

FALLING

FOR *Mister A+*



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SOPHIE-LEIGH
ROBBINS

Falling for Mister A+ *That Wilson*
Charm #3

By Sophie-Leigh Robbins

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Falling for Mister A+](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Content note](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Author's Note and Free Book](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Also by Sophie-Leigh Robbins](#)



Falling for Mister A+

Blake and I are just friends. That's right, just best friends. It doesn't even matter that he's perfect boyfriend material, because he's way out of my league and a permanent resident of the friend zone.

Gwinnie

When my ailing grandpa asks me to come and take care of him, I don't think twice about it. Moving back home seems like the perfect idea after a career-ending injury that left me with a prosthetic leg. That is, until I arrive and my plans to lay low crumble faster than an old taco shell. First of all, Grandpa's new obsession with Zumba classes proves that he doesn't need my help at all. Becoming a substitute PE teacher at the same school my best friend Blake works at wasn't part of the plan either.

So what if he's insanely hot and sweet and has abs The Rock would be jealous of? To me, he's just Blake Wilson, the guy I've known for over a decade and share all my secrets with. Okay, so maybe there is one teeny tiny secret I'm not telling him, but a girl can have some privacy, right?

Blake

Nothing exciting ever happens in my hometown, so Gwinnie Fletcher—former swim star and my gorgeous best friend—moving back is quite the shock. After everything she's been through these past few years, asking her to help coach the swim team might be a stretch, but we need her. Five seasons of failing to secure a spot in the state finals means desperation.

Ironically, while she keeps us from drowning in losses, I seem to be floating straight into a pool of feelings for her. Too bad she only cares about swimming and not about leaving the friend zone with me.



Copyright

Falling for Mister A+ by Sophie-Leigh Robbins

© 2023

All Rights Reserved

Cover design by Joey Van Olden

Editing by Serena Clarke

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

If my book boyfriends give you heart palpitations, please consult a doctor (or call your best friend to swoon over him together).

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.



Content note

Dear reader, please be advised that this book contains the topic of loss of a limb (past event, no graphic descriptions).

Be gentle when she
shows you her scars.
It takes more courage
to remove one's armor,
than to assemble it.

—J. Střelou



Chapter One

Gwinnie



Do you ever wonder how a rug can get so dirty it goes from blindingly white to muddy brown? The insane dedication it takes to see it become darker and yuckier every year and not do anything to stop it? The number of germs that must be living in that sorry piece of fabric? Those are the kind of questions that keep me up at night. Well, that and phantom pains, but we're talking rugs right now.

Before you frown and categorize me as crazy, be honest with yourself for a moment. Don't tell me you aren't mesmerized by those rug cleaning videos. I know you watch them. We all do. There's something weirdly comforting about them.

The satisfying image of dirty water flowing away from yet another disgusting carpet is replaced by an incoming call. I swipe accept and put the phone to my ear.

"Hi, Grandpa. How are you?"

There's some mumbling, feet being shuffled over hardwood floors, and the thud of a door closing. Then finally someone speaks. "Is this a secure line?"

I look back at my screen to confirm that this is indeed my grandfather's number and not someone calling from a secret CIA burner phone. "Grandpa?"

"Affirmative. Now, are you sure this line is secure? Are you alone?"

"Yeah, my security is top-notch."

"No one is listening in on us?"

I shrug. Maybe, but only a person bored to death would listen in on *my* phone conversations. I'm pretty sure Gramps

has nothing to worry about. “I’m positive. Now spill the beans. Why all the secrecy?”

He lets out a relieved sigh. “Good. The last thing we need is someone messing with my plans. Listen closely, Pumpkin. You need to come home immediately. I repeat, you need to book the first flight home.”

I sit up a bit straighter, all thoughts of rug cleaning pushed to the background. My stomach turns in anticipation of bad news. “Did something happen? What’s wrong?”

“You need to come and live with me.”

“Live with you? Why?”

“Because I’m—”

He stops talking and takes a deep breath.

“Because I’m not well, Pumpkin. I need someone to help me with basic chores like getting dressed, buying groceries, helping me remember where I put my gardening supplies, and making sure I don’t feed the fish the cat food or the cat the fish food. Those are easy to mix up. Honest mistake, right? Not according to your mother, though. She thinks I have one foot in the grave already.”

“And what do Mom’s anxious antics have to do with me? I live far away for a reason, Gramps.”

He grumbles. “I’m an old, lonely guy in a house that’s way too big for me. And now your parents are leaving too. What if your mother is right, and I die after accidentally eating cat food? It’ll be weeks before someone finds my body. That is, if Hector doesn’t eat me first,” he says before sighing dramatically.

“First of all, I doubt your cat will eat you, Gramps. And second, Mom and Dad are not leaving forever. It’s just a cruise.”

“A year-long one. That’s nuts and you know it. I took care of your mother for her entire life and now she’s abandoning me. I have a right to be upset. I’m an ailing man, for crying out

loud. What I need is my family sticking around and helping me.”

“You were dancing to Michael Jackson in your living room last Christmas, so I hardly think you need a live-in caregiver.”

Another dramatic sigh. “Those were the days, Gwinnie. Dancing and goofing around. Unfortunately, I’m kind of bedridden now.”

I frown. Christmas was only what, seven months ago? If my granddad is indeed bedridden, why didn’t my parents mention any of this to me?

“Bedridden? When did this happen?”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter. All that matters is that I need you. My favorite granddaughter helping me live the last years of my life in absolute comfort and joy.”

Now he’s really pushing it, and it’s working. I’m starting to feel guilty.

“I can’t just up and leave. I have a full life here,” I say, only half convinced of that myself.

“Come on, Pumpkin, it’ll be fun. Two cripples under the same roof. Limping out of bed. The occasional tumble down the porch steps while grabbing the paper or chasing away that cursed dog that likes to knock over my trash can.”

I draw in a big breath. “Did you just call me a cripple?”

“Oh, relax. I’m only kidding. Sort of. You do know laughing with your misery is better than wallowing and sitting around crying about it, right?”

“I’m not wallowing. And even if I were, I’m allowed to. You’re less mobile because you’re old. Me? I’m twenty-seven and disabled. That’s a whole other story and you know it.”

“It’s been two years, Gwinnie.” His voice is softer now. “Please come home. I need you here. You don’t have to worry about a thing. I won’t charge you any rent and you can stay in your mother’s old bedroom. I’ll even let you redecorate it any way you want to. Hang up some posters of those boybands you used to love. Like, uhm... The Backalley Boys or

something? Are they still hip and trendy? Anyway, you don't want your sweet grandfather to die all alone, do you?" he adds to make me feel extra guilty.

"You're not dying anytime soon. You've got at least twenty years ahead of you."

"I'm begging you. I'll even share my stair lift with you. Might charge a transportation fee, but that's only fair if you ask me."

I can't help but laugh. Grandpa has a knack of making me feel like the real person I am instead of someone to be pitied. Because I don't need anyone's pity. I've had enough of that for a lifetime, especially from myself.

I bite my lip. "Are you really struggling?"

"I am. Big time. Might need to start wearing diapers soon."

"Fine, I'll think about it, but I'm not changing any diapers."

I can almost hear him grinning through the phone. "I'll go and put fresh sheets on your bed."

"How will you manage that? I thought you were bedridden."

"You know what I mean. I'll ask someone to do it for me. Oh, and not a word about this conversation to your mother. She can't know about this."

"Why not?"

"Just trust me on this one. See you soon, Pumpkin! I can't wait for your arrival. We're going to have a blast together."

"Wait, I haven't even decided yet."

It's no use protesting, though. Grandpa has already ended the call and I'm left talking to the walls.

I sigh as I look around my apartment. It's cozy and clean, but it's also *meh*. After traveling the world for years as a swimmer, it's nice to have a place to myself but I spend most of my time in here all alone. It's crazy how losing a leg will stop people from asking you out, assuming you'd rather stay

home just because you can't dance like you used to. Not to mention how fast a guy can shout *breakup* after you get run over by a semi and have to live in a hospital for months on end.

Hint: one month. It only took him *one* month to dump me. Probably would've done it sooner if I'd regained consciousness earlier.

So yeah, living with someone again would be nice. Being close to my family and old friends would be amazing. They all still love me, and the feeling is absolutely mutual.

Plus, Grandpa needs me. What kind of granddaughter would say no to helping out her own blood relative?

It's not like I need to worry about my job. I tutor kids online through Zoom and I can do that from anywhere in the world. My apartment? Cozy but too many bad memories. The lease is still in Evan's name anyway. He felt so guilty for breaking up with me after the accident, he never dared to ask me to move out or start paying rent. Serves him right.

And then there's Blake. My best friend since college. He's been nagging me to move back home for ages. Says I'm nuts for wanting to stay in a place where I don't have any real connections anymore.

Maybe he's right. Maybe it's time to wipe the slate clean and start over. I could definitely use a change of scenery.

My phone pings with a new message. A smile spreads across my face when I see that it's Blake. Not that it should come as a surprise. We text almost daily. He's the only one who really gets me, and he has told me before that the feeling is mutual.

Blake: What are you up to tonight? Please don't tell me you're still watching those rug cleaning vids.

Gwinnie: One of these days I'm going to find the cameras you secretly placed in my apartment.

Blake: Ha! So you admit you were doing it again?

Gwinnie: I don't sit around and watch them all day long. In fact, I just got off the phone with Gramps.

I almost tell him about possibly moving back home, but I delete the message before hitting send. If I do go, then I want it to be a surprise.

Blake: Everything okay with him?

Gwinnie: Yup. I miss him, though.

Blake: There's only one solution for that... Come home, G.!

Gwinnie: Blake, we've talked about this.

Blake: I know, and I respect your decision, but I'll never stop trying to get my favorite girl back here.

His words elicit a goofy smile from me. Thank goodness he's not here to witness it. It's nice to know that someone wants you close, especially when that someone is Blake Wilson. I think back to when we lived in the same town and how much fun we used to have. Gosh, I miss those days like crazy. I miss *Blake* like crazy. I always play my feelings down when we talk, though. He can't know how I really feel or why I've been avoiding coming back home.

You could go and help out Gramps. See Blake a lot more than you do now.

Gah, why won't that voice in my head ever shut up? Should I really trust my gut and go?

I look around my apartment again, wondering what is keeping me here. Pride, maybe? Wanting to prove that I can make it on my own, even after the accident? Running away from a certain someone? Deep down, I know it's all of these reasons combined, and my stomach feels queasy thinking about spending the rest of my life in a place where I don't have any roots, true friends, or family.

Perhaps moving back home isn't crazy, but staying here is.

Before I get a chance to change my mind, I close the rug cleaning video and open a new tab to book myself a one-way ticket home.



Chapter Two

Gwinnie



You'd think I'd be used to traveling after spending years on the road and in the sky for my swimming career, but none of it prepared me for the nerves I'm feeling after boarding a plane back home. I told no one about my relocation plans. I want to surprise them, but before I can do that, I need to take a moment to stop and massage my leg or at least, what remains of it.

The air pressure changes during the flight and the accompanying spike in phantom pain are enough to make me wonder if flying was a good idea after all, but what choice did I have?

I sit down in one of the chairs in the arrivals hall and take my prosthetic off, then roll down the extra padding and stuff it in my bag. Gosh, that feels good, even though I hate doing this in public.

A mother and daughter sit down two chairs along from me. The mom is talking on her phone and doesn't give me so much as a glance, but the girl is staring at me with a look of wonder and curiosity.

"Are you a robot?" she asks matter-of-factly.

"Nope. I'm just a regular girl like you."

Her gaze flicks to my leg again. "Why don't you have any skin below your knee? And your foot? Where did it go?"

"Well, the doctors had to remove it after I got into an accident."

She flinches, gripping the plastic of her chair with both hands. "Was there blood?"

I give her a soft smile. “I guess so, but I wasn’t conscious when it happened.”

“What’s not being conscious?”

“That means you are... kind of sleeping.”

“Oh, okay.” She frowns. “You fell asleep after an accident?”

I nod. “Sort of, yeah. I woke up in the hospital a month later.”

She swings her small legs back and forth and makes circles with her feet. “I’m happy I’ve got two legs and two feet. How else could I skip rope or run to the swings? How do you do that?”

Her question is pure and innocent yet pokes me in the chest with sadness. “I’ve got this to help me. It’s like a replacement leg,” I say, pointing to my prosthetic. “This here is my little helper friend.”

“My mommy says giving and getting help is important. We need to help the poor. Are you poor or hungry? Do you need one of my cookies?”

I laugh. “I’m not poor or hungry, but thank you. That’s very sweet of you.”

“Let’s go, Molly,” her mother says, pocketing her phone and grabbing the handle of her luggage.

“I hope your leg and foot will grow again soon,” the girl says.

After she waves goodbye, I reattach my prosthetic and quickly slide my pants down. I don’t want the entire airport to see me like this. Even after two years, I’m still coming to terms with my new body myself.

Once outside, I get in line for a cab and give the driver my grandfather’s address. Half an hour later, I’m standing on the porch of the house I spent countless days in when I was younger.

Not wanting Gramps to hurt himself while getting the door, I search for the spare key he usually keeps under one of his flowerpots. The flowers have all wilted, but thankfully, the key is still there.

I turn the lock, step inside, and am immediately transported to my youth. Nothing has changed in here. Not the wallpaper, not the placement of the furniture. Not even the coats dangling from the wall hooks in the hallway.

“Hello,” I call out. “It’s me, Gwinnie.”

No answer. A bad feeling creeps up on me. What if Gramps fell and is lying somewhere unconscious? What if there’s... blood? I make it up the stairs to his bedroom, and push the door open with a fearful heart.

Huh. The bed is made and there’s no sign of Gramps, not even in his adjoining bathroom. Where is he? I thought he was bedridden.

I scan the room, looking for a sign of where he might be, but I can’t find any clues of him being alive apart from a torn copy of *Twilight* on the floor beside the bed. I take the book in my hands and leaf through the pages. I had no clue Gramps loves vampire fiction. I guess you can never truly know a person, no matter how close you are to them.

I go back down the stairs using Grandpa’s stair lift and put my luggage in one of the spare bedrooms before heading over to Mom and Dad’s. They must know where he is, right?

Decked out in a hat and sunglasses, I walk the two blocks to my parents’ house. The distance is just the right amount for me. Any longer and I’d be in too much pain.

I get my key fob out of my purse and use my old house key. It still works. Sweet.

“Hello?” I call out for the second time today.

Again, no answer. What’s with everyone? Are they all at some super-secret town meeting? Has Summerville Creek been targeted by aliens?

I go up the stairs and relief floods through me as I hear my parents' gentle bickering.

"Hello," I call out.

"Intruder," Mom shouts, slinging a pillow in my direction.

It doesn't even land within four feet of me. "That's not the best way to fight someone, Mom," I say, picking up the pillow and throwing it on the bed.

Then, realization sets in, and she lowers her arms. "Gwinnie? What a lovely surprise."

She's by my side and has me wrapped in one of her famous hugs before I can blink. She grabs me by the shoulders and keeps me at arm's length, giving me the motherly once-over. "You look good. Healthy." She squeezes my shoulders. "How long are you staying?"

"I'm not sure yet," I say. "Could be a while."

"It's good to have you back," my dad says, his eyes turning misty. "Even though we'll be leaving for our dream trip soon."

Something about his appearance doesn't add up. He's wearing a way-too-tight pair of red Speedos. Nothing else, except for a pair of white socks that reach mid-calf. He hurries over to the closet and puts a shirt on. "Sorry about that. You caught us at a bad time."

I let my gaze wander the room. Their bedroom—usually so clean you could literally eat off the floors—is strewn with clothes, suitcases, and enormous piles of underwear.

"What are you guys doing?"

My mother sighs. "Trying on clothes to see what we can take on our cruise. We've got three piles: yes, no, and maybe."

"That sounds like a great plan."

She puts a white pair of pants on the yes pile and slumps her shoulders. "Honestly, we might not even go."

Dad rolls his eyes and gives me a look that says *don't even bother*.

“Why not?”

She motions to the battlefield of clothes. “We can’t decide what to take! What if I need a blue cardigan in April and I only have a green one?”

“That would be a disaster,” I joke.

Mom swivels around to Dad and pins him with a triumphant look. “See? Your daughter understands me.”

“Uh, I was just kidding, Mom. If you need another cardigan while you’re away, just go out and buy one.”

She puts a hand on her hip. “While we’re at sea?”

“I’m sure there are shops aboard the ship. Worst case, you wait until you get to a port and go shopping there, or you don’t color-coordinate your clothes for once.”

She gasps as if I suggested walking around their cruise ship naked. “Me? Showing myself in public wearing clashing colors?”

Dad grins at me as if to say that I should’ve listened to him.

“You’ll be fine, Mom. Anyway, do either of you know where Gramps is? I went by his place, but he wasn’t there.”

“Who knows where that stubborn man hangs out? Probably at one of those Zumba classes for seniors. He’s taken an interest in them lately.”

“To watch?”

“Of course not. To participate. Are you feeling okay, honey? You’re acting weird.”

I frown. “Grandpa is doing Zumba classes? But how is that possible when he’s bedridden?”

Mom gives Dad a look that says she thinks I’m insane. My father clears his throat and guides me to the bed. “Sit down, hon. Do you need a glass of water?”

“Guys, I swear Gramps told me his health is deteriorating. It’s the whole reason I’m here. I was going to help him out.”

“Help him out?”

“You know, getting him dressed, feeding the cat, shopping for groceries.”

Mom shakes her head while trying on another pair of white trousers. I don’t even know why she keeps buying them as she’s got eighty-seven of them already, but according to her, they look nothing alike.

She sighs. “Your grandfather might have gotten the wrong idea after an argument we had. I said he should think about moving into one of those assisted living communities and it turned into a heated discussion.” She throws the pants down on the maybe pile. “He accused me of wanting to get rid of him, can you imagine that? After all I’ve done for him. Anyway, I said it was for his own good, but he wouldn’t agree with me.”

I raise my hands. “Hold up. Are you saying I’m only here because of an argument you two had?”

“Probably? I told him I wouldn’t be able to enjoy my cruise unless I was absolutely convinced he was taken care of. He said he’d deal with that *one small issue*. Seriously, do you think it’s a small issue? Because I don’t.”

“So Grandpa doesn’t need me at all?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know he would ask you to move back just to settle an argument. That’s insane. Still, I’m not surprised. You know how stubborn he can get.”

I frown. Gramps *lied* to me. Unbelievable. I feel horrible, but an idea brews inside of me instantly. “Since he doesn’t need me at all, I could live here and take care of the house while you guys are gone,” I offer, already feeling a bit more optimistic than a second ago.

My parents exchange another one of their weird looks. “We’re sorry, but we didn’t know you would suddenly feel the urge to move back home. We rented out the house for a year, and at a great price. To a lovely couple, may I add.”

“Without dogs,” Dad chimes in.

“Don’t get us wrong, we love dogs.”

Dad nods. “We just don’t want them near our property.”

“Obviously. I wouldn’t want to come back to a house covered in hair,” Mom says with a shudder. “Thank goodness the backyard will look amazing, because the guy is a gardener. Aren’t we lucky?” She flicks Dad a worried gaze. “Or do you think he’ll be too busy tending to other people’s gardens to tend to ours?”

Even though I know there’s no way that my parents intended this to be a Queen Charlotte reference, I can’t help but snort.

Dad puts his hands on Mom’s shoulders. “We’ve been over this. Let it go, Clarice. The garden will be here when we return, no matter its condition, but we only have so many years left to enjoy life. We are not cancelling this cruise.”

“Dad’s right. You’ve waited long enough for this. Go and enjoy the trip. I’ll keep an eye on your lawn, Mom.”

She arches an eyebrow. “You’re going to peek over the fence like some creep? What will people say?”

“I haven’t thought about the logistics yet. I’ll figure something out.”

My mother’s worried looks are already causing me stress. I’d better leave my parents alone before they drive me crazy. “I’m going to my old room to rest a bit.”

“That’s good, honey. Are you staying for dinner or are you catching up with friends later? I’m sure Blake would love to see you, but if you’re eating with us, I need to defrost another chicken breast asap.” Her eyebrows knit together, and I can see the cog wheels turning in her head. She doesn’t like it if her plans get derailed. Order and predictability is what she thrives on.

“I’ll stay for dinner. Oh, and please don’t tell anyone I’m back yet. I want it to be a surprise.”

My heart skips a beat at the thought of seeing Blake’s mesmerizing smile when he finds out I’m back.

Not yet though.

Soon.



Chapter Three

Blake



I probably look like a fool driving around town with a big smile on my face, but I can't help myself. Another season coaching the Summerville Stingrays, and I'm stoked about it. New school year, fresh start. Does it get any better than this?

I've been coaching our school's swim team ever since I came back to Summerville Creek five years ago and I'm loving every minute of it. Still, it'd be nice to have my team reach the state finals for once. Surely that can't be too much to ask, right? I'll do anything in my power to make it happen. This is going to be the year. I can feel it in my toes. That's why I had my team gather here during the last week of summer break. If we want to get ahead, we need a head start.

As I round the corner to the pool, my phone rings. I accept the call through a button on my steering wheel.

"If it isn't the hotshot doc himself! To what do I owe the pleasure, Doctor Drop-Dead Gorgeous?"

"Man, you're hilarious. I'm close to peeing myself with laughter," Tanner says, his voice laced with amusement despite his sarcastic-sounding words.

"What are brothers for if not for making fun of each other, am I right?"

He chuckles. "I guess. Anyway, I wanted to touch base about Ollie's birthday party."

"Shoot," I say.

Ollie is my adorable nephew, and my brother Colton is his proud father. Seriously, most days, Ollie is all Colton can talk about. Him and my sister-in-law Elle. The three of them are so

cute together, I sometimes get a toothache just from looking at them.

“Hazel thought we could all chip in and buy him that swing set he’s been obsessed with. What do you think? Is that something your teacher’s salary can handle?”

“Ha-ha, aren’t you a funny guy.”

“Takes one to know one, am I right?” he says.

“Dude, shut up. I’ll chip in, no worries. In fact, I just arrived at the pool. With my coaching money *and* my teacher’s salary, I think I can swing at least... hmm... two dollars.”

I park my car but keep it running so that I can enjoy the cold breeze the AC kindly blows my way. August tends to be hot but today is nothing short of sweltering.

“Great. Oh, and—”

My brother cuts off mid-sentence, and I already know what he’s going to say. “Sorry, little brother, I’ve got to go.”

“Trauma case came into the ER?”

I can hear him running through the hospital’s hallways. “Yeah, a head-on collision. The ambulance is five minutes out. Anyway, we’ll talk later. Enjoy swimming practice and teach those kids who’s the boss.”

I laugh. “I’m not the boss. I’m their coach.”

“Isn’t that kind of the same?”

I try to come up with a witty reply, but the call is already disconnected. That’s what life as a trauma surgeon is like for Tanner. Fast and full of adrenaline. I prefer my less crazy schedule of teaching PE to fourteen-year-olds and coaching the swim team, to be honest.

I turn the car’s engine off and grab my bag from the passenger seat. I shield my eyes from the sun as I get out and take a good look around. Nothing beats the empty parking lot and school grounds right before the start of a new school year. The silence is filled with the promises and hopes of the students that will soon crowd this place. And sure, in about a

month, all those hopes might be shattered because... well, teen drama. Not that I'm fazed by any of that. Over the past five years, I've learned how to navigate my role as a teacher and how to be there for these kids. I feel I owe it to them to be understanding. Their dramas might seem silly to the average grown-up, but I remember what it was like to be a clueless ninth grader. It sucked. All those hormones and doubts and insecurities and wanting to fit in. Ugh. Getting through that unscathed should be considered a big win.

I jog up the steps of the Natatorium—the building housing the pool. Members of the swim team are trickling in already, heading straight for the locker rooms. Their conversations are all centered around the summer. Gosh, I miss those days sometimes. Me and my best friend Gwinnie would roam these halls together, having the same conversations as today's teens—minus the Snapchat and TikTok references—and laughing with our slew of inside jokes. We thought we were hilarious and smart. Too bad nothing prepared either of us for what would be thrown in Gwinnie's path years later.

The doors to the pool slide open, and I take a deep breath in. Ah, the smell of chlorine.

I kick off my shoes and take my shirt off, throwing both on a poolside bench. I grin as every member of the varsity team steps through the sliding doors. It's showtime.

It only takes two minutes before everyone is gathered in front of me, ready to listen to my opening talk. I'm amazed by how much these kids have grown in just a few months. Why do young humans seem to do all their evolving and growing and maturing during the summer months?

"I hope you all had a great summer," I start, assessing the group's dynamics with curious eyes.

Not only do these kids grow up a bit more every year, but their personal relationships often shift in the summer and that has an impact on the team's performance. If I know the details of their dramas and who's into who—and who has it out for who—I can mitigate any negative consequences.

Josh and Leia exchange a look that I can't quite decipher but could point to a blossoming love story, and Steph and Ava—who used to be inseparable—stand at the far ends of the group. It could be a coincidence. Or not. I don't need to know everything right now, though. There's plenty of time to figure things out.

“As you all know, the varsity team is a huge commitment. Morning practice starts at six a.m. sharp on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Mondays and Wednesdays are for dryland practice so make sure to bring your workout clothes and running shoes on those days. Friday mornings you get to sleep in.”

“What about after school practice?” Taylor asks.

“Monday through Friday, we gather here from four to six p.m.”

This schedule is harsh on any teen's social life but without practice, they won't get to where they want to be. Both Steph and Josh are hoping to go to college on a swimming scholarship, and some aim even higher, with a five-year plan leading to an Olympic qualification. They've got to put in the work, and these morning and afternoon practices are the bare minimum.

“I know this schedule asks a lot of you. You'll have to hit the sack early and probably miss out on a few parties, but it's all up to you. If you don't want this, you're free to leave right now, no hard feelings whatsoever.”

Everyone glances at each other, but no one so much as moves an inch.

“Great. Now that we've got that out of the way, I need to talk about the most important thing here. Teamwork. Swimming is often seen as an individual sport, but we all need each other to grow our skills and refine our swimmer's mindset. I'm not asking you to all be best friends, but you have to support your teammates. Teamwork makes the dream work. It's a cliché for a reason and that reason is that it's true. Swimming next to someone, whether friend or foe, will make you want to push yourself to beat them. Swimming as a team will help you push past your mental and physical barriers.

Seeing others win will make you realize that winning is possible for you as well. Two things I don't tolerate in here are bullying and cliques. Keep that drama out of the pool. Also, no running. If you slip, you can die, and I don't want any of you to die. If I catch you running, you're swimming four extra laps, capiche?"

They all nod. "Yes, Coach Wilson."

"Good." I don't want to sound like a jerk, but I need to showcase my authority so that the rest of the year can go smoothly.

"What I want you guys to do tonight is think of what it means to be on a team, for you personally. You don't have to give us a presentation of your thoughts but let them inspire you to make this the best team ever. Together, we can make it to the state finals. Finally."

I feel like I'm getting through to them, except for Josh who keeps staring at something behind me. Geez, today's our first practice and he's already losing focus.

I clap my hands. "Josh, focus and listen. What could possibly be more interesting than a speech from your coach, huh?"

His cheeks grow red, and a couple of other swimmers snort and chuckle. "I'm sorry, it's just... You've got to check this out."

"Sure. Look, guys, you can't fool me. I know there's nothing to see. This is not my first rodeo as a coach, but just to humor you, I'll take the bait." I shake my head and turn around to verify that there is indeed nothing important to see.

But when I do, I feel like I'm hit in the chest with a confetti cannon. The world is suddenly brighter and brimming with possibilities I thought were forever lost.

"Coach? Was I right? Is that Gwinnie Fletcher, the international swimming champion? At our pool?" Josh asks, proving me wrong about nothing being more interesting than my speech. I gladly take the burn.

I grin and throw my clipboard on the ground. “You’re right. It’s her,” I say as I run toward those arms that I’ve missed like crazy.

“No running allowed,” Lou shouts. “That’s four laps as punishment, Coach!”

The entire team is in stitches, but I don’t care because Gwinnie is here. Finally.



Chapter Four

Gwinnie

One hour earlier

After promising my mother that I'd be back in time to eat the chicken she defrosted for me specifically and *can't be frozen again under any circumstances*, I'm out the door and headed to the pool.

Blake starts his swimming team practices today. I know this because he told me so during one of our lengthy phone calls two weeks ago. My stomach keeps turning and twisting with excitement when I think about surprising him. Even though we've been best friends since high school and he's in no way interested in me romantically, I still have dreams about him from which I always wake up feeling like I desperately need a cold shower.

Blake is my security blanket, the one who understands me, and the only guy I can be completely myself with. In his company, I don't feel the need to prove myself. I can just be me, and that's exhilarating in a world that expects way too much from everyone. Also, it doesn't hurt that he's nice to look at. More than nice. Fine, I'll admit it. He's super hot. Blake is my super-hot best friend, nothing more. It's not my fault that I have eyes and can objectively assess his looks. I'm human, after all.

My phone pings with a message. Did Blake already find out about me being here? I frown as I grab my cell phone from my purse.

Mom: Me and Dad were thinking you'd better set an alarm on your phone so you're home in time for dinner. Remember, the chicken cannot be frozen again! We're counting on you to act like a responsible adult.

Seriously? Enough with the chicken already. I reply with a thumbs up. It's all the energy I can allocate to this message right now. I hope from the bottom of my heart that their upcoming vacation will help my mother chill out a bit. She clearly needs it if she's this worried about defrosted chicken.

By the time I get off the bus and walk up the steps of the Natatorium, my hands are shaking, but not because of a possible chicken disaster.

It's silly to be this nervous. It's just Blake. Just the cutest, most charming, sweetest, hottest guy on the planet. Who happens to be my best friend. Whom I haven't seen in way too long. Gosh, I can't wait to surprise him.

I follow the long corridor to the sliding doors marking the pool's entrance. I don't take my shoes off, but I'm sure that Blake will understand why I'm not following the rules. His team of pimply teenagers doesn't need a front-row look at my prosthetic.

I quietly slip inside and wait before making my presence known. I soak in the moment of seeing him in his natural habitat, speaking to a group of teens. Were we ever that young? I know they must be at least seventeen but to me, they look like they've only recently hatched from their eggs. I close my eyes and soak up the familiar vibe of the pool. The hot air, the chlorine tickling my nose, the water softly moving thanks to the ever-working filters... Blake and I spent hours in here, every single day, again and again. Some of those days got catalogued as the best of my life and they will stay there forever, no doubt about it.

He hasn't spotted me yet. I get a bit closer to where they're standing and marvel at his physique. My eyes hook onto his muscled back supported by the kind of strong shoulders that could lift a car, at least in my fantasy world. An intricate sleeve tattoo snakes all the way from his right wrist up to his shoulder.

I let my gaze travel down to his swim shorts. They're dark blue with no frivolous touches whatsoever. Perfect for a swim coach. Perfect for his well-defined butt. I'm not gawking or

anything, just stating the facts. If he weren't my best friend, I'd probably be attracted to him and pine for him. Not that I pine for him. Nope. Just to be absolutely clear again.

Blake Wilson doesn't look like your run-of-the-mill swimmer. He never shaves his head for instance, insisting that his thick hairdo doesn't increase drag in the water, at least not in a significant way. To him, it's a tradition that he doesn't want to follow, and I get it. Blake has the best head of hair I've ever seen on a guy. Thick, wavy, and dark. If I were him, I wouldn't touch my hair with anything sharp either. And shaving leg hair? It's true that it's a mental thing. If you feel smooth and fast, you will be exactly that in the water. But again, Blake has a solid mindset of his own that doesn't require any shaving.

So yeah, the only thing that could clue someone in to the fact that this tattooed guy with the dreamy hair is a swimmer are his broad shoulders and defined legs.

One of his swim team members keeps looking at me with a mix of curiosity and disbelief. His scrambled focus prompts Blake to say something about it and to finally turn around.

As soon as our eyes lock, my body temperature spikes. His face lights up and his blue eyes sparkle brightly. A chunk of his unruly dark brown hair falls over his left eye as he runs toward me. I open my arms, more than ready for one of his tight hugs that always make me feel like a million dollars.

The moment he scoops me off the ground and twirls me around, safely in his arms, I'm home and exactly where I want to be. For the first time in ages, I can feel my body relax.

"Gwinnie," he whispers in my ear. "Tell me I'm not dreaming."

I squeeze him even tighter. "You're not. I'm really here."

"You've made my day, G. No, my flipping year."

I choke up, my eyes brimming with happy tears. I've missed him and his kind eyes more than I dare to admit to myself.

He takes my hand in his and drags me over to the swim team. “Guys, this is Gwinnie Fletcher, the international swimming champion who also happens to be my best friend.”

“You? Best friends with Gwinnie Fletcher?” one of the boys asks.

“Hey, don’t sound so surprised. I have lots of qualities that make me a great friend.”

“But it’s Gwinnie Fletcher, Coach, not some random chick.”

I laugh. “I’m not that special.”

“You kind of are,” the guy who was staring at me earlier says. “And hello, I’m Josh.”

A girl steps forward and shakes my hand. “It’s an honor to meet you. You’re my greatest inspiration.”

“Thank you,” I say, feeling my cheeks blush.

The other members of the swim team all greet me as well and fire off questions, the most recurring one being if I’m here to coach them. I smile as I burst their bubble. “No, I’m sorry, you’ll have to make do with Coach Wilson here.”

Blake winks at his team. “I might be able to convince her to show you guys some tricks.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so, B.”

He turns to me and pins me with those kind eyes of his. “I need to do coach stuff right now, but will you stay and watch? I’m all yours in about an hour.”

“Sounds good,” I say.

I take a seat on one of the benches alongside the pool and make myself as comfortable as I can without taking my prosthetic off.

Blake gives everyone directions and five minutes later, the team is doing laps in the pool. He looks good with his whistle around his neck and a clipboard in his hands, shouting compliments and encouraging words as well as advice to

improve backstrokes and breathing techniques. He's a real pro and he obviously cares deeply about his team.

Despite Gramps lying to me about his health and my parents leaving on their once-in-a-lifetime vacation, coming back here was the best decision I've made in a while. What I crave right now is a sense of normalcy and acceptance. Blake is my perfect partner in crime for that.

An hour later, the team gets out of the pool and heads for the locker rooms while Blake jogs over to me and sits down.

"Coach Wilson," I say in a stern voice. "No running around the pool."

"I won't tell anyone if you won't."

I give him a wink. "Your secret is safe with me. For now. I might still use it as leverage one day."

He stares at me for a couple of seconds, a sigh escaping his lips. "I still can't believe you're here. I need to know why, how long you're staying, and why you didn't tell me you were coming. Want to grab something to eat and talk?"

"I'd love to, but that would be a chicken-related disaster. Do you have time tomorrow?"

"I always have time for you, Gwinnie Fletcher. Also, what's that about chicken?"

I laugh. "You know what my mother is like. If I don't show up for the dinner she's prepared, she'll ground me or something."

"Oh yeah," he says, running a hand through his hair. "I vaguely remember that actually happening once."

I can't believe he remembers something that insignificant. How much information fits into that beautiful head of his?

"You're right. I once told my mother I'd be home for dinner but then we went out for burgers after practice."

"If I recall correctly, she had you eating soup for an entire week."

I snort. “Yup. She put her foot down and said it was no use cooking any real food for me anyway since I probably wouldn’t even show up to eat it. Me skipping dinner happened once. Once! She still pesters me about it even though it was your fault, not mine.”

He gasps. “My fault? You didn’t exactly put up a fight.”

I shrug and smile. “How could I after hearing the words burgers and fries?”

Blake bumps his shoulder against mine. “I’ve missed this.”

“Me too.”

He puts his hands together. “So dinner together is off the table. At least let me drive you home.”

“That would be perfect. I hate taking the bus,” I say.

He grins and jumps up. “Awesome. Let me get changed first. I don’t want to show up at your folks’ place half-naked.”

“Smart thinking. You don’t want to give my mother a heart attack. I’ll wait for you outside.”

“See you in five, G.”



Chapter Five

Blake



It's too bad that I have to keep my eyes on the road because I want to look at Gwinnie every second of this car ride. I do manage to steal a glance every now and then, though. Having her here is glorious, as if a part of me was missing and she just put me back together. I know that sounds corny, but I can't deny that's how it is. We go together like yin and yang. Besides, isn't that what best friends do? Make each other whole?

What I do know for sure is that it's awesome to be close to someone who gets you and can laugh with your silly humor. Maggie—my sister—rolls her eyes whenever I crack a joke, but Gwinnie always acts as if it's the most hilarious thing she's ever heard. It's fun. I've missed her way too much.

I pull up at her parents' place and turn the engine off. "I'll walk you up." I rush to her side of the car and hold the door open.

"Always the gentleman," she says with a soft smile.

"Makes you wonder how I'm still single, right?" I joke.

She shakes her head and laughs before slamming the car door shut. "The mind boggles. It can't possibly be because you live and breathe swimming or because of the wet towels you keep on the bathroom floor."

"G, those towels land there without me lifting a finger and you know it. It's called—"

"Gravity," she says. "I've heard all your excuses a thousand times before, Wilson."

We come to a standstill at the front door. I take her in while she looks for her keys in her purse, one of those oversized

ones women claim they need, yet can't ever find anything in.

Her hair is tied into a messy bun and her fingernails are all painted a different shade of blue. She's still as beautiful as when we first met. I don't even need to think hard to remember the exact moment I laid eyes on her and became instant friends with her. It was a Friday, hours after school was out. All my friends were gearing up for a bonfire party at the beach, discussing who they hoped to kiss that night, but I declined every invitation to join them. We were headed for state finals, and I needed to prepare.

Gwinnie was the only other person at the pool that night, so determined to swim twenty laps in a row that she didn't even notice me until she got out, out of breath but looking proud and satisfied.

She smiled at me while she towed her hair dry, asking if I was there to hit on her and saying that if I were, I should cut my losses right then and there because all she cared about was swimming. It was such an unexpected remark that I laughed and told her that I was there for nothing but swimming as well, and that I didn't have any ulterior motives.

The cute dimple in her right cheek appeared after my confession, and she asked if I wanted to practice with her the day after. We agreed to push each other and support one another from that day on, and just like that, we became inseparable. That day at the pool, when things were uncomplicated and just the two of us, was the day I started seeing Gwinnie as my favorite person on the planet.

Everyone at school assumed we were a couple, but we did everything in our power to convince them we were not, fabricating lies about why we would never work romantically. Like how annoying it was that I threw wet towels on the floor and how she never closed the kitchen cabinets after grabbing something. We told everyone who wanted to listen that we were more like brother and sister than two people interested in each other romantically.

People endearingly called us The Beegees, since she called me B and I called her G. We were almost glued together,

spending every free moment we had together. It didn't take long before we were cemented into the friend zone. Sometimes I wonder what would've happened if we'd been able to break out of that and become more than just friends. I did try once. Well, almost tried.

After years of having feelings for her and pushing them down, I decided to finally tell her, despite her being with Evan at the time. I knew she wasn't happy with him. She'd told me on numerous occasions how badly he treated her. I made the decision to at least tell her how I felt, but then the accident happened. How could I make a move right after her life changed forever like that? After she lost her leg? She had so much to process that I couldn't throw my feelings for her on that pile too. What she needed was her best friend, not another complication. So yeah, I kept my mouth shut and never told her about it. Since she has never made a move either, I'm pretty sure she only sees me as her best friend and nothing more. It's okay, though. I'd rather be friends with her than not have her in my life at all.

“Blake? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Gwinnie's question lands me back on my feet. “I was wondering if you'll ever find those keys or if we should just ring the bell.”

She lifts her hand from her purse, a set of keys dangling from her finger. “Impatient much?”

She puts the key into the lock, but before she can turn it, the door swings open.

“Blake!” Mrs. Fletcher cleans her hands on her apron and squeezes me tight against her bosom. “I can't tell you how good it is to see you. You're staying for dinner, right?” Without giving me a chance to answer, she turns around and shouts, “Henry! Defrost another chicken breast! Use the turbo setting on the microwave!”

She opens the door further and motions for us to come in. “Come on, don't stand out there in the heat. The house is air-conditioned.”

She guides us to the living room and forces us to take a seat on the sofa. “Dinner will be ready soon. You kids stay here and talk.”

Then she marches back into the kitchen.

Gwinnie snorts. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be sorry. I love this. It’s like a blast from the past.”

I mean it. Gwinnie’s parents might be a bit weird and crazy, but their house is always filled with love and quirky little habits.

I angle my body toward her. “Now that we have some time to kill, tell me why you’re back.”

“You’re not going to believe this, but for reasons I’m still trying to figure out, Gramps tricked me into it. He said he needed me to come and take care of him, while he’s actually shaking his eighty-year-old tush to Zumba music.”

“You’re kidding.”

She groans and lets her head fall back against the couch cushions. “I wish.”

“So you’re not staying then?”

My heart drops all the way to my stomach. I just got her back. I don’t want to lose her again. Not this soon.

“I am. Remember when you told me I was nuts for staying in a place where I had no real connections anymore? You were right. It’s time for a change.”

I offer her a smug look. “I was right, huh.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Wilson.” She speaks in a stern tone, but I know she’s messing with me. I can tell by the soft smile hiding at the corner of her mouth.

“Whether it was me or your grandfather who lured you back home, I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too.”

“Dinner’s ready!” Mrs. Fletcher’s voice booms from the kitchen.

We take a seat at the table while Gwinnie's mom cuts me a piece of chicken breast. "Sorry, Blake, but the extra chicken didn't get defrosted in time. A certain someone didn't mention the fact she'd be bringing a guest with her. I hope you don't mind sharing," she says, her gaze fixed on Gwinnie who rolls her eyes at her mother's passive-aggressive comment.

"Of course not. Thanks for having me. It all looks delicious, Mrs. Fletcher."

She points her knife at me. "How many years have I been telling you to call me Clarice? Don't be stubborn."

"Will do, Clarice," I say with an amused smile.

"How's work? Are you ready for a new school year?" Henry, Gwinnie's father, asks.

I nod and swallow a spoonful of peas before answering. "Yeah, I'm excited to start again next week. We do have a small problem, though. Rick, the other PE teacher at Summerville High, broke both his arms this summer."

Clarice looks horrified. "What? How did it happen?"

"He was on a cruise," I joke. "That's all I know."

Gwinnie told me in the car how nervous her mother is about leaving the house. I figure Clarice will laugh, but she's looking as pale as a sheet. Oh no.

"A cruise?" she stammers, then jerks her head to Henry. "It's a sign. We can't go."

"Honey, relax, we are not staying home."

"We'll see about that," Clarice shrieks.

Henry throws his napkin down. "We talked about this. Multiple times. Your therapist told you to go if you want us both to keep our sanity, for crying out loud."

Uh-oh. I only wanted to lift the mood a bit, not cause marriage problems.

"Guys, I'm truly sorry. I was kidding. Rick never went on a cruise. He broke his arms in a public restroom at a festival."

“How is that even possible?” Gwinnie wants to know.

I shrug. “He slipped in a puddle of beer, landed with both arms on the toilet bowl, then got a door slammed in his face. I heard it wasn’t pretty.”

Clarice’s jaw drops to the floor. I think she’s still deciding whether I’m telling the truth this time or not, but unfortunately for Rick, I am.

“Anyway, the school hasn’t been able to find a replacement,” I say. “I don’t know how I’m going to take care of double the students I normally do. It’s a lot.”

“Gwinnie will do it,” says Clarice. “She’s got nothing else to do.”

Gwinnie’s jaw drops. “Excuse me? I tutor kids online. That’s hardly doing nothing.”

“Sure, but what about getting a real job? One that gets you out of the house every day. Imagine how good you’ll feel teaching youngsters a thing or two, without a screen separating you. They start the year completely out of shape, demotivated, and bored. But then you show them how fun it is to exercise, and you help them push their boundaries. By the end of the year, they feel amazing, and all go off to some fancy college where they study hard to become surgeons and lawyers.” She smiles. “What a fulfilling job.”

Gwinnie rolls her eyes again. “That sounds like the plot of a cheesy movie, Mom. A truly bad and unoriginal one, for that matter.”

Clarice scoffs. “It could happen. Movie plots are always based on something, you know.”

“Yeah, on fantasies. You make it sound as if PE teachers possess some sort of Mother Theresa quality. You do realize most of them just chill at the sidelines and blow their whistle at strict intervals?” Gwinnie swivels her head to me. “Not you, of course. You’re the best PE teacher ever.”

I laugh. “Thanks, G. Would you consider becoming a substitute PE teacher, though? The school would love to have you.”

She pulls a face. “No, thanks. I didn’t move back here to handle sweaty teenagers every day. Trying to get them to put in some above-average effort would be a fruitless endeavor anyway. I’m not as patient as you are.”

“Suit yourself. If you change your mind, the offer still stands.”

“And it will keep standing forever, so don’t bother. I appreciate you guys wanting to help but there’s no way I’m going to take the job.”

I grin, spearing a piece of chicken with my fork. “We’ll see, G. We’ll see.”

“Shut up and eat your chicken, B.”

I stuff the meat into my mouth and wiggle my eyebrows at her. I truly hope she’s going to change her mind about applying for the substitute teacher job.

What would be more fun than working alongside Gwinnie? I for one can’t think of a single thing.



Chapter Six

Gwinnie



By the time the dishes are done, and Blake is out the door, I'm exhausted. I crave a quiet night in bed, preferably with a good book and without my prosthetic putting pressure on my nub.

Mom drives me over to Gramps' house. He's finally home from his dancing escapades. When my mother enters the kitchen, he doesn't even look up, but as soon as he sees me he jumps from his chair with the vigor of a sixteen-year-old football player.

"Gwinnie, come here," he calls out, even though I'm standing right beside him.

"Shouldn't you be limping? Or in bed, unable to move at all?" I ask, exposing his lies.

His face falls, but only for a second. He then shrugs and sighs. "Well, you got me."

"You lied to me, Gramps." I put my hands on my hips to reinforce my words but can't stay mad at him for more than five seconds. He looks so frail and innocent. It'd be like reprimanding Grog.

"I'm sorry. I mean it," he says. "I was afraid I was going to be lonely without your parents around. Luring you back here seemed like a foolproof plan."

I shake my head and give Gramps a good, long hug. "It's okay, I guess. I'm too tired to talk about this right now."

"Dad?" Mom interjects. "A word?"

She crosses her arms over her chest and taps her foot on the floor, and I already know she's about to lecture her father. I grew up as her daughter after all, and have been on the receiving end of that pose many times.

I pat Gramps on the shoulder. “That’s my cue to get out of here and unpack. Good luck with Mom.”

“Thanks, kiddo, looks like I’ll need it.”

“You sure will.”

I leave the two of them in the kitchen, but it only takes three seconds before the arguing begins. They try to be subtle by closing the door, but since Gramps isn’t wearing his hearing aids, they’re shouting. I can hear every word loud and clear. Curiosity gets the best of me, and I linger in the hallway to eavesdrop.

“What were you thinking, Dad? Dragging your granddaughter here under false pretenses? You know she’s fragile.”

“I’m old and lonely, especially with you leaving, Clarice. I need the company. And Gwinnie could use a change of scenery. Maybe now she can stop moping and start living again. It’s a win-win.”

My mother scoffs. “Stop moping? I agree that I want her to be happier, but she lost a freaking leg, Dad. She’s allowed to wallow.”

“Of course, but she lost her leg, not her life. Yet.”

“What do you mean, *yet*?” Mom shouts. “She’s not dying, is she? Did she tell you she was? What disease is it? Oh my goodness, I need to sit down.”

“Get a grip, Clarice. What I mean is that if Gwinnie doesn’t start living fully again, she’ll miss out on her life. Only, she won’t realize she missed out until she’s too old to do something about it. I don’t want my granddaughter to go through that.”

The warm sting of tears brimming in my eyes prompts me to go up and hide in my new bedroom. I know that Gramps is right, but the truth still hurts as badly as a wall of bricks hitting me in the chest. I stopped living for years. Blamed everything on the accident that changed the entire trajectory of my life. I stopped doing the things I used to love. I stayed in that stupid

apartment, far from the people I loved, even though I needed their help.

I stopped swimming.

I know that I should've moved back home right away, but I didn't want them to feel sorry for me. I wanted to prove that I could be independent, even though I went through hell. According to my therapist, those reactions were all part of my grieving process, something we all deal with in different and sometimes weird ways, but I didn't know that at the time. I only started seeing her months after the accident. That's how stubborn I was about doing this all myself.

The thing is, I will forever have a life that got split in two by the driver who hit me and cost me my leg. There's now *Before the Accident* and *After the Accident*. Two lives, same person. Dealing with that divide is not always easy. The date my life changed forever is carved in my mind like a foul memory.

I close the bedroom door and sit down on the edge of the bed so that I can take my prosthetic and liner off. Then I prop a few pillows against the headboard and get comfortable while massaging my nub.

In a way, I should thank Gramps for lying to me. If he hadn't, I wouldn't be here right now. I would still be in that apartment, feeling lonely and tutoring kids. A job that I really don't like, if we're being completely honest. The hours are crazy thanks to time zone differences, and some weeks I have no kids to tutor at all, which isn't financially viable in the long run. It's all I've got, though. What am I going to do if not that? Take the PE job? With only one leg and no teaching degree? I don't think so.

My phone buzzes with a text. I use the palm of my hand to wipe a tear away before reading the message.

Blake: What do you think, G.? You and me back at Summerville High? Only this time, WE will be the ones at the top of the food chain.

Attached is a picture of Blake posing next to the school's flag by the football field, and next to him is a cardboard cutout of me. I can't believe he still has that thing and that he dragged it all the way to Summerville High for this picture. Our coach at the time had it made for me when I won my first international swimming competition, and Blake snatched it right after the celebration party, claiming it would come in handy one day.

My phone buzzes again and is flooded with pictures of Cardboard Me and Blake in all kinds of different school locations: the cafeteria, the hallways lined with lockers, a classroom, the basketball court, even the principal's office! It's silly, but also exactly what I need right now. Instead of crying, I'm shaking with laughter.

I fire off a message to him.

Me: Thanks for making me laugh, I needed it. But you know that I already have a job, B.

His reply is almost instant.

Blake: As fun as this one? With colleagues as cute as me? I don't think so.

I shake my head. Blake is trying so hard to help me. And so is Gramps. I mean, sure, he lied to me, but he's probably scared because Mom and Dad are leaving. At least now we've got each other to lean on, thanks to his meddling. I'll tell him that as soon as Mom leaves. He doesn't deserve to be yelled at like this.

I should probably give myself some more credit as well. Why do I keep hanging on to a job I hate and that doesn't even pay well? Not that becoming a PE teacher would make me millions, but... I don't know. I could ask for an interview, but what's the point? I might not even get the job. Who's going to hire a PE teacher with only one leg? I'm tired of being disappointed. Ugh. Why can't life be easy for once?

The slam of the front door echoes through the house. Gramps knocks on my bedroom door, then opens it and sticks his head inside. "Can I come in?"

I pat the empty space beside me. “Sit down.”

He cracks his knuckles, takes a deep breath, and smiles at me before sitting down. “I’m sorry I dragged you here under false pretenses, Gwinnie. I promise I won’t do it again. Also, you don’t have to stay if you don’t feel inclined to do so.”

I chuckle. “Inclined to do so? Mom told you to say that, didn’t she?”

He shrugs. “Word for word. She even had me practice it five times so I wouldn’t mess it up.”

“Gramps, we’re okay. Seriously, I was just thinking about it, and you did me a favor by lying to me. I’m happy to be back, and if you’ll let me, I want to stay here for a while.”

His face lights up. “Are you sure?”

“Yup. We’ll have a good time, you and me. I’ll help you cook and will make sure you take your medication on time. We can play board games and watch birds or something.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Board games and bird watching? No offense, that does sound like a blast, but I’m not expecting you to act like an eighty-year-old woman. You’re young! You should go out and do fun stuff. Meet up with friends. Go to the beach. Make one of those TakTuk videos. Live a little!”

“You mean TikTok?”

He groans. “Tik, Tak, Tok... It’s all the same to me.”

My phone buzzes once again, and he motions to my mobile. “You should get that.”

“Oh, it’s not a call, just a message.” I look at the screen. “It’s Blake. He wants me to apply for a teacher’s job at the school, but I’m not going to.”

“Why not? Jobs don’t usually come handed to you on a silver platter. If I were you, I’d do it.”

I shake my head. “You’ve got two legs, Gramps. Me? I’m different.”

He mutters something under his breath. “Kids. My goodness, what does it matter if you’ve got one leg or two?”

“Well, for starters, I’m not as mobile as two-legged people. How can I expect students to follow my lead if I can’t keep up myself?”

“You’re expected to do everything *with* them? I thought PE teachers chilled at the sidelines and maybe blew their whistle every now and then. How hard can it be?”

“I don’t know, Gramps. I can’t do things like this on a whim. I don’t even know how to decide if this is something I want.”

“Nothing a good night’s sleep can’t fix. Now, if you’ll excuse me, it’s time for my nightcap.”

“Okay, enjoy your drink. See you tomorrow.”

I’m expecting him to leave, but he remains seated.

“Uhm, do you need me to bring you your nightcap?”

“Of course not. I need you to help me get up, so I can fetch it myself. Just give me a little push and I’ll be fine.”

I scoot over to where he’s sitting and push him as requested.

“A bit harder,” he says.

I push again. This time, he rocks forward a bit further than before, but still can’t get up.

“Don’t be a wimp. Push!”

Geez, he’s a tough cookie to please.

I give it all I have and this time, I’m successful. Gramps gets back on his feet. Phew. That wasn’t easy.

He shuffles to the door, but before he leaves, he looks over his shoulder. “I’m really, really happy you’re here. How about I make us some bacon and eggs for breakfast tomorrow?”

I smile at him. “That sounds nice. Thank you.”

“Great. The grocery store opens at eight. Money is in the cookie jar in the kitchen,” he says with a wink as he saunters out of the door.

I fall back onto the bed, laughing, and go through Blake's pictures again. Do I really want to complicate things by becoming a PE teacher? Or should I go for safety and keep my online tutoring gig? And then there's the added complication of me not knowing a whole lot about what teaching PE even entails. Let's face it, I'm a swimmer, not an all-round sports connoisseur. Do I even have the right degree to be considered for a teaching position?

I can't make up my mind. What I do know is that the teacher gig includes Blake, and tutoring does not. His presence is a big, fat plus on the list of reasons for taking that job, but does that mean it's a good idea?



Chapter Seven

Blake



I arrive at Maggie's place at six thirty on the dot, with a bag of fresh baked goods from Sweets of Paradise—my favorite beach café. The owner, Paige, even gave me a couple of extra donuts to celebrate the start of the new school year.

The sound of music blaring from the kitchen drifts into the hallway. I round the corner to see my sister shaking her hips while flipping pancakes at the stove and singing completely off-key. I place the bag on the table and tiptoe toward her. Then, I grab her by the shoulders and yell “surprise!”

Maggie drops her spatula and screams before realizing it's me. She whacks me on the head with the palm of her hand and throws some expletives my way like only siblings can.

“Seriously, Blake? I thought you'd grown up. What a stupid prank.”

“Oh, come on,” I say with a grin. “As your brother, it's my duty to pester you. Also, I brought donuts and other delectable treats so you can't stay mad at me for long. Not if you want to eat them, that is.”

She rolls her eyes, pretending to still be mad at me, but I can already see her expression softening. “You go set the table and I'll finish these pancakes.”

“And then you'll forgive me for jump-scaring you?”

“I wasn't scared, just annoyed.”

“Suuure,” I say as I grab a couple of plates and mugs.

She puts her hands on her hips. “I got up at the crack of dawn for this tradition of eating breakfast together at the start of the school year. I don't even work at a school and it's my

day off, so you should treat me like... I don't know... like a princess or something."

Maggie's kind of right. She hates getting up early, so this is a big favor. I truly appreciate her wanting to keep this tradition alive.

"Would your highness like some coffee?" I ask, already grabbing the coffeepot without waiting for her answer.

"It's six thirty. I'll die without another cup of coffee. Honestly, I don't know how you can get up this early to coach the swimming team all season long."

I shrug. "I don't need a lot of sleep."

"A fact I've always been jealous of," she says with a sigh.

"Besides, there's no morning practice on the first day of school, so I basically got to sleep in today."

I hand Maggie her drink and put the plate with pancakes on the kitchen table, then grab another plate to put the baked goods on. We both take a seat and clink our coffee cups together. "Here's to an awesome schoolyear."

"I have a feeling it's going to be the best ever," I say.

Maggie raises an eyebrow. "How come? What's different this year?"

"Oh, nothing."

She leans closer and frowns. "I've never seen you *this* happy to start teaching again."

"Come on, Mags, I'm always enthusiastic about getting back to Summerville High."

"Not like this. Something's different. You can't stop smiling. Spill the beans, brother."

"There are no beans to spill. Am I happy that I'll get to see my best friend at work every day? Of course. But that's not the main reason for my happiness."

Maggie laughs and leans back in her chair. "Oooh, so it's Gwinnie who's making you this chipper. Yeah, that makes

total sense.”

“Don’t make this into something romantic when it’s not.”

“Who said anything about romantic?”

I shake my head. “I know you were going to. I’m just one step ahead of you. Anyway, don’t we have more pressing matters to discuss?”

“I honestly can’t think of anything more interesting than talking about your feelings for your best friend.”

“I don’t have feelings for her, Maggie.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine, the feelings you keep denying you have for her. But I know they are there.”

“How about we discuss Ollie’s party instead?”

She taps her fingers on her lips. “You’re right. You should decide whether or not you’re going to bring a date with you. Like Gwinnie.”

“You know Gwinnie and I are best friends. Nothing more.”

“Just because you were joined at the hip without anything happening before doesn’t mean that can’t change. Every time her name comes up, you transform into this happy yappy dude. Seriously, I need sunglasses to shield myself from your glowing face.”

Now I’m the one whose rolling his eyes. “Haha, so funny, sis. Look, we’re just friends. Nothing more. Not now, not ever.”

She holds her hands up. “Fine, keep fooling yourself then.”

“The question is, who are *you* bringing to Ollie’s party?”

Her cheeks turn pink. “No one at all,” she says before stuffing her mouth with half a donut, which renders her unable to speak for at least half a minute.

I press her for a bit, but she refuses to tell me anything. Maggie’s been single for who knows how long, and I know she misses having a partner in her life. I’d love for her to find a great guy. Of course, he’d first have to pass the Wilson

brothers' assessment. There's no way I'll let some random dude date my sister, and I know that Colton and Tanner feel the same. It's our duty to protect Maggie from not-so-stellar guys, especially since she's got a knack of picking the wrong ones.

The conversation segues into safer topics like work and family, and before I know it, the kitchen timer goes off.

"Time's up. I've got to run," I tell my sister.

She shoves her chair back and hugs me. "Good luck. Not only with handling those rebellious teenagers but also with your new colleague. Try not to drool. It wouldn't be professional."

"I won't drool. And good luck to you with cleaning up this mess," I say, motioning toward the kitchen table and the countertops.

She slaps me on the arm with a shake of the head. "Go before I slap you even harder. You'd definitely deserve it."

"I know, I'm insufferable, but still an amazing brother, right?"

She sighs and smiles, then waves me goodbye.

I hop into my car and set course toward Gwinnie's house. The moment she told me she was taking the job after all, I punched the air with my fist from pure joy and did a little air guitar riff. Thank goodness we were on a phone call, so she didn't have to witness my ridiculous moves.

I promised her I'd give her a ride to school and a tour of the grounds. Even though we both attended Summerville High, a lot has changed since we were teens. Plus, no one likes to arrive at a new job all alone. It's good to have someone you can fall back on.

I park my car on Gwinnie's driveway, or rather, her grandfather's driveway. He's already outside and on his knees, busy weeding.

"Hey, Eugene," I say.

“Good morning. I’d shake your hand, but once I’m down, it’s difficult to get up again.”

“Do you need any help?”

He shakes his head. “Of course not. I’m fine.”

“But Gwinnie and I are leaving for work. What if you get stuck here?”

“If I can’t get up later, I’ll shout from the top of my old lungs, and the lady next door will rescue me.”

“Has that happened before?”

He shrugs. “At least four times a week. It’s no biggie. Carmen loves helping people, so I’m just giving her an opportunity.”

I grin. “Oh, I see. You’re doing it for her, not for yourself.”

“Smart boy. Anyway, Gwinnie’s inside, but I must warn you. She’s so nervous that she’s already visited the bathroom five times since breakfast. I offered to give her one of my diapers, you know, the ones I use at night, but she refused to wear one *over her dead body*. Can you believe that? Maybe your presence can calm her down.”

I bite my lip to prevent myself from bursting into laughter. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Diapers are on the top shelf of the bathroom cabinet,” he says matter-of-factly before turning his attention back to the weeds.

I walk through the back door and call out for Gwinnie.

“I’ll be right there,” she shouts back.

I lean against the kitchen counter and check the time on my phone. Even though we still have some time, I hope Gwinnie doesn’t take too long to show up. I want to arrive before the students do and not land in the midst of the first day of school chaos.

Five minutes later, a pale-looking Gwinnie enters the kitchen. “I’m sorry you had to wait this long. You know how I get when I’m nervous.”

“I do.” I grin at her. “Do you want me to get you one of your grandfather’s diapers?”

She puts a hand over her mouth. “Oh my goodness, he told you about that?”

“Uh-huh. Don’t worry, though, your secret is safe with me.”

“What secret? I’m not wearing one. I only got offered one. Please don’t tell me you think I have a diaper on underneath these pants.”

“I’m just messing with you.” I take a step closer and lock eyes with her. For some mysterious reason, my knees wobble a bit. It must be because of all the sugar I consumed this morning. “It’s normal to be nervous, but I’m here for you. I’m driving you to school and I’ll be there all day. Not right by your side of course, but still. It’s all going to work out perfectly. Us teachers don’t bite our colleagues.”

“I know, but you’re all experienced. Me? I’m a noob. A nobody. And an easy target. What if these kids make me suffer? You know what we were like at that age. I’m sure none of our substitute teachers sleep well thanks to how we treated them back in the day.”

“First of all, you’re not a nobody. You’re an Olympic champion. And second, if anyone makes you suffer, you tell them that Coach Wilson will come and drag their sorry asses to the principal’s office. They will regret ever acting up after I’m done handling them.”

I finally get a smile out of her. “Handling them? What are you, some kind of mob teacher?”

“Nah, kids love me. Once they know you and I are friends, they’ll back off. I’m that cool.”

She shakes her head, laughing. “No sane kid ever thinks of their teachers as being cool, but I’ll let you have this fantasy.”

“You better. Now, are you ready for your first day at Summerville High, Miss Fletcher?”

“Man, I hate it when you call me that. It sounds so... grown-up. But yeah, let’s go.”

I hold the back door open for her. “One last thing, are you sure I don’t need to grab you a diaper?”

She whacks me with her backpack. Getting slapped like this seems to be a recurring theme today. “Don’t even think about it, B. I never want to hear you say the word diaper again.”

“What if we’re around a baby who needs changing?”

“When would that ever happen?” she asks.

At Ollie’s party when I take you as my date.

“Fair enough. No more diaper talk. Come on, let’s go before the school grounds get swarmed by pimply teenagers.”

We wave goodbye to Eugene and drive away, ready for a whole new school year with endless possibilities. I honestly can’t wait to get started.



Chapter Eight

Gwinnie



My head is buzzing with all the information Blake has given me about Summerville High. There's so much to remember that I don't think I'll manage at first try.

When I told the principal I wanted to apply for the PE job, he was so happy that I didn't even have to do an official interview. He also wasn't fazed by the fact that I don't have the right degree. Apparently, the school was desperate to find someone... anyone, really. At least, that's what I choose to believe. If they didn't hire me out of desperation it must have been out of pity and that would be horrible.

All I hope is that I won't let them down and that I'll get to the end of the school year unscathed.

Blake expertly weaves through the groups of teens already swarming the parking lot while I'm starting to feel nervous again. How am I going to exert authority over this crowd? How will I ever be capable of teaching these kids something valuable? Maybe this wasn't the best idea after all. I sink back into my seat and sigh.

"Are you okay?" Blake gives me a worried look.

"Uh-huh."

He parks the car and puts his hand on my knee, a small and sweet gesture. My heart flutters in my chest. Not because of his hand touching me, of course. It's these stupid nerves that are ruining everything.

"G., today might look hard but that's because it's all new for you. New rules, new habits, new faces, new places... But tonight, the ice will have been broken and you'll feel amazing, I can promise you that."

“So I just have to get through today?”

He smiles and squeezes my knee. “If you want to use dramatic terms like that, sure, but here’s a better idea. Let everything happen as it happens and have fun, huh? Come on, I’ll take you to the teacher’s lounge and introduce you to everyone. I swear your nerves will melt away once you get to know your colleagues.”

I swallow hard. “Thank you. I couldn’t imagine having to arrive alone today.”

“That’s what best friends are for.”

I close the car door and follow Blake up the steps of the main building. It’s like stepping into a time machine, with the sole exception of now being on the other side of things. I’m no longer a clueless student who has to fear her teacher’s authority and face irritating classmates. I’m a teacher myself now, which means that I’m at the top of the food chain in this school. Sort of, anyway, because I’m still kind of clueless. Weird doesn’t even come close to describing how I feel walking these familiar halls.

We approach the corridor housing the teacher’s lounge, a place that was strictly off-limits when we were younger. Now, Blake swings the door open as if it’s no big deal. I know that it isn’t a restricted area anymore now that I work here, but it still feels a bit wrong stepping inside. It goes against my instincts.

He turns around and raises an eyebrow. “What are you waiting for?”

“Nothing, I guess. It’s weird getting to peek behind the curtain.”

“The lounge? It’s nothing special. You’ll love it, though. It’s the perfect hideout for us teachers.”

I cross the magical threshold of the teacher’s lounge and finally realize that this is truly happening. I work here now. Before, it was all just a concept, but now it’s real.

I look around and see a few familiar faces. Older than when I last saw them, but unmistakably people who used to teach me and grade my assignments. The only real difference

is that they look like normal people now. In the corner of the room, right next to the water cooler, I recognize my old history teacher Mrs. Goldflower. She's laughing at something Mr. North, my former math teacher, is telling her, and I'm stunned. This is the first time I've ever seen them smile like this. Have I stepped into some alternate universe?

Blake elbows me in the side. "Why are you staring like that? Are you sure you're okay, G.? Need that diaper after all?"

"Of course not! Stop with the diaper talk, Wilson."

"Then what is it?"

"They used to be our teachers, remember? All stern and stiff. And now they're laughing. *Laughing*, Blake."

He frowns. "Who?"

I subtly motion my head toward the water cooler where Mrs. Goldflower and Mr. North are talking.

"Oh, John and Lisa? Yeah, they're pretty cool."

John and Lisa? I mean, subconsciously I knew they had to have first names, I just never thought about them. And both of them being described as cool? My brain simply can't compute.

Before I can ask any follow-up questions, Blake clears his throat. Everyone stops talking and turns to listen to him, as if he's Moses parting the Red Sea. "Can I get everyone's attention please? This is Gwinnie Fletcher, former student of Summerville High, swimming champion, and our new PE teacher. She's subbing for Rick."

Mrs. Goldflower rips her attention away from Mr. North and marches toward me. For a split second, I think she's about to give me detention for being in the teacher's lounge, but instead, she hugs me. Hugs me! "Gwinnie, it's so nice to see you again after all these years."

"Uhm, thanks, Mrs. Goldflower," is all I manage to say.

She crunches up her nose. "Mrs. Goldflower is what my students call me. In here, I'm Lisa."

Mr. North—or rather, John—pushes his way forward as well. “Welcome to the team.” He looks at Blake, then at me, then at Blake again. “The Beegees together again, huh. How wonderful.”

A slew of other teachers follow suit and welcome me to the “trusted teacher’s team” aka the TTT, as they apparently call it. They are all so normal and friendly. Some I recognize as former teachers, others as former classmates, and some I’m meeting for the first time ever. I’m going to need a cheat sheet if I’m expected to remember everyone’s names.

The bell indicating the start of first period sounds, and all of a sudden, almost everyone grabs their bags and heads out of the door. I don’t start until second period, so I have a bit of time to chill and relax. Not that I can, seeing how I’m nothing but a tense ball of nerves.

“Well, I have to get going,” Blake says with a soft smile. “Break a leg today, G.” His face immediately flushes. “I didn’t mean... I wanted to wish you luck and—”

I wave his comment away. “Forget about it.”

“I’m really sorry.”

I smile at him. “You’re fine. *We’re* fine. Just because I’ve only got one leg left doesn’t mean you should stop using common expressions. Now go out there and teach those kids about sports. Go get ’em, tiger,” I say while shooting him pistol fingers. Pistol fingers! I couldn’t embarrass myself more even if I tried. I really need to get these nerves under control. What if I pull a stunt like that in front of my new students? It would haunt me forever.

Blake laughs heartily before heading out. A handful of teachers stay behind in the lounge and two of them invite me to sit at their table.

“I’m Vanessa, art teacher,” one of them says.

“And I’m Debbie. I teach physics.”

I give them both a small wave. “I’m Gwinnie.”

“Nice to meet you, Gwinnie. Come on, take a seat.”

“Are you sure I’m not interrupting anything important?”

Debbie snorts. “We were discussing what makes a guy sexy.”

“Oh, any insights?” I ask, sliding into a chair.

“We came to the conclusion that the male equivalent of sexy lingerie is a pair of faded sweatpants hung low on the hips and not a shirt in sight, preferably showing off a muscled chest.”

Vanessa lets out an actual moan. “That’s the exact look Blake sports when it’s too hot to even breathe. Unfortunately, that only happens a few times a year, and only after hours as it’s not exactly appropriate school attire. I’d pay my entire monthly salary to get a peek under those pants.”

I raise an eyebrow. Is this normal work talk to them?

“I’m sorry,” she says with a blush. “I got carried away. I know you two are involved.”

My brows knit together. “Involved?”

She sighs. “You’re a lucky girl, Gwinnie. He’s been telling us for years how he can’t ever date because you two are a thing.”

I wait for her to burst out laughing and shout *just kidding* but that moment never comes. “That’s... weird,” I say, my head spinning.

Why did he tell these women we’re dating when we’re not? It’s ironic how much I would love those words to be true. Me and Blake, girlfriend and boyfriend. It’s all I’ve wished for for years, but since Blake never made a move, I know he’s not interested in me. Not romantically, anyway. For him, the friend zone is enough. To be honest, I’m kind of okay with that because I’d rather be friends with him than not have him around at all.

“Why? Is your relationship not going well or something?” She sounds almost hopeful.

“No, our relationship is going great, but it’s purely platonic. We’re best friends, not lovers.”

Her coffee cup falls from her hands and rolls off the table, hitting the floor with a big cracking sound. Thank goodness it was already empty. The teacher's lounge turns quiet, and every pair of eyes is boring into us.

John rushes over. "Are you okay, Vanessa?"

She just stares into the distance, eyes wide as if she's seen a real ghost. I doubt she has. Why would a ghost choose to roam a high school? There are better places to spend eternity than the teacher's lounge.

"I think she's having a stroke. Someone call 911," John says.

Her shaky hand flies up. "No, no, don't. I'm... I... uhm... Oh, look at the mess I made. I'll get a broom to clean up these shards."

"I'll do it," John says. "You stay right here and breathe."

"Thanks," Vanessa tells him, then turns her attention back to me. "Are you sure you two aren't dating?"

I laugh. "I think I'd know if we were."

"You're right. I'm just a bit shocked by this unexpected news," she says with a frown. "Does this mean Blake is single and available?"

I open my mouth, but no words come out. Technically, he *is* both single and available, but it feels a bit wrong pimping out my best friend to these women. And I don't want him to be involved with anyone. It's selfish and petty, I know, but I can't push my jealousy aside. Then again, what am I going to do? Lie to them like Blake did?

"I guess he's single."

"You guess? Didn't you say you two are besties? Don't you guys discuss your love lives then?"

"Hardly ever."

It's true. For some reason, we always avoid talking about relationships. I don't exactly feel the need to hear about him kissing another woman. Ugh, no thanks.

She leans closer and grabs my hands. “Would you find out for me if he’s open to dating? Please?”

“Uhm, sure. I’ll see what I can do,” I say, even though playing matchmaker for my best friend I secretly have a huge crush on is the last thing I feel like doing.

Vanessa sighs. “I can already tell this is going to be the best school year ever.”

“I agree,” Debbie says with an enthusiastic nod of the head.

Gosh, I sure hope they’re right.



Chapter Nine

Gwinnie



“You’re going to pay for this, G.”

Blake’s voice startles me so badly that I drop one of the basketballs I’m putting away. The ball bounces to the other side of the gym until it comes to a stop against the far wall. I turn around and put my hand on my hip. “Seriously, B.? Do you have to scare me like that?”

He shrugs. “In my defense, you’re the one who went around and told the entire school that we’re not dating. Let me tell you that was scary too.”

I frown. “The entire school? I only told Vanessa and Debbie. They were under the impression that we are dating, and I just set the record straight.”

“News travels fast around here. Look.” He shoves his phone in my face.

“What’s this?”

“The TTT’s chat group.”

“There’s a chat group?”

“How else are we going to stay in the loop on the latest gossip? I’ll add you later today if you want.”

I take the phone from him and scroll through the messages, all of them discussing Blake’s single status. Wow. He seems to be Summerville High’s number one eligible bachelor. Not that it’s a hard spot to fill. Between old and balding John and the socially awkward chemistry teacher, Blake’s the only hot guy I’ve seen here so far. The competition isn’t exactly fierce. Besides, it’s Blake. He would be the most eligible bachelor everywhere. If he were famous, he’d undoubtedly be voted sexiest man alive by everyone on the planet.

I hand him his phone back. “Why did you lie to these poor women in the first place?”

He lifts an eyebrow. “Poor women? Believe me, they’re feisty and cunning. They kept coming on to me, and I got tired of having to decline their requests to go on a date. It takes a lot of energy and creativity trying to come up with new ways to say no. Telling them we were dating was an easy, believable lie and you weren’t even here to prove them wrong. How was I supposed to know you’d one day work here and expose my lies?”

“So you used me to get them off your back?”

He gives me an embarrassed look. “G., I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

I can’t stop the corners of my mouth from turning upwards. “This is hilarious. And genius at the same time.”

“Wait, you’re not mad at me?”

“Are you nuts? I wish I’d come up with it. Such an easy solution when you don’t feel like dating.”

He grins at me, and I can tell he’s brewing up a new scheme in that gorgeous head of his. “We could always fake date, you know. Pretend we’re a couple.”

I shake my head. “No way. I don’t want to get involved in your web of lies. You’re on your own with this one.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. Oh, and Vanessa wants to know if you’re open to dating her.”

“You can tell her I’m not open to dating anyone.”

Relief washes through me when he says those words. Maybe Blake and I can stay single forever and grow old together as friends. Beats having to see him marry some gorgeous woman who doesn’t like that we’re friends and forces him to stop seeing me.

He bends down and picks up another stray basketball. “Enough about me dating. How has your day been so far?”

Having fun already?”

“I think I did okay. No one laughed at me or treated me wrong. They respected me even without me resorting to something lame like mentioning your name.”

He smiles at me. “How about that, huh? That’s amazing, G. I knew you’d be able to pull it off.” He reaches into his pocket with twinkling eyes. “Here, I got you a gift to celebrate your new job.”

Dangling from his hand is a pastel purple whistle—my favorite color.

“Now you don’t have to shout or clap your hands like a maniac to get your students’ attention.”

I take the whistle from him and hang it around my neck. “Thank you so much, B. I didn’t even know they made these in purple.”

“Every PE teacher needs a whistle in their favorite color. I’ve got mine in blue. Look at it as a buoy. You’ll need one to survive. Without a good whistle, you’ll drown. Demand authority from these students, don’t beg for it.”

I can feel my eyes getting misty thanks to his kind gesture, so I blink a few times in a row. I don’t want to cry in the middle of the gym. “I need to take five.”

We walk over to a bench and sit down so I can take my prosthetic off and massage my nub. Man, this feels good. I let out a small moan of relief.

“Are you okay?”

I nod. “It’s going to be tough being a PE teacher with a prosthetic leg, but I need to do this. I can’t keep hiding behind my computer, working a job I don’t like just because it’s easy. Being a PE teacher is always going to be different and harder for me compared to a two-legged person. I do love my prosthetic leg because it gives me the ability to move, but I also hate it with every fiber of my being. I can never get a break from it, and I don’t like the constant questions people fire my way.” I let out a sigh. “I also want to look good, you

know? This thing makes me so self-conscious of my appearance.”

“Are you for real? You’re one of the hottest women I know.”

I let out a high-pitched laugh. “You think I’m hot? Why?”

“Well, I have eyes. But don’t worry, it’s an objective conclusion, not an expression of my feelings for you.”

“Your feelings?” My voice catches in my throat.

“Yes, my platonic best friend feelings. Isn’t that what you told Vanessa and Debbie?”

He’s right. I did tell them that.

A new slew of students trickles into the gym, and I quickly put my prosthetic back on. Blake motions toward them. “That’s my cue to run. I’ve got a fun hour of baseball with a class of sports-hating kids to look forward to. Will I see you at lunchtime?”

“If I survive this next hour, sure,” I say, only half-joking.

“Believe in yourself, G. There’s no reason not to.”

He gets up and walks away. A group of senior girls giggle as Blake passes them on his way out.

“Hi, Mr. Wilson,” one of them calls after him.

He flicks his imaginary hat at them and turns around, walking backwards. “Take it easy on the new teacher, okay,” he tells the girls. “I’m kind of fond of her.”

He then winks at me and disappears through the doors. Geez, it’s impossible to feel bad around Blake. Everywhere he goes, he leaves a trail of smiles behind.

But for now, I’m on my own again, and it’s scary. I know I told Blake things went well so far, but I conveniently left out the fact that I felt nauseous the entire time I had to speak to the kids. Why don’t they hand out barf bags to new teachers? It sure would help a ton.

“Listen up, everyone,” I shout, but not one of the seniors so much as glances at me.

I grab the whistle around my neck and blow it as hard as I can. Silence falls over the gym, and all eyes turn to me.

Ha! Blake was right. This thing is an absolute godsend.

“Good, you guys are finally paying attention. That wasn’t so hard, right?”

The entire group nods, and I continue by laying down the ground rules for an efficient and fun school year.

I sound confident and strong, even though I’m dying with nerves inside, but it works. By the end of the day, I feel as if I’m finally getting the hang of this whole teaching thing.



Chapter Ten

Blake



The first week of school always flies by. There's so much to do—trying to remember freshmen's names, settling into a new rhythm, explaining the rules a thousand times a day—that you blink and it's Friday.

All in all, I'm happy with how things are going. We're five days in, and the swimming team is already making progress. Gwinnie seems a bit more relaxed than she was on her first day here. And tonight is going to be epic, because it always is. First, we need to get through parking lot surveillance duty, though. They've assigned Gwinnie and Anna-Catherine—the home economics teacher—to oversee the end of the weekly chaos today, and I want to be here and help out for a few minutes. I can only stay for a short while as swimming practice starts soon, but at least Gwinnie won't have to face Anna-Catherine all alone. She's rather... uhm... special.

Gwinnie appears from the main building and walks over to me.

"How does this parking lot surveillance work exactly?" she asks.

I shrug. "It's nothing but a fancy term for making sure no kids hit each other with their cars and that they all get off the school grounds safely. Oh, and they aren't allowed to litter, smoke, or hide in the bushes and make out."

She crunches her nose. "We have to stake out the bushes and pull kissing teens apart? I don't think I'm up for that."

I motion toward her neck. "Use your whistle. It'll scare them off faster than you can yell detention."

“Okay, I’ll keep that in mind.” She smiles. “I have to say that this has been one fun, but overwhelming week.”

“I know. That’s why you need to let off steam. You’re coming tonight, right?” I ask her.

“What’s happening again?”

“Only the best party of the year.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know. I’m not much of a partier.”

“We always celebrate the start of a fresh, new school year with the entire teaching team. You can’t not show up. I promise it’s going to be fun.”

“Fun how?”

I grin. “Ever wanted to see good old Mrs. Goldflower dance on a table? This is your chance.”

She laughs in that heartwarming way of hers that makes my heart skip a beat. “Seeing drunk people embarrass themselves isn’t exactly my idea of fun.”

My eyes zoom in on two seniors marching toward the bushes separating the parking lot from the soccer field. “Don’t even think about it,” I yell at them.

They jump in their tracks, and quickly turn around.

“That’s right, keep walking toward your cars or the bus stop,” I say. Then, I focus my attention back on Gwinnie. “Who said anything about drunk people? Us teachers like to let loose after hours. Some prefer dancing on tables, some play a mean game of poker, some like to have a drink or two. We’re not as dull as you might think.”

She briefly touches my arm. “Dull is the last word I’d ever use to describe you.”

I smirk at her. “Then it’s settled. I’ll pick you up at seven. I’m sorry, but I’ve got to leave you to it. I can’t be late for swimming practice. Anna-Catherine should be here soon to help, though.”

Her eyebrows knit together. “Anna-who?”

“She teaches home ec. Never uses her face muscles. Not the ones for genuine smiling anyway. In short, stay clear of her. She’s toxic.”

Gwinnie grabs me by the arm. “Wait, don’t go. I can’t face a shark like that on my own.”

“You’ll manage fine without me.”

Man, the desperation in her eyes almost makes me resign as a coach so I can stay by her side every single minute of every single day and protect her from the Anna-Catherines of this world.

“Remember, if things get too bad, use your whistle,” I say. Then I hear a voice behind me.

“Use your whistle for what?”

Anna-Catherine’s voice cuts through the air, and my entire body tenses up. I swear you need a massage after hanging out with her for more than fifteen minutes. But since we’re colleagues, I need to stay professional, so I turn around and smile. “Nothing in particular. How are you on this fine Friday, AC?”

She makes a *tsk* sound and disapprovingly shakes her head. “How many times have I told you to stop calling me that? I’m not an air-conditioner. I am a living, breathing person with a perfectly fine name, so please use it.” She throws her long hair over her shoulder with a dramatic shake of the head before leaning in and wiggling her eyebrows at me. I hate it when people invade my personal space like that. “Anyway, to answer your question: I’m doing great. Everything is awesome. Even more so because a little birdie told me you’re single after all. I must say, that’s the best news I’ve had all year.”

I clear my throat, not planning on acknowledging her flirtatious remarks. “Have you met our new PE teacher yet?”

Gwinnie whips out her biggest smile. “I’m Gwinnie. Nice to meet you.”

Anna-Catherine purses her lips at the sound of Gwinnie’s name and gives her the once-over, her eyes lingering way too

long on the prosthetic that's peeking out from under Gwinnie's ankle-length sweatpants.

"I heard you lost your leg. I'm *so* sorry," she says, not an ounce of genuineness in her voice. "It must be really hard to date guys with only one leg. How did you lose it?"

My blood starts to boil. Anna-Catherine may look cute and innocent, but she's more poisonous than a forest cobra. I can't imagine how Gwinnie must be feeling right now.

Instead of getting angry, though, Gwinnie shrugs and deadpans, "Shark ate it."

Anna-Catherine gasps. "For real?"

"How else would I have lost my leg? It was awful. Lots of blood. Extremely gnarly. The beach was colored dark red."

Anna-Catherine's eyes are about to pop out of her head. I barely manage to suppress a laugh. Gwinnie will survive parking lot duty without me after all. I truly admire her for staying strong through everything life has thrown at her these past few years.

I check the time again. "I gotta run, ladies. I'll see you both tonight."

I jog over to the Natatorium and manage to arrive with ten seconds to spare. The team is already waiting for me by the side of the pool, their expressions gloomy and worried. Uh-oh.

"Why the look of doom, guys?" I ask, throwing my sports bag on one of the benches next to the pool.

Leia, who the team and I assigned team captain last week, taps her foot on the tiled floor. "The Mountainvalley Manatees."

"What about them?"

"They've been training all summer and already had a preliminary competition," she snaps, nostrils flaring. "They crushed their own records."

"And that's my fault?"

She sighs and uncrosses her arms. “No, you’re great, Coach Wilson. The best coach we could’ve wished for, honestly. It’s just... our top times don’t even come close to theirs. The Mountainvalley Manatees already seem to be one step ahead of us and the season hasn’t even properly started yet. We’re dreading another year of not making it to the state finals in May. And since it’s not you, Coach... Well, what if we’re not cut out for this? What if none of us are as talented as we thought we were?”

“Wow, you guys,” I say, as I let Leia’s words sink in. I had no idea they felt this desperate, this early in the year. Then again, we haven’t made it to the state finals in years. I understand they’re getting antsy.

“First of all, don’t panic. We’ve barely started swimming practice for the year.”

“But we’re already lagging behind. Can’t we train more often?” Josh asks.

“Or infiltrate the Mountainvalley Manatees and steal their secrets?” Leia chimes in.

I hold my hands up. “Our rival teams don’t have any secrets that we don’t. Trust me. Focus on the end goal. We *will* make it to the state finals this year. I can feel it in my toes.”

Josh steps forward with a hopeful look on his face. “That’s a tall order, Coach. Do you know something we don’t? You’ve asked Gwinnie Fletcher to help us out, right? Is she going to give us all kinds of secrets so that we can finally beat the Manatees?”

“Of course he’s asked her. They’re best friends,” Leia says. “This is great news.”

Excited murmurs go through the group. I don’t know how to break it to them that, no, the former swimming champion they all look up to won’t be helping this season. Or ever.

I shake my head. “Sorry, guys. All of this is nothing but a hopeful fantasy. I haven’t asked Gwinnie to help us.”

Their faces revert to the disappointed and worried expressions they wore when I came in minutes ago. Man,

these kids are more serious than some adults. Which is not a bad thing, per se. They're simply driven and ambitious. I can't blame them for going after their dreams with such vigor, can I? Gwinnie and I were driven back in the day, and she made it all the way to international championships and gold medals.

I'm so going to regret what I'm about to say, but I want to give my team a sliver of hope. "I'll ask Gwinnie for some tips. Maybe she'll be able to step in and coach a few practice sessions with me. Will that be enough to stop the needless worrying and get your asses in the water? You've done nothing but sulk for five minutes straight. That's precious time that could've been used actually swimming."

"Thanks, Coach," Josh says with a big smile on his face.

"Woohoo, let's get cracking," Leia shouts.

They all put their goggles on and slide into the water faster than alligators who've smelled blood.

Man, I hope Gwinnie won't murder me tonight. After lying to everyone about us being together and convincing her to go to a party she doesn't want to attend, now I've got to beg her to please come and coach the team with me? I'd better find the biggest stick of Land O Lakes I can, because I'll need to butter her up big time.



Chapter Eleven

Gwinnie



“Where did you say you were going again? A teacher’s party?” Mom asks, stuffing a whole box of anti-anxiety meds into her carry-on.

I lift my eyebrows as I eye the huge box.

“What?” she asks. “I’m going away for a long time. I might need some help to relax.”

“Isn’t relaxing the whole point of this trip? Why top it off with chemicals?”

She shakes her head and rips the suitcase closed with such force that I’m surprised the zipper doesn’t break. “You’ll understand when you’re my age. Anyway, so you’re going to a *teacher’s party*?” she asks, air quoting the last two words. “Is that code for something indecent? Because I can’t let you attend if it is.”

“First of all, it’s a way to kickstart the year. It tightens the connection between us teachers. And second of all, it’s exactly what the name says: a party for teachers. Of Summerville High. Think of it as a sort of teambuilding activity.”

“Like when Dad’s boss forced him to go on that completely irresponsible day trip with his colleagues?” she asks, terror in her eyes.

Oh my God, she’s going to talk about Dad’s teambuilding from ten years ago for the rest of eternity, isn’t she?

I sigh. “Dad went ziplining and cave exploring. He came home all happy and excited if I remember correctly. There was nothing irresponsible about that day.”

She scoffs. “Part of it was underground and Dad chafed his knee. Those activities were not appropriate for men in their

fifties.”

“Then you’ll be happy to hear that this teacher’s party doesn’t involve dark caves or ziplines. Besides, I’m a grown woman, Mom, I can take care of myself.”

She wraps her arms around me and presses me against her chest. “You’re right, you’re an adult. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. This upcoming cruise is making me anxious.”

“I should go,” I say, wriggling free from her embrace. “Blake’s going to be here any minute.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? I’ve been talking about this cruise so much, it’s almost as if I haven’t given your health problems enough attention.”

I shake my head. “I’m great, Mom. Don’t worry about me.”

“How about work? Are the kids being nice to you?”

I laugh. “Acting like classic teens, but nothing I can’t handle. Anyway, I’ll see you tomorrow for your goodbye drinks, okay?”

She frowns, her thoughts already focused on the next problem. “You’re right, the drinks. I have to check if Dad put all of the wine in the fridge like he promised. No one wants to be served lukewarm drinks at a party. Did I tell you we bought two crates of wine for the price of one? The store had a BOGO sale on the day I went shopping. Amazing, right?”

“That’s fantastic, Mom.” I give her a kiss on the cheek and head out. I asked Blake to pick me up here and I want to be waiting outside when he arrives. If I don’t, then my mother will lure him inside and we’ll never make it to the party. Not that I’d mind. I’m not a big partygoer. But I promised I’d be there, and I guess getting to know my colleagues outside of the teacher’s lounge is a good idea. Maybe Anna-Catherine will prove to be a fun girl instead of the devil she appeared to be earlier. I swear parking lot duty isn’t too bad. It’s Anna-Catherine who turns it into a torturous experience.

Blake’s car horn snaps me out of my thoughts. I slide into the passenger’s seat, and he flashes a smile at me. Uh-oh. This

is not a normal smile. Something's up.

"Spit it out, B."

He feigns surprise. "What do you mean? There's nothing to tell. I'm just excited about this party, that's all."

"I'm not buying it, but don't worry, I'll get it out of you eventually." I click my seatbelt into place. "Now will you tell me where you're taking me?"

"The TTT party."

"I know about the party. I mean where exactly are we going? Give me the coordinates."

He smiles at me. "Have you ever wanted to see where Lisa lives?"

"Mrs. Goldflower? You bet. I used to wonder just how old her house looks." A tingling rush spreads through my body at the thought of stepping inside my former history teacher's house. I'd better not admit that to Blake, though. It's too stupid a thing to get excited about. Gosh, I need to get out more if this is the highlight of my week.

"Why would her house look old?" he asks.

I shrug and adjust my leg. "No offense, but she teaches history and dresses as if she's traveled from the Middle Ages to modern times. Her home is bound to be filled with historical knickknacks."

"What kind of knickknacks are we thinking?"

I laugh. "I don't know, but if I had to guess, I'd say skulls, quills, dusty books with yellowed pages, faded paintings, maybe some potions or a giant, age-old globe."

Blake arches an eyebrow. "You do realize Lisa isn't a witch who belongs to a coven and lives in a museum, right?"

I shake my head. "We don't know that. The witch part anyway. She's so well-informed about the days of yore, she might've been alive then."

"Okay, let me get this straight. You're telling me that Mrs. Goldflower is a witch who knows how to live eternally and

has chosen to stay alive for centuries, only to end up teaching history to bored teenagers?”

“Could be.”

“Have you ever considered a career as an author? I’m sure you’d be able to write a bestseller with that imagination of yours,” he says.

“Funny, B. I could be right about her, you know.”

He slows the car and motions to a house on the right side of the street. “I guess we’re about to find out. We’re here.” He parks, then rushes to my side of the car and opens the door. “Crap.”

“What?” My hand flies to my cheek. “Is there something on my face?”

“No, I forgot to bring garlic with me. You know, in case she’s not a witch but a vampire.”

I land my fist on his firm bicep. “Shut up. I’m never telling you anything ever again.”

“Aw, that hurt,” he says.

“That didn’t hurt. You can take a small hit like that. Admit that you’re fishing for a compliment about your muscled arms.”

He grins. “Thanks. I’ve been working out. I’m glad you noticed.”

I grab his arm and lead him up the driveway. “Let’s head inside. If we keep talking about your physique, your neck will tear your shirt,” I say.

I’m pretending I’m annoyed and acting as if this is all ridiculous *boys will be boys* talk, but I’m secretly loving every second. It’s been way too long since Blake and I have been able to goof around like this. I’ve missed the two of us going out and laughing about silly things more than I realized. Being in his vicinity is good for my soul. I never want to be apart from him for so long again. It’s nice to be with someone who knows me this well and who doesn’t treat me like I’m made of porcelain, just because I’ve only got one leg.

“What are you smiling about? You’re not coming up with some cunning plan to prank me, are you?” The worry in his eyes is nothing short of adorable.

I bite back a laugh. “You’ve got nothing to worry about. At least, for now.”

Blake rings the doorbell of Mrs. Goldflower’s house. From the outside, it doesn’t resemble a witch’s residence. Then again, what do I know about witches and their lairs?

The door swings open, and my jaw drops to the floor as Mrs. Goldflower ushers us inside. She’s wearing a long, golden, glittery dress that could make Beyoncé jealous. What a difference from the white blouses and argyle-patterned slippers she normally wears to school.

“Welcome, Beegees. Please, help yourself to a drink and have some snacks. There’s plenty to go around,” she says, leading us to her dining room.

I marvel at the high ceilings and the marble countertops I get a glimpse of from this side of the house.

“Did you see those countertops? Do history teachers make more than we do?” I ask Blake while filling a cup with homemade punch.

He draws in a sharp breath. “I think I need to go talk to the principal if that’s true. I honestly didn’t know Lisa was this rich.”

“You’ve never been here before either?”

“Nope. The TTT party is always at someone else’s house. In three years, it’ll be my turn to host.”

“Three years, huh? That gives you just enough time to clean up the place and pick up your wet towels from the bathroom floor.”

He shakes his head at me. “You should be a standup comedian, G. My place isn’t as dirty as you think.”

“Canapé?” a middle-aged man asks me.

“Oh, thanks.”

Blake leans closer to me as soon as the man is out of earshot. “I think that’s Mr. Goldflower. Apparently, he’s a bigshot scientist.”

“That explains the marble counters then.” I let my gaze wander the room. “Oh, look. There’s a giant globe after all.”

I triumphantly gesture toward the ancient-looking globe by the window. Blake and I make our way over to the giant thing. I let my finger trail the beautiful surface. “Huh. There’s a button here. Do you think this is one of those Russian doll kind of things?”

“Like a globe within a globe within a globe?” Blake pushes the button. “Only one way to find out.”

The top of the globe moves upwards and we both peer inside. I can’t help but laugh. “It’s a liquor cabinet! Mrs. Goldflower keeps surprising us. I wonder what other secrets she’s got in here.”

“What’s that about secrets?”

Anna-Catherine’s high-pitched voice stops me in my tracks. I was about to pull all the book spines on Mrs. Goldflower’s bookshelf to see if any of them give access to a secret room, but I can’t do it with witnesses around.

“Oh, we were just admiring this liquor globe,” Blake says.

Anna-Catherine peers inside. “Hmm. Okay. Anyway, I’ve got something important to discuss with you.”

“Shoot.”

She lets out a laugh and pricks a finger in Blake’s chest. “Not here, you silly. Perhaps we can go somewhere quiet?”

Blake swallows. I can tell he’s annoyed, but he’s also a gentleman. “Is this about school? Because I honestly don’t want to talk about anything work-related right now.”

“Of course not. How boring do you think I am?”

I bite my lip. That’s a question I don’t want to answer, even though it’s not even directed at me. I glance at Blake as I

sip my drink. He runs a hand through his hair, searching for words.

She flicks her hair over her shoulder. “Anyway, it’s an urgent matter.” She looks at me. “A personal one.”

“Personal?”

She grins. “You know what I mean.”

“Actually,” I start, “Blake was about to help me adjust my prosthetic.”

“Oh.” Her lips purse.

I hate using my prosthetic as an excuse, but I need to get Blake away from Anna-Catherine. That’s what best friends do for each other, right? Look out for one another? It’s definitely got nothing to do with the pinch of jealousy that’s spreading through my body.

“You two go do that. I’ll be waiting for you here,” she says in a clipped tone.

I reach for Blake’s hand and drag him away behind me.



Chapter Twelve

Blake



“That was a close call,” I say as we sneak into an upstairs bedroom. I close the door behind me. “AC has been after me ever since her husband filed divorce papers.”

“Oh my goodness, look at this,” Gwinnie squeaks, completely ignoring my remark about Anna-Catherine.

She holds up a replica of a skull. “Look! The top opens and there’s candy inside.” She frowns. “I should probably put this back, though. I don’t think we’re even supposed to be in here.”

Man, she’s so cute. Every little thing elicits an excited shriek from her. I wish I had her innocent and positive way of looking at the world. The warmth radiating from her demeanor does something to my heart, but I can’t let it. She’s my best friend, nothing more. Right? I’m probably having heart palpitations because of AC’s antics. Yeah, that’s the only sensible explanation. I cannot consider the other, more logical option if I want to keep myself from getting hurt.

“How long should we hide in here?” she asks, plopping herself down on the bed.

I take a seat beside her. “Knowing AC, I’d say about seven years.”

“She’s that persistent, huh? Why don’t you just tell her no when she asks for a date?”

“Because she’s the kind of person that doesn’t take no for an answer. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

She winces, but it’s not because of what I told her. I can tell it’s her leg.

“Why don’t you let your leg rest for a bit?”

“It’s not that simple. I don’t want to take off my prosthetic here.”

“Why not? I’ll guard the door if you’re worried about someone seeing you.”

She shakes her head and sighs. “That’s not it. First of all, taking it off right now feels like getting naked in front of you. I don’t know about you, but I usually avoid undressing in public. Second of all, it’s uncomfortable to put it on and off.” She fiddles with the seam of her shirt. “Dealing with my prosthetic takes a huge amount of mental energy. There’s so much planning involved, not to mention insecurities. You see, when you have two legs and there’s an emergency like a fire or something, you can run. I can’t. The time it takes to put my prosthetic back on could be the difference between life and death for me.”

“G., if a fire breaks out tonight, I’ll throw you over my shoulder and get you out of here. I’d do anything for you. Seriously, anything.”

“That’s sweet.”

She lets out a soft breath and catches my eye. I’ve never met a girl more beautiful than her. Gwinnie’s beauty is pure and natural, inside and out. She’s so amazing that a small sigh escapes me too.

Wow, where are these thoughts coming from? I thought I had locked them away in a box long ago. This evening has clearly had a weird effect on me.

“Thank you.” She squeezes my hand.

“You’d do anything for me too, right?” I ask.

“Of course.”

I take a deep breath. “Like helping me coach the swim team and finally getting them to the state finals?”

She frowns. “That’s oddly specific, B.”

I give her my best *busted* look, hoping she won’t get mad at me for jumping the gun and telling the team she’s on board.

“Specific *and* a great idea. Will you consider it? Please? We’re desperate.”

“You’re a great coach. I don’t see why you’d need me to get to the state finals. I’m really sorry, but no way.”

Okay, so much for her going along with my plan.

“Why not? These kids look up to you. They want to learn from the best.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not the best anymore. Ever since the accident, I stopped swimming. You of all people should know how hard this has been on me. And now you’re asking me to go to the pool every day? It’s not going to happen.”

“That’s too bad. The team’s going to be devastated when I break the news to them.”

“What do you mean, devastated? They don’t know about any of this, do they?”

I hold my hands in the air.

“You didn’t, right? Tell me you’re joking.”

“I might have told them you’d at least give them some pointers. Come on, it will be fun. You and me blowing our whistles and pushing these kids to be the best swimmers they can be.” I bump her with my shoulder. “Eating burgers afterwards and topping it off with those extra-large milkshakes from Don’s Buns you love so much.”

“You’re trying to reel me in like a fish by reminding me of how much fun we used to have back in the day, but it’s not going to work. My answer remains no.”

I angle my body toward her and take her hands in mine. “Then what is it going to take? I’ll do anything.”

“Anything?” Her mouth twitches and that’s the moment I know she’s in.

“Come on, let me have it. Want me to do your dishes for a month? I’ll drive over to your place after dinner every night. Need help in the yard? I’ll rent one of those extra-powerful

lawnmowers. Do you crave homemade bread in the mornings? I'll bake a loaf a day for you."

She bursts out laughing. "You? Baking loaves of bread?"

"It could happen. I'm sure there's a YouTube video that I can follow," I say with a grin. "See? That's how desperate I am. And the team, for that matter. Please?"

"You can stop with the puppy eyes, B. Fine, I'll help you out, but you owe me big time. I'll let you know what I want in return later, but don't expect it to be something easy."

I press her against me, and she hugs me back. We're so close that I can feel her heartbeat against my chest. Heat soars through my body, and for this stolen moment, I let it.

"Sorry, am I interrupting something?" John's voice startles me, and we quickly let go of each other. Why are math teachers great with numbers yet have such a bad sense of timing?

"What's up?" I ask, acting all fine and dandy, even though I can't get that delicious hug out of my mind.

"You don't want to miss this," John says with sparkling eyes. "Anna-Catherine is about to take on Lisa in a karaoke face-off."

Gwinnie and I exchange glances and grin. "Wouldn't miss that for the world," I say.

I help Gwinnie up, and we follow John back downstairs where the preparations for the face-off are in full swing. Debbie and Vanessa are pushing the dining table to the side, and Lisa is doing stretches in her glitter dress. Anna-Catherine seems to be babbling to herself as if she's a star athlete getting prepped for an Olympic event. On the left side of the room, Mr. Goldflower is fiddling with the sound system.

"I didn't know teachers were this competitive," Gwinnie says.

"Are you kidding me? They're the worst of all. Never engage in a board game with a fellow teacher if you want to keep your sanity. Debbie once left the teacher's lounge crying

after a game of Monopoly over lunch break. When I saw her crying, I thought something horrible had gone down, but all that had happened was someone else snagging the best streets before she had the chance to.”

Her jaw drops to the floor. “You’re making this up, right?”

I shake my head and grin. “I wish.”

Mr. Goldflower taps the microphone. “Can I have everyone’s attention please? Lisa and Anna-Catherine are going to perform a duet for us.” He pushes his glasses up his nose and peers at the piece of paper in his hands. “Ain’t no Mountain High Enough. That’s the song. You can all vote for the best performance by checking one of the boxes on the voting slips Debbie is handing out.”

I get my phone out and turn it to video mode. I can’t let the opportunity to record this slide.

“How come they have all this professional gear?” Gwinnie whispers. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t have any microphones lying around at home.”

“I know, right? The plot thickens. Another mystery surrounding Mr. and Mrs. Goldflower. Do you think they’re amateur karaoke singers?”

She nods. “Definitely.”

“May the best woman win,” Mr. Goldflower says.

He turns up the volume on the sound system and the first tones of the song boom through the dining room.

Anna-Catherine jumps straight into performer mode. She shakes her hips to the music and keeps looking straight at me when she sings the chorus.

Oh boy. Now she’s beckoning me with her finger. My colleagues are all cheering and clapping, but there’s no way I’m going to join AC in whatever weird mating dance she’s doing. She twirls and shakes and sings at the top of her lungs.

I exchange a glance with Gwinnie. She laughs, her eyes shining so bright that I might need to get my sunglasses out of

the car. I grin back at her like an idiot, enjoying my insides getting all warm and cozy, until a realization hits me.

Noooo.

Seriously?

A laugh shoots up from somewhere deep inside of me. I squeeze my lips closed so it doesn't escape.

Do I... have real, *unstoppable* feelings for her? Do I really want to break out of the friend zone?

This mind of mine is hilarious. I mean, come on. I closed off the possibility of us being more than friends a long time ago. She's not interested in me at all. Except as friends. I'm interested in *her*, but I can't give in to that, because I don't want to get hurt. These feelings resurfacing are the dumbest thing ever.

Right?

The bubble of laughter gathers in the back of my throat before escaping my lips.

She frowns, probably alarmed by the weird sounds I'm producing. "Everything okay?"

I give her a thumbs up and my biggest smile. "Everything is great."

Except for me falling head over heels for you, without any way of stopping.



Chapter Thirteen

Blake



Wilson family text chat

Colton: We're making a grocery list for Ollie's party. I just wanted to touch base and have you all confirm your attendance.

Maggie: Didn't I already confirm ages ago? As if I'd ever miss my sweet nephew's birthday party!

Hazel: Our flights are booked, and Tanner promised me he's not on call the day before, so we're absolutely going to be there. Didn't I text you this weeks ago?

Elle: See? Now everyone is confused. Just be clear with them, Colton.

Colton: What do you mean? I can't be any clearer than this.

Elle: What Prince Charming here is trying to ask is this. Blake and Maggie, are you guys bringing a date?

Maggie: Why would I bring a date? I'm single.

Blake: Yeah, same.

Maggie: Oh, sweet brother, you're such a liar.

Tanner: Blake, do you have something to tell us?

Blake: Shouldn't you be doing surgery and saving lives instead of grilling me about dates?

Tanner: I just got out of a splenectomy. As long as there are no other immediate trauma cases, I've got time to talk about your love life.

Blake: Don't hold your breath, guys. There's nothing to tell. My love life has flatlined.

Maggie: Oh yeah? What about your best friend Gwinnie? The way you talk about her says it all. You're clearly in luuuuuve.

Colton: Gwinnie? As in Fletcher? Your bestie?

Maggie: Bingo! That's her.

Blake: I'm not bringing her to a party with you guys. You'll scare her off. Plus, I'm not in love with her. We're best friends, nothing more.

Maggie: Sure, that's why you can't shut up about her. You can't talk about anything else but how awesome she is.

Tanner: Wait, is that your friend with the prosthetic leg? Because if that's the case, you have to bring her. One of my colleagues is setting up a trial for new and advanced running blades. She could be a great candidate. And it's all free.

Blake: Wow, way to be opportunistic, brother.

Tanner: I'm not. This is serious.

Elle: Guys, I suggest you bicker about this in your private chats, but right now, we need to know who's bringing a date. I'll put you and Gwinnie down as a yes, Blake.

Blake: What? I never agreed to that! I'm not asking my best friend to come to a party so she can be convinced to be a guinea pig for Doctor Drop-Dead Gorgeous.

Hazel: Whoops. You do know that using that nickname is like a red flag to a bull with him, right?

Blake: Oh, I know.

Tanner: Technically, it's for my colleague, not just for me. And second of all, I don't see her as a guinea pig. It's an opportunity for her to regain more mobility. Geez, Blake, how insensitive do you think I am? I spend my days and nights saving lives and repairing injuries so people can have a better quality of life and regain independence. What harm will it do to ask her? PS: my beautiful wife is right. Stop calling me Doctor Drop-Dead Gorgeous!

Blake: If there's no harm in asking, then why don't you ask her yourself, Doctor Drop-Dead Gorgeous?

Blake: Afraid to answer that, brother?

Blake: Bro, are you seriously mad about me using that nickname? We're just joking around.

Maggie: Where did Tanner go? Is he really so mad that he stopped answering?

Hazel: Don't worry, guys. He probably got called into surgery again. You know how crazy things can get at the hospital.

Colton: We'll see you all soon then. I can't wait for us all to be together again.

Maggie: See you then!



I throw my phone down and groan. I wish I could bring Gwinnie to Ollie's party, but my siblings would scare her off immediately.

They always need to meddle like this. Why don't they team up and nag Maggie about being single? Why does it have to be me all the time? And sure, the TTT party was so magical that I thought I had feelings for Gwinnie again, but it could've been nothing. Right? Besides, any feelings I might have for her would be useless. She sees me as her best friend and has no intention of pursuing anything more than that. That knowledge alone is enough to keep any budding feelings I might have for her locked tightly in the friend zone box. I admit it's getting harder and harder to keep that box closed, but I've got to try.

Maggie loves to set people up. I guess it distracts her from the fact that she's not in a relationship herself. She hates being single, so I should cut her some slack, but... Now I have to talk to Gwinnie about coming to a family party with me and ask her to discuss a medical trial with my brother.

Ugh. How am I supposed to do that? Who am I to talk to her about anything related to her accident and injuries? I don't know what it's truly like to live with that constant phantom pain, the weird looks, and the reduced mobility. Sure, she talks about it openly with me, and I'm nothing but understanding and supportive, but that's not the same as living it yourself, right?

In all honesty, I'd take away her pain in a second if I could. Seriously, I'd trade places with her if it meant she'd be happier. It hurts me to know that's not possible. Gwinnie deserves nothing but happiness.

As if she can read minds, my phone pings with a text from her.

Gwinnie: Thanks for a perfect night. I'm glad I went to the party with you! I never knew teachers could be this fun.

Me: I had a blast too. And of course we can have fun. By the way, you're a teacher yourself now, so be careful what you say.

Gwinnie: I know, it's still weird to see myself as one. Anyway, I've got to go. Mom and Dad are hosting a going-away party.

Me: Sounds fun. I hope you'll have a great time!

Gwinnie: Fun? I don't know. It's all my parents' friends and some neighbors. I don't think it'll be the party of the year, but there is cheap wine. Oh, and snacks.

Gwinnie: Hey, why don't you come? My mother would be thrilled. She loves you.

Me: Duh. I'm super lovable. Mothers always dig me.

Gwinnie: Do they now?

Me: Seriously? G., I'm a real mom magnet. You should see me at our swimming competitions. I have to swat moms away left and right just to be able to talk to my team.

Gwinnie: I love how full of it you are, B. You always make me smile with your over-the-top jokes. See you there in an hour?

Me: Cheap wine and snacks? Wouldn't miss it for the world.

I throw my phone on the bed, take my clothes off, and hop into the shower.

It takes me a whole hour to get ready. The reason I'm running late has nothing to do with wanting to look great for Gwinnie. Nope. I only want to pick the best outfit possible, so that I look presentable for this backyard party with people I don't know. That's not a crime, and it certainly doesn't mean I'm infatuated beyond help. Not. At. All.



Chapter Fourteen

Gwinnie



I sip my drink while doing my best to pretend I'm truly interested in what Craig, my parents' neighbor, has to say about the migration of Arctic terns. Don't get me wrong, I'm not a bird-hater or anything. I love them and hearing their chirps in the morning always gets me in a great mood. What I don't love is listening to the details of their lives for more than forty-five minutes. Yup, that's right. I didn't know anyone could talk about a specific bird for such a long time, but life keeps surprising me. I try to look at it positively, though. Maybe the fact that these birds can fly more than 49,000 miles in a single year will one day be the million-dollar question in some television show, making me instantly rich.

"If you thought the Arctic tern was a special bird, you're going to be surprised by the migration of another bird species," Craig claims.

"Really?" I ask, too polite to make a run for it.

He nods enthusiastically. "Swifts can cover more than 500 miles in a single day. Could you imagine traveling that far? On foot, of course, since we can't fly."

Craig's face becomes as red as a lobster and his hand starts to shake.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

The man might dole out boring information, but he's also seventy-nine. His health might be giving him a hard time.

"I'm so sorry I said something about traveling on foot. My sincerest apologies," he stutters, flicking his gaze to my legs.

"That's okay."

I hate when this happens. People tend to focus on nothing but my disability as soon as they hear about it or notice it themselves. It's like they reduce the real me to an amputee they have to feel sorry for when in reality, I'm so much more than that. I realize that the missing part of me is extremely visible, despite it having been cut off years ago. It's not that common to see someone with an amputated leg, so I do understand people's reactions, but I just wish they would see the whole me instead of the part of me that's missing.

The weirdest thing is that people see me walking around with a prosthetic leg and feel shocked that I'm just living my life. It's like they expect me to be a mess and hide in my bedroom or something, as if they can't fathom me enjoying life and being active because I only have one real leg left.

Still, Craig looks so mortified about his comment that I feel sorry for him. "What else do you know about swifts?" I ask, trying to make things less awkward.

His face lights up and he dives into a monologue about the birds while my thoughts start leading a life of their own. I can't wait for Blake to get here. We had so much fun together at the teacher's party, even though Anna-Catherine tried to get her claws into him the entire night. I'm glad she didn't succeed, though. I'm afraid him having a girlfriend would completely change our friendship dynamic. What girl is going to be okay with her boyfriend having a female best friend and the two of them hanging out all the time? I sure wouldn't.

Right when Craig gets to the meaty topic of the swift's eating habits, I catch a glimpse of a broad-shouldered guy with wavy hair and a sleeve tattoo standing near the back door, and I can't help but smile. Blake is here!

"Uhm, excuse me, Craig. I have to go and welcome a friend," I say. "Great talk, though."

"No worries. I can send you a PowerPoint presentation about the migration cycles of five other birds if you're interested?"

I decline his offer with a wave of my hand. "Oh, that's sweet of you, but you don't have to go to any trouble for me."

“Trouble? Not at all. I’m pretty good with computers,” he says with a proud smile. “Give me your email address and I’ll make sure you get that PowerPoint delivered to your inbox. And if you have any questions, I host a bird-lovers group in the community center on Wednesday mornings. You’re free to pop in and join the fun.”

“That’s too bad, I work on Wednesdays. And the rest of the week too, so I can’t make it unfortunately.”

I turn around, but he gently grabs me by the arm. “Wait, you forgot to write down your email address.”

“Right. You’re so observant,” I say.

I grab a paper napkin from a nearby table and write down my email address in big chunky letters. “There you go.”

“Thanks,” he says as he puts the napkin in his pocket.

I tell him goodbye once more and head over to Blake. Seeing him standing there with the sun hitting his face just right and his hands casually shoved in his pants pockets sends a jolt of electricity down my spine. Huh.

“Did my eyes deceive me or did you just exchange numbers with a retired man?” he asks with a grin.

I shrug. “That’s right, I love me a good age-gap romance. We’re going on a date next week. No time to waste. Any day could be his last, you know.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Where’s he taking you? The bowling alley?”

“No, we’re going bird-watching.”

“Birds, huh? Interesting. I didn’t know you were into that.” He bites his lip to suppress a laugh.

“What, birds? My favorite topic.” I can’t help but laugh myself. “Craig’s innocent but determined, not to mention extremely passionate. I’m expecting a PowerPoint presentation from him.”

“About?”

“Bird migration.” I slap him on the arm. “Stop laughing, B. I couldn’t flat out tell him I don’t find birds *that* interesting. The guy filled me in on everything bird-related for a full hour. Besides, my grandfather will love that presentation. He’s a bird-watcher too. I’ll forward it to him.”

He whistles through his teeth. “An hour? You’re too good for this world, G.”

“You better believe it. Don’t forget I’m helping you out as well. I’m basically a saint, handing out favors left and right.”

“And I can’t thank you enough. Seriously, the team is going to be ecstatic to have you on board.”

“Want to go over the training schedule later? I need to be brought up to speed.”

“You bet.”

I smile at him. “Thanks. I’m nervous, though. What if I don’t live up to their expectations? I’m afraid they think I have some magic formula.”

He levels those gorgeous eyes of his on me. My body reacts by shooting the hair of my arms straight up. “Stop fretting about it. Merely showing up will already exceed their expectations. They all look up to you.”

“Blake,” my mother interrupts. “Hasn’t my daughter offered you anything to drink yet? You’ve been here for ten minutes.” She turns to me. “Gwinnie, don’t let your friend get parched. That’s not how I taught you to treat guests.”

“That’s okay, I’m not thirsty,” Blake says.

My mother puts her hand on her hip. “You’re only saying that so I don’t feel bad, but I’m onto you, young man. You look like you could use a drink.”

“I’ll get Blake a drink, Mom. Stop stressing.”

“Oh no.” Her expression goes from annoyance to sheer terror in an instant.

I frown. “What’s wrong? Am I not familiar with the current etiquette on fetching drinks?”

She shakes her head, grabbing a stem of dahlias behind us while she curses under her breath. “See this? Unbelievable. I’m telling you, these snails are pushing it too far. What am I supposed to do? Move my flower garden inside?” Her eyebrows knit together. “You know what, that might actually work. It’ll show the bastards not to eat my plants.”

Blake’s eyes widen in disbelief while I look up at the heavens and pray for a sliver of normalcy.

“Snails, Mom? Really?”

She scoffs. “Don’t act as if it’s not a big deal. The stupid buggers always come to *my* garden, never the neighbors’! I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve this.”

“You should talk to Craig about attracting more birds into the backyard. They love eating snails,” I tell her.

Already my conversation with Craig is paying off. Maybe the hour spent talking to him wasn’t so bad after all.

Wait, I spoke too soon.

All this tidbit of information does is elicit another scoff from my mother. “Birds? Are you kidding me? I don’t want any birds roaming the yard. They will poop all over our patio and ruin the wood. Imagine the neighbors peeking over the fence only to see a poop-covered patio.”

Oh my goodness, there is just no talking sense into my mother. I try not to take it personally, and chalk it up to the fact that she’s a nervous wreck. Traveling isn’t something my mother is able to do without nearly fainting from stress.

“Now, where’s your father with the egg rolls?” she asks like the topic-changing expert she is.

I wonder how exhausting it must be to live inside her mind, constantly hopping from one thought to another, with so-called problems vying for her attention all the time.

I saw Dad earlier while he was secretly watching the game with Gramps and a couple of other men, but I’m not telling my mother. He’s about to leave on a yearlong trip with her *and* her

nervous breakdowns, so the least I can do is give him half an hour alone in the basement.

“Not a clue, Mom, but I do think Mrs. Greenville over there needs a refill,” I say, motioning to her friend who’s standing near the rose bushes.

She nods. “Good catch. I’d better open a new bottle of wine and top off everyone’s glasses.”

As soon as she leaves, I fire off a text to Dad to warn him he should emerge from the basement soon if he wants to avoid Mom’s wrath.

“Your mother sure is a handful at parties,” Blake says with a grin. “Is she honestly angry about snails and birds being out here in nature where they belong?”

I pinch the space between my eyes. “I wish I could tell you it’s all a big joke, but she’s dead serious. I bet she’ll be calling the tenants every week for an update on the state of the house and backyard. Imagine her returning home after her trip and seeing bird poop on the patio. Can’t have that happening.”

“It would be a true nightmare,” Blake deadpans. “And what will the neighbors say?”

“My parents would never be able to show their faces in Summerville Creek again.”

He nods. “They’ll be shunned and forced to live like outcasts. They’ll have to move out of town eventually.”

“Out of state, more likely.”

He draws in a sharp breath. “Out of the country, even.”

“Worse. They’re facing a life outside of Earth. All because of those pesky birds and snails.”

I laugh and he bursts out into laughter as well, clutching his stomach for support. We probably look like two loons having way too much fun at a dull backyard party. It’s not that our jokes are that funny, but seeing him laugh like this only spurs me on.

Gosh, Blake always knows how to make me feel good. No wonder Anna-Catherine and all the other female teachers at Summerville High pine for his attention. He's the absolute best. The epitome of an A+ guy. I can't wait to coach the team with him, and not because I'll get to spend even more time with him that way.

Okay, maybe that's not entirely true.

I can't wait to see his gorgeous face every freaking day and lose myself in his mesmerizing eyes. And to help him get the team to the state finals of course. *Go Summerville Stingrays* and all that.

I should stop myself, but I can't. The whole reason I didn't move back home sooner is because I wanted to put some distance between Blake and me. Seeing him with another woman would've been too much for me to bear, even though he hasn't dated in forever. Protecting myself went great, but now that I'm back, it's like I've stepped onto an unstoppable train of feelings for him with no way of getting off.

"Look at us," Blake says. "Laughing and joking around. Just like old times."

I nod. "It's like nothing has changed at all."

He bites his lower lip and gives me a look that makes my hands shake. "Yeah. Nothing at all. We're still Blake and Gwinnie. Beegees. Best friends."

"Uhu. Just the way I like it. Us, never changing. Just best friends forever."

I swear I catch him blink his disappointment away when I tell him that lie.



Chapter Fifteen

Blake



The first competition of the season is held on the Mountainvalley Manatees' home turf, in their outdoor pool. It's a 200m breaststroke event, an exhausting race that will ask for complete focus from the team.

Gwinnie has assisted me during three after-school practices for the past two weeks. The team is pumped to have her around and I can't blame them. I love having Gwinnie around too. We've spent the past few years apart except for a couple of weeks during summers and right after her accident. Now that we have all this time together again, I'm reminded of how amazing it is to see her every day. I used to force myself to forget how awesome she is while we were living in completely different parts of the country. If I didn't, the heartache of missing her would have been too much to bear.

Man, I can feel myself getting all sappy and mushy and I can't do that, because I need to focus. If the team wins today, their morale will get an insane boost. Since sports are not only a matter of skill but also a mental game, a win will help us tremendously.

I look out at the bleachers where about half of the teaching staff is sitting. It's awesome how supportive they are. Even Gwinnie's grandfather is here. I can see him talking to Anna-Catherine and I chuckle at his constantly changing facial expressions. I'm sure it's nothing he can't deal with. Eugene is a tough guy and won't let someone like AC get to him.

"Ready to rock, Coach Wilson?"

Gwinnie appears at my side. She's dressed in a cute pair of blue capri pants and a white tank top, showing off her tanned

skin. I clear my throat. I've got to stop gawking at her like that. It's inappropriate.

"I sure am. How's the team?" I ask. Gwinnie went to check on them in the locker room while I prepared some things poolside.

"Good. Nervous, but positive."

"That's awesome." We lock eyes and smile at each other, a rush of hot and heated summersaults filling my stomach. "I'm glad we get to do this together. I've... uhm..."

"You've?" she asks, her eyes searching my face for answers.

"I've missed you while you were away all those years. I'm happy you're here with me. With the team."

She puts a hand on my arm and smiles. The top of her fingers touching my bare skin is the best feeling in the world. "Me too, B."

I swallow and rack my brain for something silly to say. If I don't change the direction of this conversation, I might tell her how I feel and that would be a true disaster. "How nervous are you?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Pretty nervous, to be honest. This is my first competition after having coached a team."

I lean in closer and whisper into her ear. "So nervous that you're wearing one of your granddad's diapers?"

"Blake! Geez, shut up. I'm not wearing... that."

I grin. "Just messing with you."

She's about to serve me a witty reply, but the team marches toward us. I turn around and drop all diaper jokes. I've got to focus.

"You guys ready?" I ask.

"As ready as possible, right guys?" Leia says.

The team nods in agreement.

“This is it, team. Whatever happens, know that Gwinnie and I are proud of you.”

“Absolutely,” Gwinnie agrees.

Josh laughs. “You sound like a married couple talking to their kids.”

Gwinnie lets out a nervous giggle at Josh’s words. Her arms flap at her side, as if she doesn’t know what else to do with them.

“Need that diaper after all?” I whisper to her.

She gasps. “Shut up, B., or you’re dead.”

I don’t know why I say these things. It’s stupid and childish to tease her about adult diapers, but I can’t help myself. Gwinnie’s got this special, inexplicable effect on me, causing me to act in all kinds of unpredictable and crazy ways.

All swimmers are called to their starting positions, and I give the team one last piece of advice. “Remember to restrict your arm strokes.”

“And focus,” Gwinnie chimes in. “Eyes on your lane. Mind on the win.”

Four of our own are competing against four swimmers from the Mountainvalley Manatees today. Steph is absent because she woke up sick as a dog today. They all take their places on their respective starting platforms and place their goggles over their eyes.

“Look at our kids all driven and ready to win. They grow up so fast,” I jokingly tell Gwinnie.

She nods. “Yeah, we’re doing a great job.”

“Take your mark!” The words blast through the speakers, and the crowd grows silent, except for a few of our teachers. “Go Summerville Stingrays,” they shout.

As soon as the start signal sounds, the eight swimmers dive into their lanes. I hold my breath and hope our team can take home the win they’re dreaming of.

Josh is the first to make contact with the wall and turn. He resurfaces a good several yard later, steadily keeping his first position.

I watch the clock recording the time of each swimmer. I don't think I've ever been this nervous about a competition before. Is it because I want to show Gwinnie that our team is good at what they do? Or is it because I feel that we finally have a shot at reaching the state finals after her helping out?

Gwinnie's eyes are zoomed in on the pool. She reaches for my hand and gives it a squeeze, as if to indicate that she's as nervous as I am.

There are two laps left and Josh is losing his advantage. After the next lap, he adjusts and swims faster than ever. Leia is right behind him, swimming neck and neck with Gareth, one of Mountainvalley Manatees' best swimmers.

Watching them approach the end of their last lap is almost too much. Gareth closes in on Josh, and I hold my breath in anticipation.

"Don't despair yet," Gwinnie says. "It ain't over till it's over."

If I trust anyone to know this, it's her. She has swum more competitions than anyone I personally know.

Josh's strokes suddenly seem to propel him forward faster than his competitors. He shoots forward like an arrow and... Yes! He's the first one to touch the wall.

The crowd erupts in cheers, shouting the team's name. Leia comes in second, shaving two seconds off her own personal record.

"They did it!" I shout.

I'm so happy that I pick Gwinnie up from the ground and swing her around. When I put her down again, she's laughing, and the sun is hitting her hair in the most perfect way, and I temporarily lose my mind. Our noses touch, and I want to kiss her. Right here, in front of everyone. She smells like peaches and vanilla, intoxicating me with a feeling so deep that I've never experienced it before today. My gaze drops to her lips.

For a second, I'm convinced she's thinking about kissing me too, but instead of putting her lips on mine, she pulls me into a hug.

"Congratulations," she whispers.

My heart is ripped from my chest. Man, this woman is so perfect for me. Why can't I have her? Why can't I leave the friend zone with her?

The team gets out of the water, and we're engulfed by their enthusiastic talking. It takes me every last shred of willpower to let go of Gwinnie's embrace.

"Awesome job, everyone," I tell them. "Next week, we've got a relay competition. That will truly test our team spirit. But for now, we're going to celebrate. Who wants ice cream? My treat."

"Thank you, Coach," Leia says, her eyes twinkling with happiness.

I walk backwards, still addressing the team. "You're welcome. You all deserve some sugar after that nail-biting race. The ice creams will be here by the time you're all showered and dressed."

"Blake, wait," Gwinnie says. "Turn around."

"You can't stop me from spoiling the team with ice cream, G."

"No, please, don't."

"Not falling for it."

"Not for it, in it!"

I realize too late that I'm at the edge of the pool and I lose my balance. I tip backwards and fall into the water with a big splash.

A few seconds later, I emerge and put my hands on the side of the pool to push myself up. Gwinnie's hand is slapped over her mouth, laughing until her eyes fill with tears, and the rest of the team follows suit.

“No need to laugh. This was all on purpose,” I say, trying to sound as casual as I can.

“Sure,” Gwinnie says. Her eyes trail down to my now-wet shorts.

I think I see a flash of appreciation cross her face, but I can't be sure as it's gone in an instant.

I think of a witty comeback, but Gwinnie gets bombarded with Summerville High teachers high-fiving her and congratulating her and the team. Still dripping wet, I grab my wallet from my sports bag and quietly disappear to the concession stand.

This time, I carefully watch my step so I don't trip and fall.

Not that it matters. I've already fallen long and hard.

For her.

Only ever her.



Chapter Sixteen

Gwinnie



Blake and I have been coaching the team like a well-oiled machine. Not that I want to take his coaching spot from him. Being head coach of the Summerville Stingrays is his thing and it should stay that way. Me handing out pointers from the side of the swimming pool about breathing techniques and backstrokes, and helping with planning dryland practices is hardly taking over, right?

A few weeks ago, we had the first competition of the year. I swear I thought Blake was going to kiss me right after the win, but it was nothing more than wishful thinking. As soon as I realized that I was imagining things, I hugged him. What else was I supposed to do? Lean in for a kiss that wasn't going to happen and make a fool out of myself for everyone to see? No thanks.

We've fallen into an amazing rhythm that I don't want to jeopardize. We carpool to school most days, spend lots of evenings talking or catching a movie, and he's been helping me and Gramps out with things like replacing broken lamps in the basement and mowing the lawn. The guy's a saint, honestly.

Teaching PE is growing on me. With every week that passes, I'm more confident about it. Plus, the kids all seem to like me, which is a huge relief. The teacher's lounge now feels familiar and safe instead of scary and off-limits. Next month, there's a teambuilding event that I'm even looking forward to, despite it being an overnight thing.

I have to admit that life is pretty great right now. Except for my feelings for Blake that I can't seem to push away any longer.

Like today. He told me his brother—Tanner—wanted to talk about a medical trial and then he invited me to his nephew’s party because Tanner, who lives in Boston, will be there. Any sane person would decline that invitation to protect themselves from possible heartache, but not me. Oh no. Good old Gwinnie Fletcher is now going to a family gathering with the guy she’s hopelessly in love with, under the guise of needing information about some medical trial.

Talk about self-torture.

“Do you need anything before I go?” I ask Gramps.

I feel a bit guilty for leaving him alone all day.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve got a lasagna I can put in the oven for dinner and a good vampire romance to keep me company. Plus, there’s a Zumba class at the community center today. You go and enjoy your date.”

I smile at him. “It’s not a date.”

“You should date. What’s holding you back? If you ask me, you’ve got it easier than other girls. Only have to shave one leg and all.”

“Gramps!”

He chuckles. “Just kidding. But still... Why don’t you and Blake go on a proper date? The guy’s perfect for you. The way he keeps helping us isn’t normal friendly behavior. He’s got a thing for you.”

I wish.

“He doesn’t. Boys and girls can be friends without expecting more, you know.”

“Oh yeah? What about When Harry Met Sandy? And don’t forget Chondler and Monica.”

“First of all, it’s Harry and Sally and Monica and Chandler. And second of all...” I pause. “Wait. Did Mom put you up to this?”

That’s the only possible explanation, right? It’s odd that my granddad would suddenly have this kind of 80s and 90s

pop culture knowledge.

He shrugs, not even trying to argue with me. “You know what she’s like. Even from thousands of miles away she feels the need to worry and meddle. Netted me a nice amount.”

My jaw drops to the floor. “A nice amount of money? Wait. Did Mom promise to pay you if you convinced me to go on a date with someone?”

He nods. “That’s right.”

“You sold out your granddaughter for a pile of money?”

“We can share the funds,” he says with a grin. “It was quite the generous offer.”

I laugh. “Fine, we’ll go to that restaurant you like and splurge on dessert.”

“Sounds great. Don’t forget to bring Blake, though. Your mother is going to request proof before she actually pays me.”

Outside, a car horn honks, and I open the curtain to signal to Blake that I’m coming. “Do you need a lift to the community center, Gramps?”

“Nah, Charlene is going to pick me up.”

I wiggle my eyebrows at him. “Charlene, huh? Why don’t you bring her to dinner sometime?”

He groans and flaps his hand at me. “We don’t have time to discuss stuff like that. Your friend is waiting for you.”

I shake my head, laughing. “Fine. But don’t for one second think I’m not going to grill you about this Charlene woman after I get back.”

I grab my purse and head out to Blake’s car. He’s already opened the passenger door for me and is waiting behind the wheel, oblivious to his surroundings. He’s reading something on his phone, his brow furrowed and his hair hanging over his eye in an unruly way. His outfit is a far cry from the sportswear he normally puts on. He’s wearing a fancy shirt that hugs his well-defined chest in the most delicious way

possible. The top buttons are open, giving me a nice sliver of skin to drool over. He looks like a movie star.

“Hey, you,” I say as I slide into the seat and close the door with a soft thud.

He immediately puts his phone down and smiles. “Hey, G. Are you ready for today? You don’t think this is weird, right?”

“Why would it be weird?”

He shrugs. “Because I’m taking you to a family thing. As a friend.”

Friend. There’s that word again, emphasizing what I already know, but still cutting deep into my gut like a sharp knife.

“It’s not weird,” I lie and click my seatbelt into place. “I’m looking forward to talking to your brother about this running blade trial. It’s more convenient to see him this way. I don’t think I’d be able to travel to Boston anytime soon.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely more convenient like this.”

These words we keep throwing at each other—friends, convenient—reminds me of how hard we’re cemented in the friend zone.

“I did bring Ollie a present. I have no experience with kids this young, so I hope what I bought him is okay.”

Blake’s eyes flit to mine. “A present, really? You didn’t have to do that.”

“It’s no big deal. I can’t show up empty-handed.”

He looks at me with an expression I can’t decipher.

“Did I break some Wilson siblings code of conduct or something?”

“No,” he says with a laugh. “I told my brothers and sisters you chipped in for the swing set. Now you’ll one-up us all with that extra gift. They’re going to tease me about how great a woman you are and how we should date.”

My eyebrow shoots up. “Date?”

He shrugs as he takes a left turn. “They think that we’re perfect for each other and that we should get involved. Romantically.”

“You guys talk about me?”

“Don’t worry, it doesn’t mean anything. They only want me to settle down and be happy.” He winks at me. “Not that I’m not happy. My brothers and sisters seem to think that I need a woman to lead a fulfilling life. What a ridiculous idea.”

“Yeah, that’s ridiculous.”

I slump down in my seat, trying to block out his words. I don’t like hearing how happy he is being single. If I thought before that we might have a tiny chance at becoming more than friends, I now know all too well that nothing is going to happen between us. What a bomb to drop on someone right before a party.

Not that it’s Blake’s fault. He doesn’t know anything about how I feel. I could be honest and tell him flat out, but I’m way too chicken for that. What if it ruins our friendship? We’ve got a pretty good thing going. The last thing I want is to risk that by being bold. Besides, I’m not mad that he’s happy. I’d always choose him being happy over him being miserable.

He turns into the driveway of an adorable house and turns off the engine. “We’re here.”

The door is decorated with tons of blue balloons and there’s bunting all around the porch. A big wooden sign saying “Ollie’s first birthday” is nestled against the gate of their fence. His brother and sister-in-law sure know how to decorate.

A knot forms in my stomach after looking at the house and the cars already parked in the driveway. I don’t know if this was a good idea after all. I don’t belong here, right? This is a family thing, and I’m not family.

“Are you okay?” Blake asks, concern written in his eyes.

I nod. “I’m a bit nervous.”

He gives me a sympathetic look. “Do you need—”

“Don’t say it,” I shout. “No diaper talk.”

“That’s not what I was going to say, but man, that would’ve been perfect.” He tips his head back and laughs, and it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve witnessed all week.

I really want to shove my feelings for him aside, but he’s making it pretty damn difficult to succeed.



Chapter Seventeen

Blake



This feels like a date. Why does it feel like a date?

Get it together, Wilson. Your older brother asked you to bring Gwinnie to this party. This is you complying. It's not at all weird that you're about to step into your brother's backyard and celebrate your nephew's birthday with your entire family *and* your best friend, even though no one else is bringing their friends.

Nope. This is all normal.

Super-duper normal.

Right?

“You coming?”

Gwinnie is waiting for me by the side of the car, the present she got Ollie clutched against her chest as if it's a bulletproof vest that will protect her from this afternoon of innocent celebrations.

Her words snap me back to reality and I lead her to the safety gate that closes off the garden. Colton and Elle had it installed right after Ollie started to crawl.

I put my hand on the handle and take a deep breath in. This is it. I'm going to act as normal and unsuspecting as possible.

The gate swings open, and we step into the backyard. I make a beeline for the birthday boy and scoop him up from the blanket he was playing on. He laughs as I give my best funny uncle performance and pull silly faces at him.

I then put him back on his blanket and motion to Gwinnie. She kneels beside me.

“This is Gwinnie, my best friend in the world,” I tell Ollie, even though he doesn’t have the faintest concept of what that means.

She pats him on his cute head. “Hi, Ollie.”

We get up again and greet the rest of my family. Everyone is super nice to Gwinnie. She’s blushing and I can tell she doesn’t feel comfortable, but I’ll make sure that changes soon enough. Meeting a family with its own dynamic and inside jokes can be quite overwhelming. Gwinnie has nothing to worry about, though. My siblings are all sweet and fun people. Most of the time anyway.

Elle is visibly touched by the fact that Gwinnie brought Ollie a present. She puts it on the table so that he can unwrap it after his nap.

“I love that my brother brought you today,” Maggie says. “He never brings a date to a family party.”

I roll my eyes at my sister. “We’re just friends, remember?” Then I turn to Gwinnie. “Don’t let my sister scare you away with her dating talk.”

“Come on, I’m not that bad,” Maggie says. The rest of us arch our eyebrows. She shakes her head. “Fine, I know I can be enthusiastic, but that’s not a crime. I love you guys and want you all to be happy.”

“I think it’s sweet,” Gwinnie says.

My sister gives me a smug smile. “See? At least your ‘friend’ appreciates what I do.”

“And that’s what we are,” I say. “Friends.”

“None of this bickering at our party, guys. Why don’t I get you something to drink?” Colton asks Gwinnie and me. “Soda? Champagne? Water?”

“I’d love a soda, please,” Gwinnie says.

I nod. “Same.” Then I turn to Elle. “I can’t believe Ollie is turning one already.”

She sighs and gives her son a loving look. “I know, right? They grow up so fast. It’s a cliché, but it’s true.”

“And how’s little Mell? Still keeping you guys up all night?”

I peek into the bassinet where Tanner and Hazel’s adorable daughter is sleeping blissfully. She’s only a few months old and cute as a button.

Hazel nods. “Yup. Thank goodness we’re both used to being awake at crazy hours, because Mell sure is a night owl.”

Tanner puts his arm around his wife. “Having a kid is exhausting, but also extremely fulfilling. It’s only been a few months, but I can’t even remember what it was like not being a father.”

Hazel kisses him on the cheek, her eyes full of love. Ugh. I adore my siblings and want them to be happy, but they constantly remind me of what I don’t have. A fulfilling relationship. Kids. *Gwinnie*.

Colton returns with our drinks. We all sit down at the garden table while Elle heads inside to put Ollie down for his nap.

“Thank you all for coming, guys,” Colton says. “Ollie will wake up in an hour or two and then he can blow out his candles and eat his first piece of cake. We got him a small one that he can devour. Or, let’s be realistic here, destroy.” He gets his phone out and shows us a few pictures. “Cute, right? And don’t worry, there’s a perfectly pristine cake for us adults too.”

While everyone admires Colton’s pictures of the cake, I lean back in my chair. I take a sip of lemonade and let out a happy sigh. Tanner and Hazel don’t visit as much as I’d like them to, thanks to their busy lives as a trauma surgeon and a scrub nurse. Then there’s Colton and Elle who live close by, but the amusement park where they both work stays open until ten p.m. several days a week. By the time they finish, I’m in bed already because swimming practice starts early, so we don’t see each other as often as I’d like. Maggie is the only one of us four that I see on a regular basis.

So yeah, I'm enjoying every second of having my family together like this. Having Gwinnie here as my girlfriend instead of just my friend would be the cherry on top, though.

Elle returns from inside the house and puts the baby monitor on the table. "Colton and I thought we could play some fun games while Ollie sleeps."

Maggie frowns. "What kind of games?"

"Nothing crazy, but the winner will get a special prize."

She reaches into a shopping bag and pulls out a trophy. My eyes grow wide. I thought she would have bought a fake trophy from one of those dollar shops, but I'd recognize this one in a lineup of a thousand other trophies.

I admire the troll doll with yellow hair and a goofy expression attached to a weathered wooden block. Behind the troll doll are his "parents"—Ken, with only one arm left, and Barbie, who suffered from a badly executed revenge haircut twenty years ago.

"The Wilson trophy? Where did you find this gem? I thought we'd lost it ages ago," I say.

Tanner takes the trophy from Elle and turns it around in his hands. "Our childhood trophy still exists?"

"Colton found it stashed away in a closet in the basement when he moved out a few years ago."

"Why didn't you tell us about this?" Tanner asks. "How could you keep it a secret for all that time?"

Colton shrugs. "Because that trophy has made every one of us cry. You and Maggie once got into a fight over it, remember?"

"I still have the scar to prove it," Maggie agrees.

"True. But we're adults now, so Elle and I figured that it was time for the Wilson Troll Trophy to get a second chance at life."

I jump from my seat. "What do we have to do to win?"

Tanner puts his arm around Hazel. “Don’t bother. That trophy is ours.”

I grin. “I don’t think so, brother. It’s got my name written all over it. And Gwinnie’s.”

Gwinnie nods in agreement. “You better believe it.”

“Team Beegees!” I say as I high-five her.

Tanner’s eyebrow shoots up. “Team Beegees? High fives? And you guys want to keep insisting that there’s absolutely nothing going on between you?”

“Scared of losing to a solid team like us, brother?” I tease him.

“In your dreams.” He gets up too. “Elle, what are the rules?”

Maggie puts her hand on her hip. “What, so you’re all going to team up? What about me?”

“Colton will be the referee. You and I can form a team,” Elle says.

My sister frowns. “But what if we win? Who gets the trophy then? We don’t live in the same house.”

Elle places her hand on Maggie’s shoulder. “I promise you’ll get to take the trophy home with you if we win. But, just so we’re all clear, we have to organize a challenge like this at least once a year. That way, the trophy will be able to circulate between all of us.”

“Not if we win every time, right Hazel?” Tanner says. “Then the trophy will be ours forever.”

His wife rolls her eyes and laughs. “Men.”

Gwinnie joins her in laughing at our competitive streak, but I don’t care. She’s beautiful when she laughs. Besides, I’m going to win and prove them all wrong.

At least, that’s what I plan on doing.

“Should we warm up first? Do some lunges?” Tanner asks.

Elle laughs. “You’re taking this way too seriously. Besides, the first game we have in mind doesn’t require any stretching. It’s not like we’re going to do axe throwing or something.”

“That does sound like fun.”

Hazel shakes her head. “Not with kids around.”

“So, tell us. What’s the first game?” Maggie asks.

Elle points to the far-right side of the garden. “See those bowls? For the first challenge, you have to fill them with at least two eggs, but there’s a catch. The eggs cannot be cracked or broken, and you have to transport them using your head.”

“As in mentally?” Maggie asks with a frown.

“No, as in put them on your head and carefully carry them. As soon as you succeed in bringing one egg to the bowl, you can switch places with your teammate. There will be one more challenge after this, so taking the lead from the get-go is a smart idea.”

We all take our places at the starting line, and quickly discuss some techniques that could help us win.

“We’ve got this,” I tell Gwinnie. “I teach these kinds of balance exercises all the time during PE. It’ll be a breeze.”

“I hope so. I wouldn’t want to be responsible for not winning that ugly troll thing.”

“Don’t insult the trophy, G.”

She stifles a laugh. “I’m sorry. I promise I won’t insult the holy Wilson trophy ever again.”

“Good,” I say with a smile.

“Everyone on their marks,” Elle says. “Ready, set, go. Let the games begin!”



Chapter Eighteen

Gwinnie



The Wilson siblings sure are serious about winning this trophy. If I didn't know any better, I'd say they were reenacting The Hunger Games.

"Come on, Hazel, focus on the trophy," Tanner shouts. "Imagine how good it will look on our mantle."

"Is that Mell crying?" Colton says.

Hazel swivels her head around, and the egg slides off and splatters on the grass.

Colton shrugs, a smile tugging the corners of his mouth. "Never mind, it was nothing. She's still sound asleep."

"That's not fair! You're distracting me on purpose," Hazel says, rushing to the starting line to grab a fresh egg.

Maggie smiles. She's only three steps away from the bowl. "I guess focus is key here."

The only one who doesn't react to any of this is Blake. He's only inches behind his sister. While the others are all trying to get each other to fail, he's the one who blocks out the world around him. He expertly deposits his egg in the bowl and sprints over to me. "Your turn."

I put the egg on my head and take small steps. I'm aware of my leg more than ever, but I'm not going to let this ruin the fun.

By the time the rest of them have safely deposited their first egg, I'm only five steps away from our own bowl.

"Come on, Gwinnie, keep your focus. You're doing awesome. Let's show my brothers and sister how us Beegees do it," Blake shouts at me.

I stifle a laugh, afraid that I might drop the egg this close to the finish line. I don't care about winning that ugly troll trophy, but I do care about Blake, and the trophy clearly means a lot to him. To all the Wilsons, for that matter. After losing their mom and their dad walking out on them, something nostalgic like this probably stirs up a lot of memories for them. Good ones. So yeah, I'm doing everything I can to help Blake win.

I crouch at the bowl and put the egg down. "Done," I yell.

Tanner drops his egg in the bowl only seconds after me, and congratulates me. Maggie and Elle take third place, and they are not happy about it.

"We won! Did you see that, guys? Team Beegees all the way," Blake says. He comes running toward me and pulls me in for an enthusiastic hug. "Well done, G. Thank you for playing along."

"Of course. Why wouldn't I? I love you... uhm... I mean I love your dedication to this ugly trophy."

My words come out as a jumbled mess. *I love you? Geez, Gwinnie, get a grip.*

Blake seems oblivious to my almost confession, though. He claps his hands and turns around. "What's challenge number two? Or should we quit while Gwinnie and I are ahead?"

Maggie collects the eggs and puts them back into the carton. "No way. One win doesn't mean anything, brother."

"For the second challenge, you'll have to show off your best Pictionary skills," Elle announces. "We'll play three rounds and tally the numbers after each round."

Colton props a whiteboard on a chair while the rest of us take a break and refill our drinks. Tanner and Blake talk about work, and Maggie, Elle, and Hazel ask me to join them on a spa day during the holidays. Thanks to Hazel's busy schedule—not to mention the distance she has to travel to see her sisters-in-law—she needs to plan months in advance.

“I’m flattered, but are you sure you want me there? I’m not family,” I say.

“That’s a small detail. Of course we want you there,” Hazel says. “It’s going to be a lot of fun. Oh, and don’t worry about the cost. It’s my treat.”

“Wow, thank you. That’s a generous offer.”

“Being married to a surgeon sure comes with a lot of perks,” she says with a wink.

“We’re ready to begin,” Colton announces, handing us all a whiteboard marker.

The first round starts off smoothly, and Blake and I take the lead. Then it’s Tanner’s turn. He reads the card and starts drawing like a maniac as soon as the timer starts.

“A mop. Filthy water bucket?” Hazel shouts.

Tanner draws a stick figure with a skirt next to the bucket.

“Skirt cleaning? Brown water skirt?” Hazel tries.

I do my best not to laugh. Blake leans in and whispers in my ear. “I’ve never heard of a brown water skirt, have you?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

Tanner adds a couple of music notes to his drawing, and Hazel jumps up. “I know! It’s Dirty Dancing!”

“Yes, Freckles, you’re right on the money,” Tanner says with a smile before kissing her.

Colton stops the timer. “Looks like you guys shaved three seconds off Blake and Gwinnie’s time. You’re taking the lead.”

Blake shrugs. “It ain’t over till it’s over. We’ve still got two rounds to go.”

“It’s an even tie between your teams.” Colton turns to Maggie and Elle. “Sorry, you guys are third place for now.”

His words must’ve spurred them on to do better, because Maggie and Elle win the second round. That means the last round will decide everything.

We're the last ones to take a shot at winning. All we need is to get a better time than Tanner and Hazel. It's a tall order but we have to try and beat them.

Blake takes a card off the deck and reads it with a surprised expression on his face. Uh-oh. That doesn't look too promising.

He takes a deep breath, cracks his fingers, and uncaps his marker. As soon as the timer starts, he draws a donut, a diamond, and a girl. It only takes me five seconds before I shout what I think is the answer. "Breakfast at Tiffany's!"

Blake throws the marker down and pumps his fists in the air. He picks up the card and turns it around. "That's right. Breakfast at Tiffany's is the correct answer."

"That's not possible! Are you guys cheating?" Maggie asks, ripping the card from Blake's hands and checking if he's being honest.

"No, but Breakfast at Tiffany's is our favorite movie ever. We've watched it together at least seventeen times," I explain. "Audrey Hepburn is so amazing in that movie."

"See?" Tanner grins. "There's only one logical explanation. These two know each other extremely well. Makes you wonder why they're not more than friends, right?"

Blake shakes his head. "Men and women can be friends without it leading to more."

"That's exactly what I told Gramps earlier," I say.

Colton hands Blake the trophy. "Well done, brother."

Tanner also steps in to congratulate us, and the rest of the Wilsons follow suit.

Blake pulls me in for a hug. He's so close that I can feel his heartbeat and smell his tantalizing scent. I force myself to keep it together and not breathe him in. Smelling your best friend is considered weird after all, right?

"Thank you, G. This trophy means the world to me."

"I'm happy I could help you win it."

He lets go of me, and already I'm missing being so close to him.

"I'll make sure to give the Wilson Troll Trophy a great spot. And next year, you guys can try to win it back, but it won't be easy. You all better bring your A game."

"Should we cut the cake now?" Elle asks, checking the time on her phone.

"Ollie is still sleeping," Colton says. "I think he'll be out for at least another half an hour."

Tanner approaches me and gives me a soft smile. "Gwinnie, would you mind discussing that medical trial for the running blades while we wait for Ollie to wake up?"

"Sure. That's why I'm here, after all."

"Great. Why don't we head inside? It's more private there."

I follow Tanner into Colton and Elle's cute living room. He shoves some toys out of the way and puts a stack of manilla folders on the coffee table but doesn't open them yet.

"Before I give you the medical explanation of this trial, I'd love to hear how you're doing and how your surgery went after the accident. Maybe you could show me your leg if that's something you're comfortable with?"

I swallow. Taking off my liner isn't something I like doing, but this is Tanner Wilson. He's a world-famous trauma surgeon. If anyone can be trusted, it's him.

"Okay."

I take off my prosthetic, padding, and liner. He gently takes my nub in his hands and inspects the scars.

"This seems to be done extremely well." He places my leg back down on a pillow. It's clear that he's a professional who deals with these kinds of injuries daily. "No post-op complications?"

I shake my head. "Thankfully, no. The whole surgery and recovery went smoothly. At least, physically."

“Yeah, these kinds of injuries can often lead to emotional trauma too. Have you been seeing someone to help you through this?”

I nod. “I was in therapy for a year. That helped. And your brother has been nothing but supportive. Did you know he stayed with me for months after the accident? He took a leave of absence from his teaching job and practically lived with me at the hospital. He’s a saint.”

It’s true. Blake was by my side day and night. Even during that first month when I wasn’t conscious yet and the doctors weren’t sure I’d ever wake up, he sat by my hospital bed all the time. The nurses told me afterwards. They all assumed he was my boyfriend because of that, which makes a lot of sense. My actual boyfriend at the time didn’t bother to show up or support me, but Blake was there every step of the way.

After I finally woke up and started my long healing process, he brought me fresh flowers and crawled into that small hospital bed with me to watch *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* or *Gossip Girl* reruns or *Gilmore Girls*. He didn’t complain once. I’m forever indebted to him. He was my light during the blackest period of my life. The life buoy who made sure I didn’t drown.

Sometimes I wonder if I would’ve made it through all of the pain and trauma and suffering if it weren’t for him.

Tanner gives me a soft smile. “You do realize that a guy wouldn’t go to those lengths for someone who’s just a friend, right?”

“But we are just friends.”

“I know my brother, Gwinnie. The way he looks at you contains more than friendship. I’m pretty sure he’s got feelings for you.”

I let out a high-pitched laugh and can feel my stomach performing all sorts of weird movements. “Feelings? Nooo. Seriously, we’re just best friends.”

“I don’t understand why you two keep dancing around your feelings like this.” He holds up his hands when he

realizes I'm about to tell him he's wrong. Again. "But don't worry, I'll keep my mouth shut about it from now on. This is up to you guys to figure out."

"Thank you."

"So, about this new running blade," he says. "You're going to love it."

"Great. I'm excited to see the prototype. I've been wanting to get back into running, but I can't afford a good running blade."

He picks up one of the folders, his eyes sparkling with passion. "Well, Gwinnie, this might be the answer you've been looking for."



Chapter Nineteen

Blake



I'm this close to being jealous of my brother. Gwinnie wouldn't shut up about him after Ollie's party and for the whole two weeks after. Sure, she only talked about the medical trial and the running blade, but I know how charming Tanner can be.

I shake my head to get rid of these ridiculous thoughts. I've got to get it together. Deep down, I know that Gwinnie doesn't have the slightest interest in my brother. The reason she's so excited is that the trial is going to give her more freedom. She's even talking about running a five-mile marathon next spring. There's nothing to be jealous about. All I want is for her to be happy and she is, which fills my heart to the brim.

"Did you see the email about an emergency team meeting?" Gwinnie asks as soon as I sit down to eat lunch in the teacher's lounge.

"I did. Do any of you know what this could be about?" Debbie asks.

"Not a clue," John answers.

I shove my orange toward Gwinnie, and she hands me her apple. Trading food like this has become a thing we do. I make a mental note to buy more oranges next time instead of only apples and bananas. She doesn't seem to be too fond of those.

"I'm scared," Vanessa chimes in. "What if this is about cutting back on teachers?"

I arch an eyebrow. "Cutting back? We're already short on staff as it is. Principal Davis is desperate to find more teachers. I doubt they're going to fire anyone."

“What do you think, Gwinnie?” John asks.

She shakes her head. “I know nothing. I’m too new to even compose a theory. Do these emergency meetings happen a lot?”

Debbie shakes her head. “Hardly ever.”

“I’ve arrived!” I suddenly hear someone shout.

I flinch at the sound of Anna-Catherine’s voice.

“What goss did I miss?” she asks.

“Goss?” John asks with a frown.

“Yeah, as in gossip,” she says with a shake of the head as if John is the dumbest person on the planet.

“We were discussing possible reasons for the urgent team meeting tonight,” Gwinnie says.

Anna-Catherine gives Gwinnie a scrutinizing look, not even acknowledging her words about the team meeting. “Did you forget to brush your hair this morning?”

I never particularly liked AC, but I tolerated her. These days, though, my patience with her is wearing thin. She’s got a knack for uttering obnoxious statements that prompt people to instantly roll their eyes. But the way she always targets Gwinnie these days—God knows why—irks me beyond measure.

“Why?” Gwinnie asks, flattening her hair with her hand.

Vanessa rolls her eyes, just as I anticipated. “Your hair is fine, Gwinnie.” She then turns to Anna-Catherine. “Not everyone sits in a classroom all day. Gwinnie here is out and about every day, doing physical work. Her hair is bound to suffer.”

“If that’s true, then why is Blake’s hair always impeccable looking? He’s a PE teacher too, but he never looks that disheveled,” she says, casting me a dreamy look.

Gwinnie gets up and shoves the remainder of her lunch back in her bag. “Me and my unruly hair are heading out. I’ve got a class I need to prepare for.”

I get up as well, determined to support her and show AC that I'll root for Gwinnie every chance I get. "Same. Gwinnie and I need to go over some details for next week's swimming team relays."

She nods. "That's right. The Summerville Stingrays have a big competition coming up. You guys are going to attend, right? We need all the support we can get."

"Sure," Vanessa says.

"Count me in," Debbie replies.

AC flutters her eyelashes at me. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Gwinnie and I walk out of the teacher's lounge and linger in the hallway, unsure of where to go.

"Do you really have something to discuss with me about the swim team, or were you just as desperate as I was to get out of there?" she asks.

I flash her a playful smile. "Yup. Couldn't stand to listen to AC any longer. Sorry."

Her laughter fills the hallway with a dose of joy. Fine, it fills my insides too. "Don't apologize to me. I completely get it."

"I do have something I want to talk to you about."

Her face twitches for a second, like she's nervous about what I'm going to say. "Oh? What exactly?"

"Do you have any plans this Saturday?" I ask, crossing my fingers that she's free.

If she isn't, all of my planning and scheming will have been for nothing.

She bites her lip, and I wonder what it would feel like if it were *my* teeth tugging on her lip. "I don't think so. We don't have any swimming team obligations and Gramps hasn't mentioned any plans either. Why?"

"Because I'm taking you out for a fun day."

“Where?”

“Can’t say. It’s a surprise.”

She groans. “I hate surprises. You know that.”

“But you’re going to love this one,” I assure her. “Wear comfortable clothes and sensible shoes. Think sneakers, no heels.”

“Why?”

“All will be revealed in good time, G.”



Chapter Twenty

Gwinnie



I've been distracted all afternoon thinking about the surprise Blake has in store for me. When he asked me if I had any plans Saturday, I almost said, "Lie in bed and cry all day while eating more ice cream than is healthy for one person."

He probably doesn't know, but Saturday marks three years since the lifechanging accident that cost me my leg—and a lot of my future.

In a way, it will be good that I don't have to sit around and wallow. If doing something with Blake can distract me from the horrible memories that day holds, then I'll gladly accept, even though I hate surprises.

After last period, Ava comes up to me while I'm collecting stray basketballs in the gym. She's a member of the swim team who dreams of making it big. I'm wholly convinced her dream is not out of reach. Ava's got the stamina, skill, and determination to make it happen.

"Miss Fletcher, do you have a minute?"

"Sure, what's up?" I ask, leading us to a bench to sit down.

She takes a deep breath. "I want to win the state championship in the 100-yard breaststroke, just like you did, but I need advice."

"What kind of advice are you looking for?"

"Anything that will help me rise to success, I guess. Swimming is my life. It's all I've ever done and all I ever want to do. How did you get there back in the day?"

I give her a smile as I think back to how I made it all the way to the national finals. "Well, I was a part of the varsity swimming pool, like you are. I had been working non-stop to

crush my own records. The competition that would decide if I became state champion? It was nerve-wracking, to say the least. When I looked at the scoreboard after touching the timing pad, a feeling of unbelief and unbridled joy came over me. I did it. Two seconds faster than the girl in the lane beside me. I defended my state champion title after that and went on to national championships. I got far, extremely far, until a car hit me out of nowhere and not only crushed my leg but my dreams as well. It took me a long time to get over that.” I let out a soft sigh. “Swimming is amazing and so is having goals, but you should realize that being a professional swimmer has an expiration date. It’s good to have a backup plan. I’m not saying you’re going to get into an accident too, but professional athletes hardly ever continue swimming up to their legal retirement age. Most of us see our prime years coming to an end before we’re thirty.”

She nods, mulling over my words. “So what you’re saying is, keep going, but know that there are other things out there?”

“Kind of. You should go all-in if swimming is what you want. Just know that there will be a life after swimming and think about how that might look for you. Lots of swimmers become coaches, for instance, but you could also choose to do a one-eighty and work in a completely different field. It’s up to you to decide what you want, and if you don’t know what you want yet, that’s okay too. You’ll figure things out when you get older. You don’t have to know everything all at once right now.”

“Thank you, that makes sense. Coach Wilson was right—you are the best.” She blushes. “And you two make a great couple.”

“What do you mean? Coach Wilson and I aren’t together.”

“I know you guys pretend to be just friends so you don’t get into trouble with the principal,” she says with a wink.

“Is that what everyone thinks?”

“Your secret is safe with me, Miss Fletcher. I won’t tell anyone.” She gives me an apologetic smile and stands up. “I’d better run if I want to catch my bus. Thanks again.”

“Sure, any time.”

I grab my stuff and leave the gym, confused about Ava’s observation. Why do people keep thinking me and Blake are a thing? It’s as if no one knows what two best friends look like. Honestly, I’m done explaining.

I head to the teacher’s lounge and pull up a chair. Blake is talking to Vanessa about an art project, and I admire him for a second. He’s always in such a good mood and everyone seems to love him. Which is no surprise, really. He’s got that charm that his brothers and his sister have too. At Ollie’s party, Elle told me that this Wilson charm is the reason they’re all so loved by everyone.

If only Blake loved *me*, that would be awesome.

He bites into an apple, juice dripping down his chin, and I sigh softly. I wish I were that apple. For the past few weeks, I’ve been obsessed with Tanner’s observations about his brother. He might be right, but if Blake truly had feelings for me, he’d tell me, no? I sigh. All of this guessing is exhausting. Something needs to happen. Maybe it’s time we talked about it, like Tanner suggested.

One by one, my colleagues trickle in, filling the teacher’s lounge with animated conversations. Anna-Catherine is one of the last to arrive.

“I have gifts,” she says, placing a Tupperware container on one of the tables.

“Cool, cupcakes,” John says.

She laughs. “Help yourself. They’re supposed to taste amazing.”

“You haven’t tried one yet? If these were mine, half of the container would be empty before I reached the teacher’s lounge,” Linda says.

“You know I can’t eat cupcakes. I’m allergic to sugar.”

Blake looks puzzled. “Really? A sugar allergy? That exists? What happens if you eat it anyway?”

“I gain weight, duh.” She runs her hands over her perfect hourglass figure. “I already look great, so why waste it eating cupcakes?”

She’s waiting for Blake to tell her she’s gorgeous, but he doesn’t take the bait.

Debbie makes a gagging motion behind AC’s back, and I snort.

“That’s not an allergy, AC. It’s basic biology. Eat sugar, gain weight. Unless you exercise,” Blake says.

“Oh, Blake,” she says with a shake of her head. “If only it were that simple.”

Vanessa leans in closer to me and whispers, “Isn’t it that simple then?”

I bite back a laugh. I don’t think anything is plain and simple in Anna-Catherine’s world.

Principal Davis enters and the entire teacher’s lounge falls silent. I feel like a teenager again, waiting for a speech in the auditorium.

“Thanks everyone for getting here on such short notice,” he starts. “I’m sure you all saw the news article about the scandal over at Clearview Lake High.”

I rack my brain trying to remember something about it, but I honestly don’t follow the news enough to stay in the loop. I look around and see some other teachers acting as clueless as I am.

“Anyway,” Principal Davis goes on. “Two of their teachers got caught... well...” He pulls on his tie to loosen it. “Let’s put it this way. They were involved in activities that should be reserved for the bedroom and a student caught them. The teachers in question have been fired, but the scandalous nature of their behavior has left a mark on the Clearview Lake community. The whole ordeal is something I’d like to avoid happening here. That’s why, starting from today, Summerville High will have a strict no-dating policy in place. The only exception is for those who can prove that they were already in a committed relationship prior to this new rule.”

“What? You can’t be serious,” Anna-Catherine yells, her gaze flicking over to Blake for some reason.

“I’m sorry, but this decision is final. The school board talked about it for a long time and the discussion got rather heated, to say the least.”

“Is it even legal to change the conditions of a contract like this?” Vanessa asks.

Principal Davis runs a hand through his hair. “Your employment contract specifies the conditions for your teaching job. If you want to know about the legality of this new rule, I suggest you talk to your lawyer.”

“And what are the consequences if someone breaks it?” Anna-Catherine demands to know.

Principal Davis tugs on his tie again and breaks out into a sweat. “It’s best to follow the rules. And if you can’t, then I think your case will have to be presented to the school board. I’m sorry, that’s all the information I can give right now. Oh, and please check your email for the details about our upcoming teambuilding weekend.”

He gathers his papers and quietly slips out the door while we’re left discussing the matter. It somehow feels like an injustice that we have to pay for the mistakes of two teachers at a different school. Isn’t that a bit of an overreaction?

“They can’t do this to us, right?” Debbie asks.

Vanessa shrugs. “I’m not looking to date any of you. Sorry, guys. However, if you feel like it’s not fair, you should sue.”

Debbie laughs. “Sue? On a teacher’s salary? I’m happy if I make it to the end of the month without going into the red. A lawyer is the last thing I want to be spending my hard-earned money on.”

“Yeah, we don’t have that kind of money,” John chimes in.

I don’t know why he’s upset about this. It’s not like he was planning to sweep someone off their feet at Summerville High. The guy is happily married. Still, it’s good to know that he’ll stand up for us single teachers if needed.

Blake turns to me, looking as pale as a sheet. “This was honestly the last thing I expected to happen.”

“Me too,” I say. “What a bummer for those of us wanting to date someone here.”

He catches my gaze and keeps my eyes locked with his. Heat sears my skin as I take in his words. “Yeah, this news couldn’t have come at a worse time.”



Chapter Twenty-One

Blake



I've changed my outfit three times already and I'm still not convinced I look the best I can. Not that I'm vain, but I want today to be perfect, and I want to look perfect. Today marks the anniversary of Gwinnie's accident, and I planned something that will distract her from that fact—at least, that's what I hope.

The only thing that worries me is that she's going to need a wheelchair to get around and I know she hates wheelchairs. I'll have to be careful broaching the subject as I'm doing all of this to make her happy, not angry.

I pull a sweater on but decide against a jacket. Even though it's October already the temperatures are still mild, which is quite a relief. The school's teambuilding weekend is coming up soon and it involves camping. I don't feel like freezing in my sleeping bag at night. Anyway, those are worries for later. I've got to get a move on if I want to arrive on time.

I fill my backpack with a few bottles of water and some snacks. Then I throw it in the trunk of my car and head for Gwinnie's house, excited about the day ahead.

The moment I pull my car into the driveway, my phone chimes with a message from her. An uneasy feeling settles in my stomach. I hope she's not canceling.

Gwinnie: Give me one minute. I'll be right there.

The corners of my mouth lift into a smile. She's not canceling. What a relief.

I open the passenger door of my car and wait for Gwinnie to make an appearance. About a minute later, the front door

swings open and she walks toward the car.

“Sorry I’m late. I lost track of time and needed to wrap up what I was doing.”

“You were watching one of those rug cleaning videos again, weren’t you?” I ask as soon as she’s in her seat.

“Do you have spy cameras set up around the house?” she asks with a frown.

I laugh. “No, but you’re my best friend, G. I know you.”

“In my defense, those videos are mesmerizing and satisfying,” she says, clicking her seatbelt into place.

“More like addicting.”

She pins me with a look. “More like relaxing.”

I throw my hands up in defeat. “You know what? Send me a link to one so I can see what the fuss is all about.”

She crosses her arms over her chest with a satisfied smile on her face. “I knew you’d break sooner or later. I’ve got a whole bunch of ‘best of’ videos I can send you.”

I lift an eyebrow. “Best of? You need a new hobby.”

“And you need to tell me where you’re taking me.”

“No can do,” I say, using my turning signal to merge onto the main road.

She pushes her bottom lip out. “Please?”

“You’ll have to wait and see. No amount of adorable begging is going to change my mind.”

She bats her eyelashes rapidly.

I chuckle. “Stop it, G. I mean it. Why don’t you put on some music? It’ll take about half an hour to get there.”

She picks up my phone from its spot on the dashboard and scrolls through my music app. “Any requests?”

“Whatever you want is fine by me.”

A mischievous look crosses her face. “Even when it’s something you don’t love? Like Taylor Swift?”

I groan. “Yeah, even if you put on Taylor Swift, I won’t complain. Today is all about you.”

She picks out Swift’s latest album and hums along with the first song. I’ve got to admit that it’s not as bad as I thought it would be, but I don’t tell Gwinnie that. It’s fun that she thinks she’s annoying me when nothing she does could ever annoy me. That’s how much I like having her around. How much I... love her.

After the first song, Gwinnie angles her body toward me. “Why is today all about me?”

“Huh?”

“Before, you said that today was all about me. Why?”

I briefly lock eyes with her, then turn my attention back to the road. “You really want to know?”

“Of course.”

“I know these past few years have been hard on you. And that today’s date isn’t particularly nice.”

“You remember that today is the anniversary of the accident?” she asks, as if I could ever forget such an important part of her life.

I nod. “I do. And I vowed to myself—and now to you—that from now on, you and I are going to do something extremely fun every year, on this date. That way, the good memories will hopefully replace the bad ones. We’ll call it your ‘legaversary’ or something fun. You know, to celebrate that you’re still alive and have one healthy leg left.”

Her eyes shine with tears, but I can tell she’s trying hard to blink them away. “You want to do that? For me?” she asks, her voice breaking. “Every year?”

“Yup.”

“What if... what if we’re not living close to each other in a few years?”

A chill runs down my spine at the thought of her moving away again. “If that happens, I’d still come and take you out

for a day of fun to celebrate your Legaversary.”

“Seriously?”

“G. Come on. You know I would. You mean the world to me.”

The air between us crackles. Neither of us says another word. The only sound is Taylor Swift singing something about two old people still looking at each other like stars shining in the sky.

Gwinnie lets out a soft sigh and gazes through the car window at the ocean glimmering next to the road.

My entire body suddenly feels different, as if I’ve been holding on to something for way too long. Something that desperately needs to come out.

After years of not wanting to break out of the friend zone with Gwinnie—or of wanting to finally confess my feelings, only to pick the worst possible timing for that—something’s got to give. I can’t keep walking around pretending everything is fine while it physically hurts to keep these feelings I have for her stuffed inside of me. Even if Gwinnie rejects me, at least it will all be out in the open.

I don’t know if Gwinnie feels something for me too, so I don’t want to get ahead of myself, but today should be the day I finally tell her how I feel. And whatever happens after that, will happen. I don’t have any control over her reaction. The only thing I can control is being honest with her.

This sudden realization sends an army of nerves through my veins. I grip the steering wheel to distract me from these sensations, but it’s no use. Confessing my love for the girl I’ve been in love with since forever is taking up all the available space in my brain.

I steal a glance at her. The fall sun hits her hair perfectly and lights up her face. She looks like an angel. To me, Gwinnie Fletcher is pure perfection. I don’t care about the things that she hates about herself. She makes me whole, and I want to be with her for the rest of my days.

“Thank you, B.,” she says, pulling her gaze away from the window and turning toward me. “I was dreading today, but you’ve made it into something great, even though I have no idea what you have planned.”

“Well, why don’t you look over there,” I say, pointing toward the stretch of road ahead of us.

Right when Gwinnie looks up, the entrance to The Magic Wonderland comes into view and her jaw drops.

The Magic Wonderland is a truly magnificent place, and I’m not saying that because my brother works there as Prince Charming. As far as amusement parks go, this one is my absolute favorite. The Magic Wonderland delivers on its promise of endless fun, magical moments, and all-round feel-good vibes.

“We’re spending the day here?”

I nod. “We are. I’ve got VIP tickets and everything. There’s one tiny problem, though.”

“Oh?”

I bite my lip. “I know you can’t walk around in the park all day without some help, so I’ve booked you a wheelchair. I’m sorry, I know you hate those things.”

“Are you kidding me? This is perfect. Wheelchair or not. I haven’t been to an amusement park since... well, it’s been years.” She excitedly turns to me. “Do they still have that rollercoaster with the three loops?”

“You bet.”

She shakes her head. “You’re the best friend anyone could ever wish for, B.”

“Thanks. So are you. This is going to be an amazing day.”

“You better believe it,” she says, her eyes full of sparkling goodness.

Now if I could only see my ultimate wish fulfilled—move out of the friend zone with Gwinnie—that would be the delicious cherry on top of a decadent sundae.



Chapter Twenty-Two

Gwinnie



I can't believe Blake has planned this entire day at The Magic Wonderland for us. The way he treats me makes me feel like a real-life princess.

He got us VIP tickets and made sure we won't have to queue anywhere if we don't feel like it. I normally hate being treated differently because of my disability, but I've got to admit that this is a nice perk. And of course, I physically can't spend the day waiting in line for hours. My leg would kill me.

"You didn't break the bank to get these tickets, right?" I ask him.

I'm worried that his plan to create awesome memories today might financially hurt him.

"It's no big deal. My brother and sister-in-law both work here, remember? If I didn't use that to my advantage, what kind of brother would I be?"

I laugh. "So it's them I should be thanking, not you?"

"Don't push it, G.," he says with a laugh.

Gah, his laughter always makes my body tingle. Blake is such a great guy. The fact that he's planned everything just to make me happy is more than flattering. It feels like pure happiness to me. I wish I could grab him by the shirt and kiss him right now.

We pick up the rental wheelchair and Blake hangs his backpack around the handles while I get comfortable in the seat.

"Okay, so if you need anything, just tell me. I've got water bottles for us, and snacks, and I even made a fruit salad."

“Fancy.”

“What can I say? I know how to cook if I want to.”

I laugh. “Since when is chopping fruit and putting it into a Tupperware container considered cooking?”

“Hey, be careful or you won’t get to taste my award-winning fruit salad.”

“Award-winning?”

He shrugs, his eyes twinkling with pleasure. “I’m sure it would win an award if I entered a fruit salad contest.”

I open the map of the park and marvel at all the fun attractions. “Where do you want to start?”

“It’s all good to me. How about that rollercoaster you’ve been salivating over?”

“Great idea. Let’s go.”

Blake pushes the wheelchair forward, making his way to Nitro Snake. Everywhere I look, there’s happy people. I sigh. This was such a great plan. Instead of wallowing in my bed, I’ll be surrounded by fun vibes all day. And I’ll be with Blake.

He parks the wheelchair near the entrance to Nitro Snake, and I look up at the roaring rollercoaster cart above us as it loops and turns along the tracks.

Blake’s hand lands on my shoulder. “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“I’m not a wus, I can handle it.”

I hope. Has this rollercoaster always been this fast? When was the last security check on this monstrous structure?

There’s only about fifteen people queuing, so I decide not to use the special entrance for this first ride. I want to feel as normal as possible today.

Blake and I join the queue. I lean against the railing and smile at him. “How fun is this? I almost feel like a teenager again.”

“Ah, to be young and reckless.”

“Reckless? What do you mean?” I ask.

He motions toward the giant metal construction. “Look at this. It’s probably about twelve thousand pounds of steel and three hundred feet high.”

I know he’s only joking, but my stomach still constricts at the thought of hurtling through the air.

“What do you think would happen if the safety harness on one of the seats fails?” I ask.

“You’d make the front page, that’s for sure.”

“Hmm. How big do you think the chances of that are?”

He chuckles. “Why? Are you really that desperate to make an appearance on the news, G.? If that’s the case, I guess the straps could break and give you your fifteen minutes of fame.”

I laugh at his joke, but the people in front of us don’t seem to share our sense of humor. They’re a couple, probably about fifty years old, and they look horrified.

The woman turns to us. “Why are you asking about the security of the seats?” she demands to know.

“Oh, I’m sorry, it was just a joke,” I tell her.

“Dave, we have to turn around. There’s something wrong with the safety of the seats. The straps could break any second.”

“Dana, relax, we’re fine,” he says. He pulls his wife against his chest and throws us a deadly look over her head.

Blake holds his hands up. “We didn’t mean to scare you. We’re just goofing around.”

His explanation doesn’t seem to help, though. Dana flails her arms around. “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire. I need to speak to someone in charge.”

She pushes forward, eliciting angry looks from the people at the front of the queue.

“Excuse me! Sir!” she shouts to the teenager who’s manning the ride. “There is something wrong with the safety

of the rollercoaster. You need to shut this ride down and get a mechanic here immediately.”

The pimply teen looks around in confusion. “Excuse me?”

The cart comes to a stop and a bunch of people excitedly exit the ride, grabbing their backpacks from the platform and making their way to the exit. All of them are completely oblivious to what’s playing out on this side of the platform.

“The straps are fragile. They’re at breaking point. People are about to die!” Dana shouts.

To be honest, it’s the teen who looks like he’s at breaking point, not the straps.

A tween boy starts crying and a young couple turns around.

“I’m not riding this thing now,” Dana says. “You’ll be hearing from us.”

The ride operator doesn’t know what to do. He’s definitely not trained to deal with people as crazy as Dana. “I can assure you guys that there’s nothing wrong with the safety of these seats.”

“Oh yeah? What about the straps breaking?” she demands to know.

“Uhm, this ride doesn’t have straps.”

Dana turns around and lifts her hands in the air as if she’s a spiritual leader speaking to her followers. “Go forth and save yourselves, everyone. This ride doesn’t even have safety straps!”

The teenager frowns. “That’s because the safety mechanism works differently for this type of—”

Dana cuts him short and gives him a furious look. “Don’t try to explain how this death trap works. I want to speak to someone in charge.”

Dave’s expression turns to frantic as well. I don’t know if he’s embarrassed by his wife’s behavior or if he’s angry or maybe afraid he’s about to be kicked out when all he wanted

was to ride Nitro Snake. Whatever the case, things are escalating, and we need to do something.

“Quick,” I tell Blake. “Salvage the situation.”

“How? I doubt I’ll be able to get through to this woman, unless I knock her unconscious. Should I give it a try?”

I snort, and I know it’s completely wrong of us, but we break out in a laughing fit. This only angers Dana more. She’s about to faint or explode, but I can’t help myself. The laughter keeps coming. The poor woman is probably just scared and now she thinks we’re making fun of her. Gosh, I need to stop laughing.

Half the people in the queue have already left by now. The teen managing the ride grabs his walkie-talkie. “Mayday. Mayday. Send someone over to Nitro Snake now. Quick. Please. I’m begging you,” he adds.

The walkie-talkie crackles to life as a person on the other end assures the teen that a staff member will arrive in less than one minute.

Dana sits down on the ground and pinches the space between her eyes. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

Dave rolls his eyes and mutters to us between gritted teeth. “See what your little joke did? Now I have to deal with *this*.”

Thankfully for Dave, a staff member arrives right away. It takes him a full five minutes and an empty rollercoaster run to calm Dana down.

“And you are sure that the straps are not needed?”

“I am,” the guy says. “The safety of this ride is monitored constantly. You were never in any danger. But I’d still like to offer you compensation for your negative experience.”

“Okay. What kind of compensation?”

Dana still doesn’t go on the ride, but she agrees not to push the issue further thanks to the staff member offering a free meal and two free day tickets to the park.

As she walks away, she stops for a moment and turns to us.
“You guys are staying?”

“Yup,” Blake says.

She shakes her head. “Well, suit yourself. Have fun plummeting to death.”

I stifle another laugh. I don’t want to end up in a laughing fit again. My stomach already hurts from the previous one.

“Do you still want to go on this ride?” Blake asks me as Dana and Dave walk away.

“Duh. But maybe we shouldn’t make any more safety jokes while we’re queuing.”

We take our seats and I make sure that my prosthetic is properly secured, per the park’s rules. I do feel nervous about this coaster, but I’m not clueing Blake in to that fact. I can do this.

The cart moves and we’re pulled up a giant incline. This ride has got to be higher than the three hundred feet Blake spoke about earlier. I squeeze my eyes shut. The moment we reach the top and go over it, I grab Blake’s hand and scream all the air out of my lungs. We barrel forward and shoot through the loops.

My fear is replaced with joy. Look at me! I’m alive and I’m safely flying through the air with my best friend beside me. Life doesn’t get more perfect than that.

Right?

Well, maybe there is one little, tiny detail that would top it all off and add to the perfection of today.

Kissing Blake. Too bad that’s not in the cards for me.



Chapter Twenty-Three

Blake



I'm on a high after riding Nitro Snake. I didn't expect a rollercoaster could make me feel this good. Of course, holding Gwinnie's hand through it might have had something to do with those good feelings, but still. Today has been nothing but a blast and the day has only just started.

"Where should we go next?" Gwinnie asks, her eyes already scanning the map of the park. "Maybe something more low-key?"

I nod. "How about one of those indoor water rides?"

"Sounds good."

We make our way to The Splashing Monkey Temple. It seems like everyone has the same idea as the queue snakes all around the building housing the ride.

"Do you want to use the regular queue, or...?" I carefully ask Gwinnie.

She frowns. "We should take the other one. At least missing a leg gives you some privileges, am I right?"

"Yeah," I say with a painful edge to my voice.

"Hey, it's okay to laugh at my self-deprecating jokes, B. It beats crying. Trust me, I've tried it all."

I push the wheelchair to the fast lane. It's for VIP ticket holders only, and as soon as the staff member sees us, he lets us skip the queue. I help Gwinnie into the front seat of the log boat and sit down behind her. I make a mental note to thank Colton for these tickets. I couldn't have afforded them on my own without resorting to eating instant noodles for a month.

The ride is jungle-themed and most of it goes through dimly lit areas. As the boat is pulled up an incline, Gwinnie glides backwards into me.

“Oops, sorry. It’s the gravity.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I whisper. “Here, I’ll hold you so you don’t have to fight that gravity.”

I put my arms around her waist so she’s securely seated between my legs. I take a whiff of her hair. She smells like a goddess.

No, she *is* a goddess.

Her body presses against mine thanks to the incline we’re on. Then, as we make it to the top, I tighten my grip around her so she doesn’t fly forward when the log boat goes plummeting down. It feels amazing to have her this close to me. I wish we could do this every day.

The boat tips over the top of the incline and we’re treated to a wave of water splashing over our bodies.

Gwinnie turns around, her face completely wet. “This is so much fun. Ready for the second one?”

I wink at her. “Absolutely.”

Even though the boat is not tilted right now, I keep my arms around her. As long as she’s not complaining, I’m not letting her go. This is too perfect.

We go down a second drop and this time, we get even wetter than before. Gwinnie tilts her head back in laughter, and my stomach does a somersault when I see how happy she is.

I’m disappointed when the ride is over. Now I have to let go of her. At the exit, I stop at the photo booth and buy a copy of the picture they snapped of us on the ride.

“Are you seriously buying this?” Gwinnie asks. “I look horrible. I don’t even recognize myself.”

“Some mornings, my own phone doesn’t recognize my face. That doesn’t mean I look horrible,” I tell her. “Trust me, you look gorgeous, G. I’m buying this one.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“Put it next to the Wilson Troll Trophy. Or hang it above my bed. I haven’t decided yet.”

She shakes her head and smiles. “Whatever floats your boat, I guess.”

I put the photo in my backpack, careful not to crease it. “What’s next?”

“How about a taste of that award-winning fruit salad?”

I nod. “Solid plan.”

We go out and sit at an empty picnic table in the shadow of the park’s castle and dig into my fruit salad.

“Isn’t that your brother over there?” Gwinnie asks, pointing to an area in front of the castle.

I squint. “Yeah, that’s Colton and Elle.”

Gwinnie sighs. “It must be so romantic working as Prince Charming and his princess. They don’t even have to pretend to be in love.”

I look over at my brother and Elle, who are greeting excited guests like the professionals they are. “Yeah, those two are still madly in love.”

“Tanner and Hazel too, right? The way they look at each other says it all.”

I roll my eyes, pretending to be grossed out by the PDAs my siblings have a knack for. “I know, they’re so in love that looking at them gives you a toothache.”

Gwinnie laughs. “You’re just jealous.”

“Maybe I am.” I pin her with a look.

“What about your sister?” she quickly says, as if she wants to avoid the topic of relationships.

I pierce a piece of watermelon with my fork and shrug. “She still hasn’t found the one, but I’m sure it will happen sooner rather than later. Maggie’s a real catch. She does have high standards, though.”

“Maybe she knows what she wants. I get it. Why settle for someone who doesn’t light up your entire life?”

“Hmm.”

It’s all I manage to say. I desperately want to tell her how I feel, but not here. Not while we’re munching on fruit salad in a busy place. If and when I do, it needs to be perfect.

After we finish our healthy snack, we try out every other rollercoaster in the park as well as some more low-key rides. By the time dinnertime rolls around, we’re both exhausted. I take Gwinnie back to the castle where we spotted Colton and Elle earlier. I snagged us a reservation at the restaurant there. Thank goodness Colton gave me a discount code to use here tonight. I honestly don’t know how people afford this place, but it’s more than worth it. Anything for Gwinnie. She’s happy and that’s all that matters to me.

The restaurant is located at the top of the castle, and if you’re lucky enough to get a window seat—kudos to my brother for fixing us one—you get an overview of the entire park. The fancy menus, candlelit tables, and a classy interior make this place feel like a true fairytale setting.

We take a seat between other couples who look like they’re in love. Not that we’re a couple, but it sure is romantic here. The food arrives quickly, and time flies by. I guess that’s what happens when you’re having the time of your life. You never want it to end.

Gwinnie eats another piece of the chocolate cake dessert I ordered for us and shoves the plate away from herself. “I’m sorry, but I can’t eat another crumb. This was all delicious, though.”

“No worries. Do you want to head out and find a good spot to watch the parade? It’s about to start soon.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll go and pay our bill and then we can head out,” I say.

We take the elevator down and Gwinnie tells me to leave the wheelchair. We look for an empty spot on the side of one of the streets where the parade will pass.

It's dark now, and the entire park is lit up with strings of twinkling lights. All around us are other guests, but I only have eyes for Gwinnie. We huddle close together and she smiles at me.

"Thank you so much, Blake. Today has been nothing short of perfect," she says.

The happiness radiating from her warms my insides until I'm about to burst. I can't pretend any longer. This box of feelings is about to explode and there's nothing I can do to stop it from happening.

"You know I'd do anything for you, Gwinnie. I mean it. You're..." I rake a hand through my hair. I need to do this. I need to tell her how I feel.

"I'm what?" she asks.

I smile and tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear. In the distance, I can hear the music of the parade getting closer, but I don't care about any of that right now. This moment is all that matters.

"You're Gwinnie. One part of the Beegees. My best friend, my... everything," I whisper.

Her eyes grow wide. "Your everything?"

I take her hands in mine. "G., I know you feel like the missing part of you makes you imperfect, but you're wrong. You're the sweetest, kindest, most breathtaking woman I've ever laid eyes on. The only thing that's missing in my life is having you by my side. Not as my best friend, but as my girlfriend."

Her voice is shaky, and her hands are trembling. "You want me to be your girlfriend?"

I nod. "I do."



Chapter Twenty-Four

Gwinnie



“How long have you felt this way?” I ask.

Blake’s dark eyes dip to my mouth as he whispers the answer. “Eleven years. Or eleven years, three weeks, and five days if you want to know the exact number, but who’s counting? Only a lovesick fool would do something like that.”

My good leg turns into Jell-O. I’m about to wobble and fall to the ground. My synapses are all faulty and firing off in the wrong direction.

A big hand steadies me. It’s his.

Blake Wilson’s strong hand is on the small of my back. Mine. Not on the back of some floozy cheering him on from the sidelines of the pool. Nope. Just little old me.

I blink. This isn’t a dream. I mean, it *is*, but it’s really happening. I’m wide awake and conscious.

His thumb grazes my lips, and our eyes lock. I don’t need words to know what he’s trying to convey. He’s about to kiss me, and I’ve never longed harder for someone’s lips to touch mine than I do now.

Fireworks burst from my pores and my breath comes out in short, ragged intervals. Blake wants me to be his girlfriend. I can’t remember how long I’ve wanted to hear those words, thinking that day would never arrive, but it turns out that dreams do come true.

I lick my lips in anticipation. He smiles and dips down, until his soft lips land on mine. He kisses me slowly, as if he’s testing the waters. I eagerly answer his kiss.

He parts his lips and we explore each other’s mouths. Soft at first, then more passionate, as if all this pent-up longing

needs to come out all at once. I guess that's what happens when you've loved someone for years without doing anything about it.

Now that we're giving in to these feelings, I realize *this* is heaven on earth. This is the missing piece of my puzzle.

It almost pains me to pull away from his mouth, but we need to breathe.

"Does that mean you want to be with me?" Blake asks, his thumb grazing my bottom lip.

I nod. "It does. I have so many question marks about the future, but I want you to be one of the answers."

"I can do that. Whatever you want, sweet Gwinnie."

I grin. "What I want is to keep kissing you."

Our lips touch, and I'm transported to my personal slice of heaven again. The parade marches on behind our backs, but nothing really registers except for his body pressed against mine. Him kissing me. His hands on my body and my cheeks.

I let out a content sigh. I never want to stop kissing him like this. I could devour the guy, but this is not the time or place for that.

"Should we watch the fireworks?" he asks in between kisses.

I shake my head. "This is all the fireworks I need, but yeah, that's a great idea."

We both face the top of the castle where the fireworks are blasting in the sky. Blake wraps his arms around me, and I lean my head against his firm chest. The Magic Wonderland is getting a stellar review from me, that's for sure.

His strong arms feel safe around me, and his fingers caress my arm. He did it. He's made this Legaversary into something I will look back on with fond feelings instead of only bad ones. He made the pain of today's memory sting a bit less.

As soon as the fireworks end, we walk back to his car, our fingers intertwined. I don't want this day to end, but the

knowledge that I'll be having a lot more fun days with him as my boyfriend eases the pain of having to say goodbye to him later tonight.

We get in the car, and I can't stop smiling.

"I'm happy," I tell him.

"We should've told each other how we felt a lot sooner," he says as he puts the car in reverse.

"I've had the most massive crush on you since forever, but I thought you'd never see me as more than a friend," I confess.

He shakes his head. "Are you kidding me? I fell for you the day we met at the pool."

My heart sinks as I think of the pool, and then the school. "What about Principal Davis' new rule?"

"You mean the no-dating policy?"

"Yeah."

Blake sucks in a breath of air. "I guess we'll have to keep our relationship a secret for now. At least until we figure things out."

I nod. "Yeah, that's probably for the best. I don't want to lose this job."

"Me neither."

"Do you think we have it in us to keep it hidden from everyone?"

"It'll be hard, that's for sure. But like you said, I don't want to lose my job either. I'm sure this policy won't last long and if it does, then... We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

I spend the drive home walking on clouds and restraining myself so that I don't kiss him while he's driving. His lips look inviting though, especially now that I know I have access to them any time I want.

Blake stops in front of Gramps' house and turns off the engine. I turn to him and grin. "Thanks for a perfect day, B. I

can tell you it was a big surprise. I never saw it coming. Especially not that kiss.”

He leans in and locks eyes with me, his gaze full of love. Instead of saying something, he kisses me again. My insides light on fire the moment his lips touch mine. Gah. Kissing Blake Wilson will never grow old.

“Sweet dreams, G. I’ll see you tomorrow,” he softly says.

I nod. “Yeah, tomorrow.”

I leave the car in a love-filled haze. It’s as if I’ve been drugged, that’s how light and floaty I feel.

I do my best to get inside the house as quietly as I can. Gramps is probably asleep already.

“It’s about time you two finally snogged.” His voice makes my heart skip a beat.

“Gramps, what the... Is that how you greet your granddaughter? By scaring her to death and by spying on her?”

I walk over to the living room where Gramps is sitting in the chaise longue next to the window with a vampire romance open on his lap and a grin on his face. “I’m sorry, but I’m just so happy that you two finally figured out what all of us knew all along.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The feelings! The snogging!”

I cringe. “Please stop saying snogging, Gramps.”

He chuckles. “Fine, but I want you to know that I’m glad you’re happy. You are happy, right?”

I sit down on the sofa with a contented sigh and nod. “I’m the happiest girl in Summerville Creek.”



Chapter Twenty-Five

Blake



After my first kiss with Gwinnie, I felt like I was on Cloud Nine. Still am. Every single day, I wake up with a big smile, and most days I have to pinch myself to prove this is all real and not a dream.

I've never been this in love. The only challenging thing about it is keeping it a secret from our colleagues. I don't know what would happen if Principal Davis found out, but Gwinnie and I both agreed that it's too risky. Neither of us wants to lose our job. I told Gwinnie I'd try to find out what will happen once we do go public with this relationship, but first we've got the teambuilding weekend to focus on. For now, stealing kisses is what we'll have to settle for.

Except when we're alone of course. I think we've made out in every corner of my house already, kissing until we can't breathe properly anymore and talking until the sun comes up.

Honestly, I'm living the dream.

Gwinnie has also been an absolute dream to the Summerville Stingrays. She's been helping me coach the team and we're well on track to make the semifinals. November is already halfway through, which means we've got another two months to prepare. I'm convinced we're finally going to make it this season.

These next few days aren't about swimming, though. Every year, the school board sends the teachers on a paid teambuilding weekend to strengthen the bonds between us. It's always a lot of fun and I hope the same will be true this year. We're heading to a camping ground and will be doing all kinds of adventurous stuff. I hope Gwinnie will be able to

participate, of course, but I'm not too worried. She always finds a way. Like I said, the girl is golden.

The temperatures have been consistently dropping these past few weeks, so imagine my relief when I found out we wouldn't have to freeze at night. The school got us all cabins. Judging from the pictures, they will be small, but warmer than the flimsy fabric of a tent.

I can't wait to spend a few hours in the car with Gwinnie. It'll be a fun road trip and we might even steal some kisses along the way. That should tide us over until we get back home.

Now everyone's gathered in the teacher's lounge, where Principal Davis is handing out the last instructions.

I'm listening to him wrap up his speech when a voice comes out of nowhere. "Hey, you."

I turn around. "You've got to stop sneaking up on people, AC."

She giggles and her hand lands on my chest. "Oh, Blake, you love it when I surprise you."

"Not really."

"I love how innocent and tough you always act. But don't worry, I know you're just teasing me."

I am definitely *not* teasing her.

"Oh, one more thing. My car broke down. Talk about bad timing right before our trip. Anyway, I'm sure you don't mind if I hitch a ride with you."

I frown. This can't be happening. "Gwinnie is already riding with me."

"You've got room for one more, right? Plus, I've got snacks."

"I thought you had a sugar allergy?"

She completely ignores me and flicks her hair over her shoulder. "Do you mind if I take the front seat, though? I get

carsick otherwise. Trust me, you don't want to experience that."

She laughs as if it's supposed to be funny. My patience is starting to wear really thin with her. Any thinner and it's nothing but a ghost.

"I'm sorry, Gwinnie needs that seat."

Her eyebrows knit together. "Because of the leg?"

I cross my arms over my chest. "Uh-huh."

"That's too bad." She taps her chin with her perfectly manicured finger. "Can't she ride with someone else? John, maybe? He looks like he could use the company."

"Or..." I give her a look. "Maybe you can catch a ride with Vanessa or Debbie?"

I throw Vanessa a hopeful look, but she gives me a *don't-you-dare* shake of the head and moves her finger over her throat in a slicing gesture. Wow. Anna-Catherine can be insufferable, but maybe Vanessa's reaction is a bit over the top.

Ugh. Now I feel sorry for AC.

"Fine, you can ride with us, but you have to take the back seat."

Literally and figuratively, thank you very much.

"Great." She winks. "I'll make sure to keep a couple of barf bags handy."

I shudder at the thought. I want to be a nice guy. I *am* a nice guy. But Anna-Catherine is making it darn difficult to show that part of me.

"Are we all set to go?" Gwinnie walks up to us with a big smile, her ponytail swinging side to side.

Oh man. Look at her. She's all smiles and happiness, still oblivious to what's awaiting her. Three hours in a car with Anna-Catherine, her sugar allergy, and her inappropriate flirting. Not to mention her possible car sickness.

“We are,” Anna-Catherine beams.

“We?” Gwinnie asks.

AC nods furiously. “Blake offered me a ride. He’s the sweetest, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he is.”

“I’ll get go my things,” AC announces before walking away.

Gwinnie grabs my arm. “She’s riding with us?”

“I’m sorry, G. She backed me into a corner by claiming her car broke down, and I couldn’t say no. You know what she’s like. She might talk our ears off, but there are worse things than arriving with a headache, no?”

She smiles and shakes her head at me. “Always looking at the bright side, huh.”

“I couldn’t tell her the truth.”

“And that is...?”

I grin. “That I’d rather kiss my girlfriend whenever we stop at a red light.”

Her eyes grow wide and she looks around the teacher’s lounge. “Shhh. Someone might hear us. We can’t let anyone know.”

“No one heard us. Trust me,” I say.

It’s true. John and Linda are by the water cooler, discussing whether or not it would be useful to take a coffee maker to the campground. Debbie is struggling to get her suitcase closed after she dumped in an enormous amount of hardcovers at the last minute, all books she acquired from the school’s library. I don’t know what she expects that we’ll be doing during the teambuilding weekend, but I bet reading for hours isn’t going to be part of it.

“Should we get a head start?” I ask Gwinnie. “I hate driving when there’s a lot of traffic.”

We make our way to the parking lot where Anna-Catherine is leaning against her black Audi, inspecting her fingernails. Her eyes light up as soon as she catches sight of us. “Great, there you guys are! You wouldn’t mind taking my bags out of the trunk and putting them in your car, right?” she asks me.

I grit my teeth. “Sure.”

“You’re such a gentleman,” she coos.

I look in her trunk and frown. She’s bringing three full bags to a camping trip that only lasts a couple of days? I take out one of the bags and groan. “Geez, AC, are you bringing your rock collection?”

She laughs. “Rocks? How old do you think I am? Of course not.”

“Then what’s in here? I can hardly lift this bag.”

“Just my workout equipment.”

“You’re bringing dumbbells?”

“Duh.” She shakes her head as if I’m too stupid to understand. “And kettlebells. And resistance belts.”

“Why?” I ask as I haul the stuff over to my car.

“Blake, you of all people should know that a camping trip is no excuse for not working out. How do you think I got this awesome-looking body? Not by sitting on my ass all day.”

I glance at Gwinnie and give her a look that says, *can you believe this?* She’s trying really hard to bite back a laugh.

“Do you work out?” AC asks Gwinnie, slowly gliding her eyes over her.

Gwinnie shrugs. “I have one favorite machine at the gym.”

“Oh? Do tell.”

She grins. “The vending machine.”

AC’s eyebrows knit together in confusion. She offers Gwinnie a weak smile when she finally gets the joke.

I’m relieved when I get the last bag in my car without straining a muscle. I shut the trunk and get behind the wheel.

“Everybody ready?”

Gwinnie gives me a thumbs-up and AC smiles. “Absolutely. Let’s start this party car.” She then leans forward, sticking her head between Gwinnie and me. “How about I put on some music to set the mood?”

Without waiting for an answer, she pairs her phone with my car, starts a cheesy pop song, and cranks up the volume.

Man, it’s going to be a long drive.



Chapter Twenty-Six

Gwinnie



We're finally here. Stepping out of the car feels like being greeted by freedom after spending a year in prison. Not that I have any idea how that feels, but I can only imagine this comes pretty close.

I've never experienced a car ride that was so exhausting. After ten minutes of loud music and being treated to her off-key singing skills, Anna-Catherine agreed to put on something less distracting, but then she started talking our ears off instead. I don't think Blake and I spoke more than a few words. All we had to do was nod or answer yes or no at the right moment. I honestly lost track of what she was talking about after half an hour, and she didn't even notice.

A few of our fellow teachers have already arrived, and they show us where the cabins are. Most of them sleep two people, and Vanessa asks me if I want to share one with her. I don't mind at all. She's fun to be around and it's only for one night. Blake pairs up with John after he assures him that he doesn't snore.

One hour later, everyone has stashed their luggage in the cabins and we're sitting around a campfire. We eat hotdogs and talk a bit about work and hobbies before heading to our cabins for the night.

Tonight was low-key, but tomorrow will be a day filled with adventure. I honestly don't know if I'll be able to participate in every single activity, but I'm going to do my best.

I can't kiss Blake goodnight, but he sends me a text message that makes up for it. Vanessa and I decide to turn in

early as well. It's been a long week, and we've got a busy day ahead of us tomorrow.

"I'm sorry I didn't take Anna-Catherine off your hands," Vanessa says as she fluffs her pillow. "I know Blake didn't want her to ride with you guys, but I didn't want her in my car either."

I nod. "That's okay, we survived. I almost feel sorry for her. It seems like no one likes her very much."

"Sorry for her? Girl, if you knew how cruel and vindictive she can be, you'd feel anything but sorry for her. Trust me, you've only seen her good side."

"That's her good side?"

"I know. Crazy, right?" She gets her toiletry bag out of her luggage. "I'm going to brush my teeth."

"Great. I already did. See you in a bit."

I take advantage of the time alone to take off my prosthetic and liner. Vanessa is a nice woman, but I still don't feel comfortable doing this around her. Or anyone, for that matter. I'll be traveling to Boston soon for the start of Tanner's medical trial, to get the running blade fitted and do some preliminary tests, so he'll definitely see me without my prosthetic again, but he's a surgeon. It's different.

By the time Vanessa returns, I'm already snug under the covers.

"So, now that we're alone," she says as she gets into her bed. "Tell me about you and Blake."

I can feel myself blush. Does she suspect something? "What do you mean? There's nothing to tell."

She tilts her head and lifts an eyebrow. "You two are friends? Nothing more?"

"Uh-huh."

"I don't get it. You guys spend so much time together. Nothing ever happened?"

I shake my head. “Nope.” It’s a lie, but I’m not going to tell her we’re a couple now. Thanks to that stupid new no-dating policy, our jobs could be on the line if I do.

“But you never had a crush on him?”

“No.”

“Gwinnie, look me in the eye and tell me that sleeve tattoo and his charm and those puppy eyes of his do nothing for you.”

I shrug. “Not a thing. It’s all purely platonic. I promise.” Another lie. I’m so going to hell for this.

“Not even a tingle in your toes?”

I prop my head under my elbow. “Why is this so important to you?”

“I don’t know. I just can’t figure out why two people who are obviously perfect for each other would be content with staying in the friend zone.”

Oh, we are so not in the friend zone anymore.

“Friend zone is where we are. Besides, we wouldn’t work as lovers. We’re practically brother and sister.”

Even though it’s a lie, it’s making my stomach turn. We are *so* not practically brother and sister, but what can I do? Tell her the truth? No way.

“By the way, do you need help with anything?” She suddenly sits up, her face filled with concern.

“With what?”

She bites her lip. “Well, you know, with your...”

“My leg? Disability isn’t a dirty word, Vanessa, it’s okay to utter it. And no, I don’t need any help, but thank you for offering. That means a lot to me.”

“I don’t know how you cope sometimes. No offense. I admire you, Gwinnie. It’s just the thought of something like this happening... It’s quite unfathomable.” She gives me an

apologetic smile. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have brought it up. I don’t want to ruin the mood.”

“That’s okay. I get what you mean. The fact that you can go from abled to disabled in the blink of eye is a terrifying thought.”

“What did you say happened? A shark ate it?”

I snort. “That’s what I told Anna-Catherine, yes, but you know that was a joke, right?”

“Thank goodness. I was getting worried I’d never be able to set foot in the ocean again.” She yawns. “Oops, sorry about that. I clearly need some shut-eye.”

“Me too. Why don’t we go to sleep?”

“That’s a great idea. Sweet dreams, Gwinnie.”

“Sweet dreams, Vanessa.”



I wake up early the next morning. Vanessa is still sound asleep and snoring loudly. I glance at my phone. 5:42 am. Helping Blake with dryland practice and swimming practice early in the mornings has reset my body. I keep waking up early, even on days that I don’t have anywhere to be.

I try to fall asleep again, but I can’t so I get up. After putting my prosthetic back on, I get dressed and put on my hiking boots, then I sneak out of the cabin and go for a morning walk.

The air is cold and light, and it won’t be long before the sun peeks through these beautiful trees.

I stop at a small stream and sit down, marveling at nature’s beauty. I should do this more often. Take the time to just sit and think.

My life has changed a lot these past few months. I moved back to Summerville Creek, got a job I’m passionate about, and finally admitted my feelings to Blake. Three years ago, I never could’ve imagined even smiling again.

My heartbeat thumps in my ears when I hear rustling behind me. Is it a bear? Or an axe murderer?

I squint my eyes. A wave of relief floods through me when I see it's Blake.

"Hey, gorgeous," he says and sits down next to me.

He quickly scans the area, then smiles at me. His gaze dips to my lips and his hand cups my cheek. He kisses me long and slow, making my toes curl.

"Sorry, that needed to be done," he says.

I smile, my body still reeling from his amazing kiss. "Yeah, absolutely. What are you doing up this early?"

"Couldn't sleep. John's a snorer."

I laugh. "So is Vanessa."

He takes my hand in his and I rest my head on his shoulder. I could spend the entire day like this, watching the water flow, listening to the birds, and enjoying being close to him. Too bad we've only got a few stolen moments together before everyone else wakes up.

I let out a soft sigh. "This is perfect."

"You are perfect," Blake says. "I know I've said it a hundred times already, but you're the best thing that ever happened to me, G."

In the distance, we hear the sounds of pots and pans clinking together, and people softly chattering.

"I guess that's our cue," I say.

Blake helps me up, and I pat some dirt from my pants.

"Would you mind waiting here for a couple of minutes?" I ask. "I don't want people to get the wrong idea."

"The wrong one? They'd be right on the money if they thought we were out here kissing," he says with a smirk.

I slap him playfully on his arm. "You know what I mean, B."

He gently pulls me closer, his tongue wetting his lips.
“One more for the road?”

“You bet.”

I let him kiss me again, and I sigh. Feeling Blake’s mouth
on mine will never grow old.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

Blake



After breakfast, we all gather to finally find out what we're doing today. Principal Davis is already waiting for us, dressed in a shiny green-and-blue matching tracksuit straight out of an 80s movie.

"Listen up, everyone. First of all, I want to say that I'm delighted we can spend the weekend together. Strengthening the bonds between colleagues is important. I know you are all wondering what's on the agenda, so I won't keep you in suspense any longer." He waits a few moments to build the anticipation. "We're going zorbing," he announces with an excited look.

"What's that?" Linda asks, worry crossing her face. "Is it even legal?"

Principal Davis nods. "It's legal all right, and a lot of fun. That's what we're here for, right? To have fun? Anyway, zorbing is done with big inflatable balls. The first challenge is avoiding getting hit by an inflatable ball that will be rolling down a hill. Isn't that fun?"

Anna-Catherine crosses her arms over her chest. "I don't know what your idea of fun is, but mine sure isn't running away from a big ball. What if we break a leg? Or an arm? How will we teach our students? Where's the fun in that?"

"That won't happen. At least, not if you wear sensible shoes," he says, giving AC's high heels a glance.

"I think I'm going to skip this one," Gwinnie says, "but I can join the other challenges later."

"I'm sorry about that, Miss Fletcher," Principal Davis says. "We all understand, of course. Why don't you snap a few

pictures of the zorbing ball race? It'll be a fun memory.”

I wonder if he's getting paid extra every time he says the word *fun*.

Principal Davis gives us the address of the zorbing park and we all get into our cars. It's only ten minutes from the campground.

We split into groups of eight. Whichever team has the most people standing by the end of the race wins. Our team goes second, which gives us the chance to analyze the whole thing before it's our turn.

As soon as team one starts, I'm having second thoughts about joining in. Sure, it looks fun, but it only takes three seconds before Linda gets smacked to the ground by the big inflatable ball. She tries to get up, but the hill is slippery, so she falls back down again. John runs back in an attempt to help her up. He doesn't count on the ball catching him, though. He flails his arms in the air and tries to escape, but the ball is merciless. John's on the ground in a matter of seconds.

“Man down,” he shouts. “I repeat, man down.”

I've changed my mind. This *is* fun.

We're all cheering for team one, even though we're technically competing against them. Next to us, Anna-Catherine pulls a wrapped salmon sandwich out of her backpack.

“What is that?” Debbie asks, scrunching her nose.

“It's salmon. Way healthier than peanut butter or jam.”

Debbie frowns. “Isn't salmon supposed to be refrigerated?”

AC rolls her eyes. “Not if you're putting it on a sandwich. It's fine. I got it out of my cooler this morning. It can survive a couple of hours without going bad.”

“Are you sure?”

“Geez, Debbie, I am. Now please let me enjoy my sandwich in peace.”

Debbie holds her hands in the air. “Fine, I was just looking out for you.”

Thank goodness team one has finished their run so that I can get away from this bickering about salmon. I jog to the starting point and do a couple of stretches. Team one finished with only two people standing. We can do better than that.

The starting signal sounds, and we all start running as if there’s a horde of zombies chasing us. Vanessa trips, but I grab her hand and pull her back to her feet. Principal Davis was right. This is a lot of fun.

I sprint as fast as my legs allow me to, and arrive at the finish line unscathed. Vanessa follows suit. “Come on, you guys,” we shout to the rest of our team. “You can do this!”

We lose a few people along the way, but four of us make it to the finish line. Not bad at all.

We’ve still got two more teams that can beat us, but I’m pretty relaxed about our chances. After all, nothing’s riding on this except some pride. It’s not like our swimming team competitions, where a win or a loss can change the course of an entire season.

Team three is even better than our team and wins the zorbing ball race. After congratulating them, we walk over to a football field where we’ll have to wear an inflatable ball and play a game of soccer.

“You’re looking awfully sexy,” Gwinnie jokes when she sees me wearing the big ball.

“I know,” I say, trying to twirl for her.

Her eyes twinkle and I wish we could be alone for a second so I could kiss her. Tomorrow night, I tell myself. When we’re alone again.

The game starts and it’s a chaotic twenty minutes of bumping against each other’s balls and trying to score points. I steal a glance at Gwinnie. She’s not really moving around a lot, probably because of her leg, but she’s laughing and that’s all that matters. My goodness, I love seeing my girl happy. I

solemnly swear that I will try and make her this happy for the rest of my days.

We all flail around, barely able to move, but this time, it's our team that wins.

I help Gwinnie out of the ball and she shakes her hair loose. "That was fun."

"We should do this with my brothers and sister. You know, for the Wilson Troll Trophy challenge next year?"

She laughs. "That would be hilarious. Your family would go all-in, no doubt about it."

"You bet."

Before moving on to the third activity of the day, we gather around for a bite to eat. It's a buffet-style lunch with a fresh salad, sandwiches, and two kinds of pasta. After all this exercise, I'm hungry as a horse.

I pile a bit of everything on my plate and take a seat at one of the picnic tables. Anna-Catherine sits at the edge, her face pale as a ghost.

"Are you okay?" Debbie asks her.

"Hmmm." She gives us a thumbs-up.

"You don't look okay," I tell her.

She puts her hand over her mouth and runs away toward a patch of trees.

"I'll go check on her," I tell my colleagues.

Vanessa shakes her head. "I told her not to eat those salmon sandwiches. They'd been in her cooler since yesterday."

I jog over to where AC disappeared into the bushes. I find her bent over, her hand clutching her stomach.

"Please, I don't want you to see me like this," she wails.

I rake a hand through my hair. "Vanessa said something about eating a salmon sandwich that had gone bad?"

Tears brim in her eyes. “You can all stop gloating. I feel horrible. This isn’t funny.”

“No one is gloating.”

“Yeah, right,” she says, lowering herself against the trunk of a nearby tree.

I sit down next to her and offer her a tissue. “Seriously, AC, we’re not laughing at you, okay?”

“You aren’t, but the rest of them hate me. Thanks for coming after me, by the way,” she says with a weak smile.

“Of course. I’m a real gentleman,” I say, trying to lighten the mood.

She puts her hand on my leg. “That’s true. You’re always so nice. And really good-looking.”

“Thanks,” I say, wishing she’d remove her hand.

“Blake, there’s something I want to talk to you about.”

Her hand is moving higher. I’ve got to put a stop to this.

I put my hand on hers, but instead of pulling away, she sees it as a sign of eagerness. She squeezes my hand. “You feel it too?”

“Feel what too?” I ask tentatively, afraid of where this conversation is going.

“This. Us.”

I bite my lip. “There is no us. I’m sorry.”

She sighs. “It’s okay to admit it, Blake. I know you’ve got feelings for me and I have them for you.”

What is she talking about? I’ve always been very clear with my boundaries.

She closes her eyes and leans in. I barely have enough time to put my hands on her shoulders and stop her from kissing me.

Her eyes fly back open. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

“Why? We’re both single. No one is going to catch us.”

I shake my head. “Please, stop. I can’t. I won’t.”

“Am I not pretty enough for you?” she demands to know.

“That’s not it. You look great.”

“Am I not fun enough?”

“Anna-Catherine, there’s nothing wrong with you, okay?”

“Then what is it?” She’s almost shouting the words.

I sigh. “It’s not you, it’s me.”

Her eyes grow wide. “Did I get this all wrong? Do you fancy guys?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then tell me why we’re not kissing right now!”

I ball my hands into fists and take a deep breath in. “It’s Gwinnie, okay. I’m in love with her. Have been for years. And she’s in love with me,” I blurt out. “We’re together and there’s no way in hell that I’d ever do anything to hurt her.”

Her jaw drops. “Wha—I really am going to be sick now. I can’t hold it any longer.”

She gets up and runs away.

“Please, we should talk about this like two adults.”

“Go,” she shouts at me, clutching her stomach. “Let a girl puke in peace, for crying out loud.”

I reluctantly get up and walk away as requested.

“Well, what’s wrong with her?” Debbie asks as soon as I get back to the table. “Do we need to call a doctor?”

“I think we’d better leave her alone for a bit,” I say. “She’ll be okay eventually.”

I glance at Gwinnie and a bad feeling forms in the pit of my stomach. I shouldn’t have told Anna-Catherine about us.

Not because I’m ashamed that we’re a couple. Far from it.

I'm afraid of what Anna-Catherine will do now that the secret Gwinnie and I have been guarding so well is out in the open.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

Gwinnie



Blake has been acting weird ever since he disappeared into the bushes to check on Anna-Catherine. What the heck happened out there?

He keeps telling me we'll talk later. There's nothing left of the smiles he was sporting earlier today. Sure, he's smiling, but it's a sour one, like he's been secretly snacking on lemons in the bushes with Anna-Catherine.

She walked around with a scowl on her face for an entire hour until she told Principal Davis that she needed a lie down. No one thought it was suspicious. After all, she ate that spoiled salmon sandwich, but I can tell there's more to it.

On the drive back to the campground, Blake still doesn't spill the beans. We sit in silence for almost the entire drive back until I can't take it anymore.

"Talk to me."

"Now is not the time," he says. "We'll talk when we get back home."

I slump in my seat. "You're going to wait until tomorrow to discuss this foul mood with me?"

His eyes are full of pain. "I'm sorry, G."

"Did I do something wrong?"

"Of course not. You're perfect."

We arrive at the campground and he cuts the engine, ready to get out, but I stop him. "Please, Blake, talk to me."

"I did something, G. It wasn't on purpose."

A feeling of dread washes over me. My mouth feels dry and I'm sweating. "What did you do?"

"I—"

A knock on the car window makes us both jump. It's Anna-Catherine, looking a bit less pale than before. Blake lowers the window. "Could you give us a minute? We're talking."

Anna-Catherine stares at us. "This won't take long."

"Please, I'm begging you."

She crosses her arms over her chest, clearly not intending to go anywhere. Gosh, why won't she take a hint?

"Blake, get out of the car. This is about what we discussed in the bushes."

Okay, now I'm feeling sick too, even though I didn't eat a salmon sandwich.

We get out of the car, but today has taken a toll on me. "I need to sit down. My leg hurts."

Anna-Catherine rolls her eyes. "This won't take long. Besides, the only real disability in life is a bad attitude. Just push through your limitations."

Blake swivels around and looks so terrifyingly angry that Anna-Catherine takes a step back. "I've had enough of your nonsense, AC. A bad attitude? Push through your limitations? Really? You should get your head checked. You're so far removed from reality that you're about to drift off the earth."

"I just wanted to be supportive and show Gwinnie that she should stay positive."

"You should shut your mouth. You don't know anything about what she's been through and how positive or negative she is. It doesn't even matter. You have no right to dictate what she should or shouldn't do, or how she should feel."

All she does is inspect her nails and sigh. "Figures."

Blake's about to explode. "Figures? What does that mean?"

“You always defend Gwinnie.”

“Damn right, I do. She’s my best friend. And you’re being a jerk to her.”

Anna-Catherine taps her foot on the ground. “Are you done? You can’t fool me. You don’t pamper her because she’s your best friend. We both know she’s your girlfriend.”

“We are not a couple,” I say.

She arches an eyebrow and gives me a smug look. “Oh yeah? That’s not what your boyfriend told me in the bushes. I know you’re Blake’s girlfriend and that you’re keeping it a secret.”

She spits the word girlfriend out as if it’s poison, but that’s not what angers me. It’s the fact that she knows that’s causing the blood to drain from my body.

“You told her about us?” I ask Blake.

He looks tortured. “Gwinnie, please, I can explain.”

“I thought I could trust you.”

“You *can* trust me.”

“Why did you tell her?” I ask.

“She wouldn’t stop flirting with me. No matter how many times I tried to tell her no, she just wouldn’t stop.”

“That’s a weak excuse, Blake. No one was supposed to know. What if I lose my job over this? I’ve only just gotten back to being happy. Genuinely happy, not the pretend kind.”

He takes a step closer to me. “What if I lose you? That’s worse than losing a job.”

“I need this job. I love this job.” My voice breaks and I bite my lip to stop myself from crying.

Blake turns to Anna-Catherine, his eyes pure venom. “Look what you did. Are you happy now?”

“What I did? I didn’t do anything. You’re the ones who went against the no-dating policy. I guess it’s only fair that you get what’s coming for you.”

“What did you do?” Blake growls.

She shrugs and flicks her hair over her shoulder. “If you can’t do the time, don’t do the crime. This is what you get for leading me on and then turning me down.”

I gasp. She must have told someone. Principal Davis will find out soon enough and then it’s over and out for me. And for Blake.

“It’ll be okay, she’s just jealous and bluffing,” Blake says. “She won’t tell anyone before we get the chance to do so ourselves.”

Anna-Catherine lifts an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t be too sure about that, *Beegees*,” she says mockingly before turning on her heel and walking away.

I wipe away the tears that are burning on my cheeks. “I need some time to think. I’ll be hitching a ride home with Vanessa.”

“But we don’t leave until tomorrow morning. Please, G., we should talk about this,” Blake pleads.

“We should, but not while I’m this angry,” I say and storm off too.



Principal Davis sent me an email only one hour after I got back from the teambuilding weekend. He says I’m expected in his office on Monday morning.

I throw my phone on the bed and try not to cry again. How could this all have gone downhill? Everything was going great, and now I’m about to get fired. And what about the swim team? I can’t leave them now that I’ve invested so much time and love into them. But the thing that bothers me the most is Blake. I thought he could be trusted with our secret, but apparently, I was wrong. If he can’t even keep his mouth shut about this, then what else will he blab about when he feels cornered? It’s not like Anna-Catherine held a gun to his head until he confessed that we’re a couple.

A knock on my bedroom door startles me. “Go away,” I shout.

It’s probably Blake, wanting to do some more groveling.

“Gwinnie?” My grandfather’s muffled voice prompts me to get up and open the door for him.

“Sorry, Gramps, I thought you were someone else.”

He hands me a steaming cup of tea. “Here, drink this chamomile tea. It’s supposed to have a calming effect, but I don’t know if that’s true, so I added some bourbon just to be sure.”

I laugh and sit down again. “Thanks.”

Hector jumps on the bed and spreads himself on my lap. I pet the cat and take a sip of tea.

“What happened on that camping trip with Blake?”

“What do you mean? And it wasn’t a camping trip, Gramps, it was a teambuilding weekend with all the teachers from school.”

He grumbles. “Potato, potahto. It’s all the same to me.”

“Why do you think something happened?”

He shuffles to my desk and rolls the chair next to my bed, then takes a seat. “Because of the sorry state you’re in. You left happy and came back sad. That means something’s wrong.”

“I shouldn’t bore you with the details.”

“Bore me? You’re my granddaughter, I’m here for you. Besides, I’ve got some time to kill before my next Zumba class,” he says with a wink.

I take a deep breath and tell him everything. How the school dropped that bomb about the no-dating policy, how Blake told Anna-Catherine about us, and how I’m about to lose my job.

When I’m done, Gramps says nothing. He just sits there and frowns.

“So? Any words of advice?” I ask him.

“I don’t understand. You love the guy and you can’t get past something small like this?”

“Like his big mouth costing me my job? That’s not small, Gramps.”

He has the audacity to roll his eyes at me. Can you believe it? I’m spilling my guts to him, and that’s how he reacts.

“Gwinnie, girl, you’re not going to lose your job.”

“Principal Davis is expecting me in his office first thing tomorrow morning. I don’t think he wants me there to celebrate. I’m definitely fired.”

Gramps waves his hand in the air as if that will erase my conviction about getting fired. “Nonsense. That doesn’t even sound like it’s legal. Besides, like I said, it’s a small thing. Do you think your grandmother and I let stuff like that get in the way of our relationship? Heck no. If we did, we wouldn’t have lasted until we did. Well, until she left me.”

“Grandma didn’t leave you. She died.”

“Eh, that’s the same thing. Anyway, is it real love between you two?”

I nod. “Yeah. At least, I thought so.”

“You thought so? Pumpkin, the way you two were snogging the other day, it’s definitely real love. The guy’s been helping and supporting you for years. That takes dedication. Not to mention real love. Trust me when I say that love is more important than any job in the world.”

I frown. “So I should just forgive him and find another job?”

“Of course not. You should let him suffer for a bit. Make him feel sorry for breaking your trust. Let him grovel and beg and apologize. And once you’re confident that he won’t ever pull a stunt like that again, *then* you take him back.”

I snort. “That’s your advice?”

His eyes twinkle as he folds his hands and sits back in the chair. “Used to work like a charm for your grandmother. I’m telling you, she was a sweetheart, but also very cunning. I did my fair share of groveling back in the day.”

My anger at Blake seeps away at the sound of Gramps’ words. Maybe I overreacted a bit. But that doesn’t change the fact that his actions have consequences for me. For both of us.

A brick drops into my stomach. What if we both get fired? Blake would take this even harder than me. The swim team has been his entire life for the past few years. I can’t let that happen. I mean, he shouldn’t have blabbed, but I understand why he did it. We all make mistakes, right?

Gramps gets up. “I can see you’re already thinking things through. I’ll leave you to it.”

I get up too and hug him. “Thank you. I needed that. I love you, Gramps.”

He smiles and I swear I see him blink away a tear. “I love you too, Pumpkin.”

As soon as he leaves, I grab my phone from the bed and look up Principal Davis’ personal information from the school’s private server. I punch in his phone number and wait with bated breath until he picks up.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Richard—I can call you Richard, right?”

“Who is this?”

Oops. I should’ve probably led with that. “It’s me, Gwinnie Fletcher. I’m sorry to bother you on a Sunday, but I need to talk to you, and it can’t wait until tomorrow.”

“Okay. Tell me what you need to say.”



Chapter Twenty-Nine

Blake



I'm a dumb guy. The biggest moron on the planet, to be more exact. I had everything I ever dreamed of and now it feels as if it's all slipping through my fingers.

It's been a week since the teambuilding weekend and Gwinnie still won't talk to me. She didn't get fired, thank goodness. I'd never forgive myself if that happened. But we both got a warning and were told to lay low until the board came up with a solution. I hope we don't get transferred to another school, or God knows what else.

I hate this. I hate that I can't be with Gwinnie. My future with her seems unsure now, and I hate that too.

But I need to focus on something else today. We have an important swimming competition this evening and half the TTT is going to show up, which is a first. Normally there's a handful of teachers in the crowd to support us, but tonight will be different. I have no clue why they're doing this, but I don't mind. The team can use all the encouragement they can get.

Still, even this competition can't hold my attention. Gwinnie is all I can think of. I'm hoping to get a moment alone with her before or after the game. We desperately need to talk. I've sent her flowers, sent her text messages, and even dropped by her house. Her grandfather told me she spends her evenings crying in bed and refused to let me in. It pains me to know that I've hurt her this much.

I hope to get a glimpse of her after school's out, but she's nowhere to be seen. Friday is her day for parking lot duty. Where is she?

"Hey Vanessa, what are you doing here? Shouldn't Gwinnie be the one to stake out the parking lot today?"

“Oh, hi, Blake. Yeah, she asked me to switch shifts with her. To be honest, she wasn’t looking too well. Said she was in a lot of pain.”

My heart falls from my chest and lands at my feet. “Pain?”

She draws in a sharp breath. “Lots of it. I think something bad is going on.”

“Could you please go to the pool and tell the team that practice is cancelled for today? I need to go to Gwinnie.”

“Sure,” she says.

Wow, that was easy. I thought it would take more convincing, but I guess Vanessa is handing out favors left and right today.

I throw my stuff into the back of my car and gun it out of the parking lot with screeching tires.

“Hey, no speeding,” I hear Vanessa call after me.

The drive to Gwinnie’s place seems to take ages. Every light turns red as if to taunt me. When I finally get there, I sprint to the front door and frantically knock on the wood.

Eugene swings the door open. He looks irritated, like I interrupted something important. “What do you want?”

“To see Gwinnie.”

I try to step inside, but he stops me. “Hold it right there, young man.”

He puts the vampire romance he was clutching against his chest on the hallway table and steps outside, closing the door behind him and forcing me to take a step back.

I wince. I want to get closer to Gwinnie, not further away.

“I’m sorry, Eugene, if I could just talk to Gwinnie for a second, I’ll be out of your hair and then you can get back to your reading.”

He leans against a pillar on the porch. “Do you love her?”

“Who?”

“Gwinnie!” he shouts. “Who else? Is there someone else? You better not be two-timing her.”

His finger wags inches from my face and I take another step back.

“Please. I’m not involved with anyone else. I love Gwinnie. She’s the only one for me.”

“Good,” he says with a grunt. “And do you swear never to act like a fool again? To never hurt her again?”

I nod. “I do. I just want to make sure she’s okay. I know she’s in pain.”

He studies my face for a brief yet terrifying moment before stepping aside. “You better get in there and make amends, Wilson.”

“Yes, thank you.”

I open the door and call Gwinnie’s name, but she doesn’t seem to be home. Huh. That’s weird.

But then I hear the back door closing and I rush to the kitchen to check it out. She’s standing outside, waiting for me—or so I hope.

I open the back door and run into the backyard. “G., I’m so sorry, let me—”

She holds her hand in the air. “No, stop. Let *me*. I overreacted, Blake. You didn’t expose our secret on purpose. You did it because you love me.”

“Wait, I don’t follow. Vanessa said you were in pain, but you’re out here apologizing.”

“Yeah, that was all a ruse to get you here before the swimming competition. Gramps is in on it as well. He didn’t give you a hard time, did he?” she asks with a mischievous smile.

“He wasn’t his welcoming self, that’s for sure.”

“Come here.”

She takes me by the hand, and that's when I see it. The entire backyard has been transformed into a collection of props. It looks like a museum. There's an inflatable pool, a rollercoaster made out of Legos, a milkshake from Don's Buns, a dirty rug and a bucket full of water, a collection of whistles, an inflatable ball... even the Wilson trophy is there. How and when did she manage to steal that?

“What is all this?”

She leads me closer, and I marvel at everything she's put together.

“Welcome to the Beegees museum, Blake. These art installations represent moments we spent together that mean the world to me. First of all, the swimming pool. It's where we met and where I fell head over heels in love with you, even though it took me years to finally admit that. Then there's the rollercoaster. Remember how fun that day was? All because you wanted to give me better memories. I love that you finally kissed me that day. Now the date marks the start of the best thing that has ever happened to me instead of the anniversary of my accident.”

Man, my eyes are getting misty. She leads me further through the display of props.

“And here, a milkshake from our favorite hangout spot back in high school. I wouldn't actually drink it, though. It's been out here since this morning.”

“And the trophy?” I ask, doing my best not to choke on my words.

“Maggie helped me steal that one. She was all too happy about it. Did you know your sister is our biggest fan? She loves that we're a couple now. To me, that trophy is a symbol of love. The bond you share with your siblings is special, and you gave me the chance to be a part of that even before we were a thing. Your family has been nothing but welcoming to me. I adore them and I adore you.”

“Gwinnie, this is the most romantic thing anyone has ever done for me.” I kiss her and man, it feels good to be close to

her again. “I’m sorry for telling AC about us.”

“It’s okay, B. I get why you did it. Besides, it was just a small mistake. Nothing that should get in the way of my love for you.”

She bends down and grabs an envelope from the garden table. “Here. This is the last exhibit in the Beegees museum.”

She hands me the envelope with a smile.

“What’s this?”

“Open it.”

I rip the envelope open and scan the text. It’s an amended contract, stating that our relationship is not in violation of the school’s no-dating policy. Neither of us is going to lose our jobs or get transferred to another school.

“How did you get this?”

She grins. “I told Principal Davis that the rule didn’t apply to us because we’ve been in love for years. Gramps even testified for us.”

“Testified?”

She laughs. “He forced me to use those words. Basically, he called Principal Davis and told him we were snogging long before the new rule ever got announced, even though that was technically a lie.”

“Snogging?” I ask with a snort.

“I know, right! Anyway, he even threatened to sue the school. You know how angry Gramps can get. I bet Principal Davis was terrified. He even apologized to Gramps for any inconvenience he had caused, can you imagine?”

I throw the envelope to the side and wrap Gwinnie in my arms. “Thank you for that, G. I love you.”

“Blake, I love you too. I don’t want anything to ever come between us again.”

“I won’t let that happen. I promise.”

She looks straight into my eyes and heat sears my skin as she squeezes me tighter.

“What do you want to do now?” I ask her.

“How about a good old snogging session?”

“I would never say no to that,” I tell her, already leaning in for another heart-stopping kiss with the love of my life.



Epilogue

Gwinnie

Six months later



The bleachers next to the outdoor pool are full of familiar faces today. Gramps is right in the front next to Charlene, who I swear is his girlfriend, even though he won't admit a thing to me. Next to them are my parents, who decided to return home after eight months instead of twelve. My mother proclaimed she did it because the trip turned out to be less budget-friendly than anticipated, but I know that's a white lie. They came back because she missed Gramps, me, and Summerville Creek too much. Now she can complain about snails ravaging her garden and remind me that chicken breasts cannot be frozen twice to her heart's content.

Next to my family are the Wilsons. I hardly believed Blake when he told me Tanner and Hazel were planning to travel all the way from Boston just so they could attend the swimming team finals, but here they are. Colton, Elle, and Maggie are also present. Talk about being supportive! I feel lucky every day to be a part of such a loving family. At least, kind of. It's not like Blake and I are married, but they all welcomed me as if we are.

Behind them is a delegation from the TTT. Vanessa, Debbie, John, and Linda are holding banners that say *Go Summerville Stingrays!* Anna-Catherine is nowhere to be seen, but I didn't expect her to show up. Vanessa told me last week that Anna-Catherine is thinking of taking a year off and traveling to India to find herself. I think it's a bit of a crazy move, but who am I to judge? If that's what her heart wants, then she should go for it.

I'm standing poolside, going over some last-minute notes that I want to share with the team later, when I see Blake jogging up to the stage in his coaching outfit. What is he doing there? He should be inside with the team.

"Go, Coach Wilson," someone shouts.

I look over my shoulder and to my surprise, the entire swim team is standing there, even though the competition doesn't start for another half hour. Did I get the timings mixed up or something?

From the corner of my eye, I see Leia and Josh giving Blake a thumbs-up. He reaches for the microphone and smiles at the crowd.

"Hello, everyone. Uhm, my name is Blake Wilson, and I'm coach of the Summerville Stingrays. Don't worry, the state finals will start soon, but I have something else to talk about first." He clears his throat. "Everyone at Summerville High knows that me and Coach Fletcher are a thing. She's standing right over there."

People clap and shout our names, and the cheerleaders perform a pompon ruffle.

Blake grins. "That's right, Gwinnie Fletcher is my girlfriend, but I hope that will change soon."

Worried murmurs go through the crowd. I'm not feeling so well myself, all of a sudden. Is Blake breaking up with me? In public?

He motions for me to join him on the stage. I reluctantly walk over and go up to him.

"What are you doing?" I whisper, but he acts as if he doesn't hear me.

"Here's my lovely Gwinnie. Did you guys know she's a former swimming champion? Who am I kidding, everyone knows that, right? But what I'm sure none of you know is that Gwinnie has been training hard for a marathon next week, despite the obstacles that were thrown in her path years ago. She's going to ace it because she aces everything she does."

More cheers. I smile at the crowd while asking Blake through clenched teeth, “What on earth is going on? You know I hate being the center of attention.”

Once again, he ignores me. He rakes a hand through his unruly hair and turns to me, the microphone still clutched in his hand.

“G., you’re the best thing that ever happened to me. From the moment I saw you, we became best friends. I always hoped for more and last year, you finally made me the happiest guy alive. Or so I thought.”

What the heck is he doing? I can’t decide whether this is a love declaration or a public breakup.

“You thought?” I ask him.

He nods. “Yeah, you make me happy, but you could make me even happier.”

“Am I not doing a good enough job being your girlfriend?” I ask, my voice laced with irritation.

He laughs that gorgeous laugh of his, and my heart reacts instantly by doing a bunch of cartwheels.

“You’re amazing, Gwinnie. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He drops to one knee and reaches into the pocket of his swim shorts. My hands tremble. He’s not breaking up with me. He’s also not performing some weird love declaration. He’s proposing to me!

I flick my gaze to my family. My mother has a tissue ready, clutching my father’s hand. Blake’s siblings are waiting expectantly, as if they all knew this was going to happen.

Oh my goodness, they’re all in on it!

Blake locks eyes with me and swallows. “I’d be the happiest guy on the planet if you would accept me as your husband, G. Will you do me the honor of marrying me?”

He opens the box and I catch the glimmer of a diamond, but I don’t look at the ring. Instead, I throw my arms around

his neck and kiss him. “Yes, yes, yes, I will marry you,” I say. “There’s nothing I want more than to become your wife.”

“I love you, Mrs. Wilson.” He scoops me up and twirls me around.

The crowd goes wild. Music blares through the speakers and everyone’s chanting our names.

Blake and Gwinnie. Blake and Gwinnie. Blake and Gwinnie.

Even though I hate being the center of attention like this, I’ve got to admit... Hearing our names being shouted by a crowd full of people is what I consider pretty amazing.

Blake plants another soft kiss on my lips and I pinch myself.

I, Gwinnie Fletcher, am definitely living the dream.



Author's Note and Free Book

Thank you so much for reading *Falling for Mister A+*! If you loved this book, I'd be honored if you would consider leaving a review or recommending this book to a romcom-loving friend.

If you want to check out my other feel-good books, go to www.sophieleighrobbins.com.

Want to connect? You can find me on Instagram where I share all kinds of bookish and behind-the-scenes stuff: www.instagram.com/sophieleighrobbinsauthor.

Click [here](#) to subscribe to my newsletter and receive a free romcom! You'll also stay in the loop about my new releases, giveaways and book recommendations.



Acknowledgements

Writing a book is never easy, so I count myself lucky to have such amazing people supporting me. I want to thank each and every one of you who makes writing books a possibility for me.

To Ash Keller. If it weren't for our daily check-ins and fun conversations, I'd probably still be procrastinating and doubting everything.

To *The Most Amazing Women in the World* (you know who you are).

To all of my other awesome and sweet fellow romcom authors. I love being a part of this supportive community!

To my editor Serena for helping me make my books better.

To Kristyn for all the help behind the scenes.

To everyone on Bookstagram. You make social media a good place to hang out!

To my dear readers. I love every single one of you.

To my best friends who I love dearly.

And to my husband for being an absolute A+ guy.



Also by Sophie-Leigh Robbins

Snowflakes and Sparks (Old Pine Cove #1)

Love to Prove You Wrong (Old Pine Cove #2)

In For a Treat (Old Pine Cove #3)

Old Pine Cove: The Complete Collection

Falling for Prince Charming (That Wilson Charm #1)

Falling for Doctor Drop-Dead Gorgeous (That Wilson Charm
#2)

Falling for Mister A+ (That Wilson Charm #3)

Alienhated: A Fun Paranormal Romcom

Snowed in With You

The Best of You

Take a Hike