

A SWEET ROMANTIC COMEDY

# Faking IT WITH My Boss' SON



BLAKELY DAWN

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# Blakely Dawn

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# Prologue

MICHELLE

## Thirteen Years Ago

Ryan and I sat together one last time on our high school campus after the farewell party was over. He passed me a packet of salt and vinegar chips as we both sat in silence.

I shook my head; my stomach was too tangled in knots to think about food right now.

“I thought they were your favorite.” Ryan said with confusion.

“Yes, they are. But I don’t feel like having them right now.” I huffed, crossing my arms.

“You seem out of sorts today.” He observed my unease.

I had a lump in my throat as Ryan said those words. “Aren’t you, Ryan? Today is the last day of school. Besides, you are leaving Davenport for good. Won’t you miss school, Davenport, me, and all our friends? Won’t you miss all this?” I said, trying not to cry.



“I will, Michelle, of course. My life will never be the same again. You know good and well that if it were in my hands, I would never leave Davenport. Dad decided to move to Los Angeles to expand his business, so I don’t have much choice. I promise to stay in touch with you. We can talk over the phone; we have Facebook, email, and Messenger. We won’t lose touch.”

I kept quiet. I couldn’t bring myself to tell Ryan how different the virtual world was from the world we were living in now. “You’ll have no time for all of this when you get there, Ryan. When you start going to college and get a new set of friends, you will forget all your friends here. And I am sure you’ll be just as popular there as you are here.” I tried to keep my tone light-hearted and playful, but of course, I didn’t mean it.

I had always found it quite hard to make friends because of my shy nature. I hardly had any friends because of it. The only friends I had were Ryan and Maya. Ryan was the popular guy and adored by all. Smart in school and talented at sports. Despite his huge circle of friends, he always made time for me. Our closeness seemed to make others think that we were in a relationship; we’d always laugh it off because we were nothing more than good friends.

“Come on, Michelle. You know that isn’t true. You know that you’re a dear friend to me. Why don’t you apply to one of the universities in Los Angeles? You’re a bright student, and I’m sure that you could get accepted to any one of them.”

“You know our financial situation, Ryan. My family can’t afford it.” I looked down at my feet self-consciously.

“You can always apply for a scholarship.” He said as if he was truly confident that I could get one. “Or maybe my family can help pay to get you through college?”

“I appreciate your kindness and that you are thinking about me. But you know it is impossible.” I said gratefully.

Ryan snorted. “I knew that you’d never agree.” He threw a small piece of pebble in the air. “But it was worth a shot.”

I put my hands on his and smiled. “Ryan, you know me well. I just want to achieve things in life on my own. It is not that I am not trying. I’ll be applying to a few universities that I have in mind. I want to see if I get a scholarship to pursue my degree in management. But LA is too far away from my family.”

“I am sure you will. But remember, Michelle. If you ever need anything, I’m just a call away.” Ryan reassured me.

I nodded my head.

“Hey, Ryan. Howdy!” A male voice called out softly behind us. Before I could turn and see who it was, Lucas appeared in front of us. He looked at me and smiled.

“Oh, Michelle. I didn’t notice that it was you.” His cheeks reddened as he saw me and Ryan together. “How is Abel?” Lucas asked me as he sat next to Ryan.

“He is fine. You haven’t been over to the house in a while. I hope everything is okay.”

Lucas was my brother's good friend, soft-spoken and personable. He was a year younger than him and in the same grade as me, but they still formed a close bond. We lived in the same neighborhood and have been friends since childhood. I liked Lucas for his kind disposition and his pleasant demeanor.

"I've been swamped with finals. I hope to visit him this weekend. Just saw Ryan in the distance and thought I should say goodbye before he goes to Los Angeles. God knows if we'll see him again or not."

*That's exactly what I am feeling right now.*

"Come on, buddy. You know that isn't true." Ryan gave Lucas a hug. "I'll stay in touch, and you know that."

I watched quietly as they exchanged pleasantries and said their goodbyes to each other.

"You guys carry on. I'll see you this weekend, Michelle." Lucas waved goodbye. He turned back once more before leaving and smiled at both of us.

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"I think we should leave now, too. It is getting late. The days are short these days." I glanced at my watch.

"I'll call my driver. He should be here in the next ten minutes. I'll get him to drop you off at home." Ryan took out his phone and texted his driver to pick us up.

We strolled through the campus one last time while we waited for the car to arrive. We had spent ten long years of our

life in this place. Stepped into this place as kids and stepped out of it as adults.

“I’m really going to miss this place,” Ryan sighed, looking around at the large brick building and sprawling green courtyard.

“This place is going to miss you too, Ryan. This city will never produce another great soccer player like Ryan Pearson.”

Ryan blushed a little as I praised him.

“You flatter me. I wish my dad would understand that my interest is in sports and not in managing a software company like him.” He sighed, putting his hands into his jean pockets.

“You can’t convince him otherwise?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Convince who? My dad? You must be kidding!” Ryan sneered. “You’ve met the man; you know what he’s like.” Ryan and I walked out of the school slowly toward his car.

“So, have you booked your tickets?” I asked with hesitation.

Ryan nodded yes.

“When is your flight again?”

“Next Friday, 10 am.”

He opened the car door for me. I stared out the window as we headed to my house, my heart heavy.

I held back my tears. I didn’t want to show my sadness and make Ryan upset. He was not feeling good about all of this either, and I had no desire to make things harder for him. I

gave him a plastic smile as I watched the distance to my house getting shorter and shorter.

“Did you see Lucas? Wasn’t he a little perturbed about seeing us?” Ryan asked suddenly, raising his eyebrows.

Ryan was a little bit unpredictable, and he often said whatever came into his mind. It was something I appreciated about him. So, it didn’t feel weird to me when he asked me about Lucas, but I was a bit curious.

“I didn’t notice. And I don’t see any reason why he would be perturbed about seeing us together. He knows we are good friends. Besides, this isn’t the first time he has seen us together. He should be used to us hanging out.” I shrugged my shoulders.

“Exactly my point. That is why it confuses me. Maybe it was kind of an odd time. I mean both of us alone, on the campus. Maybe he got the wrong idea...” Ryan pondered.

“You’re overthinking.” I laughed, “I know Lucas. He’s a nice guy. I am sure he doesn’t think anything like that. Even if he did, when have we ever cared about what other people thought about us, right?” I said enthusiastically.

“Right,” Ryan grinned.

The driver stopped the car in front of my house. Ryan stepped out of the car with me and gave me a warm hug. “Stay in touch, Michelle,” he said softly.

“I will. You too.” I cleared my throat.

“Always.”

Ryan squeezed my hand warmly and started to walk back to the car. He stopped, turned back, smiled weakly, and then stepped into his car. The smoke from the exhaust began to whirl in the air as the car drove away.

I stood there, inhaling the cold air and the smoke. I tasted my salty tears and looked at the car until it was out of my sight. The traffic was getting thinner as the day went on, and I had no idea when or if I would see Ryan again. I had a feeling that I was saying goodbye to him for the last time. He'd get busy with his life and me with mine, and we would just be a good memory in each other's lives. I had no idea what the future held for either of us. All I knew was that what I felt now was not a good feeling at all.

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## CHAPTER ONE

RYAN

### **Thirteen Years Later**

I never miss my early morning run, no matter how tuckered out I am. My athletic career came first. After playing soccer at USC, I now play for the Los Angeles FC Soccer team. We are in the off-season right now, so our practices mainly consist of weight training and cardio to make sure we stay in shape for the season. I also coach private lessons and a little league team during the off-season to make some extra money and stay busy. My dad would nag me now and then to take early retirement from sports and join his company as CEO, but I never listened. The happy-go-lucky person that I am, I'd laugh it off, which always made my dad go bonkers. Soccer was my passion, and nothing would get in the way of it.

But this morning was different. I had to go to the airport to pick up Michelle.

It was already 8 am, and she was landing at 11 am. I made sure to arrive a few hours early because she was new here, and

I didn't want her to have to wait for me when she landed. Even if I were the reason she was coming to LA to apply for the vacant position as a management consultant in my father's company, I still would have been here to pick her up otherwise because, even after all these years, she's one of my best friends.

The hours passed in the blink of an eye as I waited at LAX for Michelle. I was thrilled to see her after all these years. We had been in touch since high school but seeing her in person was altogether a different feeling. We'd tried to connect in person, but timing never worked in our favor. Telling her about the job wasn't completely selfless on my end. Having her closer to me would bring me so much joy.

Waiting outside Terminal 1, I saw her approaching me with a suitcase in hand; she was my same old, shy, and wholesome friend, Michelle Harvey. She looked gorgeous in her floral cotton dress and black belle shoes. Her brown hair was longer than it used to be, and her bangs framed her face.

"Hey Michelle, I can't believe you're finally here," I hugged her tight against me.

"Hey Ryan, I know! Had you not convinced me that it was worth a shot, I would have never come. I'm excited for the opportunity." She said as we turned to walk to the car.

"Good to see that you're obeying the orders of your potential boss's son." I grinned like a Cheshire cat.

Michelle gave me a fake smile. "I hope I get this job. And I hope that you remember your promise. No recommendations



from your side. It has to be entirely on my merit.” She gave me a stern look.

“Of course, I remember. Dad wouldn’t have even taken your interview, let alone hired you if it were my recommendation. He couldn’t care less about my opinion,” I laughed.

“I guess he hasn’t changed. He still wants you to quit soccer and join his company, doesn’t he?” She said, rolling her eyes as we neared my car.

I nodded my head yes.

“And that is something you would never do?” She asked, even though she knew me well enough to know I’d never want to.

“Of course not, well, not anytime soon. I actually feel sorry for my dad.” I sighed.

“Why?” Michelle looked at me quizzically as we walked into the parking garage.

“He has no idea how great of an athlete was born in his home. He should be so proud of me.” I burst into laughter.

Michelle smiled and shook her head. “Your sense of humor hasn’t changed one bit, Ryan.”

“I know. It’s wonderful. Isn’t it?” I grinned.

“Life is full of wonderful surprises.” Michelle smiled back at me. “One being... I finally get to see you after all these years. I wish I could have come to visit sooner. I can’t believe it’s already been 13 years.” She said, shaking her head, “It feels

like just yesterday we were saying goodbye to high school and each other.”

“Time flies, doesn’t it.” I agreed.

Michelle took her phone out of her bag to let her family know that she landed. My driver loaded her luggage into my black Lamborghini while she dialled.

I waited to open the door for her until she was finished talking. I observed Michelle keenly as she spoke to her mother on the phone. Not much had changed about her after all these years. Her simplicity, her wholesome demeanor, and her pleasant disposition were still the same. Taking small pauses while talking, speaking so softly that the listener might consider visiting their otolaryngologist for fear they might have a problem with their ears. But she’s older now, full of life experiences and an underlying confidence that hadn’t existed when she was 18. There’s a beauty that surrounds her and it’s utterly captivating.

She got off the phone and I opened the car door while gesturing for her to get in.

“Thank you, Ryan. That is so sweet of you.” Michelle said as she got into the car. I closed the door and moved towards the other side of the car.

“So, you still tell your mom everything, huh?” I said, getting into the car.

“I do, old habits die hard, you know that better than anyone.” She laughed.

“How are your mom and dad doing lately?” I asked while we drove towards Beverly Hills.

“Mom is doing good but dad was recently diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. He isn’t doing too well and is getting worse. It was definitely hard for me to leave them during such a difficult time but this is a once in a lifetime opportunity that I couldn’t turn down.” Michelle said sadly.

“Oh I am so sorry to hear that Michelle. Let me know if I can help in any way.” I said, surprised she came to LA with all the changes happening in her life.

“I will Ryan, Thanks.” She said and turned the conversation to me. “How have things been with you? You still liking LA?”

“This big city has its charm, Michelle. I’d be lying if I said that I regret coming here. But you were always missed. I’ve made a lot of new friends here, but my day wouldn’t have been the same if I wasn’t telling you everything that took place.” I said smiling.

Michelle heaved a sigh of relief, “I’m so glad that we could stay in touch despite having busy lives. There is a beautiful sense of déjà vu.” Michelle looked outside the window at the incredible city of Los Angeles.

“Why are we driving to Beverly Hills?” She asked as we passed the sign for the off ramp. “My apartment is in Hidden Hills.” Michelle was taken by surprise.

“I know, but *my* apartment is in Beverly Hills,” I replied as my driver turned us in the direction of Beverly Hills.

“But I have already rented an apartment, Ryan.” Michelle said with confusion

“You think I’m going to let you live in a rented apartment when I have an apartment in the city? Besides, you’re new to this city, I can’t let you stay in a dinky apartment in the middle of nowhere.”

“That’s kind of you, but I’ve already paid for the first month. The contractor is a friend of Lucas. He has arranged the apartment for me. So, take it easy.”

“Oh, are you still in contact with Lucas? I didn’t realize,” I looked at her with a gaping mouth.

“I am... Abel and Lucas are still best friends, and we went to the same college so I’ve spent a lot of time with him over the years. We talk almost as much as you and I do, even though he lives in New York now. Isn’t that amazing?” Michelle raised her eyebrows.

I didn’t reply. “Whatever it is, I won’t let you stay in a random apartment. Lucas might know the contractor, but I don’t. So I’d feel better if you stayed at my apartment in Beverly Hills, I haven’t been staying there anyway. I have been staying with my dad. He got Pneumonia about a month ago and I went to stay and take care of him until he gained his strength back. But I won’t force you.” I didn’t look at Michelle.

“I am sorry to hear that about your dad.” She said as she put her hand on my knee to comfort me. “Okay Ryan, I’ll stay at

your apartment. You know I can't say no to you." She offered me a small smile.

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"Is this an apartment or a mansion? It's a slice of heaven!" Michelle said as we entered the apartment and she looked around in awe; feeling the silk curtains with her hands.

"I'm sure you'll have a great time here. You take a shower and change into fresh clothes and I'll take you out for lunch." I offer, showing her to the bedroom she'd be staying in.

"I'll be ready in a few minutes." She promised.

Sure enough, twenty minutes later, Michelle was back in the living room where I was sitting and waiting for her. She's changed into jeans and a plain white T-shirt. It was simple, but again she looked beautiful.

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"Chicken Quesadilla and Greek salad for her and Spaghetti and meatballs for me."

"Do you need anything else?" The Waiter asked, writing our orders in his notepad.

"No, we're good, thanks!" I gave a quick nod, and he walked away from the table.

Michelle held her face in her hands and gazed at me with her sparkling eyes that gleamed all the more with the golden chandeliers of the restaurant.

“I still can’t believe you remember my favorite meal,” Michelle exclaimed.

“It’s hard to forget your love for Quesadillas when you’d get them every time we went to that Mexican restaurant by the school.”

Michelle laughed. She couldn’t argue with me. She asked me about my week, leaning her arms on the table as I spoke. She’s always been a great listener.

The food arrived, and Michelle started to eat her salad.

“What about Pecan pie?” I replied as I took a slice of feta from her salad and put it into her mouth.

It sparked laughter between us, making everyone in the restaurant stare at us.

“Can we be a bit more civil?” Michelle was trying hard not to laugh again. “See how everyone is staring at us?”

“You still remember that Pecan pie episode?” I asked.

She gave me a small smirk, “Of course, how could I ever forget that? You were so busy watching your phone that you put the Pecan nut into your nostril instead of your mouth.” She said with amusement, clearing her throat. She had watery eyes. “Oh! What amazing times those were.”

We sat and ate together, catching up on life, and before we knew it, our plates were cleared, and the bill was paid.

“I wish we could have a reunion and meet with all our old friends.” I sighed as we got up from the table. Most of my

friends from high school stayed around Davenport, so it was hard to keep up with each other, especially with each passing year.

“Life has become as dry as dust.” Michelle snorted as we stepped outside the restaurant.

I had initially planned just to take Michelle out for lunch, but I was so excited to show her Los Angeles that I took her on a tour of the city, which lasted for the next five hours. I brought her to all the touristy places but also showed her a bunch of my favorite places in the city. By the time we were done, we were hungry again, and my stomach was growling. So, we went out to dinner at a diner downtown. I was getting tired, so I could only imagine how tired Michelle was feeling. When we left the restaurant, it was already dark out. The full moon lingered on in the sky, and the hues of green and red caused a mesmerizing airglow as I drove Michelle back to the apartment.

“Thank you, Ryan, for making my first day in this new city so amazing.” Michelle gushed as we entered the apartment.

We exchanged a lingering look before I said, “You should hit the hay; you had a long day.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty tired, truthfully. Thanks for the tour today; it was super fun.”

“Anytime, Michelle, break a leg tomorrow!” I crossed my fingers as I said goodbye, calling it a day and heading to my dad’s house.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### MICHELLE

I was in seventh heaven as I lay on my bed thinking of the amazing day I had with Ryan. After we had left high school, I made a few friends in college beyond Maya and Lucas. My friend Leah had moved to LA two years ago, so at least I had another friend here apart from Ryan. Leah was Lucas's cousin. We would hang out in college and became pretty close, so I am excited to hang out with her. Being here with Ryan was kind of therapeutic. I was able to be myself when he was around. I was doubtful that he'd be the same Ryan who left Davenport when we were only kids, so it was a pleasant surprise. We did talk over the phone and even video-called each other once in a while. However, I was not so sure if he'd be the same in person as he appeared in the virtual world. But it was as clear as day that he hadn't changed, and I felt thrilled. Only one day in LA, and I already felt at home.

I woke up at 6 a.m. to be sure that I got to the interview on time. I took a shower and headed to the kitchen to prepare some breakfast. The refrigerator was a mini grocery store that



had everything from breakfast to dinner. I didn't need to visit the grocery store for the next ten days at least. I prepared some scrambled eggs, buttered toast with avocado, and a coffee. I had not even taken one bite when someone knocked on the door.

*Who could be here at this hour?* I was caught off-guard as I went in the direction of the door, and Ryan stepped inside. "I still have a key; I hope you don't mind," Ryan said as he walked past me into the kitchen. "The familiar aroma of scrambled eggs and avocado toast, am I right?" Ryan inhaled the aroma of breakfast, rubbed his hands together, and sat next to me at the table.

"What a pleasant surprise! I didn't expect to see you this early." I passed him a cup of coffee.

"I had to... after all, it's your interview day." He sipped his coffee.

"Yes, but I would have hired an Uber. Why did you bother yourself?"

"I know I'm being a bit clingy. But, once you settle down and get used to the surroundings, I promise no more special treatment for you." Ryan smirked, then took a drink of his coffee slowly as he scrolled through his phone.

"Come on, Ryan. You know I don't think you are being clingy. What you call clingy, I call being attentive, and you know I just adore that about you. It makes me feel special." I said, smiling. It was true; having him stop by made my interview nerves subside just enough.

Ryan didn't reply; he probably wasn't even listening to me; he was too focused on his phone. "Come on, I'll drop you at Dad's office." He said, standing up from the table and walking toward the door. "I need to go buy some flowers for Alison. I have a date tonight." Ryan was full of excitement as he turned and looked at me.

"You have a date?" I didn't have the hots for him, but I felt a little awkward when he told me that. "You have a girlfriend?" I asked him softly as I grabbed my purse from the counter.

"No... not yet. I've been dating a few girls over the past few months. But I haven't yet found the right one. But maybe things will be different with Alison."

"Alison?"

"The one I'm going on a date with, silly! Keep up." Ryan lightly pulled my cheeks, making my heart thud.

I shrugged as we walked to the car. I didn't need to nag him about his date; I needed to stay focused on my interview. I was quiet on the drive downtown, but I doubt Ryan noticed; he was busy on his phone most of the drive. He called out a "Good luck" as I stepped out of the car.

I approached the building, a mix of nerves and excitement coursing through me. Ryan drove away to fetch flowers for his date, and I found myself genuinely hoping that everything would go smoothly for him.

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“So, I see Ms. Harvey. Your resume is impressive. Brilliant academic record,” said Mr. Pearson, Ryan’s dad, in his demanding voice. It made me jittery despite the fact he was full of praise for me. Mr. Pearson was almost 60 years old but looked much younger than his age. Dressed impeccably in a black tuxedo suit and jet-black brogue Oxford shoes, he had little hair on his head and a grey, French-looking beard. He had the same eyes and smile as Ryan. It was almost like looking at an older version of what Ryan would become in the next thirty years. I could tell he wasn’t completely healed from the Pneumonia yet because he looked a little weak and would give out the occasional cough.

For the next twenty minutes, I was grilled with several questions, not only from Mr. Pearson himself but from other members of the board.

I was as nervous as a cat to speak in front of the CEO and his team, but I kept my head high and answered all the questions they asked diligently and with utmost confidence.

“It was great meeting you, Ms. Harvey. We are amazed by your resume and your skills.” Mr. Pearson gulped down two sips of water from his glass, pressed his lips together, and then widened his eyes, adjusting his glasses.

*It made me wonder if he had recognized me. I was sure that he wouldn’t because he hadn’t seen me more than a handful of times in Davenport. He knew me by name, but I was under the impression that it had been long enough since then, and he must have forgotten about me. I trusted that Ryan hadn’t told*

*Mr. Pearson anything when I had asked him not to. I was in two minds whether he had recognized me or not.*

He continued, “I’m sure you’d be an asset wherever you work. However, we have one more interview to conduct. We’ll contact you as soon as possible.” He walked me to the door, seeing me out.

I got a sinking feeling in my heart as I heard those words. My interview had been great, *so I thought*. I also thought I was the last candidate, but I wasn’t. I was sure I’d be selected, but it looked unlikely now. I broke into a cold sweat. I wiped the beads of sweat from my forehead as I stepped out of the elevator.

Ryan had told me to wait for him after the interview was over, and he’d drop me off at home. However, I was on the verge of tears, feeling stifled for not getting the job, and all I wanted to do was book an Uber and rush to my apartment. Maybe I could fall asleep and wake up in a better place mentally.

“Hey Michelle, how did your interview go?” Ryan called out from behind me. His voice startled me, but I was grateful to see him.

I fought back my tears and feigned a smile, “It was great, but I don’t think I got the job.” I pressed my lips together and tried to maintain my composure.

“Why not?” He said as we walked toward the car.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged my shoulders. “They only told me that my interview went well and they would let me know soon if I got the job, as they needed to conduct one more interview. I thought I was the last candidate. I’m sure it is the polite way to reject...”

“Michelle... shall I?” Ryan interrupted.

“No, Ryan. Please don’t. If this doesn’t work out, I’ll just try to find a different job.” I was trying hard not to burst into tears in front of Ryan.

When we pulled up to my apartment, my phone beeped, and an email notification popped in.

*Dear Michelle Harvey*

*It was a pleasure meeting you today at the interview. Thank you for your time. Our board members at Pearson’s International Software Company have evaluated your interview, and we are thrilled to inform you that you have been selected for the position of Management Consultant in our company. Many congratulations.*

*Welcome aboard. Attached is your official letter of offer.*

*Best wishes,*

*David Morris CEO*

*Pearson’s International Software Company*

*[david.morris@pearsoninternational.com](mailto:david.morris@pearsoninternational.com)*

*555-555-9595 ext 123*

I burst with joy when I read this email and squealed.

“Ryan, I got it... I got it!” I hugged him over the console and almost kissed him involuntarily in my ecstatic state and pulled myself away briskly when I realized what I was doing. I tried to look and talk normally after that. “I can’t believe I got the job, Ryan,” I said in utter disbelief.

Ryan, too, acted as if nothing happened and replied, “I knew it... I knew it, Michelle. I’m so happy and proud of you.” His face lit up. “You have been stressed out since this morning. I think you need to get some rest. I’d love to come in and have a cup of coffee with you to celebrate, but as you know, I’m going on a date with Alison tonight.” Ryan grinned mischievously, making me wonder about the reason behind that grin.

“Do you like her?” I asked reluctantly.

“Well, I don’t know yet; that is why we are going on a date. But I am hoping she is different from the other girls I’ve been dating lately.” He said with hope in his eyes.

“I hope so. Well, good luck tonight. Let me know how it goes. Bye, Ryan.” I got out of the car and walked into my apartment.

When I finally sat down on the couch to take it all in, I picked up my phone to text our college group the happy news that I got the job. Within no time, Lucas called. Lucas is the reason I believe it when people say that they are only a call away.

“Hey, congratulations, Michelle. Just read the good news.” His voice was full of joy.

“Thank you, Lucas. You’re always so quick to respond. How is NYC treating you?”

“It’s great, but I miss Davenport. And you.” You could hear he meant it.

“Yeah... Davenport is a forever home, isn’t it?” I agreed.

“Yes, it is, but hey, I’ll text you later. I have to go to a meeting. I just wanted to say congratulations, Michelle.”

“Sounds good, Lucas. Talk to you later. Thanks for reaching out.”

“Always a pleasure.” He hung up the phone.

I then called my parents to let them know the good news.

“Hello, sweetie! How’s everything in LA?” My mom’s voice filled my ears, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“Hi, Mom! Everything’s great, and guess what? I got the job!” I practically squealed with excitement.

“Oh, Michelle, that’s wonderful news. We’re so proud of you!” My dad’s voice joined the conversation.

“Thanks, Dad! It’s at one of the top software companies here. I can’t believe it!”

“We always knew you’d make it. Your hard work pays off,” Mom said.

“Yeah, and you’ve always had that spark,” Dad chimed in. I was glad to hear his voice. Sounded like today was a good day for him.

I chuckled. “Thanks, you guys. I’m really excited about this opportunity.”

“We can’t wait to hear all about it. When are you coming back to visit?” Mom inquired.

“Mom, I just got here.” I laughed. “But I’ll likely be back for a visit in a few months. I have to get some time under my belt at this job before I can ask for time off. We’ll have so much to catch up on!”

“We’ll be counting the days. Take care of yourself out there, okay?” Dad’s voice carried his usual concern.

“I will, Dad. Love you both!”

“Love you too, sweetie. We’re just a phone call away.”

With well-wishes, we said our goodbyes, and I hung up the phone, feeling incredibly lucky to have such supportive parents.

I was on cloud nine. I called Leah, and we went out for happy hour and shopping in town to celebrate.

When I got home, I went to bed at a decent hour because my first day on the job was tomorrow and I needed to be at my best.



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## CHAPTER THREE

### RYAN

The evening air was crisp as I stood at Alison's doorstep, holding a bouquet of her favorite flowers. She opened the door, her eyes lit up as she saw the colorful blooms.

"Hey there, Ryan! You remembered my favorite flowers? You're setting the bar high already," she exclaimed with a playful wink.

"Well, I aim to impress," I replied, trying to match her playful tone. "Shall we?"

We headed to a quaint bistro that Alison had suggested. The cozy atmosphere felt perfect for a first official date. As we perused the menu, I couldn't help but feel a mix of excitement and nerves.

"So, Ryan, tell me something quirky about yourself. I promise I won't judge," Alison grinned mischievously.

I chuckled, thinking for a moment. "Well, I have a secret talent for impersonating cartoon characters. Don't ask me to do it now though, the restaurant might not survive."

Alison burst into laughter, and I couldn't help but feel a surge of relief. The conversation flowed easily, and we discovered shared interests and a love for cheesy '80s movies.

Our food arrived, and we dug in, savoring the flavors and exchanging stories. We debated the merits of pineapple on pizza, with Alison passionately defending its honor while I played the role of the skeptic.

As dessert appeared on the table, a hint of doubt crept into my mind. Alison started sharing her passion for museums and art. Meanwhile, my idea of adventure was going on spontaneous road trips and camping under the stars.

“Museums, huh?” I said with a nervous chuckle. “I’m more of a ‘let’s pick up and go on a road trip’ kind of guy.”

Alison’s eyes twinkled. “Well, maybe you just haven’t been to the right museum with the right person yet.”

Her enthusiasm was infectious, but as the evening wore on, my doubt grew.

After walking Alison back to her doorstep, we shared a lingering hug. “Thank you for tonight, Ryan. I had a great time,” she said with a warm smile.

“Me too,” I replied, hoping the smile on my face concealed my swirling thoughts.

As I drove home, the radio played a cheesy love song, making me smile despite my uncertainty. I couldn't deny that I enjoyed Alison's company, but I wondered if our contrasting preferences could create hurdles.

In the quiet of my room, I replayed the evening in my mind. The laughter, the stories, the shared jokes – they were all there. I knew I needed to give it time, let our interactions unfold naturally. With that thought, I settled into my bed and dozed off to sleep.

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As I woke up for my morning run, I couldn't help but replay last night in my head. I needed to call Michelle and tell her how it went. "Hey, Michelle. Are you getting ready for your first day?" I asked with excitement in my voice.

"Hey Ryan, yes, I am. How was your date last night?" She asked with curiosity.

"It was good. I am not sure we are compatible, though. She's into museums and art, and you know that I am not." I laughed.

Michelle chuckled. "Well, I am sorry to hear that. You will find someone, Ryan; just be patient. But hey, I have to go to work. Call me later. Bye." She hung up the phone.

Alison and I continued chatting for a few more days, but I didn't want to give her any false hope, so I thought I should be upfront about my intentions and tell her that it was not working from my side. She was mad, not because she had lost someone whom she liked but because she had lost the billionaire's only son and accused me of being a playboy. I was livid at these allegations but felt I owed her no further explanation. I blocked her right away. I was anything but a playboy.

At least I was at peace that I made the right decision at the right time.

I was in my room when my dad texted me to say that he was in the living room and wanted to see me in the next ten minutes.

*Now, what's he up to?*

I huffed as I read his text. I had an inkling of what he wanted to talk about. The same old thing. When would I be joining his company as the new CEO? I'd been avoiding it for years, and I knew that I was smart enough to come up with a new idea again this time. But, this time, I wasn't avoiding it; there was something I had been thinking about, and I knew he would be happy to hear it. As I rushed to the living room, nearly running into a wall, I almost collided with my dad, who lost his balance and toppled over until I grabbed him.

“A-are you doing this deliberately so that I fall and hurt myself?” Dad barked at me as he put his hat back on that had fallen on the floor. He was red with anger, and one of his slippers had slipped off his foot and vanished, God knows where.

I tried hard to control my laughter. He looked hilarious, all frazzled and just in one slipper.

“Are you okay, Dad?” He was starting to get stronger but still would get winded with a lot of activity or excitement.

“Watch where you're going!” he snapped as he stretched his back.

“Sorry, Dad,” I said as we made our way to the living room.

“Better be,” he replied as he adjusted himself comfortably on the couch. “So, I know you keep ignoring my request, but I’m going to ask once more for you to join the company. I’m growing old now, and it is becoming challenging for me to manage things alone. I want you to take over as CEO so I can retire from work and rest,” he said.

“Dad, I’m not ignoring your requests. I have been asking you for some time. In the next six months, I’ll be starting what most likely will be my last year playing soccer professionally. I am getting up there in age and need to think about what is next for me and my career. Once it’s over, the next day, you’ll find me in your... I mean, in *our* office.” I said with my eyebrows raised.

“Well, I hope it’s not one of your ways to run from things. Are you sure?” he raised his eyebrow at me.

“As sure as you are standing there,” I said matter of factly.

“Well, I guess I can wait for another year. But *I’m sure as you are standing there* that the next thing I am going to talk about doesn’t require a year.” He replied pointedly.

I was nonplussed at his sarcastic tone. Not that it was the first time I’d heard it, but because he was going to talk about something different from my athletic career.

“And what’s that?” I asked quizzically.

“You know Ruth Smith?”

“I do. Daughter of Mr. Andrew?”

“Precisely.” He said with a mischievous look on his face.

“What about her?” I looked at him blankly.

“I want you to go on a date with her,” he said abruptly, scaring me out of my wits.

“What?” I exclaimed. “I can’t do that.”

“And may I ask you why not? You’ve been outrightly refusing everything I have asked from you,” he snorted in anger and started to leave.

“Well, Dad. It’s not like that. I’m already seeing someone.” I said quickly, in a panic.

“Who is she? And why haven’t I heard about her until now?” He said, slightly offended that I didn’t tell him about her. “I would like to meet her.”

Of course, there was no one. I lied because I knew I would date anyone on earth except for Ruth Smith. I had said it in the heat of the moment, but when my father expressed his wish to meet my girlfriend, who didn’t exist, I found myself in dire straits and had no idea what to do next.

“I will let her know you want to meet her, and we can set up a lunch date. Will that work?” I reassured him, hoping he couldn’t see through my lies.

“Sounds like a plan. Looking forward to meeting her.” Dad grinned.

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I headed to Michelle’s apartment to hang out.

“How is your first week going?” I asked Michelle as we sat in the dining room having coffee.

“It’s going fantastic. Your dad is not only a boss every employee dreams of having but also a wonderful human being. Even at his age, he is agile and active even with the Pneumonia setback. His work ethic is simply infectious. Inspirational guy. Are you even listening to me? Hello!” Michelle waved her hand in front of my face.

“Yes... yes, I am.” I lied.

“No, you certainly aren’t. You look like you are thinking about something else. Are you okay?” She asked with concern.

I looked away from her.

“Come on, Ryan. Tell me what it is.”

“My dad wants me to date someone that I have no interest in.”

“Did you tell him you went on a date with Alison?” she asked.

“No, our compatibility just wasn’t there, remember?” I asked, taking a sip of my coffee.

“I thought you were going to give it some time?” She asked, surprised.

“No... there was no sense in dragging it out when in my heart I knew it wasn’t going to work out.” I said, happy I had made that decision.

Michelle looked surprised, “Well, in that case, you should go on a date with the one your dad has chosen for you.” She said, confused about who it could be.

“You mean Ruth?” I said in disgust.

“Well, if she is the one your dad has chosen for you,” Michelle collected the coffee mugs, went into the kitchen, and returned in no time.

“No way.”

“Fine, then simply tell your dad you don’t want to date anyone until your soccer career is over.” She said, really trying to help me out.

“You know I can’t do that. He is already mad at me for not joining the company already.”

Michelle huffed, “Then, what?”

My face lit up, and I held her hand tightly, “I have an idea. And only *you* can help me with it.”

“Me?” Michelle’s voice quivered, “How can *I* help you?”

“Can you be my fake girlfriend?” I said, almost in a begging way.

It set her back on her heels, “Absolutely not, Ryan. It’s wrong. I can’t do it. I cannot trick a person who has given me a job of a lifetime and could take that away at any time. And plus, you are my Boss’s son.” She opened her eyes wide.

“Please, Michelle, just for my sake.” I pleaded.



“But for how long, Ryan? Your dad will expect you to get married one day. Then what? You can’t fake it forever. And there is no probability that you will find your Ms. Perfect anytime soon. Plus, the whole concept is not only vague but just absurd.” She said as she walked to look out the window.

“See... Michelle, see. Listen to me. Listen to me carefully. I only need to fake it for the next few months. In the next six months, I’ll be starting back to soccer, and I will tell him that I want to focus on my last year without disruption. I want to enjoy my off-season without being hounded by my dad about finding a girlfriend. Dad thinks I’m lying about being in a relationship, but once he is convinced that I have a girlfriend, he will stop nagging me. Once the season is here, I’ll tell Dad that it didn’t work between us, and we parted ways. See... I won’t put any blame on you. I’ll say that things didn’t work from my side.” I said as I walked over to her and turned her to face me.

“And, do you have any idea how awkward my position will be working in the same office with your dad as my boss after we *break up*?” She said, concerned.

“Believe me, it won’t be. I’ll manage things in such a way that you’ll appear innocent, and my dad, being soft-hearted, will feel sorry for you instead of being angry. Do you think I would do anything to harm you or your job? Do you think I would ever create any problems in your life? Don’t you trust me?” I raised my hands in the air, frustrated.

Michelle pursed her lips, “I do trust you; that goes without saying.”

“Don’t think so hard, Michelle. Trust me. I’ll never make it hard or awkward for you.”

Michelle forced a smile and nodded. She agreed to be my fake girlfriend.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### MICHELLE

Playing the role of the *fake girlfriend* was something I did reluctantly. I couldn't say no to Ryan, as he had always been at my beck and call. There were mixed feelings in my heart, an eerie kind of feeling. I was feeling too much at one time and thinking about so many things. The biggest challenge that was awaiting me was meeting Ryan's dad, not as my Boss but as my boyfriend's dad. I was at my wit's end as to how to face him, knowing that this was all a sham. At work the next week, I tried to avoid Mr. Pearson as much as possible because I didn't know how to act.

He wanted to meet his son's *girlfriend* and had invited *her* for tea. Ryan had told me that he would come to pick me up at 11 a.m. on Saturday to go meet him. Earlier, we had decided to meet him over tea because Ryan had to attend a party later that evening, and he wanted me to come with him to convince his dad that we were, in fact, in a relationship and did things together as couples do. There will be people there who know his Dad, and word will get back to him that Ryan was there

with a girl whom he will introduce as his girlfriend. I was tied up in knots and had no courage to face him, knowing I was playing my part in fooling a very kind man.

He was going to be thrown for a loop when he discovered that the girl who was working in his office was also his son's *girlfriend*, and no one had told him. I had no idea how to face this awkward situation, but since Ryan said that he'd answer all the questions that his father might have, I felt a big weight lifted off my shoulders. I decided I was going to keep my mouth shut and answer the questions only when it was necessary.

I hardly slept a wink Friday night. I was imagining sitting before Mr. Pearson in their palatial mansion; him sitting upright, dressed impeccably in an Oxford shirt and relaxed-fit chinos, smoking his cigar and asking me all sorts of questions in an authoritative yet reassuring tone. I tossed and turned in the bed, and I could hear my heart thud as I formulated those imaginary questions that I presumed he'd be asking me.

I woke up feeling fidgety. I threw off the blanket and sprung out of bed, although it was still early. I took a shower, hoping it would calm my nerves. I got cold feet as the clock struck 9:30 a.m. I couldn't imagine eating breakfast, as I had a feeling that I would throw up. So, without bothering, I got ready to meet Ryan's dad.

I dressed in an indigo and white polka dot knee-length skirt and a geometrical peplum top with black stockings. I tied my hair into a small ponytail putting on minimal makeup. I was

ready and waiting for Ryan in the living room, biting my nails, when the doorbell rang. I nearly jumped out of my skin, even though I knew that it was Ryan. He had stopped using his key shortly after I moved in.

“You look gorgeous!” He looked me up and down. “I’m sure you must be excited to meet Dad.” He joked.

“No... I am certainly not excited, and you know it. I am a nervous wreck.” I exclaimed.

“Why? I’ll be there for you. You don’t have to feel nervous. Besides, you know that Dad doesn’t talk much.” He said as he walked me to the car.

“I hope that I can answer whatever questions he has.” I sighed as we headed toward Hidden Hills.

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As we pulled into the driveway, I kept thinking how foolish I was to go along with this idea. Hopefully, we’d be able to convince him we’re dating.

We walked into a beautiful mansion when Mr. Pearson got the shock of his life as he gaped at me, realizing I was the consultant he had hired just a few weeks back. “I’m sorry. I don’t remember your name.” He pressed his temples, thinking hard.

“It’s Michelle Harvey, Mr. Pearson.” My heart was beating so fast that I was sure one more question would make me collapse there and then.

“How do you guys know each other?” He said with confusion. It looked like someone had dropped a bombshell on him. “I am flabbergasted. Would you mind explaining it to me, Ryan?”

My cheeks were burning. I looked at Ryan.

“Michelle and I have known each other since high school. She and I studied at the same school in Davenport. You met her only a couple of times back then.” I said as we made our way into the living room.

Mr. Pearson raised his eyebrows, still not able to make any sense of all this.

“I ran into her by accident two months ago at an old friend’s birthday party, and we have been dating ever since,” he lied. “It is just a coincidence that she applied to your company and got selected. Frankly, I heard about it after she applied. If I had known, don’t you think I would have recommended her to you? Right, sweetie?” Ryan asked as he put his arm around my waist, trying hard not to laugh. He was one of those people who had a bad habit of laughing during serious moments.

“Is that how you reconnected? Sounds quite romantic. Michelle is a promising employee, and I’m happy that you have found someone like her.” He flashed a warm smile at me, making me feel the pangs of guilt all the more sharply. “Glad to see you again, young lady. And this time as my son’s girlfriend.” He said as the butler handed us some tea.

“Thank you, sir. The feeling is mutual.” I smiled.

“Dad, can we have lunch? Michelle and I have to attend my friend’s birthday party this evening.” Ryan asked impatiently.

“By all means, son, let’s eat.” He said as we got up and went into the dining room.

We ate lunch, which consisted of salad and grilled chicken. It was light yet delicious. The conversation flowed easily with Mr. Pearson, and I was surprised at how relaxed I became as time passed. After lunch, we said our goodbyes so we could head to the party.

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Ryan had a belly laugh as we drove off to his friend’s birthday party, recalling how his father treated me at lunch as if I were his daughter-in-law. He found it hilarious how Mr. Pearson walked arm-in-arm with me from the family room to the dining room, talking and encouraging me that I was doing great and was impressed with my current performance, not because I was his son’s *girlfriend*, but because I was truly doing my best. He made it clear that he preferred to keep his personal and professional life separate. And in the office, I’d be treated only as one of his employees, not his son’s girlfriend. I heaved a sigh of relief that I wouldn’t have to play the role of fake girlfriend at the office and that I could concentrate solely on work.

“Gosh! I couldn’t control my laughter when Dad saw you! It was hilarious. Dad’s cheeks looked like red cherries, especially his nose. Did you notice his nose?” Ryan laughed so hard when he said it that his eyes turned watery.

Of course, I didn't find it funny, and it puzzled me as to exactly what Ryan found funny in all this.

"I was too nervous to notice anything," I said, feeling bad that we were doing this to his father.

"Thank God the tough part of it is over. Now, at least, I can relax and know that he won't bother me again about dating for at least the next year. He trusts that I will retire from Soccer after this season and join his company as the new CEO, which makes him happy." He said with a smile.

We stopped by my apartment so that I could change into something dressier for the party. I was in and out in no time and back on the road.

The moment Ryan parked his car in the parking lot, and we got out of it to attend the party, a gorgeous blonde woman with the most amazing hazel-colored eyes called out behind us.

"Hey, Ryan," she approached and hugged him tight.

"Oh my God. Am I seeing things? I can't believe it's really you, Chelsea." Ryan hugged her back tightly.

She looked breathtaking in her shimmering, maroon off-shoulder dress. I felt like a plain Jane compared to her. I had changed from my polka dot skirt into a beautiful peach-colored maxi dress. However, I felt too plain in front of her and all the other women who were going inside the banquet hall.

"Who's she?" Chelsea nudged his arm and almost whispered it in his ear.



“Let me introduce you ladies,” Ryan grinned broadly. “Chelsea, meet my sweet and dear childhood friend and now girlfriend, Michelle.”

Chelsea looked at me from head to toe, perhaps wondering how someone like me could be accompanying the heart-throb, Ryan.

“Hi...” she greeted me coldly.

Ryan turned toward me with a grin. “Michelle, meet my friend Chelsea.”

I forced a smile and greeted her warmly, “Hi...”

She gave me a lopsided smile and beckoned Ryan to come inside the banquet hall. The three of us walked slowly in the direction of the hall, and I could hear their whispers and giggles, making me feel not only awkward but out of place as well.

*Oh! I wish I had never come here.*

The moment we entered the banquet hall, Ryan started introducing me to all his friends. He knew that if he didn’t introduce me as his girlfriend, that word would get back to his dad, and the ploy would be over. I sat alone around the circular table while Ryan went to go get us drinks. I watched as the other guests went for wine, dining, and dancing. Before I knew it, someone gently tapped me on my shoulder.

“Mind dancing with me?” Ryan set down the drinks and held out his hand.

“Of course, let’s dance,” I said light-heartedly.

“It would make my night.” Something about the look in Ryan’s eyes when he said that made my heart beat faster. “Come,” he held my hand as we went in the direction of the dance floor filled with many other couples dancing.

The evening was mesmerizing, yet I carried a strange kind of ache in my heart. I wanted to run away and hide in my apartment, which was my safe haven at the moment, until Ryan pulled me close to him as the pianist played a soulful tune on his piano, making the anguish I felt more noticeable in my heart. Knowing this was all a show and that Ryan would likely never see me as more than a friend started to eat away at me as the night progressed.

“I didn’t know that you were such a great dancer,” Ryan murmured into my ear.

I blushed. I had never been so close to Ryan in the past. The closeness was making me anxious, ecstatic, and very nervous.

“Neither did I,” I said as we danced across the floor.

“Really?” Ryan said in shock.

We danced for most of the evening. Being in Ryan’s arms felt like home to me. The closer he pulled me in, the faster my heart beat. I felt his breath on my skin, and not just that...I felt like the most beautiful person in the room.

*Was I starting to have feelings for Ryan?*

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### RYAN

**I**t was midnight when I got home from the party after dropping Michelle at her apartment. The moment I entered the mansion, I was surprised to see Dad was still awake and sitting in the living room reading a book. The moment he saw me, he nearly squealed, startling me out of the euphoria that I felt from the party.

“Hey, you are home! Come here...I need to talk to you.” He said to me as he patted the couch.

“Could we do that tomorrow, Dad? I’m tuckered out.” I said, trying to walk towards my bedroom.

“It won’t take more than five minutes. Have a seat.”

“Okay.” I walked to him and sat on the couch.

“I like Michelle. She is a nice girl,” he said. I could hear there was more to come.

“Yes, Dad. She is.” I agreed.

“So, how are things going with you guys? Do you see things getting serious?”

“Things are going well. We are getting to know each other and enjoy spending time together.” I said, wondering where this conversation was going.

“I hope she is not like the other crushes you had in the past few years and you no longer feel attracted to her after a few days or weeks.”

“Dad, have I ever brought any woman home for tea or lunch, no matter how much you insisted? I’m serious about her.” I said, trying to convince him.

Dad beamed and nodded.

While Dad and I were talking, an idea struck me: it would help me kill two birds with one stone. I could convince my father that I was serious regarding Michelle. He seemed to still have doubts.

“Dad, is it important to really know your spouse?”

“Of course, it is. What an absurd question,” he sneered.

“Dad, I...”

“What, son?”

“Dad, it’s true that I have known Michelle since high school, but so many years have passed since then. We were adolescents then, and now we are both grownups, and things have changed a lot. We have only started dating recently, and I want to spend some time with her to get to know her better and

understand her so that I can be the best possible husband to my wife when that day comes. I was thinking I might go back to my apartment and ask her to move in with me. You seem to be doing better now and don't need me around as much. What do you think?" I moved my eyebrows together to give him the impression that I was thinking hard.

"That's a brilliant idea." He stood up from the couch. "When do you plan on moving?" He was filled with excitement.

"Relax, Dad. Not right now. Maybe in a few days, I'll need to make sure she's comfortable with the idea first." I'm sure Dad would not mind sending me right then to Michelle had I not shown a bit of restraint. I told him that I was ready to go to bed and said goodnight.

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I was hoping Michelle would understand the plan; truthfully, I should have texted her or called, but on Monday morning, I woke up to my bags packed and my dad grinning like an idiot. I waited until the afternoon to go to the apartment, hoping she would go along with it. When Michelle saw me at her door with my luggage, she was thrown for a loop and stared at me for a while without saying anything.

"I can explain. Let me in." I raised my hands in a pleading gesture as she moved to the side so I could step into the apartment.

"Is everything okay?" Michelle asked as she walked over to the windows to open the wooden blinds in the living room to

create more light.

“Yes...” I sat on the loveseat with a soft thump.

“What’s going on, Ryan?” She said with confusion as she sat on the couch beside me.

“I am going to stay here with you for the next few months,” I said quickly.

“What?” Michelle’s eyes widened in confusion. “What did you say? Is everything okay with you and your dad?”

“Everything is fine. He’s just eager for our relationship to progress, so I told him I would be asking you to move in with me.” I said, hoping it was okay with Michelle.

Michelle held her face in her hands, “I don’t know what we are doing. Your dad is one of the most remarkable and brilliant entrepreneurs. It is not that he cannot make out that you’re fooling him because he is naïve; it is because he trusts you, Ryan. He believes that you’re telling him the truth because you’re his son.” Michelle sounded disappointed in me.

The grin suddenly vanished from my face as Michelle spoke, making me think for a second about whether I was doing something wrong, but I dismissed the thought immediately. “You know that I love my dad dearly, but he is acting as stubborn as a mule. It’s not that I am not willing to date, but I don’t want to date who he wants me to date. Whatever it is, I need some space from him. I’m tired of hearing him talk about the office or my dating life.” I heaved a sigh of relief as I rested my head on the loveseat.

“Well... I hope this works and that this doesn't hurt my job, our friendship, or your relationship with your dad.” She said as she got up from the couch.

“I hope so.” I sighed.

“Okay. I have an important presentation to work on really quick. Then I'll cook your favorite dinner, and we can discuss this more.”

“Roasted turkey?” I smiled and raised my eyebrows.

“Exactly,” Michelle smiled back and slowly slipped away into her room to work.

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I moved to the guest room, collapsing on the bed. I had two private lessons today and a good workout at the gym lifting weights, so I was exhausted. I had no idea how long I was asleep, but when I woke up, I looked out the blinds to see the horizon and sky drenched in all the shades of red and oranges, making it all the more mesmerizing. From the kitchen came the appetizing smell of turkey being roasted with different spices, crispy fried onions, and fried rice. It was making my mouth water. I ran toward the kitchen, almost colliding with Michelle. I held her tightly by the waist as we almost embraced.

“Are you okay?” I asked. Her cheeks were all ruby. Perhaps she became conscious of the closeness between us and the fact that I was still holding her by the waist. I loosened my grip on her. She dusted off her apron and then tightened her ponytail

back into the clip it had partially come loose from. For the first time in my life, I felt embarrassed at my bad habit of not being careful while walking, running over people, and almost knocking them down.

“Yes, I am fine. When did you wake up?” Michelle asked without looking at me.

“Just a few moments ago,” I replied, trying to act normal.

“Want to have some coffee before dinner?” She asked as she walked back toward the kitchen.

“Yes, I’d love that. Are you done with your PowerPoint? You need to remember Dad won’t treat you as his son’s girlfriend but just one of his employees in the office.” I said sarcastically, following her.

Michelle gave me a closed-lip smile, making me wonder what she was thinking.

“You, okay?” I asked.

“Perfect. Why do you ask that?” She sounded uncertain.

“I know I am a bit eccentric. And often, I talk about things without thinking. I hope you don’t take it the wrong way.” I sighed, grabbing coffee cups from the cabinet.

“Of course, Ryan. I know you. You don’t owe me an explanation.” Michelle replied as she poured the coffee into the cups.

We walked over to the dining room. “Look how breathtakingly beautiful the moon looks behind the clouds,” I



said, looking out the window.

“Not as beautiful as your sense of humor.” She deadpanned, sitting down at the dining room table.

“Is that sarcasm?” I opened my eyes wide, “I had a close call because of what you call a beautiful sense of humor.”

“Don’t just say that you had a *close call*; now you have to tell me how.” She said curiously, leaning towards me. The tension seemed to subside a bit.

I burst out laughing, “Well, I had a team member, Ralph, who played soccer with me at USC. Ralph hated my guts for a reason unknown to me, and he was always up to something.” I relaxed as Michelle listened to me attentively. “So, I decided to teach him a lesson. When he was getting ready to go on a run in his neighborhood, I placed a lot of jellies on the driveway without his knowledge and hid behind the shrub to shoot the video. The next moment, he was squealing and screeching and trying hard to balance himself, crying aloud and kind of dancing like crazy, “Somebody help... somebody help.”

Michelle let out a tiny laugh.

“I sent that video to his girlfriend Mila right away, telling her what a crazy boyfriend she had. She called me, and we laughed. The next moment, I saw Ralph standing before me, bristling with anger. He ran after me like a lunatic, and to make things worse for him and funnier for me, a dog started chasing him. The running continued for almost ten minutes until I finally managed to escape. The dog almost bit him.”

I had never seen Michelle laugh as hard as she did at my story, “I can’t believe you did that.”

“And after that, Mila would call him clumsy when they got into an argument,” I told her as I poured us more coffee.

“Oh God, I hope you didn’t do that because you had a crush on Mila and wanted to win her over.” She said, placing her hand on her forehead.

“No... no, not at all. Mila is only a friend... a good friend. My crushes usually don’t last long. All the dates I have had have been a complete failure.” I said honestly.

“Really? Why so?” Michelle took a sip of her coffee.

“Maybe because I have yet to find someone I really connect with. That’s why all these dates fail before they start.” I shrugged my shoulders, sitting down at the table across from her.

We drank our coffee in a happy silence before digging into our late-night dinner. It felt natural to be here with Michelle, laughing and reminiscing about our time in high school.

Michelle finished clearing the table and turned back to me, saying, “I hope that you get to experience how incredible it is to fall in love.”

“Are you or have you ever been in love?” I looked at her quizzically.

“Ryan...” Michelle laughed, “It is getting late. I am going to hit the sack. And the answer is no. I just imagine that being in

love must be incredible. Good night. Ryan.” She said as she turned to walk to her room.

“I hope we both experience it someday soon. Good night, Michelle.”

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## CHAPTER SIX

### MICHELLE

**R**yan and I ended up talking until late last night. I had to get up early to go to work, but it was worth it. I took a shower and went into the kitchen to make some breakfast. Ryan was already awake and sitting in the living room reading his morning newspaper.

“Good morning,” he greeted me warmly as if he’d been up for hours.

“Morning! You’re already up?” I looked at the clock that read 6:45 a.m.

“Yes, I woke up early for a morning run before starting my day,” he yawned.

“Fine. I’ll make breakfast before heading off to work. When I get off, I need to run to the grocery store and buy some food to cook for when Leah comes to visit.” I said, glancing at Ryan.

“Leah?” Ryan looked at me blankly.

“Yeah...Lucas’s cousin... one of my good friends. She wanted to surprise me, but Lucas spoiled her surprise. Poor girl,” I shook my head.

“How did Lucas spoil the surprise?” Ryan sounded almost annoyed.

“It was his birthday a couple of days ago, so I texted him late at night, but because he is an early riser, he had already gone to bed. He called me in the morning and ended up blurting it out while we were talking. I’m sure if Leah finds out, she’ll give him an earful.” I laughed. “Scrambled or fried eggs for breakfast?” I pulled the eggs out of the fridge before turning towards Ryan.

“You remember Lucas’s birthday? Since when are you guys that close?” he stared at me slack-jawed.

I was a little surprised by this question and the incredulous look on his face, but I managed to answer it normally. “I told you this already, silly. We went to the same college, and we’re good friends.” I said as I continued making breakfast.

“You seem to be very fond of him.” He said, looking at me over his shoulder.

“He is a very sweet person, someone who has always been there for me. I’m lucky to have him as a friend.” I shrugged.

Ryan pursed his lips. “That’s good.” He said with annoyance.

I ignored his tone and said “I’ll have breakfast ready in no time.” I smiled, turning the stovetop off and letting Ryan get

back to his newspaper.

We ate breakfast, and then I headed to work.

As I stepped into the bustling headquarters of our software company, the hum of activity was inspiring. The office was overflowing with innovation, a fitting backdrop for my role as a management consultant. It promised to be another exciting day in the tech world.

My day kicked off with a video conference call with a client halfway across the globe. As we discussed their challenges and aspirations for a new project, I scribbled notes and brainstormed ideas on my tablet, already envisioning a roadmap for success. After the call, I dove into data analysis. Rows of code and performance indicators danced across my screen.

As I sat at my desk, engrossed in spreadsheets and emails, a voice broke through the hum of the office. “Special delivery for Michelle.”

I looked up, and there he was – Ryan, standing with a warm smile and a bouquet of vibrant flowers in his hand. My heart skipped a beat as a chorus of “oohs” and “aahs” echoed from my coworkers.

“Surprise!” Ryan’s grin widened as he held out the bouquet, a beautiful blend of colors that brightened up my workday.

I accepted the flowers with a laugh, feeling my cheeks warm. “You certainly know how to make an entrance.”

“Only the best for my favorite person,” he replied with a wink, drawing a collective “aww” from those nearby.

Then, with a flourish, he produced a bag from a local cafe. “And for lunch, a little treat.”

I peeked inside to find a delicious assortment of sandwiches and salads. “You thought of everything!”

Ryan shrugged with a playful grin. “Well, you did mention yesterday that the office vending machine just wasn’t cutting it.”

Laughter bubbled up in my throat as I shook my head. “You’ve got me there.”

As we chatted and shared a few more laughs, I couldn’t help but notice my colleagues sneaking glances and exchanging knowing smiles. It was as if the office had turned into our own little cheering section.

Ryan leaned in, his voice softening. “Also, I might have an ulterior motive.”

“Oh I know Ryan,” I whispered back.

He nodded toward the hallway, where a familiar figure stood, Mr. Pearson, watching us with an approving smile. “I wanted Dad to see that I’m treating you right.”

My heart melted at his thoughtfulness but knew it was all for show. “Well thank you Ryan, that was sweet of you.”

Ryan grinned, his gaze softening. “I could actually get used to this.” He said as he turned to leave my office.

As the day continued, I couldn't help but feel a warm glow in my heart with a sense of deep ache. Not just from the surprise flowers and lunch, but from the way Ryan seemed to care about making me happy, even though we weren't really dating.

As I caught glimpses of his dad nodding in approval from time to time, I realized that this sweet surprise wasn't just about showing his dad he was a good boyfriend – it was about how genuinely he cared about us.

As it neared 5 o'clock, I reviewed my calendar for the next day. Meetings, progress checks, presentations—all in a day's work. I felt a sense of satisfaction from a busy, productive day.

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When I got home, Ryan and I headed to the grocery store. On the way, I thanked Ryan again for the flowers and lunch.

“It was my pleasure Michelle. I have seen how hard you have been working and I thought that it would be a nice change of pace for one day.” He said with true sincerity, which made my heart flutter.

“Is Lucas seeing anyone?” Ryan asked out of nowhere. I raised my eyebrows, wondering why Ryan would ask this question.

The mention of Lucas reminded me that I had to call him later. I had not told him or anyone at home that Ryan and I were living in the same apartment. It was hard to explain to



anyone that we were only good friends. Even though we were living in the same apartment, we shared different rooms.

Although I was thrilled that Leah was coming to visit me, I was also a bit anxious about her reaction when she saw Ryan with me in the same apartment. But I knew I could trust her just the way she trusted me.

“I asked is Lucas seeing anyone?” Ryan repeated.

“I have no idea. Why are you asking?” I asked, confused about where the conversation was going.

“I mean, from what you have told me about him, he is good-looking, has a good job, is well-liked, and not idealistic like me. I’m sure that he must be dating someone.”

I shrugged my shoulders, “I don’t know if he is serious about anyone.”

Ryan didn’t say anything but continued to drive through the familiar streets in silence, which raised many questions in my mind.

*Did he think that Lucas and I were in a relationship? Even if he did, should it bother me? It shouldn’t, but it was bothering me.*

We pulled up to the apartment, but I was so engulfed in my thoughts that when I got out of the car, I didn’t see the man rushing toward me, snatching my handbag. Ryan was taking out groceries from the trunk when my shrieks caught his attention. The next moment, he was running after the man. My heart was in my throat. I cried out to him, asking him to stop,

but he was determined. The next moment, the man was lying on the ground gasping for air, and Ryan was bristling with anger as he kicked him hard in the leg. Then he picked him up by the collar and punched him in the face.

“Hey. You loser. Are you going to kill me over this piece of crap?” He threw the bag at Ryan’s face.

“H-how, how dare you hurt her...how dare you,” He gave him another hard blow to his abdomen.

“Ryan...Ryan, for God’s sake, stop. Please let him go; we got my purse back...” I cried out when I saw the man’s nose bleeding. “Ryan, please leave him alone.”

Ryan looked at me with red eyes. “Are you okay?”

The man pushed him hard and ran down the street faster than a speeding bullet. Ryan ran over to me, holding onto me tightly.

“Ryan, what was the need to risk your life and run after the guy? What if something had happened to you? This handbag was not worth it.” I said, worried about what could have happened to him.

“It’s not about the handbag. It’s about the fact that he hurt you.” Ryan said, looking down at my red wrist.

He pulled me into the apartment and led me to the bathroom, grabbing bandages for me. The pungent smell of antiseptic ran throughout the whole apartment as Ryan dressed my wounds.

I smiled, “Ryan, I am so grateful for your help. What if it had happened without you there?” I smiled weakly. “Who

would have been there to protect me then?”

He shrugged as he shook his head, “I don’t know. All I know is that I won’t let such a situation happen to you. I’ll always be there to protect you.”

I blushed.

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A couple more days passed, and it was Friday now, the night Leah was coming over to *surprise* me. Leah showed up a little after I got home from work. She was surprised to see Ryan in my apartment.

“Hey, Leah, this is my friend Ryan I have been telling you about. We went to high school together.” I said as they shook hands to introduce themselves.

“Nice to meet you, Ryan, I have heard a lot about you.” She walked into the living room. “You knew I was coming, didn’t you?” Leah smiled as we sat down on the couch.

“No, certainly not.” I tried not to laugh as I looked out the window.

“Come on, Michelle. I don’t buy that. I’m sure Lucas must’ve told you that I was coming,” Leah smiled as she looked at Ryan, who smiled back at her. “After all, he doesn’t hide anything from you.” She laughed.

I felt my cheeks burning as I licked my lips, unsure how to reply to her.

Ryan got up from his chair. “I’m going to head out now. You ladies have a great time.” He turned toward me. “I’ll be home late tonight, don’t wait up.”

I felt restless. *Was he going on a date? And if so, with whom? And why was this bothering me so much? It shouldn’t. I was only his fake girlfriend.*

I couldn’t resist the urge to ask him where he was going.

“I’ve got dinner tonight with some friends. You guys enjoy.” He said as he walked to his room to get ready.

My heart sank a little that he wouldn’t be hanging out with us tonight, but it was probably for the best so I could catch up with Leah on what all has been going on.

When Ryan left, Leah nudged my arm with her elbow, “What’s all this?” she asked teasingly. “Are you guys dating?”

“Not really. It’s complicated. We’re faking it.” I said as we got up from the couch and moved into the kitchen.

“Faking it?” her jaw dropped.

“Would you like me to make us some dinner, Leah?” I said, trying to change the subject.

“Sure, that would be great! But again, faking it?” Leah wouldn’t let me get out of this one.

I started getting the food ready for dinner and took a deep breath. “Ryan’s dad wants him to start dating his friend’s daughter, but he didn’t want to date her. So, instead of just

saying no, he came up with a ploy to make me his fake girlfriend. He told his dad that he was dating me and wanted to move in with me so we could get to know each other better. He wants his dad to stop nagging him about dating, and this was his solution.” I said, worried about how Leah would take the news.

“That’s weird, and you agreed to be his fake girlfriend?” She said, with a look of confusion in her eyes.

“Yeah! I couldn’t say no. After all, Ryan has always been there for me. He has been a wonderful friend, and I felt like I owed him.”

“That’s silly,” Leah said, frowning at me.

“I know. But Leah, promise me you won’t tell Lucas about it. You know how close he is to Abel.”

“I won’t, Michelle. You can trust me on that. But are you sure that Ryan is only a friend?”

I was taken aback by this question, “What do you mean?”

I finished preparing dinner, and we sat down to eat. Leah looked into my eyes, “You know exactly what I mean, but let me tell it like it is. I think you like him. I saw how you turned pale the moment Ryan mentioned he was going out tonight.” Leah eyed me suspiciously.

I snorted, “Come on, Leah. You know it isn’t true. We’ve been good friends since high school, and he is only going out with his friends. It’s no big deal.” My eyes darted away from her face.

“See, you can’t even look at me as you say it,” Leah smiled as she raised her hands.

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Leah left around 9 o’clock, leaving me alone with my intruding thoughts. I was moving from one room to another, looking at the time and nervously fiddling with my hands. *Why was I so worried about what Ryan was doing?* I was pulled out of my thoughts when my phone rang, which almost made me jump out of my skin.

“Hi, Lucas. How’re you?” I said, trying to sound normal.

“I’m doing wonderful. How was your evening with Leah? I hope you didn’t tell her that you already knew she was coming.”

“No... I didn’t, but she could tell,” I faked a laugh as I looked at the wall clock.

“Oh God! She is going to be mad at me,” Lucas snorted.

“No, Lucas, she isn’t mad at you. She wasn’t even fazed. Anyways, Lucas. Forget about that. You wanted to tell me something?” My phone beeped, making my heart thud. It was a text notification. I hoped it was Ryan. I quickly opened the message, but it wasn’t him. It was Leah sending me a text that she got home safely.

Lucas cleared his throat, “Michelle, you’ve always been a good friend... and I think we know each other pretty well...”

“That goes without saying, Lucas. But I’m not sure what you are trying to say.”

“Do you think we would be good together? Like boyfriend and girlfriend?” Lucas was stuttering badly, clearly nervous.

I was caught off-guard, and for a moment, time stood still. For a while, I had no idea how to reply. It was true that Lucas and I were good friends, but I had never thought about a relationship beyond that. I heard a gentle clicking of the door; the pull and the thud made my heart skip a beat. It must be Ryan. I didn't want to give him the impression that I was awake because of the eerie restlessness. I hurried to my room.

“Michelle, are you there? Did I scare you off? I've just been missing you a lot lately, and my parents were teasing me about how I never date anyone. It made me realize how much you've meant to me all these years and how well we get along. I know this is out of the blue, but I needed to tell you how I feel about you.” Lucas said with sincerity in his voice.

“Sorry, Lucas, this has caught me off guard,” I gave a nervous laugh. “You know we've always been good friends, but frankly, I've never thought about us being anything more than that until you brought it up. I need some time to think about this.” I lied.

“Certainly. Take your time, good night.” He said.

“Good night, Lucas.” I hung up.

I was so exhausted from the day that when I laid down, I immediately fell asleep.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### RYAN

I returned late last night and had to get up early the next day for my morning run and private lessons with one of my clients. With very little sleep, I was worn out. My eyes were heavy as I lay down on the shiny, black leather armchair after coming home from my run. I had no idea if I was asleep or not. Perhaps I was between two blissful states: partially awake and partially asleep.

I could smell fresh bagels, freshly brewed coffee, and scrambled eggs coming from the kitchen. It made my mouth water. I saw Michelle before me, fresh out of the shower, her hair towel dried, smelling of water lily and rose, in her light-blue gown with her innocent, honey-colored eyes, smiling.

“The breakfast smells delicious!” I smiled as I held out my hand for a coffee, wondering why she wasn’t passing me the mug. “Give it to me...”

“Ryan... Ryan. Who are you talking to?” Michelle looked at me quizzically as I was startled from my dream state. She was dressed in formal clothes, a grey and white dress, black



stockings, and black stilettos. She had combed her hair neatly and tied it with a mini hair clip on top of her head. Even in her simplicity, she looked stunning.

“How did you change so quickly, and what about the cup of coffee?” I rubbed my eyes.

“What? That was an hour ago. I put stuff in the fridge for you. You should get more rest; you look tired.” She frowned at me. “Anyway, I’m going to be late for work. Bye.” She walked out the door.

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I have planned a party for my dad’s 60th birthday next weekend. And like always, I left gift shopping until the last minute. Thankfully, I didn’t have any lessons, so I had all day to go gift shopping. I decided to see if my friend Amy would go shopping with me to get him a gift.

I picked up the phone to call Amy; she plays on the women’s soccer team in LA, so we’ve bonded over our love of sports and soccer the past few years. The last few days, we have been talking a lot on the phone and getting to know each other better.

“Hey, Amy, I’ve got a little dilemma. Would you be interested in helping me pick out a birthday gift for my dad today?”

“Of course, Ryan! I’d love to help. It sounds like a fun adventure. And lucky for you, I am free today.” Amy said with excitement.

“Perfect. I will meet you at the square in an hour.” I said and hung up the phone.

So there we were, on a Thursday morning, strolling down the streets, our mission clear – find the perfect birthday present for my dad. Amy’s presence was comforting. She had this uncanny ability to make even the most mundane tasks feel like an enjoyable adventure.

We ducked into a charming antique store, the jingle of the doorbell announcing our arrival. As we browsed through a sea of vintage trinkets, our laughter filled the air. Amy’s eyes sparkled as she held up an old record player, joking about how it could add a touch of nostalgia to my dad’s life. We moved from aisle to aisle, sharing anecdotes and bonding over our shared love for quirky finds.

In the bookstore next door, we stumbled upon a section of classic novels. As Amy held up a dog-eared copy of my dad’s favorite novel, I couldn’t help but smile. Her thoughtfulness was heartwarming, and in that moment, I realized how easily we connected, like pieces of a puzzle clicking into place.

As we continued our quest, picking out a leather-bound journal and a set of artisanal chocolates, I couldn’t ignore the nagging thought at the back of my mind. Michelle occupied a significant space in my thoughts. I was enjoying my time with Amy, but a huge part of me wished that I was shopping with Michelle instead.

As we left the last shop, bags in hand, I found myself lost in contemplation. I hoped no one had seen us together. If word

gets back to my dad that I was seen with another girl, he will further question Michelle and I's relationship.

“Ryan, you seem lost in thought,” Amy said, her voice pulling me back to the present.

I chuckled, offering her a sheepish smile. “Just pondering the mysteries of gift-giving, I guess.”

She laughed, a musical sound that warmed my heart. “Well, we did pretty well today, if I do say so myself.”

She was right. The day had been unexpectedly wonderful, a blend of laughter and shared connections.

As we parted ways, I found myself hoping that my little adventure with Amy wouldn't complicate things with Michelle. I wanted to savor both connections without one affecting the other. With that thought in mind, I headed home, gift bags in hand.

When I got home, I started to send out invites and spoke with the butlers and cooks at the house to have everything just perfect. I invited quite a few people so that Dad felt how much he was loved by his friends and family. I wish I would have just kept it as a private affair with just me, dad, and Michelle, but my dad always enjoyed a good party.

Michelle came home after work, and I couldn't wait to tell her about my day and Dad's birthday party.

“Hey, Michelle. How was your day at work?” I greeted her from the couch when she walked in.

“It was good, busy as usual. What did you do today?” She asked as she set her stuff down and joined me in the living room.

“Well, this morning, I remembered that my dad’s birthday is coming up. I called Amy, and we went shopping to get him a gift.”

“Amy?”

“Yeah. She is a friend of mine who plays soccer as well, and we have been talking a lot here recently.” I said, wondering how Michelle would respond.

“Oh, that’s good, Ryan.” She said with a half-smile.

“I am also planning a party for him next Saturday, so you have to be there as my *girlfriend*,” I said, reminding her.

“Okay, Ryan, no problem.”

The evening went on, and we shared dinner together and went to our respective rooms to go to bed.

*I wonder if Michelle is upset that I am spending time with Amy instead of her; she couldn’t possibly be jealous.*

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Saturday afternoon, Michelle walked into the living room, “What’s on your agenda this afternoon?” She asked curiously, “Are you hanging out with Amy?”

“No, she went home to Florida to see her parents for a few weeks,” I said, wondering what she had in mind.

“Well, good. I’m glad you are free,” she smiled. “Maybe we could go grab a bite to eat for an early dinner?”

With a look of shock due to her spontaneity, I replied, “Of course, there is a new spot I have been wanting to try out. Let me get my shoes on, and we can go.” I got up and went to my room to find my shoes.

We headed to Charlie’s Crab Shack in town. We settled down, facing a pile of crab legs that looked like they meant business. Armed with nutcrackers, we couldn’t resist laughing. It didn’t take long before we were cracking up more than the crabs, sending shell bits flying like confetti at a food festival. As butter dripped and giggles flowed, I realized this wasn’t just dinner—it was like our own private crab comedy show, and man, it was a blast. I really needed this.

We drove back home, and it was already getting dark. I hadn’t realized we had been there for a few hours. Since it was late, we got home and called it a night. *I hope Michelle enjoyed tonight as much as I did.*

“Well, I am going to bed, Ryan. Thanks for tonight. I really enjoyed it.” She said as she walked towards her bedroom.

“Goodnight, Michelle.”

*Was I starting to like her more than just a best friend?* I thought as I dozed off to sleep.

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The week went by without any hiccups. It is Saturday now, the evening of my dad’s birthday party. Michelle got home

from spending the day with Leah. We both started getting ready for the night. I sat on the couch when I was ready and waited for Michelle.

When she came into the living room, I couldn't help but give her a second look. She looked stunning in a V-neck, shimmering red dress with cap sleeves. Her hair ran down her shoulders, and her honey-brown eyes gleamed with a serene glow and radiance. Her lips were glossy with a nude-colored lip gloss, and her diamond studs were shining brilliantly on her earlobes.

"You look simply *amazing*," I couldn't take my eyes off her until I noticed the crimson color on her cheeks, making me a bit embarrassed about staring at her.

"Thank you. You're too kind." She said as she looked away from me. "You don't look so bad yourself." She smiled.

While I was driving, I had this strong urge to look at Michelle again and again. I looked at her in the front mirror of the car. Michelle looked out of the window in silence. However, that silence didn't feel awkward; it was beautiful and comfortable.

The moment I stepped out of the car, I went to my dad to give him a hug. For the first time in all these years, I noticed Dad had grown old. Dad smiled and put his hand on my head, "What's the matter, Ryan? Are you okay?"

"Yes, Dad. I'm okay," I lied. "I just missed you." It brought a lump to my throat to see my Dad looking old and tired.

“Hello Michelle, I am glad you could make it.” He said as he hugged her.

“Come on. It’s time for dancing and celebration.” Dad patted my back as we walked inside.

As we made it inside, I felt a tap on my shoulder. “Hi Ryan...” Ruth said as she turned me around to hug her before I could even realize who she was.

“Hi,” I smiled, trying not to show her I was shocked to see her, but I was.

Ruth was looking at Michelle curiously. “Hey, it’s Michelle, right?”

“Yeah, Michelle is my girlfriend. We studied at the same school in Davenport. She now works at Dad’s company.” I said so she would know I was *taken*. “Michelle, this is Ruth, my dad’s friend’s daughter.” I looked at Michelle intently.

“Hi,” Michelle answered slowly and smiled warmly at her, seeming unphased that she was who my dad wanted me to date.

“If you can excuse us,” Ruth grabbed me by my arm and looked into my eyes. “Come on, Ryan, let’s dance.”

Michelle lowered her gaze and settled back quietly as her smile turned into a little chuckle.

Ruth dragged me to the dance floor by my arm. As I turned to look back at Michelle, she was giggling at me. We danced for a few songs before bringing her mouth closer to my ear

and whispering, “You dance so well, Ryan. I could dance with you my whole life and never get tired.”

I felt on edge and wanted to push Ruth away. Thankfully, Dad called me over to him. I heaved a sigh of relief. “I need to go, Ruth. Dad is calling me. I’ll see you soon.” I couldn’t get away fast enough.

She gave me a disgruntled look and sighed as I walked away.

“Yes, Dad. What is it?” I asked as Dad and I sat on the chaise lounge. I observed Michelle from a distance, who was scrolling through her phone. The hallway of our home looked impeccable with the exotic upholstery, helium balloons, different lights, chandeliers, lanterns, and bunting banners. However, all these paled into insignificance as I looked at Michelle, who looked as calm as the night.

“I hope you and Michelle are doing well.” He said with true concern.

“Yes, Dad. We’re really happy together.” I said, having no idea what was to come next. And hearing those words come out of my mouth, I realized it was true.

“That’s great. I’m happy for you guys. You make a great couple.”

“Thanks, Dad. That’s kind of you to say.”

“I just wanted to pull you away from Ruth. I could see how uncomfortable you were. I know you were just trying to be nice.” He said with a chuckle.



“Well, I’m going to go and see if Michelle needs anything. Thanks for bailing me out of that one.” I said as I turned and walked toward Michelle.

I stood beside Michelle, the lights twinkling above us cast a warm glow on her smile.

My dad stepped forward, raising his glass for attention. “Excuse me, everyone! If I could have your attention,” my dad’s voice carried across the room. “I’d like you all to meet someone very special to me.”

He turned to Michelle, a twinkle in his eye. “This is Michelle, and I’m proud to introduce her as Ryan’s girlfriend.”

Michelle blushed, a mix of surprise, shame, but also delight dancing in her eyes. I couldn’t help but feel my heart race as the room erupted in cheers and applause.

As the applause subsided, my dad continued, “Now, I know this night is supposed to be about me, but I am so proud of my son for finding such a great girl. I know you’re all curious about how these two lovebirds met.”

A mischievous grin tugged at his lips, and I exchanged an amused glance with Michelle. We were about to hear our story from my dad’s perspective.

“Michelle and Ryan were classmates back in Davenport High School, and as fate would have it, Michelle’s journey led her to LA. Their paths crossed once again at a party, and ever since that encounter, they’ve become inseparable,” he shared, his grin lighting up the room. “Today, we celebrate not just

another year of life but a new chapter of love,” my dad concluded, raising his glass again. “To Ryan and Michelle, may your journey be as exciting as that first time you saw each other!”

The clinking of glasses and heartfelt toasts filled the room. As we went around the party, chatting with friends and family, I realized that our fake love story, with all its quirky charm, had been embraced by those who mattered most to me. Guilt started to hit me hard as we walked back to the table to sit down. I noticed Michelle had a look of sadness in her eyes. “Are you okay?” I asked her as I sat beside her.

“Yes... I am.” She tried to fake a smile.

“No, you’re not. Tell me, Michelle. What is it?” I put my hand on hers.

She immediately lifted her hand and took a deep breath as her eyes became watery, “Nothing, just that I’m missing my family.” She said this without looking at me.

“I understand. You should take some days off and visit them.” I suggested. I was sure this was not the only reason behind her tears.

Michelle nodded. “Maybe. I need to go to the restroom, excuse me.”

Before I could say anything, she vanished into the crowd, leaving me alone with many questions in my mind.

The party came to an end, and we said goodbye to everyone and went home. I noticed that Michelle was quiet, but I didn’t

pry.

“That was a great party you planned, Ryan.” She said, trying to hide her sadness.

“Thanks. I wouldn’t have wanted to be there with anyone other than you by my side.” I said with sincerity. “I know you are my fake girlfriend, but I am starting to enjoy all the time we have been spending together.”

We walked into the apartment.

“Me too. Goodnight, Ryan.” She said and went into her room.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### MICHELLE

I sat on the porch watching a bird drink out of a bird feeder and listening to the sounds of the birds chirp. All the events that took place last night at Ryan's dad's birthday party played in my head. Seeing Ryan with his family and friends made me miss home. Not only that, but I think I am starting to like Ryan. I enjoy our morning talks before work and our evenings together before bed. The only problem is Ryan only sees me as a really good friend. I know that Ryan is just faking liking me as a girlfriend, or he would have never come up with this ploy. I feel guilty for lying to his father, but I am also lying to him and to myself. Besides, Ryan is spending a lot of time with Amy. She is absolutely gorgeous. With her light-blue eyes, long blond hair, and perfectly toned body, she looked more like a model than an athlete. Any man would fall for her, and Ryan was no exception.

Ryan came around the corner, finishing up his morning run. The beads of sweat glistened on his forehead and shimmered in the mellow sun, making me wonder how long these

beautiful mornings would last. One day, they would come to an end. Everything was painfully vague, and it choked me to think about it.

“Are you better now? You were not quite yourself last night.” He said as he sat next to me on the patio.

“Yes, I’m feeling a little better. I called Mom earlier, but she didn’t answer, so I’ll try her again later.” I said, looking down at my phone.

Ryan gulped down water from his water bottle. For a moment, except for the chirping of the birds, there were no sounds.

“So, how are things with you and Amy? Any updates?” I asked curiously.

“No, we are just taking it day by day.” He said

Before I could respond, my phone rang. It was Mom calling me back. I excused myself and went inside. “Hi, Mom!” I tried to sound cheerful. The last thing I wanted was to make her feel that there was something wrong.

“Hi, Michelle, how have you been?” My mom asked kindly.

“I’m good, Mom. How is Dad doing?”

“About the same,” Mom sighed.

I always asked my mom how he was doing because if I asked my Dad, he would say everything was good. And I know that is not the case.

I replied, “Mom, you know it can’t be cured.”

“I do, Michelle. We can only try and make things better for him.” She said sadly.

I shook my head as if she could see me through the phone.

“I’ve specifically called you to talk to you about something,” Mom spoke each word slowly as if speaking them aloud was too much for her. “You know, Abel is struggling to find his way in life; find a good job and settle down.”

I wondered how this related to me. “Yes, Mom. What are you trying to say?” I asked with confusion.

“I would just like for you to think about starting to date more. Maybe even dating Lucas. You guys have been good friends since high school, and you get along well. I only say this because I would like for your father to see one of his kids get married one day soon before it’s too late.” She said, her voice cracking.

“Mom, I have never thought of Lucas as more than just a friend. In fact, he called me the other day to ask me how I felt about possibly dating him. I told him I would have to think about it because he caught me off guard.” I said, confused if they had spoken to each other about this plan.

Mom started crying.

“Mom... Mom, please don’t cry. It breaks my heart. Listen, Mom, I will think about starting to date more, but it is not going to be Lucas. I’m asking for some time off from work, and I will fly back home soon. We’ll talk about this when I get

back. Everything will be okay. Take a breath.” I said, thoughts racing through my head.

“Thank you, dear. I’m sorry, there’s just so much going on. I’ve missed you a lot. I can’t wait to see you. Take care, honey.”

“You too, Mom.” I hung up the phone and walked to the window.

The moment I hung up, I felt choked inside. The feeling was terrifying. I always liked Lucas, but I never felt for him what I was feeling... feeling for Ryan...or maybe had always felt. It was only then that this realization dawned on me. This feeling of dating my friend was terrible, but what was equally as terrible was knowing that the man I *wanted* to date was searching elsewhere for his soulmate, and I was nothing more to him than a good friend.

I threw open the blinds and saw Ryan strolling in the garden, smiling and talking to someone on the phone. I bet it was Amy. I had no idea what was wrong, but there was something that didn’t feel right inside of me when I thought of him talking to another girl. I closed the blinds and sat on the edge of the bed.

My thoughts, my mind, my feelings, everything was disoriented, and I wanted to be away from Ryan for a while to figure things out. I couldn’t think straight with him around. I wanted to be away from him and seeing him date other girls. I was sure that Leah wouldn’t mind if I stayed with her for a little while until I went home to see my parents. In fact, she’d

probably be thrilled to have me stay with her. The only way to come out of this taxing situation was to take a breather.

For the rest of the day, I didn't see Ryan. He left while I was on the phone and texted to say that he had a couple of lessons today and that he'd be home before dinner. For a bit, I kept staring at my phone's screen without replying to him. I held my head in my hands and sent him a short text after a while.

*Okay.*

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“The food smells delicious,” Ryan rubbed his hands as he sat beside me at the dining table. “ This is my favorite: baked chicken, eggplant, and long-grained rice. Oh my, my stomach is rumbling.”

He turned to me. “Did you get to talk to your mom?” Ryan asked as he took a mouthful of steaming long-grained white rice. “What about your dad? How is he?”

“He's not doing that well. Mom wants me to visit them.”

“ I'm sure you can take a few days off from the office and visit your parents,” Ryan continued to chew on the food, relishing every morsel.

“I will do that. But, before that, I need to go stay with Leah for a bit.” I said while taking a bite of food.

Ryan stopped chewing for a moment and looked at me, his eyebrows raised, “Leah, you mean Lucas's cousin?” He put down the spoon on the plate and gulped down some water.



“No... I mean Leah, my friend.” I said with a slight attitude.

“Isn’t she also Lucas’s cousin?” He asked.

“She certainly is Lucas’s cousin, but first and foremost, she is my friend,” I argued.

He lifted his hands and smiled, “Well, that’s the same thing. When are you leaving?”

“Friday. I need to have time to tie things up at work for when I am off and turn in my time off request.” I said with sadness in my voice.

“Will you need a ride?” He asked.

“No. I’ll take the tram or taxi.” I answered.

“Ah, come on Michelle, it’ll be quicker if I drive you... and it’ll be free nonetheless.”

“That’s so nice of you to offer your help, but I’ll manage.” I got up from the table to start cleaning up our plates.

Ryan didn’t reply to that but asked another question, “How long are you going to be staying with her?” he bit his lip.

“Maybe a week or so,” I answered, wondering if he would miss me.

He huffed. “Fine. I’ll make sure to keep my schedule free, and I will take you Friday morning. We can leave around 11 am. Will that work?”

“Perfect.”

“Great then. I’m going to hit the sack. Good night!” He got up from the table.

“But you haven’t finished your dinner,” I said, concerned.

“My stomach is full. The food was great. I’m going to miss you—your cooking.” He stumbled over his words.

It made my heart beat faster and faster. *He was only going to miss my cooking, but I was going to miss him.*

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## CHAPTER NINE

### RYAN

**T**he week passed with Michelle and I going out to dinner one night with my dad and going out on the town shopping and enjoying each other's time as we acted as if we were truly dating. Holding hands and sitting close, which I am kind of getting used to. I like how this feels, *dating* Michelle.

I rubbed my eyes as I saw Michelle in the kitchen early Friday morning. I was about to go for a morning run. She never woke up this early on her days off. She was usually up and about when I came back from running. I was surprised as to what woke her up so early; then, I remembered that I had to drop her at Leah's apartment.

*Was staying with Lucas's cousin so exciting that she couldn't sleep? Well, good for her to want to spend time with the people she loves! I thought to myself. How nice would it be if she wanted to spend time with me? but shook myself out of it when those thoughts came up in my head. She is just a really good friend, I would tell myself. Well, she only sees me as a friend.*

I was behind her, watching her work. I admired the way she was able to handle housework and office work together so efficiently and meticulously.

“Hi...how long have you been standing there?” Michelle asked as she wiped her hands with a washcloth after washing them in the sink. “I didn’t see you.”

“Just for a moment,” I lied. “It looks like you’re on cloud nine about seeing Leah,” I said sarcastically. “That’s why you’re up and about this early.”

“I’m happy that I’m going to see Leah, but that is not the reason I’m up and about so early.” She said as she walked to the refrigerator.

“Then what is it?”

“You told me the other day that you’d be missing my cooking. Now you won’t. There is enough food for you in the refrigerator for the next few days. You only need to warm it up in the microwave.” She opened the fridge and showed me all the containers.

For a moment, I was tongue-tied. “Michelle, thank you for taking the time to do all of this. You shouldn’t have troubled yourself.” I said as I watched her rearrange the Tupperware in the refrigerator. Again, guilt held me in its clutches as I silently watched her shut the refrigerator door and turn to me while I sat on the oak dining room chair.

“It is no trouble, Ryan. Not at all. Now, go on your morning run. I have a little bit of packing to do. By the time you’re

back, I'll be ready. We can eat breakfast and then head out."

I didn't reply but got up from the chair and drew a shuddering breath. "Fine, then. I'll see you in an hour."

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Neither of us spoke much at the breakfast table. I watched Michelle from the corner of my eye; she was chewing on her food reluctantly, as if someone was forcing her to eat it. It had become a cliché for me to ask her over the last few days, *are you okay? Are you okay?* When certainly she wasn't. And she came up with the same answers: either she was fine, or she was missing home. I began to doubt the authenticity of it, but I'd given her the benefit of the doubt. She was a shy person, and she might not be comfortable sharing what was troubling her with me. That was *perfectly fine with me*. Maybe Leah could get her to open up.

I wiped my mouth with a napkin and looked up at her. "As soon as you're ready, I'll drop you off at Leah's house."

"Thank you. I'll be back in a minute."

I nodded my head. She walked to her room, the shuffling of her slippers in the hallway echoing my restless heartbeat.

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The twenty-minute drive between Bradbury and Beverly Hills felt like five minutes. Time seemed to get wings suddenly. I tried to be my usual self by cracking jokes and faking being a happy camper. Many things were weighing heavily on my mind, guilt being the heaviest—which had

started to get more intense with each passing day. I was lying to my dad, and Michelle was leaving for a week. I was in an absurd predicament, having no inkling of how I was going to get out of the mess I had created for myself.

“You missed Leah’s street.” Michelle checked Google Maps to see which direction we needed to take.

“Yes, sorry.” I took the next turn and maneuvered through the streets. We got to her apartment and parked the car. “Here we are, finally!”

As Michelle stepped out of the car, I spotted a teenager walking towards us, wearing earphones, lost in his own world. The moment Michelle turned around, he collided with her, and Michelle lost her balance and toppled over into the street, falling in front of an oncoming car.

The driver was about to hit her when I rushed to grab her arm, my head and heart throbbing. Pulling her into my arms, I moved both of us to the sidewalk.

I was panting. “Oh, God. That could have been fatal. Pay attention!” I almost snapped at her, still panting and gasping for air. I exhaled and more calmly added, “Are you okay?”

I moved her away from me. “Let me get you some water from the car.” I didn’t look at Michelle when I said this.

I handed her a bottle of water and one for myself, taking a few gulps. Realization hit me like a ton of bricks. *If I hadn’t been there to catch her, I could have lost her.* My heart

somersaulted in my chest at this terrifying thought, and I began to imagine life without her.

“Are you okay? I asked. “Do you need to sit down?”

“I’m okay... I’m okay,” Michelle gulped down the water in a similar manner as I had moments before and rested her head against the fence beside us.

“This is the second time you have done this.” She pressed her lips together and drew a long breath.

“Done what?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Put your life in danger to save me,” she pouted, and her beautiful, brown eyes turned red with tears.

This hit me hard. I realized that I really care for her. I don’t want anything to happen to her. “And this is the second time I’m telling you; I’ll protect you whenever I can and as long as I can. Even if it means risking my life.”

“But I have to learn to fend for myself here in LA.” she replied firmly.

“Michelle... let’s just live in the moment for now,” I smiled, trying to sound cheerful. Both of us had been out of sorts today. “You’re safe. That’s all that matters to me.”

“I should go inside now so Leah doesn’t think I got lost.” She said as we went to the trunk to get her luggage.

“Yeah, okay. Take care and let me know when you are coming back. I’ll come pick you up.” I said as I got her luggage out of the trunk and placed it on the sidewalk.

“Okay, thanks again for the ride. See you soon.” Michelle grabbed onto her luggage, giving me one last wave before walking towards the building. I watched her until she was out of sight. I didn’t want to go home without her. I sat in my car outside Leah’s apartment for a while, thinking about the long days that I had ahead without her. *Why am I going to miss her so much?*

I started to drive slowly in the direction of Beverly Hills with a heavy heart.



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## CHAPTER TEN

### MICHELLE

I settled onto Leah's couch and told her about my near miss with the car and how it unsettled me. "It's okay, Michelle. You are safe, and that is over. Just be thankful that Ryan was there to save you." Leah said as she squeezed my hand.

"But if something had happened to Ryan, I'd have never forgiven myself. "

"Everything is fine; you're thinking too much. Can I make you some coffee or get you a glass of water? Will that help?" Leah said as she stood up.

I nodded. I had no energy to speak. I wanted to take a nap. My head was throbbing.

Leah came back quickly with a cool glass of water, passing it to me with a gentle smile. I took a few small sips.

"Better now?" Leah asked, her voice full of worry.

"A little. Can I sleep for a while? My head is throbbing." I said, grabbing my head.

“Sure, honey. You can. I’ll show you your bedroom.” Leah stood up and walked us down the hall, bringing me into the guest room. “Have a good nap.”

“Thank you, Leah. You’re a blessing.” I was excited and nervous about how this time away from Ryan would go.

I closed the door and lay on the bed with a heavy sigh. Leah’s apartment was not as luxurious as Ryan’s apartment. But everything here felt warm and homey, whereas Ryan’s apartment had started to feel like I was living one big lie. Perhaps because I was playing the role of a fake girlfriend, everything there felt fake. I didn’t know if Ryan was being so nice and caring just because he was playing a role or if he really meant it.

I woke up to the appetizing smell of smoked turkey. I went into the kitchen and saw Leah had already finished cooking and was preparing salad. I rubbed my eyes and smiled at her “Why didn’t you wake me up? I would have helped you.”

“Come on, Michelle. You’re my guest, and I haven’t made enough food to warrant your help. It was no big deal.” She smiled back warmly as she put the delectable-looking, piping-hot food on the table.

I was so hungry. I put the biggest piece of smoked turkey onto my plate. “Reminds me of Davenport.” Tears came to my eyes as I said it.

“What’s the matter, Michelle? I’ve noticed that you have been down in the dumps for days. Whenever we talked on the

phone, you always said that you'd tell me when we met. Are you okay?"

"Mom called me a few days ago." I licked my lips and sighed.

"Is your dad okay?"

"He's not okay. He's getting worse..." I sighed again. "And Mom wants me to start dating, so I can hopefully get married sooner than later."

Leah looked at me with true concern, "I am sorry to hear about your dad. How is your mom handling it?"

"She isn't handling it well. The disease process seems to be progressing quicker than we expected. She said she wanted Dad to see at least one of his kid's weddings before he doesn't have the chance..." I burst into tears.

"Come on. Don't cry. Everything will be okay. We'll talk about it later. Eat something first."

A good lunch and catching up with an old friend was exactly what I needed.

Leah passed me a cup of coffee as we both sat in the living room after having lunch. "So, who is your mom expecting you to start dating? Did she have someone in mind?"

"Yes, and you know him." I laughed awkwardly.

"Do I really? Who?" She sounded shocked.

"Lucas. And the weird thing is, just the other day, he called me and asked what I thought about us dating. You think that

was a coincidence?”

“Seriously? I mean, he *is* a great guy, but I thought y’all were just good friends?” Leah was eying me with confusion.

“I know...He *is* a great guy, but I don’t feel that way about him. I need to figure out a way to tell him that without hurting his feelings or our friendship.” I said, looking worried.

“Just tell him the truth. He will understand and appreciate the honesty. Besides, we both know who you are really interested in.” Leah said with a smirk on her face.

“Oh, we do? Who is that?” I asked with my eyebrows raised.

“Ryan! Come on, Michelle, everyone can see how happy he makes you.” Leah answered, waiting to see my reaction.

“Even if I am interested in him, what does it matter? He only treats me as a friend. You have no idea how many gorgeous girls drool over him and flirt with him.” I said softly as I imagined Ryan with all the pretty girls.

“That doesn’t matter. Why don’t you tell him how you feel? You never know; Ryan could have the same feelings for you.”

“You want *me* to tell *him* how I feel? You’ve got to be kidding. You know I can’t do that, it could ruin our friendship.” I said as we continued talking in the living room.

“Then I don’t see even a vague possibility for you guys to be together.” Leah shrugged her shoulders. “I mean, you need to do something. You can’t just sit on your butt and do nothing about it.”

“There’s no need for me to do anything because there is no possibility either way. He’s interested in someone else.”

“What? Who?” She asked with surprise.

“Her name is Amy. She is a soccer player, and they talk on the phone and hang out occasionally. He says they are just talking and aren’t serious, but I don’t know how true that is.” I said, hopeful that things fizzle out between them soon.

We continued talking for hours, and it was late. I looked down at my phone and saw a picture of Amy and Ryan on Instagram. *She must be back from Florida.*

“What?” Leah exclaimed. “Why are you shaking so badly? Pull yourself together, Michelle. Relax...let me see what you saw on your phone that drained the life out of you.”

I passed my phone to her with trembling hands. Leah held my hand in hers tightly. I pointed to the picture of Ryan and Amy on FB that Amy had uploaded. She’d tagged Ryan in it with the caption, *Happy times with the people who make me happy.* Both of them looked perfectly happy in the picture at some romantic restaurant having what appeared to be a candlelit dinner. Amy looked stunning in her mustard-yellow dress, and those dazzling eyes of hers were shining. I felt an ache in my heart—a deep ache that I couldn’t express even to Leah. *Was I too late?*

Leah bit her lip and gazed at the photo for a while, “I don’t think this proves that they’re in a relationship if that’s what you’re trying to say.”

“Amy and Ryan have been spending time together for a little bit now, and what if things are really starting to get serious? I won’t be his fake girlfriend anymore, and I won’t get to spend as much time with him. This is eating me alive.” I said as I looked outside the window.

“So, what do you want to do now? Move back to Davenport?”

I had no answers to her questions. I was mixed up and didn’t want to make a rash decision right now, but Leah wanted answers. I knew she was asking these questions because she was genuinely worried about me, but my mind and heart were too exhausted for any answers. I held my throbbing head in my hands and stayed silent like that for a few minutes.

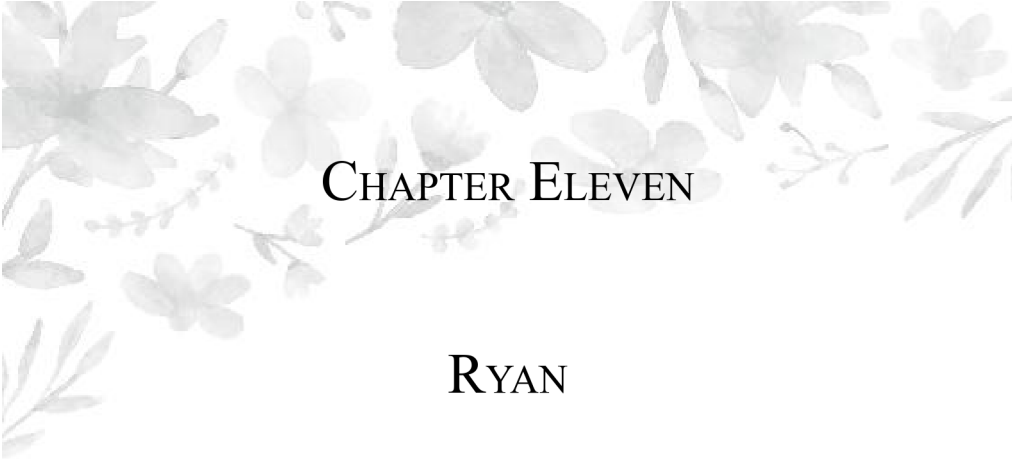
Leah, too, didn’t speak until I spoke. What I loved about her was that she knew when I was ready to speak and when I wasn’t. I lifted my head after I regained my composure a little bit and spoke. “I want to put an end to this fake girlfriend drama. I’ll tell him I can’t continue with this.” I spoke in pauses. “He can figure out how to tell his dad. And no, I wouldn’t move back to Davenport, but I would search for my own circle of friends and start to meet new people. At least I wouldn’t be a part of a game where I’m messing with the feelings of an old man who has been so kind to me and has given me such an amazing job.”

But it was only a partial truth. I knew the longer I stayed with Ryan, the more difficult it would become for me to leave

him. It was hard even now, but certainly not harder than hearing the man I was falling for talking about the times he spent with another girl while I had to fake being happy for him.

“You’ve got to listen to your heart, Michelle. I’ll be here for you no matter what you decide to do.” Leah said as she gave me a hug.

After all the emotional breakdowns that I had experienced since that morning, I went to bed and tried to sleep it off. Earlier, I was conflicted and couldn’t make any decisions, but after coming to Bradbury and talking to Leah, I was sure that I wanted to tell Ryan that I was moving out and could no longer be his fake girlfriend.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### RYAN

After I dropped her off at Leah's, I went to meet my friend Ivan and a few other people were there to visit him, including Amy. They had also stopped by to ask about his welfare, as he had undergone gallbladder removal surgery a few days ago.

Amy, Chelsea, and Eric decided that it had been a long time since we had been out together, so they all decided to eat out that night and insisted that I join them. I had no desire to go out but was left with no option, as they were unwilling to take no for an answer. Amy was a pain in the neck, taking pictures the whole time and asking me and others to pose for the pictures. I was beside myself and all I really wanted to do was to go home and rest.

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After my morning run, I opened the refrigerator to take out a bottle of water when my eyes happened upon the different food containers packed neatly with labels on the shelf. Then my memory returned, and I remembered that Michelle wasn't



here. She was at her friend's place. I felt a pang in my heart at the thought of an empty house. A pang that I'd never experienced before; it held me in its grip, and I realized I'd have to be without her for ten long days.

I sat at the table after preparing myself breakfast: two eggs, hot porridge, toast, and a coffee. I could almost imagine Michelle sitting beside me, eating in her usual calm and relaxed manner, wiping her mouth with a tissue in between bites, sipping a cup of coffee, and listening to me speak in such a thoughtful manner. I could almost feel her.

I hadn't spoken to her since yesterday. My phone died last night, so I kept it on the charger till morning. I came home late from dinner, and then I woke up early for my run and only had two hours of sleep. The lack of sleep had worn me out. Maybe I will text her later on to see how things are going. I went to my room and collapsed on the bed. I closed my eyes to catch a few more hours when the cacophonous beeping notifications woke me up.

*Oh, God! This beeping sound is driving me crazy. It'd be better to put my phone on silent for a while.*

My eyes were heavy. All I wanted to do was sleep. I yawned, sat upright on my bed, and fiddled with the side table to find my phone. My eyes opened wide as I looked at the text I received from Ivan:

*Hey, did you see the picture Amy posted of you two from last night?*

I immediately opened FB to see what the picture was about. I saw red when I realized that Amy had uploaded a picture from yesterday's dinner. It would have been okay if she'd uploaded a picture of Eric and Chelsea along with both of us but she had cropped them out of the picture and edited the picture in such a way that it looked like only the two of us were there. I was furious and wanted to give her a piece of my mind.

*I wonder what Michelle must've thought about this picture. Is that why she hadn't texted me?*

Any hopes of sleep vanished. I wanted to talk to Michelle.

I sat up in the bed, my heart beating fast in my chest. I dialed Michelle's number, my palms sweaty. But I chickened out, and I hung up before she could answer. This had never happened to me before. I could almost hear her euphonious voice calling my name: *Ryan, where have you been? I tried calling you, but your phone was off.*

I smiled at myself, imagining these words coming out of Michelle's mouth. I dialed her number once more and again hung up before I could hear it ring.

*What's happening to me? Why can't I gather the courage to talk to Michelle?* I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. *You can do it, Ryan. It's not the first time you're talking to her. Stay calm and talk to her normally.* I dialed her number for a third time, determined to talk to her this time. She picked up after a few rings and greeted me coldly, which made my heart sink. I had no idea of the reason behind her cold and unfriendly tone.

“Hi, Ryan.”

“Hi, Michelle. How are you settling in at Leah’s place? I’ve been meaning to check in, but I was out late last night, and then my phone died.”

“That’s fine, you don’t owe me an explanation, Ryan.” She said, without any real emotion.

I didn’t expect this biting reply from her. *What’s going on? Why’s she talking like this?* “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m okay,” again, her reply was unfriendly.

“When are you coming back?” I already knew the answer, but I didn’t know what else to say at that moment.

“I told you I’d be staying for a week. Is everything okay? Do you need me for something?”

“No... Michelle, nothing like that. I was only missing your presence,” I blurted out. She didn’t reply for a while, “Michelle, are you there?”

“Ryan... I have to talk to you about something really important, but I want to talk to you about it when I get back from my trip back home. I can’t talk to you about this over the phone.” She said with apprehension in her voice.

My heart dropped into my stomach. Something was surely not right. I pressed my lips and sighed, “Is everything okay, Michelle?”

“Yes... Everything is fine. I just have a few things to work through.”

“We could meet somewhere near Leah’s house and talk,” I said, trying not to have to wait a week before finding out what was going on in Michelle’s head.

“Can we meet next Monday after I get home from my trip?” She offered. “I am heading to my parents on Thursday and will be home Monday morning.”

“Yes, Monday will work. Are you sure you are okay? You don’t sound like yourself.” I said, truly concerned.

“I’m fine, Ryan. We’ll talk later. I have to go.”

“Okay, Bye,” I replied slowly, my nerves consumed me.

I’d known Michelle since my childhood, but she’d never spoken in this tone to me before, and she wasn’t giving me any clue why she was upset.

I texted Michelle many times over the next few days, asking her the reason why she sounded cold and down in the dumps, hoping that she’d melt down a little bit and take me out of my present mental turmoil, but every time she came up with the same reply: *Everything is okay. It is nothing for you to lose sleep over. Just relax.*

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I sat alone on the porch, watching the sunset and remembering all those wonderful evenings we’d shared and all the times I’d come home from coaching soccer and would be welcomed by Michelle’s beautiful smile. She seemed to be present everywhere, even in her absence, and I was sure that I could no longer stay in my apartment until Michelle returned. I

decided to go back to my dad's house in Hidden Hills to tell my dad yet another lie; Michelle had gone to help her sick friend and would be staying there for a while, and I couldn't stay alone in the apartment.

My phone beeped, alerting me to a text.

*Michelle: Hey Ryan, I made it to Davenport.*

*Ryan: Good. Thanks for texting me. Tell your mom and dad I said Hi.*

*Michelle: I will.*

I packed my bag and headed to my dad's house. I walked in to find him sitting on the couch watching TV. "Hey, son, what's going on? I wasn't expecting you." He said as he stood up from the couch.

"I am going to stay here for the weekend. Michelle went to see her family, and I don't want to be alone while she is gone." I said, setting down my bag.

"Okay. You know you are always welcome here."

"Thanks, Dad. I'm pretty tired, so I am going to go to bed. I will see you in the morning." I walked towards my bedroom and shut the door behind me, unable to get Michelle out of my head. *What does she want to tell me?*

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

### MICHELLE

**I**t was not an easy decision for me to make, but now that I'd decided what I had to do, there was no looking back. The day before I left for my parents, Leah and I talked for a long time. She continued to encourage me to tell Ryan how I felt, and I continued to tell her that I was too shy. Even if I did express my feelings to him, I feared rejection. I was sure he'd laugh in my face. I shook my head as the warm tears flowed out of my eyes and dissolved in the corners of my lips, leaving a salty flavor in my mouth and a sharp pain in my heart.

Leah and I were sitting on the couch, watching movies in our pajamas.

“Look at you, Michelle. Look at what you've done to yourself. Do you think you could live with yourself if you don't tell him how you feel, and he marries someone else?” Leah asked as she wiped the tears from my cheek.

I had no answer for this as I knew it would scar me for life if I never tried with Ryan.

“Leah,” I bit my lip. “I can’t tell him. I will just move on with my life. It will be better that way.”

Leah didn’t say anything but hugged me and wished me all the best for whatever I was going to do.

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The next morning, I flew to Davenport and got an Uber to my house.

Walking through the front door of my childhood home, a rush of memories and concern enveloped me. The familiar aroma of my mother’s cooking offered a reassuring embrace as I dropped my bags. Dad was in his armchair, struggling to steady a newspaper with hands that trembled more than before.

“Dad?” My voice carried a mix of worry and affection.

He looked up, a warm smile breaking through the wrinkles around his eyes. “Hey there, pumpkin. Good to see you.”

Kneeling beside him, I took his hands in mine, noticing the subtle but undeniable signs of his Parkinson’s worsening since my last visit. “How have you been feeling?”

He waved off my concern with a shrug. “You know, ups and downs. But enough about me. How’s your world?”

I hesitated, gazing down at our hands intertwined. “Actually, Dad, there’s something I’ve been wanting to talk to you and Mom about.”

His gaze turned attentive. “Go ahead, sweetie. We’re here to listen.”

With a deep breath, I began pouring out my feelings in a torrent of words. “I’ve been spending time with this incredible guy, Ryan Pearson. Do you remember him from high school?”

“Yes honey, he was a nice young man.” My mom said with joy in her eyes.

“He’s funny, and caring, and we just click. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.”

My father’s eyes softened, his grip on my hands grounding. “Sounds like something special, kiddo.”

“It is,” I continued, a hint of sadness tugging at my words. “But I’ve been holding back. The fear of expressing how I feel has been holding me back, and it’s been tearing me up inside. I even thought about taking a step back, maybe start dating other people.”

Dad studied me for a moment, his voice soothing and full of wisdom. “Michelle, life’s too short for regrets. If this Ryan makes you happy, don’t let fear stand in your way.”

Tears welled up, and I nodded. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Remember, you’re stronger than you realize,” he reassured me, his words carrying the weight of his own life experiences. “And we’re always here for you, no matter what.”

I leaned into his embrace, hugging him tightly, his presence bringing comfort and clarity. Amidst the challenges we faced, my father’s unwavering support ignited a newfound



determination within me. As I hugged him, I made a silent promise to myself – to embrace my feelings, confront my fears, and live with no regrets.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### MICHELLE

**T**he day before my arrival, Ryan texted me and asked me what time I was coming home. I lied and replied that Leah would be dropping me off and there was no need for him to trouble himself.

It was a golden and warm morning as the taxicab drove toward Beverly Hills. The wind ruffled my hair, and the minty fresh smell from my shampoo took me back to when Ryan and I would walk home after school. Back when things were uncomplicated between us.

The closer I got to Beverly Hills, the more jittery I became, for I knew it was the time to tell Ryan about the most difficult decision I had ever made. I had decided that telling him how I felt wasn't worth damaging our friendship if he didn't feel the same way. I got out of the cab with a pounding heart. My legs were shaking as I put the key in the lock and opened the front door with a creak. Ryan was sitting on the couch with the warmest smile on his face that I'd ever seen. The moment Ryan saw me, he came over to me and held me in his arms.

For a moment, except for the continuous and fast lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub sound of my heartbeat and the warmth I felt in Ryan's arms, I could hear and feel nothing. After a while, Ryan pulled me back gently, and we both became conscious that the hug lasted longer than normal. I blushed and gently scratched my forehead, trying to calm my nerves.

“How are you, Ryan?”

“I'm good. I'm thrilled to have you back. How was your trip?” He said as he took my luggage from me, and we made our way to the kitchen.

“It was good.” I said quietly.

“Can I get you a cup of coffee?” Ryan smiled.

“Sure, that would be nice.”

“You can't imagine how much I missed you since you left,” Ryan said as he sipped the coffee and chewed on his favorite ginger cookies, looking calm. “These cookies taste awesome. I bought them yesterday. Want to try?”

I shook my head. Food was the last thing on my mind right now.

I was trying to gather the courage to tell him what was going on. However, I felt timid and weak in my knees. But I reminded myself if I didn't do it now, I'd never be able to do it. I took a deep breath, gathered all the strength I could, and said it quickly. “Ryan, I am moving out,” I said and then took a drink from my coffee cup so I couldn't see his expression.

Ryan sounded hurt, “Michelle...”

“Please, Ryan. Let me speak first. To be honest, I can’t carry on the drama of being your fake girlfriend anymore. I’m feeling as guilty as sin playing my part in fooling your dad. I cannot look him in the eye.” I shook my head and wiped my tears, still not looking at Ryan. “I know you’ve always gone out of your way to be there for me, and I’ll always be grateful to you for that. But please, no more of this drama anymore.” I looked up to see Ryan with a look of realization that this lie was hurting me. “I understand how important it is for you to finish your soccer career and then find your soulmate, and I want nothing but the best for you.” I stopped talking to see if he would say anything.

“I understand Michelle. I am sorry I brought you into my devious ploy.” He said as he grabbed my hand lightly. “I will tell my dad tomorrow that things didn’t work out between us.

“I am so glad you understand. I thought you might get mad at me for ruining your plan.” I said with a sense of relief. Sad that I couldn’t tell him how I felt about him, but glad that the faking of our relationship was finally over.

Ryan gave me a hug and turned to walk to his room. “I have some things I have to do today; I will be home late, so I will see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, see you tomorrow,” I said as I went to unpack my bags.

*Tomorrow? We normally had dinner together. Maybe he needs time to process everything.*

I started to look for apartments online when Lucas called.

I had forgotten to get back to him about seeing us together as a couple.

“Hey Lucas,” I answered the phone.

“Hey Michelle, have you thought about what I said last phone call?” He asked, with slight hesitation.

“Yes, Lucas, I have. I think we need to stay just friends. I love you as a friend but nothing more. I hope you can understand.” I said matter of factly.

“Okay, Michelle, no worries. I value our friendship, so I understand. Let’s act like I never brought it up.” He said, snickering.

“Sounds good. I forgot about it already.” I said with a smile, glad that was taken care of.

“Well, I have to get back to work. Call me whenever.”

“Yeah, I’ll call you.”

“Okay, Bye.” Lucas hung up the phone.

*I hope he really understands and that it won’t get in the way of our friendship.*

I went into the kitchen and sat down to eat dinner alone. I just heated up some leftovers from the fridge and then called it a night. It was weird not having Ryan there, but I need to get used to it.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### RYAN

**M**y chest felt tight as I grasped the severity of the situation. The thought of losing Michelle forever sent my heart racing. What had started as a harmless idea had turned into a nightmare. I couldn't help but wonder why I had even come up with the foolish plan of creating a fake girlfriend. I knew my father was too perceptive to be fooled for long. Whether it was about my job or marriage, he would eventually see through the excuses.

During my stay with my dad, while Michelle was away, he frequently inquired about our relationship.

As my dad spoke about our relationship, I could see a glimmer of hope and excitement in his eyes. This made me feel all the more guilty. I couldn't meet his gaze, and Michelle's words only added to my overwhelming feelings of guilt.

I felt it was time to address the fake girlfriend situation, so I decided to speak with my dad about it.

I called and asked him to meet me for dinner, which he agreed to.

We met at an Italian Restaurant in town that we both loved. As we sat down and ordered, I became very nervous to tell him why I invited him to dinner.

“Dad, I need to confess something,” I said, looking down at my hands.

“What is it, son?” He asked, concerned.

I sighed and replied softly, trying to gather all my courage to speak this blatant lie. “Things didn’t work between Michelle and me. We tried our best to give our relationship time, but it seems that we aren’t meant to be with each other.” My eyes turned watery when I said this because I knew it was a lie. *Things always worked between me and Michelle.*

“But you could give it one more try? I can see in your eyes that you’re still in love with her.” He said with hope.

I gave him a sad smile and shook my head no.

“Ryan, are you sure?”

“I am, Dad,” I replied, still avoiding his gaze.

Dad put his hand on my shoulder warmly. I wasn’t expecting this kind of response from him. I thought that he would go off the deep end after hearing this, but to my surprise, he was calm. For a moment, he remained quiet. After a while, he cleared his throat and said:

“That’s okay, Ryan, if things didn’t work between you guys. Not a big deal, but we need to move ahead. I’m sure there are many women out there who are dying to date my son. Do you remember Eliza-Emma?” he asked suddenly.

I knitted my eyebrows, thinking hard, “Eliza-Emily, daughter of Mr. Rhett-Jameson?”

“Yes, her,” he replied with enthusiasm.

“I remember her, why?” I replied, wondering how Dad remembered Eliza all of a sudden.

“I think she is perfect for you, and you guys look wonderful together. You remember at Steve’s birthday party how the guests thought that you were a couple. In fact, Rhett expressed his interest in you dating his daughter sometime back.”

I felt my stomach tie itself in knots when I thought of dating someone other than Michelle. “Dad, I’ve just had a terrible breakup. I need some time,” my voice choked as I said it.

We finished dinner, and I headed home.

When I got to the apartment, it was quiet. Michelle was in her room already for the night. I went to my room and laid down, hoping I could turn my brain off long enough to fall asleep.

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I missed my morning run. I woke up much later than usual and felt incredibly distracted. I didn’t have private lessons until later that evening, so I had time to think about my personal life. I went into the living room to see if Michelle was



around or if she had already left for the office. I was under the impression that she must have left for the office, but to my surprise, she was there typing something on the laptop, still in her sleepwear. She looked beautiful in her blue cotton T-shirt and blue drop wide-leg sweatpants. She was completely unaware that I was there.

“Uh-uh, uh-uh,” I coughed.

She looked up and smiled, “You didn’t go on your morning run? Or are you already back?” she asked while continuing to type.

I yawned even though I’d slept for more than nine hours. I shook my head no, then realized that Michelle couldn’t see me as she was busy typing. “No, I didn’t go today.”

“Why? You okay?” She asked because I rarely missed my morning run.

“Yes, it’s just that I overslept. What about you? Why didn’t you go to work?”

“I’m taking the day off to find an apartment.” She said while staring at her computer.

It felt like she dropped a bomb on my heart. Although I knew that Michelle was moving out, I didn’t know it was going to be this soon.

I mustered the courage to speak. “Good luck finding one. Let me know if there is anything I can do.” I said, trying to be happy for her.

Michelle closed her laptop and turned to me, “There’s some scrambled eggs in the frying pan; feel free to help yourself.”

We sat quietly at the breakfast table. It was the first time I noticed that the scrambled eggs lacked salt, and the toast was almost burnt. Michelle, however, ate absentmindedly without paying attention to the taste. I watched her closely as she mechanically chewed her food, lost in deep thought.

She had no idea when I quietly left the breakfast table and went to my room.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### MICHELLE

**T**hursday afternoon I went and looked at a couple of apartments. I found one I really liked, and it was close to my work. I made an appointment to sign the lease tomorrow. I called Leah to tell her about it.

“Hey, Leah.”

“Hey Michelle, how are things going with Ryan? Did you tell him how you felt?” She asked me.

“No. I decided that telling Ryan how I felt wasn’t worth losing our friendship over if he didn’t feel the same way.” I paused, waiting for her response.

“Well, if that’s what you felt was best, then I support you. So, what did you tell him?” She asked curiously.

“I told him that I couldn’t keep being his fake girlfriend and that I was going to find another place to live.”

“Good for you Michelle. Any luck on finding a new place yet?” She asked.

“Yes, I looked at a place today and will be signing the lease on it tomorrow. They said I could move in as early as next week. I am so excited to go out and meet new people and possibly start dating to get my mind off Ryan.” I said as I pulled up to Ryan’s apartment.

When I walked in, it was silent. Ryan was nowhere to be seen. I lightly tapped on his bedroom door. There was no answer. I tapped again and this time Ryan answered in a soft voice, “Come in.”

When I walked into his room, he was lying on his bed.

Ryan smiled and continued watching TV. “Hi, Michelle. So, did you find an apartment?”

I walked in and sat on the other side of his bed., “Yes, I did. I will go sign the lease tomorrow and will be moving in this weekend so I can get back to work Monday.”

“That’s great!” He said half-heartedly. “So, I told my dad that we are no longer in a relationship.”

My heart skipped a beat. “What did he say? He must be really angry with me.” I said as the corners of my lips lowered. I was on the cusp of crying.

“Why would he be angry with *you*?” Ryan looked at me with a puzzled expression.

“Because I was the one who broke off this *relationship*,” I said, starting to regret my decision.

Ryan smirked. For the past few days, Ryan smirked more and smiled less. “You thought I’d put all the blame on you?”

Really Michelle? I still have my conscience and I'd never dream of putting you in a bad light." Ryan said with a quivering voice.

"I'm sorry to offend you. You didn't have to take all the blame. This is certainly not what I wanted to come out of all of this. I just wanted you to concentrate on your last season of soccer and not get distracted by me." I said, feeling bad for everything I had done now.

"My performance is going to be affected anyway," Ryan said almost under his breath.

"Excuse me..."

"Michelle, I understand that I've not been a good friend but I'm sure I've not been that bad that you'd want to leave my apartment so quickly." He said with sadness in his eyes.

"I just don't want things to be awkward. I respect you a lot, but this has all been so strange. I also didn't want to assume you'd be comfortable with me staying here." I replied. "And I don't want to make things difficult for you. Your dad would want to know the reason why I was still in your apartment even after the breakup, and I'm afraid that could be a problem for you." I said, trying to justify my leaving so quickly.

"Ok, but you can stay here until you sign the lease." He responded with a kind smile. "I will go back to Hidden Hills and let you have your own space."

I nodded and walked towards my room, and shut the door.

The next day Ryan left without saying goodbye. He only dropped a text saying that he was leaving, and he didn't want to disturb me as I was sleeping.

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Over the next few days, I went shopping for items I needed for my new apartment.

The weekend came and Leah came to help me move and set up my new place. It was nice to have my own space and make the place feel like home. It's in the heart of Beverly Hills and has a certain charm to it. I loved that sunlight spilled through large windows, illuminating the cozy living area.

Once we had settled everything into place, Leah and I treated ourselves to pizza and unwound on the patio, letting go of the exhaustion from a busy weekend.

I was nervous to go to work Monday morning and see Mr. Pearson for the first time since the *breakup*, but when I saw him, he gave me a big smile and welcomed me back from vacation.

I started going out with Leah and other girls from the office but still found myself thinking of Ryan.

We called each other almost every day, which took me back to when I was in Davenport, and he was here. I told him that we needed to hang out again and get back to how things used to be before the fake girlfriend situation. Ryan agreed.

Over the next few weeks, Ryan and I hung out a few times with friends and I tried my hardest to not let my feelings get in

the way.

One evening I got home from work and there was Ryan, standing there at my door smiling. I was shocked to see him at my apartment. He didn't even text me to warn me he was coming over.

"Ryan, what are you doing here?" I said with surprise.

He sighed. "I have a request."

"What is it, Ryan?"

"I have been thinking a lot lately and I was wondering if you would go to dinner with me?" He asked, looking straight into my eyes.

This brought a lump to my throat, *what could this be about?* "Sure Ryan." I nodded my head, "I'll change, and we can go for dinner." I smiled half-heartedly.

We headed in complete silence to one of our favorite restaurants. I didn't know what this was about, so I didn't know what to say. The restaurant was a little hole in the wall but had great food and a dance floor with a live band playing on weekends.

As we sat down and ordered, I looked up at Ryan. "Why did you invite me out to dinner unexpectedly? Is everything okay? Is your dad okay?"

"Yes, Michelle. I just wanted to do something spontaneous. I miss hanging out with you and having dinner together." He said with sadness in his voice. "I have been thinking a lot about us over the past few weeks since I moved back to

Hidden Hills. I can't believe my ploy of fake girlfriend damaged our friendship."

"I know that wasn't your intention, but I just couldn't go along with it anymore. I didn't mean for our friendship to change when I moved to my new place, but life has just gotten in the way." I said as I took a bite of food.

We continued talking about our weeks. We also enjoyed listening to the band play and watching everyone dance. We finished our meals and the waiter took our plates. "Michelle, do you want to dance? Who knows when we'll get to dance together again?" Ryan asked; the corner of his lips lowered.

"Sure, Ryan. Let's go." I put on a brave face and stood up and grabbed his hand to lead him to the dance floor.

We had a great time, spinning around on the dance floor and I finally got a smile out of Ryan.

As we pulled up to my apartment, Ryan asked if he could come in. "Of course you can. Let's have some coffee to end the night." I said as we got out of the car and walked to my apartment.



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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### RYAN

“Michelle...” I started.  
“Yeah...” She whispered nervously.

“Can we talk?” I pleaded. We sat down on the couch, and I asked her, “Do you really not want to be around me anymore?” I frowned, grabbing her hand.

“I uhh... well...” Michelle pulled away her hand.

I pulled her closer to me and held her in my arms. She blushed and looked all the more stunning. “Is there something I can do to make you change your mind?” I looked into her eyes, and she lowered her gaze.

I touched her soft cheeks. She was still silent, not answering me. I held her hand tightly in mine.

“You’ve left me with no other option, Ryan. I can’t be around you and hear you talk about finding your soulmate.” She said, looking down.

“What? That is why you have been avoiding me lately?” I asked, confused.

“It is. I’ve become miserable here knowing I can’t be with you... that you don’t feel the same way I do.”

“And in what way is that? How do you feel about me?” I stammered with confusion.

“I care about you... so much. And in more than just a friendship way.” She said with tears filling her eyes. “Ever since your dad’s birthday party, I knew that I wanted to be more than just friends.”

“Really, Michelle? Why haven’t you told me this before now?” I said, my heart filling with joy.

“I didn’t want to ruin our friendship, but it, in turn, damaged our friendship that I didn’t tell you.” She said, shaking her head.

“Well, I care about you too, Michelle.” I grabbed her hands and moved closer to her on the couch. “Ever since you moved out, I couldn’t stop thinking about how much I missed you.” I smiled and raised my eyebrows. “Spending so much time with you, going to eat crab legs, going to your work, drinking coffee on the patio, I never wanted that to end.”

“Me neither Ryan. I am so glad that you feel the same way!” She said with the cutest smile on her face.

“I want to ask you something, Michelle.” I said with a serious look on my face. “Will you be my *real* girlfriend?” Then I smiled to calm her nerves.

“Ryan...” Michelle opened her eyes wide, and her jaw dropped.

I placed my fingers on her mouth and silenced her. “Michelle, I’ve been foolish. I love you, and it took almost losing you to realize that.”

With the tears that shimmered in her eyes like the crystal-clear blue water of the ocean and the beautiful smile, she nodded yes.

I kissed her forehead and kneeled beside her. “I’ve been so out of it that I’ve fallen off with my training for soccer so I might need you to become my running buddy.” Ryan joked.

Michelle beamed and wiped her tears, “What if I beat you?”

“I’ve already lost my heart to you. I don’t mind losing a race.” I teased her.

Both of us laughed heartily.

It was weird that the ideal love I had been searching for this long was right here and had always been right here. I had been too naïve to understand her feelings. Both of us were living in denial, but not anymore.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### MICHELLE

#### **Two Years Later**

I stared down at my wedding ring and smiled. The memory of our wedding is as vivid and fresh as if the reception took place last night.

The romantic blush banquet hall looked like it had come out of a dream. It was decorated impeccably with scented candles in candelabras, flower arrangements, balloon garlands, and lighted burlap garlands decorated in pairs. There were embroidered hoops, screen-sublimated wedding flags, chair sashes, bronze lanterns, and so much more. The ambiance was unparalleled. Its aura was magnetic.

The layers of grommet drapes in red and scarlet were arranged flawlessly to cover the whole backdrop of the stage wall. The varieties of decorations complemented each other perfectly despite their differences. It was all beautiful and made jaws drop.

I was dressed in the finest silk and diamond gown, which Ryan had specially designed for me by a prominent fashion designer in LA. Ryan took me in his arms before we left for the banquet hall. He told me that he hadn't seen any woman more beautiful than me on earth, to which I replied it was his love for me that made him feel so, as I was only a plain Jane.

He kissed me on the forehead and carried me in his arms to the banquet hall. *The most beautiful moment of my life.* Ryan is not only my husband but the best friend I've got. With him, life is worth living to the fullest.

Mr. Pearson has been kind enough to let Ryan continue his passion for Soccer, and it paid off because Ryan's team won the championship, and he was voted the team MVP.

In spite of our busy schedules, we make sure we are always home to have dinner and enjoy our evenings as ours. After dinner, Ryan and I usually take a walk together and talk about our future under the starry sky.

Things became all the more beautiful for us when we discovered I was pregnant a few weeks ago. I'd done the pregnancy test at home, and it came out positive. I was thrilled, calling Ryan as soon as I found out.

“Ryan, I need you to come home quickly.”

“Is everything okay, Michelle? Are you not at work?” he was startled.

“No... I'm not at work. That's why I'm telling you to come home, silly.” I tried hard not to laugh.

“Sure, darling. I’ll be there soon.” Ryan replied and hung up.

Within the next fifteen minutes, Ryan was at home. Both of us sat in the living room. Never before had I seen Ryan this nervous as he rubbed his hands together. “Michelle... you’re scaring me now. Tell me, what is it?” He bit his lip and held my hand firmly in his.

“Ryan... we need to see a doctor quickly.” I pressed my lips together and tried hard not to laugh.

*Mr. Ryan Pearson, do you think it’s only you who is capable of these funny tricks?*

“Doctor... We need to see a doctor, but why?” he stammered with confusion.

“To make sure that we welcome the one who will be arriving in this world with joy!” I raised my eyebrows.

The poor guy got all the more confused and couldn’t understand anything, “Welcome who?” He looked at me quizzically.

I couldn’t hold it any longer and burst into laughter. I laughed so hard that tears flowed down my cheeks, “Oh, my God. I can’t believe you couldn’t see through this joke.” I snickered from the couch beside him.

“What... w-what kind of joke? What are you talking about?” he lightly scratched his head and continued wearing a puzzled expression on his face. “And what’s making you laugh so hard?”

“Ryan, you think you are the only one who can be funny?”  
I laughed again.

He was slowly losing his patience but trying to maintain his composure. He had no idea what I was trying to say. I felt it was time to give him the good news and stop teasing him.

“I can’t take this anymore.” His patience finally gave up, and he started to stand up.

“Ryan... You’re going to be a daddy.” I smiled and shrugged my shoulders.

The next moment, Ryan came running and held me in his arms. He couldn’t speak because of the overwhelming happiness.

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# Epilogue

MICHELLE

The doctor confirmed the pregnancy, and what followed next were moments of pure happiness and complete joy. They say, “to love and to be loved is one the happiest things a human heart can experience,” and I am fortunate enough to experience complete bliss.

All nine months, Ryan, personally, took care of me. My diet, my exercise, my medicines, and my appointment with the doctor. I never knew Ryan was such a strict disciplinarian. I enjoyed the pampering and every moment of this incredible journey towards motherhood.

Our little bundle of joy arrived on a warm spring morning in May. With her head full of red hair, light green eyes, and incredibly chubby cheeks, she made both of us complete. We named her Rose because she was as beautiful as a rose.

Ryan had tears in his eyes as he held Rose in his arms. He kissed her tiny, tender little fingers, pulled her close to his heart, and stayed like this for a while. He smiled at me.



“Michelle... Rose is so delicate.”

As Ryan was holding Rose in his arms, she kicked him on his belly and opened her eyes for a while, making a cooing sound. Ryan held her up in his hands and said, “Hey, little Rose Pearson. You’re kicking your Daddy. Wait a minute, little lady. Are you thinking about being a soccer player once you grow up? Well, drop that idea. You’re going to be a soccer player like your Daddy.

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Rose is nearly six months old; she is a little bit of me and a little bit of Ryan. She has completed our world. I’m on maternity leave. I want to devote myself to my daughter full-time. Many nights, we stay up nursing her because she will not sleep. We know these nights will last only for a little while, but the beautiful memories they will leave behind will last forever. Ryan is not only a wonderful husband but a doting father. He taught me that love is not only going out for a romantic date, candlelight dinners, and long drives but sticking with each other during the best and the worst times.

Ryan and I sat in the garden after I put Rose down to sleep and watched the magical yellow moon behind the clouds. The clouds appeared golden, with the light emanating from the moon. I rested my head on Ryan’s shoulder as he caressed my hair gently with his fingers. We both sat in that complete moment, enjoying the serenity and stillness. I had to go back to the office the very next day. I was a bit apprehensive as it was the first time that I was leaving a piece of my heart, my

little daughter, Rose, behind. Although she had two nannies to take care of her, I was on pins and needles.

“Michelle, what are you thinking about so deeply about?”

“I feel a little anxious about leaving Rose behind.” I sighed.

“You don’t need to worry. I’ve rearranged my schedule in such a way that one of us will be with her most of the time.”

I felt as light as a feather when I heard this and heaved a sigh of relief.

“Ryan?”

“Hmm?” He turned to look at me.

“Will you love me forever like this?” I asked as I snuggled close to him.

“No,” he shook his head and gently kissed me.

“Huh?” I pulled away.

“A little longer than forever.” He pulled me back close.

## The End

**T**hank you for reading Faking it with My Boss' Son.

Check out more from Blakely Dawn:

“Kissing My Billionaire Boss”

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CFBDLQS2>

“Kissing My Brother's Best Friend”

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0C9YFXH4F>