to me, and at least we'd remember it fondly.

Or at least I would. She'd probably forget.

I slid Linnea a cup of coffee a minute later, with a splash of cream, and I sat down across from her with my own cup. She cradled the coffee in both hands, clearly enjoying how tense I was, before she set it down with a delicate sigh.

“So, are you the reason Priscilla's so sad?”

I winced. What was the use in lying? If she actually did throw the cake, it was nothing a shower couldn't fix. “Yeah. I don't doubt it.”

She narrowed her eyes at me, watching for a while as she took a long sip of her coffee. Finally, she set it down again, leaning across the table.

“Fetch me a knife?”

“That's a bit extreme, don't you think?”

She smiled drily. “And some plates. It's for the cake.”

“Oh, thank god. So yes was the correct answer? I'm not getting a cake or a knife thrown at me?”

She shrugged. “It's because I'm assuming Pris is also the reason *you're* so sad. I'm willing to bet it's the two of you being hopeless fools.”

I was quiet while I gathered everything for the cake and cut two thin slices—Harper's orange cream cake, one of my favorites. I wondered if it had been a lucky guess or if Priscilla had told her.

“I think that's what all of it comes down to,” I said, finally. “In the end. That we're both hopeless fools.”

“So, you broke up, then.”

“Er... we weren't...” I sighed, taking a bite of cake and turning out the window. The dark clouds overhead and distant rumbles of thunder made it feel small, claustrophobic. “Yeah, we did. But it's not because I don't love her.”

She raised her eyebrows high. “You dropped the L-bomb, and you were

still planning on denying that you were dating?”

“Well—” I frowned. “I didn’t... not to her, at least. Another bad decision. Should have told her. I thought it would make it hurt more if I did.”

She sighed. “Oh, kids.”

“Hey—it’s not like this whole thing was easy. We really shouldn’t have started anything. It was an inappropriate relationship to begin with—me as her coach—and the league was starting to catch on. We didn’t really have any other choice.”

She smiled sadly at me. “In a way? I think I might actually be relieved.”

“That...” I frowned. “That we broke up?”

“That, if anything, I think you’re sadder over this than Priscilla is. You really do love that girl, don’t you?”

I winced. “Er... what makes you say that?”

“Please.” She waved me off, taking a bite of the cake. “It’s written all over your face.”

Seemed like Priscilla’s knack for reading minds was genetic. I cleared my throat, looking down. “Well... yes. I did love her. I do. But... as before. We could get in a lot of trouble for that.”

“Isn’t she moving to another school?” She put her hands up. “You won’t be her coach then.”

I hung my head. “Linnea... I appreciate it. It’s still going to look really bad for both of us if I start dating her the second she leaves my team. And she’s going to be moving away for it, too. But more than that... I didn’t want that for her. I want her to be all the things she can be, not... stay small just to be with me.”

“And if, of all the things she can be... what she wants to be is *with you?*”

I snorted, turning back to the window. “She’s got a bigger future than me. I’m damn proud of her. The best thing I can do to support her for that future now is to get out of her way.”

She sighed hard, and we fell into a silence like that. She finished her slice of cake, polished off the coffee, and finally, she stood up with a quiet sort of power, and she stood for a second watching the rain splash against the glass in gusts.

“I’m taking my flight back to Thailand tomorrow,” she said. I rose with her, a lump in my throat.

“Fly safe. I’m really glad you came to visit. It’s been great getting to

meet you.”

She gave me a tired smile. “I’m sure I’ll see you again, Annabel. Maybe at the Olympics watching your girlfriend.”

“She’s not—”

“Take care,” she said, turning back to the front door. “Don’t forget to make bad choices too sometimes.”

“Is that really—” I started, but she shut the door behind her, leaving as quickly as she arrived. I sank against the table.

Of course that was Priscilla’s mom. Only someone with that much... sense of presence could have raised a woman like Priscilla.

She’d left her mark on me, too. It all hung over me the rest of the day—another day where I finished coaching in the morning, led one of the gym classes, and then crashed at the end of it all, landing in my bed staring up at the ceiling. For a while I’d been happy to have a job that didn’t take much time, leaving me to go out, meet people. I probably could have done that now. The cabins at the north end were discounted this time of year, and there were fewer families and more small groups—the types to have parties and fun flings. But I wasn’t in the mood. All of that felt miles and miles away. I didn’t even have it in me to hang out with friends these days. They’d just ask me questions about Priscilla.

The past two weeks had been quiet and dismal and empty. And when I woke up the next morning a little too early just because I hadn’t had anything to do last night and had gone to bed early, I found myself at the gym putting in extra reps before coaching, just for the sake of doing something with myself, with my body.

Priscilla wasn’t at coaching. I tried to bring all the enthusiasm I could despite it, but I think it showed. And it really wasn’t fair to all my other swimmers, and this was exactly why we couldn’t get into things with our swimmers. I led a kids’ class right after, spending the latter half of the morning quelling a bunch of shouting and running children and trying to get them all practicing, and then right after that, it was the opposite end of the spectrum, leading a senior’s class where they mostly just wanted to sit and gossip with each other instead of doing physical workouts.

And when I dragged myself back to my place afterwards, there was a complete stranger standing at my door, and she was already giving me puppy-dog eyes.

I stood in the gate at the front of my yard, just staring at her. There was

zero doubt she was gay—she had blue hair and a nose piercing, and she was wearing Doc Martens and fishnets—and under other circumstances, I’d have considered it a blessing from the heavens to have one of the gayest-looking women I’d seen in a while showing up at my door looking for something. But right now, I just wanted to sit inside alone.

“Nice shoes,” I finally settled on saying. She beamed, sticking one foot out, showing it off. It was glittery, because of course it was.

“Thanks! I got them on discount.”

“They’re cute. So, uh, is there a reason you’re standing on my doorstep?”

She folded her hands at her waist, back to puppy-dog eyes. “You’re Annabel, right?”

“The woman, the myth, the legend. Can I help you?”

“I know this is totally out of nowhere, but I screwed up badly and I need help, and from what I can tell, you’re the best person to ask.”

I put my hands up. “Okay, well, you’ve got me with the hook. I’m definitely intrigued. So... what’s going on?”

“I need to tell Gwen I’m sorry.”

I almost dropped my bag. “Hold on one second. You’re not telling me —”

“My name’s Kay.”

“The ex-girlfriend?”

She nodded.

“Gwen was dating *you*? As in—the most boring-looking person I’ve ever seen, dating a rainbow push-pop?”

She nodded.

“Oh my god. I need a second to process this.”

“Can we go inside to process it? I’m really cold.”

“Well, of course you are, you’re—” I gestured to her. “You’re wearing fishnets and a miniskirt in November.”

“They’re *cute*.”

I shook my head. “How in the world Gwen ends up... okay. Okay, inside.”

Kay was like a timid little bunny, the way she stood rigid with her hands at her waist once we got inside. I had to gesture her to the couch, and she still sat on the very frontmost edge. Gwen would have thrown me off my own couch to get a comfortable spot. I could never in my life see these two.

“Tea, coffee, anything?” I called, heading into the kitchen.

“Oh—you don’t need to make me anything.”

I stuck my head back out of the kitchen, glowering at her. “No one is allowed to pull that around me. Say directly whether you want it or not, or we’ll never get anywhere.”

She scratched her head. “Some coffee would be amazing...”

“You don’t even go for the tea. Do you and Gwen have *anything* in common?”

“We both play Apex Legends?”

I almost dropped my bag, whirling back on her. “Gwen plays online shooters?”

Kay laughed. She had a big, bright laugh, the infectious kind. “Is she too embarrassed to share it normally? Oops. You didn’t hear it from me, okay? That’s how she and I met.”

“Unbelievable... I think I’m having a fever dream.” But I made coffee, calling out to Kay from the kitchen to ask how she liked it. It took some coaxing to get her to shyly admit she liked her coffee with cream and caramel syrup, because... because of course she did. She was the anti-Gwen. She’d probably been avoiding seeing Gwen in person because they were like matter and antimatter, and they’d annihilate if they came into contact. I muttered a quiet *what the hell* and put whipped cream on top of hers too, and she honest-to-god squealed when I set it down for her.

“Oh my god, you gave me whipped cream,” she said, eyes sparkling. “You’re the best person ever.”

“Shouldn’t you be saying that’s Gwen?” At this point, my voice was more tired than anything else as I sank into the chair across from her, holding my cup of boring coffee with just a splash of cream. Kay laughed.

“She expressly told me I’m not allowed to say she’s the best person ever. Oh—that’s a go-to thing I say a lot. *You’re the best person ever*. She wouldn’t have it. Said she didn’t want to be the best person ever, she wanted to be a mean creature of darkness instead.”

“Okay, now I believe you actually do know Gwen and this isn’t a weird fake.”

She sipped the coffee, letting out a long sigh of satisfaction, closing her eyes. “Gwen was right about you,” she murmured. I paused.

“Er... are you insulting me?”

“What?” She fluttered her eyes open. “No. Gwen’s always told me how

amazing you are. Frankly, I was a little worried at times she might have been cheating on me with you..."

I was definitely having a fever dream. "Gwen's always told you *what?*"

"Well." She looked away, a distant smile playing on her lips. It didn't reach her eyes. "Maybe that's another thing I wasn't supposed to tell you about, huh?"

I pursed my lips. "Kay... why are you here?"

She shrugged. "Because I need help. And like I said. Gwen talked a lot about you. Said you were... someone she could always count on. That you were always there for her in just the way she needed. Always patient with her."

My mouth felt dry. "Gwen said that."

"Yeah. Like I said... it made me wonder."

"I promise I've never slept with Gwen."

She smiled thinly at me. "I could see why she would feel like you're the one she can always rely on, rather than me. I've been... flaky."

I still couldn't get my head around it. I knew Gwen didn't really mean the things she said to my face, but... someone reliable who's always there for a person isn't how I'd thought of myself. But I hadn't been thinking a lot of positive things about myself these past two weeks. These past two years. Four, five, ten, who knows.

I set my coffee down. "I do care a lot about Gwen and her feelings. And you did hurt her quite a bit."

"I know." She set her drink down, too, sinking forwards, hanging her head. "That's why I'm here. I... want to make things right."

"You want to ask her to take you back? That's a bold move."

"I know." She sat up straighter, clearly summoning a lot of power to look directly at me. "But I love her. And I lost her because I haven't been bold enough. So I at least want to be able to go forwards knowing... knowing I gave it my best shot."

Rainbow push-pop had a better mindset about this than I'd expected. I should have been cheering for her. That would have been like me. It wasn't hard to figure out why I was suddenly so cynical, though. "Why, though?" I said. "As in—why did you never come to see her once, cancel your plans three times, and then the second it's too late, then you do it?"

She shrugged, hugging herself. "You don't realize what you've got until it's gone? That's the easy answer."

“And... the hard answer?”

“The hard answer is that I was scared.” She dropped her gaze, dropped her shoulders. “My parents are hardcore anti-gay, anti-everything. And as embarrassing as this is to admit, I, uh, I still live with them. So they just... loom large over everything I do.”

I arched my eyebrows. “And... they... look at you and don’t realize you’re gay?”

“That’s the power of confirmation bias, right? They could never have a gay daughter.” She kicked at the floor. “They hate my, uh, *rebellious phase* and they want me to go back to my good Catholic-school roots.”

“Oh, ouch.”

“Yeah. All-girls private Catholic school. That was where I realized I was gay.”

I felt a smile on my lips. “Hardly the first one to have that ironic story, I think.”

“Please.” She snorted. “What’s ironic is the way I realized.”

“Is this a PG-13 story?”

“Uh, X-rated.”

“I’m assuming your parents didn’t figure out.”

She laughed drily. “Nope... the other girl’s still closeted, too, last I heard. I think she’s engaged to a man. Bet he has no idea...”

I paused. “Okay, now I’m curious about the story.”

“I used to be *really* into the whole good-Catholic-student thing. So I lectured this one girl who never behaved right and told her to come do prayer with me. Well, it was after hours, we were the only ones there, and, um... I mean, she did at least get on her knees.”

“Ah.”

“She converted me pretty quick.” She cleared her throat. “Happy now?”

“Quite the rebellious phase.”

She laughed. “Yeah. So I at least get to get away with—you know, looking like a huge homosexual. But they’re really rich and they have a huge house and I figured I would just stay at their house for a while and try to save up for a down payment or something, somewhere far away... but it feels like they control everything I do.”

“And that’s why you didn’t want Gwen to go there.”

“Yeah...” She hung her head. “Not just because I was afraid my parents would find out about Gwen, but because I was afraid Gwen would find out

about my parents. She knows I don't want to come out to them, but she doesn't know that they are *literal* millionaires who basically run the local school board and help keep all the area's Christian businesses afloat."

"I mean... I guess I get that." I shrugged. "You clearly want as little association with them as possible."

"I thought I'd be safe just coming out here to meet her in secret, but..." She hugged herself tightly. "But I'm a coward. I backed out. And again. And again. I was afraid they'd find out somehow... so I told myself I'd go another time, once I was more financially secure. And again. And again."

"Until there were no more *agains*."

She closed her eyes, nodding. "That's why I'm an idiot. And why I want to apologize. Even if she doesn't want to take me back, I just... I want her to know I'm sorry. And I just want to see her face-to-face just... at least just one time."

Dammit. To think I'd been so much in Gwen's corner telling her to break it off, and now here I was, kind of starting to root for Kay. At least to have her closure. They both deserved that.

"So you just booked a flight over here and hoped your family wouldn't find out?"

She laughed nervously. "Um... I told them I'm going to visit someone I care about a lot. They were deadly paranoid until they found out it was a girl, and then they just relaxed. *Oh, just being there for her friend.*"

"God, they're oblivious. You make a Pride parade look like a televangelist's sermon."

She flashed a big smile at me. "They are. But it works in my favor. So... um... I know this is weird and out of nowhere, but do you know a place I can stay while I'm here? I kind of don't have a reservation booked or anything, I just... hopped on a plane."

I sighed. "Say Gwen does take you back. What will you do?"

She didn't miss a beat. "Ask her what she wants. If it's what she wants, I'll tell my parents. I can leave them if it comes to that. And it's worth it, to me."

"And you're going to make sure you can actually see her."

She nodded. "Honestly? I'd move into this town if it doesn't scare her away. I'm so tired of living with my parents, and it seems like a cute place here. It would be a dream come true."

"She's my friend. You're not going to hurt her again?"

“I promise.”

I jabbed my thumb towards the ceiling. “I have a second bedroom. You can stay here.”

Her jaw dropped, and her eyes bugged. “I—just like that? That’s it? How much are you—”

“I’m not charging you. Don’t be ridiculous. Just tell me if you know how to swim.”

“Swim? Is the bedroom underwater?”

“Nah.” I stood up. “But I’m going to charge you by making you come to swim practice. We’re always trying to get more people at the pool.”

She laughed, giving me an odd smile as she stood with me. “Well, if I’m being honest... I suck at it... but I’d be happy to learn. You really don’t want me to pay—”

“If you hurt Gwen, I’m throwing you out. Into the pool. So I have to teach you how to swim first, so I don’t end up liable for murder.”

She broke out into a big laugh, eyes sparkling. “Gwen really was right about you,” she said. “Thanks, Annabel. I’ll be the best I can to her. That’s a promise.”

It was sweet. Touching, honestly. And I didn’t know why, after I gave her the tour of the house and showed her to her bedroom, after I’d made us both a quick dinner using the vegetarian burgers I had ready-stocked in my freezer now, after I’d given her a towel to go take a shower and waited my turn—no surprise she was wearing cartoon bunny pajamas—after we’d said goodnight and crashed to two separate rooms, I didn’t know why I was so damn sad about it all.

Maybe this was Gwen’s happily-ever-after, after all. And I did genuinely want something happy for both of them.

The answer was obvious even before I found myself looking at the pictures of Priscilla. Us together at the park, her at the museum, her doing that thing she did where she nibbled the eraser on her pencil when she was lost in thought over her studying and didn’t know I was snapping a picture of her.

Dammit, she was pretty. And things were really damn quiet without her. Even before we’d been together, I’d gotten used to having her right there, right with me.

I hated the Olympics. And Cedarcrest. And coaching. And the water.

Chapter 17

Priscilla

I saw her name in every textbook page. Which was a problem, because the answers to my calculus exam weren't going to be *Annabel, Annabel, Annabel, Annabel*. I'd ace it if they were.

I was supposed to be good at studying. It was my *thing*. That and swimming, but I felt like I was a failure at it ever since starting lessons with Coach Julia anyway. I fumbled in the water and found myself tired and slow, and she didn't know that spot on my back that always got sore first like Annabel did, always there with the cold press, there for me later with the hot water bottle. I'd taken it for granted. I'd taken everything about her for granted, and somehow now I couldn't even focus on a page in my calculus textbook, reading over the same line again and again and again until a bag set down on the opposite side of the table from me.

I glanced up feeling like I was in a hazy dream, blinking a few times at the sight of Harper there, swaddled up in a dark trench coat and a red scarf, holding a coffee cup from Jenna's café. Which—come to think of it—was where I was. I'd been here probably close to five hours now.

"Harper?" I said. "Oh. Hi."

"You just stared at me for, like, five seconds before you said that. Do you know that?"

I flushed. "I guess now that you mention it."

She gestured to the door. "You know this place is closing in like five minutes, right?"

"Oh—god—" I fumbled with my phone, checking the time. Six minutes to ten. My face burned with embarrassment. "I missed the last bus to campus..."

“To *campus*? What on earth is happening on campus at ten in the evening?”

“Er—I was going to hole myself up in the library to study more...”

She rubbed her forehead. “Ma’am, studying won’t bring Annabel back.”

“It’s not about—” I hunched my shoulders, closing my textbook, shoving it and my notebook into my bag. “Okay. I’m going. I’m sorry.”

“Who are you apologizing to?”

“The world...” I shook my head. I wasn’t going to be a sad little sack. I’d done my fair share of being a sad little sack lately. “Sorry. I’ll stop whining. Thanks for, um—jogging me out of that. I like your scarf.”

“Thanks. I like yours, too, but I’m not sure if I should comment on it, since I know it used to be hers.”

“Oh—shoot—” I put a hand over the scarf—the green scarf that still smelled like Annabel, that faint scent of orange blossom lightly bittersweet on it. “Uh... I didn’t know you... knew.”

She gave me a sad little smile, and she gestured me to the door. “You look like you’re about to collapse. Also, I’ve barely seen you for weeks. Come crash at my place.”

“I’m really okay—”

“I know. Now come crash at my place.”

I hugged myself, my face burning. “I... appreciate you, Harper.”

It was polite of her to say *I know* when she and I both knew I wasn’t really okay. I followed her down the street maybe a ten-minute walk, not saying a word, just holding my bag and staying close to her as we made it back to the bakery and around the back, and we still didn’t say a word until I was sitting in the corner of her booth-seating corner strip at a rough wood table, cradling a cup of tea, and I only realized it was jasmine when I smelled it.

“Oh,” I said. “Jasmine.”

“I assume it’s your distressing tea. Annabel specified we have it when you came over during midterms.”

“God dammit.”

Harper looked up from where she was pouring the water for her own tea, frowning at me. “That’s a stronger reaction than I thought. Were you keeping it secret?”

Damn it all, I didn’t care anymore what anyone thought. I pushed the tea aside and collapsed on the table, folding my arms and resting my forehead on

them, and I let myself cry. Harper was good—she always was—she slid in next to me and put a hand on my shoulder, but she didn't say a word, just let me cry like a little baby having a tantrum because I missed Annabel *so much*.

"I didn't even *tell* her," I said, my voice wavering wildly.

"Tell her what?"

"That... jasmine..."

"Ah." She squeezed my shoulder. "She always was perceptive."

"I'm just... a coward... too scared of what people will say if they really know me." I sat up straighter, feeling like I'd been crying for hours even though it had only been a minute or two—just this total, full-body exhaustion that racked all my limbs. "I'm pathetic."

"Hey. More people know you than you think, Priscilla. Besides, it's never too late to be something else."

I shook my head. "Be what? A Cedarcrest student? An... Olympian?"

"I have never heard someone sound so sad about being a potential Olympian."

I pouted. "How many potential Olympians have you heard?"

"Er... one. Fair point. But you're dodging the subject, y'know."

"Yeah, I know..." I wiped my eyes. "It's ridiculous. That I miss her this much. When we were only ever just..."

"Please. *Only ever just* what? I don't think I've ever seen Annabel so uselessly in love."

"That's not true. I was just a fling. Just a... just nothing. Just some fun."

She turned to the window, where the broad, autumn-red leaves of the maple tree behind the house glided along the window in the breeze. "Funny you say that, because she told me explicitly she'd stopped doing casual."

"Um... well." I turned to her. "She told you that?"

"Yeah." She dropped her gaze to the floor. "Said she was sick of feeling like a terrible person over it. And you know what I said?"

"What... did you say?"

"Jack shit. Some friend. She's putting her heart out there, admitting to these things that scare her so much, and I didn't say a thing. Didn't follow up or try to tell her anything. You two have a lot in common, and that includes the way you both think a lot less of yourselves than you deserve."

"I don't... understand," I said, my voice small, thin, wavering, even though I think I might have understood too well. She sipped at her tea—one of Gwen's blends, something warm that smelled caramelly and nutty.

“Point is, she’d gotten it into her head that... I don’t know, wanting someone, that desiring intimacy, made her a terrible person. Put up every wall she could. And you’re the perfect example of every reason she shouldn’t want those things—someone off-limits, someone who could get hurt by it. Everything in the deck was stacked against you. So it means something that she gave in.”

I swallowed. “Um... it mostly means that I straddled her in bed and took my top off.”

“Well, that’s too much information.” She turned back to me with an amused smile. “You ever think that proves the point?”

“Well... if we’re being honest, no. What?”

“For her, the problem was raw desire. Giving in to physical temptation. That was the worst thing she could do, and the thing she’d beaten herself up over so much. If it had been anyone else trying to get through to her, doing all of that would just have touched those painful parts of her feelings and made her pull away.” She fell against the back of the seat, leaning her head against the wall, looking up at the ceiling. “You got through to her because she loves you, Priscilla.”

“That’s not—true—” My throat tightened, a hot feeling in my face, in my eyes. “That isn’t true. I... she...”

“Yeah?” She gave me a dry, sidelong smile, and it broke me. I slumped into myself.

“She didn’t... say it,” I breathed. “I told her I loved her. When she was telling me to go to Cedarcrest. And she didn’t... say it...”

“Well, obviously,” she deadpanned, and I jerked my head up looking at her. She shrugged wildly. “Would you have agreed to the plan if she had?”

“What?” My voice wasn’t normally in that octave. “That’s not—” That wasn’t it either. God, I was bad at this.

“You have no self-awareness, do you?” she said through a dry laugh. “She kept quiet for your future. Because she loves you.”

“But that’s not...” I swallowed hard. “*Harper*, you can’t say that kind of thing. You’re going to make me cry. What does it even matter? I can’t have her. Even if she loves me and I love her and we’re perfect for each other—it would ruin her career if we did. And I can’t pass up this opportunity. I told you. I need to... get over her. That’s the objective.”

She hung her head. “You know, sometimes objectives change. Nothing’s set in stone. And I think what’s going to make you happiest is

finding a way to be with her. Even if you have to swim hard against the current to get there, the joy is in the swimming and finding where it leads. Even if it's just for now. Even if you don't know what that means for the future."

"Ugh." I buried my face in my hands. "What does it matter? So much for our *getting over Annabel* team. I'm hopelessly in love with her and it's actually Paisley you're hung up on, so what does it matter?"

She sloshed her tea whirling back to me. "I am not—are you *trying* to make me throw up? I've told you it's not like that!"

"Yeah, drop the act, already. You know I see through things."

"You're normally *very* good at it, which is why it's all the more confusing that you're pushing this. Quit it."

So she said, but she had just a little bit of extra tension in her fingertips in the way she held her cup. Nerves. I'd never make sense of this... thing between the two of them. I dropped my head, looking at my fingers cradling my tea.

"Annabel would never forgive me, you know," I mumbled. "If I threw away the Olympics just to... just to be with her."

"Who says you have to choose? You can be with her while you pursue the Olympics."

I chewed my lip. "And risk her career if it gets found out? I'd never even have time to come see her. I'd just be... constraining her. She needs to be free. She was free before me. And she'll be free after me."

She stared at me for a while before she spoke, in a quiet, measured tone. "Do you... even want to go train for the Olympics?"

No flared hot and angry in my mind, but I pushed it away. "Of course I do. I can't pass up an opportunity like this. Do you know how many people would kill for this chance?"

"Just because other people want it doesn't mean you want it," she said, studying me. "You shouldn't repeat my mistakes."

"Your—what mistakes?"

"Lots. Where to begin?" She shook her head. "Well, the specific one I'm referring to is cake decorating. There were over a hundred people competing. Some of them had been competing every year for decades. They would all have walked through fire and broken glass to get that number one spot. And I got it because... because it felt like the thing to do."

I stared at her for a second, listening as the wind picked up outside the

window, a distant wailing that shuddered the tree against the glass. The low light of the table lamp cast golden shadows across Harper's face as she stared down into the surface of her tea, running a finger idly over the course grain of the wood table. Finally, I found my voice somewhere in the tightness of my throat. "You were looking for something to fill the space. After Annabel left. That's not the same at all. This is something that's been there in my life since..."

"Has it?"

I fell quiet. The room settled into an oppressive silence, broken by the rattling *click-click* where the heating came on behind me, and the feeling of it on the back of my neck along with the smell of electric heating. I found I couldn't look directly at her. Harper leaned over the table.

"I think you already know what you want to do."

I cupped my tea, breathing in the floral scent of the jasmine. "Bold words from the one who won't even admit she's in love with Paisley."

"I am not—" She scrunched up her face. "I'm not in love with her."

"Well, you won't tell me what you two *are*, so I'm left to assume."

She sighed, hard, rubbing her forehead, and we fell back into quiet for a while as the wind murmured against the window. Finally, Harper dropped her gaze to the floor.

"I don't know what we are, either."

I paused. "You and Paisley?"

"I'd rather put my head through the wall than have feelings for her. But I have feelings for her. It sucks."

This was a level of vulnerable I wasn't used to seeing from her. She didn't let anything show normally, always under her carefully constructed façade. It wasn't a small deal, seeing the tension she had over her face, knowing how deep she was digging for this. I sipped my tea slowly, giving her the second she needed to settle, before I spoke.

"I don't know," I said. "I think... having feelings for someone is nice. And we all adore Paisley. I think everybody would love it."

She scowled. "It's not about what everybody else thinks."

I raised my eyebrows. "Isn't it?"

"Well—" She pinched her lips together. "It's not... just that."

"Then what else is it?"

She closed her eyes with a heavy sigh. "It's creepy the way you just know things."

I folded my arms. "It's not some psychic ability. I just... know you."

She turned to the window, a distant stare out at the night sky, before she murmured, "Just promise me you won't tell anyone else."

"It's a promise. I know how to keep a secret."

"I just... I'm afraid. I'd mess things up. And it's safer like this."

I chewed my cheek. "What do you mean, mess things up?"

"Don't know. Just..." She hung her head. "Just that things are okay like this. And I don't want to take the risk."

I pursed my lips, watching her for a while, before I dropped my gaze to my tea, taking a long sip. "I guess I get that."

She turned back to me, her gaze pointed. "Do you? Because you're throwing away what you know you want, what you know you care about, just to chase something you don't even want."

"It's not that I don't want to..."

She leaned across the table. "Can you look me in the eyes saying it?"

My face burning, I cast my gaze out the window. "Look—it's a lot. There's more going into this than just what I want or don't want."

"*Why?* What's more important in this than what you want? It's your own damn life."

I hugged myself, shooting her a look. "And, what? Stay here, be with Annabel, get her in trouble, and say it's just about what I want?"

"Is that all it is, then? Because if it's all about that you don't want to get Annabel in trouble, you wouldn't be making up something about how the Olympics have always been your dream."

I felt my face prickle, and I stood up. "I'm not making it up. I'm... this isn't an opportunity I can pass up."

She stood up with me, planting her hands on the table. "Even when you're trying to claim it's your dream, you don't say anything about wanting it, just that you feel like you have to. Is that all it is?"

"You don't *understand*," I shot, my face burning, as I took a step back towards the door. "And I don't... I don't blame you. It's all I've done here, Harper, is make sure you don't understand. To make sure *nobody* understands. I can't fit in here. I have to... go."

I saw something flare in her eyes, but I didn't give her a chance to respond. I spun on my heel, pushing open the door, and I ignored her calling my name as I took the stairs down two at a time and didn't slow down until I was halfway down the street, my hands in my pockets, my head hunched, and

tears burning in my eyes. I wished I could say I was crying for a good reason. Just frustration at myself for being such a damn fool.

But breakups did that to a person.

I'd given up even trying to convince myself that it wasn't a breakup—there was no other word for this listlessness, this ache, this loneliness even in a crowded room. There was a little world that only Annabel and I knew, something that was created between us when we were together, and now it was gone—we each only had half the key, and now those old gates into that place would never open again. And it was such a deep, aching sadness to walk past those gates every day and remember—because that was all there was now, to remember.

But at least I could wear her scarf and mope.

I huddled in my coat as I walked back, keeping my head low against the cold wind that drove against me and tossed my hair and the end of my scarf—her scarf—and I felt like I was watching myself from the outside as I walked through the city center. Lights and warmth glowed against the dark and the cold, and I saw people in the shops laughing, talking with old friends, neighbors.

Elderly couples were out strolling in their heavy woolen coats, small groups chattering as they crossed the plaza, the smell of food wafting from the Thai restaurant by the bookstore mingling with the crisp smell of the winter that loomed, and me—I moved through it like an outsider looking in, like I was invisible, like I was pressed up against the glass looking at everyone on the other side waiting for them to see me.

And maybe it was that distant longing that had me staring at every face in the crowd until I stopped with a deep ache in my chest at the sight of Annabel in the pharmacy, just a glimpse of her through the window, taking a toothbrush to the register.

And I couldn't help thinking I'd lost my chance to be there picking out toothbrushes alongside her.

I should have moved, run away, put it all behind me, but it rooted me to the spot—this ugly, anxious churning where my body wanted to tear itself in every direction. I hadn't spoken to her in weeks, not really—we'd exchanged words at practice, but only superficial things. She'd tell me what kind of warmup to do, how many laps to do, when to pick it up, what my times were like, but that was all it was—all it could ever be. I would slip out too quickly after practice, and I would pretend not to see her if our paths crossed.

But I froze up, and I watched with that ache in my chest until she bagged up the toothbrush, wrapped herself tightly in her coat, and stepped out into the cold night air—and came face-to-face with me, freezing up too. And we stayed like that for a while, an aching eternity, neither one of us daring to make the first move, before I forced myself to look away, down at her bag instead.

“One toothbrush?” I said. “Shopping spree, huh?”

“I have an unexpected guest. She forgot her toothbrush.”

It felt like getting punched in the stomach. Of course she had a girl over at her place. I was glad she was healing, moving on, but... it just hurt wondering why I couldn't. It hurt to recognize that it hurt me, hearing she had someone over. I forced a smile. “You always were a considerate host.”

She frowned. “Oh—it's not like that.”

I put a hand up. “Annabel, it's okay. I'm not getting in the way of your life.”

“You really think I have a life? It's someone who just had a bad breakup, so I'm giving her a place to crash.”

It was embarrassing how much relief that felt like. Did it... mean something that she was trying to convince me it wasn't like that? Did it mean something that she didn't want me thinking she'd moved on too quickly, or was it me reading what I wanted into everything?

“You're too good for the world,” I laughed, but it was a hollow laugh, an empty one. I dropped my gaze to the ground. “Hey, Annabel?”

She shifted, holding her bag closer to her chest. Nervous. Scared. Of what? Me? Us? I couldn't read it. “Yeah?”

I didn't even know where I was taking the thought. I just... wasn't ready to let go of this yet. But I didn't think I'd ever be ready.

And it didn't matter. We were just passing by each other. That was all we ever could have been.

“I... hope things are all right with that girl you're hosting.”

The way she paused, staring at me, said she didn't buy it for a second. But she didn't press it. “Her name's Kay. I... think she'd really like you.”

I didn't need this right now. I forced a smile. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I mean, I've mentioned you a couple of times.”

We were never getting over each other. Maybe Harper was right. Maybe she did love me, and she just couldn't say it.

And maybe none of that mattered.

I ducked my head. “I’m sure you have plenty of complaints about how I betrayed the team...”

“Hardly. I’m not Hazel. Just...” Her smile faltered. “Just that you’re... well... things are brighter with you around.”

Dammit. I blinked back tears, praying she wouldn’t see them. Annabel always knew what I was feeling, though. What was the use?

“It’s a shame I won’t be able to meet her, then,” I said, my voice small, thin, wispy. “You know... Coach Julia’s been finding me a new place to live...”

“Right.” She nodded, looking down. “She’s thrilled about you, so I’m sure she’s moving quickly. You... she...” She took a long breath. “You’re going to do well. Really well. She’s lucky.”

“Thank you.” I pushed past her, hoping my voice didn’t show the tears too much. “I’ll... um... bye, Annabel.”

“See you,” she said, her voice a distant dream, because that was all it could ever be. All we could ever be.

Chapter 18

Annabel

Kay slipped into the pool with all the grace of an elephant slipping into a delicate teacup. People usually said they sucked at swimming and were just slow and unsteady. Seemed like Kay actually meant it.

“It’s so cold,” she said, teeth chattering, as she clung to the wall even standing here in the shallow end. I slipped into the water next to her.

“You’ll get used to it in a minute. Just relax and don’t force your body into anything it’s not ready for. It’s okay if it takes a minute.”

She made a face. “Is that a thinly veiled metaphor?”

Seemed like everything I was saying was coming out a thinly veiled metaphor these days. I was probably just wistful after having run into Priscilla last night, after having seen that look in her eyes that was just so devastatingly, dismally sad.

“Hey, Annabel,” Emberlynn’s voice called from behind me, and I glanced back to where she stepped into the hall, slipping her jacket off on her way towards us. She stopped close by, glancing at Kay and back to me. “New girlfriend?”

“Kay’s a... friend from out of state,” I said. “She’s visiting. And she royally sucks at swimming, so this is a good opportunity. Do you want to hang with her while I go get the team set up?”

“You put too much stock in my abilities...” But Emberlynn shimmied out of her pants and down to her swimsuit, and she slipped into the pool, smiling at Kay. “Hey. Emberlynn. Nice to meet you.”

Kay lit up, because she was terrible at playing it cool. “Emberlynn Morgan Wood? The one with the long name?”

Emberlynn faltered. “I didn’t think I was that famous.”

“I’ve heard so much about you,” she laughed, and Emberlynn looked helplessly to me. I shrugged.

“Ask her if you want the details... I’m getting back to the others.”

Training was... fine. Priscilla wasn’t here today, off with Julia, and I kept feeling like I needed to check on her, call her up to things, look for her. It was a cold, empty spot she left behind, and it felt deathly quiet without her here even when the rest of the team was loud and chattering.

Plus, Paisley showed up halfway through practice, and that never ended well. I think she almost drowned Kay, but Emberlynn managed to keep her alive.

We at least made it through practice in one piece, and Kyle smashed his record time, mostly because Emberlynn was there and I think he still had a hopeless crush on her. And everything seemed to be in the clear wrapping up, Hazel and Connor the only ones left from the team, before a commotion from the smaller pool tugged my attention back, and my heart dropped at the sight.

Kay, standing up out of the pool, dripping wet, her hair plastered to her face, shivering from the cold, and there in the door, frozen with her hand on the door handle, was Gwen. And judging by the look of wide-eyed fear in Kay’s eyes, this wasn’t how she’d planned their together-at-last.

It felt like the world stopped turning for a second, frozen there waiting for them to make a move and break the silence, and Kay made the first move—the wrong move. She put her hands to her chest and said, “Gwen—”

Gwen snapped. She took two long strides forward, and without any hesitation, she shoved Kay backwards into the pool. Kay went with a shriek, landing in a splash that threw water all around the sides of the pool, and it was a small miracle Gwen didn’t jump in and drown her.

“You little—” Gwen started, her face red, eyes wide, breath short. “Is this what we’re doing? Two fucking years and you can’t bother to see me once, but you’ll come swim with Annabel?”

“Gwen, I—no,” Kay sputtered, splashing as she fumbled for the wall of the pool. “Oh my god, Gwen, it’s not like that—”

“Oh, is it not? What part of it is wrong, huh? Because it’s not the part about you avoiding me for two years. And it sure as hell seems like you’re swimming with Annabel!”

At the edge of the pool, Paisley clasped her hands together. “This is juicy—”

“Shut the fuck up, Paisley,” Gwen said, and it gave me the opportunity

to cut in between Gwen and Kay.

“Gwen, Kay is—”

She shoved me, too. I was no stranger to getting shoved into pools, so I landed with less shrieking and a bit more grace than Kay, toppling backwards and falling into the water, going under for a second before splashing back up to the surface. Gwen hadn't even finished getting changed, wearing a white dress shirt with two buttons left fastened over her one-piece, but she jumped into the pool anyway.

“I don't want to hear a word from *you* about Kay, asshole,” Gwen said. “You're there talking about how I need to break up with her and then the second I do—”

“*Gwen*,” Kay said, lunging forwards into the deep end and catching Gwen by the wrists. “I came here to tell you I'm sorry. To see you and tell you face-to-face—”

Gwen tugged her hands away. “And to spend some nice quality time with Annabel in the process?”

“I'm not—Gwen—” Kay fumbled, treading water. “Gwen, I can't swim—”

Gwen reddened, grabbing onto Kay's arms and steadying her. “Oh my god. How can you not swim?”

“I live in a landlocked state! We've talked about this!”

They fumbled and kicked for a good few seconds until they were stabilized at the edge of the pool again, and I took the opportunity in the second of crucial silence that settled in while they caught their breath.

“I wasn't doing anything with Kay, Gwen, and I think you know that,” I said. “She showed up at my place asking if I knew a place she could stay—”

“*Your place* why, exactly?”

I folded my arms, resting against the pool ladder. “Well, she told me some of the things you've told her about me.”

Gwen went pale. Kay looked up through her lashes at Gwen.

“I came here to see you,” she said, her voice soft now. “I wanted to tell you I'm sorry. I didn't take this—us—seriously enough. I was scared.”

“I can't believe you told her what I said.”

“I didn't know you hadn't told her!”

Gwen hung her head. “I don't want to come swimming anymore. I need to put my shirt through the laundry.”

Kay pursed her lips. “If you want me to stop talking and leave you

alone, you need to say it, not just ignore me.”

Gwen turned on her. “It’s—I—Kay, it’s too late now. I wanted you to come here to be with me, not to apologize. I finally get to see you, but only once you’ve broken my heart? Only once I don’t want to see you anymore? I don’t... I deserve better than that.”

Kay squeezed her eyes shut. “I... I know. You do. I guess I’m not really... expecting you to take me back. I just wanted to—”

“That’s enough. That’s more than enough. You could have just texted me. That seemed to work just fine for you for two whole years. I’m going home.” And without another word, Gwen turned around and climbed up out of the pool, marching across the hall and back through the door into the locker room. An oppressive silence settled over the hall, all eyes on Kay, and I just wanted to sweep her away from it all. Take her somewhere she could process this without onlookers.

I hoisted myself up out of the pool, offering Kay a hand. “Want to get away from here?”

“Mm.” She took my hand, letting me help her up, fumbling, out of the pool and onto solid ground. We didn’t say a word—painful silence the whole time we rinsed and got dressed, and we hit the street outside, walking slowly between the construction of old buildings on our either side, winding up a weathered stone stairwell and ending up before too much longer in my living room, where I broke the silence.

“I’m teaching a class again in an hour,” I said. “You can make yourself comfortable here or go out while I’m gone. I’ll leave the back door unlocked for you. I can’t leave the front door unlocked, or Paisley will come in and start cooking lasagna in my kitchen.”

Kay folded her hands at her waist, and she nodded. “Thank you... seriously.”

“Don’t mention it. Look after yourself for right now.”

She rubbed her arm. “I want to do something for you, too, you know... you’re being too good to me.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t say no if you went and got some food from Jeremy’s pub. It’s just off Hamlet Street. Just... Gwen normally goes there after five.”

“Mm.” She nodded, and I was out the door, but my thoughts were anywhere but with me while I led another kids’ class. Emberlynn caught me on the way out, an anxious smile on her face as she pushed the sport hall’s

glass double doors open ahead of me.

“Hey,” she said. “Is everything okay?”

“For me? Sure. For Kay, um... not yet.”

“All right if I walk with you?”

“Who would I be to turn down the company of the illustrious Emberlynn? When are you going to go catch up with your hot girlfriend, anyway?”

She laughed drily. “Next weekend. She had to get back right away to help direct a showcase, but... New York City takes it out of me a little bit. And admittedly, I miss Paisley when I’m away. So I’m just taking an extra week here. Also, will we ever reach a point where you stop lusting after my girlfriend?”

“Probably when you get married and then I’m lusting after your wife.”

She elbowed me lightly. “At least you’re upfront with your intentions.”

“As ever.”

“Hardly.” She shoved her hands in her coat pockets, turning her gaze to the sky as we walked down Willow Boulevard. The air smelled like crisp autumn, and the town was quiet right now—the wind rustling in the trees and the low murmur of noise from the bistro on the other side, and the sound of our boots crunching on the leaves that decorated the sidewalk. “You’ve been mercurial as ever with Priscilla, haven’t you?”

I wasn’t up to thinking about her right now. It felt like I’d swallowed nails every time I did. I hugged myself. “Scil and I... I’ve been very upfront and communicative with Priscilla.”

“She’s not the only one who can read your mind. You’re in love with her, aren’t you?”

I looked away. “Emberlynn... can we not have this conversation?”

“What happened to you being the hedonist who chased your own personal satisfaction?”

“It’s still right there. The same reason we broke up, Emberlynn.” I hunched my shoulders. “You had bigger dreams to pursue. I didn’t want to make you smaller. She has bigger dreams to pursue, too. I don’t want to make her smaller.”

“You really don’t seem to forgive yourself for...” She gestured vaguely. “For who you are.”

“I forgive myself. Just... it makes me incompatible with the exact kind of person I’m attracted to, I guess.”

She was quiet for a while, walking alongside me, and there were a few points where I thought she'd say something—pulling herself up and drawing a breath, but then losing steam and going back to the quiet walk alongside me. Finally, she sighed.

“So... Gwen's had a girlfriend.”

“Yup. Right around when Paisley broke into my house to throw a gold-medal party for Scil—for me and Priscilla and the whole team—Kay was supposed to be visiting, finally, for their two-year anniversary. Finally seeing each other in person. But Kay backed out, again. So Gwen broke up with her, and now Kay's here trying to win her back.”

“It's genuinely always something with sapphics, isn't it?”

“You'd know.”

She laughed. “Exactly. Speaking from experience. And you... you're, what, putting her up with a place to stay while she's trying to win back Gwen?”

“More or less...”

“You really do something for everyone, don't you?”

I glanced at her. “How do you mean?”

“Just that.” She shrugged. “You're there for everyone. It's kind of cool.”

I watched her for a while, but she wouldn't meet my eyes, just staring up to the sky. Eventually, I followed her gaze. “I'm just nosy.”

“There's a reason we live in a cozy place like this one. But you're different. You get it, don't you?”

“Pais is rubbing off on you. You're speaking in half-thoughts.”

“Ew. Don't insult me like that.” She gave me an odd smile. “Hey. Random question. What's your idea of a perfect life?”

I slouched. “I eat a cheeseburger every day and I'm surrounded by hot women who want to have sex with me.”

“Is Priscilla there?”

I rubbed my forehead. “Ugh. She's all the hot women in the fantasy. I'm not even interested in hooking up with other people anymore, either. It's like she's broken me.”

She stepped in front of me, turning to face me, stopping us in the middle of the quiet little turn of the brick-lined alley behind the flower shop, and she gave me a loaded look. “And Priscilla's perfect life?”

I felt my face burn, and I shoved my hands in my pockets, looking away. “How should I know?”

“Well, probably because you know her better than anybody and you absolutely know the answer and you can’t lie to me that you don’t.”

I hunched my shoulders. “Well, I don’t know. Deal with it.” I paused. “Mostly... because she doesn’t know, either. And she’s been looking for it.”

“You know—that’s also a part of a happy life. Looking for meaning. What does being happy *while* looking look like for her?”

I folded my arms, and I leaned against the brick wall, feeling the rough, coarse texture of it on my back as I looked up to the sky, streaked with white clouds. “I get it. Really. I know she likes me, a lot. That she has for a long time, too. And that she’d be happy with me, for a while.”

“*For a while?* What does that mean?”

“Forget it.” I shook my head. “She doesn’t want to risk my career over it. And I don’t want to make her feel responsible for that.”

“So both of you are just... holding yourselves back so you don’t get in the other’s way.”

I put my hands up. “What am I supposed to do, Emberlynn?”

She softened. “I don’t know. But I know you need to figure it out with her. It’s her life, too. Why not figure out what a happy life looks like for both of you? Because I think both of your happy lives include each other.”

I pursed my lips, looking down. Suddenly I just felt so... small. So weak, scared, vulnerable. And it was only once I was here that I realized how much time I’d spent running away from that feeling. “Do you... think so?” I heard myself say, my voice small, ragged.

“You know, maybe the time and place aren’t right.” She snorted. “Trust me. I know that feeling all too well. But I’ve seen you, Annabel. I know the way you look like you’re so fully *you* with her. And don’t think I haven’t noticed her being the same way. Don’t you think it’s worth finding a way to make it work? Even if you have to work around everything?”

I swallowed, my throat burning. Talk about embarrassing, getting... reduced to this over a crush. I knew as well as Emberlynn did, though, that it was hardly just a crush. “But she’s... leaving, you know. She’s working right now on moving to Cedarcrest. And if I asked her, then she’d... stay. I can’t get in the way of her dreams. It’s the *Olympics*.”

Emberlynn hung her head. “That’s familiar.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess so.”

She shrugged. “All you can do is trust her. And yourself.”

Trusting her was easy. But trusting myself?

Chapter 19

Priscilla

I shouldn't have been here.

Annabel's house was too nostalgic, tucked into a row of tall, slim buildings woven into the brickwork of the back street. With a dusty-red roof and shutters, and a little wrought-iron fence out front that ran the edge of the terrace up to the bistro and the specialty gifts shop tucked in next to it, it was a storybook picture, a charming place that felt like it was from years ago instead of weeks ago. I stood there at the front door, my heart hammering, until I gave up, resting my forehead against the stained wood and just breathing in the cold air.

Coach Julia really had no idea. I mean—that was the goal. If she'd known Annabel and I had been together, then we'd have had other problems. But it was torture to send me to Annabel's place after everything we'd been through. And after she'd just taken me to tour my new apartment—the place that was going to take me away from Bayview, from Annabel.

I told myself *just knock, just raise your hand and knock*, going over it in my head—I would just tell Annabel how Coach Julia had sent me, that I just needed her signatures on a few forms, and she wouldn't know just how much I always ached to run here and into her arms—but I couldn't get myself to move.

And then the door pushed open, and it sent me staggering backwards with a strangled gasp. A girl's voice gasped too, from the door—not Annabel's—and I went down hard, falling on my butt right in the entrance path up to the door. My face and my tailbone both burned as the door swung open, and a girl I'd never seen before rushed out, with blue hair and a nose piercing, and dropped to one knee looking at me.

“Oh my god, I am so, so sorry,” she blurted. “Are you okay?”

I burned. I could not do this. This was hard enough without realizing I’d just walked in on Annabel together with another girl. I felt queasy, and I dropped my gaze, pushing up to my feet. “Sorry. I’ll get out of your way. I didn’t mean to—”

“Oh—are you Priscilla?” She stood up with me, and she beamed at me. “You look just like Annabel mentioned.”

I felt like I’d just been spun around a few times. I blinked at the sudden dizzy sensation. “Just like... what?”

She rubbed her arm. “Sorry. My name’s Kay. I’m just... staying at Annabel’s house for a bit.”

The girl Annabel had mentioned. Not a rebound. And the one Annabel had... said a few things about me to. Butterflies suddenly went through every part of me, and I couldn’t breathe right. Why was Annabel talking about how I *looked*?

I knew she liked taking pictures. The thought of her sharing the pictures we took together, the little mementos documenting our dates... it had my head spinning.

“Oh...” I finally said, forcing my thoughts back into line. “Hey there. Annabel told me about you. You’re... staying with her for a bit, right?”

Kay hung her head. “So I guess the gossip about me hasn’t gotten to you yet. I guess I’m relieved.”

“Gossip?”

“Don’t worry about it... are you looking for Annabel?” She lit up. “She’s inside right now, making breakfast. I was just running out to grab some bread for her, so you can go say hi and join us for breakfast. She’d love to have you.”

“I—”

She put a hand up. “Don’t worry, she’s using the vegetarian sausages.”

Dammit. I was not going to cry in front of Kay. The expression on her face told me everything—that light in her eyes, the way she seemed to recognize me like an old friend. The excitement in it. This was a person who knew a little too much about me and Annabel.

She even knew I was a vegetarian. Annabel must have... talked about me a lot.

“I don’t want to interrupt anything,” I said, stepping back. “I just need her to sign some forms, but I can come back—”

Kay turned back, opening the door, and before I could grab her and put a hand over her mouth and drag her away anywhere it took to stop her, she shouted into the house, “Annabel! Priscilla’s here to see you about something!”

“Ah—can you not,” I pleaded, my voice falling off into the most helpless little plea, too late anyway. Inside the house, I heard something drop, and Annabel’s voice came from the kitchen.

“Who’s—what?”

Kay beamed at me. “She’s out of jasmine, so I’ll grab some for you too,” she said, and she took off for the entrance, leaving me reeling like I’d just been punched in the stomach.

I should have just run away, hidden from it all, and told Coach Julia to take care of this herself. I stood there frozen, my heart pounding in my ears, as Annabel was silent inside the house, a stalemate—and then, slowly, footsteps padding over the hardwood floor, and my heart dropped at the sight of Annabel there, wearing the same cute little apron she’d worn when she’d made me pancakes, the first time I’d spent the night with her. She came around the corner into the living room, eyeing me cautiously, and that wary look broke my heart at the same time it gave me some strange sense of hope—that feeling that maybe she was just as hurt in all this as I was.

“Hey,” she said, after a second, trying too hard to sound like everything was normal. “So... you met Kay.”

I ducked my head. “She’s... energetic.”

“Not the kind of person you’d expect to see dating Gwen, right?”

I shot my head back up. “She’s dating *Gwen*?”

“Oh, you haven’t heard?” Some of the light came back into her eyes, a smile playing over her lips. “She’s not. She’s Gwen’s ex.”

“Oh my god. Is that the gossip she was talking about?”

“Is it ever,” she laughed, leaning against the doorframe. “She was dating Gwen long-distance for two years, and Gwen finally called it off because Kay would never come to see her. Then one day Kay shows up on my doorstep saying she wants to apologize to Gwen. They met accidentally at the pool...”

“Is *that* what Olive was manic about?”

She gave me a deadpan look. “Scil, when was the last time you saw Olive *not* manic?”

“Okay, touché.”

She smiled wryly again. “Kay tried to apologize. Gwen pushed her into

the pool. Yelled at her for a while. That was Friday. Kay hasn't given up, though. She's a good housemate, so she's hanging out with me while she charts her next course of action."

I ducked my head, hiding a smile I had no right to right now. "I swear, I look away for two seconds... how was *she* with Gwen?"

"Exactly what I asked. She says they met through an online shooter game."

"Gwen plays online shooters?"

"Exactly what I asked!" She laughed, and I broke out laughing, too, but it caught in my throat with the cold realization hitting me again at where I was—at what I was doing.

She'd... called me Scil again. It must have just slipped out by mistake, but I'd missed it so much.

Annabel caught the change in mood, and we fell into a harsh, quiet second before she spoke.

"Do you... want to come inside? I'm assuming this is about the move."

I winced, guilt coursing through me, like I'd been caught in the act of something terrible. As if this wasn't what she'd told me to go do. "You know about it?"

She turned away, heading back for the kitchen. "Julia told me. Said you really seemed to like the place."

I'd hated it.

That wasn't fair—it was a lovely apartment along the upper west strip, a ten minute walk from campus, a gorgeous view out the window. I had an actual kitchen there, instead of the awkward kitchenette I had in my Bayview apartment, and the neighborhood was nice and quiet, charming. Sure, the wallpaper in the kitchen was something my grandmother's grandmother would wrinkle her nose at and call it dated, but... it was a nice place. And I'd told Coach Julia that. Pretended to love every single bit of it.

But that had been true of training, too. Even in all the ways it felt wrong, awkward, backwards—like I was swimming through something heavier than water, like my body just didn't cooperate anymore, like everything tired me out so much faster, and I was humiliated again and again and again next to the Cedarcrest girls when I was supposed to be the potential Olympian among them—no matter what, I put on a smile and said I loved it.

"It's pretty nice," I said, feeling self-conscious of every movement as I followed her inside, as I shut the door behind me. "The kitchen has the

tackiest wallpaper I've ever seen."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. I don't even know how to explain it. Grandma-chic florals and line illustrations of women in bonnets."

"Ew."

"Right? But... well, the rest of it is nice."

She sighed. I don't think it was about the wallpaper. "So, what do you need to see me about?"

I flinched under it like it was a rebuke. She got back to the stove, stirring a skillet of potatoes and peppers, sizzling loudly on the heat, and she kept herself busy with her back to me. I swallowed, hard. "There's some release forms Coach Julia needs you to sign."

"Hm." She kept her eyes on the skillet, stirring more than it needed. "How much has she gotten on your case telling you to just call her Julia already?"

"Oh—a few times." But dropping the *Coach* was just... for Annabel.

She laughed drily. "No surprise the girl's sending you to get my signature instead of just sending them to me. Julia and paperwork... not exactly best friends."

"So... can you sign them?"

She sighed, hard, and she turned off the skillet, set down the wooden spoon, and she turned back to me, leaning against the side of the cooktop. Her blue eyes fixed on me, an intense gaze there that tightened my chest until it was hard to breathe, and she stayed like that for a second before she spoke.

"Stay for breakfast."

"I—what?" My heart jumped. She nodded to the oven.

"It's vegetarian sausages, so... it's safe for you."

I swallowed, hard, but it didn't get rid of the lump in my throat. "I... er..."

"And Kay is grabbing bread to make toast, since I totally forgot I ran out."

"*Annabel.*" I felt myself burn, and I crossed my arms tightly. "You can't just... just... invite me for breakfast."

She avoided my gaze. "I... want your help."

"My... help?" I dropped my arms, cocking my head. "With what...?"

"Kay." She pursed her lips. "I can't help it. She's just so... indomitable. And so damn eager to make up for her mistakes. It's endearing. I was the one

cheering on Gwen to break it off with her, because I saw how much it was weighing on her, but... now I kind of want to see them get back together.”

“And... you want my help with it.” I dropped my gaze to the floor, my face hot. “Why me? I’m not really even a Bayviewer. I’m leaving, you know. And I was never really—”

“You *are* a part of the community,” she said, fixing her gaze so squarely on me that it made me burn. “And you have been. More than you realize. And besides. You have empathy.”

I flushed, hunching my shoulders. “It’s not a superpower. I’m just... good at figuring out what a person is thinking.”

“It’s not just that. It’s that you’re good at figuring out what a person is thinking, and what they want, and you try to help them. I don’t think you’ve ever realized how damn special that is.”

I felt a tense, anxious lump in my throat, my heart hammering. I couldn’t just... stand here and listen to Annabel tell me how special I was. But what else was I going to do?

“I know,” Annabel said, softening, “that you don’t have any obligation to this community. You’re free to chart your own course and do what feels right. But... I thought...”

My heart raced wildly, and my mouth felt dry, but I summoned the words to say, “You thought... what?”

She looked away. “I thought you could... have a better ending. To your time here. Something to let you remember Bayview as a place where you mattered to people. As a... place where you learned it’s okay to be you and have people know about it. Because if you’re going to Cedarcrest, then I...” She swallowed. “I want you to be happy there. And to be *you*.”

“Annabel...” My voice felt thin, my throat tight, the prickling of tears in my eyes. She shrugged, avoiding my gaze.

“And I thought I could bribe you with food.”

I took a long, shaky breath, trying to quell my hammering heart, but I didn’t get to find words. The door unlatched and swung open behind me, and I glanced back to where Kay came into the kitchen, a brown paper bag under her arm, beaming.

“Hey,” she said. “You’re staying for breakfast, right? I got the jasmine tea.”

Dammit. Annabel didn’t play fair, roping me in with something like that —*I want you to be happy there*—giving me the sweetest and the most

beautiful thing and making it a goodbye at the same time. If she said it like that, I'd have helped her a thousand times, with anything at all. Anything if I got to spend a little more time with her.

Also, Annabel was *really* right. Kay looked cute in her print sweater tucked into a miniskirt, but... *her*, as Gwen's girlfriend?

People surprised you sometimes. But they'd probably be cute together.

"Thank you," I said, finally. "I'd love some breakfast. I barely ate anything this morning."

Annabel relaxed, but there was still so much in the smile on her face—nerves, anxiety, a million unspoken things. "This is what I've always told you. You need to put food in your body, Scil."

I don't think she realized she'd just called me Scil again. My heart jumped at the sound. I wanted to listen to her slip up on it a million more times. "I wasn't hungry then..."

"Vegetarians have to be conscious of their iron intake. You're getting that darkness under your eyes when you're iron-deficient. I'll add some kale."

Dammit. How was I ever supposed to not fall in love with her?

Breakfast was delicious, because of course it was. Annabel always made the best food. Kay fit in easily, naturally, and honestly—I never would have thought I'd be grateful for a third person keeping me from being alone with Annabel, but it was easier to relax with her around. She was chatty, and curious about everything Bayview—from the stories she said about her family, I could see why she was all too happy to get away and spend some time getting to know the place her maybe-potential-girlfriend lived.

And me—well, spending time with Annabel came naturally. I still knew where everything in her house was. It felt like home. I brewed the tea, including the jasmine that Kay had brought, and it was just what I needed.

I'd had a lot of stress.

It was after a meal that felt too nostalgic for something that wasn't even fully behind me, when Annabel gestured me towards the basement door. "Oh—let me unload something else from the cluttered nightmare of my basement onto you. I think it'll be helpful."

"*Annabel.* Will you stop giving me things?"

She just smiled, and I followed her down the stairs, into the bare-wall setup of her basement, boxes and shelves cluttered with things squeezed in all around. She turned to me once we got to the bottom of the stairs, a playful

smile on her face.

“So,” she said. “Now that Kay’s not listening. You can see it, right?”

“Um... I actually can’t see her anymore.”

“Ha, ha. You can see the two of them, right?”

I laughed nervously. My heart wouldn’t stop beating faster and faster around Annabel, even in a situation like this where my heart was breaking every second I was with her. “Yeah,” I said. “I think I’d have to see them together to judge, but... it’s cute, at least.”

“Well, they don’t play very nicely together right now, but...”

“But sometimes you just need a minute.”

“Exactly.” She shoved her hands in her pockets, leaning back against the wall. “But you see it in her eyes, don’t you?”

I clasped my hands at my waist, nodding. “Yeah. Like she just... genuinely... really cares. About everyone. She reminds me of Emberlynn a little like that. And...” *And like you.* It died on my lips, too weak, too scared to ever say it. Annabel smiled lightly, and she broke me into pieces effortlessly.

“And like you,” she said, and I let out a small, breathless noise.

“I—Annabel,” I said, dropping my gaze. “That’s not true...”

“Is it not?”

“It’s—of course it isn’t! I’m—” I gestured around me. “I’m running away from all of this. Turning my back on everyone who’s always been so good to me. All just to... join the other team. Literally. I’m awful.”

She sighed, hanging her head, and I churned with the anxiety of it—wanting, needing her to say something, anything that could help—before she looked up at me with that playful spark in her eyes. And I’d missed seeing her like that, where something was happening, something that made her feel alive.

“Hey. Have you been to Emory’s shop?”

“Um... what?”

“It’s a handicrafts shop. Kind of out of the way, hard to find. Kitschy-cute.”

“I... um...” My heart hammered faster, my mouth dry. “No. Why?”

“I’m thinking we should... take Kay. Together,” she said. “You know—make sure she sees Bayview. And make sure *you* see Bayview.”

My chest ached, badly, and it broke me finally. I folded my arms, shooting her a look. “Oh my god, you’re trying to make me cry. You want

me to see everything cute and sweet and charming right before I leave, just so I can care about everything a lot?”

She raked her fingers through her hair, looking away. “You can at least pretend to buy my pretense about it being for Kay.”

“*Annabel*. We can’t be seen together—”

“Not alone. So... this is the best we can get.” She gave me a look that was—so shy, so vulnerable, so scared, and it took my breath away. It was so rare getting to see her like this, I wasn’t sure I’d ever *really* seen it. She whispered, gentle and soft, but aching all at once. “I know it’s self-indulgent. But *I’m* self-indulgent. I want more time together... Scil.”

My eyes burned, and I took a shaky breath, fighting back tears. “You... *really* know how to break a girl’s heart, don’t you? Going back in for round two?”

“Well, you know me. I’m never satisfied with one round.” She paused, scrunching up her face. “I didn’t mean that to sound... like that.”

I knew I should have said no, pulled away. Should have just given her the forms and left.

But just a little more time couldn’t hurt. I could afford some mistakes here if I was about to leave. Wasn’t that the whole point of what Mom had said?

I wiped my eyes, smiling through the thin, wavering tears. “I bet my mom would like some kitschy gifts. Let’s... bring Kay there.”

Chapter 20

Annabel

Emory's shop was as cute as I remembered it—it had been a minute since I'd been in the place, and of course, he'd been the first to put up Christmas decorations, fake snow in the windows even though we hadn't gotten our first snow yet. Mariah Carey and Christmas ornaments with tinsel hanging from the rafters gave me a distant sort of ache in my chest, seeing Priscilla light up at the sight of it all.

"It's so charming," Kay laughed, clasping her hands at her waist as she turned slowly, taking it all in. Priscilla, on the other hand, made a beeline for a wall of handmade jewelry, and I watched with a pang in my gut as she ran her fingers lovingly over the smooth metal of a twisted metal Celtic knot pendant.

"It is," I said, quietly. Kay raised her eyebrows at me, shifting closer.

She was quiet for a while before she murmured, "She is very beautiful."

I scowled at her, pulled suddenly out of the trance. "Are you checking her out?"

She elbowed me playfully. "Uh, no. Clearly that's your job. Just..." She smiled softly. "I can see why you like her so much. She's beautiful. And there's something about how she carries herself... she's the kind of person who's impossible not to like."

My chest aching again, I turned my gaze back to Priscilla, as she slid the pendant off the wall, holding it in her hands like it was the greatest treasure she'd ever seen. All those little things—cherishing tiny moments—I couldn't help falling for her over and over seeing them. "Yeah," I said, distantly, just before Priscilla turned back and came shyly towards us.

"Hey," she said. "Do you think Mom would like this one?"

“Let’s be realistic,” I said, putting on a cool, casual smile. “This is your mom, who adores you and misses you all the time. You could give her a stick and she’d cherish it forever.”

Priscilla rolled her eyes, smiling dryly. “Well, I’m not giving her a stick, so just answer the question, dork.”

“I think it’s gorgeous. A handcrafted gift made by someone in your town?”

Your town was too loaded when Priscilla had one foot out the door, but if she caught the faux pas, she didn’t react, just smiled sweetly at me. “I think I’m going to get it. Where’s the register?”

I jabbed my thumb to one side of the space, an empty register crowded in by knickknacks hanging from the ceiling and squeezed into shelves. “There, hypothetically. Emory will probably be manning it in fifteen minutes when he realizes he forgot the register. Might as well browse in the meantime.”

It took Emory twelve minutes to get back to the register, turned out. I found myself wishing he’d take longer. Walking between the shelves laughing over little things with Priscilla and Kay felt too right, and I was counting down every second.

I was clingy and Kay made a good excuse to keep touring the town, so after we left the shop, I took them both to the boba place at the north end, and I couldn’t get enough of the way Priscilla’s eyes shone at the sights—gushing over the cute designs the place was dressed up in, pressing her face up to the glass on the pastry case looking at the cute mini-cakes inside, and giving me those puppy-dog eyes that made me want to buy her any cakes she wanted. Not that I’d ever say no, anyway.

“I can’t believe I’ve never been,” Priscilla said, once we were sitting on the barstool counter at the window with our drinks and our cake—really the only place to sit in the cramped place squeezed into the block.

“It’s like a... hidden gem,” I said. “Hey, I’d have taken you earlier, if you’d ever focus on anything other than swimming and heading right back to campus.”

Priscilla pouted. “I’d have made a schedule exception if you’d told me how cute it is here.”

Kay ducked her head. “I hope you’ll find it in your hearts to forgive me if I say I’ve never had boba before...”

I sighed. “Knowing something about your parents, they’d probably call

it *the devil's balls* or something.”

Priscilla snorted. The look on Kay's face said it was a little too accurate to laugh at. “I think I'm hooked for life,” she said, closing her eyes contentedly as she took a long sip.

“So, that means you have to stick around, right?” I said. “No matter what happens with Gwen.”

She gave me a wide-eyed look. “What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean?” I shrugged. “Scil and I have gotten attached to you, so... you kind of have to stay.”

Priscilla ducked her head. I'd been shamelessly indulging in calling her *Scil* again, just because... I didn't know why. Because I loved her, and it was our thing. She hadn't called me out on it, so I was sticking with it. For at least the amount of time I still had.

Kay lowered her gaze. “I don't know... what there would be for me here if Gwen doesn't... it just doesn't feel right, you know?”

I pursed my lips, and I was quiet for a bit, but it was Priscilla who cut in.

“Annabel's right,” she said. “You aren't happy being with your parents, so... you should find somewhere that is happy for you. And Bayview is a really lovely place.”

Then why won't you stay? It was a pointless question, and one that died before it passed my lips. But that didn't mean it didn't hang in my mind, aching for me to ask.

Kay laughed softly, giving us an odd smile. “It's cute when you two do the whole double-teaming thing.”

“Oh—um—” Priscilla reddened. I bit back a smile, focusing on Kay.

“Just saying, you can do what you like. But if you want a place for a fresh start, Bayview is open to you. No matter what happens with Gwen. It would be awkward running into her if she still says no, but... you're both adults. You could find peace in it again.”

Kay looked down, staring at her drink. “I don't know... but I will say that the offer means a *lot*. Like seriously, a lot. Thank you.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but Priscilla shoved a forkful of cake in my mouth, and—well, I could never say no to Scil putting things in my mouth. “*Annabel*, oh my god,” she laughed. “Isn't this one so good?”

She had to have fully autopiloted to feed me her cake off her own fork. She'd probably turn lobster-red once she realized what she'd done. But I never minded that. “It is delicious,” I said. “Lucky you, because now you

know you can get as much of it as you want by giving me puppy-dog eyes.”

She laughed, going back to her cake and finally realizing what she'd done the second her fork hit the cake. Just as predicted, a nice scarlet shade flushed over her cheeks. “You, um... you always were willing to give me things.”

Well, I'd give her anything in the world if she asked. But that was part of the problem.

The day went on like that, still touring the town until it got dark, and it was once we got back to my house that I got to watch Priscilla fuss with her backpack, avoiding my gaze, and give me the cutest, worst excuse I'd heard in a while.

“I, uh... I forgot the forms I needed you to...”

I waved her off. “You can bring them around tomorrow. Kay and I can join you touring some more then anyway.”

She smiled at me sweetly through a soft blush, and she nodded. “I'll remember the forms then.”

I hoped she wouldn't.

Once Kay had taken her shower—she was an evening-showerer, and I used the opportunity to change into my loungewear—we crashed on the couch and watched TV for a while until Kay finally managed some words, but they weren't what I was expecting.

“Why are you letting her go?” she said, and I frowned at her.

“Who?”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh my god, like I was born yesterday. Who do you think, you goofball?”

I swallowed back the sudden dry cotton in my throat, turning back to the TV. “I've told half this town already at this point. Priscilla has bigger dreams to pursue.”

“Do they really make it impossible to be together?”

No. Obviously, it was just about keeping myself away, because I'd ruin her. She deserved a million times better than me—funny, sweet, charming, charismatic, full of ambition, full of dreams, full of that spark of life. I'd only ever dim her light. It had become obvious ever since my conversation with Emberlynn, but it didn't mean there was anything I could *do* about it.

“It's really not proper form to date a student,” I said. “Even a former student. The league head is on my ass about me and Scil.”

She frowned. “You can't just hide away from your feelings for each

other forever.”

I sighed, sinking back in the couch, and I picked up the remote and turned off the TV. “Hey, random question. What are your dreams?”

Kay lit up. “Okay, promise not to make fun?”

“I promise.”

“My biggest dream is to be, like, an influencer. Or maybe like, a streamer, or something. Just like, an online personality. I just want a platform and a big audience to gush about all the things that excite me. That’s the goal.”

I gave her a playful little sidelong smile. “That’s what you were afraid of being made fun of for? I was expecting, like, that you wanted to be a princess. Or maybe a porn star.”

“Just the princess of Gay Nerd-ia.”

“That one I can see.”

She laughed, kicking her feet up on the ottoman. “What’s yours?”

I scrunched up my face. “Eating a cheeseburger every day and being surrounded by hot women who want to have sex with me.”

“Come on,” she laughed. “You have a real dream.”

I shrugged. “Dunno. I just want to enjoy life in the day-to-day.”

“So, why don’t you?”

“What?” I gave her a look. She raised her eyebrows.

“What, what? Why don’t you just enjoy life in the day-to-day?”

“Well... probably because I’m sad about how things happened with Priscilla, if you must know the details.”

She rolled her eyes. “Ugh, you’re impossible. You *do* have a dream, and it’s living a big and fulfilling life alongside the person you love.”

That sounded *lovely*, but I couldn’t even commit to a single person. But Kay didn’t need to know how hopeless, how helpless I was in the face of my own feelings.

“All right, all right,” I said. “Taken on board. Forget about me. Do you have any big online personalities you’re a fan of?”

She grinned. “Only, like, a million. I’m online friends with a bunch. Want to watch one of my favorite Youtubers?”

“Hit me.”

“Hope you’re ready to see the prettiest gift-wrapping in your life,” she said, snatching up the remote. “This girl Iona runs a whole channel just about wrapping gifts—”

“Hold on. You went on talking about *gay nerd stuff*, you love video games and Dungeons and Dragons, and you’re into a... a gift-wrapping Youtuber?”

She grinned. “Iona has universal appeal. Just go with me on this.”

Well, who was I to say no? Kay had a persuasiveness about her. She and Paisley would probably get along.

We watched Iona wrap presents while Kay gushed about her and all her other content-creator friends, about the kind of things she wanted to try, and as I found myself in bed that night staring at my phone with the picture of Scil with her first gold medal, I couldn’t help wondering, *if those are the things she wants to try, why doesn’t she just try?*

But maybe I could have been asking myself that, too.

The next afternoon found Priscilla at my door again, and she gave me a sheepish look.

“I, um... was just showing up when I realized I forgot the forms again... do you want me to go back?”

I leaned against the doorframe. “I’d forgotten about this shirt. You wore it all the time last winter. I guess that means it’s officially winter now?”

She laughed, looking down at herself—a fitted black turtleneck that accentuated the curves of her figure, her light hair contrasted against the dark. She looked good like this. What didn’t she look good in, though? “I didn’t realize you’d been cataloguing my shirts.”

“Coach has got to know things about her team. We can do the forms tomorrow. Classes were good today?”

Her eyes sparkled as I let her inside. “I passed my lit exam, so—”

“When you say passed, you mean you got an A.”

“Well, yeah. Barely.”

I rolled my eyes, smiling, pushing down the ache in my chest thinking all of this was going away so soon—the playful banter, the intimate familiarity of everything about her. “What do you say to taking Kay to the boardwalk today? There’s a café right near there that offers the most amazing hot chocolate this time of year.”

She folded her arms. “Cake and boba and hot chocolate? You’re going to get me out of shape.”

“Mm-hm. It’s my wicked plan to bring down Cedarcrest.”

She snorted, but the name brought a shadow over her face that disappeared as quickly as it appeared. I wondered if anyone but me would be

able to pick it out. “Well, I’m in,” she said. “I can’t wait to see Kay freak out about the bridge.”

“I don’t know if she’s going to be too scared to cross or if she’s going to dangle off it.”

She laughed, beaming. “Definitely leaning towards dangling. She’s so free-spirited. And there’s something so... liberated in how she carries herself. I think she’s excited finally discovering who she can be. I feel like she probably wasn’t like this before and is just happy to be her.”

It turned out she was right. When we got to the rope bridge along the boardwalk, Kay laughed and spun across it, rocking the bridge from side to side, enough that I got a little queasy and had to clutch to the sides until Priscilla laughed herself breathless at the face I was making. After that and all the shopping along the upper reaches of the boardwalk, sitting down was all too relieving at the café, a cute place right on the water. We sat by the big windows, sipping our hot chocolate and watching the night creep up over the ocean, and with the way Kay lit up and laughed over every little thing, I couldn’t help dwelling on what Priscilla had said.

Bringing her on for this had just been an excuse to get more time with Priscilla, but I’d been right, too—she did read Kay like a book.

She read *me* like a book, too. She knew things about me that nobody else did. And suddenly, sitting there between the two of them, feeling miles away from the conversation, I couldn’t bear it any longer—I stood up, made up an excuse about going to the bathroom, and I went around the corner before leaving the building, stepping out onto the boardwalk and leaning against the railing just to breathe in the fresh air coming in off the ocean.

It was sweet. Soothing. The kind of balm I needed. Except that I jumped and whacked my knee against the rail when someone leaned against it next to me.

“Christ,” I muttered, rubbing my knee, before I shot a look at where Gwen, wearing a wool coat and high-waisted pants, leaned against the railing, not even looking at me.

“You could be held liable for damages if you knock the railing off into the water,” she said, her voice distant.

“Might as well just creep up and shove me into the water next time.”

“It’s *you*. I’d have a better chance of killing you on land.”

“Fair point. Guess I’ll just get around via water, move to the river and swim everywhere I want to go.” She didn’t say anything, and I leaned against

the railing with her, listening to the far-off gull cries, the sound of the ocean rumbling against the beach filling the air. Finally, I said, “What’s got you out brooding by the ocean, anyway?”

“As if you don’t know?”

I paused. “How did you even know she was here?”

She hung her head over the railing. “I’d been up at Gigi’s, saw you three go by, and I spent the next fifteen minutes thinking things over. And by thinking things over, I mean having a panic attack.”

“Are you okay?”

She wrinkled her nose, glowering at me. “Don’t give me sympathy. I’d rather you punched me in the nose.”

“Uh-huh. So I’m taking that as a yes.”

“Of course I’m not okay, my ex is here in town while the girl who convinced me to break up with her is trying to convince her to win me back.”

I sighed, leaning back against the railing, casting my gaze up to the sky, where the sun dipping lower on the horizon cast the sky in shades of gold and vermillion over the town. “She’s charming,” I said, finally. “I see why you like her.”

“I do not. I want nothing to do with her.”

“Uh-huh. If that were the case, you wouldn’t be having panic attacks.”

She huffed, folding her arms and looking away. After a minute, she muttered, “Why?”

“Why wouldn’t you be having panic attacks?”

“Why the sudden about-face on her? Just because you saw her in person and you think she’s cute and you’re into nipple piercings?”

“Well, that was something I entirely did not want to know about her, but thank you for that.” I put my hands up. “It’s because the situation changed. And I think you know that. You loved her, she loved you, but she was too scared to act on it. Now she has that strength.”

She shot me a look. “Right after I went through hell to break up with her? That’s the timing we’re going with?”

“It’s *because* you broke up with her. That was something you had to do before you could be together. Not just for her, but for you. You understand, don’t you?”

I saw a hundred emotions pass over her face, and then a crestfallen, heartbroken look, an entire breakup’s worth of pain and the whiplash of going right back into this, all there in her eyes. When she spoke, it was quiet,

small. “I had sex with Will.”

“Ew. I don’t want to know about sex with men.”

“I had sex with Charlie, too.”

Girl had been as busy as she’d promised. “Well, not a man. I will give you that. How was it?”

“It was fun. But I think it was only fun because I was getting to explore the things I could do. Looking back, all I could think about was Kay.”

I looked down. “That’s normal in any breakup. Including when you rebound. And especially if you still love the person you broke up with.”

She put a hand to her forehead. “What am I supposed to... do, Annabel?”

“You don’t have to take her back,” I said, softly. “I know you probably feel like I’m pressuring you into it. Like it’s what you’re supposed to do right now—that you had a criterion for being together, and now it’s met, so you have to uphold it. And I know you don’t like feeling like you have to do something with your own heart.”

She laughed. I frowned at her, and she shook her head. “Priscilla’s really rubbed off on you.”

I frowned. “I wasn’t—”

“Your sense for people.” She turned her gaze back to the horizon over the ocean. “You wouldn’t have been able to work out this whole thing with Kay like you have if Priscilla hadn’t rubbed off on you. You’re a different person from when you were with Emberlynn, when you were with Harper.”

I rubbed my forehead. “Gwen, if this is you telling me to get together with Priscilla—”

“You stopped doing casual so you could focus on yourself, on what you really want, on what you’re really looking for in life. I’m just saying, it seems to have led you to Priscilla.”

I didn’t say anything, just feeling my heart pounding. Something about it made it feel real—like Priscilla was a real person I *could* date, as if it had only ever been a dream before, a fantasy, and I was forced to face it. But even before I could get into all the reasons it was impossible, Gwen shook her head.

“Goes the other way, too. You’ve rubbed off on Priscilla, too. She’s a lot stronger now than she was before you were dating. More self-assured. You two complete each other.”

“Gwen. Please. You’re hurting me.” I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Scil’s leaving. Yes, I adore her and I want nothing more than to just run off into the sunset with her—”

“Then do it, dammit. If I can face this with Kay, it’s only fair you face it with Priscilla.”

“It’s not the—” I stopped. “Do you mean you’re going to talk to Kay?”

She let out a short, sharp breath of air. “Isn’t that the million-dollar question?” she said. “I should. But I’m... scared.”

I studied her for a while before I followed her gaze out to the horizon, watching waves crest over the water. I meant to say something like *that’s normal*, or maybe *it’s a sign you’re confronting the right things*, but instead, I heard myself whisper, “Me too.”

She sighed, and we were quiet for a second where my heart was pounding. She glanced sidelong at me, a dry smile on her lips. “Never thought I’d be alongside you in something.”

“Yeah, yeah. Pretend you can’t stand me. Kay told me—”

She blanched. “I forgot about that.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What did she tell you?”

“Ask her.”

“Bastard.” She laughed, a small thing but a genuine one, and she turned back to the water. “I’m not... brave enough right now. But do me a favor and tell her to... not... go home yet. And...” She picked at the wood. “And tell her I said thank you. For coming here. Even if I’m still upset.”

“I will.”

She paused. “Do you think she’ll be mad I had sex with Will and Charlie?”

“Did either of them get you pregnant?”

She shot me a look. “Are you asking if *Charlie* got me pregnant?”

I put my hands up. “Hey, I don’t know what she’s got.”

“No, neither of them got me pregnant.”

“Then I think she knows it’s none of her business. I mean, hell, knowing her, she’ll probably be happy for you enjoying yourself. Even if she’ll also be jealous.” I put a hand on her shoulder. “But there’s only one way to know for sure what she’s feeling.”

“Ugh. Just promise me you’ll at least *try* with Priscilla.”

I sighed. “I’ll... talk to her. At some point. Before she moves.”

“Talk. And tell her what?”

I closed my eyes. “I don’t know. I’ll figure that out first.”

“Unbelievable. Well, I’m being no better.” She shrugged, leaning back against the railing. “Here’s to being in love and scared to death of it.”

“Cheers to that,” I said, leaning against the railing with her, and we listened to the waves rolling against the coastline, indefatigable.

Chapter 21

Priscilla

I didn't think I could ever thank Kay enough. Just... for being here. For being in the right place at the right time and giving me and Annabel an excuse to spend just a bit more time together.

I "forgot" my forms the next day, too, but Annabel didn't even ask. Seeing everything in Bayview was such an ache in my chest—all of it so sweet, so beautiful, so touching, all of it feeling like *home*, but all of it so far away, too.

It was another day after that, the last day before I needed to bring Julia the forms and move, when we'd squeezed into the boba place again, at the end of a long evening, and Kay's eyes sparkled as she looked up at the menu. The sheer joy she had at all of Bayview made my chest hurt, a kind of jealousy I didn't dare place.

There was something more there, though—a kind of distant feeling in her eyes, in how she carried herself. Something had happened today—something she was keeping to herself.

But I couldn't pay attention to her for very long, anyway. Annabel, as she always did, dominated my thoughts. And I didn't realize I was staring at her until we sat at the same spot at the window and she glanced at me, meeting my gaze. I flushed, looking away, but I felt Annabel's gaze steadfastly on me anyway—looking at me, drinking me in—and it made my knees weak.

God, if I could be that bold. I'd throw myself on her right now, kiss her furiously, ask her to have me whatever happens. But I'd always been too afraid.

But what use was it? The night creeping in over the horizon left a

sinking dread in my stomach, a bad taste in my mouth. I felt like I was grasping at the remaining bits of time we had like sand slipping between my fingers. I'd brought the forms this time, nestled in my bag. And tonight, I'd have to actually get those signatures, and then it would be goodbye. A real goodbye this time.

"So?" Annabel said, finally turning her gaze past me, to Kay. "Have you decided to stay?"

Kay's face fell, and she looked down at the plastic tabletop, cradling her drink in both hands on it. "Um... I don't really know."

"Do I need to take you to more cute shops? This town only has so many shops."

Kay smiled thinly, but she didn't say anything. Something compelled me to speak up, my heart pounding suddenly.

"What happened?" I said, and she looked at me, wide-eyed.

"Tons of things have happened. Do you wanna specify or something?"

"To you. Today." I folded my hands on the tabletop, dropping my gaze. "You've had something on your mind all day. You know it's... it's safe to share it with us. If you want."

Kay blinked fast, before an odd smile tugged at her lips. She glanced at Annabel. "She's—"

"She always does that," Annabel said.

I flushed hot. "What? What do I do?"

Kay let out a heavy sigh. "It's nothing big... you don't need to worry about it. But I appreciate it."

I chewed my cheek. "You say that, but... but you get that specific look in your eyes when it's something about your parents. And I know how you talk when you're feeling like your independence, your self-determination, is limited."

Kay just raised an eyebrow at me. "You're doing it again."

"I'm—doing what?" I flushed hotter. Annabel chimed in.

"Like I said, she always does that."

"I always do *what*?"

"You weren't kidding," Kay said. I hugged myself.

"Oh my god. I'm not getting any answers."

Kay put a hand to her forehead, turning back to the window. "They got on my case this morning, asking me when I was coming back, saying I'd been gone for too long. I told them it would just be a bit longer, but..."

But now that she was here, she didn't want to go back. I could see it plain as day in her eyes—she'd come here for Gwen, but she hadn't even realized what else she was missing. A home, a community, a safe place to openly be herself. The way she held herself was so different now just from when I'd met her, and she'd already been opening up before then. Back with her parents, she'd lived through their eyes. Now, she was finally getting to be Kay.

And it seemed like a terrible shame to have to put away something like that. Someone so full of life, of vitality—that deserved to be cherished. She inspired me in a lot of ways, too.

I put a hand on her arm, and I spoke softly. "It's a sort of kindness," I said, "I think, to share yourself with people who like you, rather than with people who want to change you."

She turned to me, surprise over her face, before she melted into a laugh. "You're doing it again," she said, and I felt my face burn.

"Oh my god."

"I guess..." She dropped her gaze to the floor. "I guess you're not wrong. And I *want* to stay here. But I don't want to cause problems, you know?"

"Even if you *did*," Annabel said, "it's perfectly possible to cause problems, and still bring enough joy that it's worth it. You don't have to be flawless to be damn well treasured. Paisley and Emberlynn will adore you. Harper's going to laser in on things about you she can use to convince you to buy cakes."

Kay laughed, a dry and tear-streaked laugh. "I can see it..."

"Besides," Annabel said, gesturing to the corkboard full of papers pinned up by the door, "looks like this place is hiring. Maybe you can work here while you find your footing."

Kay beamed. "You know? That sounds like fun."

"I'll put in a word for you," Annabel said. "I'm friends with one of the managers here, Dani. She'll love you."

I sighed. "When she says *friends with*, she means—"

Annabel put her hands up. "Okay, I slept with her a few times, is more accurate. But I pet-sit for her sometimes too."

Kay laughed, wiping her eyes. "You're both seriously the best, you know that? I really appreciate you."

"Hey, right back at you," Annabel said. "I'm glad you came here."

Kay breathed in deep and let it out slowly, spinning the straw around inside her drink. “I... think... I’m going to go to find Gwen.”

I turned on her in the same moment as Annabel. “That’s—huge,” I said. “When?”

“Tonight. Um—probably right now, before I lose my guts, if I’m being honest. If she slams the door in my face, I think I’ve reached the point where I’m okay with that. But... I know her. I know when she needs time. And I know how much time she needs when she needs time. So I want to... you know... try.” She sucked in a breath, the tension written all over her face, set in the corners of her eyes. “And based on what happens, I’ll decide if I’m staying. If she tells me to leave Bayview, I will. And if not... I think I’ll...” She straightened. “I think I’ll meet your friend-with-benefits.”

I hung my head. I think *I’d* been Annabel’s most recent friend-with-benefits. Only because we didn’t have the courage to call each other girlfriends, though.

“She’s just a friend now,” Annabel said lightly. “Might sink your job chances if you go to her talking about her sex life.”

“I’ll behave,” Kay laughed. Annabel straightened, and she spun around and stood up, away from the counter.

“If you need to go right now, then go. Get your girl. And if you need something to help your chances, maybe stop into Jeremy’s pub on the way and grab her some onion rings. Those make a perfect bribe.”

Kay stood up with her, eyes sparkling. “Oh my god, I’d almost forgotten how much she loves them,” she said. “I’ve seen her with them on video calls like a million times. She likes them with the mint sauce, too.”

Annabel raised her eyebrows. “She never told *me* that.”

“She’s a little shy.” She took a long breath. “Um... I don’t know how to thank you—either of you—”

“Thank Annabel,” I said, standing up with them. Annabel waved her off.

“Don’t thank Annabel,” she said. “I just did what anyone would do. Welcome to Bayview. Good luck.”

Kay had nervous energy coursing through her body the whole way out the door and down the street, and I felt like I was strained to my breaking point just watching her—like I was feeling the nerves secondhand.

Or maybe it was just that when she left, it was just me and Annabel side-by-side under the flower hangers out front of the boba shop, and suddenly, after almost two years being by her side, I didn’t know what to say anymore.

Like we'd said everything there was to say, and at the same time like there was too much to even know where to begin.

I shoved my hands in my coat pockets, ducking my head. "So... um... I remembered the forms this time."

"Right." She hung her head. "I asked you for help with something, and it looks like we've done... well, all we can. I can probably return the favor, finally."

"It wasn't a favor. I genuinely wanted to help." I kicked at the pavement idly. "Kay is... it's really hard not to root for her."

"Yeah. Bayview's gonna be lucky to have her." She turned her gaze to the sky. "Nothing's going to..."

I looked up at her. "To what?"

"Forget it."

I shifted closer to her side. "Tell me?"

She hunched her shoulders. "Let's head back to my place. I can sign the stuff there."

My heart pounded with an anxious sensation the whole way back, sticking close to her, neither of us daring to say a word. Her house was warm, once we stepped inside and shut the door behind us, shrugged off our coats, stepped out of our shoes—she'd always kept it a couple degrees warmer than other people. Just another little thing I'd never forget about her.

I counted them like stars in the sky. How she hung her coat up on the second peg from the left. The one on the left had been Harper's, back when they were dating. Annabel had moved her coat to the second, and it had stuck. How she kicked her sneakers off instead of untying them, even though she'd have to untie them to get them on again next time. How she stopped to take a sip from the sticker-covered water bottle she kept around the house every time she got home. It struck me how she wasn't one thing, one person—she was a mosaic, as I guess we all were, a million tiny things that made a bigger picture. And it was probably the rose-tinted vision of young love that made it seem so, but surely it was once in a lifetime, to find someone where I would fall in love with every individual shard of the mosaic?

She closed her eyes once we sat down at the kitchen table. The moment was heavy, like a damp towel over the shoulders, like the weight in the muscles after a long swim. Outside the window, a lonesome winter wind howled in the distance, over the ocean.

"So, the forms," Annabel said. I fumbled with the pages as I got them

arranged, set them out on the table, slid them across to her. It was pitiful—this small sheaf, just six papers, four of them needing signatures, and that was all I'd stalled for. Four signatures and I was off the team. Four signatures and I was a Cedarcrest swimmer instead. How small was it?

"I'm sorry for bothering you over this," I said.

"Please. I'm going to remind Julia that copy-printers exist. You'd think she's ninety, not thirty-five." She pushed her chair back, rustled in the drawer for a pen, uncapped it. One signature, scrawled on the page. Annabel kept her gaze fixed down, squarely on the paper. Another signature. And she murmured it like she didn't even know she was saying it. "I'm going to miss you."

It felt like a physical blow, leaving me reeling, tears prickling in my eyes. I swallowed. "I'm... you can't say that, Annabel. You're going to make me cry."

"Sorry." She shook her head, frustration flaring over her face. Frustration with herself. Never with me. She'd never once been. "Forget I said that."

I squeezed my eyes shut. *You can't put the genie back in the bottle.* I didn't say it out loud, though. What would be the point?

More like the monkey's paw than the genie. I knew what my wish would be. And I knew what the dark, twisted consequence of it would be. If she ruined her career for me, what would it make her think of me? How would she look at me?

She scrawled the third signature, and then the fourth. Stacked up the papers, set them down, and then hesitating like she didn't know what to do with herself, she finally pushed them over to me. "All good."

"Thank you..." I didn't take them. It felt like the dream that had been his week would shatter if I touched them, if I made it real.

She moved to say something, stopped, and then with a frustrated rush, she capped the pen back up. Put it back in the drawer, stood up. "I'm going to..."

She didn't need to come up with the excuse. I got it. I nodded, picking up the papers, a sinking feeling in my stomach. "I'll get out of your hair. Um... sorry for hanging around on you."

She gave me the kind of sad little smile that crushed my heart, ached that there could be anything I could do to make it better. "You're going to do great, Scil. The Olympics aren't ready for you. You haven't peaked at all."

This woman. My eyes burned, and a sick feeling sank in my stomach. I sniffed back the tears, swallowing hard against it. "I... thank you, Annabel. For everything."

I walked slowly, on heavy footsteps, towards the door—it felt like a dream, where moving didn't work right, where everything was harder than it should have been, where distances stretched out forever. My hand on the doorhandle. I was taking it one step at a time. And...

"Scil," Annabel said from behind me, and I turned back to where she leaned against the wall behind me, avoiding my gaze.

"Annabel?"

She chewed her cheek. "What I was saying was *nothing's going to replace you, though.*"

It didn't hurt the way I expected—a dull, tired pain instead of the sharp, stabbing ache for her I'd have thought. I looked down, suddenly so weary, so weary. "Kay fits into Bayview better than I do," I said. "She'll—"

"No."

I stopped, looking up at her. She fixed her gaze on the window.

"No. I told you, back when Emberlynn and Aria came back to visit. People... will miss you more than you ever realized."

"Annabel—"

"I'll miss you. More than you know." She forced her gaze back to me, those gentle blue eyes finding me, like electricity—terrifying and beautiful all at once. "I was talking to Gwen the other day. She told me something I'd never really realized. I... you... you've helped me be who I am, Scil. I don't think you know that."

My heart hammered, pounding wildly, out of control, but I pursed my lips and forced my thoughts back into line. "I'm not... you don't need to say things like that just to make me feel better—"

"Trust me. If I were just saying the things I should be, I'd have signed those forms days ago and sent you away, like a professional. But screw that. I signed the release forms. You aren't my student now. You always talked about how I made you, but you have no idea how much you've made me. When I stopped having hookups, casual relationships, everything, it was out of shame. But..." She looked down. "But I think it was lucky I did. For a completely separate reason. I was able to focus on me, on what I feel, what I think."

I didn't dare even breathe, fear that the tiniest movement would shatter

the moment, rip down the curtains between us and the real world. My heart pounded, and my hands shook. Annabel walked towards me, and I found myself powerless to resist—not that I'd ever want to—as she took the bag out of my hands and hung it up on the wall, on that first peg on the left.

“And I think I know what I want now,” she said, softly, her hands slipping into mine. My head spun, and some wild part of me dared to hope, dared some kind of wild dream that maybe she was going to ask me to run away with her. But I knew that look in her eyes, the deep sadness, the look of a woman saying goodbye. “You’ve been there in all the right ways at all the right moments, you know. And I’m going to miss you... so damn badly.”

I breathed hard, hot and heavy, through the tears. “You’re such a jerk,” I said, my voice thick with crying. “You could have just let me walk out that door without making me cry like a baby—”

“And be the only one crying like a baby?”

I sniffled. “I was still going to do it, just... not... where you had to see me.”

She smiled, a sad but sweet little smile that cut right through to my core. “I was too scared to say it earlier, but I should have. I guess it’s better late than never, though. I want you to know I... I love you, Priscilla. You’ve meant everything to me. You always will.”

Dammit. I’d dreamed of her saying it and the fireworks, the laughter, the tears—tears of joy, not this. Never this. I swallowed back the lump in my throat, and I squeezed her hands. “I love you, too,” I whispered. “In everything you are. *Everything.* And I don’t... I don’t want to go.”

She forced a smile. “But you want to be all the things you can be. You want to be an Olympian. It’s that... relentless courage to go for what you want that makes me fall in love with you, Scil. And I don’t want to get in the way of what you can be.”

The tears ran freely now, leaving hot trails down my cheeks. “I don’t care about the Olympics, dammit. I want to be with *you*. It’s always been you.”

“Sweetheart. Don’t do that to yourself.” She squeezed my hands. “What you’ve always wanted is to be great. To be something you’re proud of. To make your mom proud. To find out just how high you can go. No amount of me loving you will make me right for you. I’m only going to hold you back.”

“You’re *wrong*,” I blurted, my voice shuddering, crackling with tears. “That’s never, *ever* been true. I don’t recognize myself in training. It’s like

I'm a shadow of who I am with you. It's impossible to focus on my studies. I'm *useless* like this. I'm so much better with you..."

"It's natural when you're heartbroken," she whispered, running her thumb over that spot on the back of my hand that she used to when I'd get hurt training too hard and just needed her to baby me. It left me dizzy. "And I know it hurts. I know it's horrible. Trust me that I know it all too well. But you're going to soar so much higher. I'm not... like that, you know, Scil. I'm just me. A girl without the dreams, just... looking for my next night with a woman."

"That's not *true*," I said, my throat tight. "How—" I pulled back, something red-hot flaring up in my face, and I gestured wildly at her. "How can you not see it? You know me so damn well, so perfectly, every little thing about me, but you don't know a damn thing about yourself, do you?"

"I—" She furrowed her brow.

"There's a million, a billion people out there with small dreams, without ambitions. Just to carry on, to have a nice life, not to do anything extraordinary. Do you realize that?" I clenched a hand at my collar, my face burning with the intensity of the moment, of—everything. "People are happy like that. The reason you're so ashamed of this idea is that you *aren't* that."

"But—"

But for once in my life, I wasn't letting Annabel get a word in. It felt like my body was getting away from me, something possessing me to speak, words tumbling out of me in a waterfall. "You told me basically the same thing. That people peak not because they did something they can never outdo, but because they did something that makes them get complacent and give up. Even if you didn't have great dreams and ambitions, I'd still love you exactly as you are, but it isn't *true*. The reason you're so fixated on this is because you *are* more than this, bigger than this. And I just..."

The moment caught up to me. A weight settled over me, and I sagged, dropping my gaze to the floor. My voice slipped out as a small, breathy thing.

"I just want you to know. Even once I'm gone. That you've always been my biggest inspiration. You are so much more than you're afraid of."

Annabel put a hand to her forehead, letting out a slow breath, as she raked her hand down over her face. Finally, she mumbled, "You always did have me outmatched. So completely."

"It's true, you know," I said. "Every word of it."

"But... if it's true..." She hugged herself, so many insecurities,

vulnerabilities drawn over her face. “How am I supposed to know what I *do* want?”

“You already do.” I kicked at the floor, just for somewhere to keep my gaze. “You want to be incredible. Unforgettable. You want to be... treasured. And wanted. And you want to be with someone who’s the same way. Someone you support in being that way. Someone who supports you in being that way, too. I like to think that... in another universe, that could have been us.”

She fell against the wall next to me, sinking with her back to the wall, looking at the floor with me. We stayed like that, heart-pounding silence, before she breathed a quiet, “Maybe you’re right.”

“No *maybe* about it. I know I’m right.”

“I like your assertive side.”

I smiled, but it flickered away like a dying bulb. Annabel looked away.

“It was the same thing with Harper, with Emberlynn,” she said, her voice a distant whisper. “I wasn’t... you know. Up to their levels. They were both just so... *themselves*, so full of potential, and they shone so bright. And you’re like that more than anyone I’ve ever known. Why... why? Why do I always end up like this?”

“You seek out in other people what’s important to yourself, that’s why.”

She turned to me with tear-streaked eyes, and it hurt like a gash across my chest. “You always did see me on levels nobody else ever could.”

My throat tightened, and I looked down. “You let me. And you always see me the same way.”

“I love you. I have for quite a while. And it... would be nice if we could be together.” She laughed drily, bitterly. “Isn’t that a cliché? The gentle, sweet girl winning the charming rogue, getting her to settle down after all.”

It felt like my heart was cut open and bleeding love out onto the floor, so much adoration right there where it was impossible to miss it, and leaving me hollowed out, empty, lifeless. But I gave her a dry smile, nudged her playfully. “I meant what I said, you know. I wouldn’t mind you sleeping with other people. I know you. Even when you give your body to other people... you only ever give your heart to one, don’t you?”

She stared at me, brow furrowed. I shrugged.

“What? It’s not like you were going off falling in love with other people while you were dating people. It’s only ever been physical attraction to other people.”

“How do you place that when *I* didn’t even place that?”

I pouted. “*Because*, all you do is look for an opportunity to beat yourself up. I told you, I don’t have a problem with the way you love, Annabel. I never have. You’re a physical person. The way you’ve shown me love has always been physical—helping me train, paying attention to my body and what it needs, noticing my signs for when I’m uncomfortable. You wanting sex—and a lot of it—is just an extension of that. I think it’s a beautiful thing.”

She let out a long, slow breath, her gaze drifting up to the ceiling.

“Besides, you are *really* good in bed.”

“Can I... make a selfish request?”

My heart jumped, and I turned to her. “You can ask for anything at all.”

“Two selfish requests, then.” She met my gaze with a shy, nervous look, vulnerable, but staying strong. It made my heart ache so badly, I didn’t have the words for it. “Say you... go off to Cedarcrest. You train for the Olympics. You head to the Olympics and you live the life you’re proudest of, being the Olympic champion I know you can be. Once that’s happened... and once the day comes that you want to hang it up...” She dropped her gaze to my collar. “If you haven’t found anyone else by then. Can we... try again? Once the stars are aligned and the time and place are right...?”

It felt like my chest getting torn in every direction all at once. I swallowed, hard, but it didn’t do anything about the dryness in my mouth, the tightness in my throat. “Annabel... I can’t hold you up forever waiting for me. You could have anyone you want. And I want you to find someone who makes you happy, not just... just... think about me.”

She turned to the window, putting a hand to her temple. “Is that a no?”

“It’s—” My stomach lurched, and deep inside me, a voice told me *why not*. Why not let myself believe in love? Believe in a dream? Maybe it was better to believe a fantasy, a happy delusion, than to face the cold reality. I clasped my hands at my waist. “If that time comes... and your heart doesn’t belong to somebody else then... then I’m yours. It’s a promise. I...” I sucked in a sharp breath, and something possessed me to take my bag off the wall, reaching in and fumbling around until I grasped cold metal. I closed my hand around the pendant and thrust it out towards Annabel. “It’s a promise,” I repeated. “I want you to keep this. As a symbol of that promise.”

She stared wide-eyed at it, lips parted, before she looked back at me. “Scil, I can’t possibly—this was from your—”

“I told you, it was a cheap thing she bought online. Besides, you already have my heart, now and forever. Compared to that, a piece of metal...”

“Dammit.” She closed her eyes through a thin layer of tears, and she clasped the pendant in her hands, squeezing it tight. “I’m going to cry over this thing a million times, you know.”

I pushed out a sad smile, tears stinging my eyes. “I’m going to do the same over the scarf, you know.”

“Good. I guess we’re even.”

“At last.” I took a long breath, straightening. “What was... the second request?”

She flickered a smile at me. “We were in public. When we said goodbye before. So we had to just... part awkwardly. I want to do it right this time. Scil—while we’re here—just one more time—can I kiss you?”

This woman would always be the one person in the world who could undo me. Tears sprang to my eyes, and I pursed my lips. “Annabel...”

“Well, if I’m *really* allowed to make a selfish request,” she said, looking away, “I guess it would be if we could have sex. Make love. One more time.”

“I...” I sniffed back tears, my chest wrought tight, an aching want for her lodged deep in my soul. “I haven’t shaved in a while.”

“That is hardly on my list of concerns.”

“I’m close to my period, so it might be gross...”

“You can just say no if you don’t want—”

“No. I mean, yes. I mean—no, it’s not a no, it’s a yes. I want you, Annabel.” I took her hands in mine, feeling the cold metal of the pendant there between the grasp, the symbol of a hopeless promise. “Even if it’s just one more night. I want you. I always will.”

“You’ve always been my weakness,” she sighed, moving in for a kiss. I closed my eyes, my whole body buzzing with anticipation and heartbreak all in one, but she paused just shy of my lips. “No. I take it back. You’re my strength.”

“Annabel...”

“That was probably corny. Sorry.”

I laughed, bitterly, through broken tears. “I think it’s beautiful, Annabel.”

She pressed her lips to mine, and it was beautiful, painful, blissful and broken all in one night I could never in my life describe.

Chapter 22

Annabel

Paisley was in my kitchen. I stared blankly at her when I got back from a numb, senseless session coaching at the gym, but she just hummed along to the Taylor Swift song she'd put on, not even acknowledging me even though she'd seen me there, stirring a pot of ramen noodles.

"Paisley," I said flatly.

"What's up?"

"Why are you in my kitchen?"

"I was passing by, felt hungry, thought I'd just make us some noodles."

"How did you get *in* here? I know I locked the doors this time."

"Oh, I just, you know, used the window. I didn't even think to check the doors."

I rubbed my forehead. "I'm going to strangle you to death."

She whirled around with a look of outrage, her hands on her hips. "After everything Paisley does for you! Noodles and all! Well, maybe I'll just have all the noodles to myself, then, we'll just see how you like that, won't we? Won't we, Annabel?"

And as if the nightmare wasn't enough, a knock came from the front door. I rubbed my forehead, turning away from Paisley and... whatever she was doing. "I'll strangle you to death later," I sighed, starting for the door. Paisley switched off the stove and walked with me, as if I'd invited her.

"Man, you look bummed. What happened? Is this because your cute little houseguest ran back to be with Gwen and you miss her?"

"No." I paused at the door, turning back with a flare of frustration in my chest. "It's that Priscilla moved, and I miss her. That's what it is. Now shush."

She looked like I'd just stolen her wallet. "What? She just *moved*? Like that? Without consulting me first?"

"Funny," I deadpanned. "I don't remember you being the authority. I'm getting the door. Leave me alone so you don't start weird rumors."

"Psh. I'm more important than you. I'll get the door."

And before I could strangle her to death, Paisley walked past me, all but skipping, and she pulled open the front door. At the sight of Harper outside the front door, Paisley flinched, and Harper with her, looking confusedly between me and Paisley.

"Don't ask," I sighed. "I came in the house and found her in my kitchen."

"Oh my god, Harps," Paisley said, hands on her hips. "What are you doing here when you know we have a secret project you could be working on?"

Harper hung her head. "You know something? Maybe I'll get back to it later."

"What's the project?" I said. Paisley didn't even look at me.

"Annabel's sad because her girlfriend just totally ditched town—"

"Paisley," Harper and I said at the same time. Paisley threw her hands up.

"So what if I care about my dear friends' wellbeing? Ugh, the state of modern society. I'm going back to my noodles."

"*My noodles*, she says, as if she didn't just yank them from my pantry," I muttered, but I might as well have been talking to a tree—she skipped away, towards the kitchen, leaving me there in the entry with Harper, who gave me a distant smile.

"So... Priscilla finally up and made the move?"

"Mm. I signed the release forms last night." I sank back into a seat on the stairs, just... too heavy, too tired to stand up any longer. Harper shut the door behind her, sitting next to me, as Paisley's music started again from the kitchen.

"How are you holding up?"

"Depends on how you look at it... physically I'm okay. Just numb. Doesn't feel real. Emotionally?" I put my head in my hands. "Fuck, Harper. I want her back."

She dropped her gaze to my chest, and she looked up at me. "Matching pair, huh?"

“Harper, why the fuck are you talking about my boobs right now?”

“Not the boobs.”

I didn’t figure it out until I put my hand to my collar and felt it—the metal of the pendant against my skin, just peeking out from under my clothes. I’d forgotten I’d even been wearing it, even though I’d taken it off for the gym and put it on again just twenty minutes ago when I went to leave. I just... didn’t want to be without it.

“You with the pendant, her with the scarf...”

I shifted my feet up a step on the stairs, pulling my knees towards my chest. “What the hell. Guess I’m putting it all out there anyway, so what difference does it really make? She... gave me the pendant as a promise. That once this is all done... once she’s gone and fulfilled her dreams of being an Olympic star... if we’re both still waiting for each other then, then we’ll try again. Once the stars have aligned.”

She raised her eyebrows high. “Damn, but she brought out the romantic in you, huh?”

“Ugh. I love her, Harps. Don’t make fun of me.”

“I’m not. Just... you really are serious.” She looked down. “Hey, I’m... I wanted to tell you I’m sorry.”

I looked sideways to her. “Sorry for what?”

“At Paisley’s little Emberlynn and Aria party, you told me how much you... well, you know. About how you stopped doing casual—about what you’ve been feeling around it.”

I rubbed my forehead. “Oh, god. Here’s a conversation I’ve been looking forward to.”

“No, I need to say it, okay?” She turned to face me, her brow knotted in concern. “When we broke up, I wasn’t... very fair to you. I was frustrated with feeling like we were going in different directions, like we wanted different things and there was no way to reconcile that. I blamed you for it. But it wasn’t fair of me. I acted like you were ruining things by being shallow, but... you just have things you want. No different from how I have things I want. And I’m sorry for being an ass. You’re genuinely just a... just a really, really good person. And I can’t help feeling like it’s haunted you.”

I didn’t really have words for the way I felt—something strange in my chest that I couldn’t place. I sank forwards, resting my elbows on my knees, hanging my head. Harper frowned.

“I don’t want you to feel like there’s anything shallow or hedonistic

about your feelings—”

“Thank you.” I forced a smile at her. “I was an ass, too, though. So we’re even.”

“You didn’t leave any lasting damage on me, though.”

“You’ve been chasing a cake-decorating contest win nonstop since then. And a little too devoted. Have you dated anyone since then?”

She looked away. “Er, about that.”

I sat up straighter. “You’re dating?”

“No. The contest. I won.”

“You—what?”

“I won. Don’t tell anyone.”

“Oh my god, Harper, that’s amazing. What do you mean, don’t tell anyone?”

“I’m... processing some shit.” She rubbed her forehead. “Figuring out what to do with myself. I wasn’t prepared to win.”

“You don’t... know what you want to do with yourself now?”

“Mm. It’s a little confusing. I thought I’d be happy once I won.”

“Well...” I shrugged. “Being happy is more in the pursuit than anything else.”

“So—what do I pursue now, then?”

“What does your heart want?”

She chewed her lip, and she turned, glancing in the direction of the kitchen, where I could hear Paisley clattering around with something that made me worried about the integrity of my kitchen implements. “To find that passion again, I guess,” she said, softly, turning back to me.

“Then that’s what you pursue. You’ve got this. I’m in your corner.”

She looked down. “And if I just wait for the stars to align and show me what I want to do next?”

It hit me like a punch to the gut, and I looked away. The room fell into quiet, only punctuated by Paisley’s music and the sounds of her cooking, and all I could do was count my breaths.

Finally, Harper spoke softly, looking down at her feet. “What’s stopping you?”

“I... don’t want to hold her back,” I said, my mouth dry.

“What if what she *wants* is to be with you?”

“Then we’ll find out. Later on.” I pushed myself up, and I stooped by the door to untie the shoes left there and pull them on. “You and Paisley can

hang out and eat my noodles. I'll... see you around, Harps. Thank you."

"Where are you going?"

"Out. I just need a walk before I scream." I gave her a smile—a genuine one this time, even if it was faint, flickering. "No hard feelings. You're a good person, too. I don't regret a second of our time together. I think we both learned a lot about who we're supposed to be. And I'm glad I can call you a friend."

"Me too." She stood up, smiling softly at me, but it was laced with more concern than I wanted to place right now. "Thanks for hearing me out. I'm glad I could say my piece."

"Always. Just next time you want to hang out, bring a flyswatter so you can smack Paisley in the face, I've had it with her."

She grinned. "I have my ways of handling her. I'll teach her a lesson or two about breaking into your kitchen."

It was cold once I left her behind and headed out—cold for Bayview, at least, and cold for me, as a baby who couldn't handle the cold, so I wrapped my coat tighter around me and trudged. I wasn't sure where I was going, but my feet seemed to know where we were headed, and I walked until I found myself in the park, sitting at the edge of the cliff overlooking the water, watching the waves roll in against the coastline. It was deathly quiet right now—this wasn't exactly a winter wonderland tourist destination, and on a cold day like today, the locals were huddling inside using it as an excuse to eat more baked goods, and I had the whole world to myself, sitting down on the cold metal of the bench and watching as the sky darkened over the horizon.

Maybe the stars would never align.

I took the pendant off, holding it in my hand, staring down at it. I wondered where she was right now—what she was doing, how she was feeling. I imagined her sitting alone in that apartment she'd told me about, looking out the window in the direction of where Bayview was too many miles away. Was she thinking of me right now? Was she wrapped in that damn scarf, holding it in her hand, thinking about me?

"I wish you'd come home," I whispered, squeezing my hand tighter around the pendant.

I really was a damn idiot. I'd let myself think Scil was the same as Harper, as Emberlynn—girls I dated while knowing, somewhere deep down, that it couldn't last.

Priscilla was different. She *was* the stars aligning. She was every dream come true, the perfect person to complement me, everything I'd ever wanted. And when I thought of a perfect life, it was Priscilla, always Priscilla, and the two of us doing everything we wanted together. Figuring out this world together.

Maybe, in a way, Scil had been the first girl I'd loved—*really* loved. Loved as in that total, all-consuming way where I didn't want to imagine a life without her.

And I'd blown it. And the stars weren't aligning again.

I didn't deserve this damn pendant.

And so I called her. It was kind of batshit, but a girl with a broken heart was allowed to be batshit. It took enough rings that I almost threw the phone into the ocean to get it away from me, but she picked up, sounding breathless and a little lost.

Come to think of it, it was the morning there. I probably wasn't making a good impression.

"Annabel?" Linnea's voice crackled down the line, sounding, thankfully, not too tired. I hadn't woken her up. "What on earth is going on? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, just felt like giving you a heart attack. Let's call it revenge for making me think you were going to throw a cake or a knife at me."

I heard her relaxing, settling down into a seat, probably. "Well, mission accomplished. I'm about half a second away from ordering a last-minute ticket to come over there and make sure my daughter's still alive."

"She's fine. Just... moved away." I sank back onto the bench, kicking my feet at the grass below. "We'd been... sort of together for a bit again. Knowing it could only be for a couple of days. Having to say goodbye..." I shook my head. "Anyway, she gave me your pendant, but I don't deserve it, so... do you want me to mail it over there or to her? Postage will probably be expensive to Thailand."

She sighed. "You know, that thing was twelve dollars off Etsy."

"That's essentially what Scil keeps telling me, but... it's the principle of the thing."

"So she finally went through with that bright idea to move away?"

I winced. "So... she hasn't been telling you about it."

"I haven't heard a word from her lately. I've been so worried, but I don't want to intrude on her life..."

I hung my head. “Yeah. She’s officially signed onto our rival team now, so she can join the Olympic training division.”

She sighed. “And she left you for it. Or—more accurately, I suspect you told her to leave and do it.”

“Yeah. Basically.”

She laughed. “Have I ever mentioned my late husband?”

I perked up, just a little. “Priscilla’s only mentioned him in passing a few times... I don’t even know his name.”

“Nathan. Nathan Spalding. He took my last name because my parents wanted him to, and they scared him, so, Nathan Sorenson.”

“I’d wondered how Scil ended up with your family’s last name...”

“He was the brightest star in my sky until Pris came along. And then he dimmed out until he was gone.”

“I’m... sorry for your loss.”

She sighed. “Thank you, Annabel. I’ve healed. I miss him, but I’ve healed. The reason I bring him up—you know, we danced around each other a while, too. I was just thinking, you two remind me of us.”

There was something about a comparison like that, from the mother of the woman I loved, that gave me feelings I couldn’t name. “Did you? How so?”

“He’d actually worked with my parents, and we met that way. But my parents absolutely hated him.”

“Ah. I’ve heard they’re stingy.”

“You can say hardasses. They wanted their daughter to be with a big, strong man with a real job who could provide for the family, not some scrawny guy with big glasses and a degree in fine arts.”

“Was he an artist?”

“He was,” she laughed. “I’ll have to show you some of his work sometime. It wasn’t his main profession, but... he did the most beautiful paintings... it’s always such a blessing that he left them behind. There’s so much of him left in all of them.”

“So... you danced around each other because you were afraid of what your parents thought.”

“I’d always just been a daddy’s girl,” she sighed. “I didn’t want to do anything he disapproved of, but Nathan and I *really* did like each other. And he ended up leaving, for Switzerland. My heart broke, bled all over the floor, missing him. He’d later tell me his did, too, he just bled all over the canvas

instead. A family emergency brought him back to the US, and I helped support him while his mother was sick.”

I turned my gaze up to the sky, watching thick clouds drift overhead, streaks through the sky, like eraser smudges wiping it all out to start anew. “And then you got together?”

“Oh, Annabel. If only I were smarter, I would have. I’d have saved myself so much heartache. No. We loved each other, and then we said goodbye when his mother healed and he went back to Switzerland. I felt like such a damn fool. I *was* such a damn fool.”

My chest tightened. “But you found your way to each other again. The stars aligned for you.”

“Screw the stars. I threw my dad’s orange juice at his face, called him some foul names in Swedish, and then I flew to Switzerland to find him again.”

I blinked at the phone. “I’m... seeing where Priscilla gets her willful streak from.”

She laughed. “Turned out Nathan had been wanting to do the same thing, and was just too scared. Frankly, I don’t know what gave me the guts.”

“Priscilla says that a lot, too. When she’s done having her moment of suddenly asserting herself...”

She sighed. “Listen to you. The way you two know each other like an old married couple already.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, holding the phone tight. “Linnea... I wish I could meet you as your daughter’s girlfriend.”

Her voice was soft, but encouraging all the same, as she said, “Then do. Priscilla loves you. She’s waiting for you, just like Nathan was waiting for me.”

“But—”

“Oh, here come the excuses.”

“I *want* to, but she has a whole future. You know how incredibly rare and special it is to get an opportunity to train for the Olympics, maybe even compete. And I *know* she’ll be able to compete. I don’t want to take that away from her. I don’t want to hold her back.”

“Then, Annabel, my dear, don’t.”

I blinked twice. “What?”

“Don’t hold her back. Be with her in a way that helps her be extraordinary, instead. The only thing stopping us from having it all, really, is

ourselves.”

“But...” I swallowed, hard, a lump forming in my throat. My heart pounded. “But *how?*”

“You tell her you love her. And you figure it out together.” She paused, and there was a playful tone in her voice as she continued, “At least, that’s what I would say. But I get the feeling that somewhere, deep down... you already know the answer, don’t you?”

“I...” My mouth was full of cotton balls. The cold of the wintry evening around me suddenly disappeared, my face burning. “I don’t know.”

“I know I’ll visit Bayview again before too much longer. I’d very much like to meet you as my daughter’s girlfriend.”

I wanted that, too. Wanted to show up side-by-side with Priscilla, giggling, holding hands. Wanted to be seen at all the events as the obnoxious couple, together with her. Wanted to host events together—for everyone to mention *Annabel and Priscilla* in the same breath.

But no amount of *wanting* could just make it happen.

Chapter 23

Priscilla

Another lap. How was I already wiped out? I'd done twice as many with Annabel and felt energized.

"Mind-muscle connection," Coach Julia shouted, but she sounded miles away. "Focus your mind where you're swimming and *push*."

Another lap. And another.

Every training session with Cedarcrest felt like torture, but today's—my first day after moving here—it was a special kind of hell. I felt like Sisyphus rolling a boulder up a hill, one lap after another, pain with no point but to suffer. Like this was a punishment.

Another lap. I felt like my body was going to give out.

"Focus on the wave." Coach Julia's voice again. It was like hearing it in a dream. "A wave of exhaustion, and then through to the other side—push through it—"

I hated the Cedarcrest black. The swimsuit looked wrong on me. I missed our blue. The blue we'd had back home.

Home. It wasn't such a loaded word until it was gone. There had been a time where it was a mystical concept, one I'd never known, and it slowly shifted into something that I took for granted.

And now I was on the other side. Through to somewhere I never wanted to be—where I knew exactly what home looked like, only now that it was gone.

When Coach Julia blew the whistle, I almost just kept swimming, barely even recognizing that it had happened. My head throbbed with the blood pumping, and the gym spun around us as I hoisted myself out of the water, a sick feeling in my stomach. I'd pushed too hard. Much, much too hard.

Throwing up from exertion territory, even though I'd just done what Coach Julia said—just done what had been easy when Annabel was coaching.

The rest of the team ignored me as they gathered up, toweling off, chattering with each other as they headed to shower and pack up. It hurt, but at the same time, I wanted to be ignored—wanted to stay small, disappear into the corner. *This* was what I knew—watching from afar, being unknown but knowing everyone. I hadn't realized how much it had been different in Bayview until I was gone.

I didn't notice Coach Julia kneeling next to me until she spoke, and I flinched.

"You are not at your best, Priscilla," she said. "Something the matter?"

I'm okay, just tired. The move took it out of me. I'm adapting. Finals at Lakeside have been brutal. Lies I should have kept at. Instead, the truth slipped out in a tiny, fractured voice. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

She sat down with me, putting a hand on my back. "Easy, girl. You won't get any results from pushing too hard."

I squeezed my eyes shut. "What if I don't get results at all? I'm so embarrassed..."

"There's an adaptation process. I know it isn't easy right now. But the league has a lot of interest in you, and I don't intend on disappointing everyone. We'll make you the best you can be."

I hugged my knees into my chest and buried my face in my arms, curling up as much as I could. "You're... a really good coach, and I can see how much everyone is connected to you—to what you say—but I just miss Annabel *so much*."

She paused. "Priscilla... I don't want to venture into any inappropriate territory, but there was a rumor going around..."

I curled up tighter, just wanting to shield myself from everything, disappear.

"Did Annabel... you know... you two didn't have any kind of intimate relationship outside of coaching, did you?"

I should have just said *no, of course not*, should have kept up with it, kept my head down. I couldn't find words, though, everything a thin, hazy dream that I couldn't grasp.

She put a hand on my shoulder. She had a knack for a gentle touch, clearly practiced—a touch light enough to not feel like an invasion, only after easing her way in, but solid enough to be comforting. She was good at this.

She should have been good for me, too. “It’s not a topic I want to pry into, but just since Annabel could get in trouble—”

“Coach,” I said, my voice shaky. “What if I don’t want to go to the Olympics?”

She squeezed my shoulder lightly. “This is a perfectly normal reaction, Priscilla. There’s nothing wrong with feeling that way. And if, when the time comes, you decide you don’t want to go to the Olympic training division, I support it for you. But I want you to be able to make that choice while you’re at your best, once you’ve acclimated, not while you’re in this state of hurt.”

She was right. I knew she was right. It didn’t feel like she was right, but I knew she was. So why did it hurt? Why did *everything* hurt?

I sighed, staring out at the water, rippling over the surface of the pool, lane dividers bobbing at the surface. The smell of chlorine in the air felt hostile, aggressive. It had always been a friendly one.

“I’ll... try,” I whispered. Coach Julia rose with me, her expression drawn taut in serious concern.

“If there’s anything you need in support, I’m here for you.”

“Am I really supposed to be at the swim meet? After I won golds for another team this year?”

“It’s unusual, but it happens. Exceptions are made for exceptional athletes.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” I said, hanging my head. “I’m supposed to *want* to be an exceptional athlete. This is the dream, isn’t it?”

“It is.” She put her hand on my shoulder again, gentle as ever, but it felt so far away. “But feelings are hard to look past. Give it some time, Priscilla. Be gentle with yourself.”

Be gentle with yourself. The kindest thing I could have done for myself was turn around, run away, put all this behind me, and go back to Annabel. Back to Bayview, because as much as I loved Annabel, it was bigger than just her.

I took a quick rinse, got changed into my day clothes, and I pulled my scarf—her scarf—tight around my neck before I pushed out of the gym, getting a bit lost on the way to the library. Unfamiliar sights all around me and paths I wasn’t used to walking left me disoriented and feeling far away from home, and it wasn’t thrilling, exciting like it had been when I’d moved to Bayview.

I found a private study room in the library and got on my laptop to

attend my virtual classes for the day—my professors had all given me permission to miss the last couple of lectures, given my remaining finals were all essays and I was hours away from Lakeside, but I wasn't skipping classes. I just didn't do it. And it wasn't like there was anything I wanted to do with my time instead.

It got a little hot in the study room, the heating running from a creaking radiator along the floor on one wall, but I didn't take off the scarf. It still smelled like her, and I imagined it would wear off eventually.

It was a day of hazy malaise before I found myself heading back up the path to my apartment—it was *such* a gorgeous walk, up here in the hills a bit, seeing campus spread out below me and then the sweep of trees beyond that—but nothing could replace Bayview's narrow, winding rows of houses, old brick buildings and cobblestone streets.

The apartment felt cold and unwelcoming once I got inside, the smell of cleaner in the air sterile, unfriendly. I dropped my things I wasn't sure where—I was still figuring out my organization—and I made myself dinner in a kitchen where I was still figuring out where to put everything. And I ate alone, the big, open view out the window the only thing keeping me company.

The big, *empty* view out the window. Lonely. Desolate. A whole university campus full of people I would never really know—or more accurately, people who would never know me.

I'd made the wrong decision.

It was a sinking weight in my stomach, the regret of realizing the right decision too late to do anything. I'd never wanted to go to the Olympics. I wanted to swim because it was how I found people, how I connected to people without having to say a word. It was a way to find a home, not a way to find glory. And it had led me home. The stars had aligned.

And I'd walked away.

I couldn't finish my food. I knew if Annabel saw it, she'd chide me, telling me I needed to get food in my body. Or maybe she'd tell me that since I'd pushed myself too hard in my training, I had to be gentle with my body, not feed it too much right now, and just prepare something to get me the nutrients I needed in as few bites as possible.

I pushed the plate away, and I set my laptop out on the kitchen table, just... looking for something to do. It didn't really matter what, so long as I could. I had a few more class projects to finish. That would buy me some

time away from thinking about reality.

Except that I had an unexpected message, and one with a name that felt too much like things I couldn't deal with right now.

Emberlynn.

Hey Priscilla,

I hear you've moved! Congratulations. I hope it's going okay for you. I know full well how much it can feel like, moving away, or just to be far apart from someone you care about. If you need someone to talk to, I'm here.

I know you're a bit far from Bayview now, but if it's not too much trouble, I wanted to ask you to come back on the eleventh. You'll probably hear from Paisley at some point that she's hosting a "secret party" everyone's invited to, but I wanted to give you the heads-up that it's me and Aria crashing the Bayview party again—permanently this time.

She said she wanted to move back to Bayview by Christmas, and we've finally gotten it figured out. I know you're off on some Olympic training dream right now, shooting for the moon and landing among the stars, but you'll always be a Bayviewer, so...

See you there?

- Emberlynn

(P.S. Aria says hi!)

∞∞∞∞∞

"You've been doing better," Coach Julia said, kneeling next to me as I sat breathing hard on the concrete. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm all right," I said breathlessly. It was a lie, obviously—the past week and a half had been a sick fever dream, getting through my finals, preparing for the swim meet, and going back and forth in my head a million times on whether or not I'd go back to Bayview today. Whether or not I'd be able to see Annabel today and be okay.

The eventual conclusion? Of course I wouldn't be okay. But I'd be even less okay if I passed this up.

You'll always be a Bayviewer. I guess... no choice but to put it to the test and see how true it was.

Besides, day after day of waking up not sure what time it was, drifting through the day, being a ghost walking through halls where nobody looked

my way, nobody knew my name, swimming alongside people who wouldn't notice if I disappeared, back to my apartment, lying in bed at the end of the day staring at the ceiling waiting for something to give, for something to change—and again, and again, and again, drifting, wandering, lost, alone—

“I'm wondering if I should visit Bayview today,” I said, standing up. “An old friend is moving back there from New York, so... big party there to celebrate.”

She smiled at me. “You should go. I think you need it.”

I think you need it was a polite way of saying *you look like shit*, but it wasn't like she was wrong.

I packed my things, headed out and made my way back to the apartment, and I sat there with my things all packed up, the Greyhound bus schedule in front of me. Back to Bayview. It wouldn't be a comfortable ride, but... somehow that wasn't my primary concern.

I had to leave in an hour if I wanted to make it. But I found myself rooted to the seat, panic coursing through me, my stomach churning. Thinking about going back—about seeing Annabel again. About what that meant.

You'll always be a Bayviewer.

That was just something she said to be polite. It didn't mean anything. I wasn't a Bayviewer if I up and ran away—if I sold out the town, the university, the team, to chase a dream I didn't even know if I wanted.

And as the minutes crept on, a sinking weight of realization settled in my stomach that I *couldn't*—that nothing could make me go. I couldn't see Annabel again. I wasn't going to be able to bear the pain of another goodbye. And so it was that I finally sold out Bayview for good—that I gave up, ran away from it all.

Just by sitting there, alone at the kitchen table, not a sound but the clock ticking over the sink, and nothing but regret to keep me company as the hour went by.

I was Cedarcrest now. And I had to figure out what that life meant for me.

I took off my outerwear, my travel clothes, and I was only halfway through putting my things back away before I gave up on that too, just sprawling out on the bed, feeling like I was miles away from my own body. My bedroom was a prison all of a sudden, my whole apartment a punishment, and I couldn't do it any longer—something possessed me to my feet, and I

went out the door, walking until I found my way back to the gym and back into the pool. The place was quiet right now—outside of the swim team, the pool wasn't the most popular place in December—and it gave me the opening I needed to go, one lap after another, after another, after another, until my whole body burned, and it felt like I'd pass out, my head getting dizzy, a sick feeling in my stomach, knowing I had to stop but reaching the end of the pool and pushing off the other way for one more lap, one more lap, one more lap until it felt like I'd throw up—

A hand caught mine as I got to the edge of the pool, catching me from turning back. I came out of the dizzy spiral I'd gotten myself into, crashing back into reality, and I found myself breathless looking up in what must have been a dream, because it was Annabel, kneeling at the edge of the pool, my wrist in her hand.

"Easy there," she said. "Haven't I told you a million times you're not trying to fight the water?"

"I... just need to fight the water sometimes." I wasn't even sure what I was saying. My head spun. *Annabel?* I'd probably hit my head on the side of the pool and I was seeing a fever dream as I was drowning.

"Mm-hm. Like I told your mom, it's the willful streak."

"*Annabel?*" My stomach lurched, reality only finally settling in. "What are you—why are you—"

She raised her eyebrows. "What do you think? I came to pick you up for the event tonight."

"The—I—" My heart sank. All this—all of it—and she was just a chauffeur? "Emberlynn's and Aria's party?"

"It's not going to be the same without you. Besides," she said, hoisting me up, pulling me out of the water, dragging me up onto the concrete, "if you're going to swim like that, you need a spotter before you get yourself killed. And you look like you haven't been sleeping properly. Or been having enough magnesium."

"I... my supplements ran out."

"That's what I thought. I swear, I can't take my eyes off you for one second, can I, Scil?" She helped me up to my feet, and it was only here, standing in front of her like this, that I really placed that look in her eyes. I didn't have words for it, but it was something I'd never seen—something I didn't know how to read, something so powerful it felt like it would bowl me over.

“Annabel...” I glanced down at the top of her shirt, a dress shirt with the top two buttons open, and a glimpse of the pendant there against her skin. My heart hammered. “You’re wearing it.”

She reached back behind her neck, and she undid the clasp, bundling up the pendant and chain in her hand, and—my stomach turned when she took my hand and pressed the pendant into it.

“You should keep it,” she said.

“But—it’s—”

“I don’t want a promise. I’ve always been impatient with the things I want.” She clasped my hands in hers, and it felt like I was reeling, spinning, falling, all at once. Annabel held my gaze, intense blue eyes looking through mine, and I suddenly couldn’t breathe. “I want to make the stars align for us *now*. I don’t care what else is going on. I love you, Priscilla. I want you to come home.”

My chest lurched, tears prickling at my eyes. “I... think maybe I hit my head in the pool and I’m just hallucinating right now.”

She grinned. “I know, I look dreamy.”

“Are you serious? But—your career—and I live here now, and—”

“I already told Graham,” she sighed, an annoyed look passing over her face. “Coming here for you took... longer than it should have, but I wanted to do this right.”

“Told Graham? The league head? Told him what?”

She broke her gaze, flickering down shyly for a second. “That... it’s probably inappropriate for me to continue coaching, because I’m in love with one of my students. So I asked to take leave until she graduates.”

“I—” My stomach dropped out, and I found my head spinning. “You told him... that?”

“I wish you could have been there. He made a face like he just drank a cupful of vinegar.” She flashed a grin at me. “But I’m too good at what I do for them to get rid of me altogether. So it’s granted.”

“You can’t just—stop coaching because of me—”

“Why not? I’ll just start coaching privately. I can still teach the public classes at the gym.” She squeezed my hands. “And it’s a year to figure out what I want in life. And I want it to be... alongside you. Back home.”

“Annabel—”

“I know you have dreams to pursue, and I can’t tell you how much I want to support them,” she said. “But from how much Julia keeps asking me

for advice on how to help you, she's not the best fit for you, anyway, even ignoring her credentials."

"I—"

"I can coach you. Privately. And we can send you to the Olympic division, together."

"Annabel, I—"

"Bayview isn't the same without you. *I'm* not the same without you. Please... come home. I want to—"

"Annabel."

She paused, wide-eyed. "Sorry. I got carried away. What?"

I squeezed her hands, my eyes burning, a sensation I could never possibly name churning in my stomach, and I suppressed a laugh. "I'm trying to say yes here."

She stopped, blinking fast—as if she hadn't actually expected me to say yes? As if she hadn't realized that when all my dreams came true at once, when everything I could ever want was right here in front of me, that I would say yes?

"I want that, too," I whispered. "I don't want either of us to choose between our feelings and our dreams. I... am so ridiculously in love with you and I want to do *everything* alongside you."

Annabel relaxed into the biggest, most beautiful smile I'd ever seen, and all I could think was that I was the luckiest girl alive for getting to see it. "Me too," she breathed. "And... Scil?"

"Yes?"

"You... genuinely look like you're going to pass out. How many laps did you do?"

"Oh, um." I flushed. "A lot."

"You know—"

"I was having some feelings."

"How about we get you somewhere to sit down, and I'll get you some sugar—"

I broke down crying. It happened like the flip of a switch, zero to a hundred, sobbing on her as she held me.

She really was back. And right there, where I could reach her—right where she was all along.

"Never seen anyone so upset about getting sugar," she said.

"I love you," I blurted through tear-streaked eyes.

“I love you, too, non-sequitur. Let’s sit you down, because I’m getting increasingly concerned.”

“In a second,” I laughed, and never minding who else was in the gym, I threw myself on her, my arms around her neck, and I kissed her—kissed her like she was my oxygen, my lifeblood, my everything.

And I was ready to go home.

Epilogue

Annabel

Paisley jumped out from behind the couch shrieking like a banshee, and she almost knocked my lamp over. This time it was Emberlynn who caught the lamp. Priscilla still jumped out of her skin when it happened.

“Paisley,” I sighed, rubbing my forehead. “Oh my god. I’m locking all my windows from now on.”

But I couldn’t complain, really. The house was set up for a big surprise party, a *congratulations* banner strung up that Emberlynn liked to whip out on occasions—the whole party was much better put-together now that Emberlynn was back in town—and a buffet-style setup of food in the living room, along with a big cake that only a regional champion cake-decorator could have made.

Paisley put her hands on her hips. “I throw you a surprise party, and this is the thanks I get?”

Emberlynn elbowed her. “*I throw*, she says, as if I’m not the one who did everything—”

“I’m *here*, and that’s the most important part,” Paisley shot back.

Jack, still the bulkiest of my swimmers—not that they were *my* swimmers anymore, in theory, outside of Priscilla—beamed. “Paisley’s right! It’s not the same without her.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Paisley said, waving him off. Jack, as ever with the useless crush on her, seemed undeterred.

“You guys,” Priscilla laughed, settling in closer to my side, her eyes sparkling. I could never get enough of that look when she was happy—how it just *radiated* from every pore of her face. “You didn’t have to do this. This is so sweet.”

“Oh my god, move, you lazy lump,” Paisley said, shoving Emberlynn out of the way as she barreled towards us and gave Priscilla a crushing hug. “Three for three gold medals! Bringing Bayview honor. Plus, I actually saw this one! I did drugs to stay awake for it.”

Priscilla stiffened. “You did what?”

Harper sighed. “Caffeine. She drank coffee. And she hasn’t stopped referring to it as *doing drugs*.”

“Ugh, Harps, you’re killing my vibe,” Paisley said. I waved her off.

“You’re scaring poor Priscilla. She’s had a lot of feelings today.”

Paisley pouted, but she stepped back from crushing the life out of Priscilla. “I’m just complimenting her, but don’t let me compliment your girlfriend too hard in front of you.”

I was still a teenage girl on some level, because I felt a little giggly and bubbly just hearing people refer to Priscilla as my girlfriend. Everybody *knew* when she came back—not that it was very subtle, given she’d moved into my house while we worked on getting a takeover for her awkwardly-timed apartment lease—but we’d only officially come out with it two days ago. Still, my reaction was nothing compared to Priscilla, who went red, a big smile spilling over her features, and covering up a silly little giggle. “Thank you for the party, Paisley, Emberlynn, everybody.”

Hazel pushed past me, towards the party setup, with a dramatic huff. “Well, if everyone’s going to stand around talking about these two dating when we already all knew for *months* it was a thing—I’m just going to start eating.”

“Don’t you *dare* start before me,” Paisley said, spinning on her heel and marching with her back towards the buffet table. As everybody started up into lively chatter and laughter together, Priscilla glanced at me out of the corner of her eye, giving me the sweetest, softest little smile.

“Well... shall we?”

I slipped my hand into hers, still just blissful I got to *do* this in front of everybody. She really had made a romantic out of me. I hardly minded at all. “Let’s,” I said. “You deserve a big damn celebration.”

“I just swam a little, that’s all,” she laughed. “It should be a party for you.”

“In your mind, all parties should be for me.”

“Um... and that’s a problem?”

Hardly. I was completely obsessed with her, so who would I be to

criticize her for being completely obsessed with me? We were probably Bayview's most insufferable couple.

We made the rounds around the party, laughing and chatting with everybody—Emberlynn gushing about the swim meet and how much Priscilla had shaved off her time since last event, Harper mentioning how it was good she didn't have to choose which team to root for, Aria talking about how exciting my new private coaching work was. It wasn't like it had been hard to find clients—I'd already made enough of a reputation for myself that I was the ubiquitous go-to for more people than I'd ever thought.

The Lakeside team getting a new coach was the strangest change. Not being there five mornings a week to coach them was probably going to feel for a while like I was missing something. But the coach Graham had chosen to replace me temporarily was good, and he'd connected with the students readily. I think Hazel might have had a bit of a crush on him, too, but she'd die before admitting it with how much grief she'd given me and Priscilla.

But the team still knew I was on call for them anytime. And it was still me driving them to and from the meet, because nothing would ever replace the experience of the crowded van filled with my chattering students.

It was after a short while of mingling that Gwen caught me alone, off in the kitchen, where I was making a cup of tea and, predictably, she snorted at me.

“How shocking that you use the cheapest, most basic black tea you can find.”

“How shocking that you are here at a party for my students and choosing to spend it criticizing how I drink tea.”

She leaned against the counter next to me and smiled at me—a dry smile as always, but there was something different to it these days, a genuine warmth underneath it. I had to imagine it had to do with Kay, but ever since she'd gone off to talk to Gwen, I hadn't heard back from her. I'd worried a few times maybe Gwen had just murdered her, but... Paisley would probably have shared some juicy murder gossip, so I brushed that off. Besides, I hadn't seen Gwen for a few days after it, either, so I honestly just assumed they were holed up in Gwen's house making out and playing video games.

“Congratulations,” she said. “To you, Priscilla, Hazel, Olive, Connor, and Jack.”

“Again, the only one who—”

“Who pays attention, yes.”

“Thank you. How are you doing? You seem like you’re feeling pretty all right.”

She sighed, trying to furrow her brow like she always did, but there was a smile she couldn’t fight off. “I was imagining you’d ask earlier.”

“I thought you might break my arms if I pried.”

“Fair point.” She glanced down at her fingernails, inspecting them idly. “Kay came around, as I’m sure you know. Brought onion rings. With mint sauce.”

“You didn’t tell me you liked them with—”

“And we talked for a while. And you know what happened?”

“Tell me?”

She cleared her throat. “We... played a game together.”

“That Apex Legends thing?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Oh, so she told you.”

“I cannot believe *you* of all people play—”

“Anyway, it was all the silly, fun little things I’d dreamed of when she finally came to visit,” she said, her voice small. “I was too... hung-up on what I thought I was supposed to feel to actually let myself feel it. But once I did, I realized it was nice. Very... very... nice.”

“So... did you work things out, then?”

“Ugh, you have no patience, do you? Let a woman tell the full story.” She sighed, hanging her head. “I was still frustrated over everything that had happened, but... I loved her. And everything I wanted was right there. So I figured I’d just... let myself have it.”

I settled into a soft, easy smile. “I’m happy for you. Both of you.”

“Well, one thing led to another, and we talked about what we wanted. And she went back to her parents.”

I turned sharply to her. “She did what?”

“She wanted to tell them, in person. And I went with her.”

“Oh. Damn. How did it go?”

She laughed. “It was a good thing I went. They were scared to death of me. They didn’t like it, and they still don’t, but they didn’t want to get into any of that with me. I came right back here, but she’s been there to settle all her affairs. And she’s... moving here.”

“That’s amazing,” I said, pausing to sip my tea that Gwen would have thrown in the trash if she had a chance. “I know you two are—”

“She said she asked a girl you fucked to get her a job at the boba place,

so she's going to start there when she gets back."

I hung my head. "Now that I'm on the other side of Kay spilling everything she's heard, I understand your struggle. Dani will love her."

"When did you fuck Dani?"

"What, was I supposed to tell you? Forget that. When is she moving?"

"Day after tomorrow. And..." She pursed her lips. "If I'm being honest, I'm a little afraid. I want to believe she will pull through this time, make good on it. But..."

"She will." I put a hand on her arm. "It's understandable you'd feel nervous to believe in it, but... she will. She's a lot stronger now."

"Yes. She... she is." She sucked in a deep breath. "I really... don't want that to happen again. I want to be with her. I guess I'm an annoying sucker in love just like you and your girlfriend—"

"I'm the annoying sucker in love. Priscilla is the perfect angel in love."

"Ugh, you two are going to make me sick."

"I thought you wanted us to be together and be happy?"

She looked away, folding her arms. "I *do*, but I hadn't anticipated just how much you two would be clinging to each other, eye-fucking each other, giggling and flirting all the time at every social event—"

"We haven't even officially been together for any social events except for this one—"

"Which means you're only going to get worse. Gag me."

The door behind her squeaked as it pulled open, and I almost dropped my tea at the sight of Kay—unmistakable in her blue hair and her Hot Topic-esque shirt—glancing through and giving me a cheeky grin. I raised my eyebrows, but she motioned for me to shush as she crept through the door behind Gwen.

A million dollars said Paisley had been part of coordinating her showing up to surprise Gwen like this. I played it cool, looking back at Gwen.

"Let us be insufferable," I said. "We both beat ourselves up long enough. We deserve to be annoyingly cute and happy."

"Annoying and happy I will give you. Cute? Maybe Priscilla. Not you."

"Charming today, I see."

Kay snuck up behind Gwen and, moving suddenly, put her hands over Gwen's eyes from behind. "Guess wh—"

Gwen elbowed her in the gut. Kay wheezed, and I almost dropped my tea again as Gwen whirled back on her, sputtering.

“Kay? What—I—where did you—when did you—”

“I guess I deserve that,” Kay coughed, clutching at her gut. Gwen reddened.

“I thought it was Paisley! I’m happy to beat *her* up!”

“Surprise,” Kay said weakly, grinning at her. “Did I hear you talking about me?”

“I—I—” Gwen crossed her arms, ducking her head, blushing uncharacteristically. “You said you’d be here on Tuesday—”

“Well, yeah. That’s what makes it a surprise.”

“I wasn’t emotionally prepared. I haven’t vacuumed—”

“As if I care?” Kay laughed, the corners of her eyes crinkling. “Paisley help me set this up. All my stuff is at her place right now. I’m... I’m home.”

Shame I hadn’t placed the million-dollar bet. I was getting paid a lot better as a private coach, but... I still wasn’t turning down a million dollars.

Gwen sniffled. I really hadn’t placed her as the type to tear up over seeing her girlfriend, but... I hadn’t placed her as the type to play Apex Legends and date a rainbow push-pop she met there, either. “Tell me next time when you’re going to surprise me.”

Kay faltered. “Er... that defeats the purpose...”

“Welcome home,” Gwen said, her voice thin and streaked with tears. “You even wore that shirt.”

“I was wondering if you’d remember,” Kay laughed.

“Of course I do. Do I look like some—some forgetful old granny—”

Kay stepped forward and kissed her. Gwen grunted, her hands going to Kay’s sides, and she softened into her before Kay pulled back, eyes sparkling. “No,” she said. “You look like a cute little button, and I adore you.”

“I am not a cute little button. I’m—”

“I’m going to give you some space, how about that?” I said, and Gwen jumped a solid inch or two in the air, clearly having forgotten I was there.

“I—leave me alone, you creep,” she said, waving me off. “We’re having a moment!”

“Yes, I can see. Have fun,” I laughed, before I turned my gaze to Kay. “And... welcome home, Kay. Bayview’s lucky to have you.”

Kay beamed at me, all but glowing as she did. “I’m lucky to be here. I can never thank you enough, Annabel.”

“Don’t bother thanking her for anything,” Gwen muttered. I laughed,

taking my cue to leave the room, bumping into Priscilla in the living room, where she was talking to Harper in low voices at the side of the room, and she turned, giving me that brilliant, sweet smile I could never get enough of—the one I just wanted to frame up on the wall and never stop looking at. Not that I didn't already have a million pictures of her just like that in my phone.

I wondered if I'd ever stop being so totally blown away by how beautiful she was that I'd stop snapping pictures of her all the time. I was going to be eighty years old and have an entire lifetime's worth of photos, I just knew.

"Hey, you," she said, sidling closer to me, taking my hand, and she went up on her tiptoes a little to press a kiss against the corner of my lips. The taste of her tangerine lip balm lingered like a soft little tingle from it—I'd really gotten addicted to that taste. "Everything okay in there? I think I heard Gwen shout about something."

"Her girlfriend showed."

Priscilla went wide-eyed. "Oh, what? Kay? Are they together now?"

"Mm-hm. Apparently they both went back to face her family, and Kay was getting her life together before she moved over here... and she surprised Gwen by showing up early and got accidentally elbowed in the gut for it."

Priscilla covered up a laugh, eyes sparkling. "Gwen never changes..."

Harper hung her head. "I'm happy for Gwen, but I still cannot get my head around *her* dating *Kay*."

"Oh my god, you're telling me," I said. "When she showed up at my door and told me she was Gwen's ex, I thought I was hallucinating."

Priscilla pouted. "I think they're a cute couple. They just like... complete each other, you know?"

"They're cute, just..." I shrugged. "Never in my life will I understand how Gwen works."

Harper arched her eyebrows at me. "Did you ever really try?"

"No. Fool's errand." I shook my head. "You two chattering about any salacious gossip?"

Priscilla smiled sweetly at me. The whole time, her eyes just fixed on me, that adoring gaze like I was her whole universe. I knew I didn't look at her any differently. No wonder Gwen said we were so annoying, even before we announced we were together. "Harper was just talking about—"

"About how much Priscilla sucked at getting over you," Harper said.

“Back when she made a formal commitment to get over you—”

Priscilla shoved her playfully, reddening, scrunching up her face in that way she did. “Ugh, you. I think it worked out pretty okay for me.”

“For me, too,” I laughed. “I think I looked like a sad puppy when Priscilla told me she was going to *get over me*. I thought I kept it cool, but... Priscilla reads my mind.”

“I just know you, that’s all,” Priscilla said. “Harper was talking about... you know, next steps, too. Life. Everything.”

Harper shrugged, shoving her hands in her pockets. “You two clearly have a good thing going in the world, so... I was just a little jealous. Figuring out what the hell I’m doing now that I got first place in the competition.”

“What are you thinking?” I said, and she relaxed into a knowing smile.

“We’ll see. Bakery stuff is exciting. I’ve been in touch with some interesting people lately.”

“Well, aren’t we mysterious?” I said, and she grinned.

“And loving it. I’m sure I’m going to screw things up, but... it’s nice to feel like I might start moving forwards again.”

Priscilla clasped her hands at her waist. “And... anything with any girls in particular going on in your life?”

Harper glowered. “I’m perfectly happy being single right now, as it so happens.”

I looked between them, brow furrowed. “Er—did I miss something?”

“No,” Harper said, just a little too quickly, waving me off. “Don’t worry about it. Just—since we both went on that blind double date together.”

“Mm-hm,” Priscilla said, in that way where there was definitely something more to it but she didn’t want to let on right now. Scil knew how to keep a person’s secrets. I’d just have to hope Paisley was involved somehow, because I’d hear about it *that* way for sure.

“Ugh, forget it,” Harper said. “I’m going to slice the cake now.”

“Like hell you are,” Paisley said, coming out of absolutely goddamn nowhere and inserting herself into the conversation. “This is Priscilla’s party. She has to have the honor of—”

“Ugh, this again,” Harper said. “It’s not a wedding.”

Priscilla reddened, glancing at me out of the corner of her eye. I almost laughed. I could see myself marrying her one day. It was all too soon right now, but at the same time, it felt like we’d been together forever and there was nothing more certain—that sureness where there was no reason to ever

doubt it. I wondered what kind of dress she would wear.

“I think I’d like to cut it,” Priscilla said, shyly. Paisley got that cat-that-got-the-canary look, glancing between me and Priscilla.

“Maybe you two can both cut it,” she said. “You know—coach and star swimmer.”

Priscilla hunched her shoulders, blushing furiously. I laughed, putting a hand on her back. “Well, you heard the woman,” I said. “Shall we, sweetheart?”

“I—s-sure.”

Priscilla didn’t stop blushing furiously the whole time as we all gathered around the cake, the two of us holding the knife together as we sliced it, and everyone cheered for us—all a little too weddinglike, but I wasn’t going to complain. Priscilla didn’t leave my side for another second afterwards, both of us sharing a single slice of cake, talking and laughing together with our friends as they gathered around and congratulated us more—both on the gold medal and on the relationship.

Somehow, I was feeling a lot of what Priscilla had said, back in the hotel room ages ago now, that a gold medal was really nothing in comparison to some things.

As the party wound down and people started to filter out, I found myself at the front door saying goodbye to Paisley, who was skipping backwards out the door and nearly falling down the stairs, and with Priscilla already having headed upstairs, I ended up alone with Emberlynn in the entry, leaning back against the wall and smiling softly at me.

“Thanks for having us. Not that Paisley asked.”

“Always welcome to. It’s really nice having you and Aria back in Bayview.”

“Mm-hm. I’ve noticed you’ve stopped lusting after her too, now that you and Priscilla are inseparable.”

I put a hand on my hip. “Hey, Scil and I aren’t exclusive. She’s still officially permitted me to check out your girlfriend.”

“Oh, it’s her decision to make, huh? Whether you can check out my girlfriend?” Emberlynn rolled her eyes, smiling drily to herself. “I’m sure, though, but you don’t even want to, do you? Finally found someone you’re more into than Aria.”

“I mean... guilty as charged. Priscilla’s only the most beautiful person in the world, so, it’s kind of inevitable.”

She laughed. “You’re so hopelessly in love. It’s kinda cute. I won’t be surprised if you never actually *do* anything with your semi-open thing.”

“Suit yourself if that’s what you want to think. We just had a threesome last weekend.”

“Uh—excuse me?”

“Yeah, up at the north end, we were partying a bit and this girl started chatting with us, and—”

“Okay, okay, that’s enough information.”

“Hey, I’m just saying,” I said, putting a hand up. “Power to Aria if she’s not into them, but we had an amazing time.”

Emberlynn hung her head, laughing. “I... okay. You know? I’m not surprised. Seems like you found your perfect situation.”

I tried biting back a smile, but found myself useless to suppress it. “I am unbelievably happy. And not just because of the sex, but... it’s not like that’s not a bonus.”

She grinned. “And to think you tried so damn hard to deny Priscilla was in love with you...”

I looked away. “It was a defense mechanism to keep me from admitting I felt the same way, okay?”

“Uh-huh. And how’d that work out for you?”

“Terribly. And I’m glad.”

She laughed, and it settled into a soft, gentle smile. “So... you think we made it?”

“Looks like it.”

She stepped in and gave me a hug, crushing me just a little. I squeezed back every bit as tightly.

“Here’s to us killing it in the girlfriend department,” she said.

“I’m going to be a bridesmaid once you two get married, right?”

“Depends on if you can keep yourself from checking out the bride’s ass.”

“Please. It’s Aria. Everyone there is going to be checking out her ass, and you know it.”

She laughed. “Fine, but I’m expecting the same at your wedding, you hopeless fools.”

“We’ve been properly dating for two weeks.”

“That *properly* is doing some lifting,” she laughed, stepping back from the hug. “All right. I’m heading out now before Ar gets worried Pais has

gotten me killed. I'll see you at my place on Wednesday?"

"I mean, of course. You host something, I'm there, with my eye-candy girlfriend on my arm."

"Dork," she laughed, giving me an affectionate shove. "See you there, then."

Priscilla was on the stairs behind me once I'd finished seeing Emberlynn off and shut the door behind her, giving me that sweet little smile I was such a sucker for.

"*You're* the eye candy," she said, and I fought back a smile going up the stairs to catch her in a kiss.

"Someone was eavesdropping," I said.

"Only on the parts about me." She took my hand and led me up the stairs, a glint in her eyes telling me exactly what she was thinking. Still, I wanted to play difficult.

"Need to get to sleep already?"

"Mm... not really what I was thinking..."

"Cleaning the bedroom?"

"Right room. Less clean." She turned at the top of the stairs and sank back against the bedroom door, and she tugged me against her, moving my hands to her hips. That look she gave me—if I weren't already aching to have her even when we'd just done it last night in the hotel room, that look would have done me in. "Do you... want to...?"

"Always." I bent down and pressed a kiss against the side of her neck, and she arched her back into me, letting out a soft moan as I roamed my hands over her body.

Like she was every time, Priscilla was perfect—so damn perfect, every inch of her sweet paradise. I savored every noise she made, the hazy looks of lust in her eyes as I drove her higher, the way she cried my name as she came undone, and the total ravishing attention she lavished on me, giving me everything I could have wanted until I melted in her hands and came down kissing, slow and languid and melting with passion on one another in the low glow of moonlight through the window, cast over the bed and highlighting every perfect curve of Priscilla's body. She rested her head on my collar, looking at me with that all-consuming adoration in her eyes, and she whispered my name so softly that the wind outside the window threatened to pluck it away.

"I really love you, Annabel..."

“I love you, too, Scil. You’re everything.”

She tucked her hair back with a sweet, playful smile. “I’m glad you... showed up. To bring me back here.”

I avoided her gaze. “Your mom told me to, more or less...”

She went wide-eyed. “Wait, what? Mom did?”

“Mm-hm. I called her and basically cried on her about how I missed you.”

“Oh, Annabel,” she laughed, wrapping her arms around me, holding me into her. “Oh my god.”

“I owe her. And I’m looking forward to meeting her as your girlfriend. She said she was, too.”

“Mm.” She nuzzled her face against my collar. “She’s going to be so insufferable... talking about what kind of babies we’ll make...”

“Yeah... I can see it.” I rolled onto my side to face her. “Hey. Now that the season is over, I contacted one of the managers on the Olympic prospectives team.”

“That was fast...”

“I’m taking this seriously. He didn’t rule it out altogether, but it’s looking like an intensive—”

“I’m on board.”

I blinked. “I didn’t even say it yet—”

She put a finger to my lips, smiling. “You don’t need to. I’m there. Wherever you go... I’m right by your side.”

I really liked this girl. “Then... it’s a plan,” I said.

No telling where it would lead, of course. But wasn’t that where all the fun was?

The End

Thank You

Annabel's and Priscilla's story has been so near and dear to me, and writing this book has broken me and put me together in so many places and so many ways. This book is really special to me, and I can't express how much I'm grateful to you reading along and joining me for this journey.

But I can try. So thank you!!! Thank you a million times. It means a lot.

If you want more of my writing, there's plenty of it! Check out my website [here](#), where you can see all my books and sign up for my mailing list. You can even get a free copy of my novel *What Makes a Moment*, which is exclusive to my mailing list subscribers, and is, I think, a pretty good book. I'm probably obligated to say that, though, right?

Thank you again for reading *Against the Current* and coming along on this journey! Sharing it with you is an honor. That's right, you specifically. I'm very flattered that you've taken the time to read this! I appreciate you more than you know, and the world is more beautiful with you in it.

Until next time,
-Lily Seabrooke

About The Author

Lily Seabrooke



Lily Seabrooke is a lesbian, trans woman, and author of sapphic romance that stars food, because odds are, at any given time, she's hungry.

Her interests include eating food, thinking about food, writing novels about food, and drinking coffee.

Books By This Author

[One Last Shot](#)

Ava couldn't be less like her popstar twin sister—and now she needs to take her place.

A two-month tour impersonating her pop-sensation twin sister Eva—or Nova on stage—sounds like Ava Blakely's worst nightmare. For one thing, she can't sing, and being on a stage is her idea of torture.

But it might be the only way to save Eva's pregnancy.

Tour photographer Freja Callister just wanted a vacation and some pizza, but a last-minute request to shoot the Nova tour pulls her in—especially when the popstar seems a little different than she remembers. And much too interested in Freja now.

For Ava, falling for her photographer while hiding her real identity is a catastrophe in the making. But hey, what do they have to lose?

[The Rules of Love](#)

Rule number one: never fall in love.

Amber's rules have kept her safe from heartbreak—an oath to herself not to fall in love. But when her career as a romance novelist suffers for it, a vacation to her hometown brings her face-to-face with her childhood crush Celeste, and suddenly, none of her rules are enough to keep her away.

Celeste is intent on fighting her feelings for women and committing to her boyfriend Logan, but meeting her childhood crush Amber on a trip home for a family friend's wedding throws her carefully constructed life into disarray.

Sometimes, heartbreak is the only way through to healing. But sometimes, a love story will never really go away.

Fake It

Avery Lindt finally opened her dream restaurant, but there's a problem: there's no customers. When she ends up on the other end of restaurant mogul Mike Wallace's smear campaign, too, everyone loses hope but her.

Meanwhile, celebrity chef Holly Mason needs a refresh for her image, before her slimy ex-boyfriend Mike hijacks her show. The solution? Holly brings Avery onto her show to take down Mike's restaurant conglomeration together—and starts a rumor they're dating.

The only problem is this finicky attraction between them, too powerful to resist, but they absolutely can't afford to give in and make the rumor into reality. No matter how much their pretend dates start to feel like reality...